THE HURRICANE *Forgotten*

BY JEFF ROSENFELD

"It is always Sunday on the Sea Islands," Charleston author DuBose Heyward once boasted of the fertile oases that fringe the Atlantic Coast of his native South Carolina.

His words should be no comfort to the people who live there. For one Sunday night over a century ago, one of the deadliest hurricanes in American history not only leveled waterfronts from Charleston to Savannah, Georgia, but also nearly wiped out the residents of the South Carolina Sea Islands.

Despite its disastrous effects, the Sea Islands storm of August 27–28, 1893, is a forgotten hurricane. The lore of Atlantic Coast weather is now rife with multibillion-dollar storms like Hugo and Andrew that dwarf the 1893 storm's $10 million damage total. The 120 m.p.h. winds measured in 1893 Charleston are no record for the region either.

Editor's note: Our special 50th Anniversary issue of *Weatherwise* (January/February) included 12 of the "best" articles ever to appear in the magazine. There were several pieces—including this one from August/September 1993 by former managing editor Jeff Rosenfeld—which just missed that final selection. Here, as our year-long celebration continues, we present more of the best of *Weatherwise's* first 50 years.

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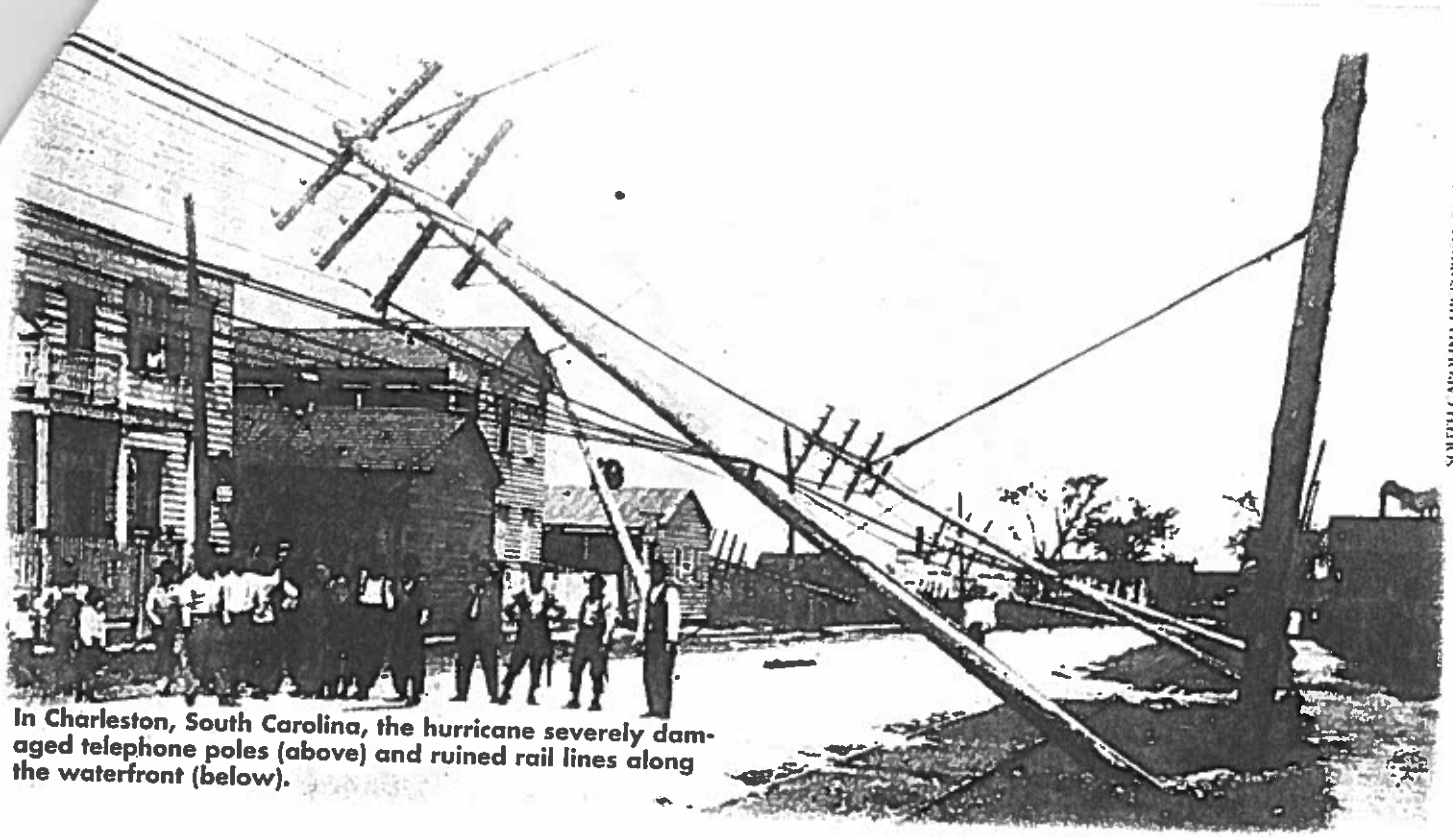

