

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN -EAU CLAIRE

# Menacing Waters

---

The City of Chippewa Falls and the Flood of 1884

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS IN CANDIDACY FOR THE  
DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

By: Benjamin J. Manny  
May 2011

History 489  
Professor Dr. Mann

Copyright for this work is owned by the author. This digital version is published by McIntyre Library, University of Wisconsin Eau Claire with the consent of the author.

## **Table of Contents**

1.	Abstract.....	3
2.	Introduction.....	4
3.	Chippewa River and Duncan Creek.....	7
4.	History of a Booming Town.....	9
5.	When Disaster Struck.....	13
6.	A Positive Tragedy.....	20
7.	Conclusion.....	24
8.	Bibliography.....	26

**Abstract**

In 1884 the city of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin was vibrating with economic growth because of its location along the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek. The logging and lumber industry was at its peak, and Chippewa Falls was emerging as a town on the rise. In mid September disasters struck in the form of severe flooding caused by intense precipitation north of the city. Dams on both the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek broke sending a wall of water and logs towards the city. The flood caused massive destruction to businesses, homes, and structures in the city. As a result of the catastrophic damage caused by the flood, and the economic instability which ensued the city and community was forced to reform their way of life.

## **Introduction**

Chippewa Falls was one of the premier cities of economic growth because of the saw-mills and flourishing population in Wisconsin. The location where the city was settled was ideal for the use of both the Chippewa River and its tributary Duncan Creek. The flood of 1884 was a disaster that occurred during the peak of the logging and timber industry when the Chippewa River was like a super highway for the logging and timber industry. In September of 1884 heavy rains north of Chippewa Falls forced two dams to collapse.<sup>1</sup> The manmade structures on Duncan Creek and the Chippewa River failed and sent a catastrophic rush of logs and water rushing down towards the city. The combination of these two water ways contained about nine hundred million cubic feet of water meeting in Chippewa Falls.<sup>2</sup>

In the state of Wisconsin the natural disaster of flooding became progressively worse over the years. The City of Chippewa Falls has been plagued by the natural disaster of flooding on this river. Flooding in the Chippewa Falls area by the Chippewa River can be dated back to 1838, 1847, 1855, 1856, 1866, and 1880.<sup>3</sup> Destruction to streets, buildings, homes, businesses, and landscape was what the river left behind after it receded. During the late 1880s and early 1890s attention was brought forward about the connection between deforestation and flooding. Gifford Pinchot was the first Chief of the United States Forest Service and preached conservation of lands and reforestation. He believed that the forests exercised a direct beneficial influence on

---

<sup>1</sup> "A Terrible Flood!" Chippewa Herald. September 12, 1884.

<sup>2</sup> *Engineering & Contracting*: July-December, 1912. Vol. #16. Chicago, Ill. The Myron C. Clark Publishing Company. October 16, 1912.

<sup>3</sup> United States. *Flood Plain Information on Chippewa River and Duncan Creek in Vicinity of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin*. St. Paul, Minn: Dept. of the Army, Corps of Engineers, 1970.

climate, stabilization of water flow, and protected soil from erosion.<sup>4</sup> The depletion of the forests in Wisconsin drew attention because the flooding was occurring more frequent.

Few scholars have really examined the affects of the flood of 1884 and how its destructive force was disastrous but also had a positive effect on a city. Many of the books and articles written about the logging and lumber industry in the area focus on that specific topic; Scholars fail to connect the flood of 1884, Chippewa Falls, and how it created stabilization for a community's economy. George Forrester edited a book of biographical sketches in 1892 called, *Historical and Biographical Album of the Chippewa-Valley, Wisconsin*, that gives a general historical sketch of the Chippewa Valley from 1634 to 1890. *Chippewa County, Wisconsin: Past and Present: a Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement*, form 1913, is another piece of literature that is about the history of Chippewa County. Both of these sources of scholarship illustrate the image of a booming sawmill town during the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The most recent historical scholarly source that was published 1994. *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925*, by Tim Pfaff, is the closest source that engaged in the same argument this paper is about. In a broader spectrum this book explains how the Chippewa Valley was settled and the communities that inhabited the area had to adapt to the economic opportunities of the times. Pfaff explains how the flood of 1884 depleted Eau Claire of its six sawmills and caused an economic catastrophe.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Vernon Rosco Carstensen, *Farms or Forests; Evolution of a State Land Policy for Northern Wisconsin, 1850-1932* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin, College of Agriculture, 1958), 47.

