

The Great Flood of 1927

Objectives

Students will learn about the Great Flood of 1927, those affected by it, and the flood’s lasting impact on the Mississippi Delta. They will then learn about the importance of having an emergency plan of their own and write one to share with their families.

The Great Flood of 1927 lesson plan is adaptable for grades 4 – 9.

Mississippi Department of Education Curricular Connections		
Common Core Language Arts	Fourth Grade	RI1; RI2; RI3; RI4; RI5; RI7; RI8; SL1; SL2; SL3; SL4; SL5; SL6; L1; L3; L4; L6
	Sixth Grade	RI1; RI2; RI3; RI4; RI5; RI7; RI8; SL1; SL2; SL3; SL4; SL5; SL6; L1; L3; L4; L5; L6
	Seventh Grade	RI1; RI2; RI3; RI4; RI4; RI5; RI7; RI8; SL1; SL2; SL3; SL4; SL5; SL6; L1; L3; L4; L5; L6
	Eighth Grade	RI1; RI2; RI3; RI4; RI5; RI7; RI8; SL1; SL2; SL3; SL4; SL5; SL6; L1; L3; L4; L5; L6
Social Studies	Fourth Grade	1c; 5f
	Mississippi Studies	2b
	U.S. History from Reconstruction to the Present	2b; 5c; 7a
	Local Resources	2; 3
	Minority Studies	1a; 4a; 4b
	African American Studies	2b; 6b

Objective:

Students will learn about the Great Flood of 1927, those affected by it, and the flood's lasting impact on the Mississippi Delta. They will then learn about the importance of having an emergency plan of their own and write one to share with their families.

Materials: *Fleeing the Flood*; *Checking Your Reading*; *Flood Vocabulary Crossword*; *Discussion Guide*; Internet access; *Emergency Planning*.

Procedure:**Activity One: Fleeing the Flood**

1. Distribute *Fleeing the Flood* handout to students and read as a class, in groups, or individually.
2. Complete *Checking Your Reading* and *Flood Vocabulary Crossword* handouts.
3. Lead a class discussion about the Great Flood of 1927 using the *Discussion Guide*. Images from the 1927 Flood Photograph Collection (available at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/1927flood) may be printed and distributed to students or projected on a screen.

Activity Two: Be Prepared

1. Discuss with students the types of natural disasters common to your area, such as floods, hurricanes, or forest fires, and the importance of having an emergency plan when these disasters occur.
2. Distribute *Emergency Planning* handout to students. Each student should complete the worksheet and then bring it home to share with their family. You may also ask students to prioritize items on their lists.

Activity Three: Disaster Zone

1. Using textbooks, library books, the Internet, newspaper articles, television news clips, or any other teacher approved source, have students research other natural disasters that have affected Mississippians, such as:
 - the Mississippi River floods of 1973 and 2011
 - the Delta ice storm of 1994
 - the 1979 Easter flood of the Pearl River
 - the Tupelo tornadoes of 1936, 2008, and 2014
 - Hurricanes Camille in 1969 and Katrina in 2005
 - the Hattiesburg tornado of 2013
2. Students may write an informative essay about their findings, a paper comparing their chosen disaster with the Great Flood of 1927, or create a presentation to share with the class.

Extension Activities:

The Flood on Film: Borrow one or more of the following films free of charge from the Mississippi History on Loan Collection. Go to the MDAH website at <http://www.mdah.ms.gov/new/learn/classroom-materials/mississippi-history-on-loan-film-collection/> or contact the Outreach Programs Coordinator at 601-576-6997. Available films include:

- *The River*: A record of the Mississippi River from the Civil War to the disastrous floods of 1927 and the 1930s. This award-winning documentary tells the story of a river, where it comes from, where it goes, what it has meant to us, and what it has cost us. This film offers insights into the use and the misuse of one of our greatest natural resources. Produced by Farm Security Administration, 1937. 32 minutes, black and white. Grades 6-12.

