

## "Jacob Zentgraf and the Johnstown Flood"

by Melinda A. Peak

Jacob Zentgraf was one of a party of four who arrived in Baltimore on the ship **Martha** on June 14, 1853 from the German port city of Bremen. The other members of his party were his mother, Catherine Zentgraf, 54, his sister Margaret Schiffhauer, 28, and her husband, John Schiffhauer, 27. All parties were listed as being from the town of Oztbach, a small community in the Thuringia region, near Saxony. Their destination is given as "Greet Wester." There is no direct translation of this place name, but presumably it referred to their intent to go to the western part of the United States. Jacob's occupation is listed as a "Maurer," translated to be a mason or brick-layer (*Ship Passenger records*).



Zentgraf Family Collection

Jacob Zentgraf  
(1821-1911)



Zentgraf Family Collection

Antone Zantgraf  
(1828-1892)

The biography of Jacob Zentgraf in the **History of El Dorado County** (*Sioli 1883*) reports that he arrived in the United States in 1852, with his home town "Saxe-Weimar-Eisner" in Germany, and settled in Butler, Pennsylvania. He came to California via the route through Nicaragua in 1853. Jacob worked as a miner on Weber Creek for a short time. In 1854, he and his brother Antone acquired the property on Deer Valley Road. His occupation was reportedly

"stonecutter" (*Sioli 1883*). This account is based on Jacob's recollections in 1883, and interestingly, the year of arrival and other reports can be shown to be incorrect based on the Ship Passenger record.

The biography in the County history also gives a year for the arrival of his mother as 1857; this is inconsistent with the Ship Passenger record showing her arrival in 1853 on the same ship with Jacob (*Ship Passenger records*).

What is not known is what happened to the remainder of the party that arrived in Baltimore in 1853. The Schiffhauers apparently settled in Pennsylvania, with children born there in about 1853, 1855, and 1859. They arrived in California by 1865, with two children born in the state in 1865 and 1869 (*Federal Census 1870*). The first child born in California is John Henry Schiffhauer, whose Pennsylvania death certificate shows his birth as June 28, 1865 in Shingle Springs.

There may have been more associations in the family that remain lost to time, particularly with the relatives in Pennsylvania. In 1880, Antone Zantgraf and his wife have six children in their household in Salmon Falls Township. Their two oldest children, ages 24 and 20, were born in California. Their next child is 18, born in Pennsylvania. Their 17- and 14-year-old children were also born in California, with a 12 year old born in Pennsylvania. Also not precise, it would place the family in Pennsylvania in 1862 and 1868. Antone reportedly returned to the wine business for

several years, opening a two-story “wine depot” at Fourteenth and I Street in the City of Sacramento, acting as his brother’s agent (*Costa 2010: 14*).

It is assumed that Catherine Zentgraf remained with the Schiffhauers, living with them in Pennsylvania, and traveling with them from Pennsylvania to California. In 1867, John Schiffhauer registers to vote in the White Oak Township of El Dorado County, listing his occupation as “farmer,” presumably living at the Zentgraf ranch on Deer Valley Road (*Great Register of Voters 1867*).

Even if Schiffhauer lived elsewhere in the area, he is certainly on the property in 1870, and is enumerated in the Federal Census as the household visited next after the Jacob Zentgraf household. At this time, Jacob is a vintner, producing wine and brandy from his own grapes. Schiffhauer, his wife, five children, and mother-in-law Catherine Zentgraf live in the same household. He is listed as a “farm laborer,” from Saxony. The 15-year-old daughter, Annie, apparently worked for others as a “housekeeper” (*Federal Census 1870*).

Since Schiffhauer is on the Zentgraf ranch in 1870, it seems likely he assisted in the construction of the still existent Zentgraf home, completed in 1871 (*Teie and Carpenter 2011*).

At some unknown point between 1870 and 1880, Schiffhauer moves back to Pennsylvania, and settles in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Catherine Zentgraf moves with her son-in-law and daughter back to Pennsylvania.

