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When the Federal Government Washed Away Mutual Aid: Response to the Great Vermont Flood of 1927

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When the Federal Government Washed Away Mutual Aid:

Response to the Great Vermont Flood of 1927

A Senior Honors Research Thesis Submitted to the Examining Committee

Department of History, Political Science, and Philosophy

by

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The Vermont Flood and its impact

Following heavy rain and the lingering effects of a tropical storm, Vermont faced its worst flooding in state history in November 1927. The Great Vermont Flood of 1927 (Vermont Flood) devastated towns, destroyed local economies, and killed an estimated 111 people.¹ Prior to the 1927 flood, Vermont faced few natural disasters beyond heavy snowstorms, blizzards, and mild floods from melting snow.² Like the greater United States in the early twentieth century, Vermont's citizens relied on assistance from their own community for nearly all emergency relief.

In the decades prior to the Vermont flood, other natural disasters across the country showed the limits of state and local relief efforts, and federal intervention became more prevalent.³ The 1927 flood disrupted the community-driven mutual aid system in Vermont and caused a major, temporary expansion of the federal government's power because of the vastness of the flooding, its detrimental impact on the regional economy, and aid precedents established in prior natural disasters. The federal government provided financial assistance, military personnel, and critical supplies to ensure Vermont's recovery. Even though community support remained strong, federal intervention provided essential support to compensate for mutual aid's weaknesses.

Prior to the flood, Vermont remained relatively isolated from affairs because of geographic barriers; however, damages from the flood led state officials to request necessary federal assistance. The state was relatively isolated from the rest of the United States. Vermont is situated between New York's Adirondack Mountains and Lake Champlain in the west and the

¹ Deborah Pickman Clifford and Nicholas R. Clifford, *"The Troubled Roar of the Waters": Vermont in Flood and Recovery, 1927-1931* (Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2007), 31.

² *Ibid.*, 30.

³ *Ibid.*, 31.

White Mountains in New Hampshire in the east. The state borders Quebec in the north. The entire state is north of Albany, NY and Vermont's capital, Burlington, is 230 miles northwest of Boston. Throughout Vermont, the Green Mountains and many rivers further obstructed transportation networks. Because of these geographic barriers and a limited mostly-unpaved highway system, many towns were still isolated from the rest of the country by 1927.⁴

Beyond these geographic barriers, the state was also sparsely populated. In 1920, the last census prior to the Vermont Flood, the state had just 352,428 citizens and was home to more cows than people.⁵ This isolation encouraged rural Vermonters to work collectively to solve regional problems. Already-small communities lost population to western migration in the late nineteenth century, so the citizens in small towns and hamlets throughout Vermont often had to assist each other during crises to preserve their communities.⁶ The state's small population allowed for community support systems and mutual aid to thrive prior to the Vermont Flood.

The Vermont Flood that impacted nearly the entire state was unexpected and had devastating consequences. In addition to the heavy rain, Vermont's waterways, including the Winooski, Mad, and Walloomsac Rivers, Otter Creek, and numerous reservoirs, overflowed into surrounding communities. Prior to the flooding in November, Vermont faced an exceptionally wet summer and autumn, so the topsoil was already saturated.⁷ Throughout the month of October, it had rained almost every day in Vermont.⁸ The forecast for November 2, 1927 was sunny and storms were not expected, but heavy rain began later that evening and residents

⁴ Frank M. Bryan, *Real Democracy: The New England Town Meeting and How It Works* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 109.

⁵ Clifford and Clifford, 33.

⁶ Lyle W. Dorsett, "Town Promotion in Vermont," *The New England Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1967): 278.

⁷ Samuel B. Hand, "Potholes and Watersheds: Perspectives on 1920-1960," in *Lake Champaign: Reflections on Our Past*, ed. Jennie G. Versteeg (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 1987), 23.

⁸ Michael Sherman, Gene Sessions, and P. Jeffrey Potash, *Freedom and Unity: A History of Vermont* (Barre, VT: Vermont Historical Society, 2004), 421.

quickly realized the extreme effects of the disaster. Unlike other natural disasters around the country that brought gradual flooding the prior spring, the flash flooding in Vermont occurred suddenly, which caused more panic. The downpour continued for the next thirty-six hours throughout nearly the entire state.⁹

As the storm continued, towns and cities flooded with rivers flowing through the streets. Homes were washed off their foundations, often with residents still inside. The Vermont Flood impacted the state's poor agricultural workers and middle class, as well as high profile individuals like Lieutenant Governor of Vermont S. Hollister Jackson.¹⁰ After his car stalled in the rising water, Jackson fell and was swept away by the current while attempting to escape his vehicle. Though a local militia company dispatched rescuers, his body was not found until the next day. Representatives from the Vermont General Assembly mourned his loss, as Jackson was a previously an essential advocate for increasing state funding for roads and bridges.¹¹ Jackson was considered likely to receive the Republican nomination for Vermont's next governor. His death opened opportunities for Stanley C. Wilson to rise to power as lieutenant governor, and later Governor of Vermont, in the 1930s.¹²

Many survivors were left with horrifying accounts of the flood. In a letter written in 1955, Mrs. Frank Lamb recounted the events of the Vermont Flood to a friend, Rev. C. Adams. Lamb carried two of her children out of a dangerous area before the rising water became impassable.¹³ Many individuals trapped in the flood attempted to rescue themselves, including Leo Beane and his family. They walked along railroad tracks, precariously crossed high water,

⁹ Clifford and Clifford, 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 16-17.

