

Salve Regina University

## Digital Commons @ Salve Regina

---

Pell Scholars and Senior Theses

Salve's Dissertations and Theses

---

12-2009

### Rhode Island's Greatest Natural Tragedy

Stephanie N. Blaine

Salve Regina University, [stephanie.blaine@salve.edu](mailto:stephanie.blaine@salve.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell\\_theses](https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell_theses)



Part of the [Physical and Environmental Geography Commons](#), [Social and Cultural Anthropology Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

---

Blaine, Stephanie N., "Rhode Island's Greatest Natural Tragedy" (2009). *Pell Scholars and Senior Theses*. 41.

[https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell\\_theses/41](https://digitalcommons.salve.edu/pell_theses/41)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Salve's Dissertations and Theses at Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pell Scholars and Senior Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Salve Regina. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@salve.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@salve.edu).

# **Rhode Island's Greatest Natural Tragedy**

Stephanie Blaine  
Professor Buckley  
HIS 490

Stephanie Blaine  
Prof. Buckley  
HIS 490  
October 7, 2009

### **Rhode Island's Greatest Natural Tragedy**

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the State of Rhode Island was undergoing several changes. People were gaining new rights, political power was shifting, the economy was going down hill, and class distinction was dissolving. Suddenly, without any warning, a hurricane of huge magnitude would strike the tiny state during its most vulnerable period. The hurricane of 1938 not only cost Rhode Island the highest mortality rate and greatest property loss in the state's history, it also came to symbolize the end of the old Rhode Island way of life. While people's homes and communities were being swept away, old customs and traditions were swept away along with them. With nearly everything gone in many areas, Rhode Island residents gained the opportunity to take in all the occurring changes and from scratch, transform the state into what will eventually become the modern version of itself. The infamous hurricane of 1938 accelerated the ongoing transformation of Rhode Island's way of life.

The state of Rhode Island enjoyed a booming industrial economy and was a center of prosperity for much of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, its luck began to change by the 1920s and thirties. The large textile mills and factories that were the source of much of the state's wealth began to decline as the jobs moved down south (Conley 164). Countless working class people lost their jobs, and laborers who were fortunate enough to be employed were trapped with horrific working conditions (Dunnington 25). As a result, numerous strikes erupted while labor unions became popular and gained a lot of influence (Dunnington 25). One of the more well-

known strikes that occurred was the Great Textile Strike of 1934 (Conley 188). Matters for Rhode Island took a turn for the worst when the stock market crashed in 1929, forcing the state to cope with the Great Depression on top of its previous economic troubles. The state's well known jewelry industry also declined since few people could afford luxurious items at the time (Sterne 245). In 1932, the unemployment rate in the state reached thirty-two percent, which meant that 35,000 workers were without jobs (Sterne 245). By 1938, Rhode Island had the highest per capita unemployment rate in the entire United States (Dunnington 25). Yet the worst tragedy still had yet to occur.

Another factor that was causing major problems for Rhode Island was the political wars that took place throughout the twenties and thirties (Conley 164). Due to the large number of immigrants, mainly Portuguese and Italian, coming in from Southern Europe, the native Yankee population had become a minority for the first time in the state's history (Conley 161). This led Rhode Island to undergo much political upheaval as the immigrant controlled Democratic Party gradually began to take control away from the Yankee Republicans (Conley 164). In 1935, Governor Theodore Francis Greene, who was a progressive Yankee Democrat with several Irish allies backing him, finally achieved a Democratic takeover of the state government in what is known as the Bloodless Revolution (Dunnington 25). Unfortunately, the new Democratic leadership lacked substance since factionalism soon developed between the Catholics, ethnic workers, and reformers (Sterne 244). The several Democratic factions that existed within the party began to compete intensely against one another, leading to corruption and fraud throughout the local government (Dunnington 25).



Providence, Rhode Island's capital, was especially hurt during this time (Dunnington 25). Originally, Providence had the reputation of an economically powerful and affluent city in not just the state, but throughout New England as well. The city was also known for having the latest technology in the late nineteenth century (Dunnington 25). However, following the example of the rest of the state, Providence confronted several struggles beginning in the early twentieth century. The severe factionalism in the new, dominant Democratic Party hindered public officials from cooperatively responding to the decline of the textile industry, constant strikes, the Great Depression, and other problems that were plaguing the city (Dunnington 25). Providence could not even begin to imagine how much worse the situation was about to become once late September 1938 arrived.

The city of Newport in Narragansett Bay has a long history of being a popular summer location for both tourists and the nation's wealthiest entrepreneurs. During the 1920s, Newport underwent a lot of expansion and modernization. The locals established a Chamber of Commerce in the year 1920 to help with the city's growth and prosperity after World War I (Warburton 63). Numerous downtown sites were renovated so the seventeenth century port could adapt to the changing times. The new Viking Hotel opened in 1926 for the incoming tourists (Warburton 64). The popular Easton's Beach expanded its facilities by replacing aging merry-go-rounds and roller coasters with safer, modern versions (Warburton 66). The town also added new restaurants, bathhouses, and a convention hall in the late twenties (Warburton 67). Bailey's Beach and the Newport Casino were popular centers of social life during the summer seasons as well (Warburton 75).

The stock market crash of 1929 along with the opening of the Mount Hope Bridge that same year would have a permanent impact on Newport's residents. Since there were few industrial centers in Newport, the city handled the Depression better than much of the country; however, unemployment still reached every level of society (Stensrud 427). In 1932, the Civic Unemployment Association managed to give temporary jobs to over 800 local residents through public works projects (Warburton 79). Wealthier members of Newport tried to help by donating clothes and other necessities to the struggling, desperate families, which largely consisted of immigrants (Warburton 79). The Great Depression hit the Bellevue Avenue summer colony especially hard; heavy investors and brokers went bankrupt while numerous estates were sold for back taxes and mortgage (Warburton 77). In 1933, the Vanderbilt family lost their famous Marble House to a man named Frederick H. Prince. The house cost millions to make, but Prince managed to buy the mansion for a mere \$100,000 (Warburton 77). Despite the fact that Newport was managing to survive the Depression, there was no way the city could adequately prepare for what lay ahead.

