

## The Flood of 1870

The flood of 1870 was one of the highest as well as one of the most memorable from the standpoint of destructiveness. The accounts of its ravages in Dubuque and Davenport are reminiscent of those set down in 1965. On April 14, 1870, the *Dubuque Daily Times* recorded:

The waters are still gathering their forces and have commenced the work of destruction. In Dunleith [East Dubuque] they are invading the homes on the flats and driving out the inmates. The lately constructed ice-breakers above the bridge, it would seem, are not proof against them, and one, it has been reported, has been partly destroyed by the flood.

The next day the *Daily Times* reported that "familiar landmarks" were being "rapidly obliterated" by the rising Mississippi and that the prospect for continued damage was imminent. On April 16th the *Daily Times* asserted:

DUNLEITH. — The principal anxiety of the people of our neighboring town, especially those who live on the flats, or have property there, is to keep out the encroaching water. So far they have succeeded by the aid of an embankment erected two years since, but the river is now even with this and teams are engaged in hauling dirt to increase the height of this protection barrier. The water outside is now five feet or more above the ground inside.

Up to yesterday morning the water had risen eight inches in the last twenty-four hours and was within three feet and one inch of the high water mark of 1859. — The year of the great flood.

The following day, with the Mississippi within a few inches of its 1859 mark, the *Daily Times* declared that the islands and "all familiar landmarks are submerged, while the shot tower and Rhomberts distillery stand like lone sentinels far removed from land." Steamboats were having difficulty docking at the crowded wharf boats. At the same time, the editor reported that the railroad companies had brought in 95 car loads of stone to use in rip-rapping in an effort to secure their road and track from the ravages of the flood.

Dispatches telling of the rising waters at Dubuque were watched with apprehension by river towns downstream. The *Davenport Daily Democrat* of April 19 quoted the following description of the Dubuque flood from the *Muscatine Journal*:

Main street, below Jones, leading to the lower depot, was covered before noon and ducks were swimming over it after dinner. The levee is reduced to a mere thread at the landing, while below it is entirely covered — less than two feet more will take the water into the warehouses. The flood is now up to or beyond the high water mark of any year since '59, and a little over a foot will touch even that.

Day after day the *Times* continued to report basements full, railroad tracks under two feet of

water, and lumber and coal yards six feet under water.

Since Saturday last it [the Mississippi] has been steadily crawling up, engulfing old land-marks, covering roads and bridges until now from Eagle Point to the mouth of Catfish Creek nothing can be seen but a broad expanse of water, on the bosom of which, small crafts can be seen darting in every direction. At the present writing it is within a few inches of the high water mark of 1859 and still rising. . . . The water covers the sidewalks of the warehouse buildings and wants but a few inches of running in on the first floor. All the basements are full while the railroad track in the rear is two feet under water.

True to its prediction, the next day the 1859 record was eclipsed as recorded by W. E. Massey, Secretary of the Dunleith Bridge Company, using as his gauge the low water mark of 1864.

<i>Day</i>	<i>Hour</i>	<i>Feet</i>	<i>Day</i>	<i>Hour</i>	<i>Feet</i>
April 6	6 A.M.	11.8	April 14	6 A.M.	17.3
April 7	"	12.5	April 15	"	18.0
April 8	"	12.3	April 16	"	18.1
April 9	"	14.3	April 17	"	19.8
April 10	"	14.11	April 18	"	20.0
April 11	"	15.5	April 19	"	21.1
April 12	"	16.1	April 20	"	21.6
April 13	"	16.7	April 20	6 P.M.	21.75

On April 21 the *Times* noted that the Mississippi continued to rise despite predictions that it would fall once the 1859 level was reached. "Water covers the corner of First and Jones streets and people are row-boating on the sidewalk in front of the American House." Many homes in Dunleith

had been "swept away" and the railroad ice house was badly damaged. A dispatch from the *Galena Gazette* read: "The water now stands seven inches above the mark of the highest water ever known before. The flood of 1870 will be memorable for generations to come."

On April 22 the *Dubuque Daily Times* chronicled an equally memorable feat in steamboat navigation:

Yesterday the unusual spectacle was seen of a boat, the *Lady Pike*, crossing the levee into the slough beyond, for the purpose of loading. She will probably never have the opportunity to do the like again. The river was thought to be on a stand last evening.

It was not until April 23, however, after much hopeful wishing, that the *Daily Times* finally informed its readers that the "mighty and abounding river" had crested on the evening of the 22nd and was falling. With this news the editor could ruefully remark:

. . . water is a handy thing to have in the house, and is exceedingly useful for cooking purposes, and some people have been known to drink it, even when whisky could be procured. Most people, however, have a choice as to what part of the house water should occupy, and but few like to have it lying about loose, occupying cellar, kitchen and parlor.

After noting that the Mississippi had been "unusually, and unnecessarily and uncomfortably high" for the past week, the editor continued:

It has got fuller than any well disposed citizen ever should, and has slopped over much to the inconvenience of the wood dealers and lumber men. Streets have been washed out, yards involved, in fact the water has had its own way, but with yesterday, we are happy to note a decline and the great flood of 1870 will soon be a matter of history.

Three days later, on April 27, the river was falling fast, at the rate of a foot a day, and the *Daily Times* informed its readers that the landing "is to be reached again with dry feet, and the sidewalk in front of the levee is nearly dry."

---

The flood of 1870 was equally devastating below Dubuque. The *Davenport Daily Democrat* of April 18 noted that the river was rising "very fast at this point, having raised 12 inches in the last 24 hours." Two days later it quoted the *Rock Island Argus* as follows:

Never in the memory of the earliest resident have we been visited by such a high stage of water on the Mississippi at this point. The lowest water known here was in the year 1864, from which hydrographic calculations are made as from zero. The highest water mark known is that of 1862, when the water reached the height of 15 feet and eight inches above zero or low water mark.

On April 21 Thomas Winkless, who had kept a measurement of the Mississippi at various stages, informed the *Democrat* that the 1870 flood was

eight inches above the high water mark of 1859. The next day the same editor revealed that nearly every cellar on the levee was flooded and factories and mills were shut down with at least one foot of water on the floor. Gazing over the vast expanse, the editor declared "the water has full sway from the bridge to the slaughter house, three miles away on Front street."

The next day, on April 23, the *Daily Democrat* quoted old settlers as saying the river was higher than it had been since 1828. Front Street was full of water to the curbstone, and factories and warehouses near the river were islands while the ferry dock "looms up somewhere out at sea."

Upstream from Davenport word from the Clinton-Fulton area indicated that all the bottom land for miles about was overflowed, rail traffic had been interrupted, and many had been forced to abandon their homes. Downstream the same destructive forces were at work. The flood of 1870 was truly a memorable one for residents of Iowa and the Upper Mississippi Valley.