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Cover

On 21 September 1938 a hurricane brought flooding to the streets of downtown Providence. RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 7598).

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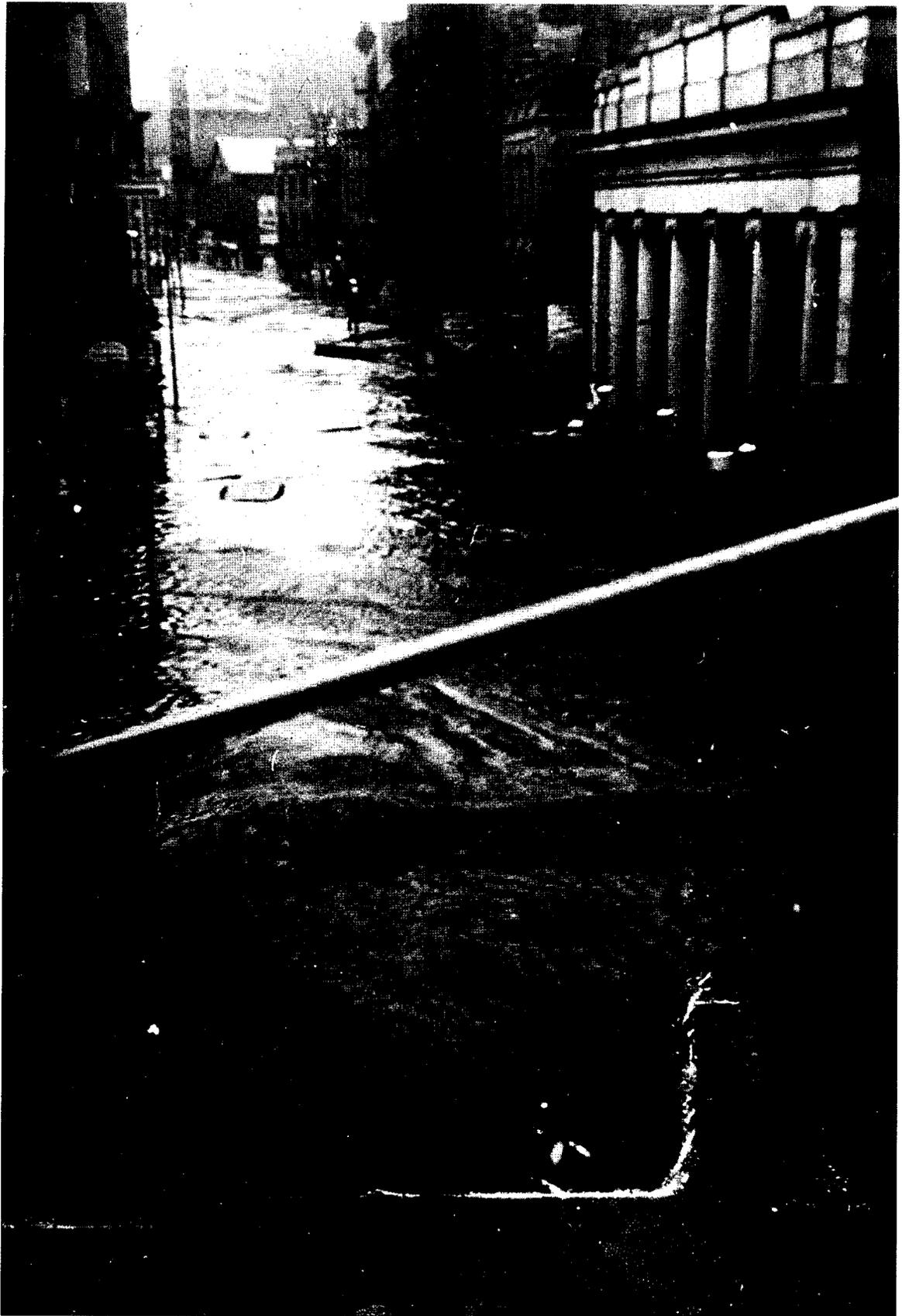
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“What Do You Do With A Disaster?”: Providence and the Hurricane of 1938

ARAM GOUDSOUZIAN

In mid-afternoon on Wednesday, 21 September 1938, David Cornel DeJong walked the gusty streets of downtown Providence in search of a dozen eggs and a half-pound of bacon. People leaned into the wind, sometimes glancing at the ominous sky. A few hats sailed through the air. As DeJong bought his bacon and eggs, the intensifying winds propelled sheets of rain, rattling storefront windows. Shoppers huddled in entryways, waiting out the unpleasantness. Pacing inside the market, DeJong noticed some fresh mackerel, and he bought two of them. “I hear there’s a big storm coming,” said the clerk while wrapping up the fish. “Anything else?”

That rumor of a “big storm” was the extent of forewarning for the deadliest disaster in Rhode Island history. No one realized that a hurricane would soon assault the state. DeJong fidgeted inside the store for a half hour, then followed a middle-aged woman onto the street. A gust propelled them against a wall. A nearby plate-glass window shattered. DeJong and the woman, already soaked by rain, resolved to reach a common shelter, but the next gust shot them in different directions. DeJong got whipped around a corner, covered in a wild blanket of newspaper, and deposited outside the Arcade. He crawled up the steps, where about fifty people laughed at his preposterous, disheveled appearance.

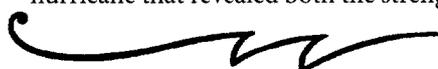
He still had the bacon, eggs, and mackerel, and he would later read importance into this “ridiculously importunate anchor against so much terror.” Like many others, DeJong would understand the Hurricane of 1938 as a crucible of character, a lens into the soul. His insistence upon saving his groceries, he realized, allowed him to focus on a trivial particular rather than on the larger terrifying situation. In this response he found consolation: “I had acted no worse than the other mortals I had been with throughout the storm. All of us seemed to have been pretty much unmoved, or rather, pretty much human and unheroic.”¹

The full force of the hurricane still lay ahead when DeJong landed on the steps of the Arcade. Not only would the winds reach an average speed of eighty-seven miles per hour, but a massive flood would inundate the downtown area. The storm was not, of course, restricted to Providence. In its larger pattern of destruction it would afflict all of Long Island and New England, killing approximately 680 people, about 300 of them in Rhode Island; it would uproot or damage 275 million trees, wreck 26,000 automobiles, and knock down 20,000 miles of power and telephone lines. According to the Red Cross, 6,933 coastal cottages, 1,991 homes, 2,605 boats, 2,369 barns, and 7,438 other buildings were destroyed by the storm. It was, at the time, the costliest natural disaster in American history, causing an estimated \$400 million in damage.²

But the hurricane’s impact was not limited to physical destruction. The storm proved also to be a force that tested the character of individuals, exposing man at both his most noble and most base. Perhaps nowhere was this more evident than in Providence, whose diverse population, physical development, and political structure shaped responses to the hurricane that revealed both the strengths and the weaknesses of the city and its people.

