

Boylston - A Maze of Trees

The Great Hurricane of 1938

by Carrie Crane



Tree Down in Old Burial Ground

Boylston Center

BHSM Archives Collection

As I sit down to write this, there are three tropical disturbances in the eastern Atlantic Ocean with varying chances of developing into hurricanes. In this day and age, anyone interested can track the development and direction of these storms on their laptop or phone and if those are not available, the weather news will let everyone know, repeatedly and often in a dramatic fashion.

This was not the case in 1938 when on September 10, off the east coast of Africa and the Cape Verde Island, a tropical storm developed. The storm made its way west across the Atlantic aiming for Florida but before reaching land it turned northward. With storm forecasting in its infancy, most forecasters believed the storm would continue heading in a northeast direction away from land, and spend its energy over the ocean. Instead, it charged due north heading directly for the New England coast. Quickly developing into a Category 3 hurricane, it was a fast-moving storm traveling at 50 miles per hour and was later aptly named the Long Island Express. (The official naming of storms did not begin until 1953.)



Worcester Telegram Headlines of September 22, 1938

BHSM Archives Collection: Mary E. French Scrapbook

If news of the storm's existence reached anyone, it likely reported the storm was to move out to sea. Its change of course and advance toward New England was mostly unknown. As the storm moved north, on September 20 and 21st, it was already raining in most of New England. It had been for several days leaving already saturated ground. When the storm made landfall in Brentwood, Long Island at 1:00 p.m. on the 21st and then shortly after in New Haven, CT, the rains intensified. But it was not until the winds picked up that residents began to suspect this was not just another rain storm.

The coasts of Long Island, Connecticut, and Rhode Island were decimated by wind, rain, and massive storm surges. The storm pushed on, continuing its rapid pace north along the Connecticut River, through the middle of Massachusetts, and on into New Hampshire and Vermont. The effects of the storm were wide spread making a 90-mile swath as it moved north. The heaviest rains and strongest wind, as typical for hurricanes, were on the northeast side of the storm.

Worcester County lay in the northeast and therefore most dangerous quadrant of the storm. There was damage to be seen everywhere. In the city of Worcester, the Unitarian Church on Main Street was completely destroyed leaving just the facade standing. Steeples of five other churches fell and an entire wall of the Classic High School collapsed.



Trees down in Pine Grove Cemetery, crushing the hearse house

BHSM Archives Collection: Mary E. French Scrapbook

Late in the afternoon of the 21st September 1938, the hurricane stomped through Boylston. The greatest damage was caused by falling trees and downed telephone and electric lines. Oscar

Silverman, a reporter for the Worcester Evening Gazette described his travails traveling through town, attempting to get to Worcester after being caught by the storm in Clinton:

"The wind howled and the rain came in torrents and there wasn't any real danger - so we thought.

All that changed as we proceeded toward the city. In Old Boylston, havoc caught up with us. There were trees down on every side. It was like driving through an uprooted forest."

"We kept traveling. And then we stopped-or were stopped-as trees made the highway impassable. It was probably a mile south of Old Boylston. We watched the wind play with a roof, nudging it from two sides until it finally took it away. We watched trees and telephone poles swing in all directions and split."



**Tree Pulling Down Electrical and Telephone Wires
in front of the Sawyer Memorial Library**

BHSM Archives Collection

Boylston's Arthur Flagg was a bus driver for the Boylston students who attended the Boys Trade School and Girls Trade School in Worcester. He describes his experience with the hurricane in a 1993 interview with BHSM interviewer, Dave Cole.

"I was in Worcester picking up the kids, the last trip coming home up Lincoln Street. Wind was blowing really hard and raining really hard and what I saw was trees, every once in a while, you'd see a tree fall right down, just fall down like a match stick and we managed to get home to Boylston without being hit.....When we got to Boylston I pulled over by the common, by the hay scale, there used to be a hay scale there, and let the kids out. They say, where I stopped the bus to let the kids off, that the flag pole snapped off and fell right where I had parked. We were very lucky we didn't get hit."

