

## Floods of Douglas County's First 150 Years

Water has always been an important resource in Colorado. The lack of water or of water rights can make or break a town or subdivision. Douglas County, home to many small creeks and dry creek beds, has had its share of extreme weather. A heavy rainstorm on the Palmer Divide south of Greenland can cause major flooding in Castle Rock. A cloudburst near West Creek can cause damage to sections of highway as far north as Deckers, nine miles away. While dams and other means have been built or proposed to protect Denver, the Douglas County area is still subject to this type of natural disaster.

[1864](#) | [1885](#) | [1912](#) | [1921](#) | [1933](#) | [1935](#) | [1965](#) | [1973](#) | [1983](#)

## May 19-20, 1864

When Denver was founded in 1858, the miners and gold seekers camped on both sides of Cherry Creek, an insignificant stream bed that no one took too much notice of other than for gold panning purposes. On one side of the creek was "Denver City" founded by William Larimer. On the other side of the creek was "Auraria City." The rivalry between the two settlements was so intense that the Rocky Mountain News and the City Hall were both built on stilts in the creek bed, despite warnings from the native Cheyenne and Arapahoe who had lived in the area for years. The Rocky Mountain News carried the following article in 1885 after another flood:

"There is a tradition that when Count Murat and his party of permanent settlers first reached the mouth of Cherry Creek in the fall of 1858, friendly Indians warned them against camping in the bottoms on account of great floods which had come down the creek in times past, and when the Count and his party laughed at the idea of Cherry Creek producing floods the Indians pointed to the debris left by the falling waters in the tops of tall cottonwoods on the banks of the harmless looking gully. This unanswerable argument probably influenced the early settlers into going a few miles up the Platte and establishing the short-lived town of Montana [on Little Dry Creek at what is now Englewood.]"

The settlement at Montana was soon abandoned, and the settlers moved to the confluence of Cherry Creek and the Platte. By 1860, Denver City and Auraria had merged to become Denver and the Rocky Mountain News published the following article on August 1:



"Cherry Creek appears to present a rather serious problem, for we have had a demonstration of what may be expected from a heavy rainfall on the Divide [the Palmer Divide, south of Larkspur], though we are not yet inclined to believe the Indian claims that the whole settlement is subject to flood."

The debate about whether Cherry Creek posed a serious flood threat to Denver was settled in 1864. Albert B. Sanford, the curator of the State Historical Society Museum, wrote an article for the Colorado Magazine in May 1927:

"Encroachments of owners on lots on what was commonly called the channel, by construction of stables and outbuildings had narrowed the narrow course to that was considered, by a sort of gentlemen's agreement, a reasonable right-of-way for the creek in caring for its drainage responsibilities. On the afternoon of May 19, 1864, a moderate rain occurred in Denver, but for several hours heavy black clouds obscured the Divide and frequent rumblings of thunder were heard... By midnight, the great majority of citizens were in their beds. Suddenly those who chanced to be awake heard a strange sound in the south like the noise of the wind, which increased to a mighty roar as a great wall of water, bearing on its crest trees and other drift, rushed toward the settlement..."

The Cherry Creek Flood Commission, appointed by the mayor of Denver in 1912 offered

the following:

"The first flood of which we have any record occurred on Thursday and Friday, May 19 and 20, 1864. The flood reached its maximum height about 2 a.m., May 20. This height it maintained until about 7 a.m., at which time the waters began to recede. This flood had its origin at the upper end of the Cherry Creek watershed, being occasioned by a heavy fall of alternating hail and rain, occurring on the afternoon of May 19. This storm extended over the watershed of Plum Creek also, which discharged into the South Platte River, making an unprecedented height."



Tyson Family, 1863, Tyson Family Photograph, 1995.060.

In all, 19 people were killed in the 1864 flood, including the [Tyson Family](#) who homesteaded south of Castle Rock on East Plum Creek. Their neighbor William Garrison described the incident:

"I write to you tonight with a pale hand and very unhappy news. Tyson and family were all drowned two days ago, on Thursday of this week... We had one of the most violent hail and thunder storms that has ever been seen in this country. Tyson's house went with the flood and as yet nothing of any of them has been found and very little or few things that were in the house...The water came down in a perfect flood without the least warning and at the same time it was storming tremendous [sic] and keeping everybody indoors. Joe Bennet was living at Oaks Mill and just made his escape with nothing but clothes on their backs. Their house washed away

before they could return to it. I learn today that Cherry Creek had swept every thing [sic] before it and all that part of Denver was washed away and the news office also and many lives lost and the Platt had cut off all West Denver on the low bottom ground."

