

The Great New England Hurricane of '38: One Family Story

Submitted by Sally Wood

© October 2021 Sally Wood

No one knew it was coming. It started like many hurricanes in the eastern Atlantic near the Cape Verde Islands, and it was reported by a ship captain when it passed north of Puerto Rico on September 18th. It was probably category 5 then. South Florida was warned to prepare, but the hurricane unexpectedly turned north. The weather service lost track of it and assumed it had continued turning, going back out to sea and posing no further threat to land. They were not aware that the storm would continue moving north rapidly at over 60 mph, about twice as fast as a typical hurricane. At 12:30 pm on September 21 people on the south shore of Long Island engaged in normal weekday activities thought they saw a thirty-foot fog bank rolling in. It was a 30- to 50-foot wall of water from the hurricane. Many on land and water were swept away by the huge storm surge. They were completely unprepared. The first warning of a storm had been issued only two hours earlier with no mention of hurricane strength.

Shirley Douglas, my mother, was 18 then. As a child she lived in Tiverton, Rhode Island on the east side of Narragansett Bay a few miles north of Sakonnet Point. During the depression her family moved to a house on Gardners Neck in Swansea, Massachusetts, just up the hill from Lee River, which separated Swansea from Somerset. Her grandfather, Henry Olding, had a boatyard on the other side of Gardners Neck on the northeast arm of the bay. His family had moved from Nova Scotia to Fall River in the 1880s. He was a carpenter and had a business with his brother building houses, but in addition to house building, he was known for his artistic talents. He built furniture, carved the bishop's chair for St. John's Episcopal Church, and was sought after for his skill in repairing and restoring the fine woodwork in cabins of damaged yachts.

Shirley was visiting her great aunt and uncle on Staten Island on the day of the hurricane. She never travelled, and the trip to New York was a great adventure for her. She and her aunt had spent the morning in New York City and were on the ferry back to Staten Island in the middle of the storm. They arrived safely but shaken. Without any basis for comparison, she didn't know that the extremely rough ride was unusual, and she had no idea about the damage the storm would bring to the area where her family lived.

The east side of a hurricane is always the worst, and most of the damage came from winds exceeding 120 mph and 15-to-25-foot storm surges. According to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the most significant storm surges were in Narragansett Bay and Buzzards Bay. Narragansett Bay is a 147 square mile natural harbor that almost divides Rhode Island into two parts. It has over 30 islands and is over 10% of the total area of the state. Buzzards Bay is on the Massachusetts shore near Cape Cod. The lighthouse keeper at Sakonnet Point on the east side of the entrance to Narragansett Bay reported that all his doors were torn away and all the windows were lost when three surges came which completely buried the tower. Despite heavy damage, he stayed in the tower and kept it lit all night. All along the bay almost all boats were sunk, grounded, or lost. Homes and bridges were swept away. Henry Olding's Swansea boatyard was completely destroyed. The huge surges continued up the bay through its narrow northwest arm and funneled into Providence. Parts of the downtown area were flooded under 14 feet of water, and many on the first floors of buildings drowned. Others took shelter on upper floors. In New Bedford on Buzzards Bay, parts of the city were under 8 feet of water and two thirds of the boats in the harbor sank.

After the storm coastal and maritime destruction was everywhere. There were boats inside of buildings, large pieces of boats in people's yards, broken bridges blown hundreds of feet from their foundations, and thousands of patches of bare ground where houses had been. Estimates of the number of deaths range from 400 to 800 with most of them in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. The National Weather Service reported 8,900 homes and buildings destroyed and over 15,000 damaged. In addition, 2,600 boats were destroyed and 3,300 were damaged. Over two billion trees were lost in New England and New York, and some forests never recovered. Paper mills were still processing fallen trees from the storm nine years later.

The devastation of the Great New England Hurricane remained a vivid memory for all who lived through it. It came without warning, and no one living remembered the most recent previous major hurricane that hit Massachusetts in 1815. Everyone had stories. Shirley's family was fortunate to have had manageable damage except for the loss of the boatyard. I had often heard the story of the ferry ride during the hurricane, but I had never heard about the boatyard or the larger context of the Great Hurricane until September, 2010. We were visiting my cousin in Massachusetts during rainy weather when Hurricane Earl threatened eastern Massachusetts. She had an old Time-Life book about the Hurricane of 38, and looking through it we saw a picture of a boatyard in South Swansea reduced to piles of unidentifiable broken wood. My mother commented that her grandfather also had a boat yard in South Swansea, which is really small and hardly likely to support two boat yards. We asked where his boatyard was, and the street matched. I asked her what became of the boatyard, and she said that her grandfather had sold it. I asked when it was sold, and after thinking about it for a while, she said she thought it was soon after the hurricane.





Providence

Photo courtesy Boston Public Library, Leslie Jones Collection.
<https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/great-1938-hurricane/>



Oyster boat from Sakonnet River blown onto grounds of home near Tiverton.

<https://www.weather.gov/box/1938hurricane>



Tiverton, Rhode Island

<http://www.tivertonhistorical.org/tiverton-stories/hurricane-of-38/>



Tiverton Basin

<http://www.tivertonhistorical.org/tiverton-stories/hurricane-of-38/>

Reference info

<https://www.nhc.noaa.gov/outreach/history/#new>
<https://www.weather.gov/okx/1938HurricaneHome>
<https://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/great-1938-hurricane/>
<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-great-new-england-hurricane>
<http://www.tivertonhistorical.org/tiverton-stories/hurricane-of-38/>

Photos are used under the Fair Use policy. They are widely available on public and government sites and are not used for profit in this story. The map sketch is hand drawn.