

# The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and the Great Migration

## How the River Impacted the People

### A Brief History

The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 affected 27,000 square miles and displaced 700,000 people, leaving a lasting impact on the Delta region. It is considered to be the most destructive flood in the history of the United States, causing \$347,000,000 worth of damage in 1927, which would be equal to \$4,233,576,440 in 2010. The flooding came from a series of events, starting in January, when flooding in Illinois caused the Mississippi river to swell. From March, to April the Delta was hit with high levels of rain, which on top of the high river levels made many people fear it would flood. On April 16<sup>th</sup>, the levee in Illinois collapsed, sending 3,000,000 cubic feet of water a second down the river (equal to the power of two Niagara Falls). In Mississippi there were two levee areas of special concern. Both were north of Greenville at the Miller Bend and the Mound Landing levees. A break at either of these places would allow water into the Delta town with the county's largest population of about 15,000 people. Levee guards were on duty and the stack of sandbags were almost even with the rising water when the levee at Mound Landing in lower Bolivar County gave way on the morning of April 21, 1927. The rush of water went all the way down the river to New Orleans and spread out to cover portions of Arkansas, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri and Oklahoma. Downtown Greenville, which is located on the Mississippi River, was covered in 10 feet of water at some points and people were taking cover on the roof of their homes, waiting to be rescued.

The 13,000 African Americans of the Greenville area were the most affected by the flooding because they received the least emergency support. During the flood the African American population of the city were moved into an area now known as Tent City, a makeshift refugee area built with assistance by the Red Cross. They were not offered evacuation assistance like the white members of the town and the city asked the African American men to help with recovery work, which they were not paid for. The African American workers were essential in repairing the levee - 500 men worked 2 shifts around the clock for 9 days to help the civil engineer repair the levee and to save the town from further destruction. The Red Cross threatened that if they did not help with the repairs that they would not be given emergency assistance food supplies, when news of this broke outside of the Delta by the Associated Negro the then Press Secretary of Commerce Herbert Hoover, who served as chairman of a special committee to coordinate all flood relief efforts, created the Colored Advisory Committee to look into the allegations, bringing national attention to the events. Because of the poor treatment, a huge portion of Greenville's African American population moved north to Chicago and Detroit where there was already a booming Blues culture - the movement is now known as the Great Migration.

### Discussion Questions - Fact and Opinion

*What is a Delta? (fact)*

A delta is a low, watery land formed at the mouth of a river. It is formed from the silt, sand and small rocks that flow downstream in the river and are deposited in the delta. A delta is often (but not always) shaped like a triangle (hence its name, delta, a Greek letter that is shaped like a triangle). The minerals in the soil of the delta that have slowly eroded over time make the region fertile for agriculture.

(Sources: <http://www.enchantedlearning.com/geography/landforms/glossary.shtml>)

*What is a flood? (fact)*

Flooding happens during heavy rains, when rivers overflow, when ocean waves come onshore, when snow melts too fast or when dams or levees break. Flooding may be only a few inches of water or it may cover a house to the rooftop. Floods that happen very quickly are called flashfloods. Flooding is the most common of all natural hazards. It can happen in every U.S. state and territory. Because flooding happens so rapidly, people often find themselves unprepared.

The Mississippi Delta is in a floodplain. Floodplains form alongside shallow rivers. As the rivers move back and forth across the landscape they form an area around the river where the elevation of the land is lower than other areas.

(Sources: <http://www.fema.gov/kids/floods.htm>, <http://www.kidsgeo.com/geology-for-kids/0080-floodplains.php>)

*What happened to the people of the 1927 flood? (fact)*

*Why would African American people want to move somewhere else after the flood? (opinion)*

*Why did so many people from the Delta Region move to Chicago and Detroit? (fact/opinion)*

Chicago, Illinois and Detroit, Michigan are very different from the geography of Greenville, Mississippi but have a very similar music culture, which made it a welcoming community to people from the Delta. \*Consider asking if any students have family in Chicago or Detroit – you may be surprised how many do!

