The Cambria Iron Co. planned and financed the Inclined Plane only months after the 1889 flood. A 600-acre subdivision on top of Yoder Hill was planned by Cambria Iron, which would be readily accessible to Johnstown, but well out of reach of any flood waters. Homes in Westmont, as the community was called, started being sold in August, 1891. Those who could afford homes in the inviting new suburb - mostly company executives - moved to the hilltop and used the Inclined Plane as their commuter transportation to Johnstown.

For almost twenty-five years, the Inclined Plane provided a vital link between Westmont and downtown Johnstown. However, improved roads and increased numbers of cars cut back business drastically. But as the Cambria Iron Company had planned, the Inclined Plane lifted hundreds of people to safety during the 1936 flood.

The Inclined Plane continues to operate even today. Only one major alteration was made to its workings - the replacement of the steam powered engine for a 400 horsepower electric motor. During nearly a century of service, the Inclined Plane has carried more than 40 million people and now operates as a tourist attraction.

Weeks after the flood, when all debris was cleared, earth dug from the cellars and streets of Johnstown was dumped at the Point, thus raising its height five feet. The concrete walls that now line the rivers were the result of a five year flood control program (1938-1943) which cost more than $8 million. Except for the extraordinary flood of 1977, the widened channels and paved river banks have enabled flood waters to move rapidly through the valley without damaging Johnstown, which understandably has been nicknamed “Flood City”.

P. The Inclined Plane

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O. The Point and The Stone Bridge

This wedge-shaped tract of land at the junction of the Stoneycreek and Little Conemaugh Rivers was set aside in 1800 by Johnstown’s founder, Joseph Johns, for the town’s “common and public amusements.” Except for occasional baseball games, the Point was used very little before the 1889 flood.

Trash was dumped at the Point, narrowing the river channels and increasing the possibility of flooding. Sections of the river also were filled in by the Cambria Iron Company and the Pennsylvania Railroad to gain more ground for tracks and structures. These encroachments led to frequent minor flooding during Johnstown’s first century.

Dumping debris into the river was outlawed in 1883, but the law was not enforced. Even if it had been, many other factors contributed to the threatening flood situation which was becoming more and more severe. The rapid growth of population and industry in the valley led to the deforestation of surrounding mountainsides. Without trees, water released by thaws and storms rushed down the slopes, eroding soil which was carried into the rivers and deposited near the Point. Here, the flow of water through the valley was obstructed.

Johnstown suffered seven floods between 1881 and 1889. On May 31, 1889, the Point and the lower end of town already stood in water up to seven feet deep by 1:30 p.m. The main flood wave hit about 4:10 p.m. and wreckage piled up behind the stone railroad bridge, completely covering four acres. (See wayside exhibit.)
A. Cambria Library
(Now Johnstown Flood Museum)

Four months after the devastating 1889 flood, Andrew Carnegie journeyed from Pittsburgh to visit the local steelworks and see the ruins of Johnstown. One of the nation’s richest men, he was better known in Johnstown as a member of the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club. The club was responsible for the South Fork Dam which gave way and sent 20 million tons of water rushing onto the city of Johnstown and the Conemaugh Valley.

This is the site of the former Cambria Library which, along with its librarian, disappeared in the flood waters. Carnegie donated the money to erect a new library on the same site. It was similar to Johnstown’s first library, which had been financed by the Cambria Iron Company. Like its predecessor, the new Library contained 8,000 standard works and had spacious, comfortable reading rooms. Its large, first floor auditorium was used for town meetings. On the third floor there was a gymnasium which included a large exercise track made of padded leather. The library proper was on the second floor. The architect was Addison Hutton of Philadelphia.

In 1973, the public library moved to a new building and this structure became the Johnstown Flood Museum. It is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

N. William Horace Rose House
(Now Knights of Columbus Hall)

1903, when it was moved to their son’s lawn. In 1944, the statue was donated to the city by Morley heirs.

Such a large lawn ornament fuels the imagination as to what kind of homes lined Main Street before the flood. Besides James Morley, who was a manager for the Cambria Iron Company, Daniel J. Morrell, the top company executive until his death in 1885, also had a home at the corner of Main and Walnut Streets. It was the largest and grandest in Johnstown. After he died it was converted into the Morrell Institute, a private school. The Cambria Iron Company’s impressive clubhouse also took up nearly a block on Main Street.

This ornate Queen Anne style residence was built by the first Mayor of Johnstown, W. Horace Rose. Rose was a prominent lawyer at the time of the flood. His original home was destroyed and he and his family were carried some distance away, still clinging to the wreckage. This house was built in the early 1890s, when the city was rebuilding. When all the boroughs consolidated into the new City of Johnstown in 1900, Rose was elected the first Mayor.
B. Cambria Iron Company General Office  
(Now State Community Correction Center)

Johnstown, in 1889, was a company town. Some 7,000 men and women worked for Cambria Iron Company and many of them rented one of the 700 company houses throughout the Conemaugh Valley. Groceries and supplies were purchased at the company store and medical attention could be obtained at the company-financed hospital. Cambria Iron Company could afford such benevolence because at the time of the flood its holdings were well over $50 million.

