

In an August journal entry Dale mentioned the Outer Banks' "Old August Storm" of 1899, and said that I would publish more about that hurricane in our September Newsletter. In the intervening weeks we all witnessed the devastation to New Orleans and surrounding areas caused by hurricane Katrina. Of course, nearly all storm stories pale in comparison. Ocracoke's recent encounter with hurricane Ophelia, for example, was extremely mild. Damage was minimal, and life has returned to normal in just a few days.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most devastating hurricane to visit the Outer Banks since people have been keeping records was the "Old August Storm" of 1899. Herewith a report.

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It was summer of the last year of the 19th century. The weather had been exceptionally pleasant for days. Young Elisha Ballance and several other Ocracoke fishermen were out in the sound in their small skiffs. Scanning the skies, they realized that a fierce storm was bearing down on them. They sought refuge in the sand dunes about eight miles "down below" (that area of the island north of the village of Ocracoke). As the weather deteriorated they scooped out a hole in the side of a small hill and covered it with their sails.

They endured the full fury of the hurricane in this primitive shelter, barely surviving the windblown debris and rising tide. The storm continued relentlessly for three days (August 16, 17 & 18), covering the island with salt water, and threatening to drown the men with every tidal surge.

Elisha Ballance was only 17 years old when he was caught in this terrible maelstrom. On the 19th he could endure the tension no longer. Concerned for his family back in the village, and unwilling to wait for the tide to fully recede so the boats could be repaired and the sails mended, Elisha, along with two others, insisted on walking the eight miles back to the village. It was a long and arduous trek fraught with danger along the way.

The island's waterways were still swollen, and at times the men were forced to wade waist deep across creeks or trudge through saturated marshland. Snakes that had been forced out of their habitat slithered past them. Elisha and his companions were weak, hungry, and exhausted from the three-day ordeal.

Eventually Elisha made his way to his family home. The scene was heartbreaking. Alone in the house he found the lower level and all of the furniture soaked and coated with muck and sludge. Seaweed, sand, and mud covered the floor. In the kitchen he slipped and fell. The depressing sight before him, coupled with his weakened condition, left him with few

resources. He passed out.

In due time Elisha regained consciousness and began a search for his family . As with so many others threatened by the rising tide, they had sought refuge with neighbors.

Elisha and his family recovered, as did the rest of the villagers, but memories and tales of the Old August Storm live on, more than one hundred years later.

Following is a first hand account of the storm, as related by Mr. S.L. Doshier, official Observer with the Weather Bureau on Hatteras Island.

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## **Hatteras Devastated by Hurricane**

U.S. Department of Agriculture  
Weather Bureau  
Office of the Observer

Subject: Hurricane  
Station: Hatteras, North Carolina  
Date: August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1899

Chief of the Weather Bureau,  
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

I have the honor to make the following report of the severe hurricane which swept over this section on the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> instantly.

The wind began blowing a gale from the east on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, varying in velocity from 35 to 50 miles an hour....During the early morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> the wind increased to a hurricane and at about 4 a.m. it was blowing at the rate of 70 miles, at 10 a.m. it had increased to 84 miles and at 1 p.m. it was blowing a velocity of 93 miles with occasional extreme velocities of 120 miles to 140 per hour. The record of wind from about 1 p.m. was lost, but it is estimated that the wind blew even with greater force from about 3 p.m. to 7 p.m. and it is believed that between these hours the wind reached a regular velocity of at least 100 miles per hour....

At about 7:30 p.m. on the 17<sup>th</sup> there was a very decided lull in the force of the wind and at 8 p.m. it had fallen out until only a gentle breeze was blowing. This lull did not last more than half hour, however, before the wind veered to east and then to south-east and began blowing at a velocity estimated from 60 to 70 miles per hour which continued until well into the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup>. During the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> the wind veered to the south and continued to blow a gale, with heavy rain squalls, all day, decreasing somewhat in the late evening and going into southwest. This day may be said to be the end of the hurricane, although the weather continued squally on the 19<sup>th</sup>, but without any winds of very high velocity.

This hurricane was, without any question, the most severe of any storm that has ever passed over this section within the memory of any person now living, and there are people here who can remember back for a period of over 75 years. I have made careful inquiry among the old inhabitants here, and they all agree, with one accord, that no storm like this has ever visited the island....

