

**Putting St. Michael on the Map: The Role of the 1889 South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Preservation Society in Developing the Forrest Hills Historic District**

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On May 31, 1889, Johnstown, Pennsylvania was hit with 14 million tons of recessed water released when the upstream Conemaugh Dam ruptured. At 3:10 p.m., the wave of water, estimated at 40 feet tall and moving with the force described at the time as that of Niagara Falls, hit the city carrying fourteen miles of debris from previously demolished South Fork, Woodvale, Mineral Point, and East Conemaugh,. The community had been accustomed to floods due to overflowing rivers and streams from rain and melted snow on a yearly basis. For that reason, few families had evacuated the city. When the flood reached the city of Johnstown, it washed away houses, factories, railcars, and streets. Those who survived the initial force of the wave, either by grasping rooftops or other pieces of floating rubble, were gathered with the rest of the debris at the Pennsylvania Railroad stone bridge. Here, the waters were dammed by a backup of trees,

houses,

Pointing out the drastic numbers of people who have flocked to the Conemaugh Valley, some as early as the day after the flood, and their effects on a community in repair-mode, she highlights the great attraction that people have had on viewing the aftermath of these disastrous events.<sup>5</sup> Geographer Don Mitchell, supportive of this view, points to the shift in public focus in Johnstown toward the centennial celebration of the flood from one of class cohesion and rebuilding to one of spotlighting the flood and the need for tourism.<sup>6</sup> In response, others within the local community of Johnstown insist that their efforts to remember the flood have been devoted equally to education and entertainment.<sup>7</sup>

One group that has been overlooked in developing this region as a center for heritage and disaster tourism is the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Preservation Society who take the approach of promoting the areas heritage and disastrous history. Walter Costlow founded this organization in order to make the town of St. Michael mean something to the average tourist, who visited the region.<sup>8</sup> What started out as a small former coal town on the outskirts of Johnstown, Pennsylvania (without its name on a road sign)<sup>9</sup> transformed into a proud heritage-rich area that brings in more than 62,000 tourists a year.<sup>10</sup> In remembering the flood and its victims, St. Michael became relevant as an important center for disaster tourism and economic development. Communicating the significance of the flood to the community and portraying life

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*Pennsylvania History* 73, no. 3 (Summer 2006): 273-315.

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*Pennsylvania History* 59, no. 3 (July 1992): 200-203.

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*Pennsylvania History* 59, no. 3 (July 1992): 227-228.

<sup>8</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>

Jan 20, 2000, accessed November 17, 2013, <http://www.progressfund.org>.

land adjustment acts, newspaper articles, political statements, and historical structure reports, this paper focuses on Walter Costlow and the Preservation Society the heritage of St. Michael, Pennsylvania, and their use of the memory of the 1889 flood. Following the line of thinking of other scholars of disaster tourism, examining the preservation activities of Costlow and his group provide a fuller understanding of the connections between disaster and heritage tourism and economic development in the region.

alter the way that the flood has been remembered.

On December 17, 1988, Walter Costlow founded the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Preservation Society with the goal to develop the Forrest Hills District. As the flood centennial approached, Costlow set into action his own plan to bring tourists, and in turn, revenue, to St. Michael. The organization made a series of moves that were modeled after the

The first step was the purchase of historically significant buildings.

The largest and most historically

since Cresson Springs was already in operation, and Frick worked as quickly as possible to complete the project. For starters, the creation of the club was against Pennsylvania law. Founded by a Pittsburgh based club, Pennsylvania law clearly stated that a club must be chartered in the same county in which they operate. Frick avoided being looked at as exploiting this small town by avoiding release of the club's name and intentions. All paperwork filed prior to the official formation of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club used different names both for the club and the founder. This aided in avoiding legal actions during the aftermath of the flood.<sup>13</sup> Frick and the rest of the sixty one club members, including Pittsburgh elites Andrew Carnegie and Andrew Mellon, received the lake and 160 acres of land to develop. The dam that

damage assessment of the break

the cause for the failure of the dam. The public was left mourning an incident they felt was avoidable.<sup>15</sup> The Johnstown public was outraged. The clubhouse vandalized while furnishings and keepsakes were stolen from within.

although very few succeeded in getting any compensation. While the state of Pennsylvania found the club responsible for loss of life due to gross negligence, nobody came forth and admitted membership to the club. Not one penny was paid to these victims of the Johnstown Flood of 1889.<sup>16</sup>

Because the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club building was symbolic of the cause of the Johnstown flood, Costlow first wanted to change public image.

not one of strictly reconnecting the visitor with an accurate depiction of the flood but to the history of the city in general. The idea was for visitors to learn more about the era of steel and industrialization in Johnstown. Lane, Frenchman, and Associates, in coordination with the city of Johnstown, created \_\_\_\_\_ which was a blueprint designed to boost the local economy by creating \_\_\_\_\_, preserving buildings, constructing a Heritage Park, renovating the Pennsylvania Railroad station, and founding the National Cultural Park. All of the plans put the focus on Johnstown as a developing tourist community, one very much different from that which existed 100 years ago.<sup>19</sup> Historian Don Mitchell has noted that the main reason why civic leaders wanted to hold centennial commemoration of the flood was to give the local \_\_\_\_\_ and the deeper meanings of survival and togetherness and used it more as a way to bring in tourism.<sup>20</sup>

During the 1980s, the Preservation Society acquired more buildings in St. Michael. The purchase of the Hunting and Fishing Clubhouse, together with the Brown Cottage, Moorhead Cottage, and clubhouse annex paved the way for the Society to reshape the history of the flood. Costlow entered into an agreement with local government, which gave the Society the responsibility of renovating, preserving, and managing these buildings. Costlow made it clear that the focus of the buildings would be not only on the story of the flood but also a historical reference to the club members and their life within the club.<sup>21</sup>

