

## **PRESS RELEASE**

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# **Johnstown to host seminar on legal implications of the 1889 flood**

JOHNSTOWN, Pa. – Many western Pennsylvanians are familiar with the story of the 1889 Johnstown flood -- but relatively few are aware of the impact the flood had on the American legal system. A seminar to be conducted in Johnstown aims to illuminate the flood's role in the reform of America's liability laws.

The seminar, "The Johnstown Flood: Torts Reformed," will take place at the Johnstown Flood Museum on Thursday, December 8, from 2 p.m.-5 p.m.

The seminar is part of a series of continuing legal education courses, The Pittsburgh Legal History Series, sponsored by the University of Pittsburgh School of Law and by Symons Capital Management, a Pittsburgh-based investment firm.

Local sponsors for the presentation in Johnstown are the Cambria County Bar Association; Spence, Custer, Saylor, Wolfe & Rose LLC; and the Johnstown Area Heritage Association.

"We are delighted to bring this program to its natural home, Johnstown," said Cristopher C. Hoel, an attorney and president of Symons Capital Management. Hoel will also serve on the seminar's faculty. "This course was extremely popular and well-received in Pittsburgh, and we were pleased to be invited to Cambria County."

The program offers three continuing legal education credits to lawyers for \$59; non-lawyers also are welcome to attend, for just \$29. A complimentary reception with the faculty will follow the educational program. Anyone wishing to attend the program and reception may preregister by calling Pitt's law school at 412-648-1305, or register at the door on the day of the event.

The flood occurred when the South Fork Dam failed on May 31, 1889, unleashing 20 million tons of water 14 miles upstream of Johnstown. After destroying intervening towns, the deluge slammed into the city, causing 2,209 deaths and \$17 million in property damage. The dam was owned by the South Fork Fishing & Hunting Club, an exclusive,

wealthy group of businessmen that included Andrew Carnegie, Henry Clay Frick, Andrew Mellon and many other notable men of the period. Despite the devastation -- and ample evidence that essential safety features had been compromised -- no victim's legal claim succeeded, prompting a national debate concerning the adequacy of the American liability system.

The seminar will cover the legal context that enabled the members of the club to avoid liability, the resulting public outrage, and the sweeping changes to the tort system that occurred in the years following the flood. In addition, the current calls for tort reform will be discussed.

"Modern Americans are shocked to hear that no one was held liable for the catastrophic damages caused by the flood," said Richard Burkert, executive director of JAHA and a seminar faculty member. "In fact, the Johnstown flood played a key role in changing the law, which is just one of the many reasons the flood story is still so relevant today."

In addition to Hoel and Burkert, the seminar's faculty includes Ron Carnevali and James C. Munro II, both attorneys with Spence, Custer, Saylor, Wolfe & Rose LLC. Seminar participants will be entitled to tour the museum and to view the museum's Academy Award-winning documentary.

This program was presented to a sold-out audience in Pittsburgh earlier this year, and received excellent reviews by those attending. The Pittsburgh Legal History Series also includes courses concerning the Whiskey Rebellion, the incorporation of United States Steel, and the Homestead Strike.

"Our first invitation, not surprisingly, concerned the flood program," Hoel said. "But we would consider bringing other parts of the series to Johnstown if interest would warrant that. We have found a strong demand for interesting, live CLE courses concerning this area's history."

The seminar is approved by the Continuing Legal Education Board for three CLE credits. Pennsylvania-licensed lawyers must earn 12 credits annually to maintain licensure.

For more information on "The Johnstown Flood: Torts Reformed," visit [www.law.pitt.edu/alumni/cle](http://www.law.pitt.edu/alumni/cle) or call Pitt's law school, 412-648-1305.

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association is a non-profit, membership-based organization dedicated to preserving and showcasing Johnstown's unique history to the nation through high-quality educational, cultural and recreational experiences. JAHA owns and operates the Johnstown Flood Museum and the Frank & Sylvia Pasquerilla Heritage Discovery Center, and produces the AmeriServ FolkFest, a 3-day free music and food festival held annually over Labor Day weekend; events commemorating the 1889 Johnstown flood; and a wide variety of additional cultural programming. The Wagner-Ritter House & Garden will soon open, and a Children's Discovery Museum is being planned. For more information on JAHA programs, museums and events, visit [www.jaha.org](http://www.jaha.org).