¹¹ L. A. Kelty, "How Lieut Gov Jackson Met Death: Globe Correspondent Says His Passing Changes Political Outlook in Vermont," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 13, 1927, B13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Waterbury Historical Society, *75th Anniversary, Nov. 3-4, 1927 Flood* (Waterbury, VT: Waterbury Historical Society, 2002), 11.

and eventually reached shelter in a neighbor's home.¹⁴ By the time the heavy rain stopped on the evening of November 4, 1927, between seven and nine inches of rain fell on Vermont, and the widespread destruction of communities from Rutland to Saint Johnsbury was evident to state residents.¹⁵ While heavy rain impacted communities in Quebec, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire, the extreme flooding primarily occurred in Vermont, as the state's many rivers and tributaries were unable to accommodate the rapid increase of the water level. The severity of the flooding had a lasting impact on the region.

The flooding brought high financial misfortune as well as a significant loss of life for such a small state. Prior to the Vermont Flood, the United States had experienced heavy flooding earlier in 1927 in the Mississippi River Basin. While more individuals were killed and greater damage occurred from the previous flooding in the Mississippi River basin, Congressman Ernest Gibson argued that Vermont suffered \$86.35 per capita in damages. Comparatively, he explained that the state of Mississippi only faced \$25.85 per capita in damages and other states in the Mississippi River Valley only suffered a fraction of that amount in per capita damages from flooding the previous spring.¹⁶ In contrast, damage was particularly significant for Vermont's isolated towns and hamlets.

The Vermont Flood had a drastic impact on small communities, and particularly on isolated towns built on the sandbanks of rivers, like Gaysville. Situated along the White River, about 56 buildings in Gaysville were destroyed and left most of its citizens homeless.¹⁷ In the days immediately following the Vermont Flood, rumors about high death tolls were rampant throughout the state. Despite concern that Rutland was entirely destroyed by the flood, the *New*

¹⁴ Waterbury Historical Society, 15.

¹⁵ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 421.

¹⁶ Clifford and Clifford, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

York Times confirmed “earlier reports that one of the reservoir dams had been carried out by the flood” were false.¹⁸ Though early estimates for the flood’s death toll were as low as 45 fatalities, more recent scholars, including W. E. Minsinger, estimate the actual death toll of the flood was much higher.¹⁹

The extreme destruction in Vermont was made worse because of the state’s lack of modern resources, including a limited infrastructure and communication network. Following the Vermont Flood, the state was at risk for an economic recession because many of its industries were destroyed. Vermont lacked the economic resources of neighboring states also impacted by the flood, like Massachusetts and southern portions of New Hampshire, to recover without drastic economic ramifications. Though Vermont had a comprehensive railway network, the impact of the disaster on transportation systems was worsened because of the state’s limited hard-surfaced roads. In 1924, Vermont only had 20 miles of paved highways. Despite some progress, highways had not significantly expanded by 1927.²⁰ Few unpaved roads even had gravel, leaving vehicles commonly stuck following the annual spring thaws. While the state’s rail network faced moderate damage, Vermont’s underdeveloped road networks and aging bridges were easily washed away by the flooding in 1927.

Beyond damages to the state’s transportation systems, communication networks were temporarily disrupted because of the Vermont Flood. Even larger cities, like Montpelier, lost their telephone and telegraph lines from the flood. For several days, the capital’s only means of communication with the rest of the nation was through two amateur radio operators who powered their radios with doorbell batteries.²¹ During initial recovery efforts, the *New York*

¹⁸ “Troops Rescue Rutland Victims,” *New York Times*, Nov. 4, 1927, 1.

¹⁹ Clifford and Clifford, 31-32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 37.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 21.

Times reported immediately after the flood that it was essential to regain wire communications before the “bitter Winter weather will strangle makeshift communication lines.”²² Vermont lacked sophisticated communication networks in urban areas; to ensure recovery, restoring these limited networks was prioritized after the flooding. The Vermont Flood’s impacts were severe because of the state’s lack of modern resources, like contemporary infrastructure and comprehensive communication channels.

Vermont’s industries also suffered from the flood, including the state’s important granite producers. A major global supplier and essential component of economic growth in the 1920s, Vermont’s quarries used innovative pneumatic tools to increase both production and revenue. Throughout the early twentieth century, the granite processing facilities also set nationwide industry workplace safety standards.²³ Unfortunately, the flooding destroyed or damaged a significant portion of the state’s granite factories. Granite operations in Barre were closed for almost four months due to the disaster.²⁴ Beyond Vermont’s importance in the regional supply chain, federal financial assistance was necessary to ensure the recovery of Vermont’s primary industries.

Vermont’s other major employers, mills and factories, were also damaged by the flooding. Though the textile industry was more prominent in New Hampshire and Massachusetts, mills owned by the American Woolen Company in Winooski, Burlington, Bennington, and the Black River Valley were major regional employers.²⁵ While mills outside of Vermont faced some damage, twenty-five feet of water rapidly flooded numerous mills.²⁶

²² Associated Press, “Flood Area Races Against Winter,” *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1927, 8.

²³ Harry B. Ashe, “Silicosis and Dust Control: Vermont’s Granite Industry,” *Public Health Reports* 70, no. 10 (1955): 983.

²⁴ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 423.

²⁵ Clifford and Clifford, 34.

²⁶ “Big Textile Plants Stood Flood,” *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1927, 10.

Following the flood, the *New York Times* reported that it was “impossible [for textile manufacturers] to estimate the exact loss to generators and electrical equipment in plants.”²⁷

Recovery from the flood was slow and it took months for some factories to resume production.

²⁷ “Big Textile Plants Stood Flood,” 10.

