

PA Dam-Related Boating Accident Fatalities 1989 - 2012

TOTAL: 26 Fatal Accidents, 39 Fatalities

2 Fatalities

5/9/89

Allegheny River

Allegheny County

A 31-year-old man and his 32-year-old roommate lost their lives when their leased 41-foot cabin motorboat went over lock #2 dam. Both men were experienced boaters. The boat apparently lost power when the mooring or lock lines became tightly wound onto the outdrive stabilizer bar. The river was very high and swift. Though several PFDs were on board they were not worn by either victim. Though two anchors were on board they were not deployed. The boat was caught in the hydraulic from the low head dam. Due to river flooding the bodies of the two men were not recovered until 13 days later. Alcohol and controlled substances may have been factors.

1 Fatality

5/20/89

Fishing Creek

Columbia County

A 29-year-old man lost his life when his 15-foot aluminum canoe capsized after going over a low head dam at Camp Creasy on Fishing Creek. The deceased was a swimmer but had very little boating experience. Fishing Creek was swollen with water from the recent rains. The victim and the other occupant of the canoe intentionally went over the dam. The turbulent water in the hydraulic at the base of the dam quickly swamped the canoe. The air temperature was 85 degrees F. but the water temperature was only 57 degrees F. Hypothermia was a factor. Though Type III PFDs were available, they were not worn.

1 Fatality

5/21/89

Delaware River

Bucks County

A 33-year-old man lost his life when his small aluminum canoe capsized after going over a dam on the Delaware River near New Hope. The dam is clearly marked "danger dam ahead" and the deceased had previous canoeing experience in the area. Water conditions were high with a swifter than average current. The deceased could swim but, according to the other paddler in the canoe, hit his head or got trapped in the canoe. PFDs were worn. The victim's body was recovered two miles downstream from the dam by another boater. The surviving paddler was rescued from an island approximately fifty yards below the dam. Hypothermia may have been a factor.

1 Fatality

10/22/89

Bushkill Creek

Northampton County

A 14-year-old canoeist drowned when his 17-foot canoe capsized in the hydraulic of a low head dam. There were no PFDs on board. The canoe was taken without the owner's knowledge. The canoeist was seen sitting alone in the bow portion of the canoe paddling toward Dundee's Dam from the downstream side. The site is approximately 300 yards from the confluence with the Delaware River. The severely damaged canoe was trapped in the recirculating hydraulic of the dam. The victim's body was recovered two hours

after the accident 60 feet downstream from the dam. The victim had very little boating experience and no formal instruction in boating safety. Since the water temperature was only 55 degrees hypothermia may have been a factor.

3 Fatalities

6/20/90

Susquehanna River

Dauphin County

A 40 year old man, his 16 year old son, and their 35 year old neighbor lost their lives when the 12 foot rowboat they were fishing from capsized in the hydraulic below low head dam. After fishing in the morning in the pool above the dam, the victims took their boat below the dam and launched it. The men rowed the boat out onto the river and approached the dam from the downstream side. When they got very close the man rowing turned the stern toward the dam. Though an anchor was deployed, it did not hold. The boat was pulled into the dam by the backwash from the hydraulic. The boat did not capsize immediately and was described by witnesses as floating parallel to the dam. This continued for a few minutes. The occupants then tried to use the oars to push the boat away from the dam. This action capsized the boat. No PFDs were used or on board. One of the occupants disappeared immediately. Another was almost clear of the hydraulic when he went under. The man rowing held onto the boat for about five minutes then lost his grip. He was circulated 2 or 3 times before he disappeared. It is very doubtful whether any of the victims had any boating experience or formal education in boating safety. The boat was overloaded. The victims bodies were recovered by River Rescue personnel 2 days later.

1 Fatality

5/10/90

Susquehanna River

Dauphin County

A 29 year old fisherman lost his life when the 15 foot open motorboat he was fishing from got caught in the hydraulic below the Dock Street Dam in Harrisburg and capsized. The accident occurred at 1:30 AM. There were two other fishermen on board. The men maneuvered the boat to within 10 to 15 feet of the dam from the downstream side. The backwash from the hydraulic pulled the boat into the dam, causing it to fill with water and capsize. The occupants held on the boat as it turned over in the water. Though he could swim, after about thirty minutes the victim could no longer hold on and disappeared. About 3:00 A.M. one of the survivors used a Type IV PFD (boat cushion) to escape from the hydraulic and get to shore. Though the boat was legally equipped with type IV PFDs, there were no wearable types on board. Help was summoned and the remaining survivor was rescued at 4:30 A.M. The operator was an inexperienced boater with no formal instruction in boating safety.