Johnstown and the associated small communities of Cambria, Conemaugh, Millville, South Fork, Mineral Point, Morrellville, and Woodville lie along the Conemaugh River at its junction with Stoney Creek. The area was served by two railroad lines, and back

then was primarily an industrial region. Large iron mines were located near the communities, as well as the large steel mill, the Cambria Iron Works, and a large woolen mill at the edge of Johnstown. The population of Johnstown totaled about 10,000, with about 25,000 to 30,000 in the region (*Harper’s Weekly June 15, 1889*). Within the greater Johnstown area, there were 123 saloons, including one run by a forty-niner, “California” Tom Davis. This seems to be a large number of drinking establishments, which also served as the social gathering places in neighborhoods (*McCullough 1968: 30*).

Schiffhauer ran his saloon at 182 Washington Street in Johnstown, a community with many German immigrants. Besides his

wife and mother-in-law, there are four children in the household in 1880—Jacob 26, Mary 22, Henry 15, and Frances 11, attending school. John and Anna are shown to be from “Saxon”; Catherine Zentgraf reported she was from “Hesse.” The two sons might be clerks for their father in the saloon (*Federal Census 1880; Johnstown City Directory 1884*).



Zentgraf Family Collection

The Zentgraf home was built in 1871.



Zentgraf Family Collection

The Zentgraf winery produced thousands of gallons of wine and brandy over the years.

**Historical notes:** 1880 Census lists Jacob had 20-acres in grapes and he produced 2,700 gallons of wine.

In 1883, Sioli in his book, **History of El Dorado County**, wrote that Jacob produced 12-14 barrels of brandy, and 4 to 6 thousand gallons of wine.

One source suggests that Schiffhauer's saloon was an outlet for sales of Zentgraf wine (*Costa 2010*). It seems more likely that brandy would have been the preferred product for a saloon for working men, and would be more cost-effective to ship. Barrels of the brandy could have been hauled and then shipped on the Central Pacific train from Auburn heading east, ending up in Johnstown, located on a major rail line.



Margaret Schiffhauer  
(1824-1887)



Catherine Zentgraf  
(1797-1887)

On March 16, 1887, Margaret Schiffhauer died at the age of 63. She is buried in the St. Joseph Cemetery in Geistown, Cambria County, PA. Her mother, whose age has been given differently through the years in the records, died two weeks later at age 89 on April 2, 1887. The family suffered another loss soon thereafter with the death of son Jacob at age 33 on May 22, 1887, with both interred at the same cemetery as Anna, in the family plot (*Find A Grave website*). It might be speculated that the three losses could have been related to a disease, with the deaths all occurring in roughly two months.

Happer's Weekly, June 15, 1889



When the South Fork Dam failed, it sent a wall of water down the Conemaugh River. The death toll from the 1889 flood was approximately 2,209, about 1/3 of whom were individuals who were never identified.

By 1889, son John had apparently moved to another location in the nearby community of Cambria. His father remained at the saloon on Washington Street in Johnstown, apparently with daughter Frances (*Johnstown City Directory 1889*).

In 1889, Johnstown became the scene of the largest loss of civilian life in a single event in America, up to that date. A group of sportsmen that included many wealthy industrialists from Pittsburgh, to the west, including Andrew Carnegie, had leased a reservoir upstream from Johnstown on the Conemaugh River. They formed a club called the South Fork Fishing and Hunting Club, with sailing on the reservoir a popular activity.

