

# Bluffton Methodist Church and Other Structures Destroyed by Hurricane in 1940

An Eyewitness Account

by

***Florence Rubert Graves***

Parenthetical commentary and editing by John Samuel Graves, III, 2018



On August 11, 1940, a Category 2 hurricane came ashore in Beaufort bringing winds of 105 mph, killing 34 people, and leaving at least \$10 million worth of damage. (That was a lot of money back then!) Beaufort received almost 11 inches of rain in 24 hours. The people of Bluffton experienced the same storm. Below is an eyewitness account that my mother, Florence Rubert Graves, wrote for the newspaper at the time:

## **Bluffton Begins Tremendous Task of Rehabilitation After Hurricane**

Bluffton, S. C., August 14, 1940—Bluffton people have paused to take a breath after, first, a frantic struggle with a terrific storm that lashed out at the low-country Sunday and, second, after the first necessary efforts toward rehabilitation. This was

undoubtedly the worst storm in this section of the country for ten years.

Bluffton, situated in the southernmost tip of Beaufort County, was one of the towns along the South Atlantic coast to feel the hardest blows of the almost incredible gale that reached hurricane proportions early Sunday afternoon. The wind, high all morning, noticeably increased shortly after noon, and by 1 and 2 o'clock, many had already sought

refuge in the school house, thought to be the safest building at hand due to its modern and sturdy construction. Many took their pets with them to sanctuary and there was a motley assortment of animals as well as humans.

With every street cluttered and practically impassible even on foot, every tree a threat of danger, all electric wires down, no telephone and no concrete aid or contact to be hoped for from the outside world, chaos reigned for a few brief hours.

By 4 o'clock, at least seventy persons were congregated in the rooms occupied by school children in calmer days. They sat in the auditorium or stood in doorways, talking in subdued fashion, apprehensive for their homes and families. A small, temporary stove was set up until kerosene could be procured for the stoves in the home economics room. Coffee was provided. One of the local merchants later, unknown to many, took several young men and faced the stinging rain and wind to bring five sacks of groceries from his store. These were used to good advantage very gladly by the tired and hungry people that night. A few others had brought supplies on a smaller scale. More than half of those congregated spent the night on the schoolhouse floor. One classroom was turned over to mothers with very young babies.

Some, more adventuresome than others and anxious about their houses, left after hearing a report which said the worst of the storm was over. They picked their stumbling way home by flashlight in groups, under trees and over wires, through the heavy rain.

There were many children and families from out of town as two family reunions had been scheduled in Bluffton for that day, the Graves and the Hodges. The cottages along the river were filled with week-enders, some of whom had not heard the warning sent out that morning.

The water rose to unheard of heights. The waves resembled those of the Atlantic itself. All of All-Joy, a small resort section just outside of town, was covered and water came up to the floors of several very high houses there. In Bluffton itself, the tide reached the porch of the Gold Eagle Tavern and swept away every dock along the bluff with the exception of the old pavilion which somehow withstood the forces turned against it.

*[The Gold Eagle Tavern used to be down by the river just past the Colcock-Teal House which is now owned by the Bluffton Historical Preservation Society.]*

At All-Joy a boat floated fantastically in the middle of the highway and one was reportedly thrown up on Myrtle Island. Most of the river craft, both large and small, were lost and haven't been found yet, or have been discovered at great distances from their moorings, destroyed. Many families, due to the tides and flood water from the swamps were marooned in their own homes, with great fallen trees on every side.

The trees, among them many of the beautiful age-old oaks this town is famous for, fell across the streets and struck several houses. The Methodist Church was completely demolished by one of these, the whole center crushed leaving the altar exposed at one end and the steeple slanting at the other with the faithful old bell poised visibly, as though to ring prophetically the last call to prayer.

*[This steeple had been built by my great grandfather, George Sewell Guilford, the builder of the Graves House. He was a founding member of the Bluffton Methodist Church and on the original 1889 Building Committee elected to organize and supervise the building of the new church on its current location. Apparently, after the 1940 hurricane, the church had to be completely rebuilt and my great grandfather's steeple was taken down.]*

There were many personal losses of property but no loss of life [in Bluffton] as far as known at present. The stories are still coming in and it will be days before the complete extent of the damage is known. Two cars were smashed by falling trees, many roofs ripped off, and personal belongings ruined by flood water and rain.

At Harrison Island, the pavilion was torn to flinders and a launch tossed in the yard. The water covered the floor of Joe Pinckney's house where the children of Mr. and Mrs. Ollie Pinckney had been taken for safety. The house stood firm, however, and no serious mishaps occurred. Miss Marie Pinckney observed her car floating and being shaken by the waves in the yard and waded out, tying it securely. Willie Pinckney, beloved head of Pinckney Colony, lost thirty head of cattle when his barn collapsed.

Hilton Head and Jenkins Island were reportedly washed clean. Many buildings and houses were gone and, hence, many homeless. The Negroes suffered particularly everywhere.

Red Cross relief work was started here yesterday. It is being organized as rapidly as possible all over the county to provide temporary aid to those most in need through damage done by the storm. The United

States Coast Guard also reached Bluffton late tonight, saying that no word of conditions had reached outside. A hasty radio room was installed in the side room of Peeples' store on Calhoun Street in order to relay news to Coast Guard stations.

Today havoc is everywhere but already the shock is subsiding. Axes are heard chopping away at fallen giants, clearing paths and houses. Hammers are busy as are saws and brooms. Order is slowing being restored. It may take time but the spirit is there. Bluffton is hitching its belt and going to work.

Perhaps yesterday's ice cream spree helped. Fred McGinny, store proprietor and ice boxless due to lack of current, treated the whole town to ice cream all day long. It was one time that the youngsters had all they could hold." (First printed on August 14, 1940.)



Florence Rubert Graves, circa 1940

The author of the preceding article, Florence Rubert Graves, with the financial and moral support of Walter Lee Mingledorff, Sr., started one of the first Community Centers for Young People in Bluffton. Some of her poems about the Bluffton area can be viewed on [graveshouse.org](http://graveshouse.org). She was the wife of John Samuel Graves, Jr., the owner and operator of the Bluffton Seafood Company (now the Bluffton Oyster Company). His father, John Samuel Graves, Sr. and mother, Cora Jane Guilford Graves, owned and lived in the Graves House on Calhoun Street, directly across the street from the Bluffton Methodist Church. Cora Jane Guilford Graves was raised in the Methodist Church.

According to *The South Carolina State Climatology Office*, "Hurricanes and tropical storms are irregular visitors to coastal South Carolina. In the period 1901-2009, only 27 tropical cyclones have made landfall on the South Carolina coast. Of these, only eight were of Category 2 to Category 4 intensity. [Cat 1 has winds up to 95 mph; Cat 2 has winds up to 110 mph; Cat 3 up to 130 mph; Cat 4 up to 155 mph, and Cat 5 has winds of over 155 mph.] Since 1900, no Category 5 hurricanes have hit South Carolina. There have been three Category 4 hurricanes (Hazel, 1954, Gracie, 1959 and Hugo, 1989). It is possible that the "Great Storm of 1893" that struck the southern coast on August 20 of that year was at least a Category 4 storm, but there was no way of accurately measuring tropical-cyclone intensity before 1900. The "Great Storm of 1893" struck the south coast at high tide on August 28, pushing an enormous storm surge ahead of it and creating a "tidal wave" that swept over and submerged whole islands. Maximum winds in the Beaufort area were estimated to be 125 miles per hour, those in Charleston were estimated near 120 miles per hour. At least 2,000 people lost their lives, and an estimated 20,000-30,000 were left homeless and with no means of subsistence."