

## Chapter XIII

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### FIRE PROTECTION    CONFLAGRATIONS STORMS

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#### *The Fire Department*

In the early days, when homes were scattered and no water available except that contained in wells and rain-barrels, there was little chance of extinguishing a fire once it started. As a portion of the town became more closely built efforts were made to secure greater safety. Companies of volunteer firemen, in charge of elected wardens were organized. Each volunteer was the possessor of a fire bucket, immediately available when an alarm was given. A number of these old leather buckets, some with elaborate designs and the names of the owners painted upon them remain as souvenirs of the old families. More as an insignia of authority than of use, the head firemen were provided with speaking-trumpets.

As a source of water supply, cisterns were built in strategic places, and covered conduits from which water could be drawn from pond or stream were constructed. In 1848, a cistern located on Second Street cost \$699 and one on Bank Street, \$800. In 1850, the newly erected First Baptist Church was paid \$125 for supplying a cistern on Pine Street with rain water from the roof. The year before the introduction of city water, there were nineteen cisterns and five so called covers which gave access to a natural water supply. With the introduction of city water, hydrants rapidly eliminated the cisterns. By 1875, there was an abundant supply of water with natural pressure, in the more thickly settled parts of the city and the same year, five years after their introduction, there had been fifty-nine electric fire alarm signal boxes installed.

The early method of fighting fires was by bucket brigade. The first hand engine was purchased in 1818. The apparatus drew its water from a tub on the machine, which was filled by a line of men who passed buckets from the source of supply. This system remained in force until the fire of 1843 when draught engines came into use. Between 1818 and 1862 the

town purchased a number of hand engines which were operated by brakes. The first hand engine purchased in 1818 was changed over to a draught engine in 1843 and continued in use until 1853.

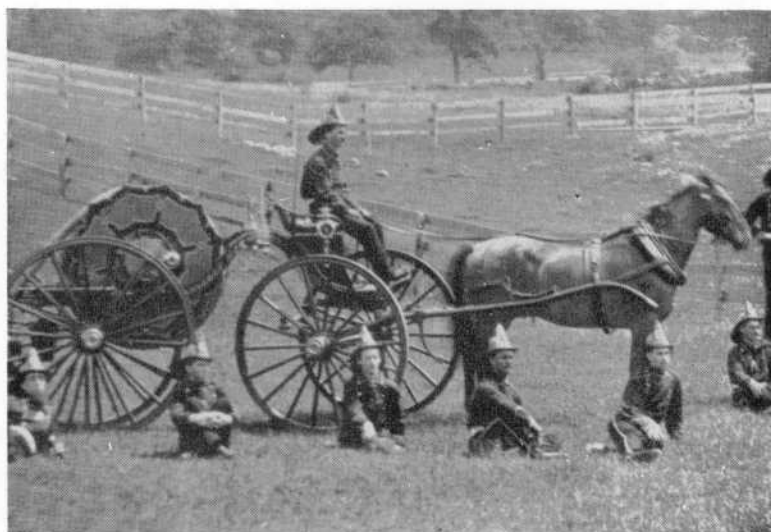
Names as well as numbers were given to all pieces of apparatus. The Hydraulion No. 2 was housed on Stone Lane, Cataract No. 3 on the corner of Rock and Franklin Streets (The building last assigned to Post 46 G. A. R.), Niagara No. 4, in the Niagara House on Pleasant Street. This engine was later moved to the corner of North Main and Turner Streets under the name of Torrent No. 2. Ocean No. 5 was housed on Pearl Street, Mazeppa No. 7 was purchased from the Massasoit Manufacturing Company and after being quartered in several stations near the center was moved to Globe Corners.

The last purchased hand fire engine was the Cascade. It belonged to the town of Fall River, Rhode Island. After the union of that town with the city in 1862, a new Cascade Engine House was built on the easterly side of South Main Street, between Rodman and Morgan Streets. The Fall River, Rhode Island engine-house was located at the same spot and the old building housed many of the offices of the town. The third fire station erected on the same lot is no longer city property. For a long time the Cascade apparatus was a "double-hitch" hose reel and the company answered all bell alarms. Previous to the establishment of the present fire signal system, the number of a signal box was recorded by the sounding of the City Hall bell and those in the towers of the fire stations.

