

GASTON August 30, 2004

After striking the Carolinas as a minimal Category 1 on August 30, the storm tracked into southern Virginia. Expected to churn through the state as uneventful, it stalled for hours over metropolitan Richmond. Up to 14 inches of rain cascaded down, drowning a forecasted 2-4 inches.

Downpours lasted about five hours. Rainfall rates in some neighborhoods exceeded 4 inches per hour. Richmond International Airport, about eight miles from downtown, had 6.68 inches. Ashland, about 20 miles away, recorded 10.61 inches, including 4.33 inches in one hour. Other totals included: Richmond (West End) 12.60", Mechanicsville 10.70", Sandston 8.10".

Gushing runoff targeted the historic Shockoe Bottom neighborhood, along the James River. Streets on adjacent hillsides became waterslides, simultaneously discharging their contents. The 25-square-block district, home to an age-old farmers market and upscale shops, condominiums and office building, became engulfed in a river. Dozens of cars floated through the streets, some with occupants pleading for rescue. Merchants, residents and tourists scrambled to safety.

Nature seemed to mock the efforts of man. Richmond's James River flood wall, completed in 1994 at a cost of \$135 million, proved useless. Gaston ambushed the city by creating its own James, a watercourse that flowed behind the "protective" barrier. (A bitter irony: Confident that the wall would protect them, many businesses and residents had no flood insurance.)

Gaston struck during rush hour, causing massive traffic jams. Floodwater carried away vehicles, overwhelming roadways within minutes. There were scores of narrow escapes. At least eight people died.

Water reached a critical height at Falling Creek Dam in Chesterfield County, forcing the hasty evacuation of hundreds of families. The structure survived.