Jamestown did not have the level of prestige that Newport experienced, but it did enjoy a brief timeframe of prosperity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Scotti 10). The little town contained several hotels and guesthouses for the use of summer vacationers, with Newport only being a short ferry ride away. While most New Englanders knew Newport as the summer getaway location for New York City's wealthiest entrepreneurs, Jamestown became the hot spot for numerous upper middle-class Philadelphians who highly disliked the extravagant excesses of the Newport mansions (Scotti 11). Unfortunately, the Great Depression brought a quick end to

Jamestown's brief period of affluence. By summer of 1938, only the Bay View and Bay Voyage Hotels were still in existence (Scotti 11). Still, the town residents continued to enjoy casinos, movie theaters, tennis courts, public golf courses, a country club, a yacht club, along with other recreational activities. The two-story bathing pavilion at Mackerel Cove was another popular place for people to visit. During some summers, residents and vacationers looked forward to America's Cup race as well (Scotti 11). Winters in Jamestown became extremely slow once the summer vacationers left. Year-round residents consisted mostly of the native white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants, also known as WASP's, who have lived in the area since the early colonization of the state. A growing number of Portuguese immigrants had been filtering into Jamestown since the beginning of the twentieth century (Scotti 15). Most people on the island were fishermen, gardeners, or tenant farmers. The Portuguese population often kept to themselves and celebrated many religious celebrations during the year (Scotti 14). Numerous residents were considered "land-rich" but "cash poor." Each year they had to make it through the entire winter on the money they had made over the summer (Scotti 15). During the Depression, three main groups developed in Jamestown: the haves who were the summer people, the have-nots who were the year-round people and the dirt poor (Scotti 15).

In the southernmost part of the state, in Little Narragansett Bay, is the location of the beachfront town of Westerly, which the Depression negatively impacted as well. However, a prosperous, upper class emerged towards the end of the 1930s (Burns 209). Wealthy vacationers spent their summers in Westerly, and overtime the seaside community became a popular, seasonal hot spot similar to other areas such as Newport (Burns 209). In the southeastern section of Westerly, lies the town of Watch Hill, Rhode

Island, which also had the reputation of a popular resort site dating all the way back to the 1830s (watchhillin.com). The natural beauty that the coast offered inspired many builders in the early 1900s to construct summer cottages for the wealthy population. The Ocean House in Watch Hill, which was the first hotel in the country to offer telephone service and indoor plumbing, remained a popular vacation site for summer tourists in the 1920s and 1930s (theoceanhouse.org). A thin stretch of land jutting out from the west side of Watch Hill is known as Napatree Point. Its face points towards the Atlantic while its back faces Little Narragansett Bay. In the thirties, Napatree was another location for the summer homes of the more affluent New Englanders (Scotti 17). By 1938, it had forty-two cottages built in a line along the sea; each house was only a few feet back from the seawall (Burns 133). In late September, most of the residents had closed up their cottages and left for the winter, however, forty-two unsuspecting people decided to stay a bit longer with the hope of enjoying the final days of summer (Burns 133).

To the east of Westerly in the South County area of Rhode Island is the small town of Charlestown, with a population of only 756 in the 1920 census (Mandeville 60). The pace of progress and change occurred a bit slower in Charlestown than its neighboring towns. The little rural, village contained people who were reluctant to accept all the new ideas brought about by the new century (Mandeville 54). However, change was happening whether residents liked it or not. By 1908, several locals had built new beach houses. Two new hotels; the Ocean View and the Worcester were also constructed to attract tourists (Mandeville 55). During the twenties, Charlestown underwent more changes as wealthier “gentlemen” farmers arrived and bought many of the previously private-owned farms in the area (Mandeville 61). The area also prospered off its fishing

industry and the few mills that existed in the more developed part of town (Mandeville 63). When the Depression hit, a New Deal program called the Civilian Conservation Corps gave jobs to unemployed men by having them clean out condemned woodland areas (Mandeville 62). By September of 1938, several summer homes were located along Charlestown's beach with several people still remaining.

Ten miles south of Point Judith, Rhode Island, lay the tiny piece of land known as Block Island. Since its founding, residents on Block Island have earned their living through farming or fishing (preserveamerica.gov). From the 1860s to the 1920s, the island gained the status as a Victorian resort with the building of several new hotels along the beach (preserveamerica.gov). Prosperous city dwellers from the mainland migrated over to the island to enjoy their relaxing, summer vacations. Block Island flourished through its fishing, farming, and hotel industries until the Depression struck. During the thirties, farming on the island struggled due to the invention of refrigerators, which allowed foods to be shipped all over the world for cheap prices (preserveamerica.gov). The upcoming September disaster would completely devastate Block Island's economic state.

In the 1930s, the majority of the Rhode Island population did not even know how to pronounce the word "hurricane", let alone know what the term meant (Scotti 22). A severe storm of that magnitude had not afflicted the area since the Great September Gale of 1815 (Conley 78). In Newport, the gale washed away dwelling houses, stores, and workshops. The storm surge washed away the Great Bridge in Providence and tossed thirty-five ships into coastal buildings (Conley 78). Historians have recorded the great

gale as part of the past, however, few people in the twentieth century knew about it and meteorologists did not consider it, when predicting the paths of cyclones (Burns 54).

The U.S. Weather Bureau was also extremely primitive in the 1930s compared to the present day. Technology such as radar and satellite images did not exist. Meteorologists at the time had no choice but to rely on thermometers and barometric readings from ships out at sea (Burns 52). Analyzing the data from the ships took them several hours, and it took even more hours to send the report to a radio station or newspaper. As a result, many weather predictions were extremely inaccurate and when they were correct, the storm often times arrived or changed course by the time the news reached the public (Burns 52). The tracking of the 1938 hurricane was no exception to the rule.