<sup>5</sup> Pfaff, Tim. 1994. *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925*. Eau Claire, WI: Chippewa Valley Museum Press. Pg 96.

Previous published work has not explored the impact and result of the flood of 1884 had on the City of Chippewa Falls. This paper will specifically discuss the destruction caused by the flood, as well as the community's response to it. During the period of reconstruction there were significant changes in the population, new economic opportunities, railroad expansion, architecture, and agriculture that indicated a growing future. This was a turning point in the logging industry and the economy of the area. However, more importantly, the flood of 1884 resulted in a more economically and structurally sound and sustainable community.

## Chippewa River & Duncan Creek

The state of Wisconsin has four major rivers, the Wisconsin River, St. Croix River, the Chippewa River, and the Mississippi River that the other three empty into along border Wisconsin and Minnesota. The Chippewa River, named after the Chippewa nation of Indians, is approximately 183 miles and flows through west-central and northeastern Wisconsin. The river is formed when the West Fork Chippewa, in Bayfield County, and the East Fork Chippewa River, in Iron County, meet in Sawyer County and Lake Chippewa, the



Figure 1. Map of Wisconsin, Chippewa River, and the Chippewa Valley. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons.

official start of the Chippewa River. The river flows from Sawyer County through Rusk, Chippewa, Eau Claire, Dunn, Pepin and Buffalo Counties, in Wisconsin. Major lakes along the river's route include the Radisson and Holcombe Flowages, Lake Wissota (created in 1917). The river's primary tributaries include the Couderay, Thornapple, Flambeau, Jump, Fisher, Yellow, Eau Claire, Red Cedar and Eau Galle Rivers.<sup>6</sup>

The Chippewa River was used for travel, distribution of resources and recreation. With all the positive attributes of the river one major flaw that has caused numerous amounts of deaths, damage and destruction is the flooding of the river.

<sup>6</sup> Boyd, R. 1931. "Up and Down the Chippewa River". *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 14, no. 3: 243-261.

The tributary that flows through Chippewa Falls and into the Chippewa River is Duncan Creek. It is named after Joel H. Duncan who built mill on it in 1857. The creek flows through Chippewa Falls from a northwest to southeast direction emptying into the Chippewa River. This tributary starts about thirty miles north of Chippewa Falls where a mill and dam was built creating Lake Como. Duncan Creek flows through the dam in Bloomer Creek before reaches Chippewa Falls and the Chippewa River. The geographical importance of Chippewa Falls was a direct coalition of the river and its tributary.

## **History of a Booming Town**

In the early nineteenth century the expansion of the United States population was spreading west. Immigrants from all over were spreading to America at a chance to work, fortune, and a fresh start at life. The mid-west became a hot bed for natural resources such as logging, timber, and mining. The area of Wisconsin was made up of dense forest, rolling hills, rivers, lakes and marshes. Its first inhabitants were Native Americans consisting of many different tribes. The main tribes in the Chippewa valley<sup>7</sup> area were the Sioux and the Chippewa/Ojibwe Indians.

The Chippewa Valley area was claimed by these tribes. When settlers came to this area, fur trading had become one of the first resources. Many of the fur traders set up trading posts and traded with the Indians for other goods. As more and more settlers began to find their way into the Chippewa Valley the demand for land and resources was building. The rivers were not just used as a food source but were one of the main ways of transportation. Many tribes and settlers strategically place their camps and homes near a river because of its use for transportation.

One of the main rivers in the Chippewa Valley is the Chippewa River because of its location and connection between other rivers and bodies of water. As more and more settlers began to inhabit Wisconsin and the Chippewa Valley the discovery of natural resources prompted the support of the U.S. government to find a way to get the rights of the land from the residing Indian tribes. The use of treaties by the U.S. government was how permission was granted to extract resources from Indian lands.<sup>8</sup> The first treaty in the Chippewa Valley was in

---

<sup>7</sup> Highlighted area on map in figure 1.

<sup>8</sup> Pfaff, Tim. *Settlement and Survival*, 1994. Pg 10.

