

1938 Hurricane And Tidal Wave Ravaged Region

A death-dealing, property-wrecking tropical storm, the worst in 115 years, struck New England and the North Atlantic states, in the late afternoon of Wednesday, Sept. 21, 1938, ravaging the region with a devastating hurricane and tidal wave.

The destructive tidal wave churned 1,000 feet into coastal cities, carrying death and destruction and paralyzing New England.

Not a vessel moved out of Boston Harbor. Not a train moved north of Montreal. Automobiles moved, if at all, in a wilderness of fallen trees on city streets and state highways.

Disaster piled upon disaster in a series of swift, piercing scenes.

A woman drowned in the very center of Providence's business district.

Seven men met sudden death in Boston Harbor when a tugboat sank under them.

A gas tank, holding 300,000 cubic feet of gas, exploded with a roar in tide-ravaged Providence, rocking the waterfront in a half-mile radius.

Two girl students died in Northfield amid a mass of toppling chimney bricks. Twenty others were hurt.

A school bus was reported engulfed by flood waters near Jamestown, R.I., and five or six child passengers drowned.

A socially prominent Philadelphia matron, Mrs. John C. Morris, was swept to death with her son, John, when a tidal wave struck Narragansett Pier, R.I.

Similar scenes flashed almost simultaneously throughout New England, as rescue workers went to work.

So bad was the situation with light-

blowing and were uprooted as public utility poles and wires crashed upon homes, automobiles and highways; as roofs were stripped of shingles; as ornaments and insignias on steeples became broken; grave fears developed and families huddled in their homes, in most cases, shaken and in prayer.

The storm struck with the suddenness and violence of a tropical twister. By late afternoon, the wind, driving torrents of rain horizontally before it, had reached gusts of 87 miles an hour, at which velocity the barometer in Providence broke.

The equinoctial tide, highest tide of the year because of the direct position of the sun in line with the moon, was due that afternoon.

Yet long before the high tide mark was reached and driven by winds which attained a velocity of 105 miles per hour, waves mounted to 30-foot crests, and the fury of the Atlantic rushed into Narragansett Bay.

The waters, driven by the screaming wind, piled up the bay into Providence and swept into the Sakonnet River, Mount Hope Bay and the Taunton River.

The swirling tide inundated Providence at the height of the 5 o'clock rush, quickly burying the downtown section of the city under almost 10 feet of the bay, creeping over cars and trolleys, tearing clothes off pedestrians who fought against the driving forces as they struggled to reach shelter.

The high water mark in Providence rose to 13 feet, 9 inches above mean high tide, breaking the record, the Great Gale of Sept. 23, 1815, by almost two feet:

As the winds rose to 121

and Portsmouth, guarding against vandalism and thefts.

Westport police were back in full control of the Horseneck and harbor areas with the withdrawal of the 26th Division Military Police unit.

Property loss in Westport to summer resorts was expected to total \$250,000, with highway and bridge damage approximating \$200,00.

The tanker Phoenix was torn from the Shell pier, swept across the river and thrown up on the rocks at the edge of Riverside Avenue, Somerset.

A federal inquiry board later determined that some of the ship's lines were cut in an attempt to save the ship when the hurricane struck and that others were snapped by the force of the wind.

Approximately \$150,000 damage was caused to buildings and orchards, and an additional \$50,000 damage to highways here by the hurricane.

There were 20 dwellings destroyed and 1,000 were damaged. Also 2,000 other buildings were damaged by the storm.

It was estimated that 1,000 shade trees were lost but no estimate was available on loss of fruit trees and crops.

The storm knocked out telephone lines with 647 lines out of order, comprising 1,475 stations.

In Assonet there were 53 lines out of order comprising 70 telephones and a diver working from a lighter in the harbor had no success in searching for the Swansea submarine cable carrying 148 lines serving 412 telephones.

The cable served the Swansea area including Touisset, Gardners Neck, Ocean Grove and Brayton Point Road.

Bay State and Rhode Island lighthouses suf-

So bad was the situation, with light, power and communication lines down in most of the area, tree-blocked highways isolating an undetermined number of cities — and some of the hardest-hit communities under military control — that United States Rep. Arthur D. Healy, Democrat of Massachusetts, wired President Roosevelt and WPA Administrator Harry Hopkins urgent pleas for all available federal aid for the stricken area.

The 1938 hurricane went into the record books as the most severe and violent storm ever to hit this area in the amount of property destroyed and the number of lives lost.

The storm began in the late afternoon (Sept. 21) as the sky turned yellow, and even as fierce winds snapped off treetops in many parts of the city, Fall River residents remained unaware of the destructive forces swirling up from the West Indies.