SOUTH CAROLINA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

In Charleston, South Carolina, the hurricane severely damaged telephone poles (above) and ruined rail lines along the waterfront (below).

Historians, too, generally write little about the catastrophe in South Carolina, concentrating instead on the miseries of the year's deep economic depression. Even newspapers of the day devoted more space to the dazzling Columbian Exhibition in Chicago.

No hurricane, however, has delivered a crueler blow on the Atlantic Coast than the horrors the 1893 storm brought to the dozens of isolated islands around Beaufort, South Carolina. At first, mainlanders could only gaze nervously across swollen rivers, past overturned ships and shattered bridges, and wonder what had befallen the mostly black homesteaders on the islands. The news that finally reached the world two days later was sketchy: No one really knew how many of the 30,000 islanders perished that night—one thousand . . . two thousand . . . some say five thousand.

"The picture of desolation upon the Sea Islands is simply indescribable," wrote one of the first mainlanders to reach the stricken islanders. "An earthquake would have shattered and destroyed the houses and left their remnants upon the ground . . ., but this unparalleled, sweeping annihilation has left no trace behind but universal destruction of every landmark."

Gale of Death

"On that sad Sabbath," recalled Rachel Crane Mather, a Beaufort schoolteacher, "the pitying heavens put on a pall of sackcloth and early in the morning brooded in silence over the doomed islands."

Those foreboding skies were no surprise. A hurricane had grazed the area before striking the New York area on Wednesday, August 23, and the daily weather map of August 25 promised little respite. A hurricane center was about 500 miles southeast of Florida and moving northwest. Signalmen relayed warnings up and down the threatened coast, and southbound ships in New York and Philadelphia were advised to remain in port.

Saturday afternoon the Weather Bureau issued a special bulletin: "The hurricane . . . should strike the Atlantic coast . . . farther south than did the hurricane of Wednesday last. The heavy ocean swell preceding the storm was reported Friday morning at Savannah." At 8 p.m. Saturday, the Bureau added: "The hurricane center will probably strike the coast of the south Atlantic states on Sunday, pass inward, and break up into general rains on Monday."

The warnings were posted prominently; maritime officials and concerned citizens alike undoubtedly spread the news via the mass of new telephone and telegraph wires crisscrossing Charleston, Savannah, and other towns.

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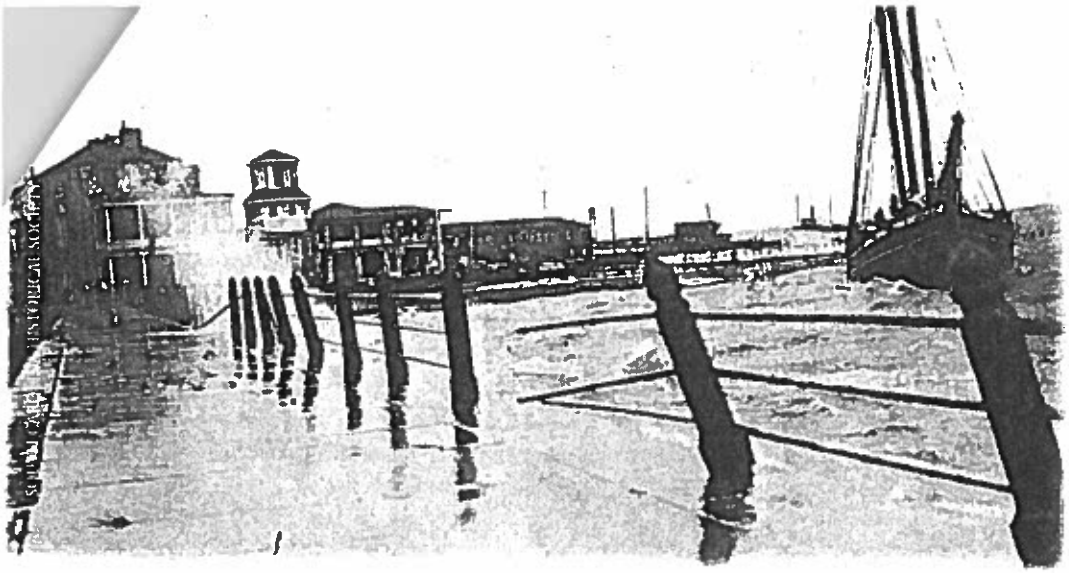