Immediate response to the Vermont Flood

During the emergency response and immediate reconstruction efforts, mutual aid and community support were still used by Vermonters to ensure the broader communities' recovery. Students from schools including the University of Vermont and Middlebury College; Burlington area high school students; and cadets from Norwich University all took leading roles to clean up the hardest hit communities like Bolton and Montpelier.²⁸ First responders in many communities provided emergency aid. In Waterbury, volunteer first responders like Police Chief W. E. Collins attempted to save individuals trapped in their homes while floodwater was quickly rising. Community firefighters provided emergency rescues for individuals trapped in many smaller towns. Led by two employees of a local undertaker, numerous trapped individuals were rescued from verandas and second-story windows in temporary boats constructed from coffins.²⁹ The state mobilized the National Guard, to provide emergency rescues for trapped citizens. Despite valiant community efforts, state officials quickly realized the necessity to look beyond the mutual aid system and expand disaster assistance.

Beyond railroad and infrastructural networks, Vermont's agriculture industry was also a major economic driver and a local and regional supplier of food. Citizens throughout the region feared food's long-term inaccessibility. Temporary rationing occurred both in parts of Vermont and the greater New England region after the flood. Soldiers stationed between Colchester and Essex at Fort Ethan Allen and the local National Guard developed plans for food and fuel rationing beginning on November 5.³⁰ Vermont's dairy farmers supplied much of New England

²⁸ "Rail Lines Resume in Northern Vermont: Middlebury Student Do Flood Relief Work in Winooski Valley Towns," *New York Times*, Nov. 20, 1927, 6.

²⁹ Lloyd E. Squier, *When the Water Came to Waterbury: A Tragedy in Three Acts Depicting Scenes of the Great Flood of November, 1927, as They Occurred on the Panoramic Stage of Vermont's Most Devastated Valley* (Waterbury, VT: The Record Print, 1928), 17.

³⁰ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 423.

with milk and cheese, including 65% of Boston's milk.³¹ Urban centers, particularly Boston, panicked over the destruction of Vermont's dairy industry and placed limits on milk consumption after the disaster. Widespread hunger was avoided in Vermont's hardest-hit cities like Waterbury and Montpelier because of these immediate, strict rationing efforts. Shortly after the disaster, a Rutland grocery store manager reported that "this talk of food famine is mere hysteria," as food supplied by government and community relief efforts already successfully reached communities in need.³² Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and other nearby states prioritized ensuring that Vermont received aid because of the state's agricultural importance for the region's food supply.

As waters began to recede on November 6, 1927, Governor Weeks recognized the paramount importance of federal assistance and requested that President Calvin Coolidge send Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover to assess the damage.³³ Following the Mississippi River flooding, Hoover had unprecedentedly expanded federal programs to provide humanitarian relief. Despite initial reservations regarding federal intervention, Weeks hoped to persuade Hoover to provide similar assistance in Vermont. The Secretary visited and surveyed the disaster, and officially put in a request for

the Red Cross to assume full responsibility for emergency relief; a way found to provide emergency credits to damaged businesses; and finally, an estimate to be made by the Federal Highway Bureau of the cost of restoring federal aid roads, while the state and federal agencies worked out the responsibilities for reconstruction.³⁴

To ensure recovery, Weeks followed Hoover's recommendation and requested assistance from the Red Cross. At the time of the flood, the Red Cross worked closely with the federal

³¹ Clifford and Clifford, 36.

³² *Ibid.*, 63.

³³ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

government to provide aid. The charity was designated as the official nonprofit aid organization to provide flood relief. The organization eventually donated over a million dollars of charity funding to Vermont.³⁵ By 1928, 11.6 percent of Vermonters received Red Cross assistance, which was more than any other state.³⁶ Local Red Cross chapters helped provide food and resources for Vermont's citizens. In addition to major recovery projects, the *New York Times* also reported that the Red Cross assisted farmers rebuild their homes and barns and obtain new cattle herds.³⁷ The federal assessment, assurance of government assistance, and support from charity organizations like the Red Cross allowed Vermont to efficiently recover from the natural disaster.

In addition to the extreme scale of the disaster, this federally-backed disaster relief was provided because of Vermont's growing importance in the regional economy. Vermont was a vital to the interstate trade and the supply chain in New England. Its rail network was more developed than the state's limited highways and transported goods and people through New England. Daily trains transported goods and individuals from Vermont to Quebec, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York, and beyond. In addition, the flooding destroyed gasoline pipelines throughout the state. One hundred twenty-five thousand gallons of gasoline, which were critical for the operation of transportation networks, were lost.³⁸ In addition to shortages faced throughout Vermont, New Hampshire and Massachusetts also faced gasoline shortfalls. *The Boston Globe* reported on the shortages and explained that remaining gasoline was prioritized for vehicles distributing food and emergency supplies.³⁹ The temporary loss of

³⁵ Clifford, 90.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁷ "To Provide Dinners at Flooded Towns," *New York Times*, Nov. 21, 1927, 17.

³⁸ "Flood Area Visited by Snow, Vermont Already Rebuilding," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 7, 1927, 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

railways and additional infrastructure prevented Vermont from contributing to the regional economy immediately after the flood.

