

Here's a recent and informative article from the Henrico County Historical Society that addresses the Great Fresh of 1771 and provides sources which, in turn, reference the basis for the height and severity of that flood. You can find more by searching on "great fresh of 1771." Scottsville is on the outside of a horseshoe bend in the James River and subject to the worst effects from flooding. I hope this is useful. Tim Small

Forty Foot High (And Rising'?)

Flood levels of the Great Fresh of 1771 still stand as a record...

Sources:

Williams and Mary Quarterly, vol 5, 1897.

Dupigny-Giroux, Lesley-Ann and Gary J. Mock, eds. *Historical Climate Variability and Impacts in North America*.

Virginia Gazette, May 30, 1771.

Tyler's Quarterly Historical and Genealogical Magazine, vol 2, no 4, April 1921.

Photo from http://www.dhr.virginia.gov/registers/Counties/Henrico/043-0023_FloodMarker_VLR_4th_edition.jpg

At the intersection of New Market Road (Route 5) and Curles Neck Road, you will find this marker



On May, 27, 1771, a wall of water came roaring down the James River valley following ten to twelve days of intensive rain. As water swept through Richmond, buildings, boats, animals and vegetation were lost. About one hundred fifty people were killed as the river reached a flood stage of forty-five feet above normal. A monument to the flood was inscribed by Ryland Randolph, of Curles, in 1771-71:

"...all the great rivers of this country were swept by inundations never before experienced which changed the face of nature and left traces of violence that will remain for ages."

The marker recalls the events of the Great Fresh of 1771, the biggest flood to affect the James River valley in our recorded history. The marker suggests a flood stage of 45 feet. The level upriver at Richmond was 40 feet above normal, a level not even approached by the flood caused by Hurricane Camille in 1972. That "fresh" reached a level of 36.5 feet above normal at Richmond.

The marker also refers to the eighteen-foot-tall obelisk on a six-foot square base, constructed of brick and faced with cement. The eighteenth century monument at Turkey Island purportedly marks the high-water mark of the flood.

Contemporary accounts confirm that it was quite a flood. A letter to the *Virginia Gazette* of May 30, 1771, said:

There is now the greatest Fresh in James River even known, it being at least twenty Feet higher than that in May 1766. The Warehouses at Westham are entirely gone, with three Hundred Hogsheads of Tobacco. At Byrd's Warehouses, the Water is now Half Way up the Lower Tier of Hogheads; the other Warehouses of Shocko are almost under Water, and the Tobacco drifting away by thirty and forty Hogheads at a Time. It is imagined there might have been about three Thousand Hogsheads in the different Warehouses at Shocko. Almost every Lamber House is gone, and destroyed, on each Side of the River, many of them full of Good.

The magazine account continues:

Some People who left Richmond the same Day, in the Afternoon, say that the River was then rising at the Rate of two Inches an Hour, but we since learn, that it began to abate about Sunset.

All the low Ground have been overflowed, by which inconceivable Damage has been done. Every Thing was carried off to Farrar's Island, belonging to Colonel Thomas Mann Randolph, and at Elk Island, John Wayles, Esquire, is said to have suffered to the Amount of four thousand Pounds. Nothing being saved but the People and five Horses...

The Ships in the River were in most imminent Danger, from the vast Number of huge Trees driving down the Rapidity of the Current, and many of them have sustained great Damage. The Ships at Shirley Hundred were driven from their Mooring over to City Point, and those at City Point down as low as Jordan's.

The estimate was a bit off, and the river was really rising on May 26 at a rate of 19 inches per hour. On June 6, 1771, John Howard of Botetourt wrote to Dr. William Cabell in Amherst:

I received last night by my Fellow Cato accounts of the dismal Destruction made in James River by the late Fresh, in which I share very deeply, and I understand all my Crop of Tobacco that was growing is ruined as well as all that was in the Tobacco Houses about 6 Hogsheads, together with all my Tobacco Houses except one, are swept away, and 13 Hogsheads that were sent to the Warehouse, or Westham, I suppose are gone, as I hear the water was over both places, my Corn House with the Corn swept away, & some of my stock, and it is owing to the great goodness of God that my People are all alive.

On August 1, 1771, Richard Bland wrote to Thomas Adams:

Upon the 27th of May a most dreadful Inundation happened in James, Rappahannock and Roanoke Rivers occasioned by very heavy and incessant Rains upon the mountains for ten or twelve days...Promiscuous Heaps of Houses, Trees, Men, Horses, Cattle, Sheep, Hogs, Merchandise, Corn, Tobacco & every other Thing that was unfortunately within the dreadful sweep were see [sic] Floating upon the Waters, without a possibility of their being saved.

Obviously, the flood was devastating, and it prompted the Assembly to issue 30,000 pounds in Treasurer notes for the tobacco lost at public warehouses.