--Much of the information in this section is quoted from [Follansbee, Robert and Leon R. Sawyer. "Floods in Colorado." USGS. 1948.](#)

## July 26, 1885

The flood of July 26, 1885, like that of May 22, 1878, was not caused by a general storm, but by local rains over the drainage basin of Cherry Creek, as the available records showed no heavy precipitation throughout Colorado. The Rocky Mountain News, July 27, 1885, mentions the floods of 1864 and 1878 as the two great floods prior to that of 1885.

Local rains over the drainage of Cherry Creek in Douglas County caused

“white capped waves [which] surged down in their mighty anger, threatening to engulf everything in their way, carrying on their surface huge timbers and debris from ill-fated bridges and buildings” in the area of the Larimer Street Bridge in Denver.

--Rocky Mountain News, July 27, 1885

"A big washout near Douglas [just south of Castle Rock] caused considerable delay with trains on the D.&R.G. last Wednesday. The frequent storms are causing enormous expenses to the company this summer."

--Castle Rock Journal, July 29, 1885

Although considerable damage occurred in both Denver and Colorado Springs, Douglas County seems to have escaped most of the destruction.

-- Much of the information from this section was sourced from [Follansbee, Robert and Leon R. Sawyer. "Floods in Colorado." USGS. 1948.](#)



## 1912

“Along Cherry Creek from the [Denver] city limits to a point about a mile above its mouth the flooded area covered a block and a half on the north bank and a half a block on the south bank... In all, 86 blocks in the residential district and 19 blocks in the business district were inundated...

From statements of residents throughout the basin it appears that the heaviest precipitation occurred in the lower half of the basin, extending from Franktown to a point about 5 miles north of Denver, and that the rain was particularly heavy below Parker. In this section the rain was so intermingled with hail and came down so fast that it was said to be difficult to see a hundred yards. The precipitation above Franktown was slight and, according to J. E. Field, did not extend to Castlewood Dam... The rain caused every dry gulch to run bank full, and as the storm apparently traveled down-stream at about the same rate as the water in Cherry Creek, the cumulative effect was nearly the maximum for a storm of that intensity.”

--[Follansbee, Robert and Leon R. Sawyer. "Floods in Colorado." USGS. 1948.](#)

“The rain and hail storm which swept this part of the country on Sunday afternoon was the worst that has visited this section for many years, and a great amount of damage was done to crops in many localities...



## 1912

The big rush of water that came down the creeks and gulches did a great amount of damages to roads and bridges. Over a dozen bridges in the county have been either washed out entirely or badly damaged...

Probably the worst part of the storm visited the northeastern part of the county, where it left ruin and devastation in its path... The [Colorado & Southern railroad] track [near Parker] was moved in places two and three hundred feet from the right of way, according to reports. The bridge at Parker was washed out and it went down the creek and took off the banisters of the big state cement bridge. Much property in that part of the county was damaged. It is said that there were only two houses in Parker, the Hood and Hoskins property, that were not damaged."

--["Worst Storm in Years Visits Country." \*Record Journal of Douglas County\*. July 19, 1912.](#)

"Christopher Jensen, eight year old son of Mr. and Mrs. August Jensen, was drowned last Sunday evening in the flood that came down Sellers' Gulch. He had been sent on an errand to the tool house and was not missed for some little time. It seems that he had gone over to the creek to watch the big flood of water come down the creek, and in some manner fell into the water. Mrs. Harry Jones and Mrs. Myrtle Neice were standing on the bridge west of town and saw him in the water, but were powerless to aid him."

--["Christopher Jensen Drowns in Flood." \*Record Journal of Douglas County\*. July 19, 1912.](#)





## June 2-7, 1921

"At no time in the history of residents here has the river ever assumed the alarming proportions that it has during the rainy season just passed. The women and children at the Water Company town at Platte Canon found refuge, some at the Union school building and others at neighboring houses on the east side of the river far enough removed to be out of danger. Six of the women, however, refused to leave. While their husbands were fighting the torrent trying to save the intake dam and the Company property, they were preparing what temporary comfort for them they could in the way of dry clothing and food. Most of the men worked over thirty-six hours without rest and in case of the intake or further flood cars were ready to take those in camp at the first signal to the high hill near..."

