



Newsletter of the Whitewater Valley Railroad Connersville, Indiana USA

Record Rainfall & Flooding

Throughout the Whitewater River Valley



In the early morning hours of August 13, the West Fork of the Whitewater River crested at an unprecedented 21.78 feet at Alpine. The towns of Connersville, Laurel, and Metamora were in the direct path of the raging floodwaters.

Since its original incorporation in 1867, the Whitewater Valley Railroad was established to bring reliable transportation to the West Fork of the Whitewater Valley—taking on a challenge that had previously bankrupted both the canal company and the State of Indiana. Facing the power of the river is part of our history, and today, it is our turn to rebuild. This time, however, the challenge extends far beyond typical washouts.

Recent flooding has severely impacted our facilities and operations:

Engine Shop: Floodwaters reached 40 inches inside the shop. Toolboxes are in disarray, parts storage areas are contaminated, and equipment throughout the facility has been compromised.

South Connersville (South Conn): Our base of operations was inundated with 36 inches of water, destroying nearly everything below that level.

Rolling Stock and Equipment: Water rushed through the yard, submerging the side sills of all coaches and cabooses. Operating locomotives suffered similar inundation. Every traction motor in our inventory was submerged—including 22 active operational motors and 26 spares.

Track Infrastructure: While a full evaluation of our 19-mile line will take time as waters recede, initial assessments reveal thousands of washouts. Fortunately, preliminary inspections of the Laurel

Bridge show no signs of movement or misalignment, and individual washouts are comparable in size to those typical of the Metamora area—there is simply an unprecedented volume of them.

Historic Structures: The Dearborn Tower experienced minimal water on the floor, while the Rushville Depot remained dry, with floodwaters stopping less than an inch below the door.

Early estimates indicate that total damages will reach into the millions of dollars.

Francis Parker, a longtime railroad member and former Ball State University professor, once remarked, "The railroad has always battled the river, and someday the river is going to win."

What makes this moment unique is that we get to decide when that day comes. With the support of our community, volunteers, and donors, we are ready to prove that the river will not win today—not on our watch.

PHOTO BELOW

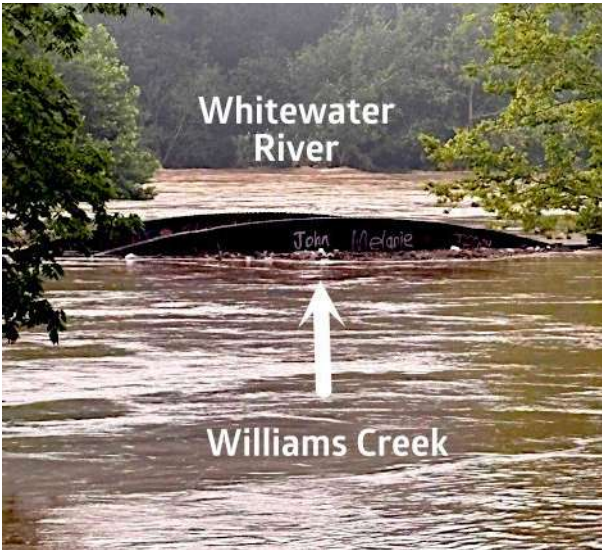
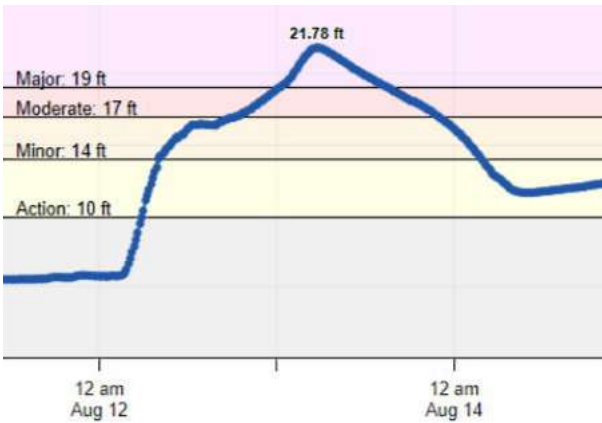
This photo was taken from Route 121 at the height of the flooding. In the distance on the left you can see our shop and the familiar orange color of engine 532.



Whitewater River Level

The Whitewater River reached a maximum height of 21.78 feet as recorded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) measurement station at Alpine, Indiana, seven miles south of Connersville. The previous record was set on April 6, 2025, at 16.8 feet. For this area, moderate flooding occurs at 17 feet, and major flooding at 19 feet. This storm's crest was well above that.

Heavy rain fell in the Connersville area, and even larger amounts fell to the north, which is in the watershed for the Whitewater River. The graph below shows how the river started rising at 3:00 am on Wednesday, August 12, and within a few hours reached flood stage then crested on Thursday at 5:30 am.



