

60 years later, the great flood of 1936 still stirs memories of its devastation

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INDEPENDENT COLUMNIST

The spring of 1936 was one that will always be remembered by those who were residents of North Chelmsford 60 years ago, especially those who were living within a few hundred yards of the Merrimack River.

It was in March of that year that the river went on one of its most destructive rampages in recorded history.

As a result of this disaster, flood control dams were later installed in New Hampshire, so we can hope that we will be spared any repeat performances. All of the town of Hill, N.H., including houses, stores, churches and cemeteries was relocated to high ground where it stands today.

Chelmsford was, of course, not the only town to suffer from the flooding. Every town and city through which the Merrimack flowed suffered equal or greater destruction.

The railroad station at the foot of Church Street was completely surrounded by swirling muddy water. Sleeper Street, Butterfield Street and the low part of Tyngsboro Road were under several



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A gasoline filling station, now the site of Jimmy's IV restaurant, was among the buildings on Princeton Street flooded by water from the Merrimack River and Stony Brook in 1936.

feet of river water. Houses in this area were badly damaged and the owners were faced with the problem of removing inches of mud and muck that the receding water left behind.

As the river rose, it backed-up Stony Brook, adding to the already freshet-filled stream. The low land behind Laughton's greenhouses was covered with water, as was Princeton Street between Richardson Road and Mt. Pleasant Street. Traffic was barred from this section of the

highway and barriers, manned by American Legion veterans, were erected at either end of the flooded area.

Temporary shelter was provided at the North Town Hall and at St. John's Hall for those who were evacuated from their homes. Patients were cared for by nurses in the Upper Town Hall and 140 people were fed for 11 days from a soup kitchen set up in the hall.

A shed, chicken houses and even a barn were seen floating

down the river. Those buildings that survived the ride over Pawtucket Falls in Lowell were disintegrated when they hit the School Street bridge just beyond.

I recall standing on Tyngsboro Road just below Groton Road talking with a man who had abandoned his home on Sleeper Street. The water was already almost up to the ceiling of the porch. As we watched together, it continued to rise until the porch roof was inundated. It was then that he remarked that he should have closed the bedroom window as the water started to flow over the windowsill.

The City of Lowell suffered a loss of drinking water because of the flood so, at their request, the Chelmsford Water District ran two lengths of fire hose between its last hydrant on Chelmsford Street and the first Lowell hydrant. Two million cubic feet of pure water were supplied to Lowell.

Although it directly affected only one part of town, the flood of 1936 will go down in history as one of Chelmsford's major disasters of all time.

George Parkhurst resides in Westford. He is a former Chelmsford resident and a local historian.