Earlier in the afternoon, the United States Weather Bureau in Washington sent out notices that a northeast storm was approaching the territory north of Atlantic City and south of Block Island.

The bureau stated also that tropical storms, including winds of hurricane force, were reported about 75 miles east of Cape Hatteras, N.C. The latter, the bureau said, moving northeast rapidly.

Those warnings were published on Page 1 of The Herald News, but this area, with no hurricane experience, failed to appreciate their import.

Even as the wind rose in mid-afternoon and increased in velocity to an officially recorded maximum of 105 miles per hour in gusts, people in the city still failed to realize that a catastrophe was descending upon the area.

Then, as trees began

As the winds rose to 121 miles per hour in some areas, water flooded the resort area of Island Park, Sakonnet Point, Westport Harbor and Horseneck Beach, sweeping homes from foundations, driving them inland to leave them as piles of lumber and rubble.

Slade's Ferry Bridge, closed since it was struck by the tanker Hogan Nov. 6, 1932, was saved from the storm because its draw was up vertically during the 100-mile gale and would have been wrecked except for its Irving grating floor, which offered little resistance to the high winds.

The whine of the gale through the deck grating could be heard by residents half a mile away during the storm.

An engineer in charge of the bridge said he thought it was "done for" when it started creaking when it was hit on the north side by the same scow that struck the Brightman Street Bridge as the flood waters receded and by a schooner on the south side during the flood.

Concrete reinforcement of the southerly side of the approach to Slades Ferry Bridge on the Somerset shore was extensively damaged.

The same engineer reported that he stood in water nearly up to his knees in his temporary office quarters at the westerly end of Slades Ferry Bridge while putting in emergency telephone calls at the height of the storm.

The little office was moved a few feet from its original position by the flood, which washed away the river bank to within a foot of the structure.

"Just a few more inches of water," the engineer said, "and my office would have been taken for a ride."

National Guard units patrolled storm-stricken Tiverton, Little Compton

Bay State and Rhode Island lighthouses suffered more than \$200,000 damage with those in Rhode Island hardest hit.

The Sands Point lighthouse on Prudence Island was wrecked, and Mrs. Robert Gustavus and son, Edward, wife and son of the keeper, and three visitors were drowned.

Gustavus was outside battening things down and was swept into the sea but washed ashore again.

Daniel Sullivan of Fall River, keeper of the Whale Rock lighthouse between Bonnet Shores and Jamestown, was saved only because he was ashore for provisions.

The efforts of Milton H. Chase of Prudence Island, who rigged up an auxiliary light to guide mariners, were highly praised by government officials.

Wrecked homes and other buildings at Island Park were razed by a national guard unit using dynamite.

Lumber from the razed building was placed in a huge pile and destroyed by burning to prevent the spread of disease.

Additional Guardsmen were stationed at the Hummocks and Common Fence Point, both in Portsmouth, to prevent looting. The troops said they

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Rita N. Wood

NEW MEMBERS

had been alerted that persons from Fall River and Tiverton would attempt to cross from those shores in rowboats.

The grim search for bodies continued at Sakonnet Point, Tiverton Third Beach and the Hummock section.

In Tiverton, free inoculations were given against typhoid, and the water in the town's wells was being tested.

Tiverton, Little Compton and Island Park residents were warned to boil water for 10 minutes before use or put three drops iodine in each quart and allow it to stand 30 minutes before use.

In greater Fall River the death toll rose to 84 and property damage, principally on the ocean front and the shores of tributary waters, mounted to millions of dollars.

A great tidal wave washed away shore property like match boxes. A fortunate point about the storm was it occurred after the vacation season had ended.

Had the hurricane struck a month earlier, it might have fatally trapped thousands of vacationists at nearby beaches.

Hurricane victims in the Greater Fall River area were: Westport, 21; Portsmouth including Island Park and Common Fence Point, 24; Prudence Island, 9; Little Compton, including Sakonnet, 7; Somerset, 7; Swansea, 6; Tiverton, 5; Middletown, 3; Fall River 1; Patience Island, 1.

Store, home, church and factory windows were blown in here.

Thousands of trees were uprooted, roofs of several mills were badly damaged and towering chimneys on the Sagamore and Howard-Arthur Mills were felled.

Electric power was disrupted with emergency power and light service provided for a few days by the Brockton Edison Co.

National Guardsmen patrolled the business district while street lighting was off. The tremendously shambled areas of



Stone Bridge is barely visible as the

nearby towns were patroled for a week or more by police, soldiers, sailors and National Guardsmen with the public prohibited for some time from sightseeing in a community effort to avoid looting.