- *Mississippi River Out of Control*: This documentary focuses on the weather and the Mississippi River levee system that contributed to the 1927 flood. The flood affected the city of Greenville, Mississippi, and the rural Mississippi Delta. Using original film footage, interviews of survivors, historians, and engineers this documentary gives a detailed account of the 1927 flood. Produced by A & E Television Networks, 2008. 50 minutes, color and black and white. Grades 6-12.
- *Fatal Flood*: This stunning installment of the acclaimed PBS series American Experience provides an up-close look at the disastrous flood of 1927 and its devastating effects on the Mississippi Delta, Greenville, and the plantation system of the early 20th century. Featuring dramatic archival film footage and first person interviews, it tells a story of greed, power, racial oppression, and betrayal. American Experience is a production of WGBH Boston and the Public Broadcasting System, 2001. 60 minutes, color. Grades 6-12.

Online Resources:

Fatal Flood: Visit the American Experience website at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/flood/> to view teaching materials related to the film *Fatal Flood*. You'll find articles, primary source materials, and biographies related to the 1927 Great Flood.

Read It!: Read "The Flood of 1927 and Its Impact in Greenville, Mississippi" by Princella W. Nowell available through *Mississippi History Now*. View photographs, read Lucy Somerville's first-hand account of the flood in Greenville, and access an accompanying lesson plan at <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/230/the-flood-of-1927-and-its-impact-in-greenville-mississippi>. Then learn about the importance of river and flood control in "Making the Mississippi River Over Again: The Development of River Control in Mississippi" Greg O'Brien at <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/94/making-the-mississippi-river-over-again>.

Singing the Mississippi Blues: Listen to blues music inspired by the Great Flood of 1927. Songs and lyrics such as Charley Patton's "High Water Everywhere," Lonnie Johnson's "The Broken Levee Blues," and Memphis Minnie's "When the Levee Breaks" are all available online. To learn more about the blues in Mississippi, including its history, structure, and the blues today, access the free online lesson plans in *The Mississippi Blues Trail and Beyond* from the Mississippi Arts Commission, available at <http://www.arts.ms.gov/programs/bluestrailcurriculum.php>.

Be Prepared, Be Ready: Visit <https://www.ready.gov/> or <http://www.redcross.org/get-help/prepare-for-emergencies/be-red-cross-ready> to educate yourself about natural and man-made disasters and what you can do to be ready for them. The website walks you through how to make an emergency plan, how to build an emergency kit, and how to prepare for special needs and individuals, such as babies, senior citizens, and even pets.

Fleeing the Flood

The 1927 flooding of the Mississippi River was one of the greatest national disasters of the 20th century. A combination of heavy rainfall and failed levees sent a volume of water approximately 1.7 million cubic feet per second rushing downstream from Illinois to the Gulf of Mexico, flooding 27,000 square miles of land, displacing 700,000 people, and causing over \$400 million in damage.

When a levee crevassed at Mounds Landing, Mississippi, around 8 a.m. on Thursday, April 21, it put Greenville, just 12 miles downstream, into the path of the river. By the next day, the Mississippi Delta's largest town was flooded. What happened to the town's 15,000 residents? Who left? Who stayed? Who never returned?

In the days before the Mounds Landing levee broke, Mississippians prepared for the river's eventual flooding. Many people fled the city of Greenville. Special trains ran until their tracks became impassable and steamboats and barges brought refugees to Vicksburg and Memphis. Many of these refugees were white women and children. The white families who remained in Greenville were generally long-term residents, ones who were sure the levees would hold and who were determined to do whatever they could to save their homes and belongings.

Another group of people remained in Greenville, although not by choice. African Americans, who made their living on the cotton plantations of the Delta, were oftentimes forced into remaining in Mississippi. At this time, many African Americans and poor white families worked as sharecroppers in the Delta. The sharecropping system had developed after the Civil War and consisted of plantation landowners renting a smaller section of land to a tenant in return for a share of the crops produced. The landowner would provide the tenant with seeds and tools to help them begin their crops with the promise that the tenant would pay the landowner back when the crop was harvested. However, if the crop failed or did not sell for a high price, it became easy for tenants to fall behind in their rent and loan payments. They would therefore borrow more money or supplies from landowners, taking on more and more debt until it was next to impossible for them to ever get ahead.