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*Pennsylvania History* 59, no. 3 (July 1992): 200-203.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>

1994 Year in Review Newsletters

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The buildings themselves were in critical condition, however, as over one hundred years of wear and tear was showing. The clubhouse reeked



The restoration project taken on by the Preservation Society lasted thirteen years. Over \$1 million was spent in the form of volunteer raised money, government funds, and grants from Save America and the family of R.K. Mellon, an original member of the Fishing and Hunting Club. The renovations helped the Preservation Society to bring in visitors and revenue. In turn, the Historic District of St, Michael was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>24</sup>

In 1990, the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club Preservation Society transformed the old National Flood Memorial Welcome Center into the Miners Museum, after it had been donated to them the year prior. The founding of this building and the creation of the Berwind Wayside Festival Park paved the way for another phase

organizations, provided visitors with great entertainment while celebrating the heritage of the surrounding area.<sup>26</sup>

The third and final phase of the integration of the Forrest Hills District into the Allegheny Ridge Heritage Park. After being approved by Governor Robert Casey in 1992, the park consists of over fifty miles of stretch across the Allegheny Mountains. It included parks from numerous cities, such as Johnstown and Altoona, and covered five themes to explain the culture of the region: the canal era, conquering the ridge, on the mainline, steel city, and kingdom of coal. St. Michael has history and heritage in two of the proposed themes: the canal era and kingdom of coal. With its insertion into the park, St. Michael was





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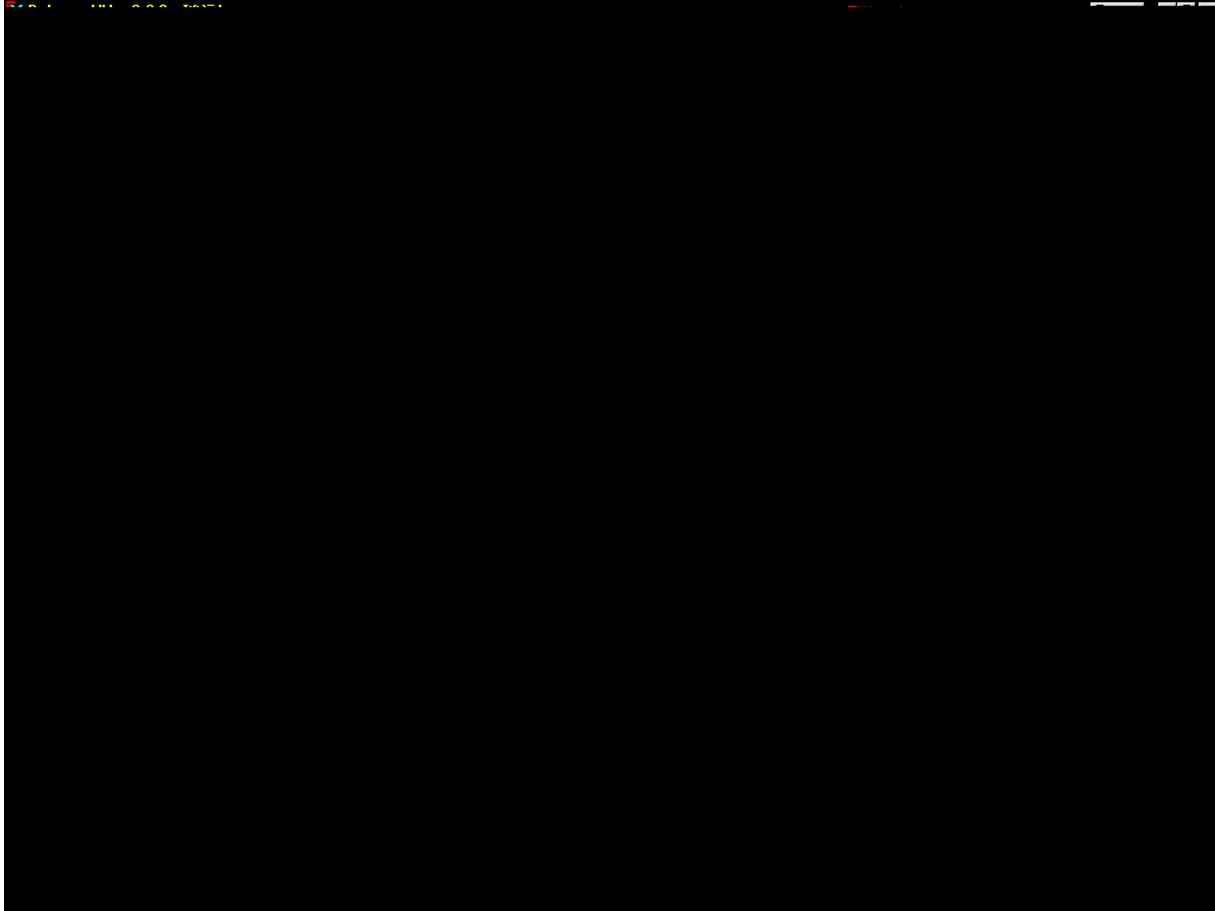
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<sup>39</sup> A picture of the Pennsylvania Railroad Stone Bridge, Johnstown A



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<sup>43</sup> A map tracking the path of the flood, [msexceptiontotherule.files.wordpress.com](http://msexceptiontotherule.files.wordpress.com), accessed December 15, 2013, <http://msexceptiontotherule.files.wordpress.com/2010/12/southfork.gif>.

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