

# Flood of 1969

**Editor's note:** When Hurricane Camille slammed into Nelson County 35 years ago today, it left behind death and devastation that few had ever witnessed. Below are excerpts from press coverage at the time.

The James River at Williams Viaduct reached its highest point in nearly 100 years when it hit 26 feet — eight feet over its 18-foot flood stage.

The last time the James reached this point was on Nov. 4, 1877, when it hit 33.0 feet. The weatherman said a recent cold front reinforced by Camille caused thunderstorms that dumped between six and eight inches on the upper James River, "something," (Mack) Ohmart commented, "that a weatherman never expects."

- Aug. 20, 1969, The Daily Advance

The storm seemed to center over the little community in Nelson County at Massies Mill.

State police reported the town, for all practicable purposes, had been completely washed away.

Edward Moore, of Piney River, said "only two buildings are left in Massies Mill."

Rescue efforts had succeeded in cutting a path through to the stricken community over a mountain from Afton, he said.

The main line of the Southern Railway between Atlanta and Washington was severed during the height of Wednesday's flooding when the bridge over the Tye River in Nelson was swept away.

John S. Phillips, Lynchburg district highway engineer, said he had toured the stricken area Wednesday by airplane and "we could see a number of people stranded in different areas."

"The Lovingson bypass is completely covered by debris and mud. On the north end of the bypass you can see a house in the middle of the highway and in several places mud appears to be eight or 10 feet deep."

"At Woods Mill, we lost about 2,000 feet of new Rt. 29 and don't have any idea how long it will take to repair the damage."

- Aug. 21, 1969, The News

Rt. 29 north of Amherst to Charlottesville remained closed today as State Highway Department trucks and personnel transported broken concrete, rocks and anything else they could use to fill the chasms caused by the waters.

"There's enough trees piled up in some areas of the road to build a whole housing project," one man said.

- Aug. 21, 1969, The Daily Advance

"The saddest part is having the aunts, uncles, mothers and fathers come in and ask if we have any word on their children and other relatives," Mrs. Molly Hood, an Amherst County Red Cross board member, said this morning.

Mrs. Hood, a housewife and mother, was one of the dozen volunteers which have manned the Red Cross shelter set up in Central Junior High School to receive the hundreds of people left homeless in the area as a result of the flash-floods which raged through the mountains early Wednesdays.

"But we've had hundreds

## Hurricane Camille in Nelson County 1969 flood: 35 years later

### Amount of rain

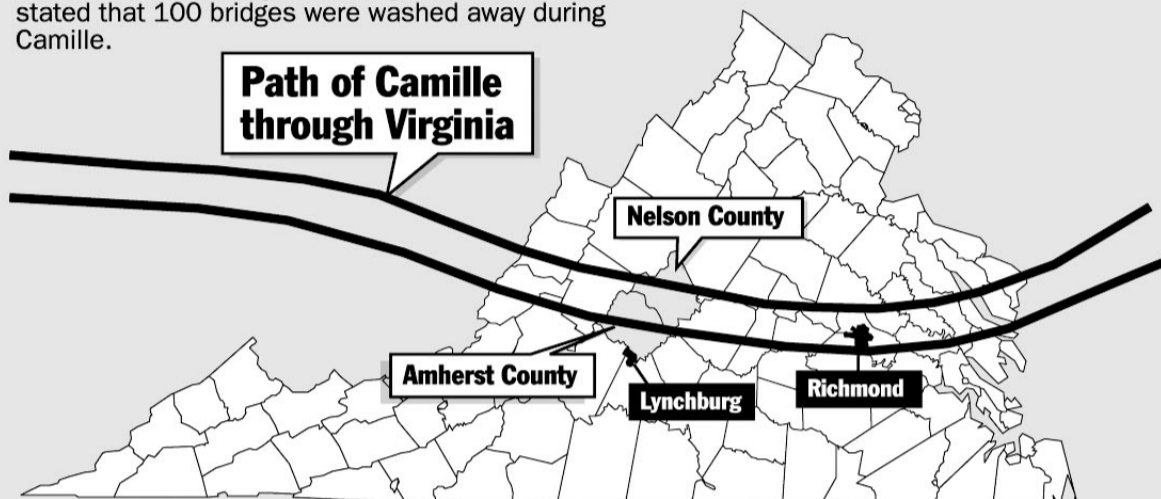
Between **25 and 30 inches** of rain fell over a period of five hours in Nelson County, mainly between the hours of 1 and 4 a.m. That number was based on an average of the worst-hit areas. Other research indicates as much as **31 to 46 inches** of rain fell in the same time period, sparking major flooding and landslides.

### Number of deaths and those still missing

In Virginia, **113 people died** that night and **41 more were never found.** Nationally, Hurricane Camille was the 11th deadliest storm since 1900 (256 dead) and one of only two Category 5 hurricanes to hit the U.S.

### Destruction

In Virginia, more than \$140 million was reported in damage: 384 homes were destroyed and another 2,350 damaged. The highway marker also stated that 100 bridges were washed away during Camille.



