

Westford Recollections

The '38 Hurricane

By JUNE W. KENNEDY

It was forty years ago on September 21, 1938 that one of the worst hurricanes in history collided with the New England coast. Most New Englanders living at the time had never experienced a hurricane. Consequently, they failed to heed radio warnings and made little preparation.

The storm originated near the Cape Verde Islands. Usually a storm of this nature would travel out into the Atlantic, but the eye of this storm shifted, sending it hurling up the Atlantic seaboard. First it struck the Carolinas, then Virginia, Delaware, Maryland and New York. After hitting the southern areas of Connecticut and Rhode Island, it worked its way through Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont before heading into Canada. Behind it lay a path of destruction that left New England in shambles.

Throughout the six-state region 682 people died while masses of injured folk were literally packed into hospitals. Damage was estimated in the millions. Nearly all communication was destroyed except for radio. Telephone workmen from the Dakotas were imported to assist in the repair of downed lines. Some areas were without power and telephone for several weeks.

Massachusetts and New Hampshire suffered the most agricultural damage. Fertile soil was washed away by the swollen Merrimack River; almost 50% of the apple crop was lost. Tidal waves and high tides ripped the coast, washed countless buildings from their foundations and tore ships from their moorings. The appearance of the coastline was drastically altered.

An excerpt from "The Lowell Courier Citizen" dated September 24, 1938, just three days after the storm, tells Westford's story:

"The hurricane Wednesday afternoon left the town in a mass of ruin such as was never before remembered even by the oldest resident. Hundreds of lovely elms, maples and pines which adorned the street and roadway and were the pride of the town, are flat. From every section is destruction, but the wind seemed to vent its fury at Westford Centre. The town was completely cut off from the outside world; no electricity, only a few local telephone lines in operation and no mail service. It seemed for a time as though even the houses would be levelled with such wind force. Chimneys are down, roofs, sheds and barns moved from their foundation. Not a street but shows the effect of the hurricane.

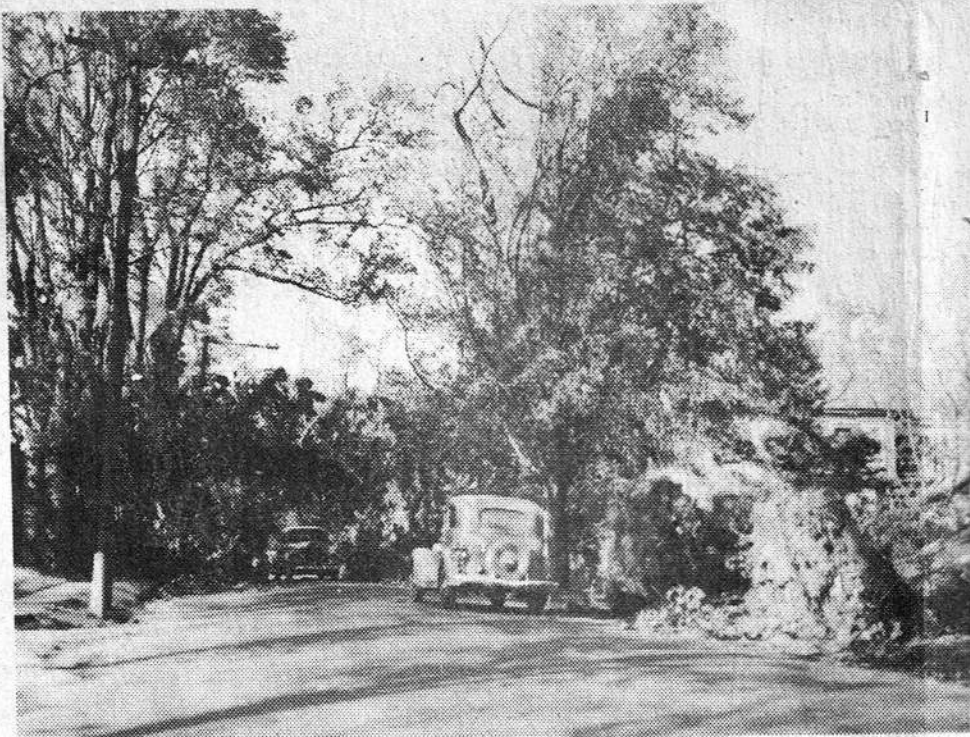
"The cupola of the town hall was blown into the street about 6 o'clock, falling with a terrific crash; at least a dozen big trees on the common are uprooted; the flagpole moved from its base and resting on wires; slate roof on one side of the town hall is off; huge elms, maples and pines on every street down; glass out in many homes. The number of poles out of service in Westford due to the hurricane is 139."

The article continued with reports of severe damage throughout the villages. The destruction in many of the large fruit orchards was deplorable. The loss was reported extremely heavy at the Drew, Wright, Prescott, Old Homestead, Fecteau and Spalding orchards for many had not finished picking their MacIntosh apples and the Baldwins had not been touched. The storm hit at a crucial time; as September is the peak apple harvesting month.

The camps and tall stand of pines at Burges Pond were flattened. At Mrs. Barrett's log cabin on Prospect Hill, the entire piazza was ripped off. At the Otis Day place, many hen houses were blown over, some of the birds found dead and many with broken legs. Harry Nesmith's barn in Parker Village was destroyed. Part of the steeple of the Methodist Episcopal Church was broken during the storm; the chimney on the Congregational Church was down. Even the town-owned pine forest was leveled.

A later report told that Governor Curley had extended daylight savings time for one week to allow for additional clearing of debris. J. Austin Healy, superintendent of streets, had a large crew of men and boys at work. Also, the W.P.A. and P.W.A. were both working hard to make the roads and highways passable. However, a week was to pass before even the schools were to open.

Many Westford residents vividly recalled that fateful day of Wednesday, September 21, 1938. I share with you some eyewitness accounts. MARIAN F. WINNEK: "I was



Hurricane of 1938 - Westford



At the height of the storm of '38 a huge tree toppled onto the roof over the Winnek's home.

driving home from Arlington during the afternoon of the storm. I was stopped in Carlisle by a tree across my path. A man from the Wright Trucking Co. of Westford was clearing a path while five or six other vehicles were waiting to pass. The other people stood under a tree. Why they did that, I don't know, but I didn't want to risk having a tree uproot while I was standing under it. The winds were picking up and I was afraid it might lift my car as it was a light one. I continued through Carlisle Station where debris littered the road. At the bottom of the hill on Boston Road, I met a man taking a wagon of apples to Boston. He told me that the road was impassable so I drove into the orchard and continued to the Center via the orchard, reaching the Center just in time to see the flagpole twist around and snap off. A school teacher came out with his lantern (it was getting quite dark) and told me that a tree had fallen on my house. Also, being informed that the road was blocked, I