



HURRICANE FLORENCE



LOCAL

Special report: Florence brought relentless rain, epic flooding and an uncertain future to NC

BY MARTHA QUILLIN
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Editor's note: This article appears in a special section on Hurricane Florence in the print edition of The News & Observer and The Herald-Sun on Sunday, Sept. 30. If you're not a subscriber, the section will be available in papers in local stores.

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Hurricane Florence was just a giant gray tumbleweed on the weather radar screen for two weeks, menacing to the Carolinas but somewhat abstract, until midday on Thursday, Sept. 13.

That's when the storm's outer bands arrived in New Hanover County, beginning four days of tropical wind and rain, two weeks of flooding and years of rebuilding from what will be known as one of worst storms to ever hit the East Coast, and one of the deadliest for both states since records have been kept.

Amy Rowlett had just moved to Carolina Beach last December with her husband, Brandon, after living on the New Hanover County mainland for 15 years. The couple obeyed orders to evacuate Carolina Beach, along with more than 1 million other visitors and residents who were exhorted to leave coastal North and South Carolina communities ahead of the growing storm.

Read more of our coverage of Hurricane Florence

Like many evacuees, the Rowletts have pets: three dogs and a cat they would not leave behind but also could not house at most local hotels where they might seek shelter. So they were staying with the first of several friends in Wilmington who offered to take them in when, at about 5 a.m. on Sept. 14, the power went out.

“There's something about when the power clicks off, you kind of wake up,” Rowlett said. “So the power went off and then we were just kind of lost from that point on. Our days just kind of went into each other. I mean, it was like hours had passed, and you were just sitting there, not doing anything.

“There was so much rain. It just did not stop. It just would not. It just sat here on us.”

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HURRICANE FLORENCE



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Three days after Hurricane Florence made landfall near Wilmington, N.C., floodwater still surrounds buildings in Trenton, N.C., on Monday, Sept. 17, 2018.

Deluged: Florence swamps the Carolinas

BY MARTHA QUILLIN
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moved at its own pace. From the time it left the west coast of Africa, it never traveled faster than about 18 mph as it ambled across the Atlantic Ocean. But what it lacked in forward speed it made up for in mass, moisture and, at times, wind speed, reaching Category 4 status with 140 mph winds before losing strength, regaining it and losing it again as it approached the U.S..

By the time the storm's eye made landfall just after 7 a.m. on Sept. 14 south of Wrightsville Beach, Florence's sustained winds were down to 92 mph — Category 1 — but its traveling speed had slowed to 2 mph. People strolling along the beach on a sunny day move faster.

At that pace, people in Florence's 500-mile-wide, curva-

ceous path across North and South Carolina all would get up to four days of almost relentless pounding, with rain totaling more than 35 inches in Elizabethtown and two feet in many other places.

Florence's combination of torrential rain and glacial movement made the storm a double threat: the initial onslaught, and then, days later, the second flood of water traveling from North Carolina's midsection to saturated communities downstream in both states.

It was enough to cause a 10-foot storm surge that turned sand dunes into cliffs on North Carolina barrier islands and sent the Neuse River to the second floors of buildings in downtown New

SEE STORM, 5H

Florence by the numbers

BY CARLI BROSSÉAU
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NC rainfall records*

35.93

Elizabethtown

34

Swansboro

26.96

Oak Island

26.58

Wilmington

25.91

Whiteville

25.20

Newport/Morehead City

25.04

Mt. Olive

24.61

Jacksonville

SC Rainfall records*

23.63

Loris

22.58

Cheraw

21.18

Carolina Sand Hills



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The Williams family off Collins Road in Longs, S.C., rapidly removes their belongings, trying to keep their mattresses dry. Water began flooding the small community of Longs late in the week, touching some homes that did not expect to suffer the flood’s wrath.

