



Written by [Staff](#) on February 22, 2016

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## Undoing a Storm's Damage

As the waters rose on the afternoon of September 8, the children of the Sisters of Charity Orphanage grew more fearful. The increasing winds and rains were eroding the sand dunes that protected the orphanage. Moving the 93 children to the second story of the stronger of two dormitories, the sisters had the orphans sing the French hymn "Queen of the Waves" to calm and comfort them as much as possible.



Further inland, people sought safe shelter as businesses and homes began to be invaded by the rising bay waters, along with the continuing rain. But because this city had seen many storms and floods over the years, leaving behind little more than inconvenience, the residents believed this one to be no different, and they continued life at its normal pace. Wading in water two to four feet deep were those making their way home for the day or helping others find dry shelter, oblivious to the real danger at hand. The local forecast official sent a special report to Washington after a 3:30 p.m. observation, telling of the rising waters and condition of the streets. After an advisory, many living by the beach made the decision to take their families to the center of the city, a move that would ultimately save their lives. Families opened their homes to those in need, sheltering 40 or 50 people in some instances.

After 6 p.m. the winds intensified to around 100 miles per hour, and the city was completely flooded. As buildings began to crumble, so did the confidence of the people. Realizing the danger at hand, many climbed to second stories and roofs. Many were killed by debris while trying to escape the storm.

The worst of the storm came between 7:30 and 8:30 that night, bringing the water 10 feet above ground at some places in town, with a deadly tide of about 15 to 20 feet along the coast.

As the fatal surge hit, houses were knocked from their foundations and propelled into other houses. The horrific storm made no distinction between people and debris, carrying both, and would alter this community forever.

Back at the orphanage, the nuns began cutting clothesline as the dormitory began to collapse. Each sister tied sections of the line to herself and at least six of the children in an effort to save them. In the end, all but three boys perished at the orphanage.

More than 10,000 lives were lost during the Great Galveston Hurricane of 1900, a storm that would take its place as the nation's deadliest natural disaster in history.

## The Devastation Revealed

"Sunday morning, the day after the disaster, began with the sound of bells from the ruined Ursuline Convent calling people to worship," writes David G. McComb in *Galveston: A History*.

The morning sky on September 9 shone bright and clear over Galveston, giving no indication of the devastation that lay below. The editor of the Galveston Tribune and a survivor of the great storm, Richard Spillane, wrote the introduction to Paul Lester's book *The Great Galveston Disaster*. He



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recalled the sight the day after the storm:

Such a scene of desolation as met the eyes of the people of Galveston when day dawned Sunday, September 9, has rarely been witnessed on earth. Fifteen hundred acres of the city had been swept clear of every habitation. Every street was choked with ruins, while the sea, not content with tearing away a great strip along the beach front, had piled the wreckage in one great long mass from city end to city end. Beneath these masses of broken buildings, in the streets, in the yards, in fence corners, in cisterns, in the bay, far out across the waters on the mainland shores, everywhere, in fact, were corpses. To bury the dead was a physical impossibility.

Isaac M. Cline, a local forecast official and survivor, was among those who opened his home to neighbors as the storm intensified. When his home was swept away in the storm, 32 out of the 50 people sheltering there were lost, including his wife. In his account of the storm, "Special Report on the Galveston Hurricane of September 8, 1900," he writes of the aftermath,

Sunday, September 9, 1900, revealed one of the most horrible sights that ever a civilized people looked upon. About three thousand homes, nearly half the residence portion of Galveston, had been completely swept out of existence, and probably more than six thousand persons had passed from life to death during that dreadful night. The correct number of those who perished will probably never be known, for many entire families are missing. Where 20,000 people lived on the 8th not a house remained on the 9th, and who occupied the houses may, in many instances, never be known. On account of the pleasant Gulf breezes many strangers were residing temporarily near the beach, and the number of these that were lost can not yet be estimated.

Many stories were to be told of miracles and of sorrows.

The Rollfings, a family of five, were fortunate to have survived together. Louisa Rollfing recalled her experience as she "heard the blinds and windows break ... and it sounded as if the rooms were filled with a thousand little devils, shrieking and whistling." The kitchen of the home they were in was torn from the house, and the house itself lifted off its pillars.

Four babies were safely born during the flood, one mother being rescued from a trunk before giving birth.

Families who had been separated for hours, adrift on debris, suddenly found one another. Many were believed to have been carried to the sea and back.

Of the sorrows, there were too many to tell. Deceased mothers and children still holding to one another and men who sacrificed their own lives to shelter their wives and children were all too common. At some locations, courageous nuns were found still tied to their orphans.

