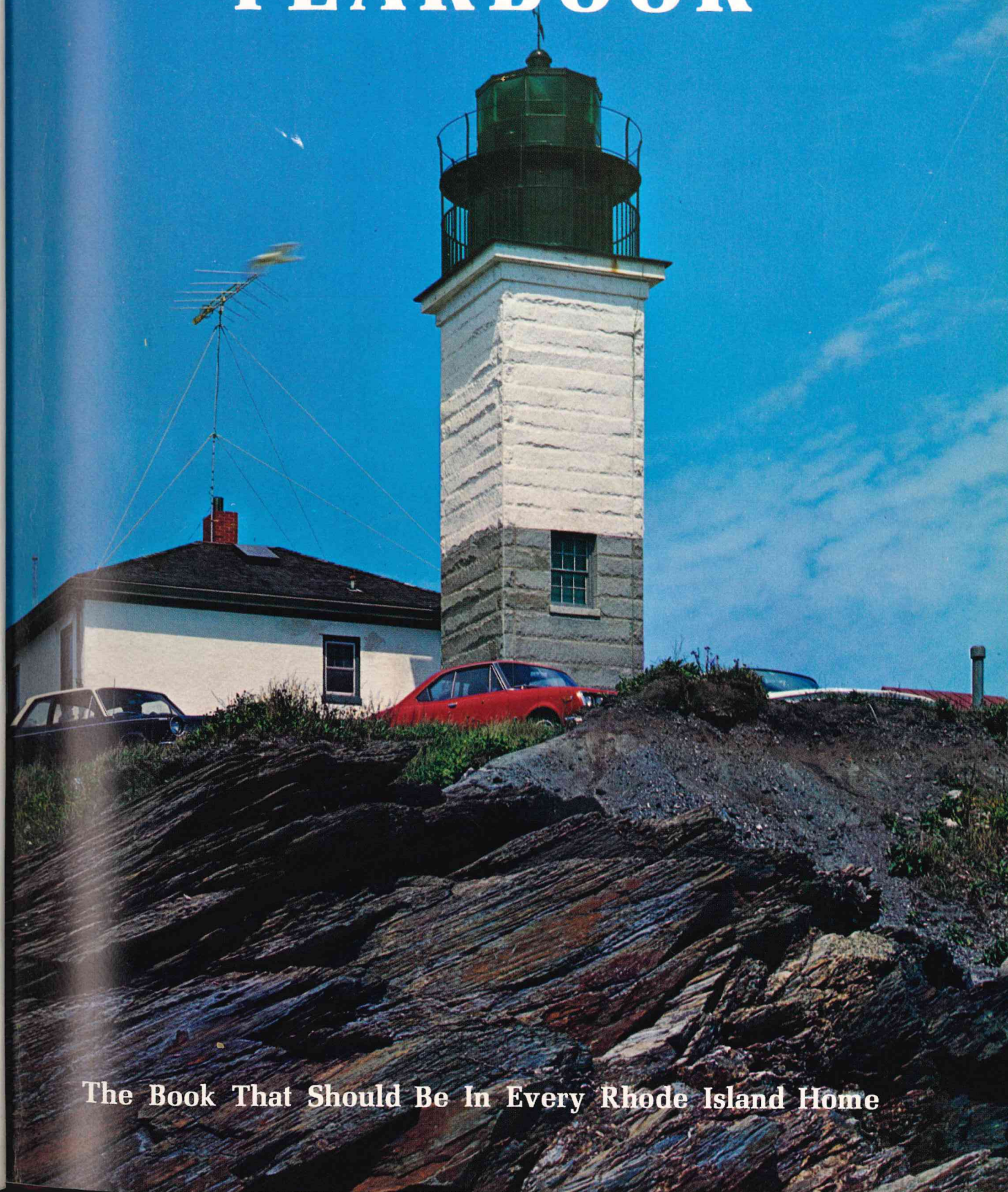


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# RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Book That Should Be In Every Rhode Island Home





Washington Park Yacht Club at height of storm—completely destroyed.

