

By Marylyne Pitz Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Minister's diaries offer eyewitness account of 1889 Johnstown Flood
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The Schultz home was found one-half mile from its foundation with a tree sticking out of it. All six members of the Schultz family survived.

The 35-foot-high wall of water that thundered into Johnstown in 1889 looked and sounded like the apocalypse to the Rev. David Beale.

Then, 118 years later, a young historian who considered becoming a Methodist minister took a Bible in one hand and a magnifying glass in the other. Nathan Koozer plunged into the 19th-century diaries of the Rev. Beale, a Presbyterian minister and flood survivor who wrote what is considered the best account of the "most appalling calamity of modern times."

Thirty of the Rev. Beale's leather-bound diaries, which turned up last year in a Philadelphia carriage house, contain the minister's ruminations on everything from fried food to football as well as the flood that killed 2,209 people, swept away 1,600 homes and destroyed 280 businesses.



Eleven days after the May 31 disaster, Rev. Beale wrote: "Persons worth hundreds of thousands a few days ago now [are] clad in ill-fitting clothes given them by others."

[Slideshow:](#) The Johnstown Flood
Click photo to view slideshow.

The diaries, which cover the 1860s through 1900, are valuable because there are few first-person accounts of the flood written in a survivor's hand, said Dan Ingram, curator at the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, which operates the Johnstown Flood Museum.

In 2009, that museum's detailed exhibit on the flood will recount the flood story through the eyes of this minister, who oversaw nine temporary morgues, including one at First Presbyterian Church, where he served as pastor.

Richard Burkert, executive director of the Johnstown Area Heritage Association, said the flood museum's exhibit, which was installed in 1989, is comprehensive but has always lacked a strong eyewitness account, which the Rev. Beale's papers will provide. In addition, Charles Guggenheim's Academy Award-winning documentary about the flood needs to be transferred to digital media.

A father of six children, the Rev. Beale grew up in Juniata County in a community once called Bealetown, now Honey Grove. A gifted scholar who studied Greek, Latin and John Locke's philosophy, he graduated from Princeton Seminary in 1864.

The minister's collection of diaries and photos includes a morgue book, one of three that survive. In it, he recorded the names of identified flood victims and described, as best as possible, unidentified bodies or body parts. Sometimes a body wore only a wedding ring; other times, the minister sketched the pattern of clothing found on a nameless victim.

"I'll go out on a limb here and say that he may have considered himself the Jesus of the flood because of his work at the morgues," said Mr. Koozer, an AmeriCorps member. That grim task involved stripping, washing and identifying corpses, including members of the minister's own congregation.

The Rev. Beale's collection contains 80 photographs of flood destruction, some of which appeared in his memoir. Many images are familiar, but the minister's handwritten captions provide dates and identify previously unknown people. Several photographs are actual prints of images that appeared in books about the flood instead of Victorian-era halftones, which do not reproduce well.

One poignant picture shows the Fenn children -- John, Daisy, George, Bismarck, Virginia and Esther -- all of whom died in the flood. Their mother,



Nathan Koozer, an AmeriCorps member, has been reading and cataloging the Rev. David Beale's diaries, which contain firsthand information on the Johnstown flood.

[Click photo for larger image.](#)

Anna, survived, but lost her husband, John, and, after the catastrophe, the baby she had carried in her womb.

Perhaps the Rev. Beale was thinking about Mrs. Fenn when he made this diary entry for Feb. 28, 1890: "In our Johnstown disaster, not a few became insane from grief."

In another reflection, the minister sounds unshakable in his faith and certain of his religion's permanence.

"Two things stand -- Geberaltor [sic] and the Presbyterian church," he wrote in July of 1894. In that same entry, he added, " God is an eternal person. Man is an immortal soul. The Bible is a divine Revelation. Christ is a living saviour."

The flood's aftermath strained the minister's already tense relationship with one of his church elders, John Fulton. As head of the Cambria Iron Works, Mr. Fulton was Johnstown's most powerful business leader.



[Click photo for larger image.](#)

"Fulton just generally disliked Beale. Fulton was angry that Beale turned the church into a morgue" before obtaining approval from the congregation's elders, Mr. Koozer said.

On June 13, 1889, the state Board of Health, fearing an epidemic, urged Johnstown residents to leave town. An exhausted Rev. Beale visited his mother in central Pennsylvania and also spent time in Baltimore.

When the minister returned a few months later in September, Mr. Fulton accused him of abandoning the congregation to recuperate and write his flood memoir.

In December 1889, The New York Times published two articles about meetings held at the First Presbyterian Church where congregation members debated whether to remove the Rev. Beale as pastor.

At first, some people blamed him for refusing to surrender morgue books that a local relief committee needed to finish its work.

At a second meeting, the Rev. Beale was retained. But the gathering was "so boisterous and noisy ... that several women fainted and had to be removed to their homes. Manager Fulton declares that the proceedings would have disgraced a New York ward political meeting," the Times reported.

The accusations stung the Rev. Beale, including an allegation that he refused to let certain people see the morgue books.

In September 1890, the minister observed, "To the best of my knowledge none but known lewd women & drunken men were prohibited from handling these books as long as they desired."

In 1892, two years after the Rev. Beale and his family left Johnstown, the minister notes Mr. Fulton's demotion from general manager to mining engineer at the Cambria Iron Works. The cause was said to be ill health, but the Rev. Beale attributed it to "his unjust and envious treatment of his former pastor."

In 1891, the minister bemoaned his "greatest loss at Johnstown," 30 years of research for a Beale family history.

"I had a book that would have reflected credit upon me, but it was all lost in the flood. Few appreciate the extent of this loss."

That same year, the minister wrote, "I risked my health & my life even in the assistance I gave my fellow citizens at Johnstown after the flood."

On every flood anniversary, the minister reflected on the event.

On May 31, 1899, he wrote, "To keep up the remembrance of this solemn day, I wish as long as I live to gather my family for prayer. I hope my book may live. ... I suppose I shall not when in heaven forget that scene of horror. I then expected to die & I wondered how I escaped."

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The leather-bound diaries, above, of the Rev. David Beale, below, were found in Philadelphia last year. Rev. Beale's account of the flood is considered the best firsthand memoir of the tragedy.

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