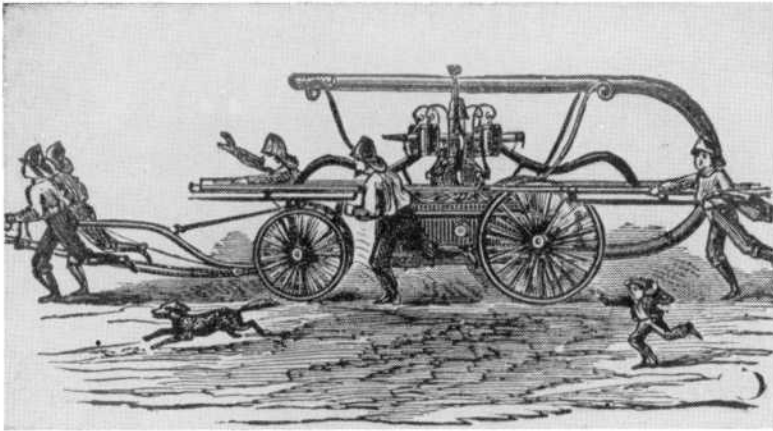
In addition to the hand engine companies there were several organizations known as "force pumping companies", which were formed by various manufacturing establishments. These were for private use in the industrial plants of their owners but were loaned to others in case of an emergency. The members of these companies were elected under the approval of the fire wardens, and they received a small compensation for their services. After 1832, the members of the regular department received compensation. Nearly all the regular companies disbanded in 1857 following the action of the city government in restricting the aggregate to be paid them but they continued as social organizations. The most prominent citizens of the town belonged to the voluntary fire companies, some of which maintained brass bands and in the early days, excursions to neighboring cities and entertaining return visits by companies from these cities were matters of great interest, because these "meets" included a contest as to the efficiency of the old hand machines, and of the manpower of the various companies.



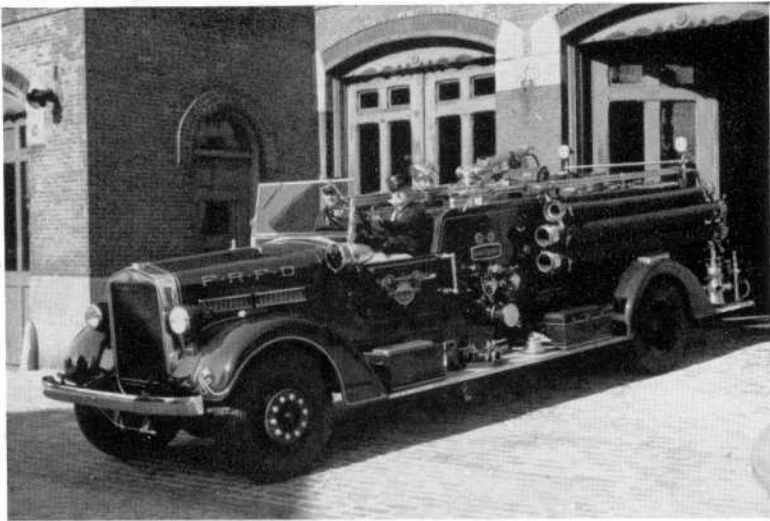
ANAWAN STEAM FIRE ENGINE, 1874 - 1879



ANAWAN HOSE REEL



CASCADE NO. 1  
*The last Hand Fire Engine used by the  
Fall River Department*



PUMPER NO. 6 - 1941

In 1826, a hook and ladder truck was purchased. This was drawn by hand, and even as late as 1871, a hand hook and ladder truck was in use. After that all "machines" were horse drawn. Steam fire engines were introduced in 1859. There was no fire alarm system, and whenever a fire was located people ran through the streets crying FIRE and the first to reach the engine house in Court Square would grasp the bell rope and ring the bell with might and main.<sup>1</sup>

The Quequechan No. 1 was the first steam fire engine purchased. At first kept in the Court Square Building, it was later moved to new quarters on the corner of Prospect Street and Highland Avenue. By 1875 seven steam fire engines were in use and several stations were erected for their occupancy. A Central Fire Station located on the northerly side of Pocasset Street, between Second and Third Streets had been built in 1870. The building was also known as the Armory Building. On the floor above the apparatus were quarters for the firemen and on the third floor an armory and drill hall for the militia. Repair shops and the fire alarm system were also located in the building. Additional quarters were provided for the fire department in 1896, on the corner of Second and Pocasset Streets, with exits on Second Street. The present Post Office and its frontage together with a widened Pocasset Street now includes the original sites of these buildings. The new Central Fire Station was erected in 1932, at the south-easterly corner of Bedford and Troy Streets.