"I got over to the Fuller's and it was terrible. He had a greenhouse and it was starting to fall apart because the wind got inside and was lifting up the greenhouse. So I worked with him until probably 7 o'clock putting boards on top of the greenhouse and holding it together the best we could. I had my car there and now I had to go home. Well, I couldn't drive home with all the trees down so I started to walk home. I got down to Old South Road (now Rt. 140, but a more rural road then) and I bumped along, it was dark and I would run into something and it would be a tree across the road. I can remember this as plain as day. Finally, I got up on route 70 and I walked home. When I got home there were two pine trees laying against my house but they didn't do damage to the roof."



**Main Street Clean Up with Onlookers
The Day After the Storm**

BHSM Archives Collection: Mary E. French Scrapbook

James Temeyer of Cross St in Boylston, describes his experience with the hurricane with BHSM interviewer, Dave Cole:

“Before the storm, we had a series of rainy days and the ground was quite saturated. The day that the storm come up, I noticed the wind was blowing quite hard but I didn’t pay any attention to it, I was milking cows for Harold French at that time and I went down to milk and in the barn, the barn door was weaving back and for and someone had the brainwave to throw it wide open which was probably one of the worst things we could have done. Calvin Andrews came down with Harold French and saw the door and said no, no don’t leave the door like that, close it up tight.”

“Going home, trees were coming down. It was starting to get a little bit dark and it was scary at the time. You could hear them break but you couldn’t see them. At that time the light department had an old line truck and that’s all they had, no bucket trucks or anything and they had to climb poles with a pair of spurs, no chainsaws, and no front-end loaders, skidders, or things like that. Everything you had to do, you had to do by hand. Run a crosscut saw or axes.”

“Cleaning up the storm damage, you tried to salvage as much as you could but it was almost impossible. In town after things got quieted down, they had two sawmills. There was what they called the “government” mill up on Central St. That was what they called a dry site. They brought in logs from all the surrounding towns and sawed them up into boards and stacked them. In other areas where there was a lot of logs, they put them in ponds so the borers wouldn’t get to them. Howard Cutler had a saw mill and cut up boards and everybody said that’s foolish all that lumber, who’s going to buy it, but it was just before World War II and there was a heck of a demand for it so they made good.”

The clean up after the storm went on for years throughout New England and had a lasting effect on the forests. While some sawmills did well, woodlot owners were suffering. According to Stephen Longley in his 2013 article in Northern Woodlands Magazine:

“All told, an estimated 2.6 billion board feet were blown down. To put that in context, a typical truckload of logs holds 6,600 board feet. It would take almost 400,000 of these trucks to transport the wood that was blown down.”

The Northeast Timber Salvage Administration (NETSA) was established in 1939 to help woodlot owners collect and process the downed trees. It is likely that the “government” mill that James Temeyer speaks of above was part of this program.

While the damage to buildings and trees was substantial, another curious natural event took place that day and we can still see the results. On Rocky Pond, on the east side of town, the water level was already high due to the previous days’ rain. Nestled in a cove on the southwest corner of the pond was a thick floating bog. As the winds picked up and the rain fell, the already high water continued to rise and further loosen the bog from the pond bottom. By the end of the night on September 21, the entire bog had been blown across the water and was resting on the west bank of the much to the dismay of the cabin owners who lost their waterfront. But the delight of those who gained some. Today that bog is still found along the left bank and appears fully rooted in place.

We are now in the peak of hurricane season for New England, and have reached E (for Earl) in the named-storm alphabet, with more storms likely to form in the Eastern Atlantic. This time, though, if a storm is headed our way, we will have plenty of notice and time to prepare for it.

Acknowledgements:

Editor, Nancy A. Filgate, Director, Boylston Historical Society & Museum, 7 Central Street, Boylston, Massachusetts

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