They Don’t Tell Stories Like They Used To. Dam Failures and Incidents: A Review of ENR Article Archives from 1875 to 1923

Jonathan Pittman, PE, Schnabel Engineering

Clint Brown, PE, Engineering Analytics

Johnathon Atkins, PE, Louisiana Dam Safety Program

In late 2017, the ENR Research Group, a sub-committee of ASDSO’s Dam Failures and Incidents Committee, was tasked with reviewing available ENR articles prior to 1923 to gather information on published dam failures and incidents from this time period. The postulation was that, while more modern dam failures and incidents are generally well-publicized, we, as the dam safety community, may lack information on many dam failures and incidents that occurred earlier in our country’s history. This was proven true in our research as we found that these ENR articles included information on nearly 100 identified dam failures or incidents, many of which lack other detailed published accounts. Many of the articles found were presented in fascinating detail, including eyewitness accounts, descriptions of the failure mode(s), the damage caused, and associated ornate, hand-drawn sketches. As a first step in capturing this information, the group used ASDSO’s dam failure and incident spreadsheet template as a documentation guide and linked PDF copies of the pertinent news articles for each dam failure or incident to the spreadsheet. We will present the research approach and specific examples of the information gathered, with a focus on the value this information brings to the dam safety community. We will discuss potential next steps to leverage this information to further enhance our understanding of our history and our profession.