

The Texas City Disaster:
The Worst Industrial Accident in U.S. History

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Individual Exhibit

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When deciding on a topic, I wanted to find something that dealt with Texas History. Since the theme is *Rights and Responsibilities in History*, I immediately thought about the town where I was born. I grew up hearing stories about Texas City and the huge explosion that occurred there. My grandfather was at Lamar College in Beaumont, where the windows shook at the chemistry building where he was having class. One of my parent's colleagues, who was six years old at the time, was orphaned by the disaster and wandered the town, by himself, for three days after the explosion. Growing up with these stories around the house, I wanted to learn more about the disaster.

I researched everything about the disaster in library books, Internet articles, and online resources from Moore Memorial Public Library. I found plenty of stories and photos regarding the disaster. The challenging part was finding information concerning the story I wanted to tell regarding the *rights* and *responsibilities*. There were so many parties responsible for the disaster; I decided to focus on who took responsibility for the recovery and what procedures were implemented to prevent other catastrophes. As far as rights are concerned, I wanted to portray the fact that citizens were finally exercising their right to sue the federal government. The court case resulting from the disaster was poorly documented, and I could not find photos of some of the primary individuals involved.

The media covered the events well, and many photographers came to Texas City to photograph the incredible destruction. Images from this historical event are what make it such an interesting visual story. The color scheme chosen reflects the tragic mood of the event. The colors of red, yellow, and orange are the colors of fire since so much of the story is about people and property being incinerated. To follow the color scheme and to make the board stand out in its

category, I decided to add flames. The bottom of the board reveals the extent of the impact that the explosion had on the surrounding areas and, ultimately, all the way to Denver, Colorado.

My topic fits the theme of rights and responsibilities in several ways. Although the Texas City Disaster is an all-but-forgotten-event, the court case that came from it was the first failed class-action suit against the United States government. These citizens were exercising their new right, granted to them by the Federal Tort Claims Act of 1947, to sue the federal government. Other results of the disaster included governments and industries having to be more responsible in disaster prevention and response. Also refineries in the Texas City area formed the Industrial Mutual Aid System to help prevent future disasters. With all disasters come changes, both good and bad. The Texas City disaster forced people to rethink how we regulate import and export of dangerous materials, and although it's still a problem today, changes have been made for the better.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archive Photos

“A Damaged Fire Engine.” *The First Explosion*. Jan. 21, 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/first.php>.

This is a photo of a damaged fire engine sitting near a dock warehouse that only has metal framework remaining. I used this photo to show the damage done to the port.

“A First-aid and Disaster Relief Station at Night.” *The First Explosion*. Jan. 21, 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/first.php>.

This is a picture of rescue workers, victims and medical personnel moving around the area. Cots are set up in rows. On the far right, a man lying under a blanket is being examined by military personnel. The aid trailer has the numbers "32195" written on a window. Behind the trailer is a large building with some damage.” I used this picture to show how people took up the responsibility for caring for the wounded.

“A Group of Men Unroll Fire Hoses.” *Fire on the Grandcamp*. Jan. 21, 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/fire.php>

This is a photo of firemen moving fire hoses to fight the fire on board the Grandcamp. I used it to show how the ship caught fire before it exploded.

“A Group of Firefighters on the Dock.” *Fire on the Grandcamp*. Jan. 21, 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/fire.php> (accessed 1/21/2014)

This is a photo of fireman fighting the fire on the Grandcamp. I used it to explain how the ship caught fire before it exploded.

“An Aerial View of the Burning Monsanto Plant after the 1947 Texas City Disaster, “

Photograph, April 16, 1947; digital image, <http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph11883/>. Jan. 21, 2014. University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Moore Memorial Public Library, Texas City, Texas.

This is an aerial view from the north of part of the Monsanto refinery and processing compound with flames visible in several areas and huge clouds of very dark smoke covering most of the photograph. Storage tanks, pipeline control facilities, and two towers can be identified. On the far right in the background are two water towers. The number "#46" is written in the lower right corner. I used this photo to show the damage caused by the explosion.

“An Aerial View of the Refinery Facilities and the Storage Tank Farm.” *The Town*. Dec. 19, 2013. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/town.php>.

This is an aerial picture of the refinery area before the disaster. The smoke stack and power house is also visible on the far left. I used it to show a before and after of the refinery to show the amount of damage caused by the explosion.

“An Aerial View of the Texas City Port Before the 1947 Texas City Disaster.” *The Town*. Dec. 15, 2013. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/town.php> (accessed 1/21/2014)

This is a picture of the port before the disaster. I used it to show a before and after of the port to try and better explain the amount of damage.

Digital Library. February 1, 2014. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/1>.

