

# **Flood Ravages Whole State Causing Many Deaths, Millions In Damage**

## **■38 Believed Lost In Worst Disaster**

August 20, 1955

The Hartford Courant

Floods ravaged Connecticut Friday, claiming many lives and causing untold millions of dollars in damage.

Early reports, unconfirmed, listed at least 38 dead or missing, most of them children. The death toll also rose in the rest of New England which was struck by torrential rains and major floods.

Terming the floods "the worst disaster in the state's history," Gov. Ribicoff declared a state of emergency and asked President Eisenhower to declare Connecticut a major disaster area so that federal funds and other assistance could be rushed here as soon as possible.

## **Communities Isolated**

Throughout the state, entire communities were isolated as raging water cut off roads, crumbled bridges, swept away railroad tracks and trestles, toppled houses and destroyed factories and ruined drinking water supplies and foodstuffs.

At least four major dams broke Friday. Homes and businesses and at least two dozen bridges were washed away in various sections of the state.

Hardest hit regions of the state were the Naugatuck Valley area, northwestern Connecticut, especially the Torrington-Winsted areas and northeastern Connecticut in the region of Stafford Springs and Putnam.

The Connecticut National Guard was mobilized by Gov. Ribicoff shortly after 1 a.m. Sixteen helicopters, equipped for rescue work, flew into the worst hit areas and took people off roof tops and trees.

Friday night the U.S. Navy flew 16 additional rescue helicopters to Connecticut. During the day, eight helicopters from Sikorski in Stratford, two from Kaman Aircraft in Bloomfield, two from the First Army and one each from West Point and the U.S. Marine Corps rescued hundreds of persons.

Civil Defense and emergency shelters in all parts of the state which were not under water were filled with refugees and the American Red Cross set up a central disaster headquarters in Hartford to care for the entire state.

Typical of the communities wrecked by the flood water was Winsted. Late

Friday afternoon a helicopter flew a First Army, Counter Intelligence officer over the area and he reported that it looked as if the entire business district of Winsted has been destroyed and estimated that about 85 per cent of the town's industries were either completely destroyed or badly damaged.

### **Troops Rushed In**

Troops were rushed into the area late Friday afternoon when reports were received in Hartford of looting. Lt. Col. Robert Schwolsky of the Connecticut National Guard, reported from a helicopter: "I've never seen anything like Winsted's Main Street. It looks like someone had taken cars and thrown them at one another."

He said he saw a four-story building turned on its base and there were countless persons stranded on rooftops pleading for milk and food for their children.

In north[eastern] Connecticut, Putnam was equally hard hit. The town was cut in two by flood waters when the Quinebaug Dam in Southbridge, Mass. burst. The town has two rivers running through it and both overflowed, putting the town under several feet of water. The Providence Street Bridge in the center of Putnam collapsed.

Adding to the disaster, a fire broke out in the Blooms Mills building causing untold damage.

### **Bridge Blown Up**

Friday night, state highway department crews and National Guard troops blew up a bridge in Putnam that had been partially destroyed. The wrecked bridge had been damming up water, adding to the peril.

In the Naugatuck Valley area, Ansonia, Waterbury, Seymour and Naugatuck were underwater in many sections. Mayor Raymond Snyder of Waterbury said there are at least 15 dead in that city. Mayor Snyder said he saw at least 12 bodies floating down the swollen river.

Martial law was declared throughout most of [the] Naugatuck Valley. For Waterbury, it was the first time in the city's history that flood waters invaded the downtown business district. At least four homes on Riverside Street were washed away but the residents were evacuated safely.

Ansonia, like Putnam, was split in two by flood waters as the Maple Street Bridge, connecting the eastern and western sections of the city was washed away. Most of the business district and many residential sections of the city were underwater.

In Seymour, the major main carrying water to the community was torn loose

by the flood waters, cutting off the drinking water supply there. Damage in Seymour was estimated at in excess of half a million dollars.

Damage to Ansonia alone was estimated at in excess of a half million dollars.

In Naugatuck, Memorial Bridge in the center of the town collapsed splitting the community in two. The high water forced the evacuation of the Fire and Police departments and emergency headquarters had to be established on higher ground. Hundreds of persons were reported marooned on roof tops and in trees there.

### **Two Feared Drowned**

In Farmington, two children were believed drowned when a State Police boat, evacuating River Glen on the banks of the Farmington River, capsized. The children were swept away by the roaring river in full view of their parents and horrified spectators.

Also in Farmington, two policemen and a policeman's son were missing and feared dead. They were last seen in a small boat taking part in rescue operations. They are Farmington Policemen Charles Yodkins and William Shields and Yodkins' son.

One of the most tragic deaths was that of an unidentified child in Canton. The pilot W. A. Newtown of West Avon, flying a Kaman helicopter, had just rescued 13 persons and was flying back to the west section of Canton where he had heard of another family marooned on roof tops. He landed on a highway to ask directions and upon taking off again, the engine failed and the craft plunged to the ground. The rotor blade struck and killed the child.

### **Switchboard Swamped**

The Herculean task of handling these calls went to Operators Gertrude Thompson and Connie Lantanzio.

Said Operator Thompson: "I've seen service at this switchboard during many emergencies in the past, but I have never seen calls come in at this rate before."

Police and civilian personnel were stationed at scores of telephones in headquarters to answer calls relayed through by the operators. There were thousands of inquiries to be answered. Motorists wanted to know the condition of highways.

### **Close Check Kept**

Most of these inquiries were answered because the Hartford barracks kept abreast of flood developments and kept a close check on the highway

situation as it was affected by landslides and washed-out bridges. Up to the minute bulletins were given to those stationed at the telephones.