In addition to the its impact on the economy, the flood also increased unemployment in Vermont. Prior to the flooding, the state's rural economy was already weaker than national averages and had slow financial growth. While the national income average was \$715 per capita, Vermont's citizens made just \$699 per capita in the late 1920s.⁴⁰ In the months following the flood, many citizens were out of work, with railroads, farms, and the granite industry destroyed or damaged throughout the state. During this period, hundreds of workers were paid to assist in various clean up and reconstruction projects throughout the state by the federal government. In Montpelier, the commissioner of public works reported that between 300 and 400 individuals were paid weekly to assist with removing debris and rebuilding the city's destroyed buildings and roads.⁴¹ Though these reconstruction jobs were temporary, they both filled an economic gap for many farmers and laborers who were unemployed following the flood and provided essential manpower to rebuild cities and towns. During recovery from the flood, Vermont's citizens participated in new employment opportunities and directly benefited from government-sponsored financial assistance.

In addition to the high levels of damage and limited economic resources, the Vermont Flood's overwhelming scale caused the disruption of mutual aid because authorities did not trust impacted individuals' ability to assist in their own recovery. This concern was prevalent because of the flooding's widespread devastation resulting in the state's leadership to panic. Though additional federal assistance was essential for Vermont's recovery, Vermonters remained capable

⁴⁰ Clifford and Clifford, 33.

⁴¹ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 427.

to contribute to reconstruction efforts despite the magnitude of disaster.⁴² Vermonters significantly participated in community assistance and provided financial donations to assist with recovery efforts. Similar to earlier disasters like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, federally-backed relief initiatives disrupted mutual aid systems because of authorities' lack of confidence in individual recovery efforts.⁴³ Though sociologist Enrico Quarantelli suggested that "panic is a relatively rare phenomenon" for individuals in emergency situations, powerful players and government leaders often overreact and panic during disasters.⁴⁴ Following the Vermont Flood, the disaster's scale inspired panic among the state's political elite. Authorities, including Vermont's state and national representatives, panicked and described the desperation through all available communication channels. The *Burlington Free Press* recounted an interaction between three stranded motorists and Vermont's governor, which highlighted that the political leadership amplified the crisis through all possible communication channels.

A man drove up...and, when he learned that [the motorists] desired to get to Burlington, he said: "You will not be able to get over the railroad or the highway out of the city for two weeks." "Do you live here?" one of the men asked him. "I guess I do. I am the Governor," was the reply. The men said the governor looked very downcast. That was when they decided to walk.⁴⁵

Authorities' panic during the Vermont Flood was often warranted and provided additional attention to the disaster, but their reactions still contributed to an elite panic. Besides officials' panic about the disaster, the scale of the flooding encouraged mutual aid systems' destruction because of the unprecedented damage to towns and cities and Vermont's limited economic resources.

⁴² Associated Press, "Flood Area Races Against Winter," 8.

⁴³ Rebecca Solnit, *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster* (New York, NY: Viking, 2009), 34.

⁴⁴ Lee Clarke and Caron Chess, "Elites and Panic: More to Fear than Fear Itself," *Social Forces* 87, no. 2 (2008): 993.

⁴⁵ Clifford and Clifford, 21.

Though state officials were desperate for outside aid, they were concerned that Vermont's lessening autonomy would negatively impact its citizens' independence. These fears of outside assistance were exacerbated because the National Guard imposed martial law in communities, including Montpelier, and focused its resources to prevent looting instead of rescuing and providing support to distressed Vermonters.⁴⁶ In Cavendish, the Vermont National Guard patrolled the slowly-receding rivers and damaged dikes to ensure residents' safety in the days following the flood; however, the *Boston Globe* also reported that "the guardsmen... [policed] the entire area for the protection of the residents from undesirables."⁴⁷ Though prioritizing looting prevention only occurred in isolated instances, reports like the *Boston Globe's* article contributed to Vermonters' distrust of federal support. Despite initial concerns about losing autonomy, Vermont's state officials requested essential outside assistance as the ramifications from the flooding became more noticeable to authorities.

Following the devastating flooding, most emergency rescues and assistance was provided by local community members. Local authorities, however, believed assistance beyond the state's capacities was crucial for recovery because of Vermont's agriculture industry and overwhelming economic repercussions. The increasingly evident magnitude of the Vermont Flood inspired state authorities and national representatives to request additional federal assistance.

⁴⁶ Clifford and Clifford, 64.

⁴⁷ Richard Fiske, "Sharp Cold Hits Vermont Hills: Warm Clothing Greatest Need in Little Villages—Food and Water Needs Are Met," *Boston Globe*, Nov. 8, 1927, 16.

Vermont's turn to the federal government

During recovery efforts from the Vermont Flood, mutual aid was the sole provider of disaster relief. Soon, however, the state turned to the federal government for disaster assistance. Despite this expansion in federal assistance and relief efforts shifted back to mutual aid as the flood's long-term relief efforts progressed. Permanent expansions of local government did occur after the Vermont Flood, but the federal government assistance did not provide long-term support. Rebuilding the state remained a local task because the federal support only provided short-term assistance to Vermont.

The federal government made critical contributions for flooding relief in Vermont, but the relief programs were only temporary because of resistance from local officials. Though federal assistance was essential for recovery, Governor Weeks initially resisted disaster relief assistance from the United States military. He told U.S. Army Captain Charles S. Ferrin that "Vermont can take care of her own" when the military attempted to send support from Boston, Massachusetts.⁴⁸ Resistance to federal assistance was primarily caused by both the independence of Vermont's local government and isolated examples of unproductive disaster relief efforts, including the National Guard's priority to preventing looters instead of rescuing individuals. Vermont had historically rejected national involvement in state affairs, personified by Ethan Allen's defiant remarks regarding a 1770 border dispute with New York that "the gods of the valley are not the gods of the hills."⁴⁹ Vermont proliferated the image of independence as a statewide cultural identity and struggled to accept assistance from and integration into the United States throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As the need for federal

