BHC-MSS 0094
Guide to the Records of Bridgeport Company Donations to Johnstown Flood Relief
By Meg Rinn and Lisa Furchtgott
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Descriptive Summary
Creator: Hincks, W.B.
Title: Records of Bridgeport Company Donations to Johnstown Flood Relief
Dates: 1889
Quantity: ½ manuscript boxes; 0.21 linear feet
Abstract: On May 31, 1889, the South Fork Dam, controlling the waters of a lakeside retreat, flooded the Pennsylvania town of Johnstown, a city about 57 miles east of Pittsburgh and then prominent in steelmaking. The disaster killed over 2,200 and left a swath of material destruction. Donations for recovery came from all over the United States, including Bridgeport. The city's contribution was spearheaded by W.B. Hincks, a Union soldier honored for his role in the Civil War and a well-known presence in Bridgeport business during the final quarter of the 19th century. These records show documents related to the donations of private citizens and major Bridgeport companies.
Language: English
Repository: Bridgeport History Center

Biographical History:

The dam was constructed by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania between 1840 and 1853 to support a canal system responsible for transporting steel and other goods. In 1863, it was closed due to the rise of the railroad industry and its own tendency to break, causing two relatively minor floods before then. Sold initially to the private Pennsylvania Railroad Company, the dam, lake and surrounding land were then purchased by the Pennsylvanian congressman John Reilly and finally, in 1879, to a group of wealthy Pittsburgh industrialists and bankers including Andrew Carnegie. There they constructed a private retreat called the South Dam Fishing and Hunting Club. Its owners did not update many of the dam's aging components, sold parts, and installed fish screens in order to trap high-priced fish deposited within the dammed waters. Punctures in the overall structure were often mended with hay and mud.

On May 31, 1889, a record-setting torrent of rain fell upon the region. The dam's weakness and clogged screens helped the lakewater overflow and begin to surge southwards toward Johnson. Efforts of Club staff to halt the water had not worked; warnings did not arrive in time.

The ensuing flood killed an estimated 2,208 people and inflicted $17 million dollars' worth of damage. Aftermath photographs showed staggering damage to land, homes, bridges, and factories inundated by the water.

The owners and members of the South Dam Fishing and Hunting Club were never charged for committing any harm. Lawsuits against them were defeated by Club members who practiced law. Some contributed money to recovery funds; Andrew Carnegie erected a Johnstown library.

The flood provoked a national and international outpouring of financial support, marking the first domestic event tended to by the Red Cross. The response included citizens and corporations from Bridgeport, Connecticut.

The Bridgeport donation effort was organized by W.B. Hincks, a co-owner of Hincks and Johnson, a corporation specializing in luxury wooden carriage-coachwork, and the treasurer of the City Savings Bank of Bridgeport. He was also a Union Civil War veteran awarded a Congressional Medal of Honor role for his role in the Battle of Gettysburg and co-executor of P.T. Barnum's estate.

Scope and Content note:
The bulk of the collection is made up of documents from various companies based in Bridgeport and their financial pledges to the relief effort. The account book essentially acts as an index to the individual donors both personal and corporate, indicating both W.B. Hincks's links to Bridgeport businesses and his role as a private citizen within the city.

Arrangement Note:
The account book has been placed first. It is followed by Bridgeport-based correspondence and individual contributions, followed by contributions from companies.

Administrative information:
Provenance: Found in collections. Accession #1996.01.

Preferred Citation:
Records of Bridgeport Company Donations to Johnstown Flood Relief (BHC-MSS 0094) Bridgeport History Center, Bridgeport Public Library.

Names and Subject Tracings
Personal names
Hinks, W.B.
Barnum, P. T. (Phineas Taylor), 1810-191

Corporate names
Holmes and Edwards Silver Manufacturing company

Subject tracings
Floods--Pennsylvania--Johnstown (Cambria County)

Detailed box and folder listing
Series 1
Box 1

1. W.B. Hinks accounts for Johnstown sufferers, 1889
2. Correspondence regarding the flood with W.B. Hincks, 1889
3. Contributions from Bridgeport companies, 1889
4. Contributions from Bridgeport companies, 1889