



Dennis Historical Society Newsletter September 2019

Volume 42, No9

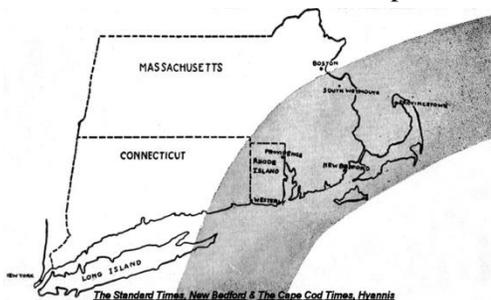
Dennis Historical Society – copyright 2019 Internet: www.dennishistoricalsociety.org E-mail: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org
**The Next Board Meeting, Tuesday, September 10th, 2:00 pm, Dennis Public Library, 5 Hall Street, Dennis Port
 Members Welcome!**

Please send information & stories for the newsletter to Dave Talbott at the DHS Website email address: info@dennishistoricalsociety.org

The 1944 Hurricane turns 75

The summer of 1944 was another difficult one for most Cape Codders. The war continued to rage in Europe and in the Pacific, although by the end of August, there was good news from both theaters. Paris was liberated on the 25th, and US forces were approaching the Siegfried Line, the west wall of the defense of Germany itself. In the Pacific, the Marines were readying for an amphibious assault on Peleliu Island, as US forces continued their march toward Japan. Despite the encouraging war news, rationing continued to impact everyday life and would until the following summer. Families endured long separations, as many Cape Cod men and women were in uniform and away serving their country. Meanwhile, a local disaster was impending!

On September 4th, a tropical wave was first identified well east of the Lesser Antilles in the Caribbean, east of Puerto Rico. By late in the day on September 12th, it had strengthened to a Category 4, and the United States Weather Bureau in Miami had christened it the "Great Atlantic Hurricane." Fortunately, for Cape Cod, when the storm reached the cooler waters off the coast of Cape Hatteras on September 13th, it began to weaken. By the time it reached



southeastern Massachusetts, sustained winds had decreased to 100 miles per hour, still a very formidable storm! Fortunately also, unlike the infamous 1938 Hurricane, there was adequate warning. Unfortunately, even though a less violent storm than 1938, which made landfall in Narragansett Bay, the Cape was almost in the crosshairs in 1944. It struck on the night of September 14th between 9 and 10 pm and by midnight winds howled at 100 mph, gusting higher, and the rain was a blinding deluge. The results were devastating; houses were blown or washed away; trees were uprooted and toppled; boats were torn from their moorings and wrecked; windows were

shattered by the thousands. Phyllis Horton remembers that a window shutter with a very distinctive design came crashing through her kitchen window. When the storm had passed and it was safe to venture out to assess the damage, a house with similarly distinctive shutters could not be found. It had must have been totally destroyed.



(West Dennis Methodist, now Community, Church)



(Rt. 28, bridge across Swan River)



(Beach in Dennis Port)

(All hurricane images in this newsletter, except storm track, are from the Dennis Historical Society Archives)

It was a night of terror and destruction. We are all so fortunate to have a firsthand account of how this hurricane impacted Dennis through the eyes of our gifted writer and historian, Nancy Thacher Reid. The following excerpt is from Nancy's beloved volume, *Dennis, Cape Cod*.

We had ample warning, and Cape Cod was mentioned as being in the path the storm would most likely follow. Yet the weather on September 13th denied the forecast. It was a quiet—almost eerily quiet—afternoon, and people were inclined to ignore, or halfheartedly follow the advisories to tie down and secure. Only a few folks went so far as to fill the bathtub and buy flashlight batteries. Most of us just continued to listen periodically to our only local radio station, WOCB in West Yarmouth, for more weather advisories. The news was not good. The next day the sale of batteries was up and boats began to disappear from the river and Sesuit Harbor.

By nightfall of September 14, the wind had already begun to increase, and it was evident that Cape Cod was in for a bit of a blow. The question was how big a blow? And how high a tide would accompany the wind? As the hours went by, we were glad we had gone down to the river to bring the canoe home and were seriously considering filling the bathtub as had been suggested.

By bedtime, everyone was on edge, as the winds reached gale force, and the skies turned lowery. In our house, at least, we decided to fill the bathtub after all. Mother sent us to bed at the usual hour. "It'll all be over when you wake up, and anyway, what can you see in the dark?" She was right about that—we couldn't see much, but we could hear—the ever-increasing, and downright scary sound of the wind.

There was little sleep throughout that noisy night. By midnight the full force of the storm could be heard around us. Electricity was lost, which made us glad we had bothered to fill the tub, for our water supply depended upon an electric pump. The battery radio had little to add to what we could judge from the sounds of fury around us. WOCB was not broadcasting, and we later learned that the transmitting tower had been bent in two by the 100 plus mile per hour wind. Two huge silver leaf poplar trees that had stood for nearly a century as guards before our front door were eased to the ground by the wind during the night, with no scream of pain, but evoking a cry of anguish when Mother noticed their fall, for she loved those ancient trees. A downstairs bedroom window lost a pane of glass to the pressure of the storm, and Father had quite a time trying to patch it to keep the wind and torrential rain out. And so we lived through that long, frightening, noisy night in darkness, while the wind and tide held sway.

