Winter 12-2008

Recounting the Hurricane of 1938: local memories of a regional disaster

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Recommended Citation
Ebbin, Syma A., "Recounting the Hurricane of 1938: local memories of a regional disaster" (2008). Wrack Lines. 44.
http://digitalcommons.uconn.edu/wracklines/44
The Hurricane of 1938 was one of those defining moments that divide time into parts that either precede or follow. It was transformative, impacting human lives and settlements as well as natural systems, coastal and inland, aquatic and terrestrial, with a force unsurpassed in the region’s living memory. Seventy years have now passed since that hurricane made its historic landfall on the afternoon of September 21, 1938. Humans have regrouped and rebuilt and nature has regenerated and reclaimed, but the memories of those who lived through the Hurricane of ’38 remain. It is some of these stories that I attempt to capture here.

Over the years, I’ve heard much about the Hurricane of ’38. I know that my grandfather’s house on Jupiter Point in Groton, built during the fall of 1938 in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane, is paneled in lovely, wide and golden, center-cuts of White Pine. The wood, taken from the hurricane’s windfall on Circle Drive in Groton, was harvested by my great-grandfather, T.K. Raymond. A lumberman, T.K. was quite busy after the hurricane, clearing, cutting and sawing logs into lumber.

In fact, in New England it’s estimated that about 275 million trees, calculated to be about three billion board-feet of timber, were blown down and that 250,000 acres of forests were flattened. Much of this windfall was mature trees, including many stately elms which were common street trees throughout the region. New Haven alone, lost 5,000 elms which had lined the streets of the “Elm City”. In addition to the wind damage, salt spray killed coastal vegetation and trees up to 20 miles inland.

But beyond the trees, the very shape of the earth was remade. The sandbar at the mouth of the Poquonnock River which formerly connected Bluff Point and Bushy Point was breached. Similarly at Napatree Point, the spit known as Sandy Point was transformed from a peninsula into an island. As a defining event, the hurricane of 1938 thoroughly transformed both the natural and human landscape of New England.

There may have been more impetus for my grandparents to build their new house at Jupiter Point, since their summer cottage at Bluff Point in Groton was destroyed in the hurricane. Bluff Point was a summer beach...
community of over 100 private cottages built on leased land. My mother remembers driving out to the Bluff to search for their belongings after the hurricane. They found nothing except their silverware which was lodged in nearby mud. But she remembers distinctly that as they searched for family possessions, her school friend, Betty Rogers, and her family were searching nearby for the body of her brother who had been out at their Bluff Point cottage on the day of the hurricane and drowned. In the wake of the hurricane, approximately 700 people were dead, over 1700 injured. Four of these deaths occurred in New London; 10 occurred in Groton and Mystic. Two of these deaths, according to local historian Jim Streeter, resulted from the crash of a 35' cabin cruiser from Long Island onto the rocky grounds of Morton Plant’s estate at Avery Point, the current home of the Avery Point regional campus of UConn and the Connecticut Sea Grant Office.

People who lived through the Hurricane love to talk about it. Many of those individuals have passed away and I now wish I had captured those stories in a permanent way. Among those who have since died, I especially wish I had tapped into the rich knowledge and experience of my grandfather, Allen Newbury. As an engineer with the Southern New England Telephone Company, my grandfather was kept busy working long hours in the weeks following the hurricane to reestablish the lines that linked the region. In fact, the storm downed 20,000 miles of electrical and phone lines, cut service to 80 percent of electrical customers and to 20 percent of New England’s telephone customers. Roughly 500,000 individuals and 240 communities lost telephone service.

Phone crews were brought in from all over the U.S. to assist with the repairs, ultimately using 400 miles of cable, 31,000 poles, 72 million feet of wire, and 50 carloads of telephone hardware to restore the system. Approximately 26,000 autos were destroyed. Roads were blocked with fallen trees making them impassable in the storm’s immediate aftermath. Railroad service was halted for one to two weeks as 10,000 workers repaired and cleared tracks. The WPA brought 1000s of workers into the region to assist with repairs. Mail was delivered by airplane to the affected areas. Transportation and communication technologies were particularly hard hit. Their failure isolated families and communities, impeding efforts to regroup and rebuild in the initial days and weeks after the hurricane.