⁴⁸ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 424

⁴⁹ H. Nicholas Muller III, "Vermont's "Gods of the Hills": Buying Tradition from a Sole Source," *Vermont History* 75, no. 2 (2007): 125.

assistance became increasingly evident, Vermont politicians rescinded their previous statements, as the governor stated that “federal troops have been of the greatest assistance in relief work in the flooded areas of the northern part of the State. This help is greatly appreciated. Rumors have gone out that Federal aid was unnecessary, which is entirely wrong.”⁵⁰ During appropriations debates in Congress following the Vermont Flood, Representative Elbert Brigham apologized for requesting financial assistance and explained that the aid was only necessary “because a disaster has befallen our State so overwhelming that it is without parallel in her history.”⁵¹ Vermonters prided themselves on their self-reliance and Brigham reminded politicians that the Vermont Flood was “the first time that representatives of Vermont in the 136 years of its membership in the Union [had] appeared before a committee of Congress, asking for relief.”⁵² Despite the 1927 flood’s devastation, some Vermonters remained resistant to federal aid. Nevertheless, national politicians requested federal assistance to ensure Vermont’s recovery from the disaster.

Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, communities in Vermont had strong local democracies, remained geographically isolated, and had small, interconnected populations. These factors perpetuated mutual aid systems throughout Vermont society and this self-initiated relief system flourished before the Vermont Flood. Citizens worked collaboratively to solve local issues through local democratic efforts. Town meetings annually occurred throughout Vermont, providing citizens an opportunity to voice their concerns about local issues.⁵³ Both concern for other community members and direct political participation were high throughout the state, leading political scientist Frank M. Bryan to argue

⁵⁰ Associated Press, “Flood Area Races Against Winter,” 8.

⁵¹ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 426.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Bryan, 6-7.

that “no state has stronger real democracy than Vermont... Vermonters are voters.”⁵⁴ Vermont’s unique independence and personalized political processes strengthened the state’s system of mutual aid before the flood.

As part of the relief efforts from the Vermont Flood, federally-funded disaster relief replaced the state’s prior system of community support because of the disaster’s scale. The United States Geological Survey reported that the Vermont Flood “was the most destructive hydrologic event in the State’s history.”⁵⁵ The flood caused an estimated \$35,000,000 in damage and left three percent of the state’s population homeless.⁵⁶ Studies after the Vermont Flood showed that 264 houses were destroyed and 1,400 damaged.⁵⁷ The unprecedented damage led Vermont’s Governor John Weeks to pronounce to the Vermont Senate that the flood was “the greatest catastrophe in Vermont’s history.”⁵⁸ The severity of the destruction forced the state government to look beyond locally-organized mutual aid. After Secretary of Commence Herbert Hoover viewed the destruction on November 16, he reported that “the cost of rehabilitation [was] beyond the means” of Vermont’s small communities.⁵⁹ Because of the damage, assistance from the federal government was critical for the state’s recovery.

Beyond the Red Cross’s charity support already provided to Vermont, Congress also allocated an additional \$2.7 million dollars to assist with the reconstruction of the state’s infrastructure.⁶⁰ This funding allowed for the reconstruction of the state’s roads, bridges, and train tracks destroyed in the flood. In addition to financial support, the federal government also

⁵⁴ Bryan, 290.

⁵⁵ Richard W. Paulson, Edith B. Chase, Robert S. Roberts, and David W. Moody, “National water summary 1988-89: Hydrologic events and floods and droughts,” *Water Supply Paper 2375* (1991): 527.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 537.

⁵⁸ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 424

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 425.

⁶⁰ “After '27 Flood, a splash of help from the Feds,” *Rutland Herald*, Sept. 25, 2005, 1.

provided manpower to assist with relief and reconstruction efforts. Just days after the flood, the *New York Times* reported that the Army airdropped mail and supplies, transported and assembled pontoon bridges to replace washed out bridges, and worked to restore radio and telephone communication.⁶¹ This additional federal funding and emergency support efforts benefited Vermont immediately after the disaster.

Despite resistance from both local legislators and citizens, the federal government also provided medical and engineering support for lasting recovery efforts. In the weeks after the Vermont Flood, the military utilized cars and aerial support to provide isolated communities with supplies. Vermonters feared outbreaks of typhoid following the disaster, especially because recovery workers were exposed to contained water. Typhoid, as well as other diseases like dysentery, commonly spread after floods “in refugee camps from poor food handling and lack of adequate sanitary facilities.”⁶² Health officials utilized pack animals, cars, and airdropping to ensure that typhoid vaccines were distributed to recovering rural communities to limit the disease’s outbreak. This effort, which included the mandatory inoculation of recovery workers, prevented an epidemic in communities with limited access to clean drinking water.⁶³ Throughout the winter of 1927-1928, the state’s Highway Department took a leading role in rebuilding the state’s lost 1,200 bridges with federal funding.⁶⁴ Vermont briefly turned into a laboratory for developing new bridge designs and construction methods. These many enduring federally-sponsored recovery programs displayed Vermont’s acceptance of federal aid.

⁶¹ Associated Press, “Army Prepares Big Air Relief: Vermont Organizes Flood Relief Work,” *New York Times*, Nov. 9, 1927, 1.

⁶² “Disastrous Midwest Flood,” *The Science News-Letter* 60, no. 4 (1951), 50.

⁶³ Clifford and Clifford, 64.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 119.