Mariners first spotted the hurricane 350 miles north of Puerto Rico on September 16<sup>th</sup> (geocities.com). They figured it would take the usual path of heading towards the Bahamas and Florida, but on September 20<sup>th</sup> the Weather Bureau received news that the hurricane was shifting north, parallel to the United States coastline (geocities.com). Since it was common for most Atlantic hurricanes to head northeast of the country and then dissipate out at sea, the Weather Bureau no longer considered the storm a threat to the public (geocities.com). Unfortunately, the cyclone continued its path directly north. By the time the Weather Bureau had noticed this, it was too late to get sufficient warning out to Rhode Island along with the other New England states in peril (Potter 13). Some warnings did reach certain areas such as Newport around one in the afternoon that day, but no one took them seriously (Ward 2). What made matters even more dire was that out of all New England, Rhode Island laid directly in the path of the dangerous right

semicircle section of the hurricane. Inside the semicircle are destructive winds that reach nearly two hundred miles per hour (Scotti 137). The state's long shoreline of deep bays and low barrier beaches made it especially vulnerable. The hurricane also struck during the autumnal equinox, which is when the highest tide of the year occurred, causing the destruction to be even more severe (Scotti 137).

On Wednesday, September 21<sup>st</sup> at approximately 3:30 in the afternoon, the hurricane made its landfall on Rhode Island (geocities.com). With the strength of 500 Nagasaki-type atomic bombs, the hurricane struck with a force hard enough to set off seismographs in Alaska over three thousand miles away (Manchester 223). The intense winds in the area had caused telephone lines and electricity to go out nearly an hour before at 2:30pm (Scotti 144). Even as the winds increased and the waves along the beach grew larger, people felt no cause for alarm and thought it was only a usual late summer line storm. Suddenly visibility became extremely poor and the pressure in the air became so low that people's ears began to pop. Residents along the beach thought they saw a giant wall of fog approaching the shore until they realized that it was in fact a giant tidal wave (Scotti 145).

Before it began to wreak havoc on the mainland, the cyclone completely obliterated little Block Island. The tiny island that is less than ten square miles was no match for a furious category three hurricane. Eighty-six of the hundred-boat fishing fleet were swept away (Goudsouzian 38). More than twelve of the boats piled on top of each other at the main harbor, while other pieces of wreckage washed up on shore. When it was all over, Block Island's fishing, farming, and tourist industries were completely ruined (Goudsouzian 38). The strong winds reaching over ninety miles per hour had torn

apart every single barn on the island while also destroying several of its hotels. With every part of its local economy destroyed, Block Island was unable to sustain itself after the hurricane and would remain in an economic depression for the next several decades (preserveamerica.gov).

The hurricane's next victims were the small, coastal towns along Little Narragansett Bay, which included Napatree Point. When the first tidal wave struck Napatree Point, it washed over the old artillery fort and destroyed the sea wall that was meant as a protective barrier for the beach cottages (Scotti 149). Before the residents were able to comprehend what had just happened, an enormous second wave smashed into the summer homes along Fort Road (Scotti 149). By the time the disaster was over, the storm had swept away all forty-four of the cottages in Napatree and completely wiped out the old Fort Road (Greene 5). Fifteen people had lost their lives. A woman named Catherine Moore from one of the lucky surviving families regarded the event as "a preview of the end of the world" (Burns 196). The Moore family was able to ride out the storm by using the floor of their attic as a raft. Fifteen of the forty-two residents who decided to stay late into the summer that year perished, while the hurricane washed the remaining survivors all the way to the Connecticut shore (Greene 5). Locals made the decision never to rebuild any of the lost homes on Fort Road (Burns 213). One reason was that homeowner's insurance was extremely rare during this time (Burns 213). Another strong motive was that people in the area developed a new fear of living too close to the unforgiving sea. Eventually, Rhode Islanders decided to turn what remained of Napatree Point into a nature conservation site (Scotti 236).



In the Westerly region, the storm reached its peak at 3:30p.m. and did not dissipate until 5 o'clock. The surge of the hurricane crashed into the Watch Hill community with as much fury as when it hit Napatree Point. Watch Hill was especially vulnerable since it was open to the rising waves and the most intense winds on the right side of the cyclone (Goudsouzian 37). Like Napatree, Watch Hill also contained several summer cottages filled with people who decided to remain until the end of the September. The storm surge sliced the famous Watch Hill Yacht Club in two while the local Coast Guard tower was recording winds up to 150 miles per hour (Goudsouzian 37). Then a giant forty-foot tidal wave struck Westerly, causing flooding and severe devastation to its business quarter (Greene 40). Some areas on Main Street were up to five feet of water, not nearly as deep as downtown Providence, but deep enough to cause destruction. Major industrial plants that previously brought a lot of revenue to the area such as the C.B. Cottrell plant and George C. Moore Co. mill suffered heavy damages (Greene 40). Officials voted to abandon the plants and move business to Fall River instead of choosing to rebuild (Greene 40). The hurricane hurt the rural sections of Westerly as well; 250 barns and silos were obliterated. Few Westerly homes escaped without some sort of damage (Greene 40). The cyclone took over sixty lives in the region of Westerly ([www.projo.com](http://www.projo.com)). All of the bodies found in the area were brought into the town high school, which was turned into a temporary morgue (Allen 144). Westerly collected so many dead that it ran out of embalming fluid and had to rely on Providence to send more (Allen 145). The town had only organized its Disaster Committee a few years before the event, but it turned out to be of great help with the relief work (Greene 1). Westerly's Sanitary Corps along with police, firefighters, and boy scouts all lent a hand to those in

need (Greene 1). Unfortunately, Westerly never regained its status as a popular, prestigious summer location after the hurricane hit, although Watch Hill was able to successfully bounce back (Burns 209).

Other towns in the Westerly region suffered a huge beating by the hurricane as well. In Misquamicut, the storm killed forty-one people and demolished 369 cottages (Greene 13). The foundations of four cottages, the remains of the Atlantic Beach Casino, the Andrea Hotel, and the Pleasant View House were all that remained of the four-hundred buildings on Misquamicut Beach (Greene 1). When asked about Misquamicut the day after the disaster, one local responded, "It is no more" (Greene 13).