1825 between the Sioux and Chippewa which gave land rights to the Ojibwe tribe. The Pine Tree Treaty of 1837 and the Copper Treaty of 1842 both ceded the Ojibwe land to the U.S. government but reserved their right to hunt, fish, and gather any other traditional resources from the land. In 1854 the last treaty was signed that established reservations, guaranteed tribal sovereignty for the Indians in the Chippewa Valley.<sup>9</sup>

After Native Americans ceded their land over to the U.S. Government the Chippewa valley began to grow. The combination of job opportunity and the numbers of settlers looking for a new start created a mass migration into the area. French Canadian, Irish, and German became the predominate nationalities of the residents that began to call the Chippewa Valley home.

In 1836, a Frenchman by the name of Jean Brunet was the first settler to officially reside in the area which is now known as Chippewa Falls. Brunet built the first sawmill in Chippewa Falls that was located between the Chippewa River and the mouth of Duncan Creek. The sawmill that Brunet built was small until The Chippewa Lumber & Boom Company took over and created what was known as the largest sawmill under one roof.<sup>10</sup>

Chippewa County was established in 1845 as one of the original 28 counties of Wisconsin that covered the entire Chippewa Valley. In 1869 the city of Chippewa Falls was officially established as a city in the state of Wisconsin.<sup>11</sup> Over the years the area developed socially and economically through the use of both the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek. A

---

<sup>9</sup> Satz, Ronald N. Chippewa Treaty Rights. Madison: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1991.

<sup>10</sup> Bartlett, William. 1921. Jean Brunet, Chippewa Valley Pioneer. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 5, no. 1: 33-42.

<sup>11</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. Friendship, WI: New Past Press, Inc. 1995. Pg 40.

correspondent of the Milwaukee News visited Chippewa Falls in 1960, then again in 1873 and wrote the following:

Chippewa Falls, was known at the time one of the extreme frontier settlements of the state, and was known, except in name, to but few persons other than the hardly lumbermen, explorers, and trappers of the northwest; but thirteen years have wrought a marvelous change in the place. Where there was a small village of a few hundred inhabitants, with the pine stumps still standing in the streets, and a dense forest in the immediate background, now stands a compact, well built town of more than 4,000 inhabitants, with handsome three and four story brick business blocks, good school houses and elegant churches, a \$112,000 hotel, (the Tremont) which in size and style nearly equals the Plankinton and Newhall, of Milwaukee; the largest saw mill in America, one steam fire engine, a city government in full blast in all its departments, a \$60,000 Court House in now course of erection, many new buildings going up, and many other evidences of a driving, thriving, thrifty little city.<sup>12</sup>

The city has come a long way from a rustic settlement for lumbermen, trappers and explores to a modernized town with a bright future. Streets were constructed with wooden planks or blocks instead of just dirt or sawdust.

The need for natural resources and the opportunity for employment in the city of Chippewa Falls was a luring advertisement for anyone seeking a change. In Chippewa County the population was rapidly increasing. When a census was taken of Chippewa County in 1855 there were 838 residences. Then when another census was taken in 1880 of Chippewa County the population was 15,492. Many who looking to change their fortunes migrated to the city of Chippewa Falls and by 1880 the population was 3,982.<sup>13</sup>

The main businesses of Chippewa Falls were located on Bridge Street, named that because it was the first street that crossed the Chippewa River. Other business streets were Spring, Central and River. Some of the businesses that were located in Chippewa Falls were

---

<sup>12</sup> *Chippewa Herald*, July 12, 1873. Quoted in Robert Clifford Ostergren and Thomas R. Vale. *Wisconsin Land and Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

<sup>13</sup> Wisconsin. *The State of Wisconsin Blue Book*. Madison, Wis: The Bureau, 1883. Pg 366

lumber companies, liverys, planing and flour mills, hotels, manufacturing company, a gas works, saloons and shops, blacksmith, opera house and meeting houses, and a brewery.<sup>14</sup>

The City of Chippewa Falls was built on the logging and timber industry. The Chippewa Lumber and Boom Company was owned by Frederick Weyerhaeuser and a group of investors. It was said that the “Big Mill, was capable of sawing four hundred board feet in one twelve hour day.”<sup>15</sup> Both the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek were used as a means to ship logs downstream. Logs were floated down the various streams to the Chippewa River to Chippewa Falls where logs were sorted for the different mills operating further south along the river.<sup>16</sup>