The federal government also publicized Vermont's plight to the nation, which contributed to the increased public and private support for the state. Early visits from high-profile federal officials, including Hoover, increased awareness about the flood's destruction. President Calvin Coolidge, originally from Vermont, had previously declined numerous requests to visit the flood relief efforts on the Mississippi River and took a laissez-faire approach to state affairs.⁶⁵ Though delayed by nearly a year, he visited communities recovering from the Vermont Flood including Rutland and Bennington in September 1928.⁶⁶ In addition to his visit, Coolidge's extended family was directly impacted by the flood's destruction, which garnered more federal attention for the disaster. Federal government and non-profit support only temporarily disrupted the mutual aid system, but the additional financial assistance, manpower, and federal attention were critical for Vermont's recovery.

While some Vermonters remained resistant to federal support in the aftermath of the flood, state officials recognized the need for continued U.S. government aid. Federal support provided essential short-term support to aid in the state's recovery, but the support failed to have a lasting political impact because it lacked permanence in Vermont. Without a long-term government commitment from federal government or an overwhelming long-term need, Vermonters' acceptance of the federal power's expanding influence was unlikely. While it lacked permanence, this modern expanse in federal involvement within state affairs failed to gain the state and national support necessary for the federal programs to grow into a more-permanent source of disaster assistance.

⁶⁵ John M. Barry, *Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How It Changed America* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 286-287.

⁶⁶ Clifford and Clifford, 134.

Previous disasters' impact on federal response

Beyond the Vermont flood's tremendous scale and lasting economic impacts, the federal government also intervened in Vermont's flood relief efforts because of relief precedents developed from earlier disasters. The federal government's prior involvement in disaster relief, including the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the 1917 Halifax Explosion, and the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 informed the national response to the Vermont Flood. The federal government's range of responses to these previous catastrophes impacted the disruption of the state's mutual aid systems and type of federal assistance provided following the 1927 Vermont flooding.

Like the Vermont Flood, the federal government's response to 1906 San Francisco earthquake supplanted a mutual aid system that was already in place. Instead of prioritizing saving lives and stopping fires, the federal government prioritized preventing looting. The federal government also assisted in rescues and a local military base provided police support to control citizens after the disaster. Following the earthquake and fire, many people found relief from mutual aid, especially from people also impacted by the disaster. San Franciscans left homeless from the earthquake and fire operated temporary cafes and community soup kitchens to help feed their neighbors. Anna Amelia Holshouser, while living as a refugee in an encampment in a public park, operated the Mizpah Café to feed other community members in need.⁶⁷ A similar mutual aid system developed in Glover and Rochester, Vermont after the flood, where women created food substitutes to distribute to neighbors. Despite limited resources, women developed starter yeast and made yeast from potatoes in order to bake bread to feed their communities.⁶⁸ Though the mutual aid systems following both the San Francisco earthquake and

⁶⁷ Solnit, 13-17.

⁶⁸ Clifford and Clifford, 63.

the Vermont Flood were effective and provided essential support to individuals impacted by the flooding, they were unprepared to handle the magnitude of the disasters and their recovery efforts. Following both incidents, the overwhelming scale of destruction required the federal government to expand beyond mutual aid to assist recovery efforts.

The 1917 Halifax Explosion also received critical government support in addition to mutual aid to restore its economy. Two military ships bound for Europe during World War I collided carrying explosives in Halifax's harbor in December 1917, causing the then-largest recorded manmade explosion.⁶⁹ The surrounding city was obliterated. Much like Vermont's economic losses following the flooding, the Halifax Explosion had lasting economic ramifications on both local industries and the supply chain. The explosion destroyed Halifax's shipping industry, fishing industry, and harbor. The Canadian government, as well as nearby American urban centers, prioritized support for Halifax because of its essential economic contributions for the war effort. While Vermont's industries lacked the international significance of Halifax's harbor, the state's economic significance inspired widespread federal attention.

While Vermont's agriculture and rail industries were not as significant as Halifax's shipping ports, they were still critical economic drivers in their region. In addition to the similar economic impacts both communities faced, Halifax's population was demographically and geographically similar with the communities impacted by the Vermont Flood. Like the Vermont Flood, the Halifax Explosion occurred in a geographically isolated region of northeastern North America. Though Halifax was an urban center, it remained a rural community with many isolated homes throughout the 1920s.⁷⁰ While Halifax's wartime industries differed slightly

⁶⁹ Solnit, 74.

⁷⁰ Hugh Millward, "The Spread of Commuter Development in the Eastern Shore Zone of Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1920-1988," *Urban History Review* 29, no. 1 (2000): 21.

from Vermont's agriculturally-based economy, the Halifax Explosion also displayed the interconnectivity of the regional economy as the disaster impacted the military, munitions factories, and medical suppliers, and the shipping industry. The broad economic impact inspired the United States to provide financial assistance and volunteers following the explosion.

Despite multinational support, sociologists Henry Prince and Joseph Scanlon argued that mutual aid remained critical to Halifax's recovery, in addition to many other disaster situations.⁷¹ Many of Halifax's citizens looked past prior social barriers, as mothers cared for orphans from different religious backgrounds and previously-outcasted sailors provided essential support for survivors.⁷² Support from all community members allowed for the city to recover rapidly. While less concerned about the benefits of mutual aid, the United States federal government and local governments in New England both observed the economic benefits of providing federal disaster support during the Halifax Explosion and provided additional support. Lessons from the Halifax Explosion shifted disaster relief policies prior to the Vermont Flood.