Directly east of Westerly, the cyclone took out over 160 of the 200 houses located in Charlestown (Burns 209). Over thirty people perished in Charlestown alone (Kellner and Lemons 129). Hundreds of workers were brought in to help clean up the debris (Mandeville 64). Fortunately, everyone in the small town helped one another out and worked together to get Charlestown up and running again. Many people from outside areas also gave assistance to those who lost their homes, since no one had homeowner's insurance (Mandeville 64). The hurricane made the residents of Charlestown extremely cautious of future disasters, so they decided not to rebuild anything on the beaches for a number of years. The combined death toll of both Charlestown and Westerly reached a devastating 109 lives ([www.projo.com](http://www.projo.com)). The twenty-two mile stretch of land from Napatree Point to Point Judith lost a total of 175 lives to the hurricane (Goudsouzian 37). Even though Charlestown suffered one of the higher mortality rates, the small town was resilient and bounced back (Mandeville 64). In 1939, it was discovered that the land was

favorable for growing potatoes, so Charlestown experienced a large economic boom that would last throughout the forties (Mandeville 64).

The storm moved on and reached the city of Newport around 4 p.m. (Stensrud 429). Extreme winds picked up and eventually reached a furious 120 miles per hour (Warburton 87). The ferocious cyclone severely damaged several of Newport's beaches and actually permanently altered the shoreline of Third Beach (Ward 9). Third Beach received some of the worst destruction from the cyclone; not a house was left standing the day after the disaster. The hurricane also caused great damage to the South shoreline area of Newport, including the Cliff Walk and Ocean Drive (Ward 9). Not only was the Cliff Walk partially destroyed, but several of the houses on the cliffside summer colony were wrecked as well. The surging waters in combination with the intense winds destroyed the surrounding sea walls and had enough momentum to toss boulders weighing numerous tons right into people's houses (Ward 9). Many homes and mansions in the area were wrecked beyond repair. The cyclone completely destroyed Bailey's Beach Bathhouses, which had been a popular tourist attraction (Ward 11). The hurricane lifted the brick rotunda of Bailey's Beach from its foundations and dispersed it all over Ocean Drive (Warburton 87). The storm surge also smashed into Long Wharf and trapped 2,000 employees inside the Torpedo Station, which was an experimental facility established by the Navy back in 1869 (Warburton 87). The September 22<sup>nd</sup> release of *The New York Times* reported that damages exceeded one million dollars in Newport. The storm surge flooded the streets in the lower part of the city, marooning several shopkeepers in their stores. People witnessed boats stranded on the roads and thousands of lobsters swimming down Thames Street after they escaped from broken traps (Scotti

201). A raging fire engulfed nearby Middletown in flames (Warburton 87). Both police and fire stations got cut off from the public (Warburton 88). Newport became one of several Rhode Island towns forced to declare martial law due to numerous instances of looters stealing from half-destroyed jewelry stores and markets (“Martial Law Declared As Newport Is Flooded”). Once the storm subsided, officials reported six dead in the city of Newport while fourteen lives were lost on the Aquidneck Island as a whole (Warburton 88). The damage on the island cost up to five million dollars.

Fortunately, the relief effort for Newport was extremely efficient. Mayor Wheeler ordered large number of groups to take part in the rehabilitation of the city (Ward 17). The Red Cross and National Guard were already at work before the storm had completely passed (Warburton 88). The W.P.A., or Work Projects Administration, which was a large New Deal agency set up to give employment during the Depression, sent hundreds of men to work for the relief projects (Warburton 88). The Coast Guard, soldiers, sailors, marines, scouts, and service organizations turned up to help as well (Ward 17). Ironically, one benefit of the hurricane was that it ultimately got rid of the high unemployment rate in the city. Every able-bodied man was hired to assist with some type of relief or repair work (Warburton 89). Within 24 hours of the tragedy, partial electrical service was restored in the city. Radio stations in the area were broadcasting messages out for assistance for three days straight without stopping (Ward 17). With the help of two hundred men, Newport was able to open its main streets to regular traffic by September 29<sup>th</sup> (Burns 204). In three weeks, workers repaired the railroad tracks between Newport and Fall River (Warburton 88).

People living in Newport tend to view the 1938 hurricane as an ironic event. Years before the disaster, the city wanted to clean up the run-down beach buildings and replace them with nicer and more modernized versions (Ward 7). The cyclone finally gave Newport the opportunity to renovate and rebuild its old, run-down infrastructure into something more up to date. A new, concrete seawall was constructed in the city, and Ocean Drive was rebuilt just in time for the forth of July celebration in 1939 (Warburton 89). The town also transformed Easton Beach into a municipal beach with the inclusion of modest, new buildings for sea bathing and recreational activities. Workers rebuilt and modernized Bailey's Beach as well (Warburton 89). The hurricane did unfortunately wipe out Viking Beach, however, Newport residents replaced the lost beach with a new and improved spot called Hazard's Beach (Warburton 89). Damage done to the Torpedo Station was repaired as well, and Van Zandt Avenue on the western side of the island was repaved. The storm destroyed the life-saving station at Price's Neck and town officials judged the site as too exposed. Fortunately, the Agassiz family generously donated land near the bay mouth, and in 1939 a new, modern station was constructed (Warburton 89). Even though Newport managed to repair a majority of its private estates, much of the property values along the coast were essentially ruined. As a result, local contractors and developers bought many of the large estates and converted them into apartments and condos (Warburton 89). This type of renovation would catch on throughout the next decade. The city of Newport may have experienced several tragedies in a row, but its residents continued to stay strong and endured. According to author Rockwell Stensrud, the Yankee spirit thrived in the community and helped it to remain resilient over the next upcoming decade (428).

