

## The 1937 Flood

In January of 1937, an unusual weather front produced an enormous amount of precipitation and 12.27 inches of rain fell in Southern Ohio. The rain continued nonstop from January 17th through January 25th, with the highest rise in the Ohio River ever recorded on January 21st.

Factory whistles blew at 11 p.m. on the 21st to warn citizens of the inevitable. By 3 a.m. the following morning, officials opened the sewer valves to keep the swollen river from backing up into the city through the sewer system.

Evacuations began at 5 a.m. that morning. On January 24th, a day later known as "Black Sunday", the river reached 68.7 feet, the highest since the flood of 1913, and well over the existing 62 foot floodwall. The river finally crested at 74.23 feet on January 27th.

As a result of the 1937 flood, 63% of the city was under water, including 97% of all stores, 6,234 homes, 14 schools and 13 churches. The total estimated damage to the Portsmouth area was \$16,244,300 (translated in 2003 as \$210 million).

More facts about the 1937 flood:

- Gas and water rationing were necessary.
- Food and medical supplies were brought from Columbus.
- As the Ohio poured into the Mississippi, it caused flooding in 196 counties in 12 states.
- During the flood, the Portsmouth Times was published in Chillicothe, Ohio.

- Expectant mother, Bessie Tomlin, 22, drowned as she held her 18 month-old daughter above the raging waters for rescuers. Tomlin was the only casualty in Portsmouth.
- Many people were taken to hilltop schools for temporary shelter. Lincoln School held about 1,600 at one point.
- To relieve the congestion of the crowded hilltop area, thousands were transported by trains to Chillicothe and Columbus.
- An estimated 10,000 were homeless.

Years prior to the 1937 flood, an expert was quoted as saying, "70 feet may be considered the highest possible rise for the Ohio River at Portsmouth, with just one chance in a thousand above that."

At the Portsmouth Public Library, the flood destroyed over 9,000 books when the waters reached 22 inches on the main floor, inundating everything on the first shelves and part of the second shelves.