Just seven months before the Great Vermont Flood, the Mississippi River's levees broke from heavy rain and most of the southern portions of the Mississippi River flooded. The Mississippi Flood modernized federal disaster relief and "[brought] about the greatest relief effort the country had ever seen, and ultimately changing the balance of power between states, the federal government, and private charity."⁷³ The Mississippi Flood represented the United States' first long-term involvement in disaster relief, which federal relief efforts later attempted to replicate following the Vermont Flood. Congressional flood control funding increased following the disaster, increasing monies already available for Vermont immediately after the

⁷¹ Solnit, 79-80.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁷³ Clifford and Clifford, xii.

disaster. Despite the similarities between both disasters, the Mississippi Flood disproportionately affected the African American community. Both the federal government and the Red Cross attempted to balance racial tensions and ultimately segregated flood relief efforts.⁷⁴ The Mississippi Flood's devastating impacts on African American sharecroppers accelerated the Great Migration and had a permanent impact on race relations in the Mississippi River Delta.⁷⁵ While flood support measures from the Mississippi Flood increased funding available following the Vermont Flood, Vermont's homogeneous population faced drastically different types of challenges during recovery efforts.

While the region impacted by the earlier Mississippi River Flood received long-term federal aid, many federal recovery programs in Vermont only served as short-term assistance. Vermont continued to receive emergency flood financial assistance until 1933.⁷⁶ Comparably, communities impacted by the Mississippi Flood continued to receive legislative support from the Jadwin Plan for the decades.⁷⁷ Funded by Congress, U.S. Army officer Edgar Jadwin's plan for Mississippi River flood control "[including] a spillway above New Orleans, diversion floodways in the Atchafalaya and Tensas Basins, a river bank floodway from Cairo, Illinois, to New Madrid, Missouri, together with strengthening and a moderate raising of existing levees."⁷⁸ Despite resistance from some residents, the plan provided lasting assistance to prevent future flooding.⁷⁹ The geographic scope and extensive scale of the Mississippi Flood demanded widespread assistance, which was deemed less essential in Vermont. Because of Vermont's

⁷⁴ Barry, 378.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 422.

⁷⁶ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 426.

⁷⁷ Barry, 405.

⁷⁸ Edgar Jadwin, "The Plan for Flood Control of the Mississippi River in Its Alluvial Valley. Presented to the Secretary of War and by Him to Congress," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 135 (1928): 34.

⁷⁹ Walter Parker and Ray McKaig, "Scheme of Flood Control Held to Be Based on Wrong Premises. Senator Borah in Idaho," *New York Times*, Oct. 15, 2018, 24.

lower risk for flooding, the federal government did not need to develop and fund widespread engineering projects to prevent future floods. While federal aid disrupted mutual aid temporarily and provided Vermont with the necessary immediate resources to recover from the disaster, this federal support did not continue after reconstruction from the flood had concluded.

The federal response to the San Francisco earthquake, the Halifax Explosion, and the Great Mississippi Flood displayed the United States' government evolving responses to disaster relief and policies they developed prior to the Vermont Flood. Like the Vermont Flood, other charity support, particularly the Red Cross was utilized to provide emergency aid for all three disaster relief precedents. By the time of Vermont's 1927 flood, the federal government was able to build on charity relief efforts. The federal government recognized the extreme scale of destruction, provide support to stimulate local economies, and initiated plans for long-term assistance. While not all prior methods were replicated in Vermont, these disaster relief precedents informed federal response to the flood.

The Vermont Flood's long-term impact on the state and federal government

Like the Mississippi River Flood earlier in 1927, Vermont flood relief highlighted an expansion of federal power, but the paramount long-term impact on Vermont was that relief efforts also led to an expansion of the state government. Executive authority at the state level was expanded, as the need for leadership continuity during relief efforts ended the state's tradition of one-term governors.⁸⁰ As Weeks' term concluded, his reelection deemed was necessary because he had provided critical support for Vermont's ongoing recovery. Permanently ending Vermont's policy of one-term governors, the state allowed Weeks to run for governor again. Because of his leadership during the Vermont Flood, he was unsurprisingly reelected as governor in 1928. Recovery efforts' necessity allowed for Vermont's state government to permanently expand in the years following the flood.

The state legislature also centralized road and other infrastructure repairs because municipalities could not afford the construction projects. This centralization took away local autonomy from individual towns and strengthened the Vermont General Assembly's control.⁸¹ In addition to increasing the power of Vermont's state government, the allocation of flood relief funding caused isolated cases of corruption. Certain railroads, including the Central Vermont Railway, received preferential funding after the Vermont Flood and were able to rebuild and to earn profits months prior to other lines.⁸² Despite some assistance from the New York Central Railroad, other companies including the Rutland Railroad struggled to receive assistance to recover.⁸³ Despite limited instances of corruption,⁸³ the expansion in state government allowed Vermont to govern more effectively following the flood, which allowed for a rapid recovery.

⁸⁰ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 427.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Clifford and Clifford, 109.

⁸³ Ibid.

Beyond eliminating barriers between social classes, some disaster relief efforts provided economic advancement opportunities for poor Vermonters. Some relief programs, including those initiated by Vermont's 1929 legislature, provided tax assistance to Vermont's poorer farmers which provided them with further chances for financial growth and created more opportunities for economic mobility.⁸⁴ Other programs provided new economic opportunities to all Vermonters, including laws passed by the 1929 legislature to expand the aviation industry in Vermont.⁸⁵ Inspired by aviation assistance after the flooding, these laws brought an additional industry to the state. As recovery from the flooding progressed, economic gains for poor Vermonters remained, but the temporary dispersion of Vermont's social classes concluded; however, the flood caused other lasting impacts on social isolation.