The hurricane had completely obliterated the small island of Jamestown, which had previously never witnessed a disaster of such magnitude. The storm also left a permanent mark on Jamestown and would alter the future of the small, rural town (Scotti 235). The three ferries that connected Jamestown to the mainland and Newport were all out of commission due to the destruction they took from the cyclone (Ward 13). Since satellites had not yet existed and all electrical lines were down, Jamestown experienced a severe sense of isolation after the hurricane. Within the next year, local engineers built a bridge to connect the island to the mainland (Scotti 235). This new, consistent exposure to the outside world forever changed the dynamics of the previously self-contained community. Jamestown went from a small farming and fishing community to more of a modern suburban town. The hurricane even managed to change the ecological aspects of the area as well. The southern end of Jamestown known as Beavertail was filled with open grasslands. However, while the storm hit, the saline rains destroyed the grassy fields, which were replaced by unusually thick scrubs and trees (Scotti 235). The most horrendous tragedy caused by the hurricane, which still haunts the community of Jamestown, was the trapped school bus loaded with elementary school children. The storm surge stalled the island's only school bus and forced all of the young kids and the driver to get out in the rising waters. Out of the eight children, only one eleven-year-old boy and the bus driver survived (Burns 148).

The cyclone continued up north with no sign of subsiding. It moved up Narragansett Bay into the city of Providence around five in the afternoon (Allen 165). The Weather Bureau had sent out a hurricane warning by 3:40 p.m., but by then it was too late to inform residents before the monster storm arrived (Goudsouzian 41). Since the

state's capital was located at the head of Narragansett Bay, the storm's surge rushed water directly into the city. The Providence River rose 17.60 feet above the average low water point (Allen 165). People leaving from work during the five o'clock rush hour period walked outside into 100 mile per hour winds and tidal waves submerging the area in water eight to ten feet deep (Allen 165). The *New York Times* declared that the hurricane marooned up to 15,000 people in the streets. All electrical power, with the exception of one telephone line, was completely out by 5:15 p.m. (Allen 171). One Providence radio station, WPRO, managed to continue its broadcasting by connecting the engine of a farmer's tractor to a power generator (Scotti 241). Some residents believed they were safer inside their vehicles, only to realize that they had trapped themselves and drowned in the rising waters (Allen 166). Other workers and shoppers sought refuge in nearby churches, high-rise buildings, and City Hall (Allen 167). By six o'clock, over five hundred people had crowded themselves into City Hall alone, with the water level still rising (Burns 166). The extreme winds blew a large piece of the Providence Public Library's roof off (Goudsouzian 41). Shattered glass poured upon the heads of unsuspecting commuters. At midnight, the hurricane had passed but Providence itself resembled a city in the midst of war (Scotti 202). Due to the chaos and constant looting of wrecked stores, the mayor of the city was forced to declare martial law for the next several weeks (Burns 166). The National Guard was called out to patrol the streets, with the order to "shoot to kill" any looter caught in the act (Scotti 202).

Since numerous factors, including the textile industry decline and the Great Depression had already put Providence in a desperate state, the Great Hurricane of 1938 completely devastated the city. Business came to a complete halt for a period after the

storm (Cady 271). The new Democratic state party, which struggled to get much progress done during the Depression, now had to deal with its largest city in chaos. This forced the state's young governing party to get its act together. Not only was martial law declared, but curfew rules had also been set to keep everyone under control and out of trouble (Cady 271). Restoration efforts in Providence took time as well. Electrical power would not be restored until the following week (Burns 204). Two weeks passed before the downtown area opened to traffic and business could begin to pick up again (Burns 190). The *Providence Bulliten*, one of the more well-known newspapers of the city, had to print its issues from the *Boston Post* offices, since the basement of the *Bulletin's* plant was still underwater after the storm passed (Burns 190). Goddard Park, known for its natural landscapes, lost twenty-five thousand trees to the hurricane (Burns 201). Newspapers stated that the storm completely destroyed the park, and many residents believed it would never recover from the damage. The hurricane also put an end to the struggling textile industry of the city; many of the mills never re-opened after the storm (Burns 205). Providence eventually recovered from the 1938 hurricane, however, it did not take much precaution in the case of any future cyclones. The city would get struck again by Hurricane Carol in 1954. Only after this storm, did government officials in Providence decide to construct a hurricane barrier to help protect itself ([www.thebostonchannel.com](http://www.thebostonchannel.com)). The 1938 hurricane also put an end to the glory days of Providence's prosperity (Dunnington 26). Locals wanted to revise the city's charter after the storm hit, but Providence would still not gain its former prosperous status until several decades later (Cady 271).



News of the disaster that struck Rhode Island along with the rest of New England was sent out to the world by six o'clock that evening (Soares 9). The devastation caused by the storm had exceeded all other natural disasters at that point in American history. The combination of lives lost and destruction of property exceeded both the 1906 San Francisco earthquake and the Chicago fire of 1871 (Burns 212). In the Northeast the damage cost up to 4.7 billion dollars in today's money (Scotti 226). The total damage for just the state of Rhode Island was estimated at 100 million dollars (Cady 270). The cyclone had wiped out ninety-nine percent of the shoreline property stretching from Quonochontaug to Charlestown, a total distance of seven miles (Scott 227). Officials estimated the state's agricultural loss to be about five million dollars (Soares 30). The Northeast had lost 682 lives to the hurricane, but the most disturbing factor was that over 300 perished in Rhode Island alone, making it the worst natural tragedy to ever occur in the history of the state (Scotti 217). The death toll was the highest along the South County beach area, including the towns of Westerly and Charlestown. Another unfortunate factor was that numerous bodies were never found (Scotti 218). Hurricanes would continue to strike Rhode Island in the future but none would take nearly as many lives as the 1938 hurricane. Satellite, radar, and other new, efficient warning systems would prevent another "surprise" cyclone from ever afflicting the country again.

Author R.A. Scotti refers to the 1938 hurricane as a "savage leveler" for Rhode Island (231). The vicious wind and destructive storm surge ravaged through homes and property from all levels of society. People of the highest wealth and status suffered as much damage as the average laborer, if not more, since the rich upper class had more to lose in the storm. This act of the hurricane is symbolic for the demolition of the status

quo, and a new political and social change of the old guard (Scotti 231). The Yankee establishment had finally given way to the new Democratic machine. The previous New England ordered way of life with its distinct classes and rules was gone in Rhode Island along with everything else lost to the storm, and was replaced with a society filled with new liberties and equalities (Scotti 231). Storm survivor Lee Davis described it as “Some line had been crossed and nothing would ever be quite the same again” (Scotti 231).

