

Portland Flood, 1894

By Unknown

In late May and early June of 1894, the Willamette River rose well above 30 feet, flooding the central business district of Portland. The water remained for days, inspiring some Portlanders to accept the situation with the humor as displayed in this shot of “hunters” taking aim at decoys floating down the street.

People adjusted to the inconvenience by using canoes, rowboats, and any other conceivable water conveyances to travel through the city. Boys fished in the downtown streets. Shopkeepers raised shelves above the floodwaters and reopened for business, and the fire department commissioned barges to carry fire engines to duty. One enterprising saloon keeper moved his business to a houseboat so people could row in for a drink.

After the waters receded, damage assessments were conducted. Unlike the Columbia River flood of 1890, the 1894 Willamette River flood inundated fewer buildings, houseboats, and other floatable objects which would have otherwise washed away. However, docks and warehouses along the riverfront shifted from their foundations, sustaining substantial damage. Newspapers warned citizens that the water contained sewage and was exceedingly unhealthy. They advised the liberal use of disinfectants and that spending the summer at the seacoast or in the mountains might be a prudent idea.

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