The use of the railroad became more popular in the area with the development and creation of tracks being laid and bridges too. The use of the Chippewa River when it came to traveling was limited. The falls that the city was named after were impossible for large steamboats to travel through past because of the enormous boulders and rock configurations. Because of this limited range the development of the railroad made it possible to travel and send materials where it was not able to before. A bridge was constructed across the Chippewa River just north of the falls by Wisconsin Central Railway Company. This created opportunity for the expansion of an economy and access for imports and exports of materials across the river that was not possible before. Chippewa Falls residents and economic dependency relied on the use of both the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek. These water ways that helped create a community with a prosperous future, but could not foresee the wrath of Mother Nature and her destructive force.

---

<sup>14</sup> Sanborn Map Publishing Company. *Insurance Maps of Chippewa Falls Wisconsin*. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1883 and 1886. Microfilm.

<sup>15</sup> Pfaff, Tim. 1994. *Settlement and Survival*, Pg 17

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term\\_id=15067&keyword=Old](http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/dictionary/index.asp?action=view&term_id=15067&keyword=Old)

## **When Disaster Struck**

On Tuesday night, September 9, 1884, an unexpected rain storm blew through the northern area of the state. The storm, which created violent winds and heavy rains, had dropped fourteen inches of rain with-in twenty four hours.<sup>17</sup> A chain of events began to happen on the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek that would only escalate the problems that were about to occur. About thirty miles northeast of Chippewa Falls, a dam in Holcombe was built on the Chippewa River to create the Holcombe flowage washed out and sent a wall of water and logs rushing down the river. In Bloomer, about twenty-five miles north, the dam collapsed and sent thousands of logs and water roaring down Duncan Creek. The combination of these two reservoirs contained about nine hundred million cubic feet of water which was released when the dams gave way.<sup>18</sup>

A couple days later the first blows of destruction came in the early morning when the rush of water and logs came roaring down the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek. Many houses were engulfed while the water began to rise. Families were carried away with their belongings and used their houses as floating biers. One house floated over twelve miles, surrounded by logs and other material, before two boys that were trapped inside could be rescued.<sup>19</sup> A mother stood for three hours, in raging waters, for three hours with her little child held high above her head until help arrived. The Booms or pockets which lumber companies used to store uncut logs in overflowed and broke. Four hundred million monarchs of the forest were hurled with irresistible force against bridges, dams, houses and mills, crushing the strongest structures into fragments as

---

<sup>17</sup> "Floods in the Chippewa Valley." Harper's Weekly. September 27, 1884.

<sup>18</sup> *Engineering & Contracting*: July-December, 1912. Vol. #16. Chicago, Ill. The Myron C. Clark Publishing Company. October 16, 1912.

<sup>19</sup> "Floods in the Chippewa Valley." Harper's Weekly. September 27, 1884.

if built of straw.<sup>20</sup> Both banks of the Chippewa River were overwhelmed by the amount of water and residents had to flee with whatever they could carry. A newspaper from the area gave a description recreating the felling of that night:

The noise and din occasioned by the advance of the avalanche of liberated logs is described as having been terrible. Huge trees were shot up thirty or forty feet into the air, falling only to rise again. The groaning and shrieking of the logs as they moved in a seething mass completely drowned all cries for succor, and the gloom of night increased the horror of the situation.<sup>21</sup>

When the flood waters on the Chippewa River finally peaked at mark of twenty seven feet above the normal mark was recorded. This eclipsed the previous record high mark set during the flood of 1800 at twenty four feet.<sup>22</sup> Duncan Creek was up fourteen feet above its normal water level.<sup>23</sup> The combination of rushing water and logs that left the city and its residents with catastrophic damage to houses, buildings and structures.

The city's main economy was the logging and lumber industry which was located on the Chippewa River and at the mouth of Duncan Creek.



Figure 2. Chippewa Lumber and Boom Company. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

The picture in figure 1 is a view of the Chippewa Lumber and Boom Company, “largest saw mill

<sup>20</sup> “Floods in the Chippewa Valley.” *Harper’s Weekly*. September 27, 1884.

