

50 years ago, town reels after hurricane

Compiled by June W. Kennedy

Fifty years ago yesterday, the Great Hurricane of 1938 swirled out of the Caribbean. It was expected to cause high tides in the Carolinas and Virginia before turning harmlessly out to sea.

Instead, without warning, it slammed through New England in a few destructive hours on the afternoon of Sept. 21.

At that time, the U.S. Weather Service was in its infancy, relying on thermometers, barometers and weather-vanes.

Indeed, this storm was the worst natural disaster in American history — in New England winds averaged 84 mph from 5-6 p.m. The highest wind for a five-minute period was recorded at 121 mph; gusts that tore houses apart measured 186 mph.

When the final toll was tallied, some 650 people had perished, 2,000 were injured, and more than 63,000 were left without homes. Almost 20,000

public and private buildings were destroyed, and 100 bridges had to be rebuilt. The cost of the damage totaled more than \$400 million in 1938 dollars.

The following newspaper and first-hand accounts tell Westford's story of "the wind that shook the world."

According to accounts in the *Lowell Courier Citizen*, Saturday, Sept. 24, 1938: "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.

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Lowell Courier Citizen
Sept. 24, 1938

"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

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HUGE ROOT BALLS of downed trees are exposed after the Hurricane of '38 vented its fury on Westford Common. First Parish Church is visible to the right; the downed flagpole lies on the ground at left in the background.
(Courtesy of June Kennedy)

8 Thursday, September 22, 1988

WESTFORD EAGLE

Town reels in wake of hurricane

□ HURRICANE

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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."

Homes hard hit

"The destruction at William H. Carver's place is the worst of any of the home places. The beautiful and spacious lawn with its bronze maples, blue spruces, elms, birches and shrubbery is completely ruined; not a tree standing; both chimneys are gone and much of the roof at the rear. At the Otis Day place, many hen houses were blown over, some of the birds found dead and many with broken legs.

"At Miss Winnick's on Main Street, a huge tree in front of the house was uprooted and crashed onto the roof. At John Fisher's on Depot Street, the pine grove near the barn was completely destroyed, besides chimney down and roof crashed in. At the Harney place, a 70 x 24 foot open shed in the rear of the barns was lifted from a cement foundation and moved back the width of the shed.

"At Harry Nesmith's in Parker Village, the barn was destroyed and havoc was wrought throughout the section. At Chamberlain Corner, trees were down, orchards ruined.

"The destruction in many of the large fruit orchards is deplorable. At the Drew, Wright, Prescott, Old Homestead, Fecteau and Spalding orchards, the loss is extremely heavy. Many had not finished picking their Macintosh apples and the Baldwins had not been touched, but no fruit is left on the trees. This does not mean, however, that what they have will be sold for song; the orchardist must still carry on and build up what he has lost.

"A large gang of WPA men



WORKERS SURVEY THE wreckage of the Victorian-style tower of town hall that lies in the foreground (right), after crashing to the pavement at about 6 p.m. on Sept. 21, 1938. At Chamberlain Corner (above), the giant elm which fell on the roof of the Fletcher home carried with it a utility pole with both electrical and telephone service wires.
(Photos courtesy June Kennedy)

have done a commendable job today in clearing the streets and highways working early and late to make them safe for pedestrians and vehicles. It will take some time to recover even in a partial way from the storm.

"It is not known just when the electric power will be restored. The pumps which supply the reservoir are operated by electricity and Superintendent Sutherland is asking that care be taken about using too much water, that there may be no shortage.

"At Burges pond where the East Boston camps were located, there is nothing left; all the tall pines and all the camps are flat. At Forge pond, where are many camps and a big acreage of tall pine trees, there are very few trees left standing; some camps were damaged con-

siderably and others came out in pretty good shape. At Mrs. Barrett's log cabin on Prospect Hill, the entire piazza was ripped off.

"Harold W. Hildreth, administrator of PWA, and the selectmen have looked after every detail in order to hasten the work of restoration. Already workmen are repairing the roof of the town hall, and as yet it has not been decided whether the building will have another cupola or not.

"Morning worship will be held in the Unitarian Church Sunday at 11 o'clock, also both church schools at 9:30 on account of the chimney on the Congregational Church being down.

"The two groups of the Y.P.R.U. society will meet Sunday evening at 6:30 p.m. in the Unitarian Church, providing the

electricity has been restored. The schools in Forge Village, Graniteville and Westford will not reopen on Monday. Watch papers for further announcement."

Graniteville, Sept. 23, 1938

"The first mail since the 'night of the big wind' arrived in Graniteville by truck on Friday forenoon, and the truck also took the outgoing mail. There was also another call from the mailman at 4 p.m. who took the outgoing mail. This system will probably be continued until the railroads are in position to handle the mail in the regular order.

"This village is a busy place at present, with every available man and boy working and assisting in clearing up the debris caused by the recent storm. So far they have been favored



by good weather.

"This village was thronged with visitors Thursday, who came by auto, bicycle and foot to view the many ruins that were caused by the hurricane Wednesday.

"The barn at the home of Belle Healy on Dunstable Road was blown down and the automobile dropped to the cellar.

"J. Austin Healy, superintendent of streets, has a large force

of men at work, and any man who wants work at this time can get it. Part of the steeple of the M.E. Church was broken off during the storm.

"There is no electric power here at present, and many of the telephones are out of commission. The people evidently will have to resort to candles and kerosene lamps for the next few days until the electric power is restored."