

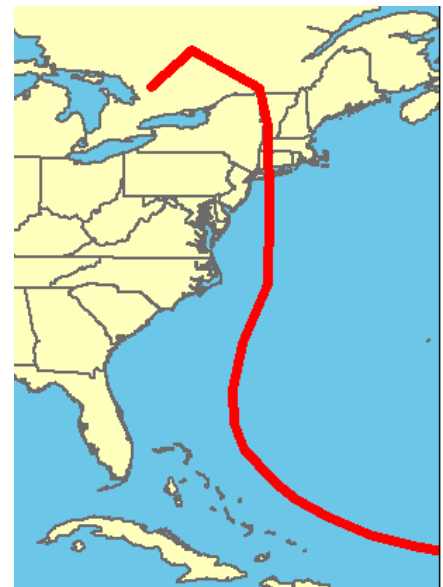
March 24



The Great New England Hurricane of 1938

While we get our fair share of bad weather in New England, it is thankfully a rarity that the area sees anything too disastrous compared to most other States. Though the 2011 October Nor'easter and 2012 Hurricane Sandy remain fresh in our minds, in almost all nationwide rankings New England states are always found in the bottom half of natural disaster frequency. The states of New England consistently rank around the top ten as the safest from disasters of this kind (Vukovic; McCann; Louis). Then it may come as a shock that Southern New England was the site of one of the most destructive and deadliest natural disasters to ever hit the United States. On September 21st, 1938, a major category-3 hurricane would barrel north through Long Island and into New England, causing severe damage and casualties to all states except Maine. It stands today as the worst storm New England has ever faced. At the time, it was considered the most financially destructive natural disaster in U.S. history - worse than the Chicago Fire of 1871 or the Great 1906 San Francisco Earthquake (Scotti).

The storm arrived sandwiched between two other disasters: The worst of the Great Depression and looming hostilities in Europe. America had been on the path to recovery since the worst of the Great Depression in 1933. However, in 1937 and through most of 1938, the United States suffered from a recession. Unemployment rose again to 19% in 1938 and manufacturing output plummeted 37% from the year prior. Over in Europe, tensions continued to rise in the prelude to World War Two. Germany had annexed Austria in March of 1938 and talks were already underway for Germany to gain possession of the "Sudetenland" regions of Czechoslovakia. Besides these troubles in the news and in daily life, what made matters worse was that the storm was a surprise and people on the coast did not have an adequate amount of time to prepare beforehand. A scenario which is unimaginable with today's technology. The storm began off the west coast of Africa in early September. Ships in the Atlantic Ocean reported its trajectory and meteorologists in Florida expected it to make landfall in their state on September 19th. After the approaching storm curved North and away from Florida, forecasters had assumed it went out to sea (Ellis). On



*Path of the 1938 New England Hurricane.
Source: Wikimedia Commons.*

the morning of September 21st, forecasters in Washington D.C. issued a storm warning along the coast from Atlantic City through the tip of Maine. At the same time, they downgraded the hurricane status to a tropical storm, underestimating its size and speed. The Washington office also incorrectly identified the location when it was only 50 miles south of mid-Long Island (National Weather Service).

The storm barreled through Long Island, leaving 50 people dead and altering the topography of Long Island by creating many new inlets. The storm then made contact with Connecticut's coast with wind speeds reaching 115 miles per hour. New Haven would observe very heavy rain, flooding, and loss of power but escaped the worst of the storm along with westward towns (National Weather Service). Towns east of New Haven would not be as lucky. Docks along the coast were immediately destroyed, boats hurled onto streets, and beachfront cottages swept away. This shoreline storm surge would cause the greatest loss of life. Old Saybrook was hit with waves 17 feet above mean high water. Katharine Hepburn's summer home in Old Saybrook was broken apart and ended up half a mile away from its foundation (Goudsouzian 23). Katharine and other members of the family narrowly escaped the property before its destruction, resulting in the loss of almost all of her belongings (Hepburn).



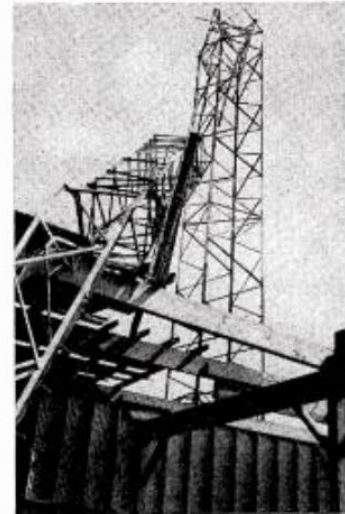
Katharine Hepburn standing on the beach at Fenwick, Old Saybrook. Rubble and aftermath of hurricane (1938). Source: Connecticut Museum of Culture and History collection 2009.62.5.



Hurricane and fire damage to train tracks and surrounding buildings in New London, CT (1938). Source: Charles B. Gunn Collection, Archives & Special Collections UConn Library, licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

New London was particularly hit hard. Roofs ripped off buildings, glass from smashed windows careened down streets, trees lay uprooted blocking transportation, pavement peeled from the ground, and downed electrical wires hung into the rising water. A large sailing ship that was anchored in the harbor was blown across railroad tracks adjacent to the shore and struck the Humphrey-Cornell building causing a fire to erupt. The fire quickly spread to other buildings in the lower harbor area. Firefighters attempted to respond while also clearing road debris. All

communication was lost between the fire station and firefighters on duty. The wind easily knocked the men over and even snapped water mains. Eventually, crews began to utilize the salt water from rising tides but found that the wind caused the water stream from their hoses to dissolve into a spray at only ten feet. Other local fire departments along with the Coast Guard responded to the blaze, ultimately containing it after 10 hours. Thirteen buildings had already burnt to rubble (Goudsouzian 26). Connecticut's first radio station east of the Connecticut River, WNLC, was located in New London and started just two years prior to the storm. It would be the worst hit of all New England radio stations. A tidal wave caused by the storm smashed through the transmitter building while strong winds broke its radio tower in half (Broadcasting Magazine 26). WNLC continued to supply news for the next few weeks using the speaker system in the lobby of the Mohican Hotel.