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The hurricane of September 1938 sent floodwaters surging through downtown Providence. On Weybosset Street the steps of the Arcade (to the right) were totally submerged. RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 7598).



Providence had transformed in the previous half century. Between 1880 and 1920 its population had grown from 104,000 to 237,000, bolstered by waves of southern and eastern European immigrants. Its industrial base of textile mills, jewelry, and base-metal products had been broadened, and its banks and insurance companies multiplied. Skyscrapers replaced wooden buildings; electric and oil power replaced coal and steam. Downtown, in particular, embodied the new Providence. These years witnessed the construction there of monumental buildings such as the Union Railroad Station and the Providence Public Library, consumer palaces such as three full-service department stores and the Loew's State Theatre, shrines to modern technology such as the Industrial National Bank, and new urban spaces such as Exchange Place.³

By 1937 Providence had the most densely populated metropolitan district in the United States. With its industrial and technological progress superimposed on an older city, small shops and old buildings stood side by side with large modern emporiums and office buildings. "Many of the downtown streets, following their ancient courses, express the leisure and intimacy of earlier centuries, when the curve was not an impediment to traffic and great spaces were not necessary," said a 1937 travel guide by the Federal Writers' Project. "The present-day visitor to Providence cannot fail to notice the short streets that can be taken in at a glance, and whose ends frame a glimpse of another street, or of an obliquely placed building on another lane." A radial-concentric street plan funneled thousands of automobiles and electric trolleys into the business district, creating constant traffic jams. Moreover, much of the new development was situated on low ground along the Providence River. The city's density and development would exacerbate the devastation of the Hurricane of 1938.⁴

The political response to the hurricane, on the other hand, was shaped by the Great Depression. The economic crisis had hit Providence particularly hard. The city's economy relied on industrial production, and the 1929 stock market crash had initiated a downward spiral of factory wages and work hours. In October 1937 the Department of Commerce reported that 63 percent of the city's families had annual incomes under \$1,500, and over 5 percent had no income at all. With the older ethnic, community-based mutual-benefit associations proving impotent before this large-scale economic disaster, new systems of relief and recovery grew necessary.⁵

The Depression ended Republican dominance of Rhode Island state government. The ethnic working class had increasingly been demonstrating and voting with the Democratic Party to gain legislation favorable to labor, including the 1928 repeal of an archaic property qualification for the franchise. The rise of a Democratic majority—marked by the so-called Bloodless Revolution of 1935—provided new political opportunities for the workers and their middle-class allies. Most important, the state government channeled funds from the New Deal, the massive expansion of the federal government under Franklin D. Roosevelt. After Roosevelt took office in 1933, over sixty federal agencies had a presence in Rhode Island. By 1935 Rhode Island ranked eighth among the states in relief benefits per family. The federal government's direct employment of workers reached a national all-time high just before the hurricane struck: as of 10 September 1938 over three million relief workers were on the rolls of the Works Progress Administration.⁶

As the New Deal expanded, the city government of Providence weakened. Of Rhode Island's ninety-two major federal projects between 1933 and 1937, only two were in the state capital. Political and ethnic rivalries on the city council hindered the formation of an effective coalition, and so federal and state authorities controlled New Deal funds without opposition. And just as the Hurricane of 1938 would expose the dangerous vulnerability of downtown Providence, so too would it reveal the political sea change of the

Great Depression as the New Deal shaped the relief and recovery efforts in the wake of the natural disaster.⁷

First, however, came the hurricane itself.



"The storm had reached its comic stage," wrote David Cornel DeJong in describing the late-afternoon scene on Westminster Street. "It ranged from coltish to absurd." The shrieking wind sent storefront windows bulging and wobbling. Streetlamps popped like firecrackers, and the Arcade's huge clock whirled wildly. Pedestrians were thrown flat on the sidewalk. A woman burst into the Outlet department store crying, "My baby's just been blown out of my arms!" (A policeman soon came in toting the disheveled two-year-old.) Yet many people huddled together outside, their expressions more bemused than frightened. The young women acting helpless were mostly flirting, and the young men responding with puffed-out chests and firm embraces were mostly flirting back.⁸

But as the wind screeched louder, the scene turned grim. Shortly after 4:00 P.M. a chunk of the Providence Public Library's roof was torn off. Then the steeple of St. Patrick's Church, located behind the State House, crashed down and onto the church roof. The arch above Union Station started crumbling, ripping off the metal roof "with a roar like a boiler factory," according to author Van Wyck Mason. Glass rained upon would-be commuters. When DeJong and others started running from the Arcade to find a better-protected location, a shattered plate-glass window crashed down on them, slicing an elderly woman on the neck. The group ran into the lobby of a building, all of them spattered with blood, the old woman soaked in it. "It was at that point that our senses wouldn't go on," DeJong wrote. "They only registered latently and feebly what we saw and heard."⁹

Had they had some warning, the citizens of Providence might have sought better shelter and taken more precautions, but no one knew that a hurricane was coming. The previous day the people of Florida had prepared for an imminent hurricane by stocking candles, storing water, and barricading windows; the Red Cross had set up shelters, and telephone and power companies had prepared to mobilize emergency workers. But fortunately for Florida, the hurricane turned north before striking land. The United States Weather Bureau predicted that prevailing winds would push the storm to the northeast, where it would dissipate in the colder waters of the mid-Atlantic.¹⁰

