

Eighteenth Century Virginia Hurricanes Eighteenth Century Virginia Hurricanes

Chesapeake Bay, an area of shifting sands and sunken ships, is surrounded by the Delmarva peninsula on the east, and mainland Virginia and Maryland on the west. Throughout history, numerous attempts have been made to make the area less dangerous to mariners, often with mixed results. Initially, lightships and lighthouses marked the way....nowadays, beacons and G.P.S. make navigation a much simpler task. No matter what better technology comes along, the weather in the area can be highly volatile. This makes the Bay, even to this day, a dangerous place to traverse. To the left is an enhanced very high resolution satellite picture of the Bay, provided by the National Climatic Data Center.

October 18, 1703: A hurricane caused great damage along the Mid-Atlantic coast. In Maryland and Virginia, many vessels left their moorings. Ten tobacco houses were overturned. Damage occurred northward to Philadelphia. Across the Northeast, northeast winds caused a very cold rain to fall. The timing of this storm was quite unusual, as it followed a very early season snowstorm by eight days.

November 6, 1706: A severe storm raged offshore of Virginia before it swept up the coast. A fleet met the storm soon after departing the Virginia shore. Fourteen ships foundered on the north coast of Cape Charles; those ships that returned sustained extensive damage to masts and sails.

September 17, 1713: A great storm attended by immense inundation affected the Carolinas and Virginia. The effects were most significant in Currituck county, North Carolina near the Virginia-North Carolina border, where the storm surge breached the Outer Banks and opened several inlets into the Currituck Sound. William Byrd, one of the commissioners who established the Virginia-North Carolina boundary, stated
"....There was no tide in Currituck until 1713, when a violent storm opened a new inlet five miles south of the old one, since which convulsion the old inlet is almost choked up by the sand, and grows narrowed and shallower everyday"
One of the new inlets carved out by the storm became the location where the Virginia-North Carolina line begins on the Atlantic coast.

August 23, 1724 (Great Gust of 1724): Almost all tobacco and much of the corn crops were destroyed by a violent tropical storm, which struck Chesapeake Bay. "Violent floods of rain" and "prodigious gust of wind" were seen upon the James river. Some homes were wrecked and several vessels were driven ashore (Ludlum). One ship was wrecked while on the James river. It may have been followed by a second tropical cyclone on the 28th, as rains continued in Virginia for days.

September 15, 1747: The next report of a hurricane in the area came twenty three years after the "Great Gust". A ship load of indentured servants, whose goal was to cross the Atlantic and pay for it with years of servitude, was lost in the Rappahannock river. She was struck just south of Urbanna by a "sudden violent hurricane" and immediately capsized. More than fifty drowned during the storm (Shomette).

October 19, 1749: A tremendous hurricane tracked offshore Virginia, northeast to Cape Cod. At 1:00 a.m. at Norfolk, winds became violent from the northeast. The fury of the storm peaked between 10:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.. In Williamsburg, one family drowned as flood waters carried their house away. At Hampton, water rose to four feet deep in the streets; many trees were uprooted or snapped in two. Torrents of rain flooded northern Virginia and Maryland. The Bay rose to fifteen feet above normal...destroying waterfront buildings.

An account of this tremendous storm was given in the biography of Commodore James Barron, *An Affair of Honor*, by William Oliver Stevens. Barron's grandfather witnessed the hurricane first hand while stationed at Fort George. The account is as follows:

A threatening sky was observed to the southeast over the Chesapeake Bay. The wind increased which soon brought the rain. As the hours wore on the wind and rain increased in fury. Sometimes the downpour slackened. One could hear the sand picked up by the wind from the beach outside and blasted against every object that still withstood the gale. All the while the rising tide was rapidly being piled up to a height never seen before in that area. The waves were pounding on the shore, finally to the very foot of the outside wall at Fort George. A large tree crashed over on its side with its roots in the air and was driven against the land side of the Fort. With the impact the wall yawned and broke. Shortly afterwards the seawall lurched and sank at the point where it was exposed to the wave fury of the storm. Finally the outside wall of the fort gave way, and the filling of sand poured out, leaving the inner wall exposed to the blast without support. When this too fell apart and collapsed, the barracks took the full force of the wind. About sundown, the storm slackened and in another hour the rain and wind had diminished to such a degree that it was clearly spent.

The next morning Commodore Barron swept the distant waters with his spy glass. He was astonished to see across Hampton Roads a wide, sand promontory which had not existed there before. A sand spit had been thrown up during the fury of the storm, which was the beginning of Willoughby Spit.

