Johnstown Flood

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Johnstown Flood
National Memorial

The Unger House and South Fork Dam Abutments

The South Fork dam failed on Friday, May 31, 1889 and unleashed 20 million tons of water that devastated the city of Johnstown, PA, fourteen miles downstream. The flood killed 2,209 people. However, the relief effort brought the nation and the world together with an outpouring of aid for the flood victims.

The dam had held back Lake Conemaugh, a private lake owned by the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. The club was a resort for wealth Pittsburgher. Unfortunately the club did not adequately maintain the dam, making it dangerously weak.

Point it out on a map.

Explain how it was discovered.

- The sides of the dam that did not wash away are still in place. These are called the dam abutments.
- The Unger House was the home of the club's manager Colonel Unger. It is still standing.

Picture with caption. Are there any pictures of archaeology on site? If not maybe some artifacts? The present pedistrian bridge?

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Describe some of the information from the past that has been found at the site.

- Three stone foundations that were used to support a bridge over the spillway part of the dam were found. The foundations measure 19.5 feet each, making the bridge about the same size as top of the dam.
- The archaeology found the size and location of the Unger House porches, which were gone from the house when the National Park Service started its restoration.

A clipboard next to one of the orginal foundations for the bridge found during the archaeology.

Explain how the information gained from the study of this sites answers questions that archaeologists are asking.

- The archaeology allowed the park to accurately restore the porches to the Unger House.
- Archaeology also determined where the spillway bridge was located so that the modern pedestrian bridge could be built in the correct location.
- The dig also provided general information about the everyday life of the Unger family when they lived there in the 1880s.

The abandoned Unger House before restoration.

Explain how the information may be important for modern people.

- This site is open to the public so people can learn the events that lead to the breaking of the South Fork dam, the tragedy of the Johnstown Flood and the compassion of the relief effort.

The Unger House today, with the South Fork dam abutments in the background on the right.

To learn more:
Johnstown Flood National Memorial: www.nps.gov/jofl

All photographs courtesy of the National Park Service, Johnstown Flood National Memorial.