Happer's Weekly, June 15, 1889



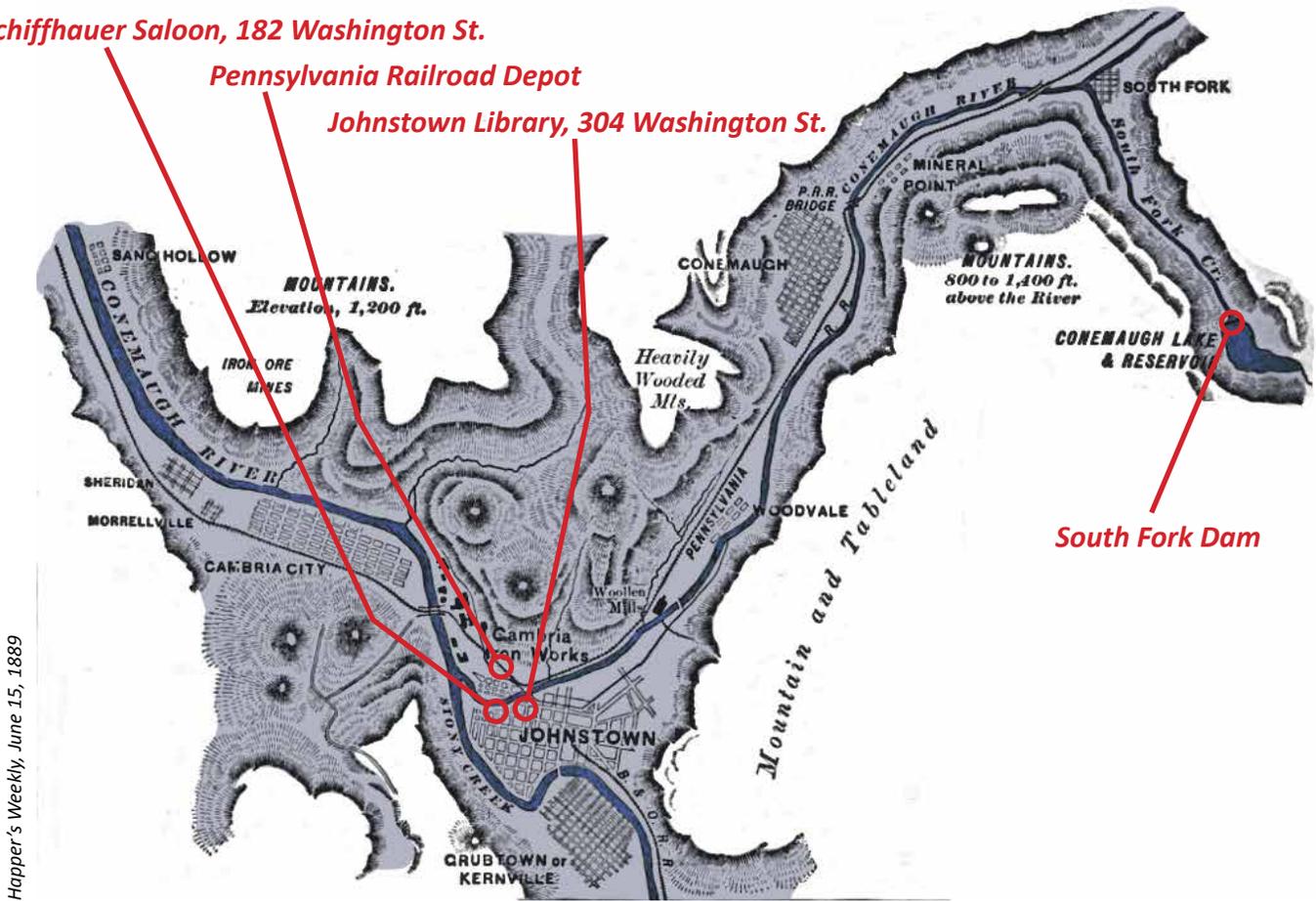
An artist's rendering of the Johnstown Flood, Harper's Weekly, 1889.

# Johnstown Flood Map, Friday, May 31, 1889

Schiffhauer Saloon, 182 Washington St.

