

## THE FLOOD OF '96

On Wednesday, January 17, the mild temperatures that had swept over the Midwest came to New York. Within two days, two feet of snow melted, representing about 5" of water. On Friday afternoon, with a steady two-inch rain, persons began worrying about how they would get home from work. Rivers and streams were swollen; inundated roads were expected. Schools closed early and people rapidly began emptying offices and buildings. By 3:50 P.M., the County declared a "state of emergency."

Floodwaters receding in Willsboro on day after peak discharge. Photo taken 20 January 1996.



Water slushed then rushed down Elizabethtown's Water Street and along the E-Town/Wadhams Road. Much of Trout Pond Road in Lewis was unrecognizable, as was Route 9 south of New Russia. Motorists' headlights picked up menacing, swirling waters as low spots in roads near the river quickly filled. Soon bridges were threatened. That evening local television broadcasters listed various road closings in northeastern counties. There was no list for Essex County, merely the words "All Roads." Even the railroad closed with flooded tunnels. Kevin Lawson's pizza & pasta restaurant in Westport unexpectedly filled with ticketed AMTRAK passengers unable to take a train nor get out of Westport by any other means.

Once home, the tension heightened for those whose homes were in low-lying areas. Basements started filling, then the steady rise of water during the night. Mercifully, rain dwindled to intermittent sprinkles and the temperature went back down below freezing. Floodwaters crested upstream on the North Branch around midnight; it was about 6:30 the next morning for those downstream. Even by mid-morning I felt sick when looking

out Ada Sharrow's window in Whallonsburg. Some trees were upright and stationary, but everything else in sight moved: ice, logs, fallen trees, fuel tanks, clotheslines, hay bales.

In Willsboro, Ashline dug sluiceways to force floodwater back from company buildings, and residents at the end of School Road were marooned. As highway crews cleared and stabilized roads, residents waded through basements, pumping out water and drying out furnaces and appliances. Wells had to be chlorinated, sand and debris removed, foundations checked, and insulation restored.

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