



MANTUA TOWNSHIP HISTORICAL COMMISSION QUARTERLY BULLETIN

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The Mantua Creek and the Disastrous Flood of 1940



Properties between Mantua Creek and First Avenue in Mantua Terrace. The onlookers shown at the top left are standing along Broadway (Route 45). This picture was published in newspapers across the country.

The Mantua Creek and the Disastrous Flood of 1940

**“Sudden devastation and a community that
came together”**

Prepared and compiled by: Jeffrey Gellenthin

Life along the Mantua Creek has included commercial, industrial, and residential activity for hundreds of years. At one time, the creek was busy with small ships, flatboats, and barges that traveled through its waters, reaching shipyards, docks, wharves, piers, and warehouses as far upstream as what is now the bridge crossing along Wenonah Avenue. The watercrafts would move cargo, including timber from local forests, glass from Glassboro, sand from Sandtown, canned goods from waterfront canneries, crops from local farms, and other freight from the area to many destinations along the Delaware River. In turn, the vessels would return with products not readily available here, such as coal, more refined lumber, furnishings, and even horse manure collected on the streets of Philadelphia, which was then spread across the farm fields of Mantua Township and beyond for fertilization.

As time passed, the creek became more attractive to the average citizen as the need for using the waterway as the primary means of transportation was quickly being replaced. First came the train, and then the automobile as a more efficient way to transport goods. The creek became less commercially used and more of a place for leisure boating, fishing, and relaxing; a place to escape the hubbub and daily-grind.

Soon enough, small cottages and houses began to line the banks of the creek, as investors and private parties planted their flag as owners of waterfront property. The investors rented their cottages to out-of-towners, who would travel from nearby cities to enjoy the peace along the creek.

The area along the Mantua Creek between Mantua and West Deptford Township has generally been referred to as Mantua. On the East side, it is called Mantua Heights, and on the West side, it is called Mantua Terrace. Mantua Terrace is in West Deptford Township. However, everyone along the creek was considered a *Mantuaite*, as the creek did not separate the neighborly spirit and the connection among those who lived and worked along the water's edge. The following primarily focuses on Mantua Terrace and its residents along First Avenue.

Early Sunday morning, September 1, 1940, Southern Jersey experienced a significant, devastating tropical storm with unprecedented, record-breaking rainfall and severe flooding. The day was marked by heavy, continuous rain.

A tropical storm offshore interacted with a cold front, resulting in extraordinary rainfall over South Jersey. An unofficial record of 24 inches of rain was reported in nearby Ewan (Gloucester County) within nine hours, making it the wettest tropical cyclone in New Jersey history. The massive amount of water caused small rivers and creeks to overflow, breaching dams and washing away roads and bridges throughout the region.

The storm caused an estimated \$4 million in damage and resulted in four deaths across the state.

The prior day, Saturday, August 31, was a typical South Jersey summer day—sunny, with temperatures ranging from 69° to 87°. It was Labor Day weekend, and the population was enjoying a long holiday. It was just before dawn on Sunday when the rain began.

The following combines research, the writer's comments, and excerpts from many newspaper articles published nationwide.



Mantua Creek and its branches, swollen to a torrential stage and overflowing banks, cut a swathe of devastation from Mount Royal to Hurffville, striking heavily at Mantua, where 300 were made homeless, and crippling transportation by washing out bridges, both railroad and vehicle traffic, as well as submerging the Woodbury Water Works at Sewell.

The most surprising thing to those who are used to having water in their cellars was the rapidity with which the creek rose. Instead of a steady, slow rise, it seemed to come all at once, catching many people unaware. Most of the people were aroused from their beds and had to move immediately.

Heavy damage was caused at Mantua, where the town was sliced in two by the rampaging Mantua Creek. Two hundred were

left homeless when 50 bungalows on First Avenue were flooded to the porch roofs.



When it first became evident that damage in the Mantua area would be heavy, Mantua firemen called on the Brooklawn rescue squad and Gloucester's ambulance for assistance. The Socony-Vacuum sent 5000 feet of one-inch rope to stretch across the highways and for other uses. Frank Sahl of Mantua, a Woodbury attorney, feared for the safety of four homes he owned on the creek front. He secured the services of several youths in boats and had heavy lines placed around the tops of buildings, and the four properties were lashed to trees, utility poles, and other stationary objects. One of the houses came loose from its foundation and bobbed around within the rope enclosure, but the ropes kept it from being swept away.



