

Great Hurricane both blessing, curse to Ocean City

1933 storm cut new inlet at the south end of town, but also proved costly

by Frank D. Roylance | Sun reporter

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Mountainous waves swept into the resort and covered some of the streets with two feet of sand. Water was still ankle-deep at the time of this photo. Described in the American Meteorological Society's August 1933 weather review as "one of the most severe storms that has ever visited the Middle Atlantic Coast," the slow-moving weather mass dumped 10 inches of rain a day for nearly a week, even before wind gusts as high as 80 mph and a 7-foot tide arrived. (Baltimore Sun file photo)

In the early years of the last century, Ocean City's commercial fishermen had to launch their boats through the surf and drag them and their catch back onto the beach with horses, ropes and pulleys. It was colorful, but inefficient.

If only the government would dig a cut through the barrier island, they argued, they could keep larger boats in the shelter of a bay, gain direct access to the ocean, and inject new life into their fishery.

No one guessed that a storm born in the tropical Atlantic was about to intervene and do the work for them, at a heavy cost.

The Great Hurricane of 1933, which struck 75 years ago tomorrow, wreaked havoc from [Norfolk](#) to Atlantic City and killed 13 people in Maryland. It wrecked Ocean City's boardwalk, flooded the town, demolished whole blocks and cut off its rail and road links to the mainland. Damage was estimated at \$7.5 million in today's dollars.

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But after the wind stopped, residents emerged to discover their new inlet at the south end of town. It was like a miracle. Maryland had ponied up \$500,000 to put toward digging just such a cut. But the federal contribution had failed to clear Congress.

Now the inlet had been carved by Nature in just 36 hours. Ocean water, driven across the barrier beach by the hurricane's easterly winds, had piled up in the bay. All that water needed an outlet, and it found a low spot in the storm-battered sand near the south end of the boardwalk.

Water poured through the breach for five days, according to Mary Corddry's book *City on the Sand*. The current ate away at the confining sand, carrying away buildings, railroad tracks and anything else it encountered.

Capt. [John Elliott Sr.](#) watched it all, and Corddry quotes his description to a local reporter in 1974. "We had a big, heavy cement septic tank for our fishing camp," he recalled. "The water got to it, rolled it over and over, and the last we saw of it, it was headed out to sea."

When it was over, the new gap in the sand was four feet deep, 250 feet wide and widening daily. To the south, the Assateague peninsula had become an island. Everyone quickly recognized that this was no calamity, but rather a gift from the sea.

The town's fishermen suddenly had direct access to the ocean. The channel made the shelter of Sinepuxent Bay available for landings by the New England fleet. And the pulse of ocean tides could revive the polluted upper bay's dying shellfish industry.

Politicians like Maryland's U.S. Sen. Millard E. Tydings immediately set about to win federal dollars to secure and improve the inlet and prevent it from clogging with drifting sand.

That's what had happened to another storm-cut inlet, opened in 1920 five miles south of town. The tidal pulse into the bay had spurred clamming and oystering there, but the industry withered after drifting sand closed the inlet in 1928.

Three days after the 1933 storm, Tydings knew it was time to act. "It seems to me the proposal has a timely significance as a public works. It would certainly encourage the people of Ocean City, who have suffered severe property damage," he said.

It was a race against the elements.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, led by Col. E. J. Dent, would have to lay down a stone jetty, reaching some 1,200 feet seaward from the beach, along both sides of the inlet. The north jetty would block the southward flow of sand, and prevent it from resealing the channel.

After dredging to a depth of 10 feet, engineers calculated that the tidal current between the barriers would keep the new channel scoured to the needed depth. Town fathers also hoped it would wash the community's raw sewage out to sea and ease pollution in the bay. The Chamber of Commerce gratefully proposed naming it Roosevelt Inlet.

Work on the \$781,000 project began in October 1933 -- just two months after the storm. By August 1935, the channel had been dredged and the north bank stabilized with concrete. Jetties constructed with Port Deposit stone would follow, but the town's improvised harbor facilities were already handling a large increase in fishing activity.

Seventy-five years later, Ocean City has exploded with high-rise condos and miles of restaurants, shops and asphalt. It has a summer population of more than a quarter million people, and the inlet cut in 1933, as predicted, nourishes a busy commercial and sport fishing port.

Commercial fish landings at the resort last year totaled 10.1 million pounds, valued at \$10.4 million, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Across the inlet, Assateague Island, too, looks nothing like it did in 1933. Starved of sand by the inlet's north jetty, the island's north end has lost its dunes and migrated two-thirds of a mile west, toward the mainland. It is regularly over-washed in storms.