The storm even permanently altered the geography of the area as well. The U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey declared that the shorelines of Rhode Island and its neighboring states were no longer recognizable and that new maps had to be drawn for all of New England (Scotti 226). The hurricane had separated Jamestown into four sections and divided Napatree into a series of smaller islands (Scotti 226). Landmarks and beaches that had defined the character of Rhode Island since the Pilgrim era and that had taken centuries to develop through natural processes, were all destroyed by the fierce cyclone in just a couple of hours (Scotti 227). White pines, which were Rhode Island’s most plentiful natural resource, were completely wiped out by the time the hurricane subsided. The U.S. Forest Service estimated that there was enough timber leftover from the storm to build over 200,000 five-room houses (Scotti 228).

Overtime, several Rhode Island residents as well as historians came to view the 1938 hurricane as a mixed blessing. Historians George H. Kellner and J. Stanley Lemons mention how analyzing the event recalls the old saying, “It’s an ill wind that blows nobody some good” (129). The cyclone can be considered as a purifying force that wiped away old beachfront shanties, run-down wharfs, docks, decaying warehouses, abandoned amusement parks, slums, waterfront whorehouses, and other deteriorating buildings all

over the southern coast and Narragansett Bay (Kellner and Lemons 129). The hurricane created the opportunity for the state to build new and more improved modern developments. Despite the fact that several Rhode Island towns were plagued by the Great Depression on top of the hurricane disaster, employment levels actually increased thanks to all of the relief programs following the storm (Kellner and Lemons 129). The thousands of trees knocked down by the intense winds provided an abundant source of lumber as well. The lumber would become especially useful once the emergency defense construction needs develop during the second World War (Kellner and Lemons 129). The 1938 hurricane began to pull Rhode Island away from the darkness of the Great Depression and bring it into the light of the new modern era.

The great hurricane of 1938 became history not long after it occurred. News of the storm was not covered well outside of the Northeast region. Unlike today, there were no televisions to show everyone else in the country the extent of what had happened. Even within the boundaries of New England, the disaster quickly became old news as people were anxiously watching the Nazis prepare their invasion of Czechoslovakia halfway across the world. In a couple of years the country would enter the second world war and the hurricane would soon be forgotten. However, the changes that it brought about in Rhode Island, along with the rest of New England, were permanent. All of the Rhode Island towns and cities that laid directly in the cyclone's path were already slowly drifting away from their old way of life, but the hurricane was the catalyst that made these alterations a lasting reality. The state would never again return to its old way of life.

## Bibliography

- Allen, Everett S. *A Wind to Shake the World*. Beverly: Commonwealth Editions, 1976.
- Associated Press. 1938. "Martial Law Declared As Newport Is Flooded." *New York Times*, 22 September.
- Associated Press. 1938. "Storm Batters All New England; Providence Hit by Tidal Wave." *New York Times*, 22 September.
- The Boston Channel. "Providence Hurricane Barriers Eyed." <<http://www.thebostonchannel.com/news/4945961/detail.html>> (Updated September 2005; accessed 11 November 2009).
- Burns, Cherie. *The Great Hurricane: 1938*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.
- Cady, John Hutchins. *The Civic and Architectural Development of Providence*. Providence: Akerman Standard Press, 1957.
- Carbone, Gerald M. "Without Warning." <[http://www.projo.com/weather/storms/archive/projo\\_20030921\\_hurri21.6a031.htm](http://www.projo.com/weather/storms/archive/projo_20030921_hurri21.6a031.htm)> (Updated September 2003; accessed 6 November 2009).
- Conley, Patrick T. *An Album of Rhode Island History, 1636-1986*. Virginia Beach: The Donning Company Publishers, 1986.
- Dunnington, Ann L. *Greater Providence: Fulfilling Its Destiny*. Chatsworth: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1990.
- Goudsouzian, Aram. *New England Remembers: The Hurricane of 1938*. Beverly: Commonwealth Editions, 2004.
- Grammatico, Michael A. "1938 Hurricane-September 21, 1938." <<http://www.geocities.com/hurricanene/hurr1938.htm>> (Updated July 1999;

accessed 24 April 2009).

Greene, Lewis R. *The Hurricane Sept. 21, 1938: Westerly Rhode Island and Vicinity~*

*Historical and Pictorial*. Westerly: The Utter Company, Printers, 1938.

Kellner, George H. and J. Stanley Lemons. *Rhode Island: The Independent State*.

Woodland Hills: Windsor Publications, Inc., 1982.

Manchester, William. *The Glory and the Dream: A Narrative History of America 1932-*

*1972*. Boston: Little, Brown And Company, 1973.

Mandeville, Frances Wharton. *The Historical Story of Charlestown, Rhode Island: 1669-*

*1976*. Charlestown: Charlestown Historical Society, 1979.

Ocean House Org. "History of the Ocean House." In the Ocean House Book.

<<http://www.theoceanhouse.org/history.shtml>> (Updated 2006; accessed 7 October 2009).

Potter, Sean. "September 21, 1938: The Great New England Hurricane."

*Weatherwise Magazine*, September/October. 2008.

Preserve America. "Preserve America Community: New Shoreham, Rhode Island." <[http](http://www.preserveamerica.gov/PACommunity-newshorehamRI.html)

[://www.preserveamerica.gov/PACommunity-newshorehamRI.html](http://www.preserveamerica.gov/PACommunity-newshorehamRI.html)> (Updated 2009; Accessed 8 November 2009).

Scotti, R. A. *Sudden Sea: The Great Hurricane of 1938*. Boston: Little, Brown And Company, 2003.

Soares, Joseph P. *Images of America: The 1938 Hurricane Along New England's Coast*.

Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2008.