Another account of the storm given by a letter written at Annapolis, Maryland describes the storm as such:

"....On Saturday October 18th, the wind began to blow hard and by 1:00 a.m. (The 19th) was very violent from the northeast with rain. The hardest portion of the storm occurred from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on the 19th. The bay (Chesapeake) rose 15 feet perpendicular, according to one witness. The tide kept fluxing and ran some small craft nearly a mile from common high water and left some in cornfields. At least four ships were destroyed at the south end of Chesapeake Bay (Shomette). Bodies washed ashore from the shipwrecks for days afterward. Damage in the area totaled £30,000...as currency of the colonies was British. Benjamin Franklin was keeping an eye on this one. It confirmed his hypothesis, the first of its kind, that storms along the coast moved from southwest to northeast (Ludlum).

October 22, 1752: A storm caused great damage in southern Chesapeake Bay. Only one ship, named Peggy and Nancy, was lost during the northeast gale. She was driven ashore on Willoughby Point at 10:00 p.m.. The ship broke up in the morning; only the sails, rigging, and five of her original 338 hogsheads of tobacco could be recovered (Shomette).

September 1761: A hurricane of great strength raked the Virginia and North Carolina coasts.

The schooner Good Intent was overtaken by the storm just after entering the Chesapeake Bay.

This storm also carved a new inlet on the northern Outer Banks of North Carolina.

October 1761: A major hurricane brushed Cape Hatteras and remained east of the Virginia Capes.

September 11, 1766: A hurricane struck the Virginia coast.

September 7-8, 1769: Considered one of the worst storms of the Eighteenth century, this hurricane passed over Williamsburg. Winds increased at 1:00 a.m., blowing a violent gale between 10 and 11 a.m.. Winds increased out of the northwest and continued "until dinnertime". Many old homes and trees were leveled. Heavy rain ruined tobacco crops and flooded roads. Tobacco in storage was also damaged at the warehouse.

Heavy damage was seen in Chesapeake Bay. High winds tore off the top of a wharf at Yorktown; a schooner rammed a nearby storehouse. Four ships in the York river were driven ashore. Two ships on the James River were also wrecked. A vessel from Norfolk, filled with coal from Williamsburg, was forced up to Jamestown before it went to pieces. At least six perished due to shipwreck. The storm tracked northeast along the coast, accelerating as it passed by New England and into Canada.

September 1, 1772: A tropical storm forced fourteen vessels ashore at Ocracoke Bar in North Carolina with 50 persons perishing. It is likely this storm caused significant winds in southeastern Virginia.

August 26, 1773: The Virginia Gazette reported a storm in Virginia.

August 29-September 2, 1775 (The Independence Hurricane): This savage hurricane raged from North Carolina to Newfoundland. Heavy rains began to fall across the colony on the 29th of August and slowly increased with time. The coast was ravaged from Currituck to Chincoteague. Wharves and storehouses on the waterfront of Norfolk were devastated. Bridges were carried away by the raging waters. At Williamsburg, mill dams broke and corn stalks were blown flat. Winds blew furiously until 10:00 p.m.

Many ships were damaged as they were thrown ashore at Norfolk, Hampton, and York. Around twenty-five vessels were run ashore, or "irrecoverable gone." The gun ship H.M.S. Mercury was driven hard aground on Portsmouth Point at 5:00 p.m. on the 2nd. It was stranded in two feet of water for eight days (Shomette). The Liberty became "hopelessly stranded" in Back River, near Hampton. A number of locals boarded her, captured the crew, secured her goods, and set the ship afire in the first outright act of war. A full blockade of Hampton Roads thereafter brought shipping to a halt for three months. At least twenty-five died due to shipwreck.

July 10, 1776: A strong gale played a role in a battle between the Royal Governor of Virginia, Dunmore, and General Lewis of the rebel forces. The royal fleet had been injured prior to the storm by General Lewis' forces and was sailing from Gwynn's Island toward St. George's Island, in the Potomac. The British crew was without water and enduring smallpox when the gale struck. A flour-laden supply ship ran aground. One ship foundered at the Mouth of the Rappahannock, while another was stranded on the Eastern shore (Shomette). The H.M.S. Otter, the Governor's ship, was rescuing another ship in distress. They

were rescued just in time. After loading the distressed ship's cargo, the ship sunk. The governor later left Virginia for good on August 5th. Many ships in the area suffered damage to their rigging, sails, and anchors. Two vessels were driven ashore in St. Mary's county (Shomette).

August 10, 1777: A storm of tropical origin affected the North Carolina and Virginia coasts.

August 12, 1778: A hurricane passed quite near the Virginia coast generally on a track which extended from Charleston, South Carolina through New Bern, North Carolina and was next detected in southeastern New England. It prevented a major naval battle between the British and the French during the American Revolution.

August 11, 1781: A gale prevailed for forty hours at Wilmington, North Carolina moving slowly northward just inside the coastline. This storm probably affected Virginia as well.

October 16, 1781: A storm of "unknown character" struck Virginia. The Earl of Cornwallis, at Yorktown, was trapped by the French Fleet and the Patriot Army, under the command of George Washington. The Earl decided to flee to the north to Gloucester Point under the cover of darkness. A "furious storm" doomed the plan to failure, as seas ran high and every boat was "swamped". He sent forward his flag of truce and surrendered, thus ending the battle (Chapman).