For many years after the incorporation of the city, the fire department was composed of both permanent and call men. Permanent engineers were first appointed in 1873, and in 1886 a captain and hose or ladder men were assigned to each company. In 1894, the captains of all fire companies were made permanent and the system of call men was soon abolished. After 1899 horse drawn machines were gradually replaced by motorized apparatus.

For a number of years (around the turn of the century) there was great rivalry between the supporters of William C. Davol and James Langford as to which would be elected chief of the fire department. City elections came to be fought on the question as to whether the Davol men or the Langford men should control the city council which insured the election of one or the other. During these years, the heads of the factions established a close watch over the members of the city council, lest they desert to the other side. On one or two occasions the pledges were taken out of town on a

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<sup>1</sup> See Fascicle I, p. 82.

“junket” prior to inauguration day, in order that the leaders might control their activities. The choice of the heads of some municipal departments sometimes depended upon the result of the Davol-Langford controversy.

A new city charter went into effect in 1905, after which the fire department was brought under the control of a “fire commission” which chose the fire-chief. Mr. Davol, who had been chief, was continued as chief until 1920. He was well known throughout New England for his skill in and knowledge of the methods of fighting fires. He made several important inventions and improvements in equipments.

At first, by common consent, Bradford Durfee was recognized by the fire wardens as chief. He was formerly elected in 1837 and served until his death in 1843. His fatal illness, it is related was brought about by over-exertion at the time of the great fire.

In 1845, the fire wardens chose Andrew Robeson, Jr. chief; in 1848, Foster Hooper. He served two years and was succeeded by Stephen Davol. James Buffington was elected in 1852 and the year Fall River became a city, Asa Eames was chief.

The fire chiefs from 1855 to 1940 were as follows:—

Jonathan E. Morrill,	1855-56,	William C. Davol,	1876-81,
	1858-59.		1884-97.
Chester W. Greene,	1857.		1901-20.
Southard H. Miller,	1860-69.	John A. Macfarlane,	1882-83.
Thomas J. Borden,	1870-72.	James Langford,	1898-1900.
Holder B. Durfee,	1873-74.	Joseph Bowers, Jr.,	1920-22.
Thomas Connell,	1875.	Jeremiah F. Sullivan,	1922-37.
		Dennis D. Holmes,	1937-40.

In 1941 the department was officered by George E. McGaw, chief, by an assistant chief and four district chiefs. The total personnel of the department was one hundred and seventy-five, three of whom were in the signal or fire alarm division. There are ten fire stations. The apparatus consists of four aerial ladder trucks, one city service truck, ten pumpers, three hose wagons, one forest fire wagon equipped with tank and portable pump, one spare hose wagon, one spare pumper, three radio equipped cars for the use of the chief and his assistants, one service car and one repair car.

Since 1923, the fire alarm service has been installed in a signal station on Pine Street opposite Ruggles Park.

### *The Great Fire of 1843*

The story of this fire is included in Fowler's History and I am indebted to that history for the major part of this story.

The fire occurred on Sunday, July 2nd, 1843 and that day will always be referred to by the inhabitants of the city as a day on which occurred one of the most memorable events recorded in the history of Fall River. It furnished a date from which incidents were often reckoned, and "before the fire" and "after the fire" were terms well understood and in common use among the people. As late as 1861 the effects of the fire were still felt, and the fire bells never struck without the remembrances of the disastrous results which once followed such an alarm, and whether at noon or at night, the alarm was scarcely sounded before the firemen were at their posts, the steam and hand engines in working order, and the streets filled with anxious and interested "lookers on".