“Clark W. Thompson.” *Texas Historical Association*. Jan. 8, 2014. <http://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/fth65>.

This is a picture of Clark Thompson. I used it to show the person who got the Texas City Claims Act passed.

“Henry Dalehite.” Jan. 18, 2014. http://search.ancestry.com/cgi-bin/sse.dll?gl=ROOT_CATEGORY&rank=1&new=1&so=3&MSAV=1&msT=1&gss=ms_r_f2_s&gsfn=Henry&gsln=Dalehite&msbdy=&msbpn__ftp=&msddy=&msdpn__ftp=Galveston%2C+Texas%2C+USA&cpxt=0&catBucket=rstp&uidh=000&cp=0.

This is a portrait of Henry Dalehite. I used it to show the man whose name was used to file the lawsuit. His wife, Elizabeth Dalehite, was one of the defendants in the case.

“Damaged Railroad Tracks Nar the Docks after the 1947 Texas City Disaster,” Photograph, April 16, 1947; digital image, (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph11872?> Jan. 5, 2014. University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Moore Memorial Public Library, Texas City, Texas. This is a photo of two damaged open-top freight cars (gondolas) loaded with rectangular wooden forms sit on an elevated wooden train track. The tracks appear to be on a wharf structure extending out to a dock. Wooden debris is densely scattered in the foreground in front of the tracks and is evidently floating in water in a channel. The front end of the track structure has collapsed and the front car is tilted downward. The forms in the freight cars have also been damaged. I used this photo to show the damage done by the Texas City explosion.

“The First Explosion.” Jan. 21. 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/first.php>.

This is an aerial view of a refinery on fire after the explosion. I used it to show some of the damage the refineries sustained during and after the explosion.

“Five Story Building Beside Slip # 1.” April 18, 1947. Special Collections, University of

Houston Digital Library. Web. February 1, 2014. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/3>.

This is a photo of a building that was destroyed by the explosion. I used it to show how much damage occurred to buildings in the town.

Donahue, James. "The Grandcamp Blast That Rocked Texas City." Orig. printed in *Houston Chronicle*. Dec. 8, 2013. <http://perdurabo10.tripod.com/ships2/id160.html>.

This is a photo of the Grandcamp docked in the Houston Harbor. I used this photo to show the Grandcamp before the explosion.

"The Hull of the Wilson B. Keene." *The Second Explosion*. Dec. 19, 2013.

<http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/second.php>.

This is a picture of another ship that was destroyed in the second explosion. I used it to show how other ships in the port were damaged.

"The Longhorn II Aground after the 1947 Texas City Disaster," Photograph, April 16, 1947; digital image, (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph11790/>). Jan. 8, 2014.

University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History,

<http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Moore Memorial Public Library, Texas City, Texas.

This is a photo of the Longhorn II cargo ship resting on dry land. It was blown ashore by the explosion of the Grandcamp. Large pieces of twisted ship's hull are beside the ship. I used this photo to show the damage at the port.

"Oil Tanks on Fire Three Days Later." April 18, 1947. Special Collections, University of Houston Digital Library. February 1, 2014. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/19>.

This is a picture of some oil tanks on fire long after the explosion. I used it to show how the explosion affected the refineries and businesses.

“Parking Lot One Quarter Mile from Explosion.” April 18, 1947. Special Collections, University of Houston Digital Library. February 1, 2014. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/20>.

This is a picture of a parking lot demolished by the explosion. I used it to show how much damage the explosion inflicted.

“Recovery.” The 1947 Texas City Disaster. Jan. 9, 2014. *Texas City Library*.
<http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/recovery.php>

After the disaster the biggest names in Hollywood and the entertainment industry staged fundraising events around the country. I used this photo to show Frank Sinatra (left) meeting with Curtis Trahan (center) and military officials before one of Sinatra’s events in Texas.

“Rows of Identical Coffins.” *Memorial Service*. Jan. 5, 2014. <http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/memorial.php>.

This is a picture of the coffins resting on boards near the grave sites during the mass funeral service for unidentified victims of the 1947 Texas City Disaster. The service was held in Memorial Park on June 22, 1947. I used it to try to explain the horror of what happened in Texas City.

“Searching for Survivors Near the Grain Elevator.” *Aftermath*. Dec. 19, 2013.
<http://www.texascity-library.org/disaster/aftermath.php>.

This is a picture of people looking for survivors in the rubble by the grain elevator. I used it to show how rescuers took up the responsibility of finding survivors.

“Slip #1 with Barge in Background.” April 18, 1947. Special Collections, University of Houston Digital Library. February 1, 2014.

<http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/4>.

This is a picture of a demolished barge after the explosion. I used it to show how the port was affected by the explosion.