The scene here on the 17<sup>th</sup> was wild and terrifying in the extreme. By 8 a.m. on that date the entire island was covered with water blown in from the sound, and by 11 a.m. all the land was covered to a depth of from 3 to ten feet. The tide swept over the island at a fearful rate carrying everything movable before it. There were not more than four houses on the island in which the tide did not rise to a depth of from one to four feet, and at least half of the people had to abandon their homes and property to the mercy of the wind and tide and seek the safety of their own lives with those who were fortunate enough to live on higher land.

Language is inadequate to express the conditions which prevailed all day on the 17<sup>th</sup>. The howling wind, the rushing and roaring tide and the awful sea which swept over the beach and thundered like a thousand pieces of artillery made a picture which was at once appalling and terrible and the like of which Dante's Inferno could scarcely equal.

The frightened people were grouped sometimes 40 or 50 in one house, and at times one house would have to be abandoned and they would all have to wade almost beyond their depth in order to reach another. All day this gale, tide and sea continued with a fury and persistent energy that knew no abatement, and the strain on the minds of every one was something so frightful and dejecting that it cannot be expressed.

In many houses families were huddled together in the upper portion of the building with the water several feet deep in the lower portion, not knowing what minute the house would either be blown down or swept away by the tide....

Cattle, sheep, hogs and chickens were drowned by hundreds before the very eyes of the owners, who were powerless to render any assistance on account of the rushing tide. The fright of these poor animals was terrible to see, and their cries of terror when being surrounded by the water were pitiful in the extreme.

The damage done to this place by the hurricane is, at this time difficult to estimate,...but is believed that the total loss to Hatteras alone will amount to from \$15,000 to \$20,000. The fishing business here is the principal industry from which is derived the revenue upon which the great majority live, and it may be said that this industry has for the present time been swept entirely out of existence....

A great majority of the houses on the island were badly damaged, and 5 or 6 are so badly wrecked as to be unfit for habitation and that many families are without homes, living wherever they can best find a home. The Southern Methodist church building was completely wrecked...All of the bridges and footways over the creeks and small streams were swept away.... The roadways are piled from three to ten feet high with wreckage....

The telegraph and telephone lines are both down.... It is reported that several vessels are stranded north of [Big Kinnakeet Life Saving Station]....

A large steamship foundered about one mile off Hatteras beach...and it is thought all on board were drowned....

The Diamond Shoals Light Ship which was stationed off Hatteras, broke loose from her mooring on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> and was carried southward by the gale....This vessel will probably prove a total loss....

The damage to the instruments and property of the Bureau here was considerable....The office building was flooded with water to the depth of about 18 inches, and the rain beat in at the roof and windows until the entire building was a mass of water....

I live about a mile from the office building and when I went home at 8 a.m. I had to wade in water which was about waist deep. I waited until about 10:30 a.m., thinking the storm would lull, but it did not do so, and at that time I started for the office.... I got about one-third of the distance and found the water about breast height, when I had to stop in a neighbor's house and rest, the strain of pushing through the water and storm having nearly exhausted my strength. I rested there until about noon when I started again and after going a short distance further I found the water up to my shoulders.... I had to give it up again and take refuge in another neighbor's house where I had to remain until about 8 p.m. when the

tide fell so that I could reach the office....

I started to the office against the advice of those who were better acquainted with the condition of the roads than I, and continued on my way until I saw that the attempt was rash and fool-hardy and that I was certain to reach low places where I would be swept off my feet and drowned.... [T]here has never been any such tide as the one here mentioned.

...The rainfall...was as heavy as I have ever seen. It fell in [a] perfect torrent and at times was so thick and in such blinding sheets that it was impossible to see across a roadway 20 feet wide.

...[E]verything went before the fury of the gale. No lives were lost at Hatteras, although many narrow escapes occurred, several families being washed out of their homes in the tide and storm. At Ocracoke and Portsmouth, 16 and 20 miles south of this station the storm is reported about the same as at Hatteras, with a corresponding damage to property. Reliable details from these places however, being lacking. A pleasure boat at Ocracoke with a party of men from Washington, N.C., was lost and a portion of the party were drowned.

There has been no communication with this place by wire or mail since the storm, and it is not known when there will be. It is therefore requested that so much of this report as may be of interest to the public be given to the Associated Press for publication in the newspaper.

Very respectfully,

S.L. Doshier

Observer, Weather Bureau