At the time the fire occurred the thermometer stood at 90°, and everything was dried and parched after a long drought; the water was shut off from the stream in order that labor might be performed in its channel. In addition, there was a high wind blowing from the southwest which tended to spread the flames. The alarm was given about 4 P. M. The fire started near the corner of Main and Borden Streets, in an open space in the rear of a large three-story warehouse occupied by Abner L. Westgate. The space was covered with shavings which were kindled by the firing of a small cannon by two boys. The fire spread instantly to the surrounding buildings and in five minutes the flames were rising to a height of about fifty feet. Showers of sparks and cinders were carried by the heavy winds and kindled many buildings before they were reached by the body of the fire.

The buildings on both sides of Main Street were soon burning and as the wind was blowing nearly parallel with the street, all hope of controlling the flames and saving the business section of the village was abandoned. The fire spread so fast and in such unexpected places that efforts to check it were ineffective. The entire space between Main, Franklin, Rock and Borden Streets was a vast sheet of fire, entirely beyond the control of men, and had it not been for a change in the direction of the wind the entire village would have been in ruins. The fire left the people feeling that they would never recover from its results; they could not foresee that it would give the industries new life and that in the course of eleven years Fall River would be numbered among the cities of the Commonwealth; its population would be increased two-thirds and its taxable property doubled; and that in twenty years, instead of running thirty-two thousand spindles, almost two hundred thousand would be used in manufacturing forty-five million yards of cloth.

While Dr. Archer's house, on the southeast corner of Main and Franklin Streets was burning, the wind, which had been blowing from the southwest, suddenly changed to the north, driving back the flames over the burned district. The house of H. Battelle on Purchase Street was the last building burned, and the only one north of Franklin Street. It took fire about ten P. M. and while it was in flames a vessel arrived at the wharf, with an engine company from Bristol, which immediately proceeded to Purchase Street and by their efforts saved the adjoining buildings and prevented further progress of the fire.

The fire had swept over nearly twenty acres of the central part of the town. After the danger had passed the remaining houses were thrown open and shelter and refreshments were furnished to many homeless and tired people, but many passed the night in the open.

Soon after the fire a committee was appointed with instructions to obtain a correct list of those who had suffered and of the amount of property destroyed. From this report it appeared that the total loss on buildings was \$264,470 and of other property \$262,015, a total loss of \$526,485; that the total insurance on all properties and of all kinds was \$176,075, leaving a net loss of \$349,510.

A circular which the committee issued was responded to liberally. Money was donated amounting to \$50,934 of which Boston contributed \$13,165, Providence \$1,700, New Bedford \$1,700 and from other sources \$24,369. The circular read as follows:—

"To their fellow citizens, near and remote, both in towns and country, the under signed, a Committee in behalf of the people of Fall River, Mass., make this, their brief appeal for help, amid the appalling calamity which, under the wise and righteous Providence of God, has overtaken us.

Our population from 8,000 to 9,000 souls, chiefly devoted to manufacturing and mechanic pursuits, is in deep distress—a portion of it in pressing want.

At 4 o'clock P. M., last sabbath, the 2nd inst., a fire broke out in the central part of this village, (the wind blowing a gale) which in its ravages was of the most desolating character.

The burnt district comprises some fifteen or twenty acres of the centre of the business operations.

Nearly 200 buildings (not including many small ones) are consumed; among which are three newly built houses of worship, and all our public offices; our post office and custom house are gone, and we have not a printing office, nor hotel, nor bank building, nor book store, nor market, nor bakery left. Nearly all of our grocery and provision stores, including one wholesale establishment, with most of their contents; and all our drygoods, druggist,



tailor, milliner, tin ware, and paint shops, with one cotton factory, running 3,000 spindles, are gone.

Nearly 200 families are turned houseless, and many of them penniless into the street.

Besides, the appalling fire raged with such fury, and spread with such velocity, that many of the sufferers gladly escaped with their lives, without a pillow for their heads, or a change of raiment for their backs. The amount of property consumed it is impossible to estimate, even by anything like a probable approximation.

The assessors of the town, in discharge of their official duties, within the last two months, have rated the property of the place at three and a half million of dollars, and the heart of the village is in ashes.

