On July 24, 1915, the passenger boat Eastland capsized while docked in the Chicago River, killing 844 of its 2,500 passengers. The Eastland Disaster remains the greatest loss-of-life tragedy on the Great Lakes. Using museum exhibits, government documents, trial transcripts, period newspapers, oral interviews, images, ephemera, and popular culture materials, this study examines the century after the disaster in terms of the place the Eastland has held in regional and national public memory. For much of that period, the public memory of the tragedy had been lost, but private memories survived through storytelling within the families of survivors, rescuers, and victims. During the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, the third and fourth generations of Eastland descendants began sharing these family histories with the world, thereby beginning to re-inscribe the tragedy in public memory, at least in the Chicago and Great Lakes region.

My research assesses how people create personal memories and meanings from historic events and how these personal memories influence public memory. This study uses memory studies scholarship—and especially the concepts of “iconic events,” “postmemory,” and “prosthetic memory”—to explore how Eastland descendants’ inherited family memories (postmemories) survived and came to affect others who had no prior connection or knowledge of the disaster, creating prosthetic memories in those
individuals. Those prosthetic memories were then used to construct historical narratives through museum collections, written histories, teen fiction, and a musical that in turn expanded the broader public’s remembrance of the *Eastland* Disaster. Despite that expansion of public memory, the *Eastland* still has not met the criteria for becoming an iconic event in the broader American culture. This dissertation also explores two secondary themes: relating the *Eastland* to better remembered incidents like the 1871 Chicago Fire and the 1912 sinking of the *Titanic*; and considering how the immigrant and working class status of the victims may have affected the tragedy’s place in public memory.