There is a twin arch bridge that crosses Williams Creek where it flows into the Whitewater River. Normally there is 15 - 20 feet between the bridge and the water level. When the river neared its crest, the bridge was nearly covered.

The Aftermath & Cleanup



The interior photo above shows the disarray left behind when the waters receded. The first day was spent removing the contents of the building and stacking it outside. Periodically, a crew comes by, loads the debris, and hauls it to a staging area at the Connersville Airport awaiting final disposal.



While we were working, a truck pulled up and unloaded all of the cleaning supplies in this photo. The 5 gallon buckets were labeled "Disaster Response, Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod." What's amazing is that they were in town within 24 hours of the water receding. We have put these materials to good use.



It's amazing the amount of debris that the flowing water carried away. Quite a bit of it came to rest on our main track down by the Rushville Depot and Dearborn Tower. It will need to be moved and consolidated for pickup. The standing water sitting in what remains of the canal bed has since receded.



This is a washout just north of Eastern Avenue. The flowing water not only washed away the ballast, but it also moved the track several feet out of alignment.



This photo was taken in Metamora after the water had started to recede, but it still had a heavy flow to it. Water on its way to the river will make a path. Unfortunately, washouts like this occurred along the entire length of the railroad.



The following weekend, the debris has been cleared and repairs are being made. The current focus is to work north of Eastern, get that track repaired, and then start heading south. Unfortunately, the next washout (photo below) is only fifty feet away, with many more to come.





The waters left behind a coating of fine silt that covered any horizontal surface, especially floors. Here the floor in the South Conn. Annex is being cleaned with a squeegee and a hose. This building contained Polar Express merchandise left over from last year, which could not be saved. Fortunately, this year's order has not come in yet.



The cleanup includes moving dirt and gravel back into place. It was amazing how much material the waters moved. The overhead door in the building provides access to our air brake valve storage area. Most of our inventory was flooded and will have to be sent out for a rebuild.



Another load of trash is being picked up. This load contained many paper records which the water destroyed. For some of the records, retention is required by Federal Railroad regulations. We have already contacted the FRA, and they instructed us to prepare a memorandum detailing the date of the flooding and extent of the damage. With this in place we would not be required to produce paper records for anything that happened prior to the flood.



All of our coaches were parked on track 3 and the flood waters were high enough to enter the cars and flood the floor, but not cover the seats. How to clean that? Our solution was to remove all of the seats, place them outside, and then have a volunteer fire department hose down the interior. It was slow going because the silt was very stubborn. They used one tank truck of water to clean coach 9 and one caboose. This process will continue until all of the equipment has been cleaned.



We have been putting pressure washers to good use during the cleanup process. In the photo above the stainless steel kitchen sink and counter are being cleaned so they can be reused. All of the various items stored in the shop buildings needed to be pressure washed (left). The floor of the old shop was also washed.



We have six rolling tool boxes in the shop, and the drawers in the lower half got flooded coating everything with brown slime. The solution was to remove the drawers and contents, clean and dry everything, and



This is a view along the west side of track 3 at the south end of our yard. As you can see, the water dug a deep trench alongside the track. It also piled quite a bit of debris under the cars.



then reinstall them. This task was handled by multiple people including a cub scout troop, and was supervised by Rusty the shop cat. She wasn't happy about the flood, but seems to have recovered.

Looking Ahead

The photos in this edition show just a part of what has happened during the first two post-flood weekends. We must keep up this pace as we work toward resuming some operations this year, even if they're limited. We will need the income since next year's ticket revenue won't start until May.

We are hoping that in the September newsletter we can announce what the balance of the operating season will look like. However, rebuilding our infrastructure and equipment will be a multi-year effort. The volunteer response from both the community and our membership has been tremendous and makes this burden easier to bear.

Signal Bungalow Destroyed

Editor's Note: This incident preceded the flood, but it is worth covering. A railroad signal bungalow is a small, weather-resistant aluminum enclosure that houses the electronics, relays, and crossing controllers for grade-crossing signals. Our tracks cross Veterans Memorial Drive just south of Connersville, and that crossing is equipped with flashing warning lights. On Saturday, July 25, there was a traffic crash where Veterans Memorial Drive crosses Route 121, which is adjacent to our tracks.



An SUV and a tractor-trailer collided, and the truck swerved across the road and impacted the signal bungalow head on. As you can see in the photo, the bungalow was destroyed. We will be filing an insurance claim for a complete replacement. In this photo our boom truck is ready to move the debris.

Meetings

Since the South Conn. facility is not habitable, member meetings will be online and you will be notified by email. The frequency will be determined by the need to communicate our status as it changes.

Board of Director meetings will continue to be held on the second Friday of each month. They will be held at Grand Central Station in Connersville, 455 Market St., starting at 7 pm.

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The Whitewater Valley Railroad is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit operating railroad museum dedicated to preserving an historic branch line railroad, the restoration of railroad equipment, and the conduct of educational railroad programs.