

Galveston Hurricane of 1900

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In the late 1800's Galveston was a prosperous city. It went head to head with Houston and beat the other city by being the first town in Texas to install electric lights along with a telephone service soon after. It was also the first place to build a post office, military base, and grocery stores. It is stated that, "Galveston at the turn of the twentieth century may have been the best of both worlds: a modern, well-appointed southern city that was still isolated from the rest of Texas" (Brennan, 2002, pg. 15). Galveston was a party town, so people could easily enjoy themselves even if they were a person of color since it did indeed have a large immigrant and African American population that strolled about. It was a place of opportunity with success and thrill around each corner.

Considering that it was beginning of the new century, there were still some issues with racism, but people of all color still mingled together in ways they could back in those days. Unfortunately, it was mostly African Americans that had to pick up the dead bodies from the aftermath of the storm and dispose of them. Besides this set back for people of color, the town was still sought after by many seen as a utopia for living. People flocked by many forms of transportation such as railroad or by boat.

When it came to prepping for hurricanes, it was suggested by the people that a sea wall be built in order to protect the town, but the city decided against this in fear that it would defer newcomers away. The town had also never experienced such a devastatingly powerful storm before, so they reasoned at the time that there was no such need for a wall to erected. It wasn't until afterwards did the city realize their folly in not constructing this structure. Once they recognized their mistake, they decide to go ahead and allow for its development. Unfortunately, this lack of groundwork is truly what caused the city to lose its grandeur. It is said that the

buildings would have been able to withstand the wind, but it was the storm surge of the flood waters that was the ultimate cause for the town's decimation. Only very few buildings had survived the harsh weather.

It is told that the morning before the storm hit that the weather showed no signs of an oncoming hurricane. The only inclination of impending doom was suggested by the rise in water. Forecasters believed that the island was in no immediate danger and that the storm would move north. Most people believed that the rain that started falling was harmless, but there were a few nervous from rumors of a disturbance.

The wind soon began to pick up, and the water from the ocean rose gradually more and more, showing no signs of receding back into the ocean. It was when the tide started rising higher along with the waves become more intense when the people of Galveston started to worry that the storm was going to be much worse than originally expected. Not late into the evening is when the hurricane made its true power known. "Survivors wrote of wind that sounded "like a thousand little devils shrieking and whistling," of 6-foot waves coming down Broadway Avenue, of a grand piano riding the crest of one, of slate shingles turned into whirling saw blades, and of streetcar tracts becoming waterborne battering rams that tore apart houses" (Burnett, 2017).

There are many stories told by survivors witnessing horrors unknown to most average people living in this day and age. Family were ripped away by the current in only the matter of seconds, and others were bludgeoned to death by flying objects. Many feared for their lives and rightly so. It can be noted that one of these misfortunes happened at an orphanage that was demolished by the waves. Along with the building it took the lives of 90 children and ten nuns.

By early morning, the storm's ferocity began to slowly subside. Those that managed to make it through had to disassemble themselves from the rubble. Men worked together to gather all

the bodies that had littered the island and get rid of them to the best of their abilities. The stench of decaying bodies from humans and other animals lingered in the air. “Pictures taken after the storm show empty streets. No people. No animals. No trees. No personal belongings. Only piles of debris that buried families beneath the remains of their homes. Bodies occasionally hang outside the debris piles. But for the most part, an eerie emptiness paints a picture few words could describe” (Mother Nature’s Wrath, 2014).

Even through what the towns people endured, they decided not to leave. The people came together and rebuilt their city piece by piece. Almost a quarter of the community had succumbed that dreadful night and those that did live immediately formed a group to clean up and rebuild what was lost. This time they not only decided in favor of a sea wall be constructed, but to additionally raise the level of the entire city. Houses and buildings were assembled with catwalks to connect them, and many were lifted on jacks. They dug out canals to allow for better drainage. If another hurricane were to blow through Galveston, it would surely manage to make it through without much significant damage.