In addition to being one of the world’s leading steel producers, the company owned many collateral interests. Among these were thousands of acres of mineral lands, 35 miles of railroad track and some 1,500 railroad cars. The company also held extensive real estate, such as a theater, a company executives’ club, shoe and furniture stores, wire, flour, and woolen mills, and several farms located on surrounding hillsides.

This general office building is one of the few structures on this street that survived the 1889 flood. However, it was the Iron Company’s large, three story department store that bore the brunt of the massive impact of the flood wave. The wave tore out an entire wall of the store but left the company’s office building intact.

M. Morley’s Dog

Although there is the mistaken notion that this statue memorializes a pet dog that saved a young girl from the flood waters, it was actually just an ornament that graced the lawn of the James Morley residence for many years. The statue was swept away by the flood wave and carried to a pile of wreckage downstream. The dog was returned to the Morley’s yard. There it remained until

Note the markers above, on the wall of City Hall, showing high water lines during Johnstown’s three worst floods. Flood control measures were taken after the 1936 disaster, yet in 1977, a “once in 500 years” storm caused a flood resulting in 85 deaths and $200 million in damage.

These next three sites represent the era of renewal and rebuilding in the years immediately following the 1889 Flood.
C. Site of Locust Street Red Cross Hotel
(Now St. Mark’s Episcopal Church)

Responding to her first major disaster since the founding of the American Red Cross in 1881, Clara Barton arrived in Johnstown on June 5, 1889, accompanied by fifty doctors and nurses. At age 67, Miss Barton had superabundant energy and worked relentlessly for the relief of the valley’s survivors. The Red Cross directly served over 25,000 victims of the Johnstown Flood.

Here, where St. Mark’s Episcopal Church now stands, the Red Cross built a hotel for “the wealthy, the elegant, the cultured leaders of society, and the fathers of the town.” After finding many of these men homeless and working long hours in the mud and rain to help in the grueling clean-up, Miss Barton reasoned: “As the salvation of the town depended in great measure upon the efforts of these men, it was vitally necessary that their lives should be preserved . . .”

A previous St. Mark’s Episcopal Church had stood here until it and its pastor were swept away by the flood. The “Locust Street Red Cross Hotel” was constructed in fast order. On the outside, the hotel looked much like the large Red Cross warehouse only fifty yards away, but on the inside it was homelike and comfortable. It had hot and cold running water, gas heat, and furnishings donated by companies from far and near.

The Red Cross relief effort continued in the valley another two months. Clothing, medicine, furniture, and domestic supplies were freely distributed to all flood refugees. This was the first real test of the newly organized Red Cross.

K. Presbyterian Church
(Facade visible inside 416 Main St.)

This Presbyterian Church was dedicated in 1866, located midway along Johnstown’s principal business row. The pastor of the church, Reverend David J. Beale, lived in the new parsonage behind the church with his wife and children. The Beales, after the flood wave hit, climbed out over the wreckage and found refuge at Alma Hall. Both the church and the parsonage were spared. Although the church was still intact, it was greatly damaged inside by the water that submerged all its pews.

For weeks after the flood, the church served as one of the valley’s six temporary morgues. As bodies were found, they were brought to the church, where volunteer undertakers from Pittsburgh, as well as other parts of the state, embalmed them. Special care was taken to record any recognizable features. Clothing was also described to help survivors identify lost family members.

Many of the dead were beyond recognition when they were pulled from under debris. Of the 2,209 total dead, 755 remained unidentified. These lie in a special memorial plot dedicated to the Unknown Flood Victims in Grandview Cemetery.
J. Alma Hall
(442 Main Street)

Alma Hall is the head-quarters for Alma Lodge 523 of the International Order of Odd Fellows (I.O.O.F.). Shielded by the Methodist Episcopal Church, it survived the flood wave and gave refuge to 264 people during the night of May 31. This four story brick building was the tallest in Johnstown when constructed in 1884. Office space was rented out on the first and second floors. The third and fourth floors contained meeting halls.

After the flood hit, the first floor was under water. Survivors from all over the valley were swept into the vicinity of the building. Many struggled over the wreckage, submerged in water 18 feet deep, and climbed into the Hall through second story windows. James M. Walters, a Johnstown lawyer, was thrown into his own office window when the rooftop he was on crashed into the building.

While it was still light, some men in the Hall took a rope and went out on the wreckage to help rescue other survivors. Walters was elected as director of the building and three other men were in charge of the hundreds of people gathered on the second to fourth floors.

Women and children were made as comfortable as possible, and prayers were led by Reverend David Beale. Strict orders were given that no one was to turn on any of the gaslights, for fear that escaping gas might cause the building to explode.

In the course of the night two babies were born. Suffering from three cracked ribs, Dr. William Matthews did his best to attend to these newborns and numerous other survivors with injuries.