Hundreds of survivors have shared harrowing accounts of their hurricane experiences. A wonderfully vivid and terrifying account that I’ve recently read is the experience recounted by Helen Joy Lee, daughter of the owner of the Packard Motor Car Company who summered on Fort Road in Watch Hill, RI, which you can read in William Minsinger’s edited compilation. However, the stories collected here reflect not the harrowing experiences of the adults who lived through the hurricane, but rather, the memories of individuals who were children and teenagers at the time. As the 70th anniversary roles around that is predominantly who is left to tell their tales.

Most of the individuals that I interviewed were in school when the hurricane struck. Some parents picked their children up in cars, many others were forced to find their way home by themselves amid the high winds. Fred Allen was in 5th grade at Colonel Ledyard School in the City of Groton and remembers being let out by his teachers into the wild wind and rain to walk home. He was blown against an iron picket fence, while Pomeroy Robertson, the son of the general manager of Electric Boat, had a car sent to pick him up at school, which splashed Fred and his friends as they battled their way home.

Lorraine Santangelo remembers taking the public bus home from Fitch High School on Fort Hill in Groton and being left off at the bottom of Morse Avenue. She walked home with a girlfriend just as the winds started to pick up and recalls that their pencil skirts were blown straight up over their heads.

Catherine Kolnaski was enrolled in high school in New London at the time and she recounted how she and her girlfriends walked around the city that afternoon after they were let out of school, looking on as trees fell in the wind. Then, from the top of a hill overlooking the city, they observed the fire which destroyed a large part of the downtown business district as it burned throughout the evening. The fire may have started when the 300’ five-masted training ship Marsala was driven on
land, possibly causing electrical wires to short-circuit.

John Wheeler, who characterized himself as his teacher's pet, was in 8th grade at the Mystic Academy. When the students were let out of school there was no one at his home to pick him up. He recalled his teacher driving him to her home in Mystic where he spent the remainder of the hurricane.

Dee Harrell, who also went to the Mystic Academy, was not so fortunate, however. With no one to pick her up, she was forced to walk home with her friends. Some of the boys tied a rope around her and the other children to keep them from being blown away as they walked home atop the stone wall along the side of Water Street, which was flooded. Halfway to her house, they reached the home of a friend. The friend's parents took the whole group of children in and let them spend the night there.

“The next morning,” Dee remembers, “I didn’t even know if my grandmother was alive.” She walked down to her home at Fort Rachel the next day and was happy to see that her house and grandparents were alright. “The first thing my grandmother said to me was ‘Go see if you can find the refrigerator. It floated out during the storm.’” So Dee and her friends went out and looked down the railroad tracks that ran along the shore of the Mystic River. “There we saw the refrigerator,” she recalls, “halfway to Noank on the tracks.”

Dee's Great Aunt Grace, her grandmother's sister, who lived in Watch Hill, RI was less lucky. She had gone to the beach in Misquamicut for a picnic with other women from the Mother's Circle at Christ Episcopal Church. As the weather deteriorated, the group of women moved into an oceanside cottage to watch the storm. Unfortunately for them, the cottage they took refuge in was washed away and none of the group survived.

Lorraine Waldron was a student at Norwich Free Academy at the time. Fortuitously, their school, which had a reputation for never closing, was not open the day the hurricane hit because recent heavy rains had overtopped a nearby brook, inundating streets around the school, making them impassable for the school buses. This flooding is an important detail, because the rains which preceded the hurricane were a critical factor in exacerbating the damage created by the storm, one of several synergies that were present. The region had experienced a rainy summer, and there were record high rainfalls in the four days preceding September 21st. When the hurricane hit, soils were saturated, and rivers and streams were already at high water levels. This led to widespread flooding in inland areas of New England, much of which occurred after the hurricane left the region. The destructive force of the hurricane was compounded by the fact that the storm’s landfall coincided with the high tide. On top of this, it came during an exceptionally high (“spring”) tide, which was a foot above the normal high tide level.