The federal government has launched a 25-year program to pump sand onto the island from offshore bars to slow Assateague's retreat -- yet another echo of that storm 75 years ago.

frank.roylance@baltsun.com

MONTHLY METEOROLOGICAL SUMMARY

Station, **RICHMOND, VA.**

75th meridian time

Month, **AUGUST, 1933.**

8/33

Date	Temperature (°F.) Thermometers, 11 feet above sod				Moisture							Wind		Per cent of sunshine†	River stage, feet				
	Extremes		Mean	Departure from normal	Dry bulb			Relative humidity, per cent			Vapor pressure, local noon	Precipitation, inches*							
	Max.	Min.			8 a. m.	Local noon	8 p. m.	8 a. m.	Local noon	8 p. m.		Total				Snowfall, un-melted			
										8 a. m. to 8 p. m.	Mid. to mid.	8 p. m. to 8 p. m.	Depth on ground 8 p. m.			Max. velocity, miles per hour	Direction of max. velocity		
1																			
2	95	74	84	++ 6	78	92	86	89	60	69	.896	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	11	sw.	100	1.7
3	95	74	84	++ 6	78	92	86	89	60	69	.810	.09	.06	0.0	0.0	22	n.	81	1.5
4	90	72	81	++ 3	75	84	79	89	71	86	.838	.11	.16	0.0	0.0	17	w.	80	1.5
5	78	68	73	- 5	74	74	73	91	80	74	.661	.02	.05	0.0	0.0	15	ne.	19	1.0
6	82	62	72	- 6	70	78	74	77	45	56	.432	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	18	e.	96	0.8
7	85	62	74	- 4	73	82	76	63	36	60	.402	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	12	e.	97	0.8
8	84	61	72	- 6	70	82	76	79	48	67	.517	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	12	s.	86	1.1
9	88	67	78	- 3	72	83	80	89	50	62	.675	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	13	nw.	87	1.0
10	88	74	81	+ 3	75	86	80	77	55	67	.684	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	12	ne.	62	0.9
11	85	71	78	+ 1	74	84	75	91	63	97	.732	.87	.82	0.0	0.0	14	s.	28	1.0
12	84	72	78	++ 1	75	83	75	90	72	96	.810	.61	.61	0.0	0.0	15	n.	26	1.1
13	91	71	81	++ 4	78	85	83	95	71	71	.810	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	19	nw.	66	1.6
14	93	72	82	++ 5	78	83	79	87	52	73	.757	.03	.01	0.0	0.0	18	nw.	89	1.8
15	82	70	76	- 1	72	74	77	91	74	72	.616	.01	.03	0.0	0.0	12	n.	43	0.5
16	85	68	76	- 1	73	83	76	84	47	67	.536	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	10	se.	74	0.1
17	84	67	76	- 1	74	82	75	77	53	66	.595	.00	.03	0.0	0.0	13	so.	70	0.1
18	86	68	77	+ 1	72	80	79	92	74	82	.757	.00	.34	0.0	0.0	9	s.	65	0.0
19	85	70	78	+ 2	73	81	80	92	70	73	.707	T.	.01	0.0	0.0	12	w.	60	0.0
20	84	70	77	+ 2	72	80	78	92	72	81	.732	T.	.01	0.0	0.0	10	sw.	45	0.0
21	.80	70	75	- 1	73	74	71	94	94	95	.810	.24	.25	0.0	0.0	15	se.	19	0.0
22	75	68	72	- 4	71	74	68	88	88	98	.684	.03	.06	0.0	0.0	17	ne.	4	0.0
23	77	65	71	- 5	65	70	75	97	90	91	.661	.11	.11	0.0	0.0	20	ne.	16	0.4
24	75	69	72	- 3	70	72	72	96	99	94	.783	1.85	3.19	0.0	0.0	89	ne.	60	1.8
25	88	72	80	+ 4	75	85	80	72	58	75	.634	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	28	w.	96	0.5
26	81	67	79	+ 4	72	83	83	53	50	63	.661	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	10	w.	100	2.0
27	93	68	80	+ 5	74	91	70	91	44	93	.633	.74	.74	0.0	0.0	90	n.	77	0.5
28	91	70	80	+ 5	75	89	82	91	58	72	.733	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	9	nw.	80	0.7
29	93	69	81	+ 6	75	89	71	87	60	98	.810	.60	1.97	0.0	0.0	21	n.	78	1.0
30	69	61	65	- 10	67	63	67	86	95	95	.536	.82	.82	0.0	0.0	14	ne.	00	1.9
31	78	60	69	- 5	67	76	68	89	58	77	.482	.00	.00	0.0	0.0	18	se.	100	1.7
	77	63	70	- 4	65	74	72	90	78	85	.661	T.	T.	0.0	0.0	10	no.	25	1.4
Means..	84.9	68.2	76.6	+0.1	72	81	76	87	65	79	.679	5.43	8.84	0.0	0.0	60	60	0.9
Normals.....			76.5					82	58	78			4.42	0.0	0.0	63	63	0.9

ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE
(Reduced to sea level, inches and hundredths)
Mean..... 29.98
Highest..... 30.35 on the 7th
Lowest..... 28.93 on the 23d

PRECIPITATION
Greatest in 24 hours... 3.19 on the 22-23d
Excess (+), or deficiency (-) this month as compared with normal..... +4.42
Accumulated excess (+), or deficiency (-) since January 1st..... +2.26
Greatest snowfall in 24 hours..... 0.0

WIND
Total movement..... 5,790 miles
Average hourly velocity..... 7.8 miles
Prevailing direction..... ne.

TEMPERATURE
Highest..... 95 on the 1st
Lowest..... 60 on the 30th
Greatest daily range..... 25 on the 26th
Least daily range..... 6 on the 23d
Accumulated excess (+) or deficiency (-) since January 1st..... +3.43
Average excess (+) or deficiency (-) since January 1st..... +1.4

WEATHER
(Number of days)
Clear (0 to 3)..... 9
Partly cloudy (4 to 7)..... 9
Cloudy (8 to 10)..... 18
With 0.01 inch or more of precipitation..... 17
With 0.25 inch or more of precipitation..... 8
Total sunshine hours..... 252.2

MISCELLANEOUS PHENOMENA
(Dates of)
Frosts—Light..... 0
Heavy..... 0
Killing..... 0
Auroras..... 0
Halos—Solar..... 13, 19
Lunar..... 0
Hail..... 0
Sleet..... 0
Dense fog..... 0
Thunderstorms..... 1, 2, 10, 11, 17, 20, 26, 28.

* "T", trace, amount too small to measure. † Number hours possible sunshine; 1st, 14.1; 15th, 13.6; 30th, 13.1; for this month, 421.7.

COMPARATIVE DATA FOR THIS MONTH FROM THE RECORDS OF PREVIOUS YEARS — August, 1872 to 1933

TEMPERATURE				WEATHER				Mean Temperature and Total Precipitation.																																																																																																																																																																																				
Highest this month..... 107 on the 6th, 1918. Lowest this month..... 49 on the 22nd 1923.				Average number of days this month— Clear..... 10 Partly cloudy..... 13 Cloudy..... 8 With .01 inch or more precipitation 11 With .25 inch or more precipitation. 8 Greatest number of days this month with .01 inch or more precipitation, 18 in 1920.				Yr. T P Yr. T P Yr. T P																																																																																																																																																																																				
1872	4.95	1893	76	3.45	1914	78	2.42	1873	9.22	1894	75	5.12	1915	76	7.34	1874	2.34	1895	79	2.68	1916	76	1.53	1875	9.50	1896	81	0.45	1917	76	2.74	1876	2.75	1897	78	1.83	1918	78	2.76	1877	1.97	1898	79	6.31	1919	75	2.62	1878	3.65	1899	78	5.61	1920	75	8.69	1879	7.33	1900	83	3.66	1921	77	0.61	1880	78	8.98	1901	77	6.99	1922	73	7.78	1881	79	1.78	1902	75	3.10	1923	75	6.41	1882	77	4.44	1903	76	3.21	1924	76	8.05	1883	77	1.79	1904	76	3.83	1925	74	2.55	1884	76	1.49	1905	76	4.01	1926	76	5.24	1885	78	1.69	1906	78	8.63	1927	71	7.19	1886	75	4.20	1907	78	5.81	1928	78	8.05	1887	77	8.27	1908	74	10.40	1929	75	2.41	1888	78	4.19	1909	74	4.01	1930	76	2.35	1889	74	3.99	1910	75	2.90	1931	76	11.42	1890	76	5.51	1911	78	7.26	1932	79	1.86	1891	78	4.20	1912	76	1.49	1933	77	8.84	1892	80	3.32	1913	78	4.59	1934