The threat of the surrounding water crushing the building was ever-present through the long night. By morning, one survivor had died. Those who were able climbed out a window and struggled their way across acres of debris to the safety of Green Hill.

D. Central Park

This park was designated as public space by the town’s founder, Joseph Johns, when Johnstown was first chartered in 1800.

By the mid-19th century, a firehouse, butcher shop, jailhouse, and a large market stood here on the public square. During the Civil War, soldiers used Central Park as a drill field. Children came with their parents to see circuses or watch the town’s two baseball teams, the “Kickenapawlings” and “Iron Club,” practice.

In 1872, the grounds were cleared of all buildings and laid out as a formal park. There was an ornate water fountain in the center. Nearly 100 planted trees offered shade in the summer. It was a small, quiet oasis in a busy industrial town.

The years of landscaping were wiped out in seconds by the flood wave. When the waters receded, debris 10 to 15 feet high filled the park. Within four days the wreckage was cleared to make room for tents that would house the 14th Regiment from Pittsburgh.

After the troops departed, the park was lined with temporary wooden stores for about a year. The square was finally restored as a park, and new trees were planted. Today the park even includes a large, ornate fountain, donated by Frank Pasquerilla and very similar in style to the original fountain from the 1880s.
E. First Methodist Episcopal Church  
(Now Franklin Street United Methodist Church)

The Reverend Henry L. Chapman, pastor of the First Methodist Episcopal Church in 1889, was preparing his Sunday sermon when a B & O Railroad car floated by in front of the parsonage. He rushed his family to the attic. From the attic windows they watched as the row of frame houses down the street were whisked away by the flood waters. “Pale, frightened, and awestricken,” they waited through the long night, “expecting each moment to be swept away.”

The Chapman family survived mainly because their house stood close to the massive sandstone church, which took the brunt of the flood without a crack in its walls. The flood wave parted around the church, and continued on its path of destruction across town. Several other buildings that stood in its protection were still intact when the waters subsided.

Although no damage was done to the exterior, the church suffered serious damage inside. Water broke through the windows and poured into the sanctuary some 18 feet deep, causing the floor to cave in, ruining the plaster, and destroying the choir gallery and numerous pews.

Later, a Citizen’s Committee in charge of reconstruction ordered the church dynamited and cleared away. Fortunately, the commander in charge of relief troops, recognizing its significance in protecting lives and property, placed a guard around the church to save it until the committee reconsidered that decision.

I. Original Tribune Building  
(207 Franklin Street)

On the rainy Friday of May 31, 1889, George T. Swank, editor and publisher of the Johnstown Tribune, was preparing the weekly issue of the paper on the second floor of this building. At 2:30 p.m. he noted that the water stood about a foot deep on Franklin Street and that the current was flowing from Stoney Creek River toward Main Street at about 6 miles per hour. Downstairs, the Tribune staff had given up trying to print the newspaper and was restlessly awaiting the recession of the waters, as was the rest of Johnstown.

Swank received a call at 3:15 p.m. from the Central Telephone Office reporting that South Fork Dam was “getting worse all the time, and the danger of it breaking was increasing momentarily.”

Swank had soothed the fears of Johnstowners about the South Fork Dam for years. If it would break, he assured, it would cause little damage because it would spread out over the valley floor. But even Swank now felt grave concern. “It is idle to speculate,” he wrote, “what would be the result if the tremendous body of water . . . should be thrown into the already submerged Conemaugh Valley.”

The lake water was tearing out of the broken dam on its way to Johnstown when Swank was writing the above quote.

When the flood wave hit downtown at about 4:10 p.m., Swank could see buildings “melt like sugar in fire.” The Tribune men, after being warned of danger by a cracking partition wall, ran into the adjoining building just before part of the rear wall of the printshop collapsed. The men spent the night on the roof in the cold and rain, in the flickering glow of a fire that burned on at St. John’s Church. Morning could not come soon enough.
The original St. John’s Church burned down during the 1889 Flood. The flood wave had already overturned dozens of houses with coal stoves in the kitchens, and one of these crashed into the Church with enough smoldering embers to ignite the structure above the water line. Another spectacular fire erupted at the Stone Bridge, where the debris was soaked with oil from railroad cars that had been swept down from East Conemaugh. The flames there raged for three days before the Pittsburgh Fire Department could get equipment close enough to bring the blaze under control.

Although St. John’s Church was destroyed, a nearby convent did survive. Half the convent building was sheared away by the flood wave, but an upstairs room where the Sisters of Charity had sought shelter was spared, and they were able to climb to safety the next morning.

This house, originally built by John Ludwig, was far enough uphill to escape severe damage in the 1889 Flood and later provided lodging for Clara Barton, according to oral history. The house also became a distribution site for clothing and supplies. In the 20th century, it was Gordon’s Mortuary for nearly three decades.

Some of the commercial structures on Main Street survived the Great Flood because the buildings were so close together that they supported each other against the force of the water. However, the debris in the street was piled up to the second story windows, and it took weeks and thousands of workers to clear the streets and make the buildings safe for use again.
Walking Tour of Downtown Johnstown