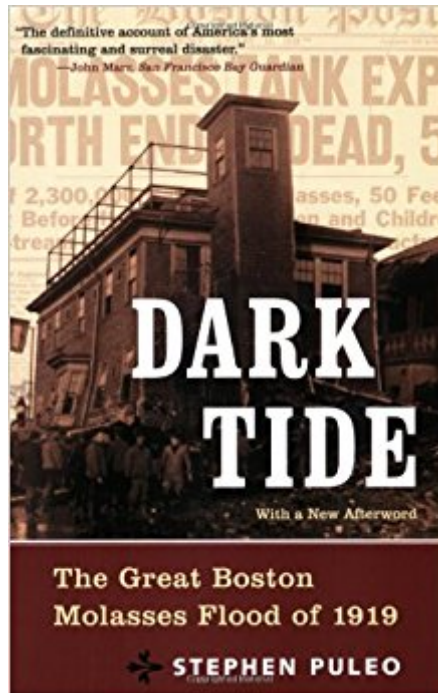


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# Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood Of 1919



## Synopsis

Around noon on January 15, 1919, a group of firefighters was playing cards in Boston's North End when they heard a tremendous crash. It was like roaring surf, one of them said later. Like a runaway two-horse team smashing through a fence, said another. A third firefighter jumped up from his chair to look out a window-"Oh my God!" he shouted to the other men, "Run!" A 50-foot-tall steel tank filled with 2.3 million gallons of molasses had just collapsed on Boston's waterfront, disgorging its contents as a 15-foot-high wave of molasses that at its outset traveled at 35 miles an hour. It demolished wooden homes, even the brick fire station. The number of dead wasn't known for days. It would be years before a landmark court battle determined who was responsible for the disaster.

## Book Information

Paperback: 273 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press (September 16, 2004)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807050210

ISBN-13: 978-0807050217

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.8 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 12.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

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## Customer Reviews

Dark Tide by Stephen Puleo details the molasses flood that devastated the Commercial Street area in Boston on January 15, 1919. A fifty-foot tall steel tank owned by United States Industrial Alcohol Company (USIA) collapsed and unleashed 2.3 million gallons of molasses on the congested waterfront district in a fifteen-foot-high wave moving as fast as thirty-five miles per hour. Incredible structural damage resulted as well as over one hundred injuries and a score of deaths. I had never heard of this tragedy until I ran across this book as an .com recommendation. It seems odd to me that this event is not more widely known due to its unusual nature. Puleo explains that it was considered an "isolated event not connected with larger trends in American history" (x). The author sets out to make these connections throughout his book. The story of January 15, 1919 and its

aftermath is interwoven with the most important headlines of the day. Puleo expertly connects the molasses flood to the Great War (the USIA was distilling molasses for industrial alcohol used in munitions production), anarchism and the Red Scare (the tank was built in a southern Italian district), Prohibition, and the pro-Big Business administrations of Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge. The author also demonstrates, mostly through the deposition of the USIA assistant treasurer responsible for the tank's construction, the unbelievably rushed and careless manner in which the tank was built. It leaked profusely from the outset. Workers near the tank, even the children in the community, noticed the leaks but the company responded only by occasionally re-caulking the plates and rivets and painting the tank molasses color to make the leaks less noticeable.

Syrupy, sweet, sticky molasses have long been a favorite treat in America. Actually they were more than a treat because for many years molasses were America's primary sweetener. They also were the base ingredient for rum, America's primary beverage in colonial times. It was in fact a tax on molasses that first aroused colonial ire against Parliament. Molasses were also irrevocably associated with Boston because of the famous triangle trade of molasses, rum and slaves. It was no accident then that United States Industrial Alcohol had a distillery near Boston and therefore decided to build a huge molasses storage tank near Boston harbor. Stephen Puleo has done a masterful job in this book of telling the story of this storage tank; its construction, use, disintegration and the aftermath. This is a story not just of a disaster but of the social tensions of that era and the callous disregard for human life displayed by big industry in search of war profits. Puleo however, has also managed to make this the story of the victims of this tragedy. The story is riveting in itself but the author's ability to give a human face to the disaster makes this book not only an interesting read but a touching one as well. United States Industrial Alcohol (USIA) used molasses to make its product and that industrial alcohol was in turn used by companies like DuPont to make smokeless gunpowder and high explosives for artillery shells. World War I had greatly increased the demand for industrial alcohol and as USIA increased its production they decided that they needed this molasses storage tank. As Puleo tells his readers about the construction of the tank he begins to introduce his audience to some of the people who lived and worked near by.

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