



Annals from the Archives

The Hurricane of 1938 (continued)

N. E. HURRICANE KILLS 85

2000 Injured, \$100,000,000 Loss, Many Communities Dark, Fires Start
Hundreds Homeless---Three Cities, Two Towns Under Martial Law

Headline from the *Boston Globe*
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—In my [August 2014 Annals from the Archives](#), I wrote about the impact of the September 21, 1938 Hurricane on the Massachusetts communities of Somerville and Lowell. Because the Annalists varied in their styles of recording events within the convents and schools, not every Annal kept by New England sisters mention this historic event. But the sisters in Chicopee, Worcester, Tyngsboro, Newton, South Boston and Providence, RI, recorded their experiences with this extraordinary storm.

The 1938 hurricane descended on an unprepared New England. Weather forecasting—even today not an exact science—was still in its infancy. On September 20th, the *Boston Globe* reported on page 6 that a storm was expected to miss Florida and hit the coast of North Carolina. That forecast was dead wrong. Instead the hurricane slammed into New England, the worst one to hit the area since 1869. By the time it made landfall, the winds were recorded as high as 160 mph, with gusts going over 180 mph. The highest winds were recorded in southern New England. Rainfall anywhere from 3 to 6 inches fell in much of New England, but the communities along the Connecticut River saw almost 17 inches of rain. The flooding that followed tore away roads, destroyed homes and killed more than 500 people.

One city near the Connecticut River was Chicopee. There the sisters wrote that, “September 21 will be long be remembered as the day of the hurricane. A terrific storm broke out at four o’clock, with rain coming down in torrents and a very high wind. The grape arbor near the fence was blown down, the other one was partly broken. The skylight was half blown off and the rain poured in. Huge trees along the street were uprooted, steeples and chimneys were blown off. The electricity all over the city was shut off for two or three days. Causing greater inconvenience was the fact that the water supply was cut off for two days. For this reason, the schools were closed. Our good friends, the Morans, Corridans and Mrs. Keating sent us supplies of water. Our sisters in Springfield sent us ice cubes and kettles of water.”

In Providence, where winds were over 100 mph, the sisters at St. Teresa’s convent described the effects it had on their community. “On September 21st New England was visited by a violent hurricane. Trees fell by the hundreds, bridges were torn down and floods occasioned by the yielding of certain dams along the Connecticut and Merrimac Rivers. To add to the devastation Providence and other places along the Rhode Island shore suffered from a tidal wave.” That “tidal wave” was caused by the nearby ocean cresting upwards to 25 feet above normal.

The sisters living at the Vernon Street, Worcester convent said that, “The September of 1938 will long be remember because of the hurricane which raged so furiously for some hours on the afternoon and night of the 21st, and which left in its wake such fearful horror and ruin, not alone in Massachusetts and vicinity, but in all of New England States. Providentially the children had departed for home a brief hour before the storm broke, otherwise there would have been a sad toll of lives from falling trees and wires. The beautiful trees in the garden fell one by one, the grape arbor fell to the ground in a broken wreck. The magnificent maples on Vernon Street swayed lower and lower and finally broke off rendering the street well high impassable, and bringing down the electric wires for miles. Since that time, trolley service has never been resumed, and has been replaced by bus service. During the hours of the storm, the Community remained on the ground floor lest the tower and

cupola should collapse. *Rosary after rosary was recited in common as the Sisters sat in the refectory peeling peaches which had just that day been sent in for preserving by the Reverend Pastor. At length the worst of the danger was over, and about nine o'clock the Community retired. For several days after that, it was impossible for classes to be resumed, but the damage done by the hurricane lingered for long months.*"

Even in places where the damage wasn't catastrophic, such as in Tyngsboro, the sisters stated, "On the 21st [of September], a hurricane of subtropical origins whirled out of the Atlantic Ocean and struck the northeast corner of the United States. Although the damage at Tyngsboro, comparatively speaking, was very slight, no one who lived through those hours of the 21st will ever forget the havoc they worked on our beautiful grounds. Lights were out for over a week, telegraph poles were swept down and hundreds upon hundreds of our giant pines were swept down by the wind. The next morning it was desolate place that we went out to see. . . .The roads were all blocked so the Boarders were sent home, as there was no promise of light, heat, water, or transportation for a least one week. Our grove has lost much of its charm and only the years will replace it."

In other communities, electric power was not restored for much longer. The Newton Sisters wrote, "On Wednesday [Sept. 21] about 4:30 p.m. a dark wind swayed the many trees about our convent. The velocity of the wind increased so that by 5 p.m. our lighting system was out of order. Meditation time was advanced, then Holy Family. During our time in chapel we could plainly see tall, sturdy trees swaying in the wind. By six o'clock the storm was at tis worst. The house and streets were in darkness—as Boston and the surrounding towns had no lights. Vigil lights were placed in various places throughout the house and we had this system of lighting for a period of about two weeks."

And in South Boston, the sisters on Broadway Street recorded, "About ten days after the opening of school, all New England was visited by a terrific hurricane. As the children were dismissing on that memorable September 21st, a heavy downpour of rain together with a very high wind gave warning that an unusual storm was coming. Around five o'clock the rain ceased but the wind increased alarmingly. During Holy Family meeting, we heard glass breaking and we saw some slates from the roof of the school flying, like paper, through the air. Sister Superior thought the Sisters would feel easier if they went to the Chapel, so we adjourned the Community meeting. Before supper time that evening, the lovely ivy vine which for years adorned the front of our convent, was blown to the sidewalk. The window in one of the cells on the front of the house blew in, but fortunately no one was in the path of the breaking glass. No serious damage was done either to the convent or to the school. It was only the next morning when the children brought clippings from the papers, that we realized how good God had been to us at Broadway, for we were wonderfully spared from harm. Because of wires which were on the ground, and the danger of trees which had been loosened, falling, there was no school the next day."



Images of damage from the Hurricane of 1938

From weather.gov



Sources consulted for this article

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- ◆ Worcester Vernon Street Convent Annals, 1872-1970. 2017.07.
- ◆ Tyngsboro Academy of Notre Dame Convent Annals, 1934-1972. 2017.26.
- ◆ Providence, RI St. Teresa's Convent Annals, 1921, 1954. 2016.25.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-2017.
- ◆ Weather.gov