

The Flood of 1985

The Government Responds





Two people observe the flood damage on West Virginia Route 72, Rowlesburg, W.Va., November 1985, West Virginia History OnView, <http://wvhistoryonview.org>

Cover Image: Congressman Harley O. Staggers, Jr. surveys damage to the Blackfork Railroad Bridge near Parsons, W.Va., November 1985, Harley O. Staggers, Jr., Congressional Papers, Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education

Background

The storm of November 3-5, 1985, in the central Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia and Virginia was spurred by Hurricane Juan, which made landfall in the Gulf Coast on October 31. Juan brought moisture northward up the Mississippi Valley, and a low-pressure cyclone, moving north through the Southeastern United States, forced moisture westward up the slope of the Appalachian Mountains. Heavy rainfall in West Virginia and Virginia produced extraordinary flooding and triggered thousands of landslides. Most of the damage occurred in the Cheat and Potomac River basins. The record flooding killed 47 people in West Virginia, damaged 9,000 homes, and destroyed business and public lands. The federal government declared 29 counties a major disaster area. The estimated damage cost the federal government \$285 million in public assistance, assistance to individuals and businesses, and flood damage claim payments.

Colucci, Stephen J., Robert B. Jacobson, and Steven Greco. "Meteorology of the Storm of November 3-5, 1985, in West Virginia and Virginia" in U.S. Geological Survey Bulletin, no. 1981, 1993.

United States General Accounting Office. "Report to Congressional Requesters: Disaster Assistance Response to West Virginia's November 1985 Flood Shows Need for Improvements," February 1988.

Overview:

This lesson uses congressional and political documents to introduce students to the historic 1985 Election Day Floods in West Virginia and to lead them through the recovery process. Additionally, students will build research and information analysis skills through closely examining documents from the archival collections of Senator Robert C. Byrd, Congressman Harley O. Staggers, Jr., and Governor Arch Moore, Jr.

Guiding Questions:

What role does the government play in leading recovery efforts following massive natural disasters?

How do local, state, and federal officials work together to make recovery efforts successful?

What role do local citizens play in directing recovery efforts?

Recommended Grade Levels:

Grades 7-12

*In West Virginia, this lesson can be applied for 8th graders who are taking their West Virginia History class.

Objectives:

Students will:

- Gain basic archival research skills
- Identify local, state, and federal actors and their roles in disaster response
- Gain a better understanding of the process of requesting, justifying, and acquiring disaster assistance
- Identify political considerations in disaster response

Estimated Time Required:

1.5/2 Hours (more time required if you extend the lesson to compare with a more recent similar disaster relief effort)

Lesson Plan:

Before class:

- Print the documents and arrange them as they are presented in the lesson plan or, if your class size necessitates less groups, rearrange them accordingly.
 - If possible, place the documents individually inside folders so that your students can have the experience of opening them as they would in an archive.
- Print enough copies of worksheet 1 to supply to each of your students.
- Print copies of worksheets 2 and 3* to give to one designated “recorder” in each group you will have in the class. *Worksheet 3 is optional depending on how you plan to manage the class discussion.

Introduce the lesson:

- Provide a brief overview of the 1985 Flood using the information supplied in this lesson plan as well as any additional research.
- Introduce the students to the political figures whose papers they will be investigating (descriptions of Senator Byrd, Congressman Staggers, Jr., and Governor Moore follow in this lesson plan).
- If you have not led your students through a document analysis exercise before, introduce them to this practice (you can access resources for teaching document analysis from the [National Archives Educators’ Toolbox](#)).

Group work:

- Divide the class into groups and provide each with a set of documents and worksheet 1 (for each student).
- Allow time for each group to review their documents and complete worksheet 1.
- Once everyone has completed the document analysis, distribute worksheet 2 to each group and have them select or designate one recorder for each group. That person will complete worksheet 2 based on group discussion of the findings of their document analysis.

Class discussion:

- After each group has completed worksheet 2, bring the entire class together to discuss their findings from the document analysis.
- Allow each group to present their findings as they recorded them on worksheet 2.
- (Optional) Distribute worksheet 3 to each of the group recorders to write notes of the group presentations during this stage in the lesson.

