

Marine

THE HURRICANE THAT OPENED OREGON INLET

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"We are informed upon reliable authority, that the destruction consequent upon the late gale in those counties and islands bordering on the coast from Cape Henry to Currituck Inlet, has been without precedent in the recollections of the oldest citizens of the States of Virginia and North Carolina."

The preceding account referred to a northeaster in 1846 which caused remarkable destruction along the Outer Banks. Years after the storm Henry Ansell of Knotts' Island recalled that "the news flew that the Atlantic was...breaking on the island shores. I with others went down to the bay side. Such a sight had never been seen before. No marsh, no beach. The tops of a few mountainous sand hills were all that could be seen."

The March 1846 storm washed away all of the hogs, cattle and sheep from Knotts' Island. Near Corolla, sand ridges which had been as tall as 40 feet disappeared. Because the storm was the worst ever experienced by local residents, no one would have expected that within six months another storm of this intensity would strike. It would be a hurricane that would wreck ships, wash away buildings, crops and farm animals, and change the course of maritime history in North Carolina.

The origin of the September 1846 hurricane is obscure. North Carolina was the first state to feel the fury of the storm as it roared out of the North Atlantic Ocean. It is possible that the center of this hurricane came near the Outer Banks and then curved back to sea.

One of the first to encounter the hurricane was a young naval officer on the U.S. Brig Washington who reported that, "after a pleasant cruise about a month in the Gulf Stream, where she had been employed surveying, the U.S. Brig Washington... stood in, on the 7th inst., for the Capes of Virginia. As the weather appeared threatening, the wind fresh and blowing on shore, great anxiety was felt to reach an anchorage."

It would be more than two weeks before the vessel would reach shore for that evening,

"sea and current (forced the vessel) upon Cape Hatteras...the gale, now increased in volume, howled ominously through the rigging, and already our little vessel swaggered under her canvas; the sky was obscured by flying masses of dark clouds; the crests of the waves heaving their dark volumes to the sky, flashed with the ghostly phosphorescent light often observed in storms...the barometer fell rapidly, and everything foretold a terrible strife of the elements."

During the night the small boats on the brig were swept overboard and the jib, topmast and staysail were lost. By seven o'clock the next morning, the wind increased to hurricane force and "the brig lay over completely on her side; the water boiling over the lee rail." For hours the crew held to the rigging, but around noon "a heavy sea broke on board...washing overboard nearly every soul. In a moment they were swept from our view; that moment showed them calm and composed, the determined spirit, which supported them on board seemed still to animate them. One noble fellow as he passed astern waved his hat in token of adieu, and the driving spray hid them for ever from our sight."

On shore the hurricane changed the land and the lives of the people who lived within its path. C.O. Boutelle wrote that, "on the morning of the September gale the sound waters were all piled up to the southwest from the effects of the heavy northeast blow of the previous days. The weather was clear...until about 11 a.m., when a sudden squall came from the southwest, and the waters came upon the beach with such fury that Mr. Midgett, within three quarters of a mile from his house when the storm began, was unable to reach it until four in the afternoon. He sat upon his horse, on a small sand knoll, for five hours, and witnessed the destruction of his property, and (as he then supposed) of his family also, without the power to move a foot to their rescue, and, for two hours, expecting to be swept to sea himself."

The Edenton Sentinel described some of the remarkable changes that took place as wind-driven water caused extensive damage to property.

Much damage has been done by the late storm to the shipping on the coast. Our Bay presented quite a novel appearance; nearly all the water was blown out of it, except immediately in the channel. The water in Perquimans River, near Hertford, fell seven feet, which was, as a gentleman living in the vicinity informed us, four feet lower than he had ever known it before. At Nag's Head the tide rose about nine feet higher than common tide, and destroyed the warehouse of Mr. Russell, proprietor of the Hotel, together with nearly all the stores which it contained, carrying it down the Beach about half a mile, swept away the market house; the house belonging to Dr. Wright was blown from its blocks; and nearly all the trees on the Hill were destroyed. Several families were compelled, for safety, to leave their houses and seek shelter in the Hotel. All the boats belonging to this place were carried off, depriving them of the means of fishing for a time. Persons living some four miles below Nag's Head, on the sea beach, found it necessary to flee to the garrets of their houses; to save themselves from drowning. They lost all they had to survive on; their clothing was all destroyed, and also their cooking utensils.

At Hatteras, all but six houses were destroyed and at Ocracoke 18 ships were driven ashore or out to sea. Some, as the Schooner Charles Slover, were bound for ports with their holds full of naval stores and lumber, while others, like the Schooner Paragon, were filled with farm goods.

At that time, Ocracoke Inlet was the principal avenue for the shipment of goods from the area of Pamlico and Albemarle Sounds. But with the hurricane of 1846, two new entrances were established. The creation of one of the new inlets was observed by C.O. Boutelle of the U.S. Coast Survey. When the winds shifted from northeast to southwest "the force of water coming in so suddenly...broke through... the sea beach...and created the inlets. They were insignificant at first, not more than 20 feet wide, and the northern one much the deepest and widest. In the westerly winds which prevailed in September, the current from the sound gradually widened them."

Both inlets are of major economic importance today. Commercial and recreational vessels pass through them to the rich fishing grounds along the coast and the nearby Gulf Stream. A major bridge now spans one inlet, providing quick access to the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge

and the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Ferries shuttle across the other, carrying goods and people to and from Ocracoke Island. Their names are well known and in the past 136 years many have become accustomed to their existence. They are Hatteras Inlet and Oregon Inlet, carved out by the September hurricane of 1846.