The hurricane begins its assault on Charleston.

By 2:30 p.m. Sunday, train tracks from Savannah to nearby Tybee Island were buried with wind-blown sand, cutting off vacationers who had chosen to remain on the island. The track would be found the next day standing like a fence, with twisted spikes wrenched from the cross-ties.

The winds topped 50 m.p.h. by 5 p.m., and pedestrians along the Savannah waterfront found it nearly impossible to stay upright in the wind, especially on the rain-slicked sidewalks. Many got down on their hands and knees and crawled.

About this time, too, the city's electrical infrastructure began to go haywire. Responding to an alarm, a fireman named Flynn set out in the assistant chief's buggy. At Liberty and Abercorn streets his horse slipped on the asphalt and Flynn was thrown to the ground, fortunately uninjured. He fought the gales on foot only to find two crossed wires had shorted the circuits—the first of nearly incessant false alarms that would be lost in the wail of wind that night.

New electrical and telephone wiring added to the spectacular display of nature's fury. By 9 p.m., overhead wires "yielded to the strain upon them and one after another went down," wrote one witness. "Wherever they fell upon other lines, luminous corruscations and often resplendent flames burst upon the peculiar gloom which shrouded the air, instantly shimmering and sparkling as though spanned by intense lightning." By 10 p.m. electricity went out for good across Savannah, and people switched to gas lamps.

Unfortunately the old lamps were a threat of a different kind: On Tybee Island, Charles Green's house was holding up well in the storm until plasterwork upstairs began collapsing in the onslaught. Green had carried a lamp upstairs and was inspecting the damage when a blast of wind and water knocked him off balance and sent the lamp tumbling down into the wall. An explosion followed and the house was burned to the ground.

Hugo Johnson, the lighthouse keeper near Fort Pulaski, had to leave his home under even more bizarre circumstances. Johnson and his seven-year-old sister watched helplessly as the water covered the island to a depth of six feet. Then a dredge boat, its steam whistle screaming in the wind, smashed into the house and knocked it off its foundation. Johnson quickly grabbed his sister and carried her to the dredge through water rising up to his neck. Throwing her aboard, Johnson was jammed by the boat against his house, yet somehow managed to scramble unscratched onto the dredge.

Near midnight, at the height of the storm, the tide reached an astounding 17–19.5 feet above mean sea level. Pine Island, not far from Savannah, was awash with water. The hardy residents of the island, which had been similarly inundated in an 1881 hurricane, took to the trees and rode out the storm in their boats, braving the howling spray that "stung like shot." Meanwhile, the wharves along the Savannah riverfront lay under six to eight feet of water, the tide having risen eight feet between 9 and 11:25 p.m. A night watchman in a waterfront warehouse found himself up to his neck in water as the building began to float. At Fitzpatrick's Gaiety Theater, the wind rolled up the tin roof like a window shade and filled the inside with sheets of rain.

While the eye of the storm churned through Savannah (pressure bottomed out at midnight with a reading of 28.31 inches), South Carolina bore the northeast quadrant. In Charleston, 70 miles from the landfall of the eye, the tide reached a record 8.9 feet above mean sea level. On nearby Sullivan's Island, between Charleston and the sea, dunes 25 feet high were swept away. Families took refuge in the relative comfort of Fort Moultrie, where children were wrapped in blankets and placed in bomb-proof areas. One optimistic cottager had brought along a coffee pot.

