

Imagining the Unimaginable

BEFORE

The Flood crashed down the Conemaugh Valley and arrived in Johnstown through the gap between the hills in the center of these photographs. The top photo of Downtown Johnstown was taken before the Flood; the bottom one soon after.

Newspaper artists had the tough job of reconstructing what happened in-between — what people saw during the Flood.

You're the artist reporter!

1. **Read** eyewitnesses' descriptions of the flood-wave on the "Describing the Indescribable" page.
2. **Collect** words that help paint a picture on the "Describing the Indescribable" worksheet.
3. **Find** pictures of waves, floods, wind, and heavy rain for more ideas. Look at the Flood picture galleries.
4. **Draw** what you think people saw when the floodwave hit Johnstown.

This area of Johnstown was not as badly damaged as most other areas. When the Flood reached the massive stone Methodist Church (second steeple from the left), the church didn't budge.

The wave divided in two around the church. Many buildings behind the church (the ones we see in this picture) were saved. The photo galleries show how the rest of Johnstown looked.

Describing the Indescribable

The scenes they witnessed, the sounds they heard, and the experiences through which they passed can never be described.” (Rev. Dr. David Beal) Survivor George Barbour wrote in a letter to his family: “I cannot describe it with a pen, but must try to tell you all.” Hundreds of survivors trying to tell what happened to them would repeat the words, “*I can’t..., but I must.*”

Read the words survivors and eyewitnesses used to try to describe the indescribable:

1. Read each of the eyewitness descriptions of the floodwave on the Web;
2. Write down words or phrases about how the Flood looked and sounded, how it moved, and what it did.

What the eyewitnesses saw and heard...

How it looked: shape, color, texture	How it sounded: the flood, things it hit, people	How big it was: How tall? How wide?	How it moved: Speed, direction, what it carried	What it did: to buildings, land, people and animals

After your reading:

3. Underline descriptions that come up again and again;
4. Circle words that help you see a picture in your imagination.
5. Draw, paint, or model what you picture the floodwave looking like when it hit. Tips: Look at the before and after Johnstown photos — what force of water could make that much damage. For ideas, look at photos of water in motion, like ocean waves, river rapids, or waterfalls.