## Dateline: Providence, Sept. '38

BY BRADFORD F. SWAN

SOMETIMES I think that my late wife, Lila, was the only person in Rhode Island the afternoon of September 21, 1938, who really knew what was happening to us. She had lived for ten years in the tropics, and she knew a hurricane when she saw one.

I tried to tell her it was just a "line storm," like the August breeze of 1924 — the one in which the *Wanderer* was wrecked on Cuttyhunk — and that New England frequently had such storms in the fall, when the sun was crossing the line, whatever that was supposed to do. We were avid antique hunters in those days, because I was working nights for the *Providence Journal* and prowling second-hand shops in the afternoon was something we could do together, and that afternoon of September 21 we were bound for the Providence Public Library to consult books in the art department, which was on the top floor of the old building. It was pelting rain and signs were swinging wildly in the wind, which was really blowing, and Lila remarked, with cool aplomb:

"I don't care what you call it, but this is a hurricane."

We reached the library without getting too wet and climbed to the art department. We hadn't much more than got settled with our books when a light of glass broke in the skylight above us and came crashing to the floor. This was disturbing, not only because of the shower of falling glass, but because rain began to follow it. We were advised that the department was going to have to close until this storm damage could be repaired.

Thus turned out into the storm I suggested we seek shelter down Fountain Street a couple of blocks in the Journal Building, and maybe I could find out what this storm was all about. Our passage down Fountain Street was somewhat perilous, for conditions had worsened considerably in the brief time we had been in the library. A couple of shop signs were torn loose and came crashing to the sidewalk, the rain was coming down horizontally, and everything seemed to be shaking.

Photos in this article courtesy of  
The Providence Journal, Adler Art Associates,  
Providence Public Library, Pawtucket Times,  
Corps of Engineers United States Army



I didn't know it then — nor did anyone else, for that matter — but a full-fledged hurricane was already upon us. The Weather Bureau had sent out an advisory at 3 p.m. stating that a tropical storm was about 75 miles east southeast of Atlantic City and moving rapidly north northeastward, so that it was likely to pass over Long Island and Connecticut with shifting gales late that afternoon or early that night. This advisory was received in Providence at 3:40 p.m., but by that time the storm was already here, for the winds had reached a velocity of 54 m.p.h.

We all stood around the big windows on the Fountain Street side of the Journal Building and watched the storm. I remember that the late Sevellon Brown Jr., the editor, came over and remarked that if high tide came at the same time as the peak of the storm we were in for trouble. A little more than an hour later I realized how right he was.

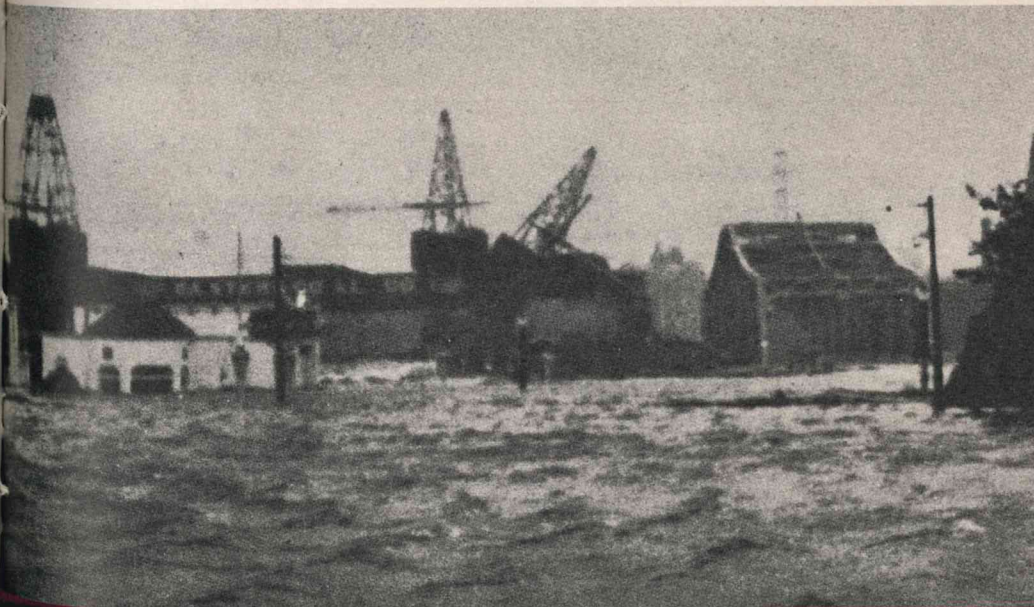
For some reason I was looking out the windows on the Sabin Street side of the building about 5 o'clock when I noticed water bubbling up through the holes in a manhole cover. In minutes the bubbler effect had been transformed into a fountain and the street was starting to flood. At first I thought it was just that the storm sewers couldn't handle the run-off of rain water, but in time it began to dawn on us what was happening: the rising tide had not only blocked the sewer outlets, backing up the run-off, but it also was being forced into the sewers from the river by the tremendous pressure of the tidal wave.