There were calls, too, from residents along the Farmington River who reported that flood survivors were being swept down the raging stream on logs, houses and debris.

This emergency information was relayed to disaster headquarters at the State Armory, which directed the operation of rescue equipment, including boats, amphibian "ducks" and helicopters.

More of the telephone calls that swamped State Police were from persons alarmed by the flood news and anxious to learn about situations existing in towns where friends or relatives resided. There were scores of calls, too, from concerned parents of children now attending summer camps in the Winsted, New Hartford area.

Every once in a while would come a telephone call which would make troopers throw up their hands in disgust.

A West Hartford woman called to announce there was water in her cellar, and what could she do about it.

A Hartford woman called to inquire if there was any substance to the report that a Front Street bank was underwater. She was concerned about her savings account.

### **Wanted LST Boat**

An Avon farmer telephoned for an LST boat to evacuate 100 cows from a flooded pasture.

A Boston, Mass., woman made several calls imploring police to check the whereabouts of her groom-to-be who was supposed to be enroute from New York City.

There were numerous calls from people who wanted State Police to advise them when it was going to stop raining, or when flood waters could be expected to recede.

Troopers who returned to the barracks at 5 p.m. after hectic hours in the flood areas had bizarre stories to tell about the fury of flood waters which caused untold millions of dollars damage. One trooper reported seeing a house, complete with lawn and landscaping, floating down the swollen river. A little later, he reported, he observed another house being swept by, smoke coming from its chimney.

Also missing in the River Glen section of Farmington was a 4 or 5 year old

girl. Four other members of her family were saved by the heroic efforts of two Farmington firemen and a helicopter pilot. The family was rescued by boat, but the boat carrying them to safety was swamped. Swept along by the current, the family managed to cling to the roof of a submerged house. They tied the children to trees and returned to the road where they managed to flag down a rescue helicopter. The craft picked up the mother and one child was picked up by helicopter. One child was rescued later from a tree and the remaining child was believed swept away by the water.

### **Polio Victim Rescued**

In Granby, a helicopter picked up 21-year-old Joan Schramm, a polio victim, and rushed her to Bradley Field where she was taken to McCook Memorial Hospital here by ambulance.

In Washington, two elderly persons, who had refused to be evacuated, were drowned when their home was swept down the Shepaug River. Washington's Main Street was under 15 feet of water and at least a dozen buildings were reported as being tipped over or moved off their foundations.

In Collinsville, a sick man, being evacuated from his home, died in the boat as rescuers were bringing him to safety.

Late Friday night, First Army Corps of Engineers, Boston Regional office, notified Gov. Ribicoff a half million dollars had been authorized [f]or relief to flood victims here immediately.

The New York Air National Guard said it will send two C-47 planes here today to drop food to stricken communities. The Connecticut Air National Guard will use a third C-47 for food drops.

Highways and bridges throughout the state were either washed out or impassable at many points. The State Highway Department reported that at least 17 bridges were destroyed by rampaging waters and numerous rock slides blocked roads that had not been damaged by water.

Thousands of dollars worth of damage to crops along the Connecticut River were estimated Friday and property damage was expected to reach into the millions. The crop most seriously damaged was the shade and outdoor tobacco which was previously damaged by Hurricane Connie. After the hurricane, about one third of the crop remained to be harvested. Much of this was damaged or destroyed.

The "New Haven" Railroad released a tentative summary of damage on the line's entire system, but gave no estimate of damage costs. The line reported 24 washouts; six landslides; one five-car derailment of a freight train; 10 bridges washed out; four trestles washed out; one culvert destroyed; three cases of communication failures; 15 areas where tracks were flooded; five

track blockages from debris, sand or boulders.

Service between New Haven and Springfield was discontinued because of flooded tracks and washouts at Windsor Locks and Newington. Service on this line will be renewed with train 412 out of New Haven at 7 a.m. today. Normal service is expected gradually during the day.

Hardest hit was the Naugatuck Valley and Berkshire lines to Pittsfield. At Waterbury, the freight yard at one time during the day was under 15 feet of water. A yard office floated away along with 40 to 50 box cars which were lifted off their wheel trucks and washed around the yard.

Worse trouble from [a] service standpoint was on the Boston to New York Route. Between Boston and Providence on the main line there were 3 washouts and blocked track. Service is expected to return to normal this afternoon on the Boston to New York and the New Haven to Springfield lines. But the line to Pittsfield will be out for an indefinite time because of the destruction of five or six bridges.

The derailment occurred at Monroe, Conn.

On the Canal Line, a freight service from New Haven to Northampton and Holyoke, Mass., the road was blocked by two slides at Westfield, a trestle washout at Simsbury and a bridge and trestle washout at Avon. A train crew was rescued by boat when their train was trapped at Avon by a washout 20 feet deep behind the train and a trestle and bridge washout ahead of the train.

At Ansonia, water rose so fast around a switching engine that the crew had to be removed by boats operated by the police and fire departments.

From Hartford to Boston via Willimantic service was stopped by 1,800 feet of track under water at Bolton and also a landslide at the same town.

In Seymour late Friday night 200 residents of the business district were evacuated to the Ansonia Armory. They will be fed three meals there today by Civil Defense and National Guard personnel. The Third battalion of the 102nd Inf. Regiment went into Seymour to assist.

At Waterbury late Friday, Civil Defense authorities estimated damage at \$150 million. There was an estimated \$1 million in food damage alone. Water at that time was receding. The Scoville Manufacturing Company and American Brass were shut down with 15 feet of water in the plants.

In Suffield it was reported that 10 state maintained highway bridges had been washed out. With the washouts the only route of entry to Suffield was from the north by way of Feeding Hills, Mass.