The floodwaters reached rooftops. Houses were raked and twisted, some torn from their foundations and swept down the creek. Like Mr. Sahl, citizens and rescuers worked to anchor the homes to trees and poles to keep them from washing away. A total of twelve homes were washed away.



The water rose well up on First Avenue, putting the Mantua Terrace water system out of operation.

A cabin boat owned by Captain David Strain was reported to have been swept from its anchorage and destroyed. Captain Strain's boat was docked at his property adjacent to the east side of the Broadway bridge.

Mantua firemen, facing a shortage of rowboats to use in traveling back and forth in the flooded area, enlisted the aid of truck drivers to bring rowboats from the Alcyon Lake in Pitman.

Two bridges leading into Mantua, one from Wenonah and the other from Woodbury, were threatened with destruction by the raging waters. The residents of Boathouse Row in Mantua Terrace, and houses on the one side of First Avenue (the

next street up from the Mantua Creek), moved out, with possessions, or without, depending on the time they had, and watched their homes, nearly covered with water.

Only a foot or two of roofs remained above the water on the waterfront houses, while those on First Avenue were flooded to the top of the first story. Houses along the north side of First Avenue, on much higher ground than the others, were nearly dry, with water lapping only around the steps of the front porches. It was to these houses that the victims fled when they were driven from their own homes.



One woman stated that she had been a resident on First Avenue for over 25 years and had never seen the water as high as it was on Sunday. She said that the woman next door had called to her about 9 a.m. Sunday, and told her that there was water in her backyard. "I didn't worry about that, related the woman, "because we often have water up

that high, but when it began coming in the house, I moved in a hurry." She, like most of the other nearby residents, moved most of her furniture into the loft above the first floor. In this row of houses, the lofts were the only parts not underwater. The heavier furniture remained where it was.



One woman told of moving her sofa and living-room furniture by floating it across the street to dry ground. By the time they got back again, however, the water had come up so suddenly that the sofa was already covered with water.

Those who could rescue furniture and clothing, and they were few, were invited into the homes of nearby neighbors. In the Mantua area, where the Mantua Creek reached a new highwater level, stories of the friendly help of nearby neighbors were prevalent. Nearly every house in the flooded section was opened to the women and children from the flooded homes. A group

who had borrowed a rowboat to row around the flooded streets was welcomed in several places, as grateful women told how they had been taken in by friends, supplied with clothes, warm food, and a place to sleep until their own homes would be fit to live in again.



There was a report of small children standing inside windows, looking out across the dirty, swirling waters to where their homes were. On a section of higher ground, rabbits and chickens were caged together, pulled out of low areas by early rescuers.



In addition to the kindness of neighbors, the National Red Cross set up headquarters in Mantua and took charge of housing and feeding those evacuated from their homes. Some were lodged at the Mantua Terrace School, while others stayed with friends.

The Second Alarmers Association of Montgomery County, PA, was on hand at Mantua and at other points throughout the County, serving coffee and sandwiches to the firemen, the Works Progress Administration (WPA) workers, and the homeless.

Policing the area and guarding the bridge, state troopers were aided by volunteer firemen from Mantua and several nearby towns. Several fire companies brought boats, and flood-bound victims were still being rescued at 4 p.m. Sunday. Motorboats were speeding across places that, on Saturday, were green lawns and macadam roads. And not only were people being rescued, but several boats brought scared little children holding tightly to pet dogs.



Across the creek, the Seaman Lumber and Coal Company lost some lumber when the waters rose above the flood level and flooded several sheds filled with new wood. One structure on the waterfront fell over against the one next to it when the wooden piling underneath gave way. This appeared to be the only property damage, with the exception, of course, of that done to homes.

The railroad between Wenonah and Sewell, along with its bridges, was washed out. Five hundred people, shore-bound for the holiday, were stranded for six hours at Sewell on three trains caught between a track washout and a demolished bridge.