Like many other hurricanes, the Hurricane of ’38 was born in Africa, in the Sahara desert, on the 4th of September. Its birth was recorded by a French weather observer, who noted a slight wind shift. This low pressure area traveled out to the Atlantic Ocean passing over the Cape Verde Islands off the coast of Senegal. On the 16th of September, the storm was already a full-blown hurricane when it was reported by the merchant ship SS Alegrete about 300 miles northeast of Puerto Rico. This notice led U.S. Weather Bureau meteorologists in Florida to post hurricane warnings for the region of southeast Florida.

The storm veered north off the coast and was expected to continue to veer to the northeast and head out to sea, so hurricane warnings were dropped for the Florida coast. One minority voice was raised, however, by a dissenting junior meteorologist who forecast an east coast landfall. His prediction was dismissed, and instead “rain, probably heavy” was forecast. The next report of the storm came after midnight on the 21st from the waters off Cape Hatteras where the passenger ship Corinthia was traveling. At this point the hurricane was picking up speed. It traveled the next 700 miles in only 8 hours, moving at over 60 mph.

Applying the current classification system, the Hurricane of ’38 would be a Category 3 storm; the Blue Hill Weather Observatory recorded sustained winds of 120 mph, with gusts as high as 186 miles. The storm was impressively large, approximately 200 miles in diameter; the eye alone was 50 miles wide. It galloped into the region, first hitting Long Island, giving rise to its moniker “the Long Island Express.” It then crossed over Long Island Sound and hit the coast of Connecticut, moving up the Connecticut River valley towards Hartford, passing into Massachusetts, Vermont, and New Hampshire. It was felt even in upstate New York.

The most powerful hurricane winds were experienced along the
eastern edge, so towns east of the Connecticut River, encompassing New London, Groton and Stonington, Connecticut, as well as coastal towns in Rhode Island and Massachusetts, were among the hardest hit. Lack of knowledge and familiarity with hurricanes led many to venture out when the storm winds died as the eye passed over, only to be caught by even stronger winds when the second half passed over.

The last major hurricane that hit the New England region prior to 1938 was in 1815. At the time of the ’38 Hurricane, it was widely held that New England did not have hurricanes, these being tropical phenomena that affected only the Caribbean, Florida and the southern states of the Gulf and east coast. Most thought the storm that hit on September 21, 1938 was a “line storm”, a nor’easter that was typically associated with the autumnal equinox. Thus, many coastal New England residents possessed a sense of complacency, a desire to sit back and watch the high surf and stormy weather snug inside. This was accompanied by great confidence in modern science and technology, a belief that the country’s meteorologists had really mastered the art of weather forecasting and that no storm could lash out without fair warning. In fact, an editorial which appeared in the New York Times only hours before the hurricane hit Long Island on September 21st, stated that “if New York and the rest of the world have been so well informed about the cyclone it is because of an admirably organized meteorological service…hour by hour a cyclone is watched, peril that it is, until at last it whirls out into the Atlantic…”

Overall, the storm wreaked about $400 million worth of damage, a figure well into the billions in today’s dollars. More than 93,000 families had suffered some property loss, including the total loss of 9,000 homes, cottages and buildings and damage to 15,000 more; 63,000 people were left homeless. Horace Newbury remembers his mother carefully parking her car in the garage, only to have the garage collapse, crushing the car. Fred Allen watched a small ice cream stand near his house flip over on its top and fly into his parent’s ’33 Plymouth, denting the top of the car. He noted that his parents never did get that dent repaired. Their outhouse blew over as did their barn, crushing his father’s Willys Knight sedan that was stored there. The Allen summer cottage on Jupiter Point, along with their boats and dock, was pushed across the street and bay by the storm surge, all the way up to the backyard of his current home which backs onto Bayberry Lane. To replace the cottage, his father towed two wayward beach cabanas from the Shennecossett Beach Club which had blown away. Lorraine Waldron remembers that their summer cottage was destroyed, one side was completely torn off, the rest of the house floated down the street. Generally, houses that lacked good foundations either floated away or turned into kindling. Phyllis Corey’s house, built on stilts, was one which floated away, but was towed back still in serviceable condition.

