

An aerial photograph of a large, circular hurricane system over the ocean. The hurricane has a distinct eye and is surrounded by dense, swirling clouds. The ocean is a deep blue, and the sky is a lighter blue. The text "SEA ISLANDS HURRICANE OF 1893" is overlaid in the center of the image.

SEA ISLANDS
HURRICANE OF 1893

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE



“IKE” HILLSBORO, OHIO SEPTEMBER 2008



“MATTHEW” DATAW ISLAND OCTOBER 2016

SETTING THE STAGE

- The US consists of 44 states with a population of 63 million
- Transportation by railroads and ships
- High-speed communication by wire telegraph
- Public information by newspapers
- Bureau provides flood warnings
- President McKinley established a hurricane warning system in 1898



BEAUFORT, SC 1893



THE SEA ISLANDS

- Sea Islands are connected by rail and steamboat
- Some islands are linked by ferries and small bridges
- Small boats provide inter-island travel
- Beaufort County's population is 34,000
- The "islands" are populated mostly by ex-slaves and their descendants who live on small farms



DATHA ISLAND

- Estimate about 16-25 homes and 60-100 people on the island
- All residents are African American farmers
- Cabins may have been near the old slave quarter area; others may have been on the farm lots established on the north end of the island
- The B.B. Sams house (the ruins) was partially destroyed by fire in 1876
- Lewis Reeve Sams house was probably abandoned and partially destroyed by an earlier hurricane

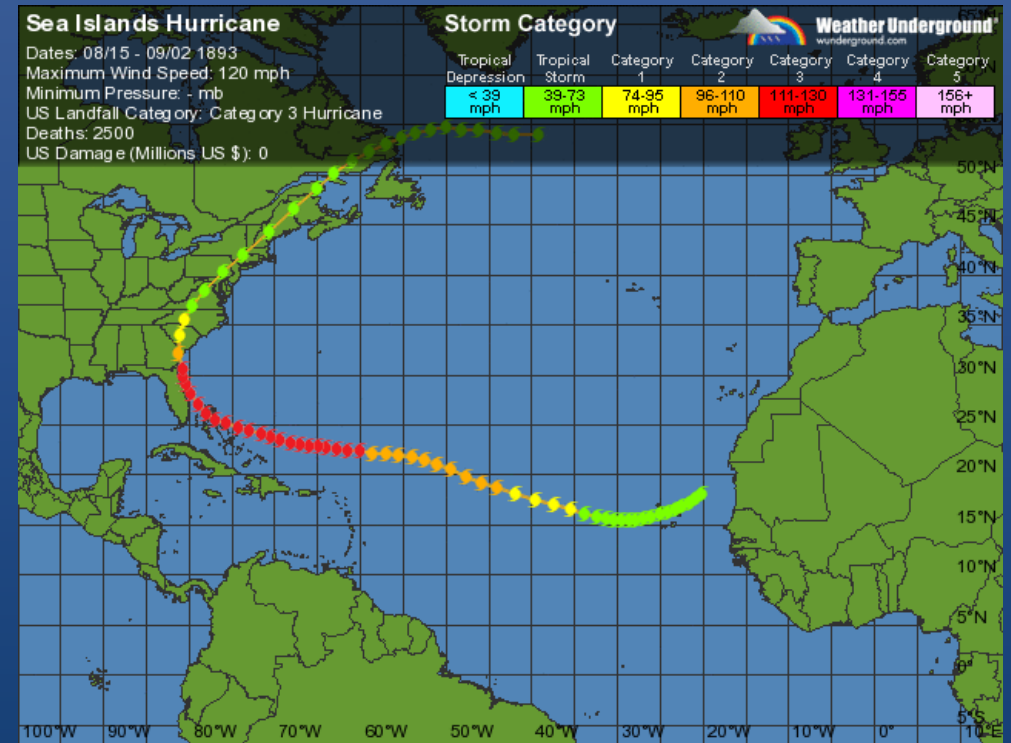


THE STORM

Although the Sea Islands had historical experience with tropical storms, no major hurricane had threatened the area for twenty years.

