

Seventeenth Century Virginia Hurricanes

Dates before September 2, 1752 converted from the Julian to the Gregorian Calendar

August 4, 1609 (The Tempest): Sir Thomas Gates, future governor of Virginia, was on his way to England from Jamestown. On Saint James Day, while between Cuba and the Bahamas, a "most terrible and vehement storm" raged for 44 hours. One of the small vessels in the fleet sank to the bottom of the Florida Straits. Four of the remaining vessels reached Virginia soon after the storm...followed a few days later by three other ships.

The flagship, known as Sea Adventure, disappeared and was presumed lost. A small bit of fortune befell the ship and her crew when they made landfall on Bermuda. Although the vessel was damaged on a surrounding coral reef, all survived and spent ten months on the unsettled isle. The Spaniards, though shipwrecked on the island many times, had failed to colonize there.

The British claimed the island and quickly settled the subtropical isle. In May 1610, they set forth for Jamestown, this time arriving at their destination.

This near catastrophe provided the inspiration and background for William Shakespeare's play, The Tempest.

August 24, 1635: A major hurricane affected the Virginia coast as it moved to the east of the colony. Despite its impact in New England, no references to damage in Virginia has been found.

1649: A "great storm and tide" destroyed a large quantity of tobacco stored in various rolling houses (Chapman).

September 6, 1667 (The "dreadful hurricane of 1667"): This system is considered one of the most severe hurricanes to ever strike Virginia. On the first, this same storm was reported in the Lesser Antilles. The hurricane devastated St. Christopher as no other storm had done before. The "great storm" went on to strike the northern Outer Banks of North Carolina and southeastern Virginia. The wind turned from the northeast to due south and finally to the west, which suggested a track similar to the August 1933 hurricane, a benchmark storm for the Hampton Roads area in the 20th century (see page 33). This 1667 hurricane lasted about 24 hours and was accompanied by very violent winds and tides. Approximately 10,000 houses were blown over. Area crops (including corn and tobacco) were beat into the ground. Many cattle drowned in area rivers and bays by the twelve foot storm surge and "many people had to flee." The foundations of the fort at Point Comfort were swept into the river. A graveyard of the First Lynnhaven parish church tumbled into the waters. Twelve days of rain followed this storm across Virginia. This system is blamed for the widening of the Lynnhaven river. Ships in regional rivers sustained great damage. Several accounts attest to the fury of this great storm. The first was published in London from Strange News from Virginia.

Sir having this opportunity, I cannot but acquaint you with the relation

of a very strange tempest which hath been in these parts (with us called a hurricane) which had began August 27th (September 6th Julian calendar) and continued with such violence, that it overturned many houses, burying in the ruines much goods and many people, beating to the ground such as were any wayes employed in the fields, blowing many cattle that were near the sea or rivers, into them., whereby unknown numbers have perished, to the great affliction of all people, few having escaped who have not suffered in their persons or estates, much corn was blown away, and great quantities of tobacco have been lost, to the great damage of many, and utter undoing of others. Neither did it end here, but the trees were torn up by the roots, and in many places whole woods blown down so that they cannot go from plantation to plantation. The sea (by the violence of the wind) swelled twelve feet above its usual height drowning the whole country before it, with many of the inhabitants, their cattle and goods, the rest being forced to save themselves in the mountains nearest adjoining, while they were forced to remain many days together in great want.

The tempest, for the time, was so furious, that it hath made a general desolation, overturning many plantations, so that there was nothing that could stand its fury.

The following is a letter from Secretary Thomas Ludwill to Lord Berkeley on the subject of this "dreadful hurly cane" of September 6th gives added information about the cyclone.

Jamestown Colony - this poore country is now reduced to a very miserable condition by a continental course of misfortune. On the 27th of August followed the most dreadful Hurly Cane that ever the Colony (Jamestown) groaned under. It lasted 24 hours, began at North East and went around northerly till it came to west and so it came to Southeast where it ceased. It was accompanied with a most violent rain but no thunder. The night of it was the most dismal time I ever knew or heard of, for the wind and rain raised so confused a noise, mixed with the continued cracks of failing houses.....The waves were impetuously beaten against the shores and by that violence forced and as it were crowded into all creeks, rivers and bays to that prodigious height that it hazarded the drowning of many people who lived not in sight of the rivers, yet were then forced to climb to the top of their houses to keep themselves above water. The waves carried all the foundations of the Fort at Point Comfort into the river and most of furnished and garrison with it.....but then morning came and the sun risen it would have comforted us after such a night, had it not lighted to us the ruins of our plantations, of which I think not one escaped. The nearest computation is at least 10,000 houses blown down, all the Indian grain laid flat on the ground, all the tobacco in the fields torn to pieces and most of that which was in the houses perished with them. The fences about the corn fields were either blown down or beaten to the ground by trees which fell upon them.

The storm passed inland northeast of Jamestown into northern Virginia. A severe storm in Manhattan on the 8th was most likely a continuation of this cyclone, as it recurved northeast. Another hurricane may have passed very close to the

Virginia coastline on September 10th since the "dreadful hurricane of 1667" was accompanied by twelve days and nights of rain.

A second storm passing close to the Virginia coast would have extended the period of rain.

August 18, 1669: This hurricane struck the northern Outer Banks of North Carolina, and most likely affected Virginia.

August 23, 1683: A hurricane which made landfall in Virginia caused a tremendous flood in the Connecticut Valley.

September 5-10, 1683: William Dampier, a sailor and buccaneer, gave a "vivid account" of a hurricane in the North Atlantic, three days after leaving Virginia. He addressed it in his chapter titled "Discourse of the Trade-Winds, Breezes, Storms, Seasons of the Year, Tides and Currents of the Torrid Zone throughout the World," published between 1703 and 1705. This writing became a classic of maritime literature (Ludlum).

October 29, 1693: A "most violent storm in Virginia" stopped the course of old channels and created new ones from Virginia northward to Long Island. The great storm was violent as it passed through Accomack, which was located on the Delmarva peninsula between Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic, sixty miles northeast of Norfolk. This storm may have created Fire Island Cut, to the east of New York City.