2 Fatalities

11/16/90

Susquehanna River

Dauphin County

A 49 year old man and his 43 year old wife lost their lives when their 16 foot open motorboat capsized after going over the Red Hill Dam. The couple had been spotting deer from a borrowed boat at approximately 10:00 PM. The operator had a great deal of boating experience in the area. Apparently, they got too close to the dam and could not turn in time to keep from being washed over in the heavy current. Two walleye fishermen in the area witnessed the accident. Four PFDs have been recovered or seen

caught in the hydraulic below the dam. It is almost certain that none were worn by the victims. No bodies have been recovered as of this date. Alcohol may have been involved. Hypothermia was a probable factor. It is unknown whether the victim had any boating experience or formal education in boating safety.

1 Fatality

8/10/91

Brandywine Creek

Chester County

A 16-year-old girl lost her life when the 15-foot aluminum canoe she was paddling capsized above a small dam. The two paddlers in the rented canoe were proceeding upstream in the impoundment above the dam. The paddlers had difficulty controlling the canoe and the current pulled it toward the dam breast where they ran aground. The surviving paddler got out, pushed the canoe off the dam and got back in. The canoe only went a short distance before it capsized putting both paddlers in the water. The girl was swept into the breach in the dam by the swift current and apparently snagged on submerged debris or part of the dam. Rescue workers located the victim after approximately twenty minutes but could not retrieve her due to the swift current. They then removed some rocks and debris and the victim was swept through the breach. CPR was administered with no success. The victim could swim and was wearing a PFD. The paddlers were inexperienced boaters. It is unknown whether either paddler had any formal education in boating safety.

1 Fatality

3/27/92

Bushkill Creek

Northampton County

A 23-year-old man lost his life when his 10-foot kayak capsized after going over a low-head dam. The victim had briefly beached his boat to look at the dam, and then intentionally paddled over it. He was caught in the hydraulic below the dam where he circulated for a few minutes. A rescue attempt by a witness on the scene was unsuccessful. Twenty minutes later, a local rescue unit recovered the body downstream from the dam. Though the victim could swim, was an experienced boater, and was wearing a wet suit and a PFD, he should not have been boating alone on cold water. It is unknown if the victim had any formal boating education. The water temperature was 43 degrees, so hypothermia was a probable factor.

Note: The following accident was not a recreational boating accident. Commercial boating accidents are investigated by the Commission but are not included in annual state statistical information.

2 Fatalities

4/23/92

Susquehanna River

Dauphin County

A 28-year-old man and a 36-year-old man lost their lives when their 16-foot open motorboat swamped in the hydraulic below the Red Hill Dam at Three Mile Island. It is unknown which of the victims was operating the boat at the time of the accident. The two men were employed by a contractor and were conducting a shad survey at the time of their deaths. According to a witness fishing on the opposite bank, the two men maneuvered their boat close to the dam, where the hydraulic action drew the boat to the dam's breast. The boat flooded and then capsized. The witness saw one man holding onto the boat for a brief period before disappearing. The body of one victim was

recovered an hour after the accident; the other, a month later. Both men were wearing PFDs, were experienced boaters and were above-average swimmers. The water temperature was 54 degrees, so hypothermia was a factor. One of the victims had completed Maryland's Basic Boating Course.

2 Fatalities

12/20/92

Swatara Creek

Lebanon County

A 31-year-old man and a 37-year-old man lost their lives when their 17-foot canoe capsized after going over a low-head dam. Both men knew the area and were familiar with the dam. Apparently, they intentionally "shot" the dam, going over it in the middle of the creek. The canoe capsized and was held against the dam by the hydraulic. One victim held onto the canoe long enough for a witness in a following canoe to attempt a rescue. The witness approached from downstream but was unable to reach the victim. While attempting the rescue the witness saw one of the victims float by his boat. Volunteer fire personnel recovered both bodies downstream within an hour. The canoe was held against the dam until it was pulled out with grappling hooks. Wearable PFDs were on board but were not used. Both boaters were experienced but had no formal instruction in boating safety. Alcohol was a major factor. The water temperature was 38 degrees, so hypothermia was a direct contributor. Both victims could swim.