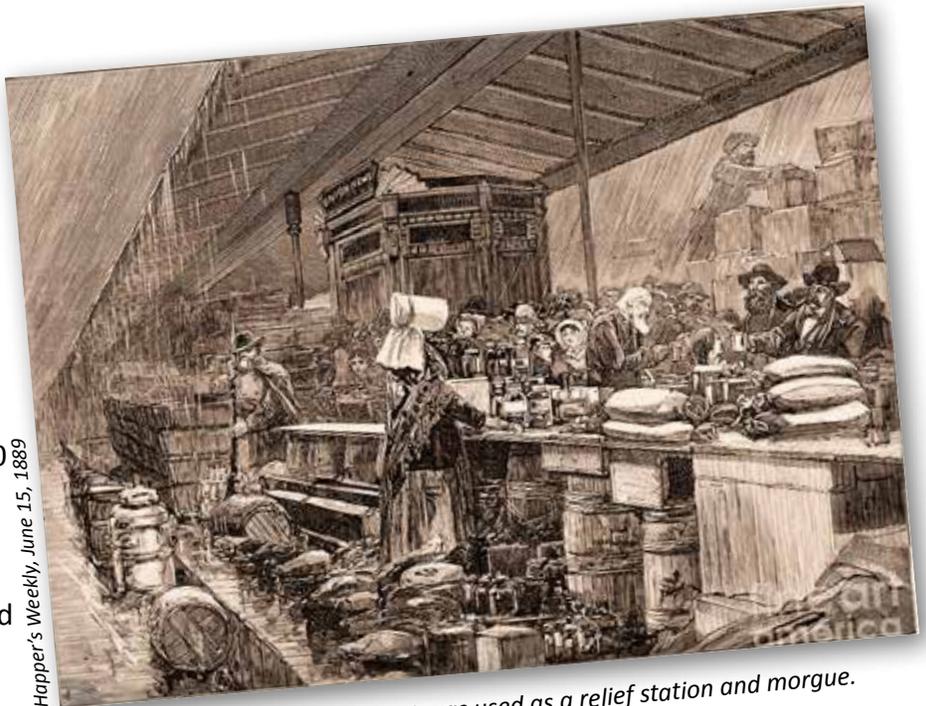
Pennsylvania Railroad Depot

Johnstown Library, 304 Washington St.



Happer's Weekly, June 15, 1889

The South Fork Dam was built from 1838-1853. Due to poor engineering, a lack of maintenance, and removal of outlet pipes, there had been warnings made by various engineers about the potential instability of the dam. During a severe storm on May 31, 1889, the South Fork Dam failed and a violent, deadly wall of water swept down the river. Over 2,200 lives were lost in the communities along the river, making the disaster the largest loss of civilian life in the United States at the time. An excellent account of the flood and its aftermath can be found in David McCullough's 1968 book, *The Johnstown Flood*.



Happer's Weekly, June 15, 1889

The Pennsylvania Railroad Depot was used as a relief station and morgue.

Two lives lost in the flood were Schiffhauers who had lived at the Zentgraf ranch—John Schiffhauer was killed in the flood, as well as his daughter, Frances Schiffhauer, age 19. John’s body was recovered, and he is buried beside his wife in the St. Joseph Cemetery. Daughter Frances was never found (*McCullough 1968*). The family erected monuments for both John and Frances in the family plot (*Find A Grave website*).

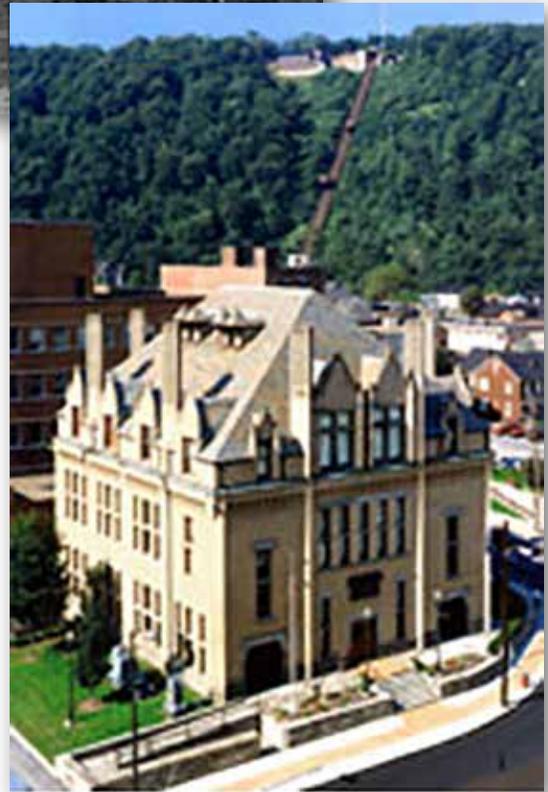


*The town library was destroyed by the flood. It was rebuilt on the same site and in 1973, it became the Johnstown Flood Museum.*

The South Fork Club members never spoke publicly about the disaster, and the Club and its members never paid for any damages suffered in the lawsuits that followed the tragedy. Andrew Carnegie visited Johnstown, and did help to build a new library, now the site of the Flood Museum.

Schiffhauer’s life story is an interesting and tragic study touched by some of the events that shaped the second half of the nineteenth century. He and his wife come to America with the wave of immigrants from Europe in the 1850s, seeking a better life and economic opportunity. Perhaps because of his burgeoning family, he did not have the same freedom as his brother-in-laws, Jacob and Antone Zentgraf, who were able to join the rush to California for a new life with people from all parts of the world, seeking the riches promised by the discovery of gold in 1848. Jacob Zentgraf realized very early on that he was better served by becoming a farmer, and he created a successful wine and brandy business in the greater Rescue area.