We cannot, we need not enlarge.

We tell you in few words the simple, sad story of our calamity; and with the scene of desolation before us, and the cries of distress around us, we ask your aid: — In behalf of our suffering neighbors, and in the name of humanity, and of our Heavenly Father, we appeal to your kindness and your love, and solicit your assistance; not to repair our losses and rebuild our village, but to relieve our present distress, and enable us to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and shelter to the houseless; until, with due effort on the part of all among us, a merciful and righteous God, who has justly afflicted us, shall command the hum of business the smile of contentment and the song of joy to return to our now desolate borders. Send us what you can, send, Food, Clothing, Money — send it addressed to either of us, and it shall be carefully distributed to the needy.

N. B. Provisions or other articles by the way of Providence, Rhode Island, may be sent to the care of Capt. Thomas Borden, of the steamboat King Philip, which plies daily between that port and ours.

Jervis Shove

Orin Fowler

John Eddy

Jefferson Borden

Enoch French

David Anthony

Asa Bronson

Richard Borden

William Brown

Joseph F. Lindsey

Fall River, Mass., July 4, 1843.

### *Later General Conflagrations*

On February 15-16, 1916, for five hours during the night, the Fall River Fire Department, aided by apparatus from other localities, battled with a stubborn blaze on South Main, Borden and Spring Streets; the heaviest holocaust the city had known since the great fire of 1843. The burned area covering several acres, extended along both sides of South Main Street, from the Baptist Temple to Columbia Street on the west, and from Borden south on the east, also embracing buildings on Spring Street to St. Mary's

Cathedral, and down the same thoroughfare to Pearl Street. One fireman was electrocuted by a falling wire, and others were injured.

The blaze started from an unknown cause in the basement of the four story brick building of the Steiger Company at the southwest corner of South Main and Spring Streets, rapidly getting away from control, and jumping to the east side of the street. The Edwards Building at the corner of Columbia Street checked its progress to the south. The property destroyed consisted chiefly of brick blocks of three or four stories. Among the structures destroyed and firms burned out were the Steiger Building, Flint Building, Sullivan Building, Egan Building, Lenox Hotel, New York Cloak and Suit Company and Cobb, Bates and Yerxa. Cherry and Webb suffered some fire damage. Numerous stores were destroyed.

The total loss was estimated as between \$1,500,000 and \$2,000,000, covered by about \$1,000,000 of insurance. The heaviest sufferer was the Steiger department store, where the loss was placed at \$300,000 on building and contents. Subsequently a solemn service of Thanksgiving to God was held in the Cathedral that the handsome granite edifice had been spared.

### *Conflagration of 1928*

On Thursday night, February 2, 1928, Fall River was visited by the greatest catastrophe in its history, when fire ravaged over an extensive area in the business center, wiping out property estimated at \$4,000,000. The flames spread through North Main, Pocasset, Central, Bedford, Granite, Bank, Purchase, and Rock Streets, and the conflagration was stubbornly fought by the firemen of Fall River and other cities and towns from 6:30 in the evening until 2:30 the next morning. It was a bitterly cold night, with a light wind, and water pouring from the hose froze as it fell, greatly impeding the work of the firemen. Fire apparatus was coated with ice. Six firemen were severely injured and a score or more less seriously.

The blaze originated in the large structure of the abandoned Pocasset Mill, in the rear of the Granite Block, between Central and Pocasset Streets, which was in the hands of wreckers, all the windows and automatic fire sprinklers having been removed. It is asserted some of the wrecking crew had built a fire in the building to warm themselves. This soon communicated to the oil soaked floors. It was thought the flames were extinguished by the department on the first alarm, and the apparatus left the scene. Not long after smouldering embers broke out again, soon enveloping the mill in flames, which quickly leaped to the historic Granite Block, erected in 1843,

following the great fire of that year. This was rapidly consumed. Blazing embers were everywhere, igniting building after building. The progress of the blaze was north and easterly. Three times the tower of the Merchants Mill, as far away as Fourteenth Street was in flames from the flying sparks, and the Troy Mill tower caught fire several times, but these structures were saved, together with numerous other buildings in their vicinity.