2 Fatalities

5/1/93

Susquehanna River

Lancaster County

A 35-year-old man and a 34-year-old man lost their lives when their 15-foot open motorboat went over the Holtwood Dam. According to witnesses, one of the men on board shouted "go faster" as they approached the dam. It was just turning dark at 8:30 PM when the accident occurred. The owner of the boat was an experienced boater who knew the river well. It is unlikely that he did not know where he was on the river because of his familiarity with the area and the fact that the dam was well lit. It is possible that they intentionally "shot" the dam. An extensive search below the dam resulted in the boat being recovered on May 5th. Personal flotation devices were onboard but not used. It is unknown if either victim could swim. It is unknown, but doubtful, that the operator had formal boating education. Alcohol was a major factor in this accident. The water temperature was only 55 degrees so hypothermia may have been a factor. The victims' bodies were recovered on May 8th and May 10th

2 Fatalities

4/30/94

Susquehanna River

Lancaster County

A 34-year-old man and a 24-year-old man lost their lives when their 14-foot open motorboat collided with a dam. The two men were attempting to cross the river late at night above the York Haven Dam. A strong storm with winds exceeding 25 mph and a heavy downpour created very hazardous conditions on the river when the two men launched their boat. The victim's boat collided with the dam. This may have caused the two victims to be ejected from the boat. The water temperature was 48 degrees, so hypothermia may have been a factor. Alcohol was a major factor. Both victims could swim. Neither victim was wearing a PFD, but the boat was equipped with cushion Type

IV throwable devices. The operator of the boat was a very experienced boater but had no formal instruction in boating safety. Both bodies were recovered on May 7.

1 Fatality
11/9/97

Kishacoquillas Creek
1:45 P.M.

Mifflin County
Sunday

A 47-year-old man lost his life when his 10-foot kayak capsized in the hydraulic below a low-head dam. He and two other paddlers were going downstream when they encountered the dam. The first paddler went over the dam and capsized. The victim followed and capsized also. The third paddler made it to shore above the dam and proceeded downstream to assist his friends who were trapped in the hydraulic. The paddler on shore pushed his kayak out to the men fighting for their lives in the backwash from the dam. The first paddler made it to shore. The victim washed away from the dam but appeared to be unconscious. The first paddler attempted CPR but was unsuccessful. The other paddler went for help. Emergency personnel were quickly dispatched to the scene but the victim never regained consciousness. He was wearing a PFD but was not wearing a wet or dry suit. Sudden immersion into cold water of the creek was probably a factor. The victim could swim and was an experienced boater. It is unknown if he had any instruction in boating safety.

2 Fatalities
5/24/00

Perkiomen Creek
4:15 p.m.

Montgomery County
Wednesday

A 14-year-old male paddler and his 42-year-old father lost their lives when they apparently capsized their 15-foot canoe. Little is known about this accident because there were no witnesses. They launched the canoe in the swollen waters of the creek for a 10-mile float trip. After waiting several hours, the person who was to meet them reported them missing. A general search began, which resulted in rescuers finding the canoe stuck in the boil below Goodrich Dam. Two Type III PFDs and a canoe paddle were also in evidence. An extensive search ensued. The body of the 14-year-old victim was recovered on May 30. His father was not found until July 21. A witness stated that he talked to the two paddlers just upstream from the dam and helped them launch their canoe after a brief rain shower. The water temperature was 62 degrees, so hypothermia or sudden immersion may have been a factor. Neither paddler was wearing a life jacket. It is unknown if the victims had any formal instruction in boating safety or boating experience. It is unknown if they could swim. It is also unknown if the paddlers capsized their boat above the dam or if they were swept over it.

1 Fatality
8/11/02

Schuylkill River
Unknown

Montgomery County
Sunday

A 73-year old paddler lost his life. There were no witnesses to this accident. The activity at the time of the accident is unknown. The victim was paddling a 10-foot kayak earlier in the day upstream toward the Plymouth dam but it has not been recovered. His body was found the following morning "stuck" to the dam. It is unknown if he was boating at the time he went into the water. The victim could swim. He was wearing a Type III PFD when recovered. The victim was an experienced boater but had no formal instruction in boating safety. Alcohol may have been a factor. The cause of death was ruled as drowning by the coroner.

2 Fatalities
4/22/06

Monongahela River
6:25 p.m.