WARNINGS

- By 1893 the telegraph cable network permitted tropical storms to be tracked
- Charleston gets the first word from the Bahamas on Friday, August 25 of a tropical storm 180 miles east of Florida
- By Sunday morning on the 27th, pilot stations are flying gale warning flags
- By Sunday afternoon, the leading edge of the storm was visible from the barrier islands
- 5:00 PM, the telegraph line from Beaufort to Charleston goes dead



BEAUFORT COUNTY PREPARES

- The city of Beaufort had warned that a major storm was working its way up the coast
- Concern was focused on the phosphate mining dredges on St Helena sound and the ships anchored at Port Royal
- We can assume that since the people had experience with tropical storms, they probably did take steps to secure property; some did in fact evacuate
- But the farmers on the outlying Sea Islands probably had no warnings

THE STORM HITS THE BEAUFORT, LADY'S ISLAND, ST HELENA AREA

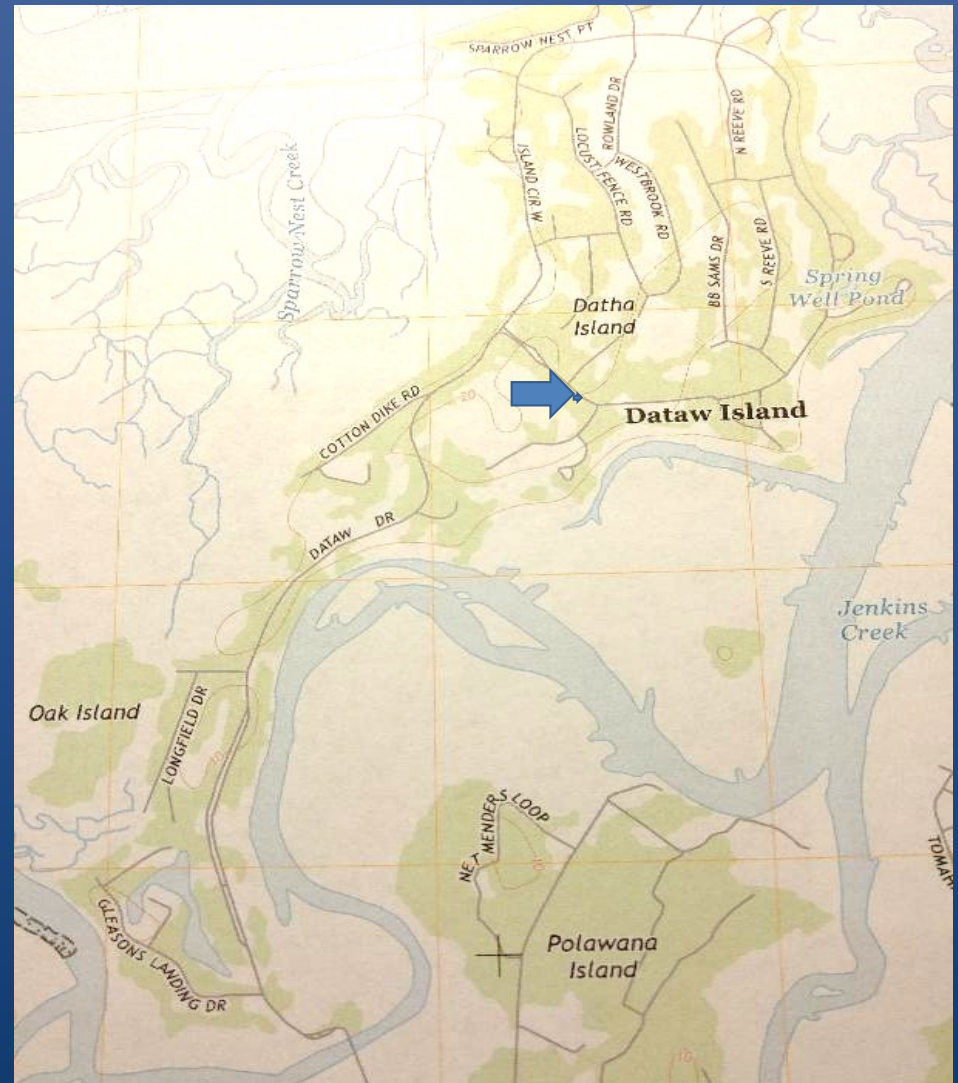
- The low tide that Sunday was at 2:00 PM; for the following six hours, the incoming tide came in with a force that had never before been experienced.
- By high tide, at 8:00 PM twenty-one bridges had been destroyed, as had all the major ferries
- High tide was compounded by a storm surge that was at the time estimated at 15-16 feet
- The eye of the hurricane passed near the city of Beaufort around midnight
- Reports at the time claim hurricane conditions existed in the area for at least fourteen hours

THE STORM HITS (CONTINUED)

- NOAA has said that modeling with their SLUSH program indicated that 30' of tidal water could have occurred
- Datha Island's high point was about 22 feet above sea level
- Most of the island has elevations of 10-15 feet
- High tides in August can run 6-8 feet
- A surge of 15-16 feet over a high tide would cover most of the island
- A tidal wave of 30' would cover everything

DATAW ISLAND TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP SHOWING ELEVATIONS

The high point of the island is a little over 22 feet at about the intersection of Island Circle East and Country Club Drive