The region’s fishing fleets suffered a particularly substantial loss, including the loss of boats, gear, docks, and most tragically, lives. The storm destroyed over 2,600 vessels and damaged almost 3,400. Some reports note that only three commercial fishing boats out of 100 that had fished the waters between New London, Connecticut and Point Judith, Rhode Island, remained. The hurricane is estimated to have destroyed $2,610,000 worth of fishing boats and equipment and shore-side infrastructure. On Long Island, 200 fishermen families were left homeless. The storm also impacted the region’s agricultural base, destroying over 2,300 barns. Roughly half a million to three quarters of a million chickens and 1,675 head of cattle were killed. Orchards were especially hard hit as the hurricane destroyed half the apple crop which was still on the trees.

In the end, the Great Hurricane of 1938, in addition to being a force of destruction, was also a force of renewal. The 107 cottages that lined the shores of Bluff Point in Groton, Connecticut were blown away and in
their place a state coastal preserve was created, accessed by thousands of hikers, bikers, birders, boaters, clambers, fishers and bathers each year. All 39 houses built along Fort Road on Napatree Point, a sandy peninsula which juts out from Watch Hill, Rhode Island, towards Stonington, Connecticut, were obliterated. In the years following the storm, the Watch Hill Fire District gradually acquired all the parcels and the area was transformed into a public beach. Similarly, 50 acres of sandy beach in New London were dedicated in 1940 as Ocean Beach Park, comprised of a municipal beach, boardwalk and other recreational amenities. This replaced about 200 buildings which had served as private beachside residences and businesses that were damaged or destroyed, their foundations undermined by waves and high water during the 1938 hurricane. In its wake, the Great Hurricane of ’38 rearranged both visible and invisible lines of human ownership imposed on the landscape, facilitating the creation of open, public spaces for the benefit of the community as a whole as well as the coastal ecosystems that regenerated in these areas.

On the other hand, most coastal communities were rebuilt, many more densely than before. There has been a tremendous amount of capitalization in the houses in the beachfront neighborhoods of New England. Some stand higher and sturdier on concrete foundations, with micro-lam beams and steel girders. Others, however, still sit on rudimentary foundations, pilings and even (on my street) old nail legs filled with cement. What will become of the dense coastal communities we have built since the Hurricane of ’38? What have we learned from that great hurricane, the Long Island Express? Are we ready for the next big hurricane that makes landfall here? Do we trust that schools and school bus drivers know what to do with our children in the event that another hurricane makes landfall during the school day? Are our transportation and communication systems able to withstand the impacts of such an event?

On September 24, 1938, in an editorial that was strangely prescient of future disasters, the New York Times noted, “Knowing full well that storms and floods are inevitable, we do little to minimize their effects in advance. It does not appear from the reports of disaster to cities and villages on the Atlantic seaboard that we have profited by past experience. There was the old helplessness, the old panic when houses were washed away, the old instinct to flee…how easily that life is disrupted we learned quickly enough the other day when the lights went out, electric refrigerators in hundreds of homes suddenly ceased to chill food, elevators stopped midway between roof and cellar. To dismiss a catastrophe as an act of God and to wait for the wind to abate and the sun to shine again is not the way of prudence.”

What is abundantly clear is that the increasing density of coastal development in Connecticut, Rhode Island, and indeed throughout the United States, has increased since 1938. There are more people, more structures, and concomitantly, fewer uninhabited or open coastal spaces. The economic value of these coastal properties has also escalated. That means that no matter how prepared we are, how organized and well-planned our response, the next hurricane will be substantially more devastating and have significantly greater costs.

Acknowledgments

Thanks go to the individuals who provided so much information and so many memories.

For Additional Reading:

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