Among the property destroyed were three bank buildings, — the Massasoit-Pocasset National (containing also the Fall River Co-operative Bank), Metacomet National and Citizens Savings and the structures housing the Troy and People's Co-operative Banks. The Union Savings Bank building was considerably damaged but not beyond repair. Two hotels fell a prey to the flames, The Mohican and Wilbur; two theaters, the Rialto and Premier; Temple Beth-El on Bank Street and the large Durfee Block. The Buffington Building on Purchase Street was gutted, but subsequently repaired. Business structures of stone, brick and wood were reduced to ashes and sufferers by the fire included merchants, lawyers (who lost valuable records of land titles and other important papers), insurance men, realtors and occupants of various other offices. The two telegraph offices were burned out, but the telephone exchange escaped destruction. City Hall and the Post Office also were saved. Military rule was promptly established in the burned area and maintained for several days. The total amount of insurance carried on the property was estimated at \$2,615,000.

Most of the devastated district was subsequently rebuilt. A much needed widening of Central Street at the junction of North Main was brought about and improvements were made on the site of the Pocasset Mill, where a terminal for the inter-city bus system was established.

### *Threatened Conflagrations*

July 16, 1890, an afternoon blaze destroyed John D. Crowley's junk shop at the corner of Anawan and Summer Streets. A brisk west wind blew sparks on wooden structures as far as South Main Street, fourteen buildings being on fire at one time, causing great apprehension as to a general spread of the flames. Sharp work held the fire under control. The loss was only \$11,500.

January 23, 1939, an extensive fire destroyed several buildings at South Main and Columbia Streets and for a time a repetition of the conflagrations of 1916 and 1928 was feared. The loss was \$300,000.

Facts concerning disastrous and destructive fires in cotton mills have been recorded in Fascicle II, Chapter XVI.

*Storm Records*

The United States Weather Bureau has record of storms, on a basis of accurate instrumental observation since 1871 but there are climatological records relating to severe storms as early as August 15, 1635. The weather records, over a series of years during the last few years of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth century, as kept by a correspondent of Timothy Dwight, president of Yale College, are in accord with present conditions.

Though the type of most of the earlier storms seem to have been similar, they were less destructive, due in part to a lesser congestion of property. The famous hurricane of 1635 was widespread in New England. Bradford said that a century's growth of forest was wrecked; that the water was forced twenty feet higher than normal and the Indians climbed trees to escape drowning. A ship (the *Angel Gabriel*) of 240 tons burden was wrecked but the cargo and passengers were saved. At the colonial trading post at Manomet, the flood carried away the "boarded roof" of a house, floating it to another place, though the posts remained standing in the ground.

In 1675, as appears from the diary of Peter Easton of Newport, came "a like storm to that of 1635" which blew down the "wind mill and did much harm". The mill referred to was the one which was built (probably wooden) by Easton in 1633, which was replaced after 1675 by the stone mill which was long believed to be of Norse origin. At Thatcher's Light (off Cape Ann) Mr. Anthony Thatcher was marooned over a weekend.

A letter from a Dr. Holmes to the president of Yale College records the violent storm of August 15, 1675 as follows:—

"Immense numbers of forest trees were destroyed. Many houses were unroofed, many blown down, and the Indian corn was beaten to the earth. The tide rose twenty feet perpendicularly. At Narrhgansett the natives were obliged to climb trees for safety; yet the tide of flood returning before the usual time, many of them were drowned." Another eye witness wrote, "It broke the high pine trees and such like, in the midst, and the tall young oaks and walnut trees, of good bigness, were wound as withs by it; very strange and fearful to behold."

Col. Joseph Durfee in his reminiscences relating to the early history of Fall River, said, — "This (1779-80) was the coldest winter known during the last century. The river and bay were frozen over so thick, that people with loaded teams passed all the way from Fall River to Newport on the ice."

The storm of December 26-27, 1788 was accompanied by a severe snowstorm with intense cold. It is called the "Magee Storm" because Capt. Magee's armed brig was wrecked in Plymouth harbor and of his crew of seventy men most of them perished when they were frozen in the rigging within sight of shore.