Stensrud, Rockwell. *Newport: A Lively Experiment 1639-1969*. Newport: Redwood

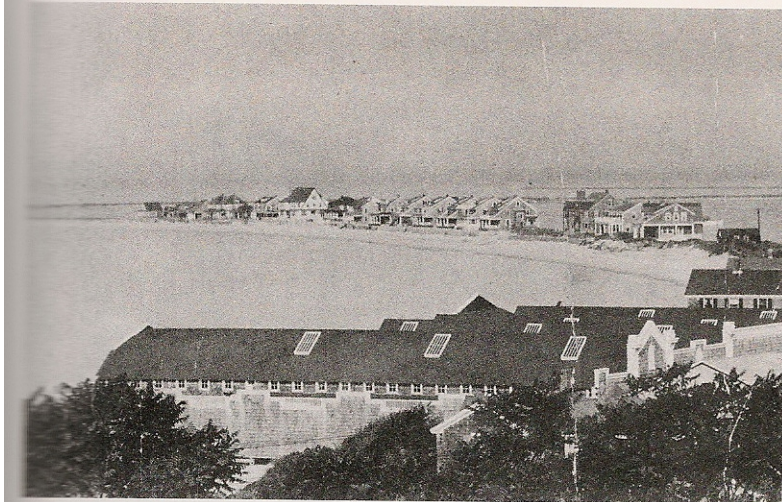
Library and Athenaeum, 2006.





[http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.electricscotland.com/thomson/images/8.1%2520Rhode%2520Island.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.electricscotland.com/thomson/reflections8.htm&usg=\\_\\_BmEk3S41A8wVJKrX1QiOip3rENQ=&h=328&w=418&sz=35&hl=en&start=4&tbnid=RaMhE0JIN5EQaM:&tbnh=98&tbnw=125&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dmap%2Bof%2BRhode%2BIsland%26gbv%3D2%26hl%3Den](http://images.google.com/imgres?imgurl=http://www.electricscotland.com/thomson/images/8.1%2520Rhode%2520Island.jpg&imgrefurl=http://www.electricscotland.com/thomson/reflections8.htm&usg=__BmEk3S41A8wVJKrX1QiOip3rENQ=&h=328&w=418&sz=35&hl=en&start=4&tbnid=RaMhE0JIN5EQaM:&tbnh=98&tbnw=125&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dmap%2Bof%2BRhode%2BIsland%26gbv%3D2%26hl%3Den)

(Picture of Napatree Point before and after storm)



The residents of Napatree Point built their summer cottages close to the water on a point of sand that stretched out into the sea. A modest seawall was all that stood between them and the water, and Fort Road was the only way to get on and off the point. (*Tidings Magazine*)



Burns, Cherie. *The Great Hurricane: 1938*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

(Moore house on Napatree Point/ Fort Road damage after storm)



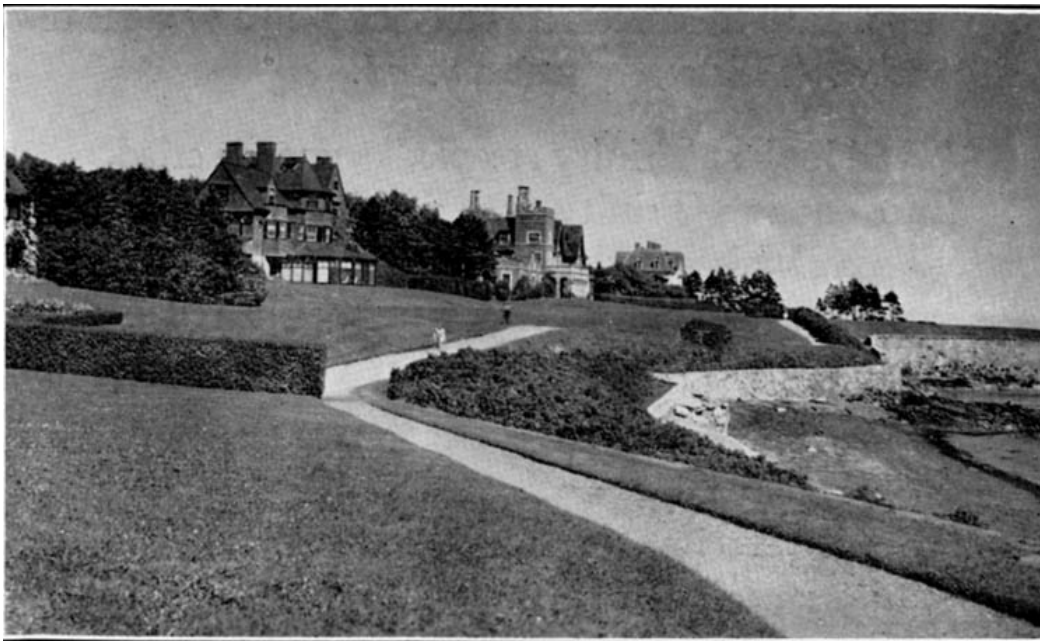


The Moore house was boasted to be one of the largest and the most sturdy built cottages on Napatree Point. As the waters rose, the Geoffrey Moore family fled to the top-floor maid's room. When the roof blew off, a remnant of the floor it was attached to became the raft the group of ten set afloat on. (Lives Magazine)



Burns, Cherie. *The Great Hurricane: 1938*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.

(Cliff Walk, day before hurricane)



Ward, A. Hartley G. *The Hurricane in Newport: A Graphic story of the storm by an eye witness*. Newport: Ward, The Printer, 1938.

(Cliff Walk, day after hurricane)



Ward, A. Hartley G. *The Hurricane in Newport: A Graphic story of the storm by an eye witness*. Newport: Ward, The Printer, 1938.