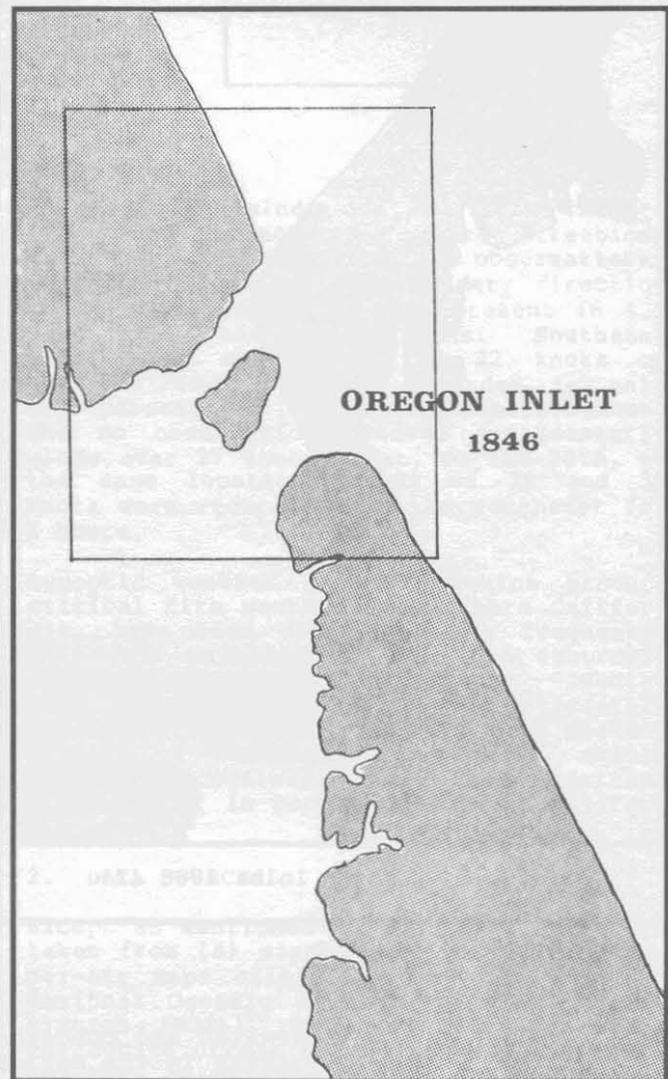


FIGURE 1. Oregon Inlet 1846 (2)

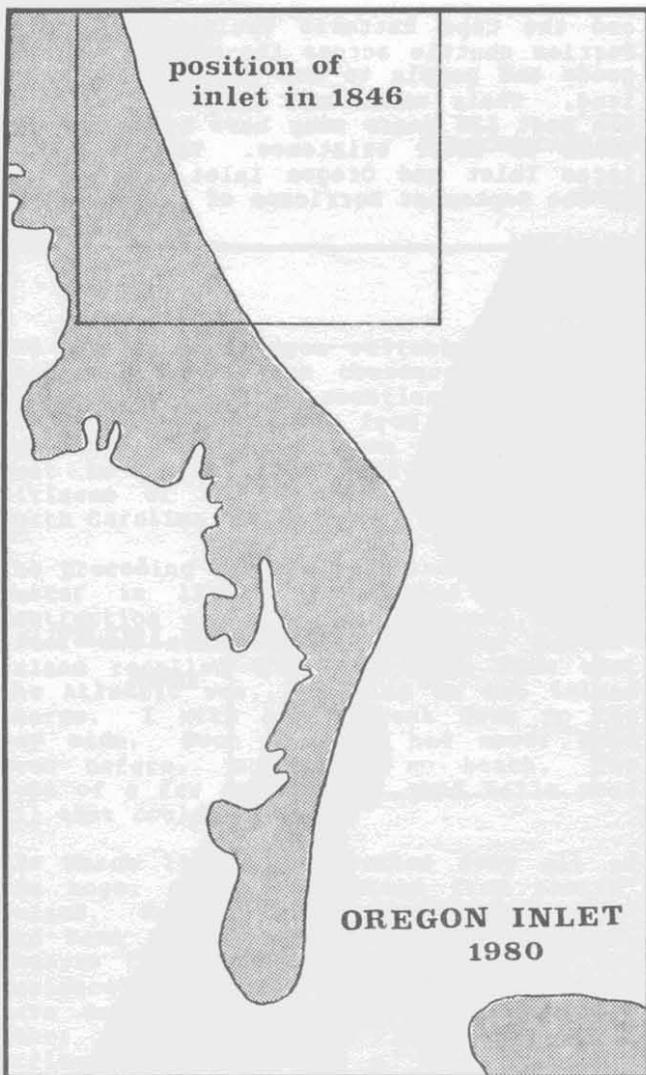


FIGURE 2. Oregon Inlet 1980 (2)

REFERENCES AND FOOTNOTES

1. John Sanders is the coastal weather awareness specialist for the University of North Carolina's Sea Grant College Program. A companion article, *Applications of Television to Enhance Hurricane Awareness Programs*, was published in the February 1983 issue of the *National Weather Digest*.

2. INFORMATION ON THE MAPS

The maps show the location of Oregon Inlet after it was created during the hurricane in 1846. Since that time, the inlet has shifted approximately 3.5 miles to the south-south-east. The data sources were the historical records of the U.S. Coast Survey and recent analysis of aerial photography by the National Ocean Survey.

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