We know that the gale of September 22-23, 1815 was most disastrous in Narragansett Bay. It is said to have been in violence and destructiveness "without parallel", in a narrative written by Mr. R. M. Devens. A full twenty-four hour violent rain was followed at ten o'clock on the second day by a gale which demolished chimneys and blew down trees and buildings, after which the wind shifted to the southeast, the rain ceased, the sky darkened and the ocean spray turned to the form of white clouds, raised to a height of a hundred feet. Five thousand trees were destroyed, five hundred buildings were razed and fifty vessels were wrecked in Providence alone. At Stonington, Connecticut, the water rose seventeen feet above the high water mark. A very hot current of air accompanied the tempest, and wells and pools were contaminated. At Portsmouth, the tide carried through what is now Island Park and Town Pond from the Sakonet River to Mount Hope Bay where the course of the tide and the contour of the shore and the character of the land were substantially altered. At Providence, the water rose to a point eleven feet nine and one-fourth inches above mean high tide.

There was another similar disturbance on September 3, 1821 which caused substantial damage.

There was a severe snowstorm beginning on January 15, 1831. A record made by Samuel and Thomas Rodman of New Bedford states that the snow was three feet deep in the woods and the roads were obstructed for many days by drifts as high as twelve feet. At Union Street in New Bedford, the snow reached the second story windows and the tenants reached the street through snow tunnels.

Another violent storm of wind and rain swept New England on October 23, 1851. One of the severe storms of the century began on the evening of January 16, 1867 and lasted approximately thirty hours until midnight of January seventeenth.

### *"The September Gale"*

On September 8th, 1869, occurred a gale of great intensity, which was referred to for a generation as "the September gale." It covered a wider area than others in the northern latitudes, extending from Nova Scotia, as far westerly as the Mississippi River. Eight and five one-hundredths inches

of rain fell in torrents for forty consecutive hours, followed by floods which exceeded all previous records. The gale came very suddenly, causing a complete embargo on traffic.

In Fall River, three chimneys on the Pocasset Block (now Talbot's Block) were blown down, with similar like destruction throughout the city. The roofs of the American Linen, Mechanics and Merchants Mills were blown off and the spire of the Central Church, located on the corner of Bedford and Rock Streets collapsed. Much damage was done to shipping. Several vessels were blown ashore on the Somerset side of the bay. It took a train twelve hours to reach Fall River from Boston due to track obstructions and a stop at Dighton was necessary to feed passengers.

Intervening between the gale of 1869 and that of 1938 there were substantial gales on —

October 23-24, 1878

August 24, 1893

November 27, 1898

August 24, 1924

During the storm of August, 1924, the rainfall was 6.36 inches and the wind velocity reached eighty miles. Southern Massachusetts and Rhode Island coasts stood the brunt of the storm and while thousands of trees were blown down, there was no storm wave due to the direction of the wind as it blew up the coast from a hurricane which was centered off the coast of South Carolina but there were heavy gusts of wind from the northeast.

The hurricane of September 21, 1938 was equaled in severity to that of 1815. It originated as a tropical storm in the West Indies and veered northwards with its path directed by a high pressure area on each side. The center of the storm moved up the Connecticut valley and from there northerly to the St. Lawrence valley near Quebec. The damage caused by this storm was greater than that done by any other because the property which was exposed to its action was more congested and of greater value.

At Westport Harbor<sup>2</sup> and Horseneck Beach the property damaged exceeded four hundred thousand dollars, with half as much more loss due to the necessary bridge and road repairs. A hundred cottages were blown down and buildings, some with their occupants, were floated inland, many for a substantial distance. On Cape Cod, the damage was even greater, reaching nearly two million dollars at Onset alone. Beach erosion and tidal waves changed the coast line in many places.

<sup>2</sup> See "The Hurricane at Westport Harbor, September 21, 1938" by Richard K. Hawes.

The high winds and resultant tidal wave caused unprecedented damage along the shores of Sakonet River and the estuarian region of Narragansett Bay.

In its entirety the property damage to owners was in excess of five hundred million dollars. Five hundred lives were lost. The United States War Department allocated five million dollars for flood control. The Red Cross spent twenty thousand dollars for immediate needs and provided for much hospitalization, clothing, food and shelter.