While the sharecropping system kept African Americans and poor whites at an economic disadvantage, it made landowners very prosperous. They became concerned that if the African American population were allowed to evacuate the flood zone, they would never return, leaving no labor force to work on the plantations when the flood waters receded. Thus an official government decision was made that these individuals were necessary to help repair damaged levees and reinforce existing ones, as well as assist in recovery and clean-up activities. African Americans were paid as little as 75 cents a day, if at all, for their labor and were living in "tent cities" on the remaining levees. These tent cities were crowded and unclean, despite the efforts of Red Cross workers who constructed kitchens, hospitals, and schools to serve the refugees. Armed guards prevented African Americans from leaving the tent cities and those working on the levees.

Despite this, many African Americans escaped the flood zone and Mississippi. They followed the "river road" north (Highway 61) to cities such as St. Louis, Detroit, and Chicago in search of better jobs, pay, and living



A kerosene lantern carried by night watchmen who patrolled one-mile sections of the levee during the flood of 1927. These men looked for structural weaknesses that could cause a break or crevasse. MDAH Museum Division Collections.

conditions. Chicago would go on to become a second home for the blues and helped bring this music from the plantations of the Delta to a national audience. The blues allowed its singers and musicians to express their feelings about a host of issues including segregation, sharecropping, relationships, and events such as the Great Flood. It was not unusual for multiple issues to appear in a single song such as in “High Water Everywhere” by Mississippi bluesman Charley Patton. Written two years after the flood, Patton sings

Well, backwater done rose all around Sumner now,
drove me down the line.
Backwater done rose at Sumner,
drove poor Charley down the line.

As he tries to move south to Leland, Greenville, and Vicksburg to escape the flood waters he continues

You know I can't stay here,
I'll go where it's high, boy.
I would go to the hilly country,
but they got me barred.

This last line is a reference to the politicians and armed guards who kept African American laborers from leaving the flooded Delta. Lonnie Johnson of New Orleans repeated Patton's sentiments in “The Broken Levee Blues” of 1928 singing,

They want me to work on the levee, I have to leave my home.
They want to work me on the levee, that I have to leave my home.
I was so scared the levee might break out and I may drown.

The police say work, fight or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.
Police say work, fight, or go to jail, I say I ain't totin' no sack.
And I ain't building no levee, the planks is on the ground and I ain't driving no nails.

The Great Migration of African Americans and the blues from the South would continue through the 1960s as people continued to not only search for better jobs, pay, and living conditions but also escape from increasingly violent civil rights confrontations.

The Great Flood of 1927 has had a lasting impact on Mississippi. In 1928 the Flood Control Act was passed giving the federal government control over the lower Mississippi River. Thus, towns along the river such as Greenville and its citizens were no longer responsible for building and maintaining their local levees. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) was placed in charge and is still responsible for this today.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Checking Your Reading

Answer the questions below based on the reading Fleeing the Flood.

1. When did the levees break at Mounds Landing? _____

2. What was the largest Delta town to be affected by the flood? _____

3. How did people leave the Delta before the levee broke? _____

4. Where did they go? _____

5. Who was the main group of people to remain in the Delta? _____

6. Explain the phrase “sharecropping was a form of economic enslavement.” _____

7. Where did refugees live? _____

8. Why were many of them not allowed to leave? _____

9. What cities were popular destinations during the Great Migration? What drew migrants there? _____

10. What did refugees take with them to Chicago? _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

11. What is the tone of the blues songs excerpted (happy, sad, angry, etc.)? How can you tell? _____

12. What act did the government pass in 1928 and why was it important? _____

13. The Great Flood of 1927 had a significant impact on Mississippi, affecting its agricultural industry, social relationships, civil rights, music, literature and many more aspects of everyday life. Think about one of these outcomes and compare it to the effects of a modern disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. Was the response of Mississippians in 1927 the same as they were in 2005? Why or why not? _____