In its defense, it should be noted that the Weather Bureau lacked such modern tools of meteorology as radar, jet planes, and satellites with television equipment. Forecasters relied, rather, on voluntary reports of data from ships at sea. Yet on the morning of 21 September, Charles Pierce, a twenty-eight-year-old junior forecaster at the Washington bureau, foresaw the disaster. Noting unusual high-pressure systems off the Atlantic coast and along the Appalachian Mountains, he predicted that the hurricane would follow a tongue of low pressure straight into New England. It had happened before. Plymouth Colony governor William Bradford wrote that a 1635 storm "blew downe sundry houses, and uncovered others; diverce vessels were lost at sea, and many more in extreme danger. It caused the sea to swell above 20 foote, right up and downe, and made many of the Indians to clime into trees for their saftie." The "Great September Gale" of 1815 wreaked similar havoc, smashing the Weybosset Bridge, casting loose all the ships in Providence's harbor, and destroying one-third of the city's taxable property. But no storm of comparable power had touched New England since 1815, and Pierce's supervisors overruled his prediction. Downgrading the hurricane to a tropical storm, the bureau warned only of whole-gale winds and cautioned small ships to stay in port.¹¹

The *Providence Journal* thus forecast "rain, probably heavy," without mention of a possible hurricane, even as the newspaper printed a weather map showing the high-pressure areas that would soon direct the storm into New England. In the early afternoon of 21 September the only clues to looming disaster were something less than scientific. Clifton Howard, a thirty-four-year-old mill worker at Brown and Sharpe, recalled a smell like sulfur in the air. Others had a strange feeling in their ears. Rose Alessandro, who had been raised on a farm in Sicily, warned her husband of a hurricane after watching her goats acting oddly.¹²

The hurricane first hit Long Island around 2:45 P.M., pounding the strip of dunes along the southern coast from Fire Island to Montauk. Huge waves—fifteen feet above normal, frosted with breakers another fifteen feet high—soon engulfed the beach communities of the Hamptons. The jolt from the first big wave registered on seismographs in Alaska. The Connecticut River Valley was already flooded from four straight days of rain, and so the hurricane maintained full strength across New England, as if it were still traveling across a tropical sea. Cities such as Hartford and Springfield fought battles against overflowing rivers, and towns were isolated by floods as far north as New Hampshire. The New England coast from Saybrook Point in Connecticut to Buzzards Bay in Massachusetts was particularly hard-hit. A storm-tossed ship sparked a fire that wiped out much of New London's business district. Floodwaters derailed a train in Stonington, Connecticut, prompting a heroic rescue effort by the crew. Eight children drowned after getting off a stalled school bus in Jamestown, Rhode Island. Rhode Island's South County paid the stiffest toll; entire communities were washed away in the twenty-mile stretch from Napatree Point to Point Judith, and 175 people died.¹³

By the time anyone in Providence got word of the hurricane, it had already struck. After 4:00 the winds grew vicious, and by 5:00 they approached eighty miles per hour. Billboards toppled; windows shattered; the sheet-metal roof of the Railway Express Agency building rolled up, according to one observer, "as though a giant can opener had peeled it back." Brudencia Robinson emerged from a Chinese restaurant and got tossed down the street; a man reaching out from a store entrance pulled her to safety. Attorney Dennis Roberts recalled the Turk's Head Building swaying while he worked there. When Brown University sophomore Edward Ziegler ran into the Biltmore Hotel around 5:00 to deliver a quick message, he left his car door open; when he returned, the wind had blown it off.¹⁴

Those who were struggling to walk home from work dodged flying debris and fought the raging wind. Commuters beginning to leave the city faced a snail-paced exodus through streets strewn with fallen trees and poles. Bus service had come to a virtual halt. Basil Whiting, who usually drove to his Warwick home from downtown Providence in about thirty minutes, needed two and a half hours to get there. But he was among the luckier commuters; those trying to leave downtown after 5:00 endured the worst of the storm in a bizarre, deadly scene that would epitomize Providence's agony in the Hurricane of 1938.¹⁵



David Cornel DeJong was taking refuge in a building lobby when someone there noticed the water on Westminster Street. Rain had stopped falling, yet the water "was suddenly swirling and billowing down the street. It was water already turbulent with white caps, and people in the street were caught in it, cars desperately bucked it. No one seemed to believe it was water, not water suddenly several feet deep, right there in our busiest street." When the water flushed into the lobby, DeJong clambered upstairs with the others to safety, holding his groceries above the swarm. They could all smell it, taste it: it was seawater.¹⁶

The hurricane had created a "storm surge"—a tidal wave, except that tidal waves are technically caused by earthquakes. Storm surges occur as winds push water into a hurricane's center. At sea, the water can spread out, but as the ocean floor rises near land, the waves pile up on each other and then crash upon the shore. Such storm-driven waves cause about three-fourths of all hurricane-related deaths. In the nineteenth century, storm surges killed appalling numbers—200,000 in Backergunge, India, in 1876; 300,000 in Haifong, China, in 1881. When the 1938 hurricane blew water up Narragansett Bay, the water was funneled into a larger and larger wave as the bay tapered toward its northern tip. Compounding the effect, the surge hit less than two hours before high tide. Propelled by the surge, the Providence River rose over seventeen feet above mean low water, one and one-half feet higher than its peak during the Great September Gale of 1815.¹⁷

As the surge rushed up Narragansett Bay, it swept acres of coastline into the sea. Tearing through Warwick, it destroyed over a hundred homes at Conimicut Point and left about one hundred people homeless at Oakland Beach. It also caused a huge gas tank in East Providence to explode with a blast that could be heard for miles around. The surge first hit Providence three miles south of downtown at Field's Point, inundating the waterfront's oil and coal plants and crushing a dock where Portuguese immigrant Donato Mezzanate was working as a stevedore; Mezzanate could not swim, and he survived only by grabbing onto a floating tire and bobbing up and down for breath. When Everet Atchison emerged around 5:00 from Eddie's Diner at the base of the Point Street Bridge, he saw a massive wave breaking over the land. The surge had swept through a lumberyard, and the waves deposited thousands of boards into the web of the bridge.¹⁸

Meanwhile, water was spurting out of manholes in downtown Providence. A clerk at the F. A. Ballou shoe store called the offices of the *Providence Journal* and asked when the water would go down. The reporter had no idea what she meant. "The water in the street," she said. "It's flooding the store." The deluge had reached the level of the sidewalk.¹⁹