President of the American National Red Cross Clara Barton, who helped secure donations for goods and funds for the ruined city, described her impression of the wreckage: "It was one of those monstrosities of nature which defied exaggeration and fiendishly laughed at all tame attempts of words to picture the scene it had prepared."

The loss and damage suffered by Galveston that fateful day in September 1900 can only be appreciated in the light of what the city was beforehand. Founded in 1836, Galveston became the capital of the Republic of Texas. It was one of the largest cities in the state, with a population of 36,000, and one of the wealthiest cities per capita in the United States by the end of the 19th century. As



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cityofgalveston.org tells us, "Fortunes were made in cotton, mercantile houses, banks, publishing and printing, flour and grain mills, railroads, land development, and shipping." The downtown area of the city known as the Strand became the Wall Street of the Southwest.

According to wikipedia.org, "During the mid-19th century, Galveston emerged as an international city with immigration and trade from around the U.S. and the world. The city became one of the nation's busiest ports and the world's leading port for cotton exports." With its cosmopolitan flair, Galveston boasted a list of firsts for the state. Among them were the first hospital, opera house, post office, golf course, and country club.

During the spring before the storm, the city completed an impressive structure, the Texas Heroes Monument, located at the intersection of 25th Street and Broadway. This was to celebrate the victory during the Texas Revolution at San Jacinto, as well as Texas' independence. The monument was dedicated on April 21, the anniversary of the Battle of San Jacinto. To celebrate, the city held a parade and ceremony, complete with speeches and band music.

Little could anyone suspect the devastation that would occur less than five months later. Those few storm-ridden hours of panic and struggle on that evening in September would leave in their wake a city forever altered.

This beautiful up-and-coming city now lay before the eyes of the survivors a spectacle of devastation and waste.

Cline continued his narration of the desolation:

That portion of the city west of Forty-fifth street was sparsely settled, but there were several splendid residences in the southern part of it. Many truck farmers and dairy men resided on the west end of the island, and it is estimated that half of these were lost, as but very few residences remain standing down the island. For two blocks, the damage amounts to at least fifty per cent of the property. There is not a house in Galveston that escaped injury, and there are houses totally wrecked in all parts of the city. All goods and supplies not over eight feet above floor were badly injured, and much was totally lost. The damage to buildings, personal, and other property in Galveston County is estimated at above thirty million dollars. The insurance inspector for Galveston states that there were 2,636 residences located prior to the hurricane in the area of total destruction, and he estimates 1,000 houses totally destroyed in other portions of the city, making a total of 3,636 houses totally destroyed. The value of these buildings alone is estimated at \$5,500,000.

Editor Spillane, who was sent to Houston to give an account of the storm stated, "It will take a week to tabulate the dead and the missing and to get anything near an approximate idea of the monetary loss. It is safe to assume that one-half the property of the city is wiped out, and that one-half of the residents have to face absolute poverty."

Without delay or time for proper grieving, decisions had to be made. As Spillane continued in his introduction to Lester's book, "To a people upon whom such a terrible calamity had been visited, now devolved a duty the like of which a civilized people had never been called to perform."

And that duty would, indeed, be performed by the stricken city. However, it would be done in a manner that many today would be unfamiliar with, through the voluntary aid of fellow countrymen and without unnecessary interference of the federal government.



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## Starting Over

On September 9, by 10 a.m., emergency city council meetings had been called by Mayor Walter C. Jones. By the end of that day, a central relief committee had been appointed. The people of Galveston decided to rebuild their city.

As the need for immediate aid was imperative, Texas' Governor Joseph Sayers sent an appeal for aid to Dallas. The citizens of that city, along with organizations such as the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias, joined together, creating soliciting committees. As a result \$10,000 was raised within 24 hours of the storm, along with the money appropriated by the Dallas city council.

Members of those same organizations and citizens of Dallas also traveled by train to the storm districts to offer direct aid and relief to the victims.

Having been deputized by the mayor and the citizens' committee of Galveston, Spillane sent communication to Washington, D.C., requesting help. President McKinley's answer was, "The reports of the great calamity which has befallen Galveston and other points on the coast of Texas excite my profound sympathy for the sufferers, as they will stir the hearts of the whole country. Have directed the Secretary of War to supply rations and tents upon your request."

Three days after the storm, another appeal for help was sent by Galveston's mayor to the people of the United States, telling of the loss of lives and property and asking for prompt assistance with transportation and care-giving for the thousands still in need.

Every church and charitable institution in Galveston having been damaged by the storm and unable to perform normal functions, there was dire need for donations of food, household goods, and clothing, as well as provisions such as water, gasoline, oil, and candles.