Extend the lesson:

- Use the example of a recent significant natural disaster (flood, hurricane, etc.) and have the students analyze the recovery effort. Then, compare [that](#) recovery to [the](#) story documented in the archival materials used in this lesson to determine if a similar process was used and if the results were comparable.

- Ask the students to consider what might have been done differently to produce better results in the recovery effort from the 1985 floods or another similar disaster relief effort.

Lesson Plan Resources

The Flood of 1985: The Government Responds was developed collaboratively by the Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education and the West Virginia and Regional History Center, located at West Virginia University.

The Robert C. Byrd Center, located on the campus of Shepherd University, was founded in 2002 and is a congressional research center dedicated to advancing representative democracy by promoting a better understanding of the United States Congress and the Constitution through programs and research that engage citizens. The center holds numerous public programs each year, including the Teacher Institute, introducing primary and secondary educators to new resources, tools, and methodologies for teaching about the Constitution and Congress.

The West Virginia and Regional History Center, founded in 1930, is the foremost historical archives library in West Virginia, preserving manuscripts pertaining to the history of the state and the central Appalachian region. Each year, the collections of the center, including the papers of former Congressman and Governor Arch Moore, Jr., are featured in exhibits, the center's growing digital archives, and educational resources such as this lesson plan.

The Collections

Robert C. Byrd (Nov. 20, 1917 - Jun. 28, 2010) represented West Virginia in the U.S. Congress for over 57 years. First elected to the West Virginia House of Delegates in 1946, Senator Byrd served a term in the West Virginia Senate (1950-1952) before being elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1952. After serving three terms in the House, he was elected to the U.S. Senate in 1958 and served for the next 51 years until his death in 2010. Senator Byrd held more leadership positions in the U.S. Senate than any of his predecessors, serving as Majority Whip (1971-1977), Majority/Minority Leader (1977-1989), and President Pro Tempore (1989-1995, 2001-2003, 2007-2009). Senator Byrd's papers are open for research at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education.

Arch Alfred Moore Jr. (b. 1923) served two consecutive terms as Governor of West Virginia from 1969-1977 and a third term from 1985-1989. He was an unsuccessful candidate for reelection for governor in 1988. Previously, he was elected as a Republican to five terms in the United States House of Representatives, serving from January 3, 1957-January 3, 1969. He was not a candidate for reelection to the Ninety-first Congress in 1968. He died on January 7, 2015, in Charleston, WV. The Governor Arch A. Moore Jr. papers are unprocessed but available for research at the curator's discretion at the West Virginia University Libraries.

Harley Orrin Staggers, Jr. represented West Virginia's second congressional district in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1983 until 1993. Harley Staggers, Jr. was elected to the West Virginia Senate in 1980 and served one term before announcing his candidacy for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1982. As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congressman Staggers, Jr. served on the Agriculture, Veterans Affairs, and Judiciary Committees. He also served on the Select Committee on Hunger (1988-1989) and the Select Committee on Aging (1989-1993). Congressman Staggers' papers are open for research at the Robert C. Byrd Center for Congressional History and Education.

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Worksheet 1: Each member of your group should choose one document and answer the following questions.

Document type (e.g., map, correspondence, article, etc.)	
Date(s)	
Author(s)	
Author title/position	
Intended audience	
Subject	
What problem/issue/need is identified?	
Who is responsible for solving the problem/issue/need? What stakeholders are identified?	
What funding issues are identified in the document? What is the proposed solution?	
What other obstacles are identified in the document? What is the proposed solution?	
What does the document reveal about the process of requesting, justifying and acquiring disaster assistance?	
Does the document describe a resolution to the problem/issue/need? If so, what is the resolution?	
Is there any information missing in the documents? What questions remain?	

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Worksheet 2: Take turns sharing what you learned with your group. Compare documents and answers to find connections and themes. Answer the following questions, and prepare to report your findings.

How are your group's documents similar or different? Think about dates, subjects, authors, and audiences.	
What problems/issues/needs are revealed in the documents?	
Who is responding to the issues? What level of government?	
What types of human, financial, political, or other considerations are being made?	
Do the documents describe a resolution to the problem/issue/need? If so, what is the resolution?	
Based on your documents, what comparisons can you draw between the floods of 1985 and 2016?	
Is there anything in the documents that you found particularly interesting or surprising?	

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Worksheet 3: Choose a member of your group to report. Use the worksheet below to record notes and questions.