JASON LEE | jlee@thesunnews.com

CAROLINA JUNE 15, 2018

19.94

Chesterfield

19.56

Marion

19.17

Jefferson

*In inches, for a tropical storm. Sources: NC Department of Public Safety, SC Emergency Management, Division, National Weather Service

MORE INSIDE

Rivers in both Carolinas broke record levels or came close to doing so. **See page 5H**

CONDITIONS ALONG THE COAST

A beach-by-beach report on damage in our coastal towns. **7H**



IMAGES FROM THE STORM

Photographers in the Carolinas capture nature’s fury. **8-9H**



WHERE AND HOW TO GET HELP

Tips to maneuver through the relief red tape. **11H**



A special 12-page section on Hurricane Florence will be in the print edition of The News & Observer on Sunday, Sept. 30.

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It was enough to cause a 10-foot storm surge that turned sand dunes into cliffs on North Carolina barrier islands and sent the Neuse River to the second floors of buildings in downtown New Bern. Enough to almost instantly refill Carolina Beach Lake, which the town had pumped dry before the

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storm's arrival. Enough to send the Neuse, Cape Fear, Lumber, Little Pee Dee, Great Pee Dee and Waccamaw rivers to record or near-record levels and cause epic flooding in North Carolina that then inundated parts of South Carolina.

It was enough to flood tens of thousands of homes and businesses, many of which had been flooded by Hurricane Matthew in 2016. Enough to send more than 25,000 people into shelters from Winston-Salem to Georgetown, and force 1.2 million of North Carolina's 1.5 million public school students to miss class. Schools across half of South Carolina closed days ahead of the storm as well.



See images of Hurricane Florence's devastation from the air as photojournalist Casey Toth flies along with a National Guard relief mission to Trenton, NC on Monday, Sept. 17, 2018.

By Casey Toth

Enough to submerge sections of 2,200 roads across North Carolina, including stretches of interstates 40 and 95 and U.S. 70, prompting Gov. Roy Cooper to suggest that thru-travelers re-route through Tennessee and avoid N.C. altogether. As the flooding moved into South Carolina, at least 200 roads closed there, including 18 miles of I-95 in both directions.

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Enough to knock out power for more than one million customers in two states. Enough to kill more than 4.1 million N.C. chickens and turkeys, and at least 5,500 hogs, and to drown soybeans and sweet potatoes still in the field. Enough to send hog waste and coal ash flowing over earthen berms.

Enough to cause up to \$50 billion in damages, making Florence one of the costliest storms on record.

Worst of all, it was enough to be a contributing factor in at least 47 deaths: 36 in North Carolina, nine in South Carolina, and two in Virginia.

The first deaths happened the afternoon the storm arrived, when a tree fell on a home in Wilmington, killing a mother and her baby. Between the storm surge and the rain, the downtown edge of the city that meets the Cape Fear River was quickly underwater. As the rain continued to fall — two feet of it, total in Wilmington — the water rose on the outside edges, too, closing off highways and making the Port City an island.



Three good samaritans rescue a couple in danger of drowning after trying to ford the Little River, swollen by rains from Hurricane Florence, on Monday, Sept. 17, 2018.

By John Hansen

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As the storm crawled along on Friday, rain bands began to reach further north and west into North Carolina, and south toward Myrtle Beach, dropping trees, power lines and phone lines as it went. As rivers and streams rose, professional and volunteer water-rescue teams began retrieving stranded people in Fayetteville and Cumberland County, and in Lumberton and surrounding Robeson County. In the town of Newport Friday morning, workers at the Carteret County Humane Society used Facebook to call for help getting themselves, 43 dogs and 80 cats out of their flooded building.

Saturday, the storm inched further along. Power was still on in Myrtle Beach, but as in other beach towns, businesses were closed. Hotels, restaurants, convenience stores — nearly everything was shuttered, leaving those who had waited late to evacuate almost nowhere to go and no gas to get there. Towns began imposing curfews, to keep people and property safe.