Communities also suffered increasing social isolation from the rest of the nation immediately after the flooding because of geographic isolation; however, as federally-back relief efforts progressed, social isolation continued within Vermont because the temporarily-limited mutual aid restricted community connections. During the flood and immediate relief efforts, communities had strong connections. As part of Vermont's mutual aid system, neighbors assisted each other to survive the disaster. Despite these intimate social connections within Vermont, the state remained geographically isolated from the greater United States. Historically, Vermont remained both geographically and socially isolated from the rest of the nation. Immediately after the flooding, both access to and communications with large portions of Vermont were immediately cut off from the rest of the country. Montpelier was cut off from all communications for 30 hours after the flooding, until a temporarily radio transmitter was

⁸⁴ Clifford and Clifford, 141.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

rigged.⁸⁶ Communications remained limited as flood relief continued. Communities were left with no option except assisting themselves, particularly during the initial storming and weeks immediately following the destruction. Among many events to assist individuals after the flooding, the Burlington Red Cross hosted a community Thanksgiving dinner for all residents impacted by the disaster.⁸⁷ Vermont's isolation forced communities to rely on community support and mutual aid immediately following the flood.

As federal financial disaster relief increased and replaced mutual aid following the crisis, communities slowly shifted and became less socially connected. Federal relief efforts prioritized assisting larger cities and towns. This limited support for isolated areas contributed to the decline of small communities in Vermont.⁸⁸ Increased federal funding and support meant Vermonters no longer relied closely on their neighbors for both food and recovery assistance. This social change was temporary, as assistance from the military, Red Cross, and other outside personnel only lasted for the immediate weeks following the disaster. As federal support decreased and mutual aid returned, Vermont's interconnected community continued to flourish. The Winooski Valley organized community clean-up efforts the following May to plant flowers to hide the Vermont Flood's destruction.⁸⁹ Similar efforts occurred throughout the state as mutual aid returned.

While many changes initiated by federal assistance remained temporary in Vermont, the state remained more unified with the greater United States following the federal-funded disaster relief assistance. Despite temporary decreasing connectivity between Vermont's communities, the advent of federal assistance allowed the state to become more interconnected in national

⁸⁶ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 423.

⁸⁷ Waterbury Historical Society, 33.

⁸⁸ Clifford and Clifford, 168.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 126.

affairs. The relief efforts following the Vermont Flood forced the state to “move from ‘independence’ to full participation—and integration—in the region and nation.”⁹⁰ Following the flood, Vermont remained unified with national affairs. Vermont closely contributed to providing support for later national catastrophes like the Great Depression and the Second World War. While mutual aid was temporary replacement with federally-supported relief, social isolation among Vermonters only briefly occurred; however, the federal response overcame Vermont’s geographic barriers and increased the state’s interconnectivity with the rest of the nation.

While the federal aid did serve as practice for New Deal programming, it only served as an extension of prior efforts from the Mississippi Flood. The federal response to the Vermont Flood did not serve as a precedent for New Deal programming because of relief effort’s small size, limited scope, and impermanence. While relief efforts in Vermont impacted nearly the entire state, the recovery efforts ultimately impacted a small number of people. In 1928, Vermont remained small and its 404,000 cows outnumbered the state’s population.⁹¹ While New Deal programs impacted nearly all Americans, Vermont’s small population prevented the federal flood relief efforts from serving as an adequate test for federal relief’s widescale implementation and sustainability. The New Deal also impacted broad areas of American life, ranging from revolutionizing the banking industry to providing federal assistance to artists. Comparably, relief from the Vermont Flood only attempted to provide short-term support to rebuild infrastructure, homes, and businesses. Additionally, federal recovery efforts ended in Vermont upon the reconstruction of the state’s roads and bridges. These programs did not attempt to provide permanent support, while the legacy of New Deal programs’ impact continues to effect twenty-

⁹⁰ Sherman, Sessions, and Potash, 423.

⁹¹ Clifford and Clifford, 33.

first century policies. While the Vermont Flood allowed the government to refine the use of widespread federal assistance, the precedents set by the Mississippi Flood provided a larger scale and more diverse population to serve as more-representative tests of New Deal programming prior to the Great Depression.

Despite the varying short-term social impacts from the flooding including shifts in social class, Vermont's isolation, and the rise of the eugenics movement, the federally-supported disaster relief was short-lived and failed to provide a permanent impact within Vermont society. Though Vermont's state government and citizens were willing to accept temporary federal assistance because of the disaster's scale, economic destruction, and other federal disaster relief precedents, the federal government was reluctant to provide long-term assistance and Vermonters were resistant to accept the support. Scholars repetitively cite that Vermonters' highly valued their state's independence and citizens' resourcefulness.⁹² The state legislation resisted long term assistance from federal government following the Vermont Flood. Few Vermont farmers applied for federal financial relief after the flooding, highlighted by the Flood Credit Corporation's limited applications and popularity.⁹³ Vermont's independence and resistance to further support led the federal government to limit its financial assistance and support.

Following the devastating flooding in November 1927, federally-supported disaster relief temporarily replaced the mutual system aid in Vermont because of the massive scale of the disaster, the copious regional economic impacts caused by the flood, and disaster relief precedents from other early twentieth century disasters. Federal disaster relief in Vermont provided financial assistance and emergency personnel, which allowed the state to efficiently

⁹² Clifford, 177.

⁹³ Ibid., 106.

recovery. While many lasting political and social changes occurred following the flood, including shifts in the state government's power and changes to Vermonters' national isolation. Despite the federal disaster relief's disruption to mutual aid and the short-term social changes it caused, federal support failed to permanently replace mutual aid and community support in Vermont.

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