October 8, 1783: The first of three major storms to affect the East coast that month made landfall near Charleston on the 7th. At Richmond, violent winds blew in from the northeast for 24 hours. Norfolk saw a 25 foot rise in the tide, which caused damage there and at Portsmouth totaling around £9000. The reference to 25 foot tides was probably more of a reference to wave heights. This cyclone moved offshore New Jersey and continued past Providence, Rhode Island.

September 22-24, 1785: The "most tremendous gale of wind known in this country" passed over the Lower Chesapeake Bay and went along a track very similar to the Chesapeake-Potomac Hurricane of 1933. At Norfolk, lower stories of dwellings were flooded. Warehouses were totally carried away by the storm surge, causing large amounts of salt, sugar, corn, and lumber to disappear. A large number of cattle drowned, and people hung onto trees for dear life during the tempest. At Portsmouth, the entire town was submerged. Forrest's book, Sketches of Norfolk, offers this account of the storm:

"....This year, 1785, was noted for the highest tide ever before known to Norfolk, completely deluging a large portion of its site on the water side". Almost all ships in the area were driven from their moorings near Norfolk. Many ships were dismasted as well. The brig Nancy, coming from Madiera with a cargo of wine, was dashed to pieces on the Virginia Capes. Only two aboard survived the ordeal. The sloop Phobe lost its bowsprit and was laid upon her beam ends. A Dutch ship was found fully loaded, with no one aboard. Vessels floated inland into cornfields and wooded areas. No less than 30 vessels were seen beached after the storm. Damages totaled £30,000. At least two died due to shipping disasters. After ravaging Virginia, the system tracked up the coast to Boston.

July 23-24, 1788 (George Washington's Hurricane): This storm originated near Bermuda on the 19th before making landfall in Virginia. It passed directly over the Lower Chesapeake Bay and Mount Vernon, the home of George Washington. This track is very similar to the track of the Chesapeake-Potomac hurricane of 1933. At Norfolk, winds increased at 5 p.m. on the 23rd with the wind originating from the northeast. At 12:30 a.m., the wind suddenly shifted to the south and "blew a

perfect hurricane, tearing down chimneys, fences"...some corn was also leveled. In addition, large trees were uprooted and houses were moved from their foundations.

Port Royal and Hobb's Hole experienced a violent northeast gale which drove several vessels ashore. In Fredricksburg, great quantities of corn, tobacco, and fruit were destroyed. Houses and trees fell in great numbers across Northumberland, Lancaster, Richmond, and Westmoreland counties. Crops were destroyed and many livestock perished in Lower Mathews county. Many plantations saw their houses leveled. Homes were flooded with water six feet deep... several inhabitants drowned. Gloucester county was inundated, \$400,000 in damage was incurred.

Historical figures of the time logged the storm's antics. George Washington noted the sinking of the small ship Federalist and uprooted trees. Colonel James Madison, father of the future president, experienced the passing of great winds and rains near Orange. In Alexandria, damage to wheat, tobacco, and corn was "beyond description" (Ludlum).

The schooner Patriot was stranded and bilged near Portsmouth. The schooner Serenity was driven aground at the Portsmouth distillery, proving a total loss. A newly constructed brig, most likely the Neptune, was lifted up from here moorings and left in the main street of town. The Mermaid was dismasted. The Favorite was completely destroyed at Hampton Roads...only two ships in Hampton Roads escaped the hurricane. Many small craft were "torn to pieces".

August 2, 1795: A hurricane which passed through North Carolina passed to the south of Norfolk. A ship foundered off Cape Charles. Heavy rains in northwestern Virginia flooded Winchester and Martinsburg. Roads were impassable beyond Baltimore, disrupting mail service. A large amount of corn and hay were in ruin. Mills and mill dams were swept away. Great damage was noted across Culpeper and Orange counties. It then recurved across Maryland and passed south of New York City to Halifax. Several vessels were lost off Norfolk. The brig Esther was lost, with most of her cargo from Jamaica, twenty-five miles south of Ocracoke Bar.

August 12-13, 1795: A major hurricane...only ten days after the previous storm...struck North Carolina and produced high winds as far inland as Winston-Salem. At Monticello, near Charlottesville, Thomas Jefferson noted that the loss of soil from the heavy rain thus far that month could be "modestly estimated at a year's rent" (Ludlum). A "powerful torrent of rain" deluged Petersburg; creeks were at their highest point of the past 70 years.

September 5-6, 1797: A sloop was lost at Currituck Inlet on the 5th during a storm. The sloop Betsy was returning from Cape Hatteras during the 6th. In sight of the Cape Henry lighthouse, she "was obliged to bare away in a gale of wind" (Chapman).