The remains of the washed-out bridge between the Wenonah and Sewell Railroad stations

Residents of Sewell, completely isolated for the first few hours after the storm, turned their attention to providing for the hundreds of passengers aboard trains halted in the town. The first train stopped, a 15-car excursion from Pittsburgh, was loaded with hundreds of would-be holiday merry-makers. The group walked back and forth along the tracks, exchanging talk with the townspeople, grumbling at the railroad company's service, which put them in such a predicament, but generally maintained a good attitude. Fred Gurk, a storekeeper, reported his stock was practically exhausted by the hungry group, and Victor Evans, a dairyman, sold out his entire milk supply to the group. Townspeople also shared food with the excursionists.

The Pennsylvania-Reading Seashore Lines had crews working 24 hours a day, rushing repairs so that the service could be resumed on the Camden-Millville electrified line and other branch lines. Railroad officials said the damage was the worst ever experienced in South Jersey. Between Wenonah and Sewell, a section of a 75-foot-high embankment was washed out for a distance of over 150 feet. Workmen bridged this gap with a trestle, and the line was opened the following Wednesday. Huge pile drivers mounted on flat cars were used to drive piling into the edges of the breaks to hold the banks in place. Flat cars loaded with poles and heavy timber, and cars loaded with cinders, were to be seen wherever the railroaders were making repairs.



This train from Pittsburgh was storm-bound at Sewell when the roadbed gave way between Sewell and Pitman and another section went out between Sewell and Wenonah.

Mantua firemen and WPA workers were warmly praised for their work in the Mantua flood area. The Mantua Fire Company did a most meritorious job. When the floodwaters first struck, the firemen responded immediately and worked 24 hours straight without rest. Later, when the water had

subsided, they returned to the herculean task of cleaning out the flooded homes.



The Ladies' Auxiliary of the Mantua Volunteer Fire Company made coffee and sandwiches all day Sunday and carried them down to First Avenue to serve the firemen, many of whom had no breakfast, and those who had to leave their homes in the flooded district. On Monday, they served lunch and a cooked supper in the firehouse to the members of the fire companies assisting with the work at the creek.

As floodwaters drove families from their homes, telephones began ringing insistently at the South Jersey Bond Bread plant. *"These folks are going to need food in a hurry!"* Bond Bread representatives, whose customers live in the stricken area, reported. Immediately, the following message was sent to the mayors of South Jersey communities: *"We have available ten thousand loaves of bread for free distribution to the flood-stricken in your community. If you contact your local Bond Bread representative, he will see that the required quantity is immediately delivered to you."*

"I never before labored so hard on Labor Day," one representative said later. *"But we were glad to be able to help these folks. Most of them are our regular customers, and we welcomed the chance to show our appreciation when they were in trouble."*

The news is spreading!

Bond Bread

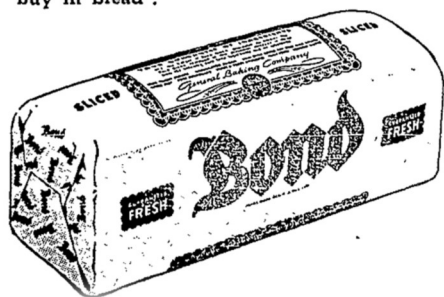
is now only

10¢

And with every day that passes, we are baking still more Bond Bread for the housewives of South Jersey and vicinity.

It's the same fine bread, baked from pure, wholesome ingredients of the finest quality—with no substitutes—guaranteed by our bond on the wrapper.

South Jersey's favorite bread has long been Bond—now more than ever. Try an oven-fresh loaf and see if you don't agree it's "your best buy in bread".



The Mantua area and all of South Jersey were buzzing with newspaper reporters and photographers, and several planes were pressed into service to record the flood for newsreels. The country soon became aware of the local disaster caused by the flood in Mantua and the surrounding areas. Reports of all types could be heard. One false report stated that a state trooper had shot two men who were looting the lumberyard, while another story erroneously passed the word that three men had drowned.

Homes along First Avenue, which were washed away, were not all destroyed, it was

learned. Several washed down Mantua Creek a considerable distance and were deposited in new locations, some of them in marshes, some against other homes that were not damaged, except for mud and silt deposits, which are now found to have been damaged from being struck by houses floating down the swollen creek. One Mantua Terrace woman reported that her kitchen table, set for Sunday morning breakfast, floated up to the ceiling and settled back to the floor with every dish, every fork, knife, and spoon exactly as they had been placed for the meal. In the same house, and in other houses, refrigerators floated about.



