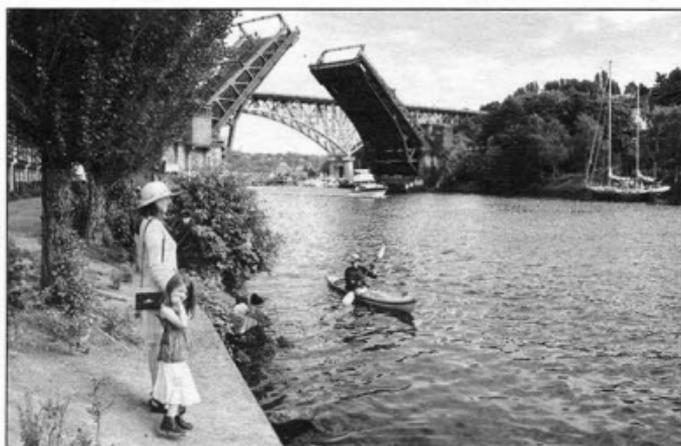




COURTESY OF ARMY CORPS OF ENGINEERS



PAUL DORPAT

The Big Spill

BY ITS OWN, neatly hand-printed caption, this is the "Lake Washington Canal Dam and Spillway at Fremont Avenue looking east." The scene is one of many captioned photographs produced for or by the Army Corps of Engineers during construction of the ship canal.

The caption, however, is mildly misleading. More properly, this is the dam and spillway not "at Fremont Avenue" but rather as seen roughly from the line of Evanston Avenue North, one block west of Fremont Avenue. The distant trestle, left of center, is the Fremont Bridge as it was rebuilt after the center support collapsed and was washed away when the Fremont Dam broke open. It rapidly dropped Lake Union 10 feet with all of it rushing for Ballard through this ditch.

Today's "then" photo is dated Dec. 11, 1914. The dam broke on the previous March 13. It was, perhaps, a not-so-unlucky 13th because the damage and the scouring allowed the corps to build both a new dam (to the west side of the reassembled Fremont Bridge) and the spill-

way. With the dam and spillway, government engineers could prepare the site for construction of the bascule bridge that is now being renovated.

In this view the spillway looks as if it is about to overflow. Perhaps that is the point of the photograph — to show it stressed. In fact it was effective and essential to building the bridge. The bridge's two concrete piers were kept dry by this wide flume during their construction in 1915-16. The flume was then extended east between the two sides of the bridge work. When the piers were completed, the flume was removed and the channel dredged. In the late summer and early fall of 1916 the canal from Lake Washington to the Ballard Locks slowly settled to its navigable level. 

Paul Dorpat specializes in historical photography and has published several books on early Seattle.

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