Deadliest American Disasters and Large-Loss-of-Life Events
Terms, Definitions, Scope

This is a compilation of data and information on large-loss-of-life events in American/U.S. history, other than battles within wars.

A deconstruction of this sentence is essential before going further.

Data is first captured in the **Chronology Document**. It is a single line entry on each event that highlights important information, some examples within the categories are as follows:

> Date: year, month, and day/or time frames
> Typology (type of event): aviation, epidemic, fire, maritime, violence
> Sub-type: scheduled aviation, cholera, hotel fire, ship collision, labor violence
> Brief description: "take-off crash caused by bird strike"
> Locality: city, counties, region, coordinates
> State: state abbreviations, oceans, nationally
> Fatalities: number of or range when the precise number is unknown or disputed.

Information refers to the material transcribed or cut-and-pasted from sources that go into a narrative document. The narrative documents can provide more descriptive detail, relate circumstances, identify victims, note responsibility, identify actions taken afterwards in efforts to mitigate against or prevent future losses, or note the legal aftereffects. The "narrative" also includes a bibliography of sources and notes these sources for all the information within the "file."

Large-Loss-of-Life typically includes 10 or more fatalities. However, when this project first began, this compilation started with the projected low of 1,000 deaths as its definition of a large-loss-of-life event. Yet, through research, there were so many events of lower fatality that the term "event" gradually changed, and the project included events down to ten fatalities. This is with the acknowledgement that to attempt to include all events would simply not be doable. Thus this framework was developed. To reiterate, the researcher has chosen ten or more lives lost for this compilation. There are exceptions though – such as events of national interest (e.g. space shuttle losses), or to make a "Top Ten" list of the deadliest events within a typology.

Events: The choice to use the term "Event", instead of "Disaster", is deliberate. Even though for most of the "events" for which information is compiled would generally be considered a "disaster." The term was chosen for two reasons. First, there is a long history to the debate of what is a "disaster?" Academics of different disciplinary persuasions, practitioners (such as emergency managers), and members of the public have their own thoughts and definitions. Books have been written on the subject. Thus, the decision was not to engage in this debate. Secondly, and related, to capture more pertinent information in this compilation, one must review events such as epidemics of contagious diseases, heat-related deaths, residential home fires and road accidents taking

ten or more lives. Moreover, the acts of violence, such as riots and rampage shootings, should also be included, which some might not consider as "disasters." To again avoid engaging in what could be a debate concerning the propriety of the inclusion of such events in a compilation of large-loss-of-life "disasters" the researcher has chosen to use the more neutral and unarguable word "event." But in this choice, gives a much broader understanding of historical large loss of life in this country.

American/U.S. The term "American/U.S." refers to what today is the United States, and before it's inception to include events from colonial and even pre-colonial time, as long as the events are historical, i.e. there is a written record. The work also includes events in areas of the country that are post-colonial but not part of the United States when the event happened – say the crash of a U.S. plane in Alaska before Alaska was a state.

War-related battles: This compilation does not include data on battles fought on American/United States soil during wars. However, it does include such pre-war precipitating events as the attack on Pearl Harbor as well as white/native or native on native attacks which led to conflict. Similarly included are such events as attacks on U.S shipping by Germany prior to World War II. Also included are "atrocities" during declared war on American/U.S. soil committed against unarmed civilians or troops who have surrendered, as in the atrocity at Fort Pillar, TN.

Overview: Our goal is to be the most complete, and the most authoritative, source in existence on large-loss-of-life events in American history.

To date we have compiled data on more than 5,300 events which have taken ten or more lives and over 350 others taking fewer than ten (such as the space shuttle disasters and some terrorism incidents). We believe this to be in the 90+ percentile range of large loss-of-life events. We have a "To Do" list consisting of possible events to include in the future, most of which relate to conflict between Whites and Native Americans.

One document, which lists in chronological order all events we are aware of, from a 1527 hurricane in Matagorda Bay, Texas to today, using one-line for each event, comes to 136 pages in 12-font Times New Roman, one-inch margin, format.

These one-liners in the Chronology document are then cut-and-pasted into a "Typology" document which is over 675 pages. It is much longer than the Chronology in that most types – such as hurricanes – are listed twice – in chronological order and then by mortality. In addition, some events are cross-listed. For example a fire in a hotel set by an arsonist would be listed in the Structural Fires typology within the Hotels/Motels sub typology and would be cross listed in the Violence typology under Arson.

We next cut-and paste the one-liners into a State document which lists all fifty states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico alphabetically. Thus, to the extent of our current

state of knowledge, we show in chronological order every large-loss-of live event for every state of the Union plus DC and Puerto Rico.[1]

Next, we create a Microsoft Word narrative document starting with the one-liner and then providing anything from a one-paragraph description to many dozens of pages on the event, using quoted language from identified sources, and including a listing of all sources used. This documentation totals more than 14,000 pages.

Considering that the Narratives contain information on more than 5,700 events that averages just a bit more than three pages per event. This is not, on average, a great deal of information, but it is not our mission to write histories of all "disaster" events in American/U.S. history, but to chronicle the existence of all such events. Most, after-all, have, for most intents and purposes, been lost to history. This material is accessed via a URL click within the Spreadsheet.

Spreadsheet: Finally, information from the Chronology is being put into an Excel Spreadsheet for the user who wishes to query the data in a way not provided in one of the Word documents (e.g., Chronology, Typology, State), or not directly or easily provided. This is basically a two-part and on-going process. First a "one-liner" from the Chronology is "inserted" into the spreadsheet. Secondly, a URL link is, or will be, created which takes one to a Google narrative document on the event. These files always contain notations of the source or sources for all the information in the one-line description. For most events there is also cut-and paste or transcribed and quoted narrative information within quotation marks (again noting sources). At the end of the narrative file is a "Source" section containing full source citations, including URL links when available.

---

[1] At over 280 pages this document is also longer than the Chronology. One primary reason is that a number of events are multi-state. An epidemic, flood, heat wave, hurricane, tornado outbreak, or winter storm, for example, can be multi-state. Thus, while there would be one line in the Chronology noting total deaths for a multi-state event, in the State document the one liner would be broken out – identifying the fatalities in each State wherein ten or more people died.