The "Sherwood" house on First Avenue

On Monday, the water receded from the north side of West First Avenue in Mantua, leaving behind thick mud that covered roofs, walls, floors, and furniture of all or parts of 28 homes. Water still stood in puddles in the yards of 20 homes on the south side of the street. Cellars were still full of water, and some lower floors in the homes along the creek front still had water, from whence the eight homes were washed away the day before.

After the Storm Was Over—at Mantua



Mrs. Helen Hocking with her belongings after the storm ravaged her home at 21 First Avenue.



Six-year-old Shirley Hosking is shown cleaning the mud from her doll.

After the rain stopped and the sun came out, the folks, even those who were homeless, seemed happy and gay, glad to be alive and uninjured. The problem of immediate shelter seemed to be taken care of, for, besides the neighbors, it was reported that the public school would be opened for use for the night.



Pierson Hancock and his brother are shown examining their soaked and muddy Sunday clothes.

As reported in the local newspaper: *The West Deptford Health Officer announced on September 4 that he would begin inoculating victims of the Mantua flood against typhoid. It was estimated that between 200 and 300 people would be inoculated as a precautionary measure. It was further reported that: All Firemen and any others who helped with the flood on Sunday and Monday are requested to meet at the firehouse tonight at 7 o'clock to get serum treatment for typhoid fever.*

Typhoid fever is a life-threatening infection caused by *Salmonella Typhi* bacteria, spread through contaminated food or water. Symptoms include high fever, headache, weakness, and a rash, with further complications possible if untreated.



September 1, 1940



Looking down First Avenue – December 2025

Despite their losses, which they seemed to dismiss without concern, the victims were generous in praising the firemen and volunteer rescue workers who had done their job so effectively that there were no casualties and only a few minor injuries.

Two things my father would often say are, *"You can't stop water, you can only direct it, and "Build on a hill.*


After the flood, contractors began advertising to help with the rebuilding and repairs of the homes and property destroyed. There were also advertisements by insurance companies emphasizing the importance of having homeowners' coverage.

SPECIAL NOTICE
 To Persons Whose Homes Were
DAMAGED BY FLOODS!

BAXTER'S Economy House Cut to Gal. 77c
 PAINT 5 gal. can 88c

ROOF COATING

SPECIAL PRICE ON ROOFING
 20% Discount on All Felton-Sibley Paints,
 Oil Stoves, Linoleum, Kitchen Furniture, etc.

Grove and  NATIONAL
 Asbury Aves. PARK

**When Disaster Strikes
 It's Too Late
 INSURE NOW**

Hurricanes are choosing new paths, and new sections to lay waste.
 Tornadoes are striking in sections heretofore unfamiliar with that type of windstorm.
 Cyclones come without warning and tear buildings apart.
 Nobody can foretell or guess where the next gale will strike or what will be its nature or its force; but windstorm insurance can be arranged now. Tomorrow may be too late, 5

Everybody Needs **Storrie & Budd Agency** for Protection

Wm R. Storrie, President Harold K. Budd, Secretary
35 Cooper Street Woodbury, N. J.
 Consult Your Insurance Agent as You Would Your Doctor or Lawyer

The storm that lashed South Jersey served to emphasize that man, with all his skill and progress, is still no match for nature. He could not stop the rainfall, stem the rising tides, save the bridges, railroad trestles, buildings, and roadways from the battering force of unleashed water.



Aerial Image taken during 1940 (pre-flood)
 Street names and landmarks are labeled as they were known during this time.



