The Sea Island Hurricane of 1893

BY BETTY JOYCE NASH

Before hurricanes carried names and price tags, like New Orleans' Katrina (estimates start at about $100 billion) and Florida's Andrew ($44 billion) and South Carolina's Hugo ($12 billion), a nameless storm slammed the islands clustered off Georgia and South Carolina. These islands were home to descendents from Africa, former slaves who were of the Gullah language and culture. Beaufort County, S.C., which includes many sea islands, got the worst of it.

It would be tempting to compare the "big blow" with Katrina, as the nation watches money and effort being plowed into rebuilding New Orleans. But that would be facile and off the mark. Still, history is sobering, if not always perfectly instructive.

With little communication and no means of evacuation from the bridgeless islands, upward of 2,000 people (only two of them white) died in the 1893 storm. But starvation following the hurricane was an equal opportunity problem, with blacks and whites alike on survival rations, and only Clara Barton's American National Red Cross to help feed and clothe them.

The storm of 1893 was one of three big hurricanes to hit coastal South Carolina in one decade, but it was the 1893 big blow that sank Beaufort County into an economic slumber and great migration, from which it didn't begin to awake until the government invested in the Marine Corps base on Parris Island in the run-up to World War II, according to Lawrence Rowland. He is professor emeritus of history at the University of South Carolina at Beaufort, and has written a history of the county.

Today, Beaufort County is prospering, with the highest per-capita income in the state. Although there's little industry to speak of, three military installations account for about a third of the economy. Tourism and real estate are the other two legs.

Where starving black people 112 years ago dug ditches to reclaim flooded fields, half-million dollar homes and golf courses edge coastal marshes and rivers on dozens of islands strung out along the coast. Descendents of barefoot farmers who scratched out a living 112 years ago cross the bridge to resort town Hilton Head, Rowland says. There, they work in service industries created by retirement and tourism, or perhaps they work for the government at wages 40 percent higher than everyone else in the county.

Before the Storm

Phosphate mining was the biggest industry in Beaufort County when the storm crashed the coast on Aug. 27, 1893, with its 15-foot seas.

Phosphate, used in fertilizer, was discovered in rivers in and around Beaufort County around 1867, according to Rowland. From about 1870 until 1893, 60 percent of the phosphate produced in the United States came from South Carolina, and half of that was mined in Beaufort County. People could earn something like $2 to $5 a day, a decent wage at the time. "The vast majority who worked there were freedmen, black Sea Islanders," Rowland says.

Most of Beaufort County was black, according to the 1890 Census, about 31,400 people. There were about 2,700 white people living in the county at the time.

"Absolutely the history of Beaufort County would have been different if the hurricane hadn't wiped out the phosphate industry," he says. "How remarkably prosperous

The storm killed more than 2,000 people and plunged Beaufort County, S.C., into an economic decline

Clara Barton (forefront, third from right) and her American National Red Cross distribute food on Lady's Island, one of the Sea Islands.

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLARA BARTON NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE - NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

it was before 1893 and then drifted into abject poverty over the next 30 years."

Most Sea Islanders, freed from slavery when the Union captured Beaufort County in 1861, kept plots of sweet potatoes and vegetables to feed their families, and one of cotton, used to obtain cash. There were some black merchants and professionals, mostly in the town of Beaufort. White people farmed, owned businesses, worked as doctors and lawyers as well as in the maritime trade or on the railroads as machinists, Rowland says. Most whites lived inland. The black people who lived on the islands typically lived in frame homes, with shutters against the wind. The swampy, mosquito-ridden islands were magnets for disease.

"Roofs were made of rough-hewn native wood shingles, chimneys of worn bricks," write Fran and Bill Marscher in *The Great Sea Island Storm of 1893*. Bill Marscher's grandparents lived through the storm, and the newspaper stories he found as a child inspired and informed the book. "On the islands' sandy two-rutted roads, the people traveled by foot, by horse, or by two-wheel ox cart." It took a boat to leave the islands.

The phosphate industry was on the wane even before the hurricane hit, as huge and efficient deposits had been discovered in Florida in 1888, Rowland notes. But the hurricane nailed the industry for good in Beaufort by destroying the barges and boats and other infrastructure.

The cotton industry, too, had declined under competition from Egypt and India. The long fibers of Sea Island cotton, almost like silk, had brought premium prices until growing international supply drove prices down. However, most of the Sea Island farmers grew a bale a year just to bring in a little cash. The storm did away with that too.

Rowland believes the hurricane accelerated migration from the county. "You can see it happening [in census data] and I believe the principal reason was the hurricane in 1893. It was not the only hurricane. There were five hurricanes in 10 years in the Sea Islands."

Another pre-storm investment was the U.S. Naval Station at Port Royal, tucked on the Beaufort River off the Port Royal Sound. By 1901, the naval jobs were gone. "What happened, in essence, was that after the hurricane the Navy wasn't sure they wanted Port Royal Sound anymore," Rowland says, adding that politics also played a role in that decision.

"Here were all these jobs, the naval shipyard, and phosphate; by 1901 they were all gone," he said. That threw the county into a depression from which it didn't recover until after World War II.

The Human Suffering

The winds of August 27, 1893, exceeded 115 miles per hour and brought in a high tide of perhaps 15 to 20 feet or more in places. The storm killed more than 2,000 of some 31,400 black people in Beaufort County.

