Background on Creator:
The Mill River flood of 1874 was one of the great man-made disasters of late nineteenth century western Massachusetts. Early in the century, the combination of high hills and rapid water encouraged the construction of a string of mills up and down the Mill River Valley, with as many as six mill villages rising up to take advantage of the cheap and abundant source of power.
Factories for the production of silk and woolen cloth, buttons, brass and iron, and a variety of other products lined the banks of the river, supporting a growing population of workers.

By the 1860s, mill owners began to recognize that the natural, seasonal variation in water level in the Mill River could be evened out by damming the river, and in 1864, they began work on constructing a large earthenwork dam just above the town of Williamsburgh. Weighing the cost of the project, however, they decided to economize by designing and building the dam themselves, and cutting further corners and cost during the actual construction. Despite complaints from the surveyor and workers that these measures were potentially compromising to public safety, work continued, and even the presence of leaks when the dam was first filled in 1866 did little to slow the project.

Following heavy rains on May 16, 1874, disaster struck. When the dam collapsed, 600,000,000 gallons were sent coursing downstream in a wall of water nearly 40 feet high in places. Despite efforts to warn the residents downstream, few heard the warning, and fewer still heeded it. When the waters finally subsided, 139 bodies were strewn in its wake, with nearly total devastation of the factories and homes, bridges and roads.

In following days and weeks, the state government, for one of the few times in its history, stepped in to lend $120,000 assistance to rebuild the infrastructure, and despite a coroner’s inquest that laid clear culpability for the disaster on the shoulders of the mill owners and engineers, no one was ever brought to account.
Scope of collection

The nineteen images in the Mill River Flood collection are a small sampling of a series of 110 stereographs taken by the Knowlton Brothers of Northampton to document the devastation caused by the flood of May 1874. The collection also includes one view taken by F. J. Moore of Westfield, who issued his own series of 21 stereographs, and one by an unidentified photographer.

Collection inventory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 4. View from below Reservoir, showing break in both walls</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 12. View at Williamsburgh Reservoir</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 13. View of Geo. Cheney on his horse</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 42. View showing ruins of Engine, etc.</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
at Skinnerville

Knowlton Brothers: No. 57. View at Haydenville: Site of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Brass Shops from above

Knowlton Brothers: No. 71. View in Main St., Leeds, wreck of engine house

Knowlton Brothers: No. 76. Quigley's house, Leeds, from the west

Knowlton Brothers: No. 81. Ruins of Geo. P. Warner's Button Factory, Leeds, from the west
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowlton Brothers: No. 84. Ruins of Stone Bridge, Leeds</th>
<th>1874</th>
<th>1 stereograph</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. [88]. View at Leeds: View looking up Leeds St., near Button Shop</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. [95]. View at Leeds: Workmen searching for bodies near Cook’s dam</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 99. View of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Brass Shops, Haydenville before the flood</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. [101]. View at Haydenville: View of Hayden, Gere and Co.'s Band Building and Office</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. 105. Cook’s Dam and Iron Bridge, Leeds, before the flood</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: No. [107]. View at Leeds: Leeds from the Hill</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowlton Brothers: Site of Wm. Skinner’s Silk Mills, Skinnerville</td>
<td>1874</td>
<td>1 stereograph</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Knowlton Brothers: View in Leeds Street


Unidentified photographer: Cove at Williamsburgh were 20 bodies were found

Administrative information

Access
The collection is open for research.

Digitized content
Digitized versions of the images in this collection have been
Provenance

Processing Information
Processed by Dex Haven, August 2009.

Bibliography

Language:
English

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Cite as: Mill River Flood Stereographs (PH 019). Special Collections and University Archives, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

Search terms

Subjects
- Floods--Massachusetts--Mill River Valley (Hampshire County)--Photographs.
- Haydenville (Mass.)--Photographs.
- Leeds (Mass.)--Photographs.
- Mill River Valley (Hampshire County, Mass.)--Photographs.
- Skinnerville (Mass.)--Photographs.
- Williamsburgh (Mass.)--Photographs.

Names
- Knowlton Brothers.
- Moore, F. J.

Genre terms
- Photographs.
- Stereographs.

Link to similar SCUA collections
Environment Massachusetts (West) Photographs