--["Acequia Items." Record Journal of Douglas County. June 10, 1921.](#)

The severest flood of record on South Platte River occurred during June 1921 and was caused by heavy rains widespread throughout the State, June 2-7. The rainfall extended east of the mountains for considerable distance, and the plains tributaries as well as those in the mountains contributed to the flow in the South Platte River. No gaging stations were being maintained at the mouths of the tributaries, and it is impossible to determine the discharge entering the river from tributary streams. At South Platte, in the canyon section, the flood reached a stage of about 9 feet and washed out the narrow-gage track of the Colorado & Southern Railroad in the canyon. From the mouth of the canyon to Denver, a distance of 43 miles, farms in the bottom lands were inundated by the overflow, which varied in width from 1/2 to 1-1/2 miles.



**June 2-7, 1921**

Several families were driven from their homes. Bridges were rendered impassable, and several were destroyed. The South Platte River rose about 7 feet in Denver; the local press estimated that about 500 houses were inundated and many families forced to seek higher ground.

--[Follansbee, Robert and Leon R. Sawyer. "Floods in Colorado." USGS. 1948.](#)



**August 3, 1933**

The Castlewood Dam was built in 1889 so that nearby farmers in usually dry Douglas County could irrigate their crops throughout the year using Cherry Creek water. The dam had two walls several feet apart and many feet thick made of large stones and filled in with broken rock and dirt.



*Sitting on the Castlewood Canyo dam wall, 1900-1916, Helen Oltmans Personal Papers, 1993.005.0040.0003.*

The downstream wall was stepped to a 45 degree angle, and people climbed the dam on weekend excursions. The dam was 600 feet long and 70 feet high.

### [See Photos of the Castlewood Dam](#)

Unfortunately, the dam began to leak almost immediately. 100 feet of the dam was washed out in heavy rains in 1897, but it was soon repaired. The engineer of the dam even responded to questions from citizens of Denver in the newspaper in 1900, reassuring the



*Castlewood Canyon Dam, 1900-1916, Helen Oltmans Personal Papers, 1993.005.0027.0002.*

citizens that “The Castlewood Dam will never, in the life of any person now living or in generations to come, break to an extent that will do any great damage either to itself or

## August 3, 1933

others from the volume of water impounded, and never in all time to the city of Denver.” Struggling financially, several owners of the dam tried to sell enough water to recoup their investments, and possibly improve the dam, but all the plans failed.

After two days of heavy rain, the dam’s caretaker, Hugh Paine, heard the first rumblings of the flood at about 1:30 am on August 3, 1933. Paine rushed into Castle Rock and called the Parker telephone exchange. Nettie Driskill the telephone operator no doubt saved many lives downstream by warning the city of the impending flood. By 7:00 am, the water reached Denver. Only two people died, but the property damage was extensive.

For more information see:

[“Castlewood Dam is Washed out by cloudburst.” Record Journal of Douglas County.](#)

[August 4, 1933](#)

[“The night the dam gave way: a diary of personal accounts.” By Castlewood Canyon](#)

[State Park.](#)



## May 1935

Heavy rains on the Palmer Divide and the Cherry area caused flooding in Elbert and Kiowa, wiping out bridges, railroads and about 40 houses. Earlier in the month, Cherry Creek experienced flooding in the area of Franktown, wiping out a bridge, which the Civilian Conservation Corps stationed in Castle Rock repaired.

[--Record-Journal of Douglas County, May 31, 1935.](#)



## June 16 & 17, 1965

Perhaps the greatest flood in Douglas County history, the 1965 flood caused massive destruction to highways in the county, shutting down transportation south of Denver for weeks.



Damage to Wolfensberger Road bridge, 1965,  
Roberta Moore Photographs of June 1965 Flood,  
1997.043.0010.

A tornado struck Palmer Lake on the Palmer Divide south of Castle Rock. The ground was already soaked from a day of rain the day before, and a torrential downpour caused several inches to fall on the Divide. East and West Plum Creeks, Cherry Creek and Kiowa Creek swelled with water.