John Schiffhauer apparently came to California to pursue an agriculture career. He may have lacked the capital to purchase his own property, or discovered that he was better served living in a working man’s community in Pennsylvania, selling his family’s brandy.



It is a unique and tragic connection—a family from rural El Dorado County being tied to an event of unfathomable scale at a national level.

## Carp's Corner

As this page is being written for the newsletter I believe that we are in the middle of one the hottest summers that I can remember. Fighting fire this year is very challenging. I'm not sure why fires spread in every direction. I guess we were lucky in my fire fighting days. There are more fires on the west coast than I ever remembered before.

The lack of water this year has been rough. We're on EID water. For those people on a well, if it is a good one, it probably doesn't matter much. We have lost numerous trees as this is the second year of our serious water shortage. A large Ponderosa Pine our front yard was cut down this spring. The "Pine Beetle" got it. It was over 100 years old. Looking to the north at our son's place he has a large Ponderosa Pine with a dead top. The beetles have got it also. All you can do is fell the tree. The beetles spread from tree to tree, and I believe that the drought also helps the beetle infestation proliferate.

As Joy and I grow older we realize how few friends we have left who can assist us with local history. My parents were a gold mine of information, however we never took advantage of it. From time to time my father would point out where an old cabin used to set or perhaps a mining claim. There were many of them. The problem is that nothing was ever written down. Names could have been attached to most of the buildings and claims, and I wish we had.

Today, only from such items as James Russell's diary, Pearl's notes, Sue Silver's "Road House Tracking" (modern), and individual studies do we gain more knowledge of our local history. I know of two grave

sites in Kanaka Valley that are not public knowledge. Why? Because no one knows where to start the search for at least one of them. Who is buried in them? James Russell's Diary gives a clue as to who might be buried in one of them. A journal entry dated Nov. 2, 1861 states that Frank Wilson was buried at Kanaka Valley on this date. Thank you Linda Van Gundy. As to the actual site location, I don't know. A possible burial site was handed down to me by someone who used to live there some 70 years ago. It's on BLM land. Today the location is part of The Kanaka Valley Recreation Area. I'm not sure what is going on there.

I hope everyone is having a pleasant summer.



## President's Report

We are a small organization with an honorable mission—attempt to keep the story of Rescue alive! We have a small membership and limited resources. Based on these realities, we have to concentrate on quality rather than quantity. Keeping that in mind, we will focus our efforts on updating and improving our homepage, and next spring, hosting a “best ever” Rescue Historical Faire.

I want to thank Michelle (Krell) Malone and Melinda Peak for their contributions to haring and preserving Rescue history.

“Carp” and I are in the process of developing a second bus tour route—the Lotus, Luneman, Jurgens Road loop. It has real promise, but will take some time to

prepare the tour presentation. For this reason, we have postponed the next tour to next fall. As always, your ideas and/or recommendations for contributions to the Rescue Historical Society Newsletter are welcome and appreciated! If you have a story, pictures, or other memorabilia featuring Rescue, give as a call.

Our next business meeting will be Saturday, November 14, 2015, at 10 a.m. in the Rose Springs Literary Society hall.

There is not much more to report.



ps...I was talking with a friend the other day about our organization and she came up with some interesting one-liners!:

***Preserving the past . . . for the future!***

***History is a treasure. Rescue, California history is a gold mine!***

## Your Officers

### **President**

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*If you or someone you know is interested in this position, please contact Bill.*

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### **Web Master**

Rose Springs Literary Society Hall  
Constructed in 1896



Rescue Historical Society, Inc.  
PO Box 13  
Rescue, CA 95672

### Important Notices:

- **November 14, 2015, Saturday** – The Rescue Historical Society will hold a business meeting in the Rose Springs Literary Society Hall, starting at 10:00 am.

Visit our homepage :

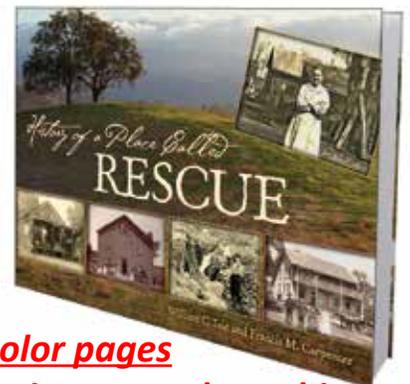


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