

# 75th Anniversary: New England's Greatest Hurricane

By CHRIS JENSEN · SEP 19, 2013



*Flooding in Ware, Massachusetts effortlessly tore out a stone bridge.*  
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That odd color of the sky.

On September 21, 1938 that's what worried Beatrice Dorsey, a 10-year-old living in Plainfield, New Hampshire.

"The sky above my house was green. It was pretty scary, that ominous green," said Dorsey.

Dorsey and many other New Englanders didn't know that green sky meant the most damaging hurricane to hit New England was on its way.

“For most people it was a complete surprise,” said Plymouth State [associate professor Lourdes Aviles](#) who has written a new book about the hurricane: “Taken By Storm, 1938.”

Aviles said hurricanes were rare in New England.

Big storms typically came up the East Coast and courteously veered out to sea. That’s what forecasters figured this storm would do.

“But this one didn’t because of the meteorological patterns at the time,” she said.

This storm’s power increased. It became a hurricane.



*High water and winds brought boats and houses together in Rhode Island.*  
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Late in the afternoon it smashed into Long Island and then Southern New England with sustained winds of 120 miles per hour combining with high tide.

“A huge storm surge came in. In some places more than 20 feet,” said Aviles. “Specially in Providence, Rhode Island. And this is when most of the deaths occurred. People who were out and about. Beach outings.”

It is estimated almost 700 people died in New England.

Then the hurricane began moving inland, covering about 50 miles each hour, says Aviles.

Typically the storm took about three hours – from start to finish - to move through an area, according to a 1938 report by the American Red Cross.

It was a terrifying three hours.

The highest wind measured during the storm was 186 miles per hour at the Blue Hill Observatory in Milton, Massachusetts.

There wasn't much of a chance to warn people, particularly in rural areas like Gilsum where Marjory Trombley lived.

She was 11 years-old, living in a farmhouse with her mother and grandmother, and their house had never been hooked up for electricity.

"We didn't even know it was a hurricane until it was over. Imagine that," she said.

In Northern New England the hurricane arrived with rain and wind.

But it had been raining for several days so that wasn't alarming to Beverly Shaw who lived with her family on a bluff overlooking Woodsville.

Then the wind increased and windows began blowing out. The wind was so strong it carried small stones into the house where they landed, making a pile on a table.

"My mother would say, 'Now children. God is going to take care of us. God loves us,'" Shaw remembered.

But then, Shaw said, her mother would scream for her husband who was trying to board up the broken windows.

At one point the family realized the youngest daughter, Betty, was missing.

“She was in the closet, looking for an umbrella in case we had to go out in this crazy storm,” Shaw said.

Over in Berlin Cecile DuBois was 18-years-old, working as a hair dresser at her family’s home.

She looked out the window and as the winds got worse and worse it was clear this was something special. Something specially bad.

Her last customer of the day was too afraid to leave.

They hunkered down wondering what would happen.

“And it was a very, very frightening night,” she said.

Aviles said as scary as those winds were New Hampshire didn’t get the worst of it.

“Throughout Northern New England fifty or 60 mile per hour winds and gusts were very common. That is quite enough to knock down trees but the true, major hurricane winds happened in the very southern portions of the region,” she said.

Tens of millions of trees were downed in New England. They blocked roads, took down electric and telephone lines and damaged buildings.

Marjory Trombley of Gilsum remembers how a friend of hers struggled to get around.

“He had to walk home on top of trees and that used to fascinate me,” she said.

And the wind also took an odd toll on a local cemetery, Trombley remembered.

“It rooted up some trees and not a lot but a few caskets came up and were floating around and I never forget that,” she said.

[A 1938 report by the government’s Federal Writers Project](#) said the amount of timber “mowed down” in Grafton and Coos was thought to be about the same as would be cut over six normal years.

The sudden loss of so many trees saddened people, said Aviles. They’d lost a familiar landscape.

It had been raining hard for several days before the hurricane, so rivers and streams were already high. Consequently anyplace close to a river was flooded, says Aviles.

Late in 1938 the Federal Writers Project – which sent reporters and photographers throughout New England - published a 221-page report on the hurricane. Among its findings in New Hampshire:

\* North Weare was the scene of what it called “the greatest New Hampshire tragedy.” Four women were standing on the bridge sightseeing, when it collapsed throwing them into the “torrent.”

\* In Petersborough a fire broke out in the business district. Flood waters kept fire fighters from reaching it. Embers floated onto other buildings and some residents thought the only reason the entire town didn’t burn was that the buildings were already soaked.

\* In Manchester only 10 minutes after a group of women working at the Cohas Factory Building left “more than half the top floor was swept away.”

\* The night of the hurricane Concord was cut off because roads were either flooded or blocked by downed trees. And there were no lights. At disaster headquarters candles were used.

\* In Canaan the storm tore off a church steeple, flipped it over and put it back upside down.

\* The Crawford and Franconia Notches were closed.

\* Farmers said three-quarters of the McIntosh and almost all the Baldwin apples were lost.

\* In the flooded farming areas there were problems trying to rescue sheep and cattle who refused to swim. “Five hundred volunteers mobilized to save poultry from the waters of the Contoocook.”

\* “Dams burst at Deering and North Weare, carrying away more than a dozen bridges.”

\* In front of the State House in Concord five 100-year-old elm trees were blown down. But “the famous statue of Daniel Webster, although hit by one of the trees, came through without a scratch.”

The storm took a toll in New Hampshire, says professor Aviles.

“There were 12 killed in New Hampshire and the damages were about \$12.3 million in 1938 dollars. That would be about \$200 million right now,” she said.

That didn’t include the timber loss.

According to Aviles’ research throughout New England:

- \* Almost 20,000 structures were damaged.
- \* About 26,000 automobiles lost.
- \* About 6,000 boats lost.
- \* Railroads were out for as long as two weeks.
- \* Eighty percent of people with electricity lost it.
- \* There were at least 1,000 railroad or road washouts and 100 bridges gone.
- \* Almost 325,000 sugar maples were lost.

If that hurricane occurred today the loss in New England would be \$40 billion to \$55 billion, according to a [2008 study by Risk Management Solutions](#), a consulting group.

“It is still the most devastating and expensive New England hurricane. Any recent weather event that you can think of doesn’t even come close,” Aviles said.

Starting Friday night Aviles has an exhibit at the [Mount Washington Observatory Weather Discovery Center in North Conway](#) about the effects of the hurricane.

It is called [“The Great Blowdown” and is sponsored by Plymouth State’s The Museum of the White Mountains.](#)

It is free and continues through the end of the year.

For a newsreel of the hurricane by the federal Works Project Administration go [here](#).

Beatrice Dorsey, Cecile DuBois and Majory Trombley were interviewed at The Morrison in Whitefield.



*The Merrimack flooding.*

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<https://www.nhpr.org/post/75th-anniversary-new-englands-greatest-hurricane#stream/0>