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The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 -

II

Lead: After the Civil War, attempts to harness and confine the channel of the Mississippi River kicked into high gear. While effective in the short term, in the end the River nearly always wins the battle.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Shortly after the Civil War two great engineers struggled to enforce their will over the Mississippi River. James Buchanan Eads was often opposed by the at times intolerant and uncompromising chief

of the Army Corps of Engineers, Gen. Andrew Atkinson Humphreys. Eads conceived the brilliant plan for the construction of parallel jetties far out into the Gulf of Mexico below New Orleans. This narrowed the channel and used the force of the River's own current to cut deep shipping lanes through the silt and sediment dumped by the water at the Mississippi's mouth. Soon the Port of New Orleans became one of the world's largest. Both men were committed to the construction of levees but also believed that constant dredging was required to ensure that the river channel could be maintained. They also believed that provision should be made for dispersal of river water when, in times of flooding, the levees

were incapable of holding back and containing what was in excess of 3,000,000 cubic tons of water per second rushing toward the Gulf.

When Eads and Humphreys left the scene in the late 1800s the Mississippi River Commission adopted a policy that envisioned the construction of levees, “designed to limit the high water width of the river, by the concentration of the flood discharge of the channel ... (thereby to) secure the energy of the flood volume in scouring and enlarging the channel.” In defiance of reality, and the experience of these two great engineers, states up and down the Mississippi working with the Army Corps of Engineers began

to rely on levees alone to contain the river. People also began to fill up the floodplains in the false illusion that the levees alone could protect them. It was a prescription for disaster. Next time: a springtime harvest of horror.

Research assistance by Ashleigh Greene, at the University of Richmond this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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Taken from
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