### How it happened

On Aug. 17, 1969, Camille came ashore with sustained winds of 180 mph and was tracking the Mississippi River. It was expected to dissipate as it weakened into a tropical storm and then a tropical depression. The storm turned eastward across West Virginia and

over the Appalachian Mountains, where it picked up strength. The storm paused along the Blue Ridge Mountains on Aug. 19, 1969, directly over Nelson County. The rain from the storm fell so fast that pressure built up between the soil and rock, creating a lifting mechanism

that ripped the soil, trees and loose rock off the mountainsides. **Thirty landslides were reported between Charlottesville and Amherst**, with the worst slides being 5 feet deep. Camille returned to sea on Aug. 20, 1969, leaving more than \$1.4 billion in damage nationally.

of people come here looking for relatives she said. "When they ask about an area such as Massies Mill and we tell them it was wiped out you can see them cringe," she said.

- Aug. 21, 1969, The Daily Advance

It was 9 p.m. Tuesday before Mrs. Selena Delk emerged from counting election returns in the Nelson County courthouse and noticed the rain.

"It was coming down like out of a bucket," she said, but she thought little of it.

Some 24 hours later, Mrs. Delk couldn't drive back up to show a visitor the courthouse. It was hidden behind an immense and muddy swath of boulders, earth, brush and trees that had sluiced down the mountain-side above this tiny central Virginia town and heaped its remains on Main Street.

- Aug. 21, 1969, The Associated Press

Walter Evans, whose home opposite Lea's Store on Rt. 56 withstood the ravages of the flood, gave some indication of the force of the angry Tye River as it escaped from its banks.

"If there was any house that I would have bet would have stayed the longest," Evans said, "was old Otie Coffey's stone house once situated on Rt. 56 and State Rt. 679. That thing was built of stone and railroad ties and I thought it could take anything. Now you can't even tell where it stood."

- Aug. 22, 1969, The Daily Advance

"It's there. I see it. But it's almost too much to believe," said Gov. Mills E. Godwin Jr., as he peered excitedly out the window of the twin-engine State Highway Department plane that banked and circled for two hours over the flood-ravaged hill country of west-central Virginia.

As the plane swept over U.S. 29 south of Lovingson, an enormous pile of debris completely covered a bridge. "I swear, it looks like a whole sawmill piled up there," Godwin remarked.

Much of Nelson County presented a scene of surreal-

### Hurricane Camille left many destroyed cars behind in Nelson County in 1969.

istic disarray. Houses perched awkwardly in the middle of highways, others were barely visible in the debris. Car tops were like colorful islands in the river bottoms and railway cars leaned crazily from trackbeds sucked beneath them.

"It all just shows," Godwin said, "we never really have the elements under control."

Another member of the party commented that it's difficult to plan for "acts of God."

"This all looks more like acts of the Devil to me," Godwin replied.

- Aug. 22, 1969, The Daily Advance

In hard-hit Nelson and Amherst counties, many residents said they had given up hope of living in the area again.

"Why should people here come back at all? They have nothing to come back to," said Mrs. R.W. Stratton of Massies Mill as she stood in her mud-filled living room in

one of the few houses of the tiny village which survived.

There's no way to accurately assess the damage, nor the death toll. State police, county sheriffs, and emergency rescue coordinators shake their heads in despair when asked.

- Aug. 22, 1969, The Associated Press

In Lynchburg, a historic packet boat which had been converted to a house on the James was thought to be a total loss.

Its owner, George H. Argenbright, said his wife and children fled when the river began to overflow. The boat was torn loose from its foundation, he said, and turned almost completely over on its side.

- Aug. 23, 1969, The News

A geologist from Virginia Tech said that the catastrophe resulted when a deluge of more than 10 inches of rain fell on already rain-soaked hillsides. He said that the mountains had thin layers of topsoil over rock "and these layers, trees and all gave way."

"The slides kept building up into dams and then breaking away again until finally they built up so much pressure nothing could stand in their path," the geologist said.

As some workers painstakingly untangled the complex webs of entangled debris in a search for bodies this morning, others continued to rush food, water and clothing to isolated areas where survivors remained hungry, thirsty and cold from the unseasonable cool night.

Others, such as one 84-year-old mountain woman at the headwaters of Davis Creek, refused to leave their life-long homes, although badly damaged by the floodwaters and mudslides.

Mrs. Dora Morris told rescue workers, "The Lord put me here and I'm staying until the Lord takes me away."

Even after begging by her cousin, Mrs. Idell Loving, who had been flown in by helicopter from Charlottesville, the wiry Mrs. Morris still refused to leave.

- Aug. 25, 1969, The Daily Advance

"Most of the people in these areas (Massies Mill and Tyro) have told us that they want to stay and not be evacuated. Many of them still have relatives missing and they want to stay at least until they are found," she commented, "so we have to have enough volunteers to go to them."

"They came down to the base units in the daytime from the mountains. They just take enough food to last a day. Then, they go back into the mountains for the night. I suppose they are staying with relatives, but I really don't know. They are just living on a day to day basis," she explained.

- Aug. 26, 1969, The Daily Advance



File photo