No federal or state money flowed. South Carolina's Gov. "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman first advised people to plant turnips. The work of relief was left to the fledgling American National Red Cross and its president, Clara Barton. The storm destroyed people, homes, and land. And it did away with the remnants of South Carolina's rice plantations.

"The killer hurricane, another 'strong force,' hit the state's coast in the worst possible place — the flat, remote Sea Islands," according to the Marschers' book. "It hit at the worst possible time — near the end of harvest season, on high tide. Its violence was most ruthless against the nation's most vulnerable citizens — former slaves and their offspring, the Gullahs."

There was no way to get word to people living on the islands off South Carolina and Georgia, even though ships' reports telegraphed from Washington sent storm banners flying in Charleston, Savannah, Ga., and Wilmington, N.C.

Here is a firsthand account from the diary of Margaret Weary, of the Beaufort Industrial School for Girls:

I was so busy that evening cooking supper I never minded the wind and rain, nor the great roaring of the waves, till I looked out through the shutter and saw the sea all around the house. Then we were all frightened, as we saw the waves rushing up to the door. Ma seized my little sister, Grace, wrapped her in a blanket and ran to a neighbor's house on the hill. Brother and I jumped out into the water and ran as fast as we could, but I fell down into the water, my brother picked me up, and we pressed on through the waves till we reached the house where Ma was. The water had come up all around that house, too, and so we had to run to another, up on higher land, and there stayed all night.

Next morning we went home, but there was no house there, nor anything left. All had been washed away into the marsh, and the sedge and sea weed were piled up all around higher than my head. We saw dead cats and dogs, dead horses and hogs all along the shore, and some dead men and women and children. We saw one dead woman holding on to a timber of her house by her teeth.

Many of the Gullah believed in spirits, and if someone drowned, his soul was in limbo. And there were many, many in limbo.

Survivors were in a limbo of their own, with no food, water, clothing, dwellings, nor even soil in which to plant crops.

Clara Barton Returns

It was four days before even Gov. Tillman found out about the extent of the island damage from a telegraph pleading for relief. The governor responded by asking for donations. Local relief committees formed, and railway cars of food arrived in Beaufort, with 2,500 loaves of bread, 25 pounds of corned beef, 100 boxes of soda crackers, 50 barrels of grits, and five barrels of molasses.

"Although the governor expressed compassion and pleaded for donations from the public, he grossly underestimated what it would

The chief field agent for the American Red Cross, Dr. Hubbell, looks over ditches dug by hurricane survivors. The flooded lands needed to be drained so crops would grow.

take to relieve the suffering . . .," the Marschers write. The governor suggested that the islanders could eat fish. But, of course, they had no boats.

Finally, the governor, with overwhelming evidence of the calamity, called on the American National Red Cross three weeks after the storm. Clara Barton, founder and president, took charge.

Barton had spent nine months during the Civil War on Hilton Head, then occupied by Union forces. She arrived in mid-September to sick, sleep-deprived, hungry, naked people who had only water from brackish wells to drink, no food, and no shelter.

Barton had to feed 30,000 people with a mere $30,000 in donated funds, until spring crops could be harvested. Her appeals to the state Legislature and U.S. Congress were denied.

Barton, who was 72 at the time, set up warehouses in Beaufort, her desk a dry goods box with a homemade drawer. Each family of seven was given a peck (eight quarts) of hominy grits and one pound of pork weekly. People who worked digging ditches and building homes or otherwise helping out could earn double rations. Donations of seeds, food, money, and clothing poured in from the North. She established sewing circles.

Still, starvation hung over the county like a black cloud, even into June 1894 — 10 months after the hurricane. Racial tensions broke out when whites in Bluffton claimed they weren't getting food because they were white, not black.

Eventually, the residents made headway. They constructed homes, dug ditches to drain the land, and planted spring crops. Barton folded her relief operation in May of 1894:

"If it is desirable to understand when to commence a work of relief . . . it is no less desirable and indispensable that one knows when to end such relief, in order to avoid, first, the weakening of effort and powers for self-sustenance; second, the encouragement of a tendency to beggary and pauperism, by dependence upon others which should be assumed by persons themselves."

A Throwback: St. Helena Island

St. Helena Island today is one of the few without the golf resorts, the big homes, and immaculate landscaping of the retirement villages that have sprung up on the coast in the last 40 years. Driving along, you might see a couple of small shops or an art gallery by the side of the road or pass a truck loaded with watermelons headed for market.

St. Helena, for one thing, is largely still black-owned. It's the home of Penn Center, a former school for black children dating from the Civil War era, which now serves as a repository for research and gatherings about the Gullah culture. The land has been hard for outsiders to develop because it's chock-full of tiny plots, with unclear title to ownership. After the Civil War, Rowland explains, many freed slaves bought land there in federal government sales.

"St. Helena may have been the largest concentration of independent black landholders in the state," he notes. "It's created an awful lot of 'heirs' land' where there are so many heirs, one can't determine the owner, and that's retarded real estate."

And so without the strip malls and lush subdivisions, the traffic roads are calm, even on a brilliant October day when marsh grasses glow in the distance.

With another "big blow" . . . well, the story would be different today. While early warning systems could help mitigate the cruel loss of life of 1893, the economic price tag would be calamitous, given the population and escalating development. Were the storm of 1893 to hit today, the damage is forecast at $50 billion, given current population and buildings.

Rowland, a Beaufort native, has moved to higher ground on Dataw Island, 25 feet above sea level. Just in case. **RF**

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