<sup>21</sup> “Floods in the Chippewa Valley.” *Harper’s Weekly*. September 27, 1884.

<sup>22</sup> *Chippewa County, Wisconsin: Past and Present: a Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1913. Pg 84.

<sup>23</sup> “The Roaring Chippewa.” *The Weekly Wisconsin*. Milwaukee, WI. Wednesday, September 17, 1884. Pg 8

under one roof,” that had damage done to its buildings and product. It is showing the power of the flood waters displacing logs and debris over a large area.

Not one single bridge was left standing in Chippewa Falls on Duncan Creek. Kehl’s planing-mill and the feed warehouse belonging to George Collins washed away. The livery barn of Messrs Stiles, Lego and Bailey was completely ruined too.<sup>24</sup> Equipment was also lost during the dismantling of these businesses; five horses and



Figure 3 Rubbish against tresses, contains Kehl’s Planing Mill that went down Duncan Creek. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

machinery from the machine shops were destroyed too.<sup>25</sup> Figure 2 is a graphic example of the destruction and devastating caused by the flood. The enormous piles of debris are a result force that roared down Duncan Creek.

The business districts and residential areas that were located on Bay, Bridge, River, Spring and River Streets were virtually submerged in flood waters. The damage done to the view in figure 3 is from Bridge Street looking up from the Chippewa River. Boats were used to travel up and down the street.<sup>26</sup> Businesses and houses still underwater, clean up of the debris

<sup>24</sup> Forrester, George. *Historical and Biographical Album of the Chippewa Valley, Wisconsin, Including Ancestral Records, Biographies, and Portraits*. Chicago, Ill: A. Warner, 1892. Pg 110.

<sup>25</sup> “The Roaring Chippewa.” *The Weekly Wisconsin*. Milwaukee, WI. Wednesday, September 17, 1884. Pg 8

<sup>26</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. Friendship, WI: New Past Press, Inc. 1995. Pg 60

could only begin after the flood waters receded. The telephone or electric pole in the middle of the picture illustrates destruction of communication and power to the city.



Figure 4. Bridge St. looking up from Chippewa River, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Bay Street which runs parallel to Bridge Street was also submerged. In view from figure 4 is looking up Bay Street. Flood water filled the City Streets making business inaccessible. Men on the left side of the picture are standing on the warped sidewalk observing the damage and water. At the bottom of the picture is part of the wooden



Figure 5. Bay St. looking north from Chippewa River, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

streets that were submerged or washed away during the flood. Thousands of dollars worth of damage had been done to sidewalks, fences, and cellars in the flood area of the city.<sup>27</sup>

The Wisconsin Central Railway Bridge was destroyed along with the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Bridge. Tracks were also washed out along the Chippewa River and the railroad

<sup>27</sup> "The Roaring Chippewa." The Weekly Wisconsin. Milwaukee, WI. Wednesday, September 17, 1884. Pg 8

companies had to change the routes of trains.<sup>28</sup> The View from figure 5 is from west end of River Street looking towards Catholic Hill.<sup>29</sup> In the picture is the train depot, on the right and some businesses/residences on the left. Not pictured is the train-tracks further right of the train depot that were washed out. Looking further down the street the water has not yet receded causing a delay in the clean up.



Figure 6. Train Depot, looking towards Catholic Hill from west end of River St. Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Figure 6 is another photograph of River Street but this view was taken at the foot of



Figure 7. River St. from the foot of Catholic Hill, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Catholic Hill. River Street crosses Duncan Creek and this photograph it illustrates by looking down River Street the destructive force of the flood waters. The bridge that was once there is gone and the only the footing are left. Across the creek piles of debris can be seen of the mess that was left in the wake of this disaster.

<sup>28</sup> "Floods in the Chippewa Valley." *Harper's Weekly*. September 27, 1884.

<sup>29</sup> Catholic Hill: called that because the first Catholic Church, Notre Dame, -was built atop the hill looking over Chippewa Falls.



Figure 8. Spring St. from Catholic Hill, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Spring Street runs parallel one block north of River Street also crosses Duncan Creek connecting Catholic Hill suffered mass destruction from the flood. The view from figure 7 is from Catholic Hill looking west down Spring Street. The bridge crossing Duncan Creek is almost fully submerged enabling residents to cross into the business area of the city. Across the creek a building has collapsed do to the destructive force of the flood

water and any other debris.