Name: _____ Date: _____

Checking Your Reading

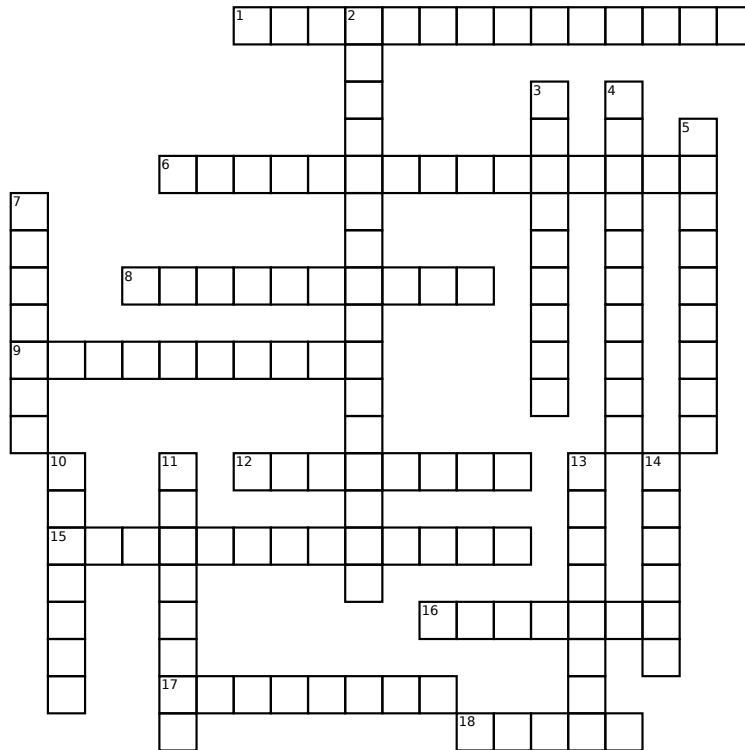
Answer the questions below based on the reading *Fleeing the Flood*.

1. When did the levees break at Mounds Landing? **Thursday, April 21, 1927**
2. What was the largest Delta town to be affected by the flood? **Greenville**
3. How did people leave the Delta before the levee broke? **Trains and steamboats**
4. Where did they go? **Vicksburg and Memphis**
5. Who was the main group of people to remain in the Delta? **African Americans**
6. Explain the phrase “sharecropping was a form of economic enslavement.” **African Americans were tied to land by heritage and a lack of education and money that would have allowed them to pursue other types of employment. White landowners knew this and exploited it, finding ways to keep African Americans within the sharecropping system. This included making them financially dependent upon the landowners they rented land from, not allowing them to leave the county, and using violence and intimidation to “keep them in their place,” both physically and socially.**
7. Where did refugees live? **In tent cities on the levees**
8. Why were many of them not allowed to leave? **Government officials needed men to repair and reinforce levees and clean-up from the flood. City leaders wanted them to stay so they could return to work on the cotton plantations.**
9. What cities were popular destinations during the Great Migration? What drew migrants there? **St. Louis, Detroit, and Chicago. Migrants were looking for better jobs, pay, and living conditions.**
10. What did refugees take with them to Chicago? **The blues**
11. What is the tone of the blues songs excerpted (happy, sad, angry, etc.)? How can you tell? **Sad. “Poor” Charley Patton is driven (forced) down the line but is “barred” from the safety of the hill country. Lonnie Johnson is scared that the levee will break and he will drown but he is also defiant because despite the threat of jail, he refuses to work on the levee.**
12. What act did the government pass in 1928 and why was it important? **The Flood Control Act was important because it gave the federal government control over the lower Mississippi River and made it responsible for building and maintaining levees and ensuring the proper protection from flood for river populations.**
13. The Great Flood of 1927 had a significant impact on Mississippi, affecting its agricultural industry, social relationships, civil rights, music, literature and many more aspects of everyday life. Think about one of these outcomes and compare it to the effects of a modern disaster such as Hurricane Katrina. Was the response of Mississippians in 1927 the same as they were in 2005? Why or why not?