Across the water, the low-lying south and west sections of Charleston lay under four feet of water by 4 p.m. on Sunday, and six to 10 feet just four hours later. Of more than 100 piers along the Charleston waterfront, only two would survive. A new iron and steel bridge was

destroyed in a sustained wind that peaked at 120 m.p.h. But Charlestonians were able to recover—and quickly—from the devastation. It was a matter of pride, the city having endured a major earthquake in 1886. Beaufort, Port Royal, and the surrounding sea islands, however, were a different matter.

A Haven by the Sea

In the last year of the Civil War, Union General William Tecumseh Sherman paused during his relentless drive through the South to set aside land for freed slaves. The islands near Beaufort, South Carolina, were part of that legacy. President Andrew Johnson later rescinded Sherman's order, but many of the freed slaves retained ownership of small, 20- to 30-acre plots. Their best crop: Sea Island cotton, the pride of the South's export.

The prosperity—and relative isolation—of the blacks along the coast enabled them to preserve the unique Gullah customs and language that bonded them closely to their African heritage. Many could take pride in two-story homes, livestock, and horses and buggies. On some of the islands, farmers were able to supplement agricultural income with seasonal work in phosphate mines along the coast.

But the August 1893 hurricane—probably as strong as 1990's Hugo—nearly wiped it all away, leaving 30,000 homeless and destitute.

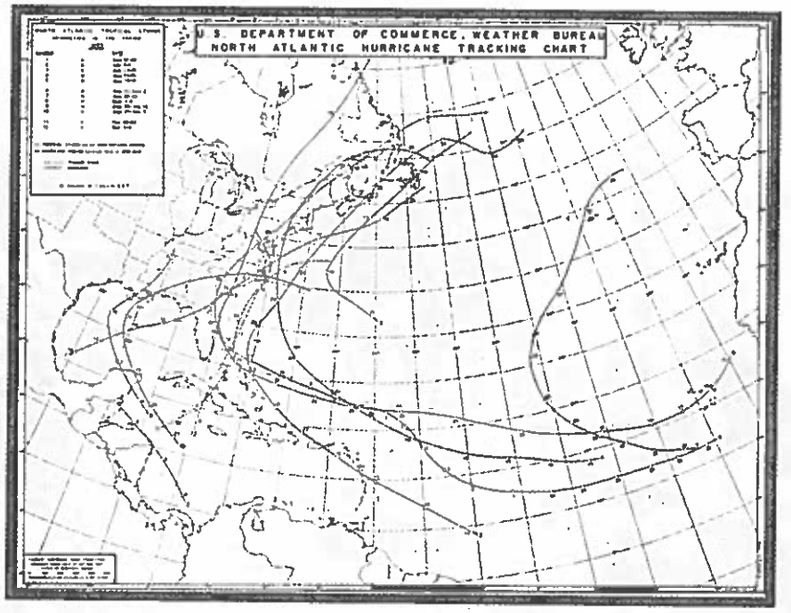
With no wireless, even on prosperous St. Helena, the Sea Islanders received no warning from the Weather Bureau. Nonetheless, the crescendo of northeasterly wind on Sunday, August 27, clearly meant danger to the Gullah islanders. They'd lived through hurricanes before. There simply was nowhere so many people could go. Recalled one islander, Margaret Weary, to Rachel Mather:

"I was so busy that evening cooking supper I never minded the wind and rain, nor the great roaring of the waves, till I looked out through the shutter and saw the sea all around the house. Then we were all frightened, as we saw the waves rushing up to the door. Ma seized my little sister Grace, wrapped her in a blanket and ran to a neighbor's house on the hill. Brother and I jumped out into the water and ran as fast as we could, but I fell down into the water. My brother picked me up, and we pressed on through the waves till we reached the house where Ma was. The water had come up all around that house too, and so we had to run to another, up on higher land, and there stayed all night.

"Next morning we went home, but there was no house there, nor anything left. All had been washed away into the marsh, and the sedge and seaweed were piled up all around higher than my head. We saw dead cats and dogs, dead horses and hogs all along the shore, and some dead men and women and children. We saw one dead woman holding onto a timber of her house by her teeth. Pretty soon we built up a fire on a heap of sedge and we dried ourselves by the fire."

Survival in the Beaufort area sometimes was by sheer luck. One pair on Port Royal Island survived only because a vine had wrapped itself around the frame and roof of their refuge. The winds could only knock the building off its blocks.