Figure 8 shows a view of Spring Street toward Catholic Hill, Notre Dame Church in the middle on top of the hill. The flood waters have not yet receded making Spring Street inaccessible. Some areas the destruction was not as visible as because there was not any structural damage.

On the south side of the Chippewa River was an area called



Figure 9. Spring St. looking towards Catholic Hill, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.



Figure 10. View of the Chippewa River from Frenchtown, Wisconsin Historical Society Image ID# PH 3209. Reproduced with the Permission of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

Frenchtown because of nationality of the French-Canadian residents that settled there. It was completely submerged and the houses and structures were washed away by the raging water. Figure 9 is a view from Frenchtown of the Chippewa River. In the photograph Structures and

houses can be seen still submerged and what was left of

a bridge that crossed the river. The people in are standing on debris and logs that were left from the receding flood waters. Because of the destruction of these bridges people in Frenchtown and the south side of the river were isolated from parts of the City of Chippewa Falls. The first woolen mill in Chippewa County was built in Frenchtown in 1882 and was partially destroyed during the flood.<sup>30</sup>

The flood of 1884 left the City of Chippewa Falls with destruction of catastrophic proportion. Residents were stranded because of the dismantling of bridges and buildings that were used for survival and providing for their families. The overwhelming task of rebuilding damaged or destroyed houses and businesses was only the beginning of replacing the devastated city.

<sup>30</sup> Forrester, George. *Historical and Biographical Album of the Chippewa Valley, Wisconsin*. 1892. Pg 113.

### **A Positive Tragedy**

After the flood waters receded the monumental task of cleaning up the devastated area began. Not only did the flood consume the possessions of residents and businesses but they also lost jobs because the places of employment were either damaged or destroyed. The community of Chippewa Falls had to find a way to forage through the economic downfall caused by natural disasters like flooding.

The city of Eau Claire, that is located about twenty miles south on the Chippewa River, was feeling the effects of the flood of 1884. Like Chippewa Falls, logging and lumber was the main source of economic stability in Eau Claire. Because of the destruction of the flood the Eau Claire lost more than 4,000 residents between 1885 and 1890 because of unemployment.<sup>31</sup> The population in Chippewa Falls was completely opposite of that in Eau Claire. In 1880 the population of Chippewa Falls was 3,982 residents and increased 110 percent in 1885 to 8,719.<sup>32</sup> During the rebuilding process the city was able to sustain employment its population declined in 1890 to 8,670. But by 1895 the total number of residents increased to 9,196 because new economic impact. This disaster affected residents and businesses that played a role in the transformation of the city of Chippewa Falls from a dominated logging industry to diversified manufacturing town. This change did not occur overnight, the logging continued to operate and contribute to the economy of the city. With this change other areas were able to blossom and jobs created that brought more people to the area.

The creation of new economic opportunities began to be seen in the city following the flood in 1884. The Chippewa Shoe Factory, founded by William Weyenberg created

---

<sup>31</sup> Pfaff, Tim. 1994. *Settlement and Survival*, Pg 96

<sup>32</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. 1995. pg 61

employment opportunities along with the Lienenkugel Brewery, which benefited from the population increase because of the fifty-seven saloon license issued, one for every 157 residents. The Chippewa Lumber and Boom Company recovered from the flood and invested installation of one of Wisconsin's first hydroelectric generators in its saw-mill.<sup>33</sup> In 1885 the Chippewa Falls Water Works and Electric Company was created and started pumping spring water through new city mains. The Hospital Sisters of St. Francis started nursing services in their home and the patients too.<sup>34</sup>

The railroad had developed into a primary source of transportation for the importing and exporting of resources and materials. A city with valuable railroad connects was attractive in luring new investors and strengthen existing businesses too. Railroad companies understood the importance of get their tracks repaired and the trains running. The development of the railroad in northwest Wisconsin meant that the logging and deforestation could continue all year long because loggers did not have to wait for the thaw.<sup>35</sup> A positive side of this was the year round employment but also the forests as a resource would be depleted at a much faster rate. In the northwestern part of the city a train depot was established by the Omaha Railroad Company.<sup>36</sup> The re-building of bridges crossing started with the Wisconsin Central which was progressing rapidly in early October. New piers had to be made to replace those that were washed out and it will be four feet high then before.<sup>37</sup> The flood did not discourage the railroad companies from

---

<sup>33</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. 1995. pg 60.

