At the end of the last ice age (20,000 years ago), a glacier formed an ice dam on the North Fork of the Clark River in Montana. When the dam broke, it caused a 500-foot-high wall of water to sweep west over Washington, where the waters scraped off layers of soil, leaving behind a landscape known today as the "Scablands".

The flood continued west and south to Oregon and through the Columbia River gorge. At Portland, the water flooded the Willamette Valley (briefly reversing the flow of the river) and finally headed northwest to the mouth of the Columbia where the flood waters, and the debris they carried, emptied into the Pacific Ocean.