### Activities to Reinforce the Learning:

#### Connecting the 1927 Flood Area Using Maps:

Distribute a map of Mississippi and its surrounding states to illustrate the extent of the Great Flood. Tell students that the Great Flood of 1927 affected an area of approximately 27,000 square miles. Have them pinpoint their town on the map with a compass and draw a circle with a radius of about 93 miles around it. This will illustrate the enormity of the area flooded in 1927. Ask them to list the things that would be affected by such a flood. (Another way to illustrate the huge area flooded is to have students color in the states of Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire, and Vermont on a U.S. map to represent the 27,000 square miles.) (Worksheets are attached)

(Source: <http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/230/index.php?s=lesson-plans&id=232>)

#### Writing prompts:

- If you lived in Greenville during the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 how would you convince your family move to another city?
- Imagine you could go back in time to 1927, what do you think Greenville looked like before and after the flood?
- Floods can be very scary because they happen so quickly. Imagine you lived in 1927 during the flood, what would you write in a letter to your family in another city?

## FRAMEWORKS AND COMPETENCIES

### SOCIAL SCIENCE

#### 1. Develop an understanding of the state in relationship to the expanding horizon theme. (C, H, G, E)

c. Evaluate the impact and interactions among all groups through the history of Mississippi (e.g., European, African, Asian, Native Americans, etc.)

d. Identify the ideas and individuals that were significant in the development of Mississippi and that helped to forge its unique identity (e.g., cotton as king, Mississippi waterways, music, literature, etc.).

e. Explain the connections between Mississippi and other states (e.g., economic, political borders, etc.).

#### 3. Demonstrate the ability to use social studies tools (e.g., timelines, maps, primary sources, globes, compasses, graphs, technological resources, grids, schedules, etc.). (C, H, G, E)

a. Describe relationships among people, places, and environments (e.g., the Delta and the blues, etc.)

d. Identify time relevant to the student's environment (e.g., home/school) by using social studies tools (e.g., maps, timelines, graphs, etc.)

For more information, contact

For reservations or additional resources, contact

## READING/LANGUAGE ARTS FRAMEWORKS

1. The student will use word recognition and vocabulary (word meaning) skills to communicate.

c. *The student will develop and apply expansive knowledge of words and word meanings to communicate.* (DOK 1)

3. The student will express, communicate, or evaluate ideas effectively.

a. *The student will use an appropriate composing processes (e.g., planning, drafting, revising, editing and publishing/sharing) to compose or edit.* [Note: Editing will be tested under competency four.] (DOK 3)

d. *The student will compose informational text and at least three supporting details.* (DOK 3)

2. Letters, thank you notes, invitations

e. *The student will compose a simple persuasive text.* (DOK 3)

### Resources on the Great Flood of 1927:

- Mississippi History Now: The Flood of 1927 and Its Impact on Greenville, MS  
<http://mshistory.k12.ms.us/articles/230/the-flood-of-1927-and-its-impact-in-greenville-mississippi>  
(history, lesson plans)
- Mississippi Levee Board: <http://www.msleveeboard.com/1927.html>  
(pictures of Greenville during the flood)
- PBS American Experience: The Fatal Flood <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/flood/index.html>  
(timelines, maps, teacher's guides and songs/recorded interviews about the flood)
- Going to Chicago: The Story of America's Great Migrations:  
<http://www.georgeking-assoc.com/gointochicago/index.html>  
(music, art, poetry, short films and educator resources about the Great Migration from the Delta)

There were several songs inspired about the flood including:

- "High Water Everywhere" Charlie Patton [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72oQy\\_M7h4Q](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72oQy_M7h4Q)
- "Broken Levee Blues" Lonnie Johnson <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pB-qf-L053Q>
- "Greenville Levee Blues" Alice Pearson <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLGrodTtL1I>