At dawn's first light we could feel the wind losing its grip, and we emerged into the calm of the morning to see for ourselves what the storm had done. A quick glance told us that ours were not the only old trees to bend to the power of the wind. The Main Street which ran in front of our house was impassable, strewn with branches and blocked by massive tree trunks, most of them completely uprooted. With no news from the battery radio, we decided to venture forth to walk around the town to see how others had fared. The sight was awesome! Trees, poles, wires, in jumbled heaps; roads washed away, the dunes at West Dennis beach leveled, the fishing shanties and bathhouse piles of lumber. The tidal surge had been even higher than anticipated, and water still covered Lower County Road and the roads south of it. The lower bridge across Swan Pond River was out. The new dining room at the Lighthouse Inn had been lifted from its floor and deposited in a heap at the bridge across Weir Creek. Guest houses were tossed from their foundations. Down at the Camp Grounds in Dennis Port, the trees in the old pine groves were uprooted, or snapped in two, and trailers and cabins destroyed. The stately trees that had surrounded Toy Village in West Dennis were also blown down, and the steeple of the West Dennis Methodist Church was torn off and thrust through the roof of the building. All of our fears of destruction by bombing which had never materialized were now more than realized in the aftermath of a single night of nature's fury.

A state of emergency was declared and truly existed. The wells near the south shore were contaminated with salt water, but even those which were not were useless if they depended upon electricity to pump them, as most did. The streets were impassable because of downed trees, electric wires and washouts. The boys of the National Guard who were too young to have been sent on active duty were called out to direct what little emergency traffic there was and to protect damaged property from looters. Those with battery radios shared news and advisories with others; those with an oil range shared hot coffee and cooking facilities. The salt water which had been pushed up and over Lower County Road in West Dennis and Dennis Port slowly receded, and the cleanup began. Telephone service and electricity were not restored for days and in some sections, weeks. Schools remained closed for most of the month. Damage was most severe on the south side, but the north side did not escape damage to trees and outbuildings, as well as electric wires. In the more than three hundred years since the English had come to Cape Cod, many great storms had struck the area. Some had been of equal and perhaps greater velocity. Previously, however, the population was not dependent on electricity, telephones and automobiles. No summer cottages and trailer camps existed along the shore, and the beaches

were not the great attraction for the tourist industry which was now the major industry of the Cape. Previous storms had claimed sailing vessels, wharves and the lives of our mariners. The casualties of the Hurricane of 1944 were mostly summer cottages, electric poles and trees. There had been no loss of human life on the Cape. Still, we grieved.



(Cottages in West Dennis)



(Along Bass River)

Cape Cod sustained severe damage from Falmouth to Provincetown. There was more damage to utilities than in 1938. Crews from as far away as Pennsylvania worked for weeks to restore the power. Power was out in Dennis for more than three weeks. The storm demolished 230 homes on Cape Cod and damaged 3,898 buildings. Across the northeast, there were 31 deaths because of the storm, none occurred on the Cape.

In the October 27, 2005 issue of *The Register*, Nicole Muller wrote a terrific article about the 1944 hurricane in which she interviewed and wrote the recollections of Burt Derick, Nancy Thacher Reid, Adelia West and Phyllis Horton. The article is available to read online if you do the following: In the search portion (box) of your browser, type the following: sturgislibrary.org/collections/newspaper-indexes/; next, click on [SEARCH THE ARCHIVES HERE](#); finally, type "weathering the 1944 hurricane" in the search box at the top of the page and click the search icon. You can access back issues of both *The Register* and the *Barnstable Patriot* using this wonderful resource!



"This Unknown House"

This image is from the Digital Archives is photo, circa 1880 from the **Geta Crowell Collection 2** owned by Nancy Kellogg of Concord, MA, a descendant of James Sturgis Howes. Nothing is know about this picture except that the house might have been in East Dennis. It is surely long gone, but the buildings in the background may provide a clue. If anyone can identify the house, or provide any other information about this picture, please email me at: info@dennishistoricalsociety.com.



How many differences?

- Chimney not up through the ridge
- Dog house dormer gone
- No house next door
- No third chimney
- Far right chimney size & location
- Front door location

Although all are explainable they do raise questions.

Editor's Note: I'll have to let the readers decide. "This Unknown House" was tentatively identified as 964 Main Street (6A) in Dennis. I have to say I am not sure even after visiting and photographing the house. If confirmed that it is 964 Main, the first to make the proper identification will be announced in next month's newsletter.

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THE DENNIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY PRESENTS

Pamela Talin-Bryant

Talin Bookbindery in Yarmouth Port

“Taking Care of Your Book Collection”

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 7, 2PM

DENNIS MEMORIAL LIBRARY
1020 Old Bass River Road in Dennis Village

A \$5 donation is recommended



AUTUMN AT THE MANSE

Saturday, September 21, from 1-4pm

Time travel to the 18th century for a very special
one-day-only event at the 1736 home
of the minister for whom Dennis is named

JOSIAH DENNIS MANSE

61 Whig Street in Dennis Village

FREE ADMISSION (donations gladly accepted)

September brings us these two wonderful events, don't miss them!