The rain kept falling and rivers began to rise. Before noon on Saturday, the City of Fayetteville and the Town of Wade in Cumberland County issued mandatory evacuation orders for anyone living within a mile of the banks of the Cape Fear and Little rivers. In Lumberton, local officials asked that anyone who lived in areas that had flooded after Hurricane Matthew to evacuate. Saturday night, with the Lumber River rising faster than expected, the city ordered everyone out of south Lumberton. All around town, volunteers with boats on trailers idled in parking lots and on the shoulders of roads, ready to pluck people from the water.

Sunday morning, with the rain still falling on an area stretching across North and South Carolina and reaching into Georgia, broad sections of central and Eastern North Carolina were under water, from a few inches to several feet. Through the day, creeks turned to rivers, and rivers and swamps turned into seas. The water surrounded houses, neighborhoods, whole towns.

Throughout the day, the rain kept coming down and the grim count of deaths kept going up. That night, a woman would drive into water flowing across a road in Union County, N.C., get swept away and lose her year-old baby to the flood. In South Carolina, it was the deadliest night of the storm, with three people killed on flooded roads.

The storm continued to grind across South Carolina, no longer a hurricane but still dropping heavy rain as it went: more than 15 inches in Conway, more than 19 inches in Marion, more than 22 inches in Cheraw.

Finally, on Monday, what was left of Florence moved into Western North Carolina, headed for Tennessee before making a turn toward the northeast. In Eastern North Carolina, skies began to lighten and people emerged from houses, shelters and hotel rooms that had not had electricity for

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days. They stepped outside to see what was left.

In some places, the water had begun to recede. In others, it was holding steady. Along the Cape Fear River, the worst flooding was yet to come, with the river cresting again as much as a week later.

South Carolina, which at one time had thought it would bear the brunt of the storm, now braced for the worst of its leftovers as all that water rolled south. In the tiny town of Nichols in Marion County some residents had just rebuilt from Matthew and others had left for good. On Sept. 20, Nichols was under 4 to 6 feet of water from Florence. Residents there, just like those in flood-prone North Carolina communities, will wrestle with whether to start again.

On Sunday, Sept. 23 — more than a week after Florence came ashore — officials in Georgetown County told more than 8,000 households to evacuate. Many residents spent the weekend moving their belongings out of the way to let the Waccamaw and Little Pee Dee rivers flow through. The next day, the Waccamaw River in Horry County was still on the rise and expected to top out at a level 4 feet above where it hit after Matthew in 2016 and Hurricane Floyd in 1999.



As Hurricane Florence flooded the Trent River it damaged all of the churches in the small Jones County town of Trenton, North Carolina.

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By Robert Willett

A hundred miles away, homeowners in Carolina and Kure Beach were counting both their losses and their blessings. When they were allowed to return to the island, there was no electricity, but few people in Wilmington had it either, and Amy Rowlett said she and her husband would rather be without power at their house than at someone else's.

While Brandon peeled the plywood off the windows, letting in some light, Amy rummaged through the cupboard to see what she could cook using the burner on the grill.

“I wouldn't make a very good pioneer woman,” she said, but she found a jar of marinara and some spaghetti. When she served it to Brandon, she said, “I swear I thought he had a tear in his eye.”

Since the storm, Rowlett said, she has seen her neighbors cook hot meals for first responders and gather gift cards for utility crews who have stayed at a local high school so long they have run out of shampoo and shaving cream. Islanders have begun helping one another with cleanup, and are looking for ways to aid those whose incomes could not bear the blow of several days of lost work and nights in hotel rooms.

People keep asking her: Why do you want to live in a place that gets hit by hurricanes?

“Because this doesn't happen every day,” Rowlett tells them. “And now that I have seen the way the community pulls together, we just could not imagine living anywhere else.”

Information in this story is based on reporting by The News & Observer; The Charlotte Observer; The Myrtle Beach Sun News; Columbia, S.C.'s The State; the Wilmington Star News; the Wall Street Journal; the Associated Press; the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; the N.C. Department of Public Safety; and the web sites of Cumberland County and of the cities of Wilmington and Fayetteville.

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