(Washington Square, Newport RI)



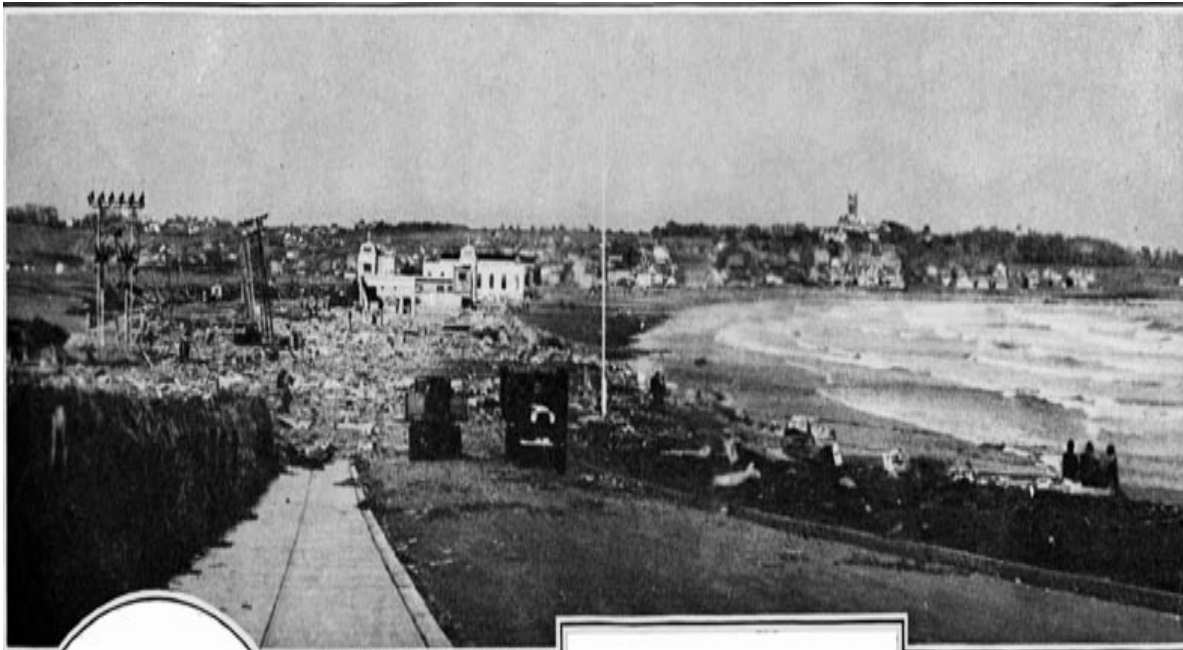
Ward, A. Hartley G. *The Hurricane in Newport: A Graphic story of the storm by an eye witness*. Newport: Ward, The Printer, 1938.

(Newport Beach)

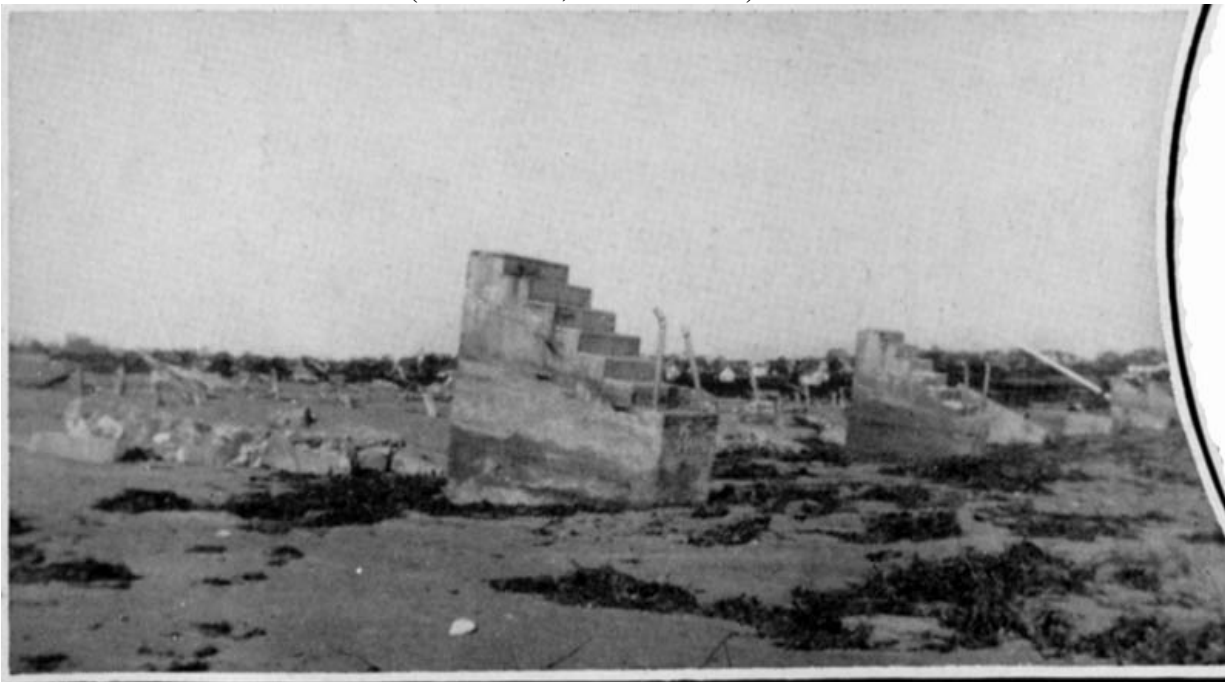


Chelsea Evening Record. 1938. *The Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area, September 21, 1938*. Chelsea: Chelsea Evening Record.

(Newport Beach)



Chelsea Evening Record. 1938. *The Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area, September 21, 1938*. Chelsea: Chelsea Evening Record.  
(Jamestown, Rhode Island)



Chelsea Evening Record. 1938. *The Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area, September 21, 1938*. Chelsea: Chelsea Evening Record.  
(Providence, Rhode Island)





PROVIDENCE, R. I.  
A close-up of what thousands of marooned people in the Providence business district saw as they looked onto the street during the height of the storm. This view is on Fountain St.  
—Providence Journal

Chelsea Evening Record. 1938. *The Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area, September 21, 1938*. Chelsea: Chelsea Evening Record.  
(View of City Hall at Providence, RI)



Incredulous citizens sought refuge in the City Hall and watched while it became an island in a swirling debris-ridden sea.

Livermore & Knight Co. 1938. *The Hurricane and Flood of September 21, 1938 at Providence, R.I.: A Pictorial Record*. Providence: Livermore & Knight Co.  
(Picture of downtown Providence)



Burns, Cherie. *The Great Hurricane: 1938*. New York: Grove Press, 2005.