The storm surge struck downtown around 5:15, just as electric power failed and office workers spilled onto the streets. Ollie Holbrook walked out of the Industrial Bank Building and saw the Arcade's huge clock crash to the ground. Crossing the Canal Street Bridge and looking down the Providence River, she saw a white wall of water covering Dyer Street to the west and South Water Street to the east. Holbrook ran to safety, but others were not so fortunate. A couple standing near the Crawford Street Bridge got swept away and slung around a corner onto Custom House Street. Providence's narrow and curved streets, closely constructed buildings, and sea-level business district created perfect conditions for a downtown flood.²⁰

The ensuing hours were surreal. No one had anticipated a hurricane, let alone one of such violence and magnitude. Water gushed west across downtown "almost as fast as if you held a glass in front of a spigot," according to Solomon Brandt, a Weybosset Street printer. Within minutes the low-lying region west of College Hill and south of the State House was flooded. Seawater roiling with whitecaps rose as high as thirteen feet. People jumped onto their car roofs, only to be swept away by the rapidly rising water. Van Wyck Mason saw a woman wading to high ground "when she popped out of sight like a jack-in-the-box. She evidently stepped into an open sewer."²¹

The water reached the street signs in Market Square, and in Exchange Place it created a graveyard of floating automobiles and inundated trolley cars. "It was like you put water in a pan," marveled Armand DiMartino, who watched the scene from the top-floor ballroom of the Biltmore Hotel. "It just swirled right in just like something was pushing it in there."²²



Crossing flooded Providence streets could be difficult.
RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 1883).

Downtown Providence became the scene of a bizarre parade of floating objects. The floodwaters sent refrigerators bobbing up the Outlet department store's basement stairs and onto Weybosset Street, where they joined a flotilla of cars, boats, barrels, footballs, dolls, tree branches, furniture, clothes, tires, and entire store counters with goods still on top—not to mention people, some stripped to their underwear, others just naked. “It was a token that the urban world had been overthrown and chaos reigned,” the *Providence Journal* would later reflect. There were some light touches amid the chaos. A big gray rat, perched atop a gasoline tin, floated down Westminster Street. A man stood in knee-deep water downstream from a haberdashery, trying on floating hats until he found one that fit. The patrons of a bar refused to abandon their posts until the water reached their shoulders. At another tavern the bartender kept serving until the windows broke, and then stopped only because he feared shards of glass getting into the drinks.²³

But mostly the sense of chaos was mixed with fear and disbelief. “No amount of repetitious description could possibly picture what the mind at first failed to grasp completely,” reported the next day's *Providence Evening Bulletin*: “A downtown Providence under raging water, men diving from high signs on the sides of buildings, men swimming for their lives on Westminster Street and Exchange Place, all to the tune of a screaming wind that tore with vicious fingers at tall buildings and shook this city to its very foundations.” The submerged headlights of some cars still worked, and they burned with an eerie under-

water glow. Shorted-out car horns bleated. For many, the storm brought harrowing near-death experiences. At Pierce's Shoe Store a clerk and his customer climbed to the top of a ladder as water rushed into the store, and there they managed to wait out the flood with just one foot of air between the water and the store's ceiling.²⁴

The struggles for survival often depended upon courage and cooperation. On Fountain Street traffic policeman Pete Johnson shepherded people to higher ground through chest-deep water; on Dorrance Street two policemen and four drugstore clerks linked arms to anchor the escape of twenty-four people from a shoe store. A group on Westminster Street failed three times to rescue a woman apparently unable to maintain her grip on their human chain, but the rescuers remained patiently determined and finally pulled her to safety. Nearby, four men and a woman swam out of a flooded restaurant, grabbed a rope lowered by a janitor on the second story of the Providence Tribune building, and pulled themselves up. On West Exchange Street court stenographer Emily Wickett found herself trapped with three others in a ground-floor restaurant. As floodwaters rose past their knees, a brave soul pushed the door from the outside while they pulled from inside, prying the door open despite the water pressure. The current then swept Wickett down the street, but she was able to grab onto the side of a building and was lifted to safety by men who climbed down a fire escape to help her.²⁵

In some instances the hurricane sparked sharply differing impulses among those confronted by its dangers. Flora Magnan and Helen Harrington, juniors at St. Xavier's Academy, were in Thompson's Restaurant on Westminster Street when water bubbled through the floor and up to their waists. The customers started climbing onto tables; "That's when the rosary beads came out and the prayers started," recalled Flora. As the water kept rising and the tables started floating, some men broke open the door to the cafeteria's second-floor bakery and guided the women and children up the stairs. Flora remembered one panicky man clambering past them, and the men in charge throwing him aside and chiding him. Helen later described a more chaotic scene, with many more men pushing and yelling as they climbed the stairs.²⁶

Whatever the truth, everyone made it upstairs, but the bakery kitchen was cramped and an oven had sprung a gas leak, and so the fleeing group climbed another flight via the fire escape. One woman had broken both legs after the wind tossed her against a brick wall, and she screamed in agony as the men lifted her. Another woman, a young attractive blonde, had her front teeth knocked out. Flora had placed a pie in her schoolbag while in the kitchen, and as they waited out the flood from the third floor, the girls offered pie to their fellow refugees. Some accepted, scooping it up with their fingers. Compassion and composure, spinelessness and selfishness—all were on display during the hurricane.²⁷

So was tragedy. Nine people died in Providence. A crumbling roof on Ericsson Place killed nineteen-year-old Clorinda Lupoli. Hilda Pieczentkowski, a schoolteacher and mother of two, died when a chimney fell on her parked car on North Main Street. The crumbling roof and wall of a building at Fountain and Garnet Streets killed thirteen-year-old Dorothy Atwood. Leonard Almy was found dead on a South Water Street dock, and William Riley in the Providence River. A collapsing garage door crushed Aband Kabbas. Night watchman Thomas Redfern died of "overexertion" while protecting the Jones Warehouse on West Friendship Street.²⁸

Prior to the hurricane the deaths of James McDuff and Chester Hayes would have seemed unfathomable. Fifty-year-old McDuff became trapped under a car on Westminster Street. Hayes, thirty, was holding onto a sunken automobile when a floating car struck him and tossed him into the current. An onlooker tried to save him, but the frothing



water pushed the would-be rescuer away and around a corner, and Hayes was swept into Exchange Place. Both McDuff and Hayes drowned on the streets of downtown Providence.²⁹