It is easy to understand why this is considered the worst natural disaster in American history. While there is without a doubt many other tragic and horrific events that have caused lasting effects on those that endured it, Galveston surpassed those due to the amount of people that died and went missing in one day. It is estimated between 6,000 to 10,000 lost their lives. Over 3,500 buildings were demolished singlehandedly, and historians believe restoration exceeded 20 million dollars. If inflation is considered, that would be around 700 million in today’s currency.

When discussing the stats of the storm that hit the town in 1900, it is determined that it was a category 4 hurricane. “Cline reported that winds increased steadily throughout the

afternoon, reaching a sustained velocity of 100 miles per hour shortly after 6:00 p.m. – at which time the station’s anemometer was blown away. Within another two hours, wind speeds were estimated in excess of 130 miles per hour” (A Difficult Prediction, 2017). It is rare for such a powerful hurricane to make landfall.

There are reports that can still be found today claiming that ships had recorded late that summer of some disturbances in the water that may or may not be a storm. During those days, meteorologist were soon learning how to forecast a storm, however they still did not have the technology to determine how strong it could be or even where it would go. To this day, scientist still struggle to predict where a hurricane will make landfall, and the damage that it may cause. The only thing that could help weathermen in those days where the ships out at sea that happened to be near or even in the middle of the storm itself. “Those shipboard observations were recorded in logs and then communicated, when possible, to other ships by semaphore. In 1900, wireless ship-to-shore telegraphy was still experimental; weather reports made from sea could only be telegraphed on land, well after the observation itself had been made, and sometimes much later” (Roker, pg. 23, 2015). This form of forecasting could only predict and record so much data. The storms would soon move over thousands of miles on the ocean untracked, until it hit the shore.

Cubans had some of the best tracking technology on predicting the paths of hurricanes, but American’s hubris at the time interfered with getting any form of information from the islanders. The Cubans knew that the storm was going to be violent, and they also predicted that it would hit Texas. The relationship between the two countries during those time caused the Americans to ignore warnings and any other sort of communication with the Cubans. This was all because Willis Moore who happened to be the director of the United States Weather Bureau

believed that their information was inaccurate, and that they warned for massive storms that never followed through causing unnecessary panic among the populace. The Cubans did try reaching out to warn Moore, but they couldn't get through due to the phone lines being cut off. Father Gangoite sat back helplessly in Cuba, hoping that the Americans would soon catch onto the storm heading their way relentlessly.

Another important figure that stood out during this storm is a meteorologist known as Isaac Cline. He was the one that predicted something bad was about to befall on the town. Everyday he would precisely read his instruments with unwavering dedication. This man happened to be not only Galveston's chief meteorologist, but also head of Texas U.S. Weather Bureau, and he took his job very seriously. Anything that seemed to be out of the ordinary was his duty to report. In the beginning of the week, he had noticed nothing unusual, until readings started appearing different than normal. Cline was very meticulous with his readings of the barometer, thermometer, anemometer, weathervane rain gauge and the hygrometer which were all tools important in forecasting weather. He had to record readings at the same exact times every day multiple times a day.

Cline was very knowledgeable in predicting weather. He could forecast when there were oncoming freezing conditions in enough time for farmers to protect their crops. He also predicted a flood in Colorado ten days in advance, which prevented any lives from being lost. It wasn't till that Friday morning when the Weather Bureau had decided that things could possibly not go the way they had originally predicted that Cline felt unconfident in his readings. Isaac and his brother spent all day busy trying to find something that could support the hypothesis of dangerous weather. The Cline brothers then started to see something was off and spent the

duration of Saturday heading warnings to the towns people. It was unfortunately too late for many to get a train off the island.

The Galveston Storm of 1900 was truly tragic. The stories that survivors tell is not only gruesome, but tear jerking. Perhaps if the Americans didn't cut communications with the Cubans it could have saved thousands of lives. Maybe if Cline had voted in favor of building a seawall when it was suggested, it could have lessened some of the damage. This disaster did influence the Weather Bureau to rethink and adopt new hurricane forecasting techniques. Moore was also relieved from the Weather Bureau in 1913. It appeared more so that the amount of lives loss was due more so over human error then from the storm itself. If they had built that seawall or perhaps headed the warnings the Cubans were trying to send then perhaps the Galveston Storm of 1900 wouldn't be the worst natural disaster in American History.

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