“Slip #2 with Ship Destroyed in Second Explosion.” April 19, 1947. Special Collections, University of Houston Digital Library. February 1, 2014.

<http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll4/item/8>.

This is a picture of one of the ships in the harbor after the explosion. I used it to show the damage the port sustained.

United States. Cong. House. Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 2 of the Committee on the Judiciary. *Texas City Claims Act*. 84th Cong., 1st Sess. H.R. 4045. Washington: GPO, 1955. *Library of Congress*.

This act considers legislation to establish a commission to settle claims based on Federal negligence in the Texas City, Texas, fertilizer explosion disaster of Apr. 16 and 17, 1947.

I used this act to show the national impact of the Texas City explosion.

“United States Supreme Court Building.” Feb. 25, 2014. http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:US_Supreme_Court_Building.jpg.

This is a picture of the United States Supreme Court building. I used it to show where the case would take place.

“Warren E. Burger in 1944.” Feb. 25, 2014. [http://www.minnpost.com/politics-](http://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2008/08/minnesota-tradition-others-him-pawlenty-takes-advantage-convention-limelight)

[policy/2008/08/minnesota-tradition-others-him-pawlenty-takes-advantage-convention-limelight](http://www.minnpost.com/politics-policy/2008/08/minnesota-tradition-others-him-pawlenty-takes-advantage-convention-limelight).

This is a picture of Warren E. Burger. I used it to show the person who defended the United States in the Texas City court case.

Interviews

Davis, Otis. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. Mr. Davis, who was working at Monsanto only hours before the explosion, helped me understand what the cleanup was like.

May, Bea. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. Ms. May, a survivor, told me about being trapped in rubble for hours after the explosion and how two pieces of metal are still in her hand. She also said, she refused to sue the federal government because it was Texas City's fault.

Latham, Gene. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. This survivor's interview helped me understand how some people handled things after the blast, and whether or not they held anyone responsible.

Mitchell, John. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. My interview with this survivor helped me understand the long term effects of the disaster, such as more safety protocol in the school district and at the ports.

Latham, Gene. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. This survivor's interview helped me understand how some people handled things after the blast, and whether or not they held anyone responsible.

Luna, Julio. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. This survivor told me about how he spotted the fire below the decks of the Grandcamp. Because he recognized the ammonium nitrate for what it was, he was able to take part in the court cases after the explosion.

Stalky, Bill. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. My interview with this survivor helped me

understand how the explosion changed the way people of the town went about their daily lives. After the disaster, people lost their sense of well-being.

Sanford, Edith. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. This survivor explained to me what the panic was like during the disaster and how people felt responsible for the loss of life around them.

Tripp, Mike. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. Mr. Tripp, a survivor, told me about the way the disaster changed his perspective on rights of citizens and how to deal with tragedy.

Tripp, Wynette. Personal interview. 12 Apr. 2014. This survivor helped me understand the mindset of people in that time about the government. People objected to suing the government because they were scared of it.

Secondary Sources

Books

Deckard, Ivy Stewart. *In the Twinkling of an Eye*. New York: Vantage, 1962.

This book explains that the Texas City Disaster that happened April 16, 1947, was the deadliest industrial accident in U.S. history. The fire detonated approximately 2,300 tons of ammonium nitrate, causing a chain reaction of fires and explosions that killed at least 581 people. These events led to the first ever class action lawsuit against the United States government, under the then-recently enacted Federal Tort Claims Act (FTCA), on behalf of 8,485 victims. From this book I used information to create my title and several captions.

Minutaglio, Bill. *City on Fire*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003.

This book describes the disaster with numerous witness accounts and survival stories. It then tells of how the people of Texas City sought compensation by taking the federal government to court. I used this book for many quotes and pictures. I also used it to learn about the disaster.

Stone, Ron. *Disaster at Texas City*. Fredericksburg: Shearer, 1987. Held at Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas at Austin.

This book is about the explosion on the SS Grandcamp that killed almost 600 people and injured thousands more in Texas City, Texas. I used information from this book to understand why the explosion occurred and what happened afterward.

Texas City. *Remembering Yesterday – Celebrating Tomorrow*. Texas City: The City of Texas City, 1997.

This book tells the story of the disaster, citizens seeking compensation, and Texas City today. It tells its story through captions, quotes, and pictures. From this book I used numerous pictures, captions, and quotes to describe the disaster and the court case.

Internet article

Havel, Gregory. “*Fire Engineering: Texas City Disaster*.” Dec. 15, 2013

<http://www.fireengineering.com/>.

This article did a really good job of addressing the safety standards and emergency guidelines that developed as a result of the disaster. I used a quote from this article to show the impact of the Texas City Disaster.