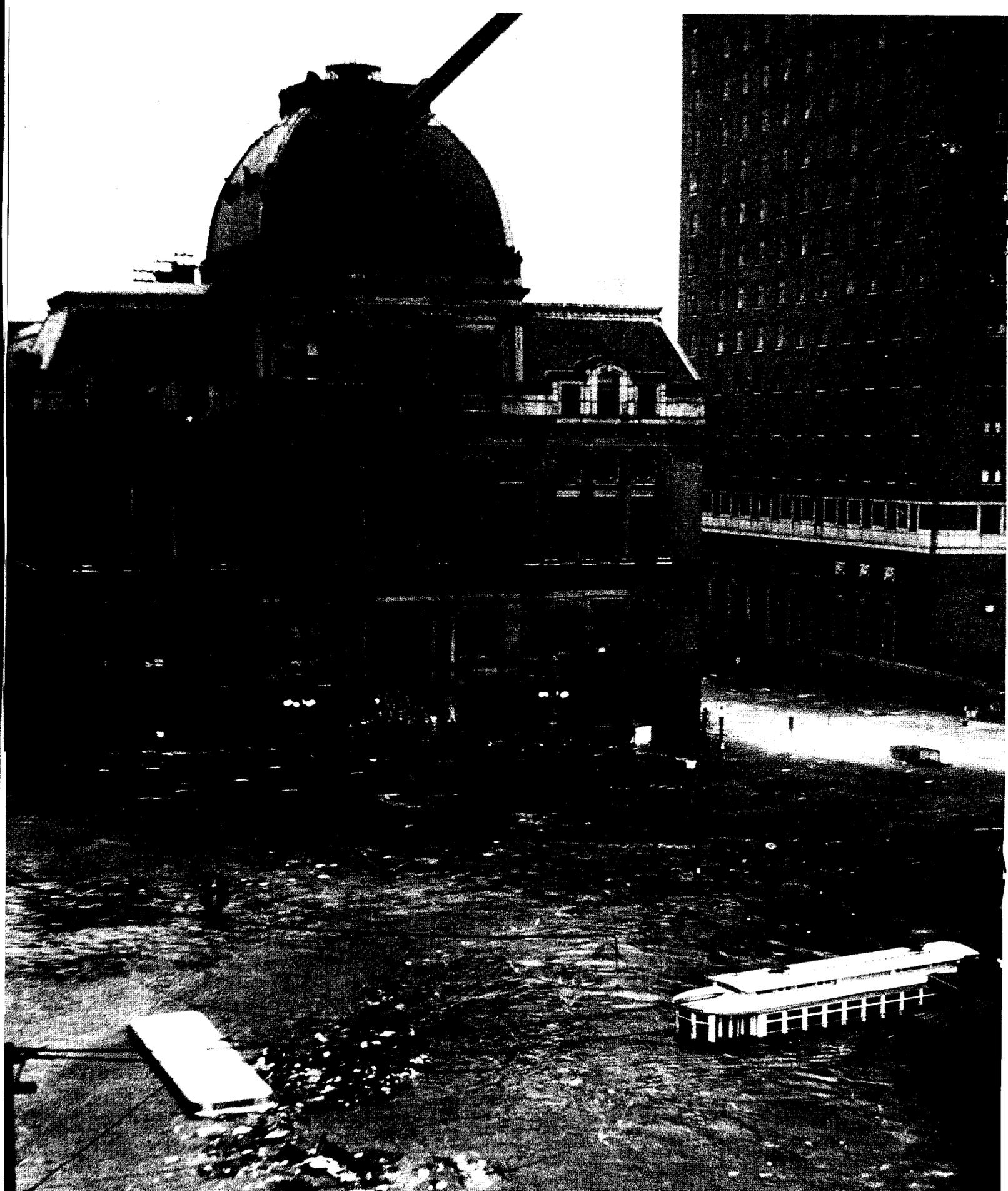
Darkness fell. Only candles flickered in scattered windows. The wind kept howling and car horns kept sounding. The churning waters—still twelve or thirteen feet high on some streets—looked ominously black, with debris drifting through watery shadows. Then, around 7:00, the wind began to die and the water began to recede; and now flashlight beams were reflected off the floodwaters. The looting had begun. “They came, neck deep, or swimming, holding flashlights dry above them, rising out of the water and disappearing through the demolished store windows,” wrote DeJong, who watched the scene from a lawyer’s third-floor office. The trickle of looters turned into a horde. They piled their swag into rowboats or crammed it into burlap sacks. “They were brazen and insatiable; they swarmed like rats,” DeJong remembered. The looting continued even after policemen rowed in. The looters outnumbered the police, and lawlessness reigned.³⁰



Dorrance Street was inundated by the storm. The water receded by the following day. RIHS Collection (RH1 X3 7686, 7687).

Perhaps revealing a desperation unique to the Depression years, perhaps exposing a universal instinct of greed, the looters took everything imaginable. They cleaned out the J. A. Foster Jewelry Company of its ornaments and silverware. They invaded banks, sometimes encountering guards who had stayed on duty. They stole fruits and vegetables from the Governor Dyer Market, and they stole ten-cent notebooks and five-cent pencils from Woolworth's. Hastily organized gangs roamed the India Street docks in search of booty. One man swam into H. L. Wood Marine Supply and rowed off down Pine Street in his prize.³¹

Restoring order was the first priority in Providence, and the problem demanded state and federal power. Even as the hurricane raged, the State Police notified Governor Robert Quinn of the need for emergency measures. Off-duty policemen soon reported for orders. At 6:00 P.M. Secretary of State Louis Cappelli called out the National Guard; with radio stations unable to broadcast, the mobilization order had to be spread by word of mouth. As the water withdrew between 7:00 and 9:00, the ranks filled. Some reported without an order, deciding that the crisis demanded their help. Others reported for regular drill at 7:30 and were immediately mobilized. By then the looting had



become even more brazen. Hundreds sloshed through knee-deep water, casually plucking goods out of store displays. Plate-glass windows that had survived the storm now succumbed to the looters. There were also reports of sexual assaults on women. Just before 10:00 the first militia unit marched out from the Cranston Street Armory, and soon 150 men, tin helmets on their heads and bayonets on their rifles, were patrolling downtown Providence. Huge anti-aircraft searchlights shone down the main streets, casting an eerie blue glare and portentous shadows off downtown buildings. Seven people would be arrested on suspicion of looting before the night was over, and troops would order most other people off the streets. Providence resembled a war zone.³²