Name: _____ Date: _____

Flood Vocabulary Crossword

Find the crossword puzzle answers based on the reading *Fleeing the Flood*.



Across

- 1 period of time when hundreds of thousands of African Americans moved North (2 Words)
- 6 act stating the government would provide flood control along the Mississippi River (3 Words)
- 8 warning from the National Weather Service for areas where floods may occur within 48 hours (2 Words)
- 9 the largest town in the Delta
- 12 international organization that gives aid during wars and disasters (2 Words)
- 15 where the levee broke (2 Words)
- 16 a popular destination for African Americans
- 17 type of Mississippi music (2 Words)
- 18 an embankment that prevents flooding

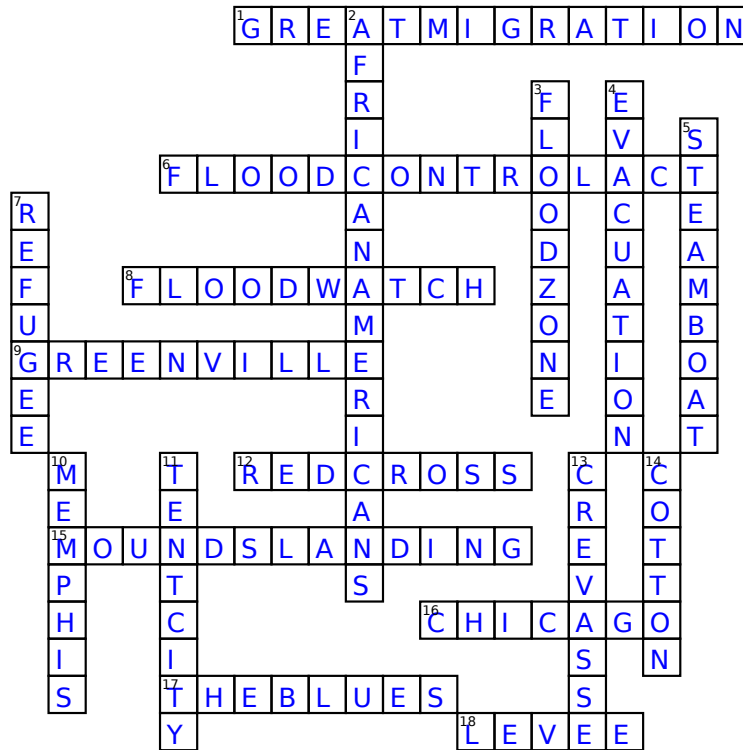
Down

- 2 a large population that was not evacuated from the flood zone (2 Words)
- 3 27,000 square miles of land and 7 states (2 Words)
- 4 the removal of things or people from a dangerous area
- 5 transportation used to evacuate Mississippians before the flood
- 7 one who flees a dangerous area
- 10 the city north of Mississippi that many refugees fled to
- 11 refugee camp on the levees (2 Words)
- 13 a breach or hole in a levee
- 14 the main crop of the Delta

Name: _____ Date: _____

Flood Vocabulary Crossword *Answer Key*

Find the crossword puzzle answers based on the reading *Fleeing the Flood*.