Soon we began to see the tide creeping through the city. It came up Fountain Street, each wave lapping a little higher, until it was almost up to LaSalle Square and Empire Street. By that time it was several feet deep at the front door of the Journal Building, a foot deep in the lobby, and pouring down into the cellars where the huge rolls of newsprint are stored. In a few minutes the electric power failed and everything in the building shut down.

This was our first real hurricane. Two storms later we had become fairly competent at handling such situations, but back then in '38 we just went around like hens with our heads cut off. Reporters were sent out into the flood to see what they could find in the way of news, and some of them damn near drowned. I remember Dick Cunningham, who was then something of an eager beaver — he's now a sedate editorial writer for the *Worcester Telegram* — making his way all the way down to the Turks Head Building, and having to swim for his life part of the time. He told me he had to swim past the Biltmore Hotel and finally took to the high ground of the park in front of the railroad station until the waters subsided.

At first it was a big lark. Youngsters swarmed into the downtown business area and swam around or commandeered drifting rowboats and logs and paddled through the flooded streets. The big store windows began to break under the pressure of the water if they hadn't already shattered in the suction of the low barometric pressure and the howling wind.

*Water above street level at Point Street Bridge.*



*Lower Fountain Street from Journal Building.*





We began to get reports of looting in the downtown stores, and of people drowning in the downtown streets. I remember what a shock it was the first time I saw a store dummy come drifting around the corner of Mathewson Street into Fountain Street; I thought it was a body and it took some time and more careful inspection to discover that it wasn't a drowned woman.

Gradually, of course, the tide receded, and we reporters had to go to work. It was decided that Lila would remain in the safety of the Journal Building and I would go out in his car with Jack Martin, the schoolboy sports editor, on a tour of the hospitals to see what conditions were like there. Then, as now, I was never very familiar with the geography of Providence, and as we wound our way through the darkened streets — all electrical power had failed when the waterfront stations were flooded — and had to make detours because fallen trees blocked the streets, I soon became hopelessly lost. I'm sure I was no help to Jack, because I never knew where we were or how to make a detour or much less how to reach a destination by a circuitous route. I may have provided some companionship, but that was about all. Somehow the hospitals seemed to be surviving without any help from us; they had emergency power plants, which was more than the rest of the city had, and our tour produced few hair-raising stories.

It must have been about 3 o'clock in the morning when we got back to the Journal Building and Jack volunteered to try to get us home to our apartment in the home of Fred Sisson, the Journal's art critic, at 18 Arnold Street. I remember Jack had to back out of Arnold Street for a whole block, because a fallen tree had blocked the street, but he got us home. It wasn't much of a home at that moment. It was all dark, of course, and we began to feel the lack of electricity almost immediately. Fortunately we had two fireplaces and a good supply of firewood, and for at least a week Lila cooked in the fireplace, just the way the original inhabitants of this beautiful old Arnold Street house had had to do their cooking.

That is, she cooked when we could get anything to cook. Mostly it was opening cans and heating the contents, or boiling water in a kettle and making tea. Food, the first several days, was a scarce article. Thousands of dollars worth had been spoiled by coming in contact with the flood waters which were, naturally, full of sewage. You began to be very much aware of this if you walked through the downtown flooded area during the first few days after the hurricane. Everywhere machine-driven pumps were emptying the flooded cellars of office buildings and stores, pouring the smelly water into the gutters. Sodden piles of paper began to grow on the sidewalks when enough water had been pumped out of the cellars so that the clean-up could begin.

