At the turn of the 20th century, Winston’s brick and concrete water reservoir lay at the top of Trade Street Hill, where today’s W. Eighth and N. Trade Streets intersect. The Winston Water Supply Company had built the reservoir in 1882. This private company acquired what was known as “Belo's Pond” on Peters Creek (near what was Western Electric’s Chatham Road plant) and built a pumping station to push water up the steep ridge to the east. Trade Street Hill was, at that time, the highest point in Winston, so water from the reservoir could be fed in all directions by gravity flow. In 1894, the Winston Water Supply Company sold out to the Town of Winston. The Town in turn enlarged the reservoir by adding ten feet in height and six feet in length. Unfortunately, the reservoir leaked and there was some concern about its condition. In 1903, voters overwhelmingly approved a $100,000 water bond issue (a vote of 307 to 10). The new water system was completed on October 12, 1904. Within a week, powerful pumps filled both the new metal standpipe, visible on the skyline in photographs of the time, and the old brick reservoir, which remained a supplementary part of the new system.

The reservoir was located on what was then Winston's north fringe. This was a racially-mixed neighborhood, but predominantly African-American, and it was largely made up of small, one-story rental houses. Trade Street Hill pitched downward from W. Eighth Street to Peters Creek, along which Northwest Boulevard now winds. N. Trade Street itself then ended at a railway cut some four to five blocks below and north of the reservoir.
On Wednesday, November 2, 1904, people in the neighborhood were awakened at 5:20 a.m. by a loud thud and shudders "like an earthquake." The entire north wall of the reservoir, the wall overlooking the steep descent of Trade Street Hill, had collapsed. A cascade of water estimated at 800,000 to 1,400,000 gallons exploded into the neighborhood, destroying houses, killing nine people, and injuring many more. The Western Sentinel newspaper called the collapse "the most horrible catastrophe in the history of Winston-Salem." The Union Republican termed it, "The saddest chapter in our history," and the Winston-Salem Journal called it "Winston-Salem's greatest tragedy."

The water flowed north down the Trade Street Hill past W. 12th Street and the Southern Railroad to Peters Creek, covering a large area of low-lying "Bottom" housing. At Peters Creek, it gushed west and southwest along the creek past today's N. Cherry Street and into Belo's Pond (near Rundell Street and Northwest Boulevard). It is said that a Town official looking down over the flooded area remarked that it looked "like a pond," and that the name stuck.

Emerging from the disaster, the families that survived banded together, worked hard, prayed much, and out of the community emerged many successful professionals, including doctors, lawyers, ministers, educators, and others. Each year, descendants of individuals involved in the disaster hold an annual reunion commemorating those who lost their lives in the tragedy and celebrating those who lived through it. The Pond continues to have one of the richest histories in the City of Winston-Salem.

This information is also available at the Forsyth County Historic Resources Commission's web site: http://www.ForsythCountyHRC.org