*WNLC radio tower broken in two.
Source: Broadcasting Magazine vol
15, No. 8 (October 15, 1938) pg. 26.*

Inland Connecticut also saw destruction. The state had already been inundated with rain for about a week, leaving the Connecticut River water level at the edge of its banks by the time the hurricane arrived. The addition of rain from the storm and strong gusts produced disastrous floods throughout the Connecticut River Valley (Tannehill 287). In most cases, hurricanes tend to lose strength rapidly over dry land as they rely on pulling warm, humid air upward into the warm hurricane core. The pools of shallow water in the valley fed the hurricane, allowing it to travel up the river at a remarkable 70 miles per hour. Sections of the state were underwater: large swaths of Windsor, Wethersfield, Hartford, East Hampton, Norwich, Willimantic, and many more saw seriously damaging floods (Barry). A story goes that a man caught a seventeen-pound carp while



*Aerial survey of hurricane damage to Westbrook, CT (1938). Source:
Connecticut State Library, State Archives PG 160, Box 12.*

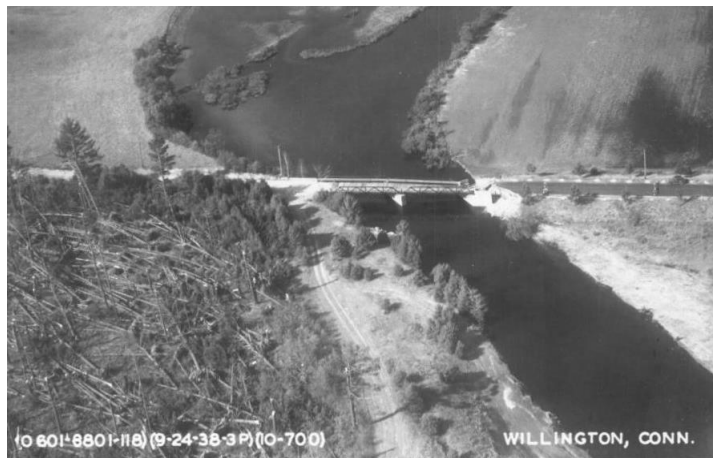
fishing in front of the general store on Main Street, East Hampton after the storm (Goudsouzian 32). Many of Connecticut's iconic tobacco barns and church steeples were lifted into the air. Roofs of mills were torn off and pieces of the factory buildings struck residents; this occurrence claimed at least a few lives throughout the state (Barry). In the State Capital, National Guardsmen patrolled the street in boats. The Connecticut River had risen over 33

feet by the 22nd of September. Most of the city was flooded, but the southeast neighborhood section was saved by a team of over 1,200 government laborers, veterans, college students, and volunteers that built a levee of sandbags along the dikes near the Colt factory (Goudsouzian 35).



Aerial Survey of hurricane damage to Hartford, CT (1938). A scene of intense flooding. Source: Connecticut State Library, State Archives PG 160, Box 11.

The coastal regions of Massachusetts and especially Rhode Island suffered immensely from the 1938 hurricane. Overall, it affected New York, all New England states, and reached up into Quebec. The storm's damage footprint was 15 million acres - three times the size of Massachusetts (Shipley). Reports and estimates of the damage fluctuated in the days following. On September 22nd, Connecticut newspapers were already reporting the death count at 157 and that damage was in the millions in various towns (The Waterbury Democrat). By October, the American Red Cross reported 488 lives lost in the hurricane, 100 people still missing, and that 93,122 families were facing serious economic losses. We know today that the grand total of lives lost is estimated to be 682 fatalities with 90 of those fatalities occurring in Connecticut (Scotti). Thousands were now homeless. The total economic loss from the storm in all areas that were affected was estimated to be at least \$250,000,000 with an upper estimate of \$330,000,000 (Tannehill 288). Adjusted



Aerial Survey of hurricane damage to Willington, CT (1938). Bridge out and downed trees on the Willington/Storrs line. Bridge on Tolland Turnpike Rd. Source: Connecticut State Library, State Archives PG 160, Box 11.

for inflation, that would be a shocking average of 6.34 billion dollars today. The Great New England Hurricane still holds the record for being the deadliest and costliest storm in New England history. Despite this, the storm fell into relative obscurity outside of New England. The hurricane had to share the front page of newspapers with stories regarding the escalation of war tensions in Europe. Great Britain's Neville Chamberlain would meet with Adolf Hitler regarding his demands of Czechoslovakian territory the day after the hurricane, often relegating the devastating 1938 New England hurricane to a side story.



Front page of *The Evening Star* on September 23rd, 1938, Washington D.C. The situation in Europe commands the top story. Source: Library of Congress, [Chronicling America](https://www.chroniclingamerica.org/).

Ryan Elgin serves as EC-CHAP Assistant Director, Curator of the Gardiner Hall Jr History Museum, and Volunteer Coordinator. He may be contacted directly at ryan@ec-chap.org.

The Gardiner Hall Jr Museum is open to the public Saturdays from 10:00am to 12:00pm. For more information, please call 518-791-9474.

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