So many people arrived at Rhode Island Hospital that its staff stopped keeping records of the injured, instead just treating them as quickly as possible. Two babies were delivered at the Lying-In Hospital by emergency lighting. But throughout the flood district, refugees who had escaped to high ground were confined there until the waters receded. In a scene repeated elsewhere with slight variations, secretaries on the sixth floor of the Industrial Trust Building found a soaked woman wandering around in a daze; they wrapped her in dry coats and gave her whiskey. At fire department headquarters on Richmond Street, a hundred women stayed on the second floor until firemen could requisition boats to ferry them to safety. Three hundred people took shelter at City Hall, five hundred at the Narragansett Hotel, and hundreds more at the Biltmore. Over a thousand people waited out the storm on the upper floors of the Outlet department store, where the first floor was submerged. Two hundred people of all faiths sought peace in the downtown Grace Episcopal Church, their only light the flutter of altar candles.³³

One of the places that offered people refuge from the hurricane was the city's Hope Club, where Van Wyck Mason spent the night listening to shorted-out car horns. The author had begun the day toting the only copy of his just-completed 700-page historical novel on a steamboat bound for New York City from Nantucket, but when the hurricane halted his journey at New Bedford, he boarded a bus and arrived in Providence just before the flood. The *New York Times* reported him missing on 23 September but pronounced him among the living the next day. Relating his experience, Mason noted that in granting shelter to female storm refugees, the all-male Hope Club had allowed women through its doors for the first time in its history. "The oldsters didn't like it," recalled Mason. "They said no good would come of it."³⁴

As the floodwaters drained away, thousands spilled out of downtown buildings. The disorientation, vacant stares, and idle talk of many revealed an inability to fully grasp the devastation. There was no electricity and almost no telephone service; no buses, trains, or planes were operating. Stalled-out cars, some on their sides and others upside down, had washed blocks from their original locations. Splintered boards and crumbled bricks were everywhere. A massive soda fountain sat in the middle of one street; in the center of Exchange Place lay a canoe. The air stank of mud and sand.³⁵

The next day's *Providence Evening Bulletin* admitted that it could not yet estimate the extent of the damage; it knew only that the Hurricane of 1938 "was and is the greatest disaster that has ever befallen this State." At the Outlet, for instance, the entire first-floor inventory of men's suits, shoes, jewelry, drugstore goods, stationary, and candy was damaged or ruined by the flood. Brown University, perched on College Hill, avoided flooding, but it sustained about \$25,000 in damage from felled trees and battered buildings, and it suffered the destruction of its original 1765 charter, which had been stored in a downtown bank vault. The hurricane had been a cataclysmic experience for the people of Providence. "This day will go down in history," wrote one man in his diary that night. Another man was overheard the next morning talking on an emergency telephone line

at one of the city's department stores: "No, I'm not phoning from the hotel. How could I phone FROM THE HOTEL? Jake, you don't understand. It should happen to Hitler, what happened to the hotel!"³⁶

As that frantic call indicated, the hurricane had isolated pockets of population throughout New England. "For all the people of Providence knew," surmised the *Bulletin*, "all Europe might have been aflame with war, and Newport, Block Island, and Bristol might as well have been in the middle of the African jungle for communication purposes." Everyone thirsted for information about the hurricane's wider impact, but the storm had destroyed the major newspapers' plants. The *Bulletin's* publisher and editor ordered a crew to gather as much information as possible until 5:30 the morning after the storm and then head north to the offices of the *Boston Post*, whose editors had agreed to let the *Bulletin* use their presses until noon. The newspaper had one of only two available telephone lines in operation between the two cities, and it kept a man on the line at all times. The staff produced a twelve-page paper for that evening. The *Providence Journal* had turned out a four-page paper that morning after procuring a similar arrangement with the *Woonsocket Call*.³⁷

Meanwhile, friends and families feared the worst for each other. Harry Hardiman had left his family's plumbing business five minutes after his brother and sister, but the flood had arrived in the interim, and he reached home in Edgewood three hours after his siblings did. Donato Mezzanate, the stevedore who survived the hurricane bobbing on a floating tire, walked ten miles home the next day to join his bride of two months, who had assumed he was dead. Yvonne Corsi's family, who had come from Taunton, Massachusetts, to Providence on 21 September for a shopping trip, separated into two groups before the hurricane struck, with Yvonne and her cousin Julienne at the Outlet on Weybosset Street and Yvonne's mother, aunt, and another cousin at Shepard's department store on Westminster Street. That night Yvonne and Julienne slept on couches at Loew's State Theatre, while the others, who had been rescued by canoe, took refuge at the Biltmore Hotel. Neither group knew whether the other had survived until they all returned to Taunton the next day.³⁸

The hurricane separated families, but one new family was created that night in Providence. Joe Fogel and Lorraine Martin had arranged their wedding for the second-floor ballroom of the Narragansett Hotel. But while Lorraine and her family waited there, Joe and his family remained trapped at Union Station by the storm. "We were nervous," recalled Lorraine. "The hours went by. Where is he? Where is everybody? What's happened? And there was no way to find out." Meanwhile, flood refugees at the hotel ate the prepared wedding feast and drank the nuptial champagne before Joe finally arrived around 11:00. The minister, who was anxious to find his own family, rushed through the ceremony. Since Joe had reserved a room at the Biltmore, the newlyweds tiptoed across the debris downtown, escorted by the National Guard, shielding their eyes against the glaring banks of lights.³⁹



David Cornel DeJong stumbled home that night past felled trees, dangling wires, and torn-up sidewalks. Lurching up three pitch-black flights of stairs, he threw his bacon, eggs, and mackerel on his kitchen counter with a small sense of triumph. His neighbor came by with a candle. "What a night, what a night, we mumbled fairly soothingly to each other," DeJong remembered, "our eyes unbelievably on my fallen ceiling, my bashed-in windows, my sodden work table." He collapsed into bed and woke the next morning to a fresh and brilliant day, as if the hurricane had vacuumed up a gloomy

shroud. But the sun now shone upon a landscape strewn with wreckage, a people reckoning with their dead, a city confronting urgent new challenges.⁴⁰