Arthur Wilson, 12, was on the dredge *John Kennedy*, pride of the local mining fleet, when winds sent it drifting helplessly in the storm-tossed waters. A wave capsized the boat and threw Wilson into the water, but fortunately, at the last minute the boy had buckled on a life preserver. Wilson caught a rope from the dredge and rode the waves through the night. But his grip weakened and weakened as his pleas to passing boats went unheard in the storm and throughout the following day. Finally he passed out and drifted away.



Tuesday morning, a nearly lifeless body washed ashore 20 miles from the wreck of the *Kennedy*. Arthur Wilson was revived merely a block from his mother's home.

Not all were so fortunate. Gowan Hazel, a Confederate Army veteran, had owned a St. Helena plantation until losing it in the Civil War, but thereafter gained widespread admiration as a doctor for the Parris Island community. He drowned in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue two boys from the water; his house was lost as well—and with it 11 members of one family.

The Sea Islands Hurricane (track highlighted in yellow) was one of several that battered the North American coast in 1893.

Aftermath

For the survivors of Beaufort, a huge task awaited: The tide in the city, much of which lies 10–12 feet below the 100-year flood mark, may have reached 18 feet above sea level as ocean and rivers merged into one. Boats like the tug *Catharine* lay five miles from water. Decaying branches and sedge had to be burned, and hundreds of bonfires soon dotted the town (happily thwarting the mosquitoes). Meanwhile, the water supply was infected with bacteria, and nearly every roof needed to be repaired or replaced, and every wharf and warehouse rebuilt.

Then there were the islands: bodies lay everywhere, some washing ashore with each tide, some hidden in the marshes. On Coosaw Island, the local custom was to bury drowning victims on the beach. Sandy mounds more than a hundred feet long were filled with bodies, with predictably disastrous results in the succeeding tides.

Many of the survivors on the Sea Islands near Beaufort were stunned with the loss of not only families and homes but also livelihoods. Salt water had been driven inland 20 miles up the rivers, ruining some 50 percent or more of the rice crops along their banks. Counting farmers on the mainland, some 70,000 people suddenly had little or no prospect of a livable income in a year in which railway failures had caused hundreds of bank failures, labor unrest had crippled industries with more than a thousand strikes, and farmers were burning their corn for fuel because produce prices were so low.

On the islands this economic devastation was complete: a near-total loss of corn, potato, peanut, and rice crops; the valuable cotton, barely weeks away from harvest, was parched or mildewed—only a small number of bolls were salvageable. The Charleston *News and Courier* reported: "It was something odd to see here and there a bed of earth which seemed veined with a streak of black. They were once bright green potato vines." To add insult to injury, the crippled phosphate works were nearly totally uninsured, aside from the big dredge *John Kennedy*.

Governor Benjamin Tillman of South Carolina sent James Babcock, head of the state mental institution, to survey the islands. Through resulting pleas over the wire services—and fortunate connections between citizens of Beaufort and wealthy northerners—donations were received from New York and Boston as well as storm-ravaged areas like Charleston. But there was only so much the financially strapped state could do.

Survivors sort through potatoes which had been donated by the Red Cross.

Enter the Red Cross

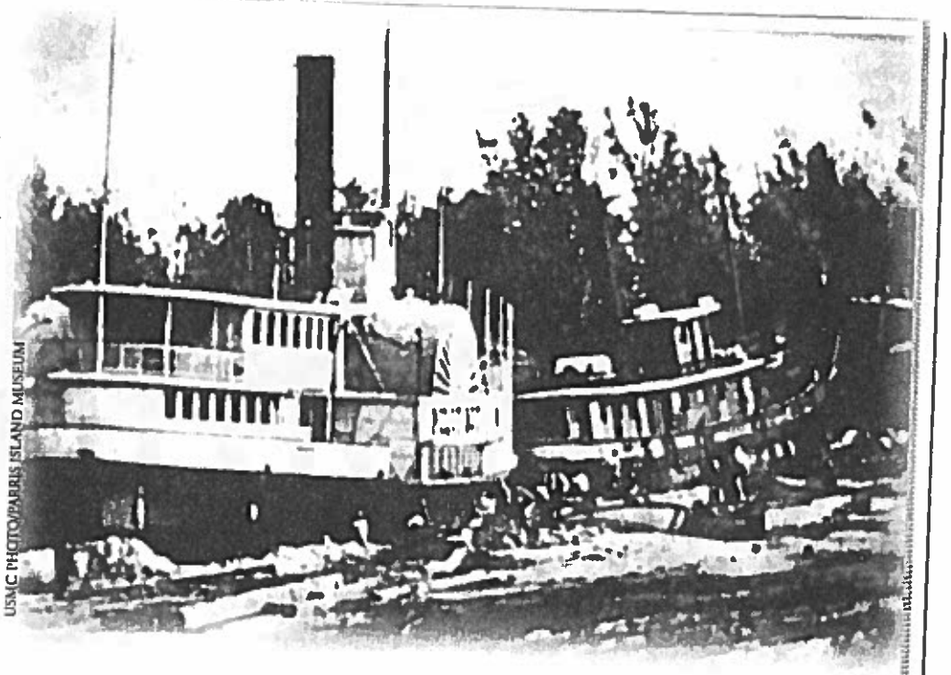
Governor Tillman and President Grover Cleveland turned to Clara Barton, head of the relatively new American Red Cross, to mobilize relief efforts. Barton was fondly remembered by Sea Islanders who had met her when she was a nurse in the area during the Civil War. One woman freed in that struggle traveled 30 miles to greet Barton.

