

The Lone Star Story. ...an epic saga of the events that
changed Texas forever!

*The Galveston Storm Legacy and The Everlasting Impact
of “The Storm”*

Megan Liu

Seventh Grade

St. George Episcopal School

San Antonio, Texas

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The warnings began from late August to early September. A ship near the West Indies coast reported troubled weather. Then, came a small tropical storm in the Florida Straits. Next, The Louisiana, a vessel in the Gulf Coast, sent word of a hurricane they sustained. The coasts of Mississippi and Louisiana also battled a hurricane, resulting in downed telegraph lines. A small story in the newspaper and hurricane flags being raised several days before the storm didn't unnerve Galveston citizens. Heavy swells and high tides were mistaken for the signs of an ordinary, regularly occurring weather front approaching. Isaac Cline later advised people to seek shelter. Still, no one was concerned. A survivor said, "We knew there was a storm coming, but we had no idea that it was as bad as it was."

"It would be impossible for any cyclone to create a storm wave which could materially injure the city." That was what Isaac Monroe Cline, the U.S. Weather Bureau chief observer and Galveston resident, stated in an article in 1891. If something phenomenal happened, a storm might approach, but it would be unsubstantial, or so he thought.

On September 8, 1900, winds at 140 miles per hour and a tidal surge of 15' submerged Galveston and destroyed more than 3,500 buildings. This devastating storm killed one fifth of the city's population and left 80% homeless. The estimated death toll was 8,000 people dead. The legacy of the Great Storm of 1900 was \$30 million in damage, equivalent to \$700 million today. Although donations poured in from around the world, it still took 12 years for Galveston to recover.

Cline's personal opinion and the poor state of hurricane science at that time caused the lack of early and accurate warnings. The U.S. Weather Bureau forecasts only utilized reports from ships and what people observed offshore. Aircraft did not exist yet, so there were no aerial

views of storms until the 1940's. In early September, 1900, the weather bureau predicted a path from Florida to New England. Because of conflicting views, the director of the bureau, Willis Moore, canceled the flow of data directly between Cuban cities and U.S. cities, forcing all information to go through Washington. Cuba was not the only source they ignored. New Orleans had to notify Washington directly before communicating with other local cities. Moore also prohibited certain words to be spoken in forecasts to make them less alarming.

Results of these poor communication policies included an unprepared Galveston and one of the most destructive hurricanes in U.S. history. As MIT professor, Kerry Emanuel, explained, "If you make it political, people will die."

Before the hurricane, Galveston, the "Wall Street of the West" and "New York of the South," was one of Texas's most progressive cities. Wealth came from shipping, finance, and commerce, due to a large and busy port. A relative of a survivor stated, "That same proximity to the sea that made Galveston prosper changed Galveston forever."

Two years later, a newly organized government began the construction of the seawall. The first segment was completed in 1904. Extensions continued over the next sixty years. The initial scope was a 16' base, 17' at its highest point, and 3.5 miles in length. Next came the grade-raising, an engineering marvel. Jacks lifted 2,100 buildings. A canal transported sand from the Galveston Harbor entrance to fill underneath the buildings. Catwalks allowed pedestrians to walk at the buildings' new level. Five hundred city blocks were elevated 8 to 17' higher by 1911. Some citizens chose to fill their bottom floors or use them as basements. The grade-raising also supported the seawall and helped the city's drainage system work. Over the years, five tempests hit Galveston; there were less casualties.

Galveston's legacy meant better communication channels and a functional emergency plan. In 2008, Time Magazine reported, "Partly because of the storm and partly because oil was discovered in Houston... Galveston became a beach town." The Galveston Storm of 1900 earned a name among locals, simply, "The Storm." All hurricanes will be compared to this Texas benchmark for storms. Its legacy is respect for Mother Nature's wrath and tough lessons learned.

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