The streets of Providence flooded again that Thursday morning, but this time because firemen were pumping water out of store basements. The churning pumps had operated through the night, and hoses poking out of windows spilled water onto the streets. Business owners, waiters, clerks, bootblacks, and hundreds of others donned grungy clothes and dragged sodden, silt-covered trash out to the sidewalks.⁴¹

That day the city permitted citizens downtown for the initial cleanup, but the National Guard cleared the streets of sightseers and anyone else without necessary business there. At 5:00 P.M. the city instituted a curfew until 7:00 the next morning, by which time the mobilization of 1,824 guardsmen was complete. People needed a pass to work downtown; many complained that authorities were issuing four kinds of passes, and that workers had to keep going to the police station for new passes. But in the battle for public order, martial law reigned.⁴²

The Red Cross played a critical role in the early relief efforts. The Providence chapter fielded inquiries about missing friends and relatives from 259 chapters and 135 individuals. The organization's local disaster committee delivered food, clothing, first aid, medicine, and shelter soon after the floodwaters receded. Under an emergency plan formulated during a meeting the previous January, the Red Cross further cooperated with such organizations as the Boy Scouts, which had mobilized Scouts to run messages for relief operations by 8:00 in the morning following the storm.⁴³

With transportation stymied and food stockpiles potentially contaminated, the city feared food shortages and epidemics. The state health director issued warnings to boil water, to cook all fruits and vegetables, and to drink only pasteurized milk. Restaurants and stores had to destroy potentially tainted goods. A full-blown food crisis never developed, but stores carried little but canned goods for weeks. State health authorities further warned that those who suffered cuts and bruises should receive tetanus antitoxin, and that those who swallowed floodwater should get inoculated against typhoid. Vaccine and serum were flown into Rhode Island, and the state's Department of Public Health supplied medicine free of charge.⁴⁴

Providence soon began taking small steps toward normalcy. The city's health department declared drinking water safe on Friday, 23 September. Martial law continued for four days, until police replaced the National Guard in maintaining civic order. Some downtown stores declared themselves open for business as early as the twenty-third, and by noon of that day shoppers had cleared their shelves of flashlights, oil stoves, candles, and oil lanterns. Some lunch counters opened, but they served only cold food. At Shepard's department store, however, cafeteria cook Pat Petrarca displayed some crisis-forged ingenuity: with his ruined refrigerator full of lamb and his stove not functioning, he boiled lamb stew in a big pot with a blowtorch.⁴⁵

Serious problems still remained for downtown businesses. The four major downtown banks had soggy documents, stock certificates, and currency. (In a terrible pun, some bankers said that the banks were "overliquid.") Claiming public interest, Governor Quinn refused to declare a bank holiday. Some banks closed to clean up but opened on Friday to cash checks and make up payrolls. Soon the affected banks shipped \$31 million in waterlogged bills to the Federal Reserve Bank in Boston to be exchanged for crisp new ones, but wills, securities, and ledger sheets had to be cleaned and dried by the banks themselves. The day after the flood the Providence National Bank looked "like a Chinese laundry," according to its vice president. Under the supervision of bank officials, clerks

washed individual sheets of paper with a cloth, pressed them with a blotter, and then ironed them dry—first with flatirons that they brought from home, later with large electric mangles. The cleaning and drying process took weeks, but the banks ultimately saved the great majority of their documents with this process. Other businesses adopted much the same procedure to save their financial records.⁴⁶

With few telephone and telegraph lines in operation, ham radio operators were in sudden demand. For nearly two weeks after the storm, as many as twenty-five amateur radiomen transmitted from a room near the governor's chambers at the State House, relaying information between the state capital and the devastated coastal areas. Twenty-four hours a day (with rotating turns napping in the legislative chamber), they passed on death notices, health updates, information on embalmers and caskets, and the course of relief operations.⁴⁷

Restoring electrical power and telephone service demanded massive efforts. The hurricane had knocked out 88 percent of outlets in the southern New England electrical power grid, and only a few emergency telephone lines connected Providence to Boston and New York. The New England Power Association used not only its twenty-six hundred regular crewmen but also another two thousand part-time and emergency workers. Electric and telephone repairmen, originally on reserve in case the hurricane hit Florida, instead

*Flooding wrought havoc in many downtown shops.
RIHS Collection (RHi X3 7688).*



arrived in New England from twenty other states, including Virginia, Texas, and South Dakota. In Providence, downtown was dark save for emergency generators. Saltwater had corroded forty of the electrical network's sixty-four vaults in the city's underground alternating current system. Trolley cars and traffic lights were out of service, and traffic problems plagued the city. But with engineers and repairmen logging twelve- to fourteen-hour days, emergency street lights were on three days after the storm, and 40 percent of telephone lines were in service after one week. Traffic lights and full power to downtown took nearly two weeks, however, and it was more than six weeks before street lighting was completely restored.⁴⁸

An air of gloom seemed to hang over Providence throughout the storm's aftermath. Many were concerned about their economic future; few business owners' policies covered looting and few homeowners' policies covered wind or flood damage, for such provisions were generally an unaffordable luxury in the Depression years. Other factors were contributing to the city's malaise as well. Theaters were slow to reopen; Roger Williams Park remained a tangle of fallen trees; many bridges remained closed to traffic; stores, restaurants, and hotels could offer their customers no more than incomplete service; first armed soldiers, then police paced the streets; and mud seemed to be everywhere. Then, too, there were surreal memories of the downtown under water to be dealt with. As newspaper reporter Santo Amato recalled, "Normal was a long time away."⁴⁹



David Cornel DeJong interpreted the hurricane as a lens into human nature. "Something had fooled us and made us very small," he wrote. "We hadn't wanted to know and see more; we were made on too small a scale to hold more." He had taken comfort in his personal response. Focusing on groceries, for instance, had allowed him to process the hurricane in nibbles, rather than gorging on the crisis in all its enormity and enormity.⁵⁰

"What Do You Do With A Disaster?" asked a *Providence Journal* headline eleven days after the event. DeJong tried to answer that question: the disaster had rendered him more ordinary than ever. But in others it had sparked heroism and good will, and in still others it had exposed crass impulses. In the storm's aftermath, the people of Providence kept searching for what the hurricane revealed about them.⁵¹

