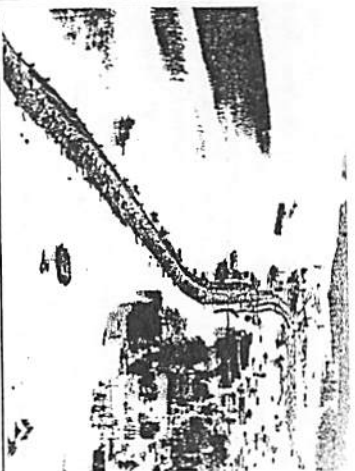


Impacts of the Great Flood

Directions: Use the sources to identify the Social, Political, and Economic changes that occurred because of the Flood of 1927

Source 1

Excerpt from Mississippi River flood of 1927
By The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica



Victims of the Mississippi River flood of 1927 camping on a levee, Arkansas City, Ark. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

After several months of heavy rain caused the Mississippi River to swell to unprecedented levels, the first levee broke on April 16, along the Illinois shore. Then, on April 21, the levee at Mounds Landing in Mississippi gave way. Over the next few weeks essentially the entire levee system along the river collapsed. In some places, residential areas were submerged in 30 feet (9 meters) of water. At least two months passed before the floodwater completely subsided.

In the aftermath, authorities were severely criticized for favoring the white population during rescue and relief operations. Thousands of plantation workers, most of them African Americans, had been forced to work, in deplorable conditions, shoring up the levees near Greenville, Miss. Then, as the waters rose, they were left stranded for days without food or drinking water, while white women and children were hauled to safety. African Americans gathered in relief camps also were forced to participate in relief efforts, while receiving inferior provisions for themselves, and to clean up flooded areas. At least one black man was shot, reportedly for refusing to work.

The flood brought about long-term social and political changes in the country. Over time, African Americans largely switched their loyalty from the historically antislavery Republican Party (the party of Pres. Calvin Coolidge, in office during the disaster) to the Democratic Party. In addition, the disaster contributed to the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to cities in the North.

Source 2

After the Flood of 1927

Following the Great Flood of 1927, the Army Corps of Engineers was again charged with taming the Mississippi River. Under the Flood Control Act of 1928, the world's longest system of levees was built. Floodways that diverted excessive flow from the Mississippi River were constructed. Reservoirs on major tributaries like the Missouri River were also built. By 1936, the Mississippi River had 29 locks and dams, hundreds of runoff channels, and 1000 miles of levees. Would this new set of flood control structures be able to contain a flood event?



US Army Corps of Engineers

The New Madrid, Missouri floodway was built in the 1930s to divert floodwaters from the Mississippi. Although the nearby farm is inundated by water, areas downstream were spared more extensive damage by utilizing the floodway.



Baylor State University

This dwelling was located near the base of a large levee constructed after 1927. Although levees held back small floods, large flooding events could explode through the barrier with the effect of a dam giving way.



Library of Congress

This image shows dam construction on the Mississippi in 1937. Dams were constructed to provide reservoirs for containing floodwaters.



Library of Congress

Locks had to be constructed to allow barge traffic to move around dams. This image shows lock construction on the Mississippi in 1937.

Economic Effects of the Mississippi Flood

Economic conditions in the area inundated by the 1927 Mississippi flood have not yet been restored to normal, although the flood was practically over by the middle of last June and the great majority of the refugees were back in their homes a month later. Recent reports from the flood districts of the lower Mississippi Valley state that some 50,000 flood sufferers face destitution if the outside aid they are now receiving is withdrawn, that many thousands of others have been ruined and will have a difficult struggle to reestablish themselves at their former standards of living and that the economic life of the inundated area has been so thoroughly disrupted that a considerable period will elapse before it can be fully restored.

"While the economic conditions have been much improved, yet the majority of the flood sufferers face problems still unsolved," L. O. Crosby, Director of Flood Relief and Rehabilitation for Mississippi, reported at the beginning of 1928. In much of the area the people have made practically no crops except such feed crops as pea vine and soy bean hay which will possibly carry their stock through the winter. Some of the planters even failed to get more than a very light crop of this hay; others...have enough to carry them along until their alfalfa and oats come on, but they have made no money crops whatever.

Judge W. A. Wail, representing the flood sufferers before the House Flood Control Committee, said, "The 1927 flood left us penniless and in debt," and former Senator Le Roy Percy of Mississippi said, "We are bankrupt; all of the 29 levee districts are up to their limit in taxing capacity." These are typical of statements that have come recently from prominent citizens of the lower Mississippi Valley in support of their claim for appropriate measures of rehabilitation and measures of their control that will protect them against a recurrence of disastrous floods.

In early May of 1928, with the House and Senate trying to reconcile their versions of the bill, Coolidge finally stepped in to strike a deal. To his satisfaction, it stipulated that Washington would be financially responsible only for the areas flooded in 1927. But it also allowed that the cash-strapped localities wouldn't have to contribute and thus spent more federal dollars than the president wanted. It also established a federal board to improve the physical engineering around the river. And, notably, it deemed that the region's flooding to be a matter of national concern. Declaring the measure "the best that can be obtained from Congress," Coolidge accepted it—though he declined to host a signing ceremony, finding the bill in private on May 15, just after finishing his lunch.

Social

Excerpt from The Great 1927 Mississippi River Flood
By John M. Barry

Although there is no scientific data on the question, it seems, based on existing policy and newspaper editorial commentary that most Americans in the 1920s felt the government had no responsibility to provide any direct assistance to individuals. There was certainly a widespread sense that people who sought government help were at best weak and at worst immoral, and government policy reflected such sentiments.

That attitude was reflected in federal policy toward flood relief. In 1927, the Red Cross fed over 600,000 people, some for a year, and more than 300,000 lived as refugees in tent cities. All the money for this was raised privately. Not only did the federal government spend nothing to feed, clothe, and shelter these people, the army demanded reimbursement from the Red Cross for use of its tents and field kitchens.

When it came to recovery, the story was the same. To help these people and the devastated states recover—the agricultural economy in parts of seven states and the banks which had financed the agriculture were destroyed—the federal government spent nothing. Coolidge not only ignored numerous pleas to visit the flooded territory, but refused even to autograph pictures of himself to be auctioned off at fundraisers. The Red Cross gave people departing refugee camps who had lost absolutely everything—every piece of furniture, every cooking utensil, every tool, every farm animal—goods and seeds worth less than \$20. Hoover personally urged bankers and big businessmen to privately finance recovery efforts, but the government did nothing.

By and large, Americans thought this was wrong. Months of media coverage of hundreds of thousands of desperate Americans seemed to change the country's view of government's role. In 1927 John Parker, no longer governor of Louisiana, was in charge of the state's recovery. In 1922 he had refused to seek aid. Now, with 200,000 Louisianans homeless and destitute, he asked for all the aid he could get from every quarter.

<https://www.gilderlehrman.org/history-by-era/roading-twentieth-century/great-1927-mississippi-river-flood>

Political

Economic