Fayette County
Saturday

A 40-year-old angler and a 35-year-old angler lost their lives when their 16-foot open motorboat capsized below a lock and dam. A witness said that two men were fishing in a boat some 700 feet inside the restricted zone below a gate. When the gate opened, the boat capsized, putting both men into the water. A worker at the lock saw one of the victims attempting to hold onto the overturned boat. That victim was wearing a PFD. The workers at the lock closed the gate and attempted to lower a life ring, but the victim was pulled under in the turbulent water. The boat operator at the time of the accident is unknown. One victim was wearing a PFD; the other did not. It is unknown if the boat was properly equipped with PFDs. It is unknown if the operator had any boating experience or formal instruction in boating safety. Both victims could swim. The water was 58°F, so cold water shock was a probable factor. One of the victim's bodies was recovered a week later; the other was not found until August 30.

2 Fatalities
7/1/06

Allegheny River
8:04 p.m.

Allegheny County
Saturday

A 42-year-old man (the boat operator) and a 19-year-old woman lost their lives when their 21-foot cabin motorboat went over the dam at Lock #2. The male victim was recovered floating face-down by Commission waterways conservation officers a few minutes after the accident. With great difficulty he was placed onboard a fire rescue boat that responded to the accident. He later went into cardiac arrest. A witness stated that the operator was operating too fast and would not slow down. The next thing she knew they were airborne as the boat went over the dam at a high rate of speed. She began handing out PFDs to the other women on the boat. There were not enough PFDs to go around for the eight people on board the boat. The boat then capsized. Another witness stated she read a sign "Restricted, Boats Keep Out" just before they became airborne. The operator was an experienced boater but it is unknown if he had any formal instruction in boating safety. It is unknown if the operator could swim. The female victim was an average swimmer, which probably would not help her in the hydraulic below this dam. Alcohol was a factor. The female victim's body was recovered on July 4 a half-mile downstream.

1 Fatality
4/29/07

Susquehanna River
2:30 p.m.

Lancaster County
Sunday

A 16-year-old girl lost her life when the 16-foot open motorboat in which she was a passenger went over the Holtwood Dam. The owners had just purchased the boat and were operating it for the first time. They stopped the boat and anchored while eating lunch. They pulled anchor, but when they began to approach the dam they could not restart the boat. They deployed the anchor but the water was too deep for the anchor to catch. All six occupants jumped out of the boat before it went over the dam, including the victim. The boat and persons were swept over the dam. Five persons were rescued. Four of the six people onboard were wearing PFDs when the boat and people went over the dam. The victim could not swim and was wearing a type II PFD. The drop over the dam is the 60 feet. One of the survivors saw the victim floating downstream after the drop still wearing an orange PFD. She waved her hand above her head and called out for

help twice. The water temperature was 49 degrees so hypothermia or sudden immersion into cold water (cold-water shock) may have been factors. The boat operator was inexperienced and had no formal instruction in boating safety. The victim's body was recovered May 8 by emergency personnel.

1 Fatality	Susquehanna River	Northumberland County
8/3/08	6:00 p.m.	Sunday

A 19-year old man lost his life when the 17-foot canoe he and three others were paddling swamped then capsized in the hydraulic current below the Sunbury Generation LLC power company dam in Shamokin Dam. The paddlers made a decision to cross the dam upstream, even though it was a clearly marked run-of-the river low-head dam exclusionary zone, and did not think there would be a problem. However, when they approached the dam they realized that they could not get up over it and were unable to turn back due to the hydraulic current. They tried to go toward an island, paddling parallel to the dam but the boat was drawn to the dam by the hydraulic current, got stuck, filled with water and capsized putting everyone in the circulating hydraulic below the dam. The victim began having a lot of trouble. His brother tried to get the victim to put on a life jacket but was unable to do so. Just as another boat arrived, the victim disappeared. The three survivors were transported to the hospital. The boat was properly equipped with life jackets. However, the victim was either not wearing one, or was wearing one that was improperly fastened, at the time of the accident. The victim was a below average swimmer. It is unknown, but doubtful, if the victim had any boating experience or formal instruction in boating safety. The victim's body was recovered on 8/5/08.

2 Fatalities	Brandywine Creek	Chester County
6/9/09	2:00 p.m.	Tuesday

A 28-year-old man and his 34-year-old brother lost their lives when they intentionally paddled their borrowed 10-foot kayaks over a low-head dam on the rain-swollen creek at Brandywine Picnic Park. The two brothers passed the dam warning signs approximately 300 yards upstream from the dam. They were then hailed by a life guard who was stationed upstream from the dam to keep people away from it. She told the brothers not to go over the dam, but to portage around instead. One of the brothers waved to her and said: "we're fine." He then went over the dam, was immediately caught in the hydraulic and began calling for help. The other brother attempted to exit his kayak before going over the dam. He too became caught in the hydraulic and began calling for help. An attempt by two park employees to rescue the brothers failed due to lack of equipment and the conditions of the river. They could see the two victims being repeatedly circulated below the dam in the hydraulic but could do nothing about it. Both men were wearing PFDs although the second victim's PFD was not secured properly and came off once he began circulating in the hydraulic below the dam. Alcohol may have been a factor. The water temperature was 67 degrees so cold water shock may have been a factor. It is unknown if either of the victims had any formal instruction in boating safety. Neither victim has been issued a boating safety education certificate in Pennsylvania but both were from out-of-state. It is unknown if the first victim had any boating experience. The second victim had some paddling experience. Both victims could swim. The first