Many believed it had blown away selfishness and greed. "It brought people together," remembered David Molloy. "They helped each other out and really cared." Providence residents collected clothes and food, nursed the injured, sheltered the newly homeless, and cleaned up the streets together. Editorials in the city newspapers celebrated this spirit of cooperation, while also decrying the looters "who, like rats forced out by the storm, make their slimy ways through the gutters to feed on human misery." Profiteers earned similar enmity, for charging inflated prices seemed to violate a social compact forged by the disaster. In fact, one day after the storm Governor Quinn ordered the arrest of anyone selling gasoline above set prices.⁵²

Quinn's edict not only suggested that the hurricane was a test of personal character and community spirit; it also demonstrated the significant political impact that a crisis can have. Nationally, the crisis of the Great Depression had birthed the New Deal, a massive expansion of federal programs that had not ended the Depression but had at least promoted security in such diverse realms as finance, housing, and agriculture. Beyond its more localized effects, the 1938 hurricane revealed the extent of broad political transformation that had come about under the New Deal.⁵³

This family was left homeless by the hurricane. Photo taken by the WPA. RIHS Collection (Rhi X3 6927).



The Works Progress Administration was a huge, available, and willing work force for emergency duty. On the morning after the hurricane, hundreds of WPA workers were already hauling trash off the streets of Providence, removing trees and poles from the highways, and clearing Rhode Island beaches. That same day Governor Quinn requested additional federal aid from President Roosevelt. On Friday, the twenty-third, the WPA appropriated \$1 million for municipal relief in Rhode Island and assigned five thousand workers throughout the state. On Sunday, the twenty-fifth, the New England governors met with WPA director Harry Hopkins at Boston's Copley Hotel and asked him for \$75 million from the WPA coffers. By then sixteen thousand WPA men were working in Rhode Island. Suspending the existing regulations that limited the funds, workers, and hours that the WPA could authorize, Hopkins paid particular attention to Rhode Island, the state hardest hit by the hurricane. After meeting for an hour with the sister of a Narragansett Pier victim, he proclaimed that "Every resource of the Federal Government is behind Rhode Island in this fight."⁵⁴

Hopkins rejected a proposal to divert WPA funds to local communities, where the money would be spent with little federal or state supervision. "This is our job," he insisted. "We will do it and take the responsibility for it." The federal government in fact dominated the relief and recovery efforts after the hurricane. The Providence City Council appropriated \$1 million for relief, but that figure represented only a small fraction of what was needed in the city. Likewise, the Red Cross sought only \$500,000 in private donations for relief in the entire multistate area affected by the hurricane. Governor Quinn estimated the damage in Rhode Island at \$25 million. Only New Deal agencies had the resources to meet this challenge, and federal and state authorities controlled those funds.⁵⁵

On 27 September state WPA administrator Farrell Coyle collected damage reports from local communities so that he could submit a figure to the federal government for an organized reconstruction plan. The next day Governor Quinn flew to Washington and obtained a \$10 million loan without security from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation (RFC). By then the Disaster Loan Corporation had set up offices in Providence and started providing low-interest loans for hurricane victims. The next week Governor Quinn returned to Washington and solicited funds from the secretary of agriculture, the secretary of war, and the Farm Security Administration. The Army agreed to refloat a grounded ferry at Jamestown, and the Navy consented to clean up Narragansett and Little Narragansett Bays. The WPA allotted another \$3 million for Rhode Island relief on 5 October, and the Public Works Administration later granted millions more. Thanks largely to the sixteen hundred WPA men on duty, the streets of Providence were cleared of mud and debris by the end of the first week of October. The WPA now launched its first major rebuilding projects, and Rhode Island began its climb back—not only from the hurricane but also from the Depression. The rebuilding effort demanded the labor of great numbers of workers, and the federal government was willing to employ them.⁵⁶

Rhode Island climbed back, however, with a recognition of how the New Deal was changing American life. In a common complaint of the 1930s, some accused WPA workers of loafing on the job and claimed that the New Deal was weakening the nation's work ethic. The *Providence Journal*, whose editorial pages supported obtaining funds from federal agencies, also feared the governor's plan to distribute \$10 million in state funds, obtained from the RFC, directly to hurricane-stricken businessmen. The newspaper considered the idea fiscally irresponsible. "Perhaps most important of all, the plan would all but weaken confidence that individual initiative is as strong in this crisis as it



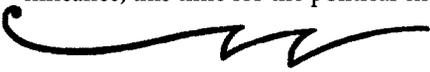


The WPA dispatched thousands of workers throughout the state to aid in cleanup efforts after the storm. These men cleared debris from a swimming pool at Rocky Point in Warwick. RIHS Collection (RHi X3 6857).



WORK
PERFORMED BY
WPA

ever was; individual initiative and the will to fight certainly are more necessary than they ever were." Like David Cornel DeJong, the *Journal* viewed the hurricane as a test of significance, this time for the political character of the state.⁵⁷



What had the Hurricane of 1938 meant? A Greene Street pastor argued that it had produced "a democracy of suffering," for rich and poor together endured the crisis, showing the bonds of common humanity, revealing the natural superiority of the American republic. His words had extra resonance because Europe was in the throes of a crisis: Adolf Hitler was threatening Nazi Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia, a bastion of democracy in central Europe. Hitler wanted the Sudetenland, and ultimately he wanted war. That specter dominated American attention, even in New England, where the hurricane rubble was still being cleared. Richard Brown Baker, who had just returned to Providence from study at Oxford, reflected upon the connection: "The destruction here, the bodies being recovered from the debris of crushed houses, the loss of property, the soldiers on guard, the ambulances hurrying along the roads, the Red Cross, the inconvenience of no electricity, the broken communications, and the general misery present at this moment a condition in Rhode Island that hints at the horror and destruction of war. God spare Europe and the world from the greater ruin that war would bring them!"⁵⁸

Of course, war arrived the next year. And like the Great Depression, World War II forged a reorientation of American political life, as the United States emerged from the conflict as the world's chief guardian of democracy. The Hurricane of 1938 had arrived at the crossroads of these two defining crises. On a lesser scale, the hurricane had also fashioned challenges to Providence and its people, challenges exposing a dependence upon the federal government, spurring institutions to seek creative solutions, prompting acts of both valor and avarice, and inspiring a determination simply to survive with one's spirit intact—along, perhaps, with a dozen eggs, a half-pound of bacon, and two mackerel.

Notes

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