Group 1	
Group 2	
Group 3	
Group 4	
Group 5	
Group 6	
Group 7	

List of the Primary Archival Sources Used in this Lesson Plan:

Groups 1 & 2 Theme: Immediate crisis, assessment, and response (emergency declaration)

Group 1

- Memo to Gov. Moore: Small stream flash flood warnings in effect [November 4, 1985]
- Memo to Gov. Moore: Damage report (by county), as of 7:00 p.m. [November 5, 1985]
- Flood update memo to Sen. Byrd regarding Moore's declaration of emergency, including a draft letter to President Regan [November 5, 1985]
- Press release: Sen. Byrd urges President Reagan to speed emergency relief to West Virginia [November 6, 1985]

Group 2

- Press release regarding Sen. Byrd's trip to flood damaged areas, including itinerary [November 9, 1985]
- West Virginia House Delegation letter to President Reagan requesting a waiver of 25% match requirement [November 14, 1985]
- Resolution from North Central West Virginia Home Builders Association requesting federal aid for floods [November 15/16, 1985]
- Talking points memo for Sen. Byrd regarding bridge and road reconstruction and repair [November 1985]

Groups 3 - 5 Theme: Intermediate response by federal/state government, policy and legal hurdles, securing funds

Group 3

- Memo to Gov. Moore on time limitations for presidential declared disasters, detailing work schedule for temporary housing and public assistance [November 1985]
- Press release from Sen. Byrd announcing congressional approval of flood relief measures toward stream rechanneling and land rehab, including an overview of amendments made during committee mark-up session. [December 5, 1985]
- An article from the *Washington Post* detailing farmer's losses in West Virginia [December 1, 1985]
- Letter from Gov. Moore to Rep. Staggers, Jr., regarding declaration of additional counties as disaster areas [December 2, 1985]

Group 4

- *News 'n Views* magazine article "Flood Relief goes to West Virginia" [November/December 1985]
- Press release from Sen. Byrd announcing approval of relief funds including bridge construction and flash flood warning system [December 18, 1985]
- Letter from Samuel Speck (FEMA) to Sen. Byrd responding to his initial inquiry regarding FEMA's responsiveness to floods [December 31, 1985]
- Memo from Director of Department of Natural Resources to Gov. Moore regarding status of repairs to sewage systems damaged by the flood [January 2, 1986]

Group 5

- Special report from Sen. Byrd detailing federal response to the floods through the end of 1985 [December 1985]
- Press release from Sen. Byrd announcing the approval of additional appropriations funds for West Virginia [December 20, 1985]
- Report on loans made by the Small Business Association to support business owners impacted by the floods. [December 1985]
- Memo to Gov. Moore from Tom Tinder detailing an investigation into the flood recovery effort by the U.S. Comptroller General, including a letter sent from the state's House of Representatives Delegation requesting the investigation [January 16, 1986]

Groups 6 & 7 Theme: Longer term, accounting, outcomes, investigation, credit claiming

Group 6

- Memo to Gov. Moore from Mannie Griffith, Director West Virginia Office of Emergency Services regarding the Integrated Flood Warning System Expansion (IFLOWS), including documents referencing Sen. Byrd's actions to obtain money for the system, government oversight's approval for the expansion, and his letter offering to resign. [January 27, 1986]
- Constituent letter of appreciation to Rep. Staggers, Jr., for FEMA grant [April 11, 1986]
- Press release from Sen. Byrd announcing resumption of recovery work in West Virginia [June 25, 1986]
- *Charleston Daily Mail* article "U.S. Flood Aid Wasted or Too Late, Victims Say," describing Small Business Association loans that were not awarded and a subsequent congressional hearing [June 26, 1986]

Group 7

- A report on the total funds sent to West Virginia through FEMA's public assistance program [December 15, 1986]
- Memo to Tom Tinder (Administrative Assistant to Governor Moore) with a summary of assistance provided to flood victims (from the Department of Human Services) [October 28, 1986]
- Press release from Gov. Moore "Governor Marks Flood Anniversary with Tour – Calls Progress 'Remarkable,'" including a list of assistance and "innovations" made by the Moore administration [November 5, 1986]
- Special message to West Virginians from Sen. Byrd focusing on relief aid secured for West Virginia since the floods one year earlier [November 1, 1986]