<sup>34</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. 1995. pg 61.

<sup>35</sup> Pfaff, Tim. 1994. *Settlement and Survival*, Pg 78.

<sup>36</sup> "Ruin Worked By Floods." *The Decatur Morning Review*. Decatur ILL., September 14, 1884.

<sup>37</sup> "Local Matters." *The Daily Leader*. Eau Claire, WI., October 11, 1884.

new depots. “Chicago, St. Paul, Minneapolis & Omaha will build a passenger and freight depot in Chippewa Falls,”<sup>38</sup> this coming from an Eau Claire newspaper in October of 1884.

With the realization of the logging and lumber industry dissolving itself, a way to reuse the land was discovered by creating farms for agricultural growth. The fertile soil that was left had to be turned into a quick profit or the land would be considered valueless. A vast majority of the land was littered with stumps and had to be cleared before any cultivating could be done. The removal of stumps was labor extensive operation but had to be done in order to reuse the land.<sup>39</sup> Farming was one of the ways residents of Chippewa Falls and County created a lucrative means to generate an income.

The architecture of Chippewa Falls reflected the main economic source of the area. The connivance and availability of lumber made it an obvious choice to use to construct houses, businesses and structures. In 1869 the entire city was built of wood.<sup>40</sup> The floods in 1884 caused excessive damage and an evaluation of the durability of structures. Community leaders realized that changes had to be made geological and structurally to prevent a devastating event occur again. They were recognized for it in *The Peoples Paper* in 1894, “great credit is due the president board of public works for their determination in having the work done on Duncan creek of such a permanent nature as will withstand the floods that come down that stream. The people will find there is no waste of money making those piers flood proof and putting upon them steel instead of wooden bridges.”<sup>41</sup> The use of masonry and steel was substantially more durable and presented the city with progressive look towards the future.

---

<sup>38</sup> Weekly Free Press. Eau Claire, WI. October 9, 1884.

<sup>39</sup> Elser, Louise Helen. *The Change from lumbering to agriculture in Northern Wisconsin, 1870-1920*. 1923. Pg 30.

<sup>40</sup> *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. 1995. pg 40.

<sup>41</sup> “The City.” *The Peoples Press*. Chippewa Falls, WI. August 18, 1894.

The future of Chippewa Falls was recognized by community leaders and the recruitment of new industries was needed for its survival. Railroad connections, inexpensive water power, and a community ready to work was great advertising for new investors. Companies like Leinenkugel's Brewery and Mason Shoe that were established, endured the economic change of the times. The Wisconsin Sugar Company and Boone Tire & Rubber are examples of businesses that moved to Chippewa Falls.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Pfaff, Tim. *Settlement and Survival*. 1994. Pg 82.

## **Conclusion**

The expansion westward by immigrants and the discovery of natural resources in the mid-west led to settlement of Wisconsin and the Chippewa Valley. The discovery of dense forests in northern Wisconsin led to the logging and lumber industry and the growth of the area. Chippewa Falls was established because of its geographical location where Duncan Creek empties into the Chippewa River. In 1869 the state recognized Chippewa Falls as a city. The city's population and economic growth was benefitting because of the success of sawmills that could use the water power produced by the water ways. Growth and development continued by the construction of the railroad which created an even more profitable economy.

In September of 1884 a disaster flood devastated the City of Chippewa Falls. This result was a caused by combination of heavy rains in the northern part of the state and the collapsing of two dams on the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek. The water levels rose both on the Chippewa River, twenty-seven feet, and Duncan Creek, fourteen feet, above their normal mark. The flood led to the destruction of houses, businesses, and structures. All bridges crossing the Chippewa River and Duncan Creek were destroyed. The downtown business district was almost completely submerged along with Frenchtown. When the water receded, the piles of debris were massive and had to be cleared before any rebuilding could start. The city and its residents had to begin the process of rebuilding both structurally and economically.