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Teacher Discussion Guide

Use images from the MDAH Digital Archive entitled “1927 Flood Photograph Collection” (available at http://www.mdah.ms.gov/arrec/digital_archives/series/1927flood) to lead your class in a discussion analyzing and interpreting the following images:

1. Type in “African-American flood refugees stand in line at Birdsong Camp” (Item 8) in the “search for keyword” box: Why are these refugees standing in line?
 - They are waiting to collect things that they would have lost in the flood and which would be in short supply such as food, clothing, or medicine.
2. Type in “Two males standing on porch of house surrounded by flood water” (Item 21) in the “search for keyword” box: Some people did not evacuate the flood zone. What would you have to do to flood-proof your house and prepare your family to wait out the flood?
 - Put outdoor equipment such as cars, lawn furniture, and farm animals on the highest ground possible; roll up rugs and stack furniture and put in the attic; have food and water available for people and any pets/livestock and to ensure that you would be able to cook the food without running water or electricity; and build or buy a boat to keep at home and use for transportation.
3. Type in “Flood water surrounds depot at Egremont” (Item 50) in the “search for keyword” box: Why would railroad tracks make a good place to escape flood waters? Who and what are using the tracks in this image?
 - Railroad tracks were placed on elevated dirt embankments similar to levees. This higher ground made them natural places for small and large groups of refugees. In this image you see people, animals, cars, personal belongings, and boats. Very likely, there are people using the boxcars as shelters.
4. Type in “View of different water levels on either side of levee” (Item 61) in the “search for keyword” box: This image shows a levee with two very different water levels on either side of it photographed on May 2, 1927. What does this tell you about the status of flood waters two weeks after the levees broke?
 - It says that the Mississippi River (on the right) is still high and that it did rise higher than anyone thought it would (because it breached the levee and flooded the town (left). Because the river is still so high, the town was unable to drain. It would be August before water levels returned to normal.
5. Type in “Tracks lined with sand bags” (Item 67) and “Black males in rail cars filling sand bags” (Item 74) in “search for keyword” box: What is the purpose of the sandbags? Who put them there?
 - The purpose of the sandbags is to protect the railroad track from flooding and to allow as long as possible the evacuation of refugees and the import of recovery supplies and personnel. Sandbags also helped slow the erosion of the levees by protecting them from the swiftly flowing water. Many of the sandbags alongside railroad tracks and levees were filled and stacked by African American workers. In many instances, these men and their families were forced to remain in the flood zone to provide labor that would help reinforce and repair levees.

6. Type in “Camp for flood victims, tents with occupants” (Item 71) and “Refugee camp for flood victims” (Item 103) in “search for keyword” box: What is this an image of? What would be some of the challenges of living here?
- The image is of Tent City, a refugee camp setup by the Red Cross. Challenges of living here would have included overcrowding; lack of clean drinking/washing/bathing water; sanitation (no indoor, flush toilets) and an excess of mud, debris, and animal carcasses that floated downstream; minimal medical supplies and personnel; and scarce food and clothing.
7. Type in “Cotton bales on rail cars and floating in flood waters” (Item 104) and “Panoramic photograph of flooding in Yazoo City” (Item 105) in “search for keyword” box: How would the Great Flood have impacted Mississippi’s economy?
- The flood destroyed farmland that was predominantly used to grow cotton. Because the flood waters did not completely recede until August of 1927, an entire year of crops were lost. In addition to that, any harvested crops (such as the cotton in this image), merchandise in stores, or machinery that was in the flood zone was either washed away or damaged so it could no longer be used.

Name: _____ Date: _____

Emergency Planning

What would you do in an emergency? Where would you go? What would you bring with you? An emergency plan can help you and your family be prepared for any disaster at any time. Decide what type of emergency plan you need - fire? flood? tornado? Then look at the list below and decide what category it fits in – Things to Do Ahead of Time, Things to Bring with Us, and What I Also Need. Finally, go home and share your plan with your family!