Remarkably, in Fall River there was not a single reported case of looting.

With no electric power available The Herald News was printed at the Boston Post on Sept. 22.

Some of the early morning stories of the storm

were written in The Herald News office with the aid of flashlights and candles.

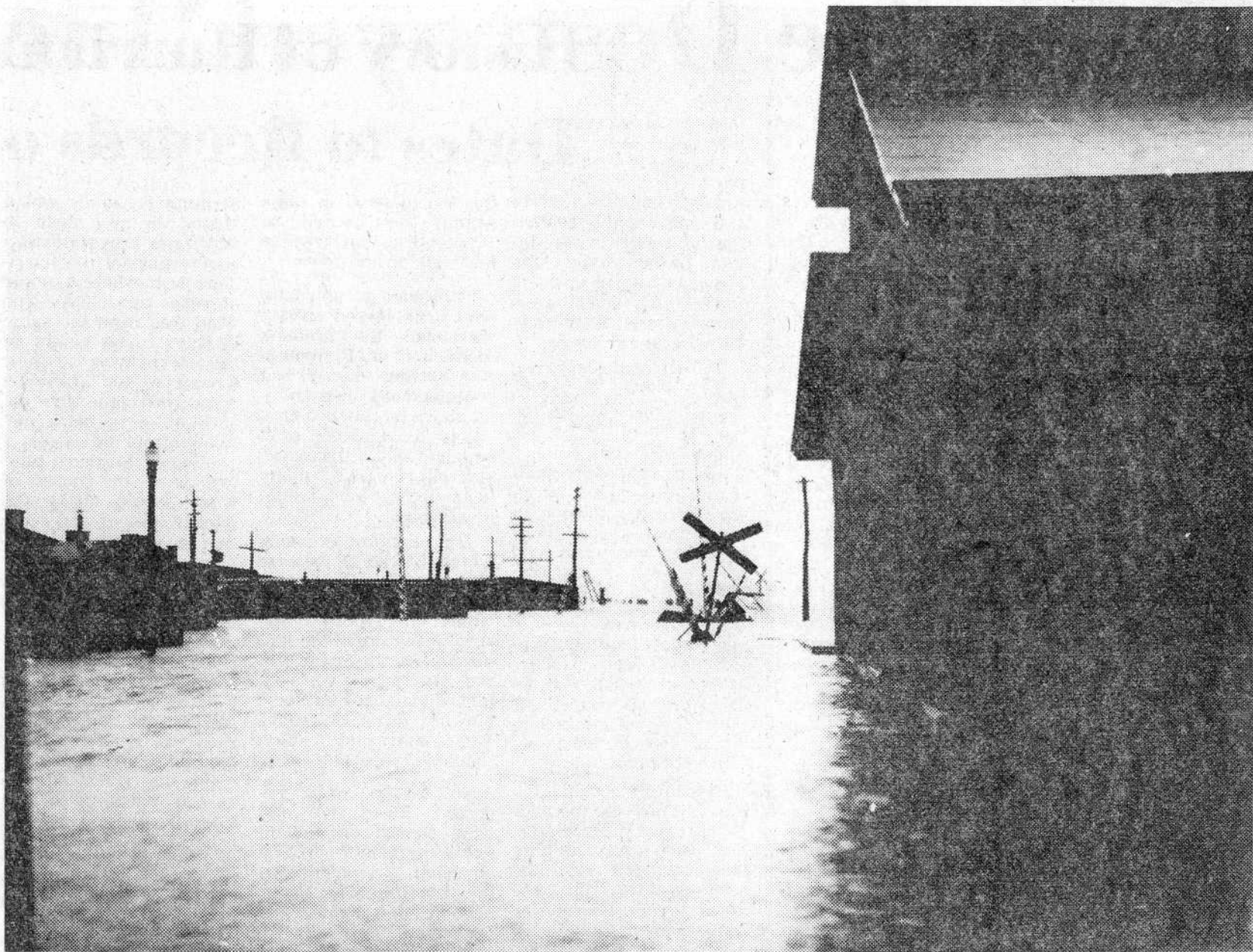
Later stories that day were telephoned to part of the reportorial staff sent to the Post plant with the The Herald News composing room force.

For several days after the storm, The Herald News printed scores of pictures of heart-stirring damage in this immediate vicinity and elsewhere. This newspaper later distributed a special booklet of storm pictures.

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Water Street lived up to its name during hurricane of 1938.



Stone Bridge is barely visible as the 1938 hurricane rages over the area.