The Little Kanawha Flash Floods of 1943

Event Details

- Date: August 1943 (nighttime)
- Precipitation: As much as 15 inches in 2 hours
- Affected Area: Approximately 50 miles long and 10 miles wide
- Flood Type: Summer Thunderstorm
- Fatalities: 23
- Main Impacted Streams: Copen Run (8 fatalities), O'Brien Fork (8 fatalities), Big Island Run (5 fatalities)
- Location: Wirt, Braxton, and Gilmer Counties, WV
- Communities Impacted Most: Heaters, Copen, Girta

Mitigation Efforts

- Stream Gauge installed on Tug Fork (accounts for 25% of fatalities post-flood)
- No mitigation existed at the time of flood; 100% of fatalities occurred prior to construction of flood infrastructure

Risk and Impact Analysis

- **Flood Zone Classification:**
  - 78.3% Zone A
  - 21.7% Unmapped
- **Cause of Death:**
  - 23 by drowning
- **Fatality Locations:**
  - 21 in structures
  - 2 in water

Demographics of Victims

- **Age Groups:**
  - 9 children (Ages 0–12)
  - 3 teenagers (Ages 12–18)
  - 4 young adults (Ages 19–39)
  - 5 middle-aged adults (Ages 40–70)
  - 1 elderly adult (Ages 70+)
- **Gender Distribution:**
  - 14 female
  - 9 male
- **Mass Casualty Events (82.6% of fatalities):**

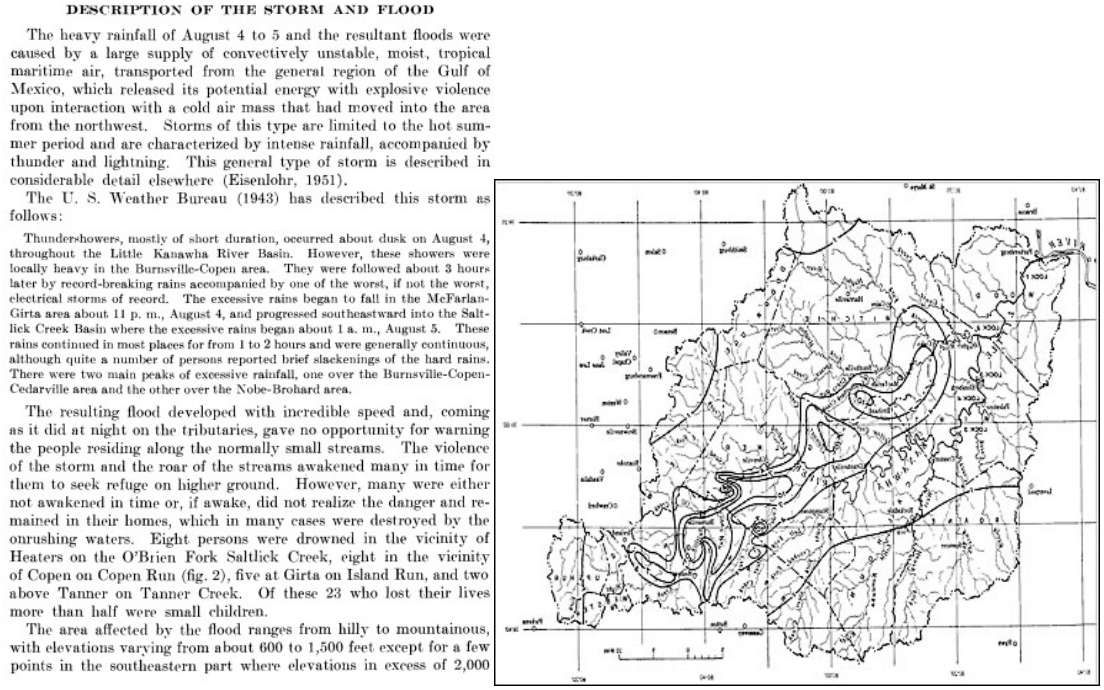
- **Queen Family:** Six family members and two guests (the Daughterys) were swept away from their home on Copen Run
- **Yeager Family:** Six members perished when their house was destroyed, including a 3-day-old infant and the 52-year-old father
- **Nelson Family:** The entire family, ranging in age from 6 to 52, was killed when their home was washed away. The middle child's body was recovered 23 miles away in Parkersburg, WV

Notes

Record-breaking rainfall was accompanied by "one of the worst, if not the worst, electrical storms of record."

Multimedia & Sources

- USGS Water-Supply Paper 1134-A
- Beckley Raleigh Register – August 6, 1943



DESCRIPTION OF THE STORM AND FLOOD

The heavy rainfall of August 4 to 5 and the resultant floods were caused by a large supply of convectively unstable, moist, tropical maritime air, transported from the general region of the Gulf of Mexico, which released its potential energy with explosive violence upon interaction with a cold air mass that had moved into the area from the northwest. Storms of this type are limited to the hot summer period and are characterized by intense rainfall, accompanied by thunder and lightning. This general type of storm is described in considerable detail elsewhere (Eisenlohr, 1951).

The U. S. Weather Bureau (1943) has described this storm as follows:

Thundershowers, mostly of short duration, occurred about dusk on August 4, throughout the Little Kanawha River Basin. However, these showers were locally heavy in the Burnsville-Copen area. They were followed about 3 hours later by record-breaking rains accompanied by one of the worst, if not the worst, electrical storms of record. The excessive rains began to fall in the McFarlan-Girta area about 11 p. m., August 4, and progressed southeastward into the Saltlick Creek Basin where the excessive rains began about 1 a. m., August 5. These rains continued in most places for from 1 to 2 hours and were generally continuous, although quite a number of persons reported brief slackenings of the hard rains. There were two main peaks of excessive rainfall, one over the Burnsville-Copen-Cedarville area and the other over the Nobe-Brohard area.

The resulting flood developed with incredible speed and, coming as it did at night on the tributaries, gave no opportunity for warning the people residing along the normally small streams. The violence of the storm and the roar of the streams awakened many in time for them to seek refuge on higher ground. However, many were either not awakened in time or, if awake, did not realize the danger and remained in their homes, which in many cases were destroyed by the onrushing waters. Eight persons were drowned in the vicinity of Heaters on the O'Brien Fork Saltlick Creek, eight in the vicinity of Copen on Copen Run (fig. 2), five at Girta on Island Run, and two above Tanner on Tanner Creek. Of these 23 who lost their lives more than half were small children.

The area affected by the flood ranges from hilly to mountainous, with elevations varying from about 600 to 1,500 feet except for a few points in the southeastern part where elevations in excess of 2,000