A number of factors contributed to the rebuilding and transformation of an economically dominated era by the logging and lumber industry. A sustained population in need of employment was complemented by new economic opportunities that need workers. The swift repairing and rebuilding of railroad depots, tracks, and bridges was a lure for new industries to the city. Deforestation left fertile land that was profitable through farming and agriculture.

Finally, the Architectural development of masonry and steel for buildings and structures replaced wood that was less reliable. The city of Chippewa Falls had realized that their economic dependency needed to change. The flood of 1884 was a turning point which allowed the residents of the city to create a more economically and structurally sound and sustainable community.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary Sources

- “A Terrible Flood!” *Chippewa Herald*. September 12, 1884.
- “Chippewa Falls.” *Eau Claire Daily Free Press*. September 13, 1884. Pg 2.
- “The Chippewa Flood.” *St. Paul Daily Globe*. September 13, 1884. Pg 4.
- “Losses by Water.” *The Daily Leader*. September 17, 1884. Pg 3.
- “The Roaring Chippewa.” *The Weekly Wisconsin*, Milwaukee, WI. Wednesday, September 17, 1884. Pg 8
- “Effects of the Flood.” *Chippewa Herald*. September 19, 1884.
- “Floods in the Chippewa Valley.” *Harper’s Weekly*. September 27, 1884. Pgs 635, 637.
- Weekly Free Press*. Eau Claire, WI. October 9, 1884.
- “The City.” *The Peoples Press*. Chippewa Falls, WI. August 18, 1894.
- Our Story, 1776-1976: the Chippewa Valley and Beyond*. Eau Claire, WI. Eau Claire Leader-Telegram, 1976.
- “1884 Flood Drew National Attention.” *The Leader-Telegram*. Volume V: spanning the years. Pg 13.
- Engineering & Contracting*: July-December, 1912. Vol. #16. Chicago, Ill. The Myron C. Clark Publishing Company. October 16, 1912.
- Elser, Louise Helen. *The Change from lumbering to agriculture in Northern Wisconsin, 1870-1920*. 1923.
- Wisconsin. *The State of Wisconsin Blue Book*. Madison, Wis: The Bureau, 1883, 1885, 1889.
- Forrester, George. *Historical and Biographical Album of the Chippewa Valley, Wisconsin, Including Ancestral Records, Biographies, and Portraits*. Chicago, Ill: A. Warner, 1892.
- Chippewa County, Wisconsin: Past and Present: a Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress and Achievement*. Chicago: S.J. Clarke, 1913.
- Sanborn Map Publishing Company. *Insurance Maps of Chippewa Falls Wisconsin*. New York: Sanborn Map and Publishing Company, 1883 and 1886. Microfilm.

### **Secondary Sources**

“Great Flood dwarfed by water in 1884.” Photo. *Centennial Edition Chippewa Herald-Telegram*. June 30, 1965.

“This is the Way.” *Centennial Edition Chippewa Falls Herald-Telegram*. June 30, 1965

Bartlett, William. 1921. Jean Brunet, Chippewa Valley Pioneer. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 5, no. 1: 33-42.

Boyd, R. 1931. Up and Down the Chippewa River. *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*. 14, no. 3: 243-261.

Satz, Ronald N. Chippewa Treaty Rights. Madison: Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters, 1991.

Pfaff, Tim. *Settlement and Survival: Building Towns in the Chippewa Valley, 1850-1925*. Eau Claire, WI: Chippewa Valley Museum Press. 1994.

Ostergren, Robert Clifford, and Thomas R. Vale. *Wisconsin Land and Life*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997.

1995. *The Chippewa County Chronicle 1845-1995*. Friendship, WI: New Past Press, Inc.

1913. *Chippewa County Wisconsin: Past and Present*. Volume 1. Chicago, Ill: The S.J. Clarke Publishing Company. Pgs. 231-331.

United States. *Flood Plain Information on Chippewa River and Duncan Creek in Vicinity of Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin*. St. Paul, Minn: Dept. of the Army, Corps of Engineers, 1970.

### **Figures**

Chippewa Falls, Wisconsin, flood stereographs, 1884. Wisconsin Historical Society.

Wikimedia Commons, Chippewa River Map,

<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chippewawirivermap.png> (accessed April 14, 2011).