

MORETOWN HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

Spring 2023

Volume 1, Issue 12



Wednesday, September 21, 1938

85 years ago this September, Moretown along with the rest of New England was devastated by the one and only true “Hurricane” we have had here in New England. It was also known as Long Island Express or the Great New England Hurricane of 1938.

The hurricane that pummeled the northeastern United States on September 21, 1938, was New England’s most damaging weather event ever. Without warning, the storm plowed into Long Island and New England, killing up to 700 people and destroying roads, bridges, dams, and buildings that stood in its path. Not finished, the hurricane then raced inland, maintaining high winds into Vermont and New Hampshire and uprooting millions of acres of forest.

The hurricane tore up trees that, if processed collectively, represented an estimated 2.6 billion board feet of timber — the equivalent of 400,000 truckloads or 65 years of production at New England's largest hardwood sawmill, in Brattleboro. The devastation to the region's infrastructure required repairs costing \$300 million in Depression-era dollars, approximately \$5 billion today.

36 hours of almost steady rain fell, and the Mad River and its tributaries were overflowing their banks that Wednesday afternoon. That night the winds picked up and by 8 PM most people were finding other shelters and it continued to rain. Many remembered the nightmare of November 1927 and they were fearing the worst.

This article was in the local newspaper the following week and chronicled Moretown's suffering.

Moretown residents suffered great losses in the flood and hurricane last week. The swollen Mad River rose to nearly the 1927 height, flooding several homes in the village, Families began to leave their homes and move to safer sections at an early hour in the evening. The men of the village worked most of the night moving furniture, cars, and other property, and assisting occupants to leave their homes in some cases where they had waited too long before attempting to leave. The homes badly flooded with water, varying from one to five feet were: S.E Atkins, Mrs. Blanch Griffith, Ralph Wimble, Perley Farnham, Sidney Turner, Sam Farnsworth Mrs. Hattie Bates, Mrs. Elia Shea, William Blair, Mrs. Lillian Booth, E.E. Chouinard, and Mr. Adelbert.

Kingsbury's Blacksmith Shop and Joslyn's Garage were also flooded as was St. Patrick's Church. Many other homes had the basement filled with water. The home of Merrill Reagan was badly damaged by a falling tree. Several other large trees fell in the village, with no damage to buildings.

The Ward Lumber Company lost thousands of dollars worth of wood and lumber, but their mills and bridges remained intact.

The southern approach to the bridge at the upper end of the village was washed out for a distance, of about 60 feet. Farmers suffered severe losses in corn and sugar trees. E.E. Chouinard lost several heads of young cattle and a large number of chickens.

Most of the people involved had been through similar experiences in the 1927 flood and for the second time went to work on Thursday morning, with pitiful courage, scraping the mud from their water-soaked floors and furniture, drying rugs, curtains, and bedding and pumping out cellars.

Looking at a Moretown map of 1931 most of the affected properties were in the village between the Catholic Church to just below the General Store. Mr. Alelbert owned what we have known as the E. Goodyear place and Mr. Chouinard was in the G. Maynard place.

Several years ago, in talking with the late Ron Ward, he recalled his father Forest bringing him to the end of what is now known as Freeman Hill after the hurricane. He was about four years old and was very impressed with the devastation. A whole line of old maple trees that were laid flat on the ground. All laid in the same direction, and he thought there were probably 25 of them. Others that grew beside them were left standing.



All the troubles brought plenty of work to get things fixed up before the cold weather set in.

Up in Waitsfield Alton Farr's lawn between his house and the next house was washed out eight feet in depth and his barn was undermined and an addition to the barn tipped over. And Mr. Farnsworth's house was undermined and fell into the cellar. Mr. K. W. Cota had a shed with 25 cords of stove wood taken out and most of it went down the river.

Excerpt from the book "Draw Logs From Dowsville" by Mary A Gow and Kitty Werner

Hurricane of 1938



The Merrill Reagan house with tree damage.

"If flood, fire, and depression all in the space of eight years were not enough, in late September the Hurricane of 1938 rolled in. The first hurricane to hit the Northeast straight on since 1869, the monster storm hammered New England and laid another blow on Vermont. It damaged or destroyed more than 57,000 homes, killed over 650 people, and devastated transportation systems. Every New England state was hit hard-serious hurricane damage extended from Maryland to Quebec.

In Vermont, the hurricane killed five people. Houses, barns, farmland, and over 2,000 miles of roads were damaged. Power lines were downed. A radio transmitting tower of WDEV in Waterbury was knocked down and out. Floodwaters again charged through communities including Moretown. Lumber from the Ward yards was carried downstream as far as Lake Champlain."



Damage at the Lower Mill

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