victim's body was recovered at the scene by fire rescue personnel who attempted to revive him with no success. The second victim's body was recovered four days later.

2 Fatalities Allegheny River Allegheny County
4/10/10 2:30 p.m. Saturday

A 26-year-old and a 59-year-old male angler lost their lives when their 16-foot open motorboat capsized when it was drawn into a low head dam by the recirculating current. There were three men onboard the boat when they approached the Lock #3 dam from downstream and got too close. The boat slipped sideways and began to take on water over the bow. It soon capsized putting all three men into the hydraulic below the dam. The boat's operator made it to shore but the two passengers drowned. There were no buoys marking the dam at this time of year. The victims' bodies were recovered the same day by emergency response personnel. The older victim was a poor swimmer, the younger one was an average swimmer. The water temperature was 58 degrees so hypothermia or sudden immersion into cold water (cold water shock) may have been factors. The boat was legally equipped with wearable PFDs but the victims were not wearing them. The operator was an experienced boater who had no formal instruction in boating safety.

1 Fatality Fishing Creek Columbia County
5/7/11 6:10 p.m. Saturday

A 37-year-old male paddler lost his life when his 9.5-foot kayak capsized while attempting to paddle over a low-head dam. The victim, who was wearing a lifejacket and could swim, was thrown from the kayak when his bow hit the boil and was forced under. The victim gained footing for a short time but was caught by the recirculating current. The victim's paddling companions made several unsuccessful attempts to rescue him, and after several minutes, he was ejected from the boil and recovered by a member of his party. Emergency personnel administered CPR and transported the victim to Bloomsburg Hospital where he was pronounced dead. The water temperature was 55 degrees so sudden immersion into cold water (cold water shock) were factors. Another member of the paddling party was treated for hypothermia. The operator was wearing a Type III PFD and was an experienced boater but had no formal instruction in boating safety.

1 Fatality Youghiogheny River Fayette County
5/21/11 3:20 p.m. Saturday

A 31-year-old man lost his life when his 12-foot kayak capsized. The victim was paddling with a friend on the Youghiogheny River when the friend capsized and swam to shore. The victim remained in his boat and attempted to retrieve his friend's kayak downstream then disappeared from view due to a bend in the river. The victim's empty kayak was observed traveling over the South Connellsville Dam a short while later. Both kayakers had wearable PFDs shoved into the bow but neither paddler was wearing a lifejacket. The kayakers were designed to be used on flatwater, not whitewater, and neither had spray skirts. The victim had no whitewater paddling experience and no formal boating safety education. It is not known if the victim could swim. Water levels were three times the normal level. The air temperature was in the low 80s and the water

temperature was in the low 50s so hypothermia or sudden immersion into cold water (cold water shock) may have been factors.

1 Fatality	Susquehanna River	Dauphin County
6/15/11	4:12 p.m.	Wednesday

A 41-year-old man lost his life when his 9.5-foot kayak went over the Dock Street Dam and capsized. A witness observed the victim paddling across the current when he was swept over the dam in his kayak. The victim was considered a very inexperienced paddler and had purchased the kayak only a few days before the incident. The victim was not wearing a life jacket, although one was found in the boil of the dam along with an inflatable air bladder. The victim had not taken a formal boating safety education course. The victim could swim. The victim's body was recovered the same day, approximately ½ mile downstream of the dam.

1 Fatality	Ohio River	Allegheny County
5/20/12	3:20 p.m.	Sunday

A 24-year-old female lost her life when the personal watercraft on which she was a passenger traveled over a dam. Both the operator and passenger were caught in the boil below the dam for an unknown period of time. Another boater pulled them from the water and they were treated by EMS personnel prior to transport to the hospital. The victim was pronounced dead at the hospital and the operator received minor injuries. Both were wearing life jackets at the time of the incident. The operator was an experienced boater and had taken formal instruction in boating safety.