Aerial Image taken during 1951 (post-flood)

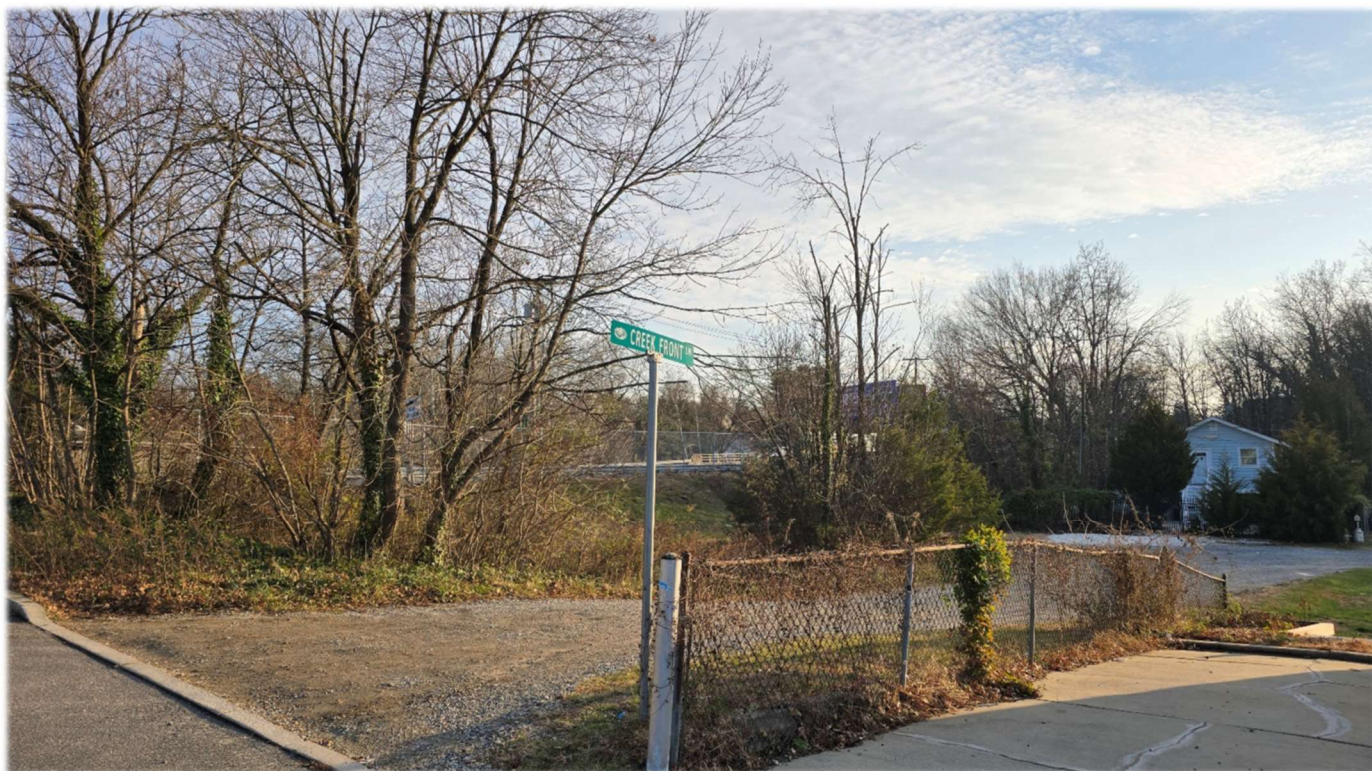
Street names and landmarks are labeled as they were known during this time.

Note the absence of homes in the center of the picture along the creek, above the "MANTUA" label.

Today, the Mantua Creek remains as it always has, ready to channel the water from a storm, as the watersheds throughout Southwestern New Jersey all go downhill, toward the mighty Delaware River. Since the 1940 storm, homes have been raised and better prepared for the next go-round with nature.



Mantua Township and its neighbors will continue to survive come hell or high water.



The above (4) pictures were taken on December 12, 2025

Fashion Spotlight: Winter Trends of 1905



Photo Credit: The Saturday Evening Post Published
December 23, 1905

Artist: Guernsey Moore

On this day in History, from The
Woodbury Daily Times: December 23, 1905

Fashion Hints:

