

Name: _____

Date: _____ Period: _____

Supplemental: The Great New England Hurricane

This Day in History

<http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-great-new-england-hurricane>

Without warning, a powerful Category 3 hurricane slams into Long Island and southern New England, causing 600 deaths and devastating coastal cities and towns. Also called the Long Island Express, the Great New England Hurricane of 1938 was the most destructive storm to strike the region in the 20th century.

The officially unnamed hurricane was born out a tropical cyclone that developed in the eastern Atlantic on September 10, 1938, near the Cape Verde Islands. Six days later, the captain of a Brazilian freighter sighted the storm northeast of Puerto Rico and radioed a warning to the U.S. Weather Bureau (now the National Weather Service). It was expected that the storm would make landfall in south Florida, and hurricane-experienced coastal citizens stocked up on supplies and boarded up their homes. On September 19, however, the storm suddenly changed direction and began moving north, parallel to the eastern seaboard.

Charlie Pierce, a junior forecaster in the U.S. Weather Bureau, was sure that the hurricane was heading for the Northeast, but the chief forecaster overruled him. It had been well over a century since New England had been hit by a substantial hurricane, and few believed it could happen again. Hurricanes rarely persist after encountering the cold waters of the North Atlantic. However, this hurricane was moving north at an unusually rapid pace—more than 60 mph—and was following a track over the warm waters of the Gulf Stream.

With Europe on the brink of war over the worsening Sude-tenland crisis, little media attention was given to the powerful hurricane at sea. There was no advanced meteorological technology, such as radar, radio buoys, or satellite imagery, to warn of the hurricane's approach. By the time the U.S. Weather Bureau learned that the Category 3 storm was on a collision course with Long Island on the afternoon of September 21, it was too late for a warning.



Westhampton, Long Island

Along the south shore of Long Island, the sky began to darken and the wind picked up. Fishermen and boaters were at sea, and summer residents enjoying the end of the season were in their beachfront homes. Around 2:30 p.m., the full force of the hurricane made landfall, unfortunately around high tide. Surges of ocean water and waves 40 feet tall swallowed up coastal homes. At Westhampton, which lay directly in the path of the storm, 150 beach homes were destroyed, about a third of which were pulled into the swelling ocean. Winds exceeded 100 mph. Inland, people were drowned in flooding, killed by uprooted trees and falling debris, and electrocuted by downed electrical lines.

At 4 p.m., the center of the hurricane crossed the Long Island Sound and reached Connecticut. Rivers swollen by a week of steady rain spilled over and washed away roadways. In New London, a short circuit in a flooded building started a fire that was fanned by the 100 mph winds into an inferno. Much of the business district was consumed.

The hurricane gained intensity as it passed into Rhode Island. Winds in excess of 120 mph caused a storm surge of 12 to 15 feet in Narragansett Bay, destroying coastal homes and entire fleets of boats at yacht clubs and marinas. The waters of the bay surged into Providence harbor around 5 p.m., rapidly submerging the downtown area of Rhode Island's capital under more than 13 feet of water. Many people were swept away.

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Saltaire, Fire Island

The hurricane then raced northward across Massachusetts, gaining speed again and causing great flooding. In Milton, south of Boston, the Blue Hill Observatory recorded one of the highest wind gusts in history, an astounding 186 mph. Boston was hit hard, and “Old Ironsides”—the historic ship U.S.S. *Constitution*—was torn from its moorings in Boston Navy Yard and suffered slight damage. Hundreds of other ships were not so lucky.

The hurricane lost intensity as it passed over northern New England, but by the time the storm reached Canada around 11 p.m. it was still powerful enough to cause widespread damage. The Great New England Hurricane finally dissipated over Canada that night.

All told, 700 people were killed by the hurricane, 600 of them in Long Island and southern New England. Some 700 people were injured. Nearly 9,000 homes and buildings were destroyed, and 15,000 damaged. Nearly 3,000 ships were sunk or wrecked. Power lines were downed across the region, causing widespread blackouts. Innumerable trees were felled, and 12 new inlets were created on Long Island. Railroads were destroyed and farms were obliterated. Total damages were \$306 million, which equals \$18 billion in today’s dollars

Questions:

1. What were the names given to the unnamed hurricane that hit New England?
2. Why did the U.S. Weather Bureau and the chief forecaster overrule Charlie Pierce’s forecast.
3. What evidence was there that the residents of New England were not prepared for the hurricane in 1938?
4. What damages did New England suffer as the hurricane pushed its way northward?
5. What could people have done prior to the hurricane to have minimized damage and loss of life?