Everywhere there were odd sights — a rowboat grounded on a Weybosset Street sidewalk, autos and street-cars stranded everywhere, piles of lumber tossed like jackstraws onto the banks of the Providence River, trees and billboards down, the metal roof of the railroad station a tangled mass in the street.

The National Guard was patrolling the downtown streets to prevent looting, and I had to show my police card every time I passed to and fro to work. My job, by this time, was simple: I would report to the newsroom and work 12 to 14 hours — quite literally until I was so physically and mentally tired that I could work no more. Then I would go home, Lila would get me something to eat, and I would take to the bed for six or eight hours, get up, dress, and go back to the office again.

We had men in Woonsocket, where the *Call* had offered the use of its plant, and in Boston, using the offices and presses of the *Post*. The *Journal* was published at the *Call* from September 22 until we got our power back in the Fountain Street building on October 3. Nine emergency editions of the *Bulletin* were printed at the *Post*.

I was one of those left behind in the *Journal* office. In a way, it was the most exciting period I have known in my 40 years in the newspaper business, and if it hadn't been for the tragedy we were writing about, it would have been the most



fun. We even got a sort of macabre kick out of it after the first few days had hardened us to the sort of news we were handling.

For instance, I remember a joke that went around the newsroom. A woman had called up and asked if you had to go down to the morgue to identify a body. The fellow who answered her said, "Yes, ma'am. THEY don't send them out on approval."

I spent a great deal of time writing alongside my good friend, the late George Loveridge. We would go up to the city desk where there was a spike filled with notes that had been sent in or dictated by reporters in the outlying districts. We just took these notes in the order in which they came, went back to our typewriters and whipped them into some sort of form for publication. Sometimes the story would be just a brief note; sometimes it would fit into a larger story, and an extensive rewrite job would have to be done.

Bay steamer "grounded" by storm. ▶



The Mall, now Kennedy Plaza, under water. ▲

◀ Lower Washington Street.

▼ Wreckage at Bailey's Beach, Newport.

Fox Point Hurricane Dam, all pumps working. ▼





I won't say that we were quite as meticulous as we should have been, or we would be if it were possible to check the facts for accuracy. I remember that I wrote a real spine-tingling feature about a hero engineer on a New Haven Railroad locomotive who had put his fireman out on the cowcatcher to push floating timbers aside and then had chugged through foot-deep water on a flooded section of shore line trackage hauling his passengers to safety on high ground. Later I was told that wasn't quite the way it was. No matter, it was a good story, and for once we felt in our hearts that it was impossible to exaggerate in anything we wrote.

George Loveridge had a funny experience. He was a wonderful writer—one of the best I've ever known in the newspaper business—and he did a wonderful story about some South County character who was supposed to have been carried away and drowned when the tidal wave hit. I think the fellow's name was Charlie. Anyway, a couple of days later, a body which was thought to be Charlie was recovered from one of the salt ponds behind the beaches. It was brought in to be identified, George was there on the scene, and an old South County character was asked to take a look.

"Nope, 'taint me," he said.

It was Charlie himself, very much alive, and George dutifully recorded what has since become a piece of New England folklore. He was just as good, too, writing the story which destroyed the very moving piece he had written about Charlie's "death."

That was the way it went: grab a note, read it through for possibilities, do a rewrite job on it, and turn it in to be sent to Woonsocket or Boston. Gone was any sense of working for one paper or another. We paid no attention to deadlines. We just ground the stuff out, hour after hour, day after day, until finally this relentless effort of work-sleep, work-sleep, work-sleep came to an end and the city and the newspaper began to recover itself and head back toward normal.

I admired Sevellon Brown quite some for the way he handled that tremendous emergency. He was, of course, the captain of the ship, and upon his decision-making a great deal of our success rested. But we in the lower tier of the galley, we pulled our oars too. We got out papers. We didn't care whether there was any advertising in them or not. We honestly felt it was our primary duty to keep the public informed as best we could, and we did a job.

For once, anyway, I was very proud to be a newspaperman.

"The Great Gales"  
1815-1938  
height of water as  
shown on the  
Old Market Building



Photo by Chas. U

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