One act of charity came from the mayor of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. Remembering the outpouring of aid his city received from throughout the nation and from 18 foreign countries after the catastrophic Johnstown Flood of 1889, Mayor Lucian Woodruff issued a proclamation for his city:

Later and more definite information of the fearful destruction of life and property at Galveston and other places in Texas recalls to our attention the awful calamity in Johnstown and vicinity eleven years ago. Whole squares of homes have been swept away, hundreds of dead are lying unburied and thousands of people destitute. This would be a fitting time to show our gratitude for what the world did for us in the hour of need.

He went on to assure that any contributions received would be recognized and promptly delivered to those in charge of the work relief. In fact, money had already begun coming in before the proclamation was issued.

Keeping the federal government's involvement to a minimum is beneficial because individuals feel the weight of responsibility and have the opportunity to give or repay in the form of voluntary efforts and donations. True charity comes from the people, not the government. Forced "charity" in tax dollars prevents true charity and is, in actuality, theft by government.

The importance of keeping the relief effort as local as possible can also be seen in light of the careless and costly involvement of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. In 2005, New Orleans was thrown into a disastrous situation, similar to the one



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Galveston faced 105 years earlier, with 80 percent of the city and surrounding parishes being flooded and at least 1,400 lives lost. Instead of the immediate action taken in Galveston by those who had a vested interest in the outcome, the people of New Orleans depended on the federal government for help, waiting days before FEMA established operations in the area. The *Washington Times* reported of the agency, "FEMA has endangered disaster-stricken communities by placing them under the control of a lumbering, distant bureaucracy.... When disaster does strike, confusing regulations scare off emergency workers from other regions, since you can get called into court if you don't jump through the right hoops."

Specifically of the aftermath of Katrina, the paper also noted, "The agency's failure cost taxpayers billions of dollars, suffocating state and local governments and private aid organizations, which are far better suited to help disaster victims."

This lost idea espoused by the *Washington Times* proved to be the foundation of Galveston's reconstruction, as volunteers from around the country, as well as material goods and charitable donations of more than \$1.25 million, came to the aid of the city.

However, Galveston's struggles were far from over. While the majority were preoccupied with salvaging their city, there were those who would profit from others' misery. Thugs and vandals robbed the dying, killing those who resisted. Some went so far as to cut off the fingers of the dead to steal the rings they bore. Profiteers raised the price of necessities such as food and transportation to outrageous levels, forcing their fellow citizens to suffer for their own gain.

These and other lawless activities persuaded 15 of Galveston's prominent citizens to form a committee of public safety. Colonel J. H. Hawley, chairman, along with Mayor Jones and Chief of Police Edward Ketchum, formed a triumvirate having complete authority, and declared Galveston under martial law. Men were sworn in and deputized to protect the city and its people. Within a day every part of the city was being patrolled.

The first days that followed the calamity were difficult and trying. A speedy removal of the thousands of dead was necessary for the safety of the living. The sun made the decomposition process faster, threatening disease from pestilence. Men, women, and children waded through the mud and muck, clearing debris and bodies. Catwalks as high as eight to 10 feet above ground were erected for the people to use as they moved about the city. The buildings not already on stilts were raised with jacks, including St. Patrick's Church, which weighed 3,000 tons and was raised five feet. Within seven days a bridge a little more than two miles long was built across the bay to the mainland, reestablishing connection and commerce with the rest of the world. Water and telegraph services were also restored during the first week. By the second week, telephone lines were being laid for a new system. Electric trolleys began to operate and freight was moving through the harbor during the third week. During the first month, more than 50 bodies a day were found and funeral pyres were burned into the month of November. Spillane said of the Galveston residents, "An undaunted people strove as only an indomitable people can strive, to rehabilitate the city."

For years the residents lived with pumps, sludge, and canals while the city was in the process of being rebuilt. Five hundred city blocks had been raised by 1911. By 1912, Galveston had become the second-largest port in the United States, as well as the leading cotton port in the world, with more than four million bales shipped each year. More than 10 miles of seawall was built within 60 years. Elizabeth





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Hayes Turner says in her article “One of those monstrosities of nature”: The Galveston Storm of 1900,” “The disaster that hit the city in September 1900 had left Galvestonians dazed and grieving, but out of that experience of death, damage, and disruption came a determined desire for recovery.”

In 1994, on the anniversary of the Great Storm, Galveston would house yet another monument. A Texas historical marker was placed as a memorial, this time at 69th Street and Seawall Boulevard, the site of the fallen orphanage. Descendants of two of the survivors, Frank Madera and Will Murny, participated in the ceremony. The song “Queen of the Waves” was sung, once again, at the same place and time as it was during the storm, and it continues to be sung by the Sisters of Charity of the Incarnate Word every year on September 8.

Galveston, whether or not it ever reaches the peaks of financial success it saw before the Great Storm of 1900, saw a success most cities will never know. With raw determination, human kindness, and charity, Galveston was raised by its own.



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