

Great Hurricane both blessing, curse to Ocean City

1933 storm cut new inlet at the south end of town, but also proved costly

by Frank D. Roylance | Sun reporter

August 22, 2008



Mountainous waves swept into the resort and covered some of the streets with two feet of sand. Water was still ankle-deep at the time of this photo. Described in the American Meteorological Society's August 1933 weather review as "one of the most severe storms that has ever visited the Middle Atlantic Coast," the slow-moving weather mass dumped 10 inches of rain a day for nearly a week, even before wind gusts as high as 80 mph and a 7-foot tide arrived. (Baltimore Sun file photo)

In the early years of the last century, Ocean City's commercial fishermen had to launch their boats through the surf and drag them and their catch back onto the beach with horses, ropes and pulleys. It was colorful, but inefficient.

If only the government would dig a cut through the barrier island, they argued, they could keep larger boats in the shelter of a bay, gain direct access to the ocean, and inject new life into their fishery.

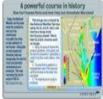
No one guessed that a storm born in the tropical Atlantic was about to intervene and do the work for them, at a heavy cost.

The Great Hurricane of 1933, which struck 75 years ago tomorrow, wreaked havoc from [Norfolk](#) to Atlantic City and killed 13 people in Maryland. It wrecked Ocean City's boardwalk, flooded the town, demolished whole blocks and cut off its rail and road links to the mainland. Damage was estimated at \$7.5 million in today's dollars.

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But after the wind stopped, residents emerged to discover their new inlet at the south end of town. It was like a miracle. Maryland had ponied up \$500,000 to put toward digging just such a cut. But the federal contribution had failed to clear Congress.

Now the inlet had been carved by Nature in just 36 hours. Ocean water, driven across the barrier beach by the hurricane's easterly winds, had piled up in the bay. All that water needed an outlet, and it found a low spot in the storm-battered sand near the south end of the boardwalk.

Water poured through the breach for five days, according to Mary Corddry's book *City on the Sand*. The current ate away at the confining sand, carrying away buildings, railroad tracks and anything else it encountered.

Capt. [John Elliott Sr.](#) watched it all, and Corddry quotes his description to a local reporter in 1974. "We had a big, heavy cement septic tank for our fishing camp," he recalled. "The water got to it, rolled it over and over, and the last we saw of it, it was headed out to sea."

When it was over, the new gap in the sand was four feet deep, 250 feet wide and widening daily. To the south, the Assateague peninsula had become an island. Everyone quickly recognized that this was no calamity, but rather a gift from the sea.

The town's fishermen suddenly had direct access to the ocean. The channel made the shelter of Sinepuxent Bay available for landings by the New England fleet. And the pulse of ocean tides could revive the polluted upper bay's dying shellfish industry.

Politicians like Maryland's U.S. Sen. Millard E. Tydings immediately set about to win federal dollars to secure and improve the inlet and prevent it from clogging with drifting sand.

That's what had happened to another storm-cut inlet, opened in 1920 five miles south of town. The tidal pulse into the bay had spurred clamming and oystering there, but the industry withered after drifting sand closed the inlet in 1928.

Three days after the 1933 storm, Tydings knew it was time to act. "It seems to me the proposal has a timely significance as a public works. It would certainly encourage the people of Ocean City, who have suffered severe property damage," he said.

It was a race against the elements.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, led by Col. E. J. Dent, would have to lay down a stone jetty, reaching some 1,200 feet seaward from the beach, along both sides of the inlet. The north jetty would block the southward flow of sand, and prevent it from resealing the channel.

After dredging to a depth of 10 feet, engineers calculated that the tidal current between the barriers would keep the new channel scoured to the needed depth. Town fathers also hoped it would wash the community's raw sewage out to sea and ease pollution in the bay. The Chamber of Commerce gratefully proposed naming it Roosevelt Inlet.

Work on the \$781,000 project began in October 1933 -- just two months after the storm. By August 1935, the channel had been dredged and the north bank stabilized with concrete. Jetties constructed with Port Deposit stone would follow, but the town's improvised harbor facilities were already handling a large increase in fishing activity.

Seventy-five years later, Ocean City has exploded with high-rise condos and miles of restaurants, shops and asphalt. It has a summer population of more than a quarter million people, and the inlet cut in 1933, as predicted, nourishes a busy commercial and sport fishing port.

Commercial fish landings at the resort last year totaled 10.1 million pounds, valued at \$10.4 million, according to the National Marine Fisheries Service.

Across the inlet, Assateague Island, too, looks nothing like it did in 1933. Starved of sand by the inlet's north jetty, the island's north end has lost its dunes and migrated two-thirds of a mile west, toward the mainland. It is regularly over-washed in storms.

The federal government has launched a 25-year program to pump sand onto the island from offshore bars to slow Assateague's retreat -- yet another echo of that storm 75 years ago.

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