Barton set up her headquarters in Beaufort on September 30. Many of the islanders, without clothing or shelter, somehow survived the month after the storm by foraging for wild berries. Brackish water was blamed for cases of yellow fever, but many of the sick were probably misdiagnosed—weakened instead with malaria.

Through the Red Cross, medicines, food, and other supplies poured in from around the country. With loans of hammers and saws and other tools, the Red Cross put willing and able Sea Island men to work rebuilding houses and digging drainage ditches in exchange for double rations of pork and grits. Sea Island women were similarly organized into sewing committees, patching together useful clothing from oversized or tattered donated garments. The State of Columbia, South Carolina, noted wryly, "Never was there such a revival in sartorial style. It was a common spectacle to see ricefield hands plumed in velvets and silk and crowned with last year's fashionable millinery creations, all contributed from the wardrobes of Northern subscribers to the relief efforts."

To ship food and supplies to the islands, where almost no boats survived, Barton enlisted the help of the U.S. Treasury Department, which contributed the use of two ships to ferry lumber, food, seeds, and thousands of blankets to the islands. The ships' doctors also lent valuable medical assistance.

By the end of June 1894, a new crop had been planted with donated seeds. Three hundred miles of ditches had been dug to drain the island fields of sea water. A million feet of lumber had been transformed into housing. The 10 months of tireless relief efforts by the Red Cross had helped the Gullah islanders put themselves back on their feet. The grateful Sea Islanders would not forget Clara Barton. Seven years later, when Galveston, Texas, was ravaged by the worst natural disaster in U.S. history, the Gullah islanders immediately donated hundreds of hard-earned dollars to the Red Cross.



USMC PHOTO/PARRIS ISLAND MUSEUM

Storm-battered ships in Beaufort, South Carolina, after the hurricane. The tide in the city may have reached 18 feet above sea level.

Lessons Unlearned

Over a century later, life for the islanders has changed considerably. The coastal phosphate mining and rice farming never really recovered after the hurricane of 1893 and fell victim to depression and domestic competition. Imported Egyptian cotton, high in quality yet lower in price, eventually supplanted Sea Island cotton as the premium crop.

But activity along the vulnerable Sea Islands has not ceased. The remaining black islanders—numbering perhaps 10,000—preserve Gullah culture in the face of a boom of development on now-expensive Sea Island properties. Hilton Head in particular has become a major resort area.

New development does not necessarily bring with it the possibility for another tragedy like the 1893 hurricane. Hurricane forecasters can give adequate warning and new bridges provide residents and vacationers with evacuation routes in the face of hurricanes.

But nothing can stop a storm from wiping away the expensive new homes on the Sea Islands just as the Gullah blacks were nearly swept away a century ago. Hurricane Hugo, for instance, was a lucky miss compared to what a more southerly landfall could have done, says Steve Moore of the South Carolina Coastal Council, who surveyed damage from the 1989 storm. And builders suffering damage came back with even more expensive projects along the shore. "People are willing to take bigger and bigger risks," Moore says. "It's popular to say a big storm will change all that, but it doesn't."

In a way, all hurricanes become forgotten hurricanes far too soon. □