- Copy of Important Paperwork (ID, emergency contact list, insurance, medical records)
- Medical Devices (crutches, wheelchairs, etc.)
- Change of Clothes (layers, to prepare for all weather)
- Moist Towelettes (for personal hygiene)
- Flashlight and Weather Radio with Batteries
- Cell Phone with Charger
- Map of Area
- Travel Plan/Evacuation Route and Destination
- Checkbook, Cash, and Credit Cards
- Whistle (to signal for help if needed)
- Matches (in waterproof container)
- Soap and Disinfectant
- Pet Supplies
- Prepare the Car with Gas, Signal Flares, Jumper Cables, and Basic Tool Kit
- Water for 3 Days (1 gallon per person per day)
- Baby Supplies
- Eyeglasses, Contact Lens Solution, or Prescription Medication
- Tent or Plastic Sheeting and Duct Tape
- Paper and Writing Supplies
- Check with Friends, Family, and Neighbors – should you all evacuate together?
- Prepare to Leave Early
- Leave a Note on Your Door – tell others where you’ve gone and how to contact you!
- Food for 3 Days (non-perishable) with Can Opener, Eating Utensils, Plates, Cups, etc.
- Bedding (sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows)
- First Aid Kit
- Bleach (for purifying water)
- Board-Up House Windows and Doors

Name: _____ Date: _____

My Emergency Plan

Number of People in My House: _____

Type of Emergency: _____

Our Safe Destination: _____

<i>Things to Do Ahead of Time</i>	<i>Things to Bring with Us</i>
<i>What I Also Need</i>	

Name: _____ Date: _____

My Emergency Plan *Answer Key*

Number of People in My House: _____

Type of Emergency: _____

Our Safe Destination: _____

<i>Things to Do Ahead of Time</i>	<i>Things to Bring with Us</i>
<p>Travel Plan/Evacuation Route and Destination Copy of Important Paperwork (ID, emergency contact list, insurance, medical records) Prepare the Car with Gas, Signal Flares, Jumper Cables, and Basic Tool Kit Check with Friends, Family, and Neighbors – should you all evacuate together? Prepare to Leave Early Leave a Note on Your Door – tell others where you’ve gone and how to contact you! Board-Up House Windows and Doors</p>	<p>Water for 3 Days (1 gallon per person per day) Food for 3 Days (non-perishable) with Can Opener, Eating Utensils, Plates, Cups, etc. Bedding (sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows) Change of Clothes (layers, to prepare for all weather) Moist Towelettes (for personal hygiene) Flashlight and Weather Radio with Batteries First Aid Kit Cell Phone with Charger Map of Area Checkbook, Cash, and Credit Cards Whistle (to signal for help if needed) Matches (in waterproof container) Soap and Disinfectant Tent or Plastic Sheeting and Duct Tape Paper and Writing Supplies Bleach (for purifying water)</p>
<p><i>What I Also Need</i> Pet Supplies Baby Supplies Eyeglasses, Contact Lens Solution, or Prescription Medication Medical Devices (crutches, wheelchairs, etc.)</p>	

**MISSISSIPPI DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY LESSON PLANS
TEACHER EVALUATION**

COMPLETE BOTH SIDES AND PLEASE MAIL OR FAX TO THE ADDRESS ON THE NEXT PAGE. THANK YOU!

TEACHER NAME _____

SCHOOL NAME & ADDRESS _____

EMAIL (OPTIONAL) _____

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS _____ GRADE LEVEL _____

LESSON TITLE _____ The Great Flood of 1927 _____

1. In your opinion, did this unit elicit better than average student response; if so, how?
2. Which segments of the unit exceeded your students' attention span?
3. Will this unit be of assistance to you in developing future classroom activities; if so, how?
4. How did this unit add to your earlier teaching on the same subject?
5. Would this teaching unit be handier to use as a:
___ multi-day unit ___ multi-week unit ___ other
6. Were the activities and lessons appropriate for your students? How?

Please rate the following lesson materials and activities by circling the appropriate number.

4=excellent, 3=good, 2=average, 1=inadequate

<u>Directions and Notes</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Curricular Connections</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Student Worksheets</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Interactive Activities</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Historic Images</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>

<u>Activity One: Fleeing the Flood</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Activity Two: Be Prepared</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Activity Three: Disaster Zone</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Extension Activities</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Overall Unit</u>	<u>4</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>1</u>

We would appreciate any additional comments on this teaching unit and any suggestions for improvement. Comments may be entered in the space below.

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