STORM SUMMARY

- In 1893 ten hurricanes made landfall in the U.S.
- The 1893 “Season” was one of two on record where four Atlantic hurricanes were active on the same day – Aug 22, 1893
- The 1893 Sea Island Hurricane made landfall at Savannah on Aug 27 and passed over the Sea Islands on Aug 28
- Wind speeds reached 100-120 miles per hour
- The storm maintained hurricane-force winds for about 15 days of its life

THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH



AREA DAMAGE

- No first-hand written reports documenting the damage to Datha Island
- The Beaufort County Library has a collection on the storm that includes twenty photographs of the damage
- “The Sea Islands appeared as if a conflagration had swept the earth and destroyed or withered everything”
- The majority of houses were wrecked or washed away
- Live oaks were the major tree survivors

DATHA DAMAGE

- The live oak at the Sams cemetery obviously survived
- The B.B. Sams house ruins survived
- Sams cemetery was not washed away, but oral tradition says part of the old slave cemetery on Cotton Dike Road was
- Lewis Reeves Sams house at the north end of the island?

AREA CASUALTIES

- The major impact of the hurricane was on human life
- Estimates of deaths range between 1000 and 3000
- In the first week after the storm, the coroner's count had already reached 752
- Almost all victims drowned
- The deaths almost all occurred in the rural black population
- Large numbers of domestic animals were drowned

DATHA CASUALTIES

- Datha area is listed with 37 deaths
- Burials were generally done quickly
- Four graves were discovered in the Curisha Point area
- 40-60% of the island's residents were killed

RECOVERY

FIRST RESPONSE

- There were no FEMA-type organizations
- On Monday, August 30, assessments of the damage began
- Farm animals; homes; crops; and fields
- Lack of communication/transportation
- Sea Island Relief Committee to seek outside assistance and organize the reconstruction



Robert Smalls

ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

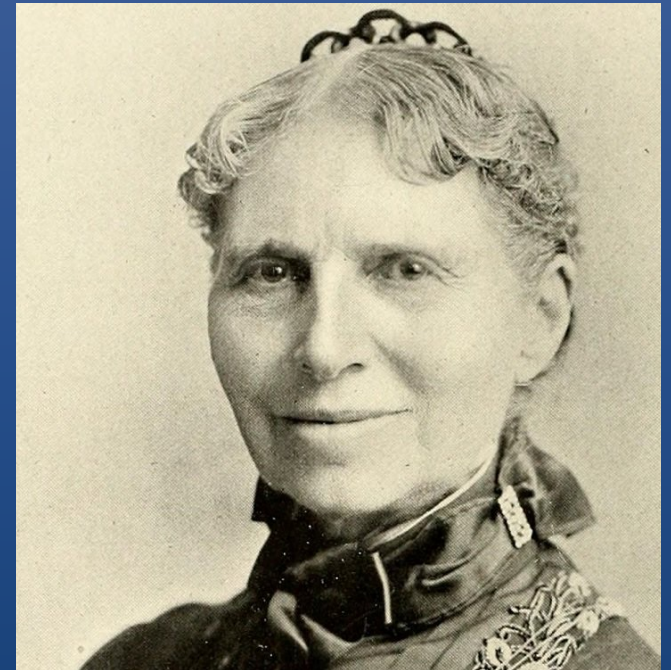
- No established role for government at the state and national effort
- The governor of South Carolina was notified by telegraph the night of August 31
- The legislature was appealed to later in the year
- No immediate assistance was given by the federal government due to the national depression
- Secretary of War provided some tents for temporary housing
- Finally, the following spring, the Department of Agriculture provided seeds for crops



Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman

THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

- In the third week, Governor Tillman made an appeal to the American Red Cross for assistance
- ARC had been established by Clara Barton in May of 1881
- Clara Barton was familiar with the Sea Islands
- Miss Barton coordinated the provision of food and other supplies to over 40,000 people from October to the following June
- Native workers dug over 37 miles of drainage ditches
- ARC coordinated the building of docks, established medical services, and provided materials for home rebuilding
- Aid from the country's private citizenry



Clara Barton

THE RACE FACTOR

- Early newspaper reporting tended to understate the severity of the storm
- Governor “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman
- Partisan political attitude also was apparent in the state and national legislative bodies
- Relief should only be given to those willing to work
- Complaints from white upland farmers

THE FUTURE

- The storm ended the period of economic prosperity for Beaufort County
- Decline and ultimate loss of the phosphate industry
- Suitability of Port Royal Sound facilities for the expanding US Navy
- The Lowcountry black community reverted to their small subsistence farming activity
- Major change at Datha was still ninety years in the future

IN SUMMARY

- The 1893 hurricane still ranks as number four or five in all-time deadliness
- Rated Class 3 by today's standard
- Wrath of the storm was on the black farmers
- State and federal governments played a very minor role in relief efforts
- The destruction of life and property resulted in an economic setback to the area that didn't alleviate for at least 50 years

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