Fancy clothes are the great fabric success of the season. Handsome ribbons are one of the attractions on evening gowns, with many gowns to be merely elaborate settings for jewels. Attractive little fans made of white celluloid imitations of ivory. Mistletoe and holly are among the hair decorations to be worn at holiday parties. Fine Chenille, wrought into beautiful lace-like patterns, is lavishly used on the gowns. Wrinkled suede gloves in the natural shade are worn for afternoon in preference to the white glove, which is not now favored until evening. A

shopping bag for the suburbanite, who goes from the shops to the matinee, has a compartment therein for a dainty pair of opera glasses. If you want to give your complexion a delicate rose effect, draw a bit of fine pink tulle over the face and hair before putting on the outside veil of lace or chiffon. Coiffures are puffed out more at the one side, giving the head a round shape. Revers and collars of delicately embroidered silk come for the dressy coat. The new cloth suits are beautifully braided with silk braids in fancy designs. Bands of tulle or velvet are fastened with antique buckles or slides around the throat. The most becoming ruches are made of pleated maline, sprinkled with a tiny silky dot. Those in rose pink are the loveliest. Umbrella skirts made with a number of goers shaped almost to a point at the waistline are acceptable models of the season.



BOLERO JACKET OF PERSIAN LAMB

Black and brown furs have the call this season, the lighter furs such as squirrel, chinchilla, and ermine appearing mostly in the evening, when they appear to their best advantage, but for all-around wear, dark furs have the call. A stylish jacket is pictured above in black Persian lamb with a muff to match.



Stylish House Gown:

For the house gown, the Empire gown vies with the Princess and is indeed becoming to most figures. A very pretty house gown is pictured here in soft gray Henrietta. It has a short bodice resembling a bolero, with chemisette of tucked batiste. The skirt portion has overskirt effect tucked at the waistline and the skirt proper and overskirt are edged with bias folds of the material.



For general all around wear, for shopping or street wear, the walking length costumes are always good form. Two stylish dresses are pictured above. The first a green and blue plaid corset, hip length jacket, plaited to fit the figure, with yoke and vest portion of plain blue manish collar of velvet. The skirt knife plaited in its entirety and walking length.

The second sketch pictures an olive-green cloth suit, three quarter length coat with trimming of soutache braid and buttons. The skirt is also ankle length with double plait at centre front side and back with several rows of braid encircling the bottom.

*This information was taken verbatim from "The Woodbury Daily Times" by Susan Altimus.

RECENT NEWS

On October 18th, 2025, the Mantua Township Historical Commission joined the Wenonah Historical Society and other history-minded organizations at the Wenonah Cemetery Walk and Festival.



RECENT DONATIONS

Linda Richman – Fossils of Belemnites. Linda shared her story of how she discovered these in the early 1960s: *When I was a little girl, Jim and Joe Neely and I would explore the woods behind their home. We would cross the white bridge between Barnsboro and Sewell and hike the “Indian Trail” as we called it, starting on the Barnsboro side of the creek. It took us back to a dilapidated building with a large water wheel attached. There were a couple of places where we could cross back and forth over the creek. Some days, we would cross Center Street and scale down the embankment to search the creek for fossils. We didn’t even have to dig for them; they were all over the creek bed. I kept them with my many childhood treasures, and later searched the internet and found they were Belemnites.*



A belemnite fossil is the fossilized internal skeleton, or rostrum, of an extinct squid-like cephalopod that lived from the late Triassic to the late Cretaceous.

Don Manel – a generous monetary donation.

Linda Dickman and Glenn Malsbury of Medford Lakes, NJ - Schoolbooks from the late 1800s.

Barnsboro United Methodist Church – a generous monetary donation in memory of Theresa and Michael DiGiamberardino

Ralph Richards – a family Bible

David Garrett – A letter written by Amy T. Heritage James to her cousin Edna Hayes. The envelope and letterhead are from her father-in-law, Hiram James's business. Hiram sold corn, bran, brewery grain, manure, and wool waste in Sewell, N.J. His obituary states that he was the best-known businessman of Gloucester County, NJ. The letter is dated July 29, 1897.



THANK YOU

Mayor Robert Zimmerman and the Mantua Township Committee members - for your continued support.

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The museum is open every Saturday from 10 AM to Noon or by appointment.

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Facebook page:

www.facebook.com/MantuaTownshipHistoricalCommission

Our mission is to preserve and share the rich history of Mantua Township.

Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from the Mantua Township Historical Commission



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The Mantua Township Historical Commission is always accepting donations of pictures, documents, artifacts, and stories related to the Township's history.