By the time the flood reached Castle Rock on East Plum Creek, it was big enough to wipe out Highway 85 (Interstate 25) and all the bridges between south Castle Rock and north Denver.

Sedalia, at the confluence of East and West Plum Creeks, was completely inundated. The Presbyterian Church, Albert Manhart's house, and a number of other building were completely washed away.



Western view of flood damaged buildings near  
Sedalia, Colorado, 1965, Mary Cornish  
Photographs of June 1965 Flood, 1993.006.0007.



By the time the flood reached Louviers and Titan Road, a twenty foot wall of water was rushing down the creek bed. Denver began shutting down streets, rerouting traffic, and evacuating buildings as floodwaters from the South Platte and Cherry Creek crested through the city.

### [See Photos of the 1965 Flood](#)

Throughout Douglas County, helicopters were used to ferry people and supplies across the flooded Plum Creeks, and people rode horses to get supplies across to Sedalia and points west. Eventually the waters receded into Kansas and Nebraska, flooding those states. On the other side of the Divide, the Arkansas River through Pueblo also rose and caused massive flooding.

From the Douglas County News:

#### **FLOODS, WED., THUR., JUNE 16-17, 1965**

Wednesday, June 16, 1965, from about 2 p.m., when a tornado hit Palmer Lake, letting loose a torrential rain following a day long rain. Waters accumulated from the run-off down through East Plum Creek and West Plum Creek, various gulches, converging at south entrance of Castle Rock, washed out all bridges enroute. Cherry Creek gathered more water aided by various gulches enroute west Parker and on into the Cherry Creek Dam. The flooded Plum Creek emptied into the Platte and continued



washing out bridges, buildings down through Denver. Thursday, June 17, 1965, tornado warnings in Castle Rock were issued but winds blew the threatening clouds east into the Elbert-Kiowa area where the skies dumped a deluge in the Kiowa Creek – East Bijou Creek and various gulches, creeks enroute north about 6:00 pm in the meantime about 1:30 p.m., a tornado had dumped tons of water in the Fountain area, sending waters cascading down the flooding Arkansas River east through Pueblo.

Labeled the “greatest calamity in Colorado history,” the floods rolled through Nebraska and Kansas out of Colorado. At the same time, floods were reported originating in New Mexico also...Helicopters not only aided in evacuation, but also in guiding rescue workers and kept the public continually advised. Town, county and state highway crews worked immediately and constantly to make emergency roads in washed out areas. Civilian relief was set up instantly. Area declared a disaster area by President Johnson following Governor Love’s request.



## May 5 & 6, 1973

From the Douglas County News May 10, 1973:

"The heavy rain on Saturday night May 5th, and Sunday May 6th, on top of land that was already saturated from winter snow melt caused lots of personal problems. Almost everybody you talk to was affected in some way, ranging from difficult driving conditions to no phones, no electricity, wet basements or actual flooding. Schools had problems because buses couldn't get to students or the schools had no electricity or no fuel. The worst damage occurred on roads and bridges and many in the county were rendered useless. Electricity was out in the Franktown area for almost 20 hours and there was flooding of fields and homes in the low living areas.

When I was out taking pictures of bridges, I ran across a young couple on Haystack Road trying to carry groceries home. The road around the bridge was gone but the guard rail still crossed the area so the husband was doing a neat balancing act across the top of the guard rail.

We have a small creek that runs across our road that we normally drive across with no problems since it is about three feet wide and three inches deep. Today it is 30 feet wide and 3 feet deep. We have a car on each side, but the only way across is to wade and hope you don't fall down in the soft sand.

These examples are not unusual and there are a lot of unsung heroes in the county including the line men who had to work during the storm to try to restore electricity and the road crews who are just starting to replace all the broken pavement and lost bridges."



**May 10, 1983**

Spring runoff caused flooding in the West Creek area to break the old (no longer maintained) J. O. Hill dam on Pine Lake. Two homes in West Creek were destroyed. The flood continued down Horse Creek, and about twelve sections of Highway 67 were destroyed, trees were knocked down, and the Horse Creek Saloon and Campground had to be evacuated.

If you would like more information on resources available through Archives & Local History, please contact us at [localhistory@dclibraries.org](mailto:localhistory@dclibraries.org).

