



HURRICANE OF 1893





# PERSONAL EXPERIENCE



"IKE" HILLSBORO, OHIO SEPTEMBER 2008



"MATTHEW" DATAW ISLAND OCTOBER 2016

# SETTING THE STAGE

- The US consists of 44 states with a population of 63 million; today it's 325 million. The Civil war has been over for twenty –eight years.
- Long distance transportation is by steam engine railroads and boats and by sail ships.
- High speed communication is still by wire connected telegraph.
- Public information is basically disseminated by newspapers.
- By 1891 the Weather Bureau is responsible for providing flood warnings.
- But it isn't until 1898 that President McKinley establishes a hurricane warning system.



# BEAUFORT SC 1893





# THE SEA ISLANDS

- The Sea Islands are connected by rail to the mainland; and by steamboat to the outside world.
- Some of the islands are linked by ferries and small bridges.
- Small boats are the prevailing mode of inter-island travel.
- Beaufort County's population is 34,000 (today it's over 180,000).
- The rural portions of the "islands" are populated mostly by African American ex-slaves and their descendants; they generally live on small subsistence farms.



# DATHA ISLAND

- Although no data exists, a reasonable assumption is there were 16-25 homes (more like sheds/cabins) and 60-100 people on the island.
- All residents are black and all were farmers.
- Some of the cabins may have been near the old slave quarter area; others may have been on the eight 10 acre farm lots established after the Civil War on the north end of the island.
- The B.B. Sams house (the ruins) had been partially destroyed by fire in 1876 and was apparently never reoccupied.
- The Lewis Reeve Sams house on the north portion of the island may have been abandoned and partially destroyed prior to the hurricane.



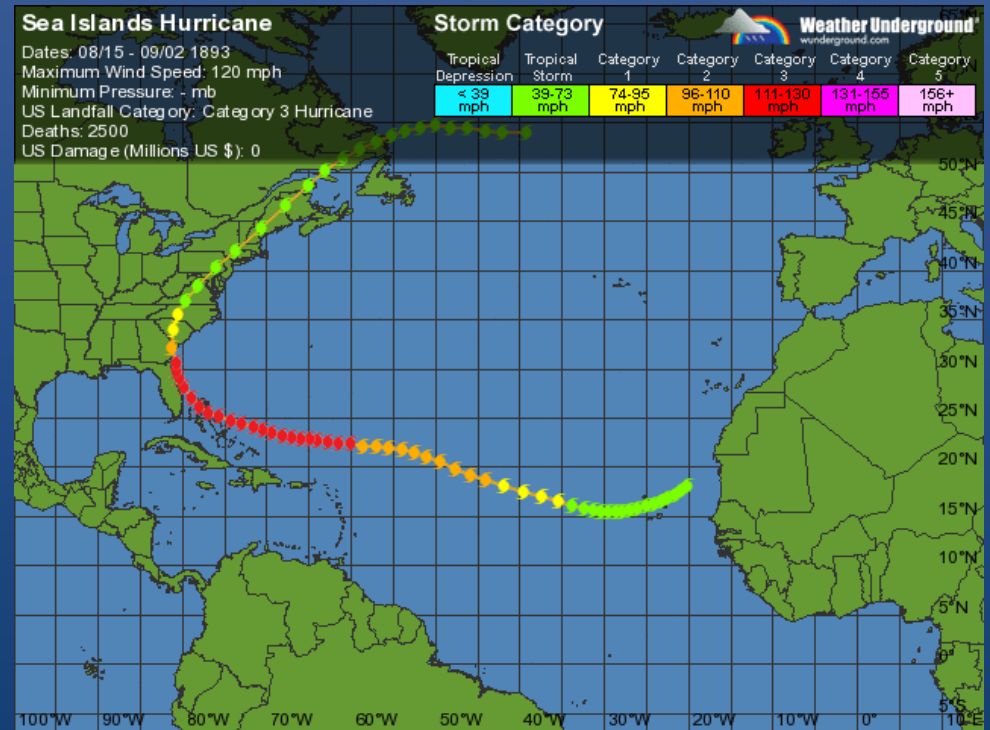


## THE STORM

*Although the Sea Islands had historical experience with tropical storms, no major hurricane had threatened the area for twenty years.*

# WARNINGS

- By 1893 the telegraph cable network permitted tropical storms to be tracked as they passed over various landfalls.
- Charleston gets the first word from Nassau, Bahamas on Friday August 25 of a “violent tropical cyclone” about 180 miles east of Florida.
- By Sunday morning on the 27th pilot stations along the coast from Tybee Island to Fort Sumter have raised double-gale warning flags.
- Sunday afternoon saw the leading edge of the storm visible from the barrier islands. Torrential rains and high winds began to batter the coast.
- At 5:00 PM the telegraph line from Beaufort to Charleston goes dead.





# BEAUFORT COUNTY PREPARES

- The residents the city of Beaufort had warning that a major storm was working its way up the coast. However, concern was focused on the equipment associated with the phosphate mining on St Helena sound and the ships anchored at Port Royal.
- Although there is no report on specific actions being taken, it can be assumed that since the people had experience with tropical storms, they probably did take steps to secure property; some did in fact evacuate.
- However, the farmers on the outlying Sea Islands probably had no warnings until the rain and wind began to build on Sunday afternoon and evening.

# THE STORM HITS THE BEAUFORT, LADY'S ISLAND, ST HELENA AREA

- The low tide that Sunday was at 2:00 PM. For the following six hours the incoming tide came in with a force that had never before been experienced.
- By high tide at 8:00PM twenty-one bridges had been destroyed as had all the major ferries.
- The high tide was compounded by a storm surge (the wave of water above the normal high tide) that was at the time estimated at 15-16 feet.
- The eye of the hurricane passed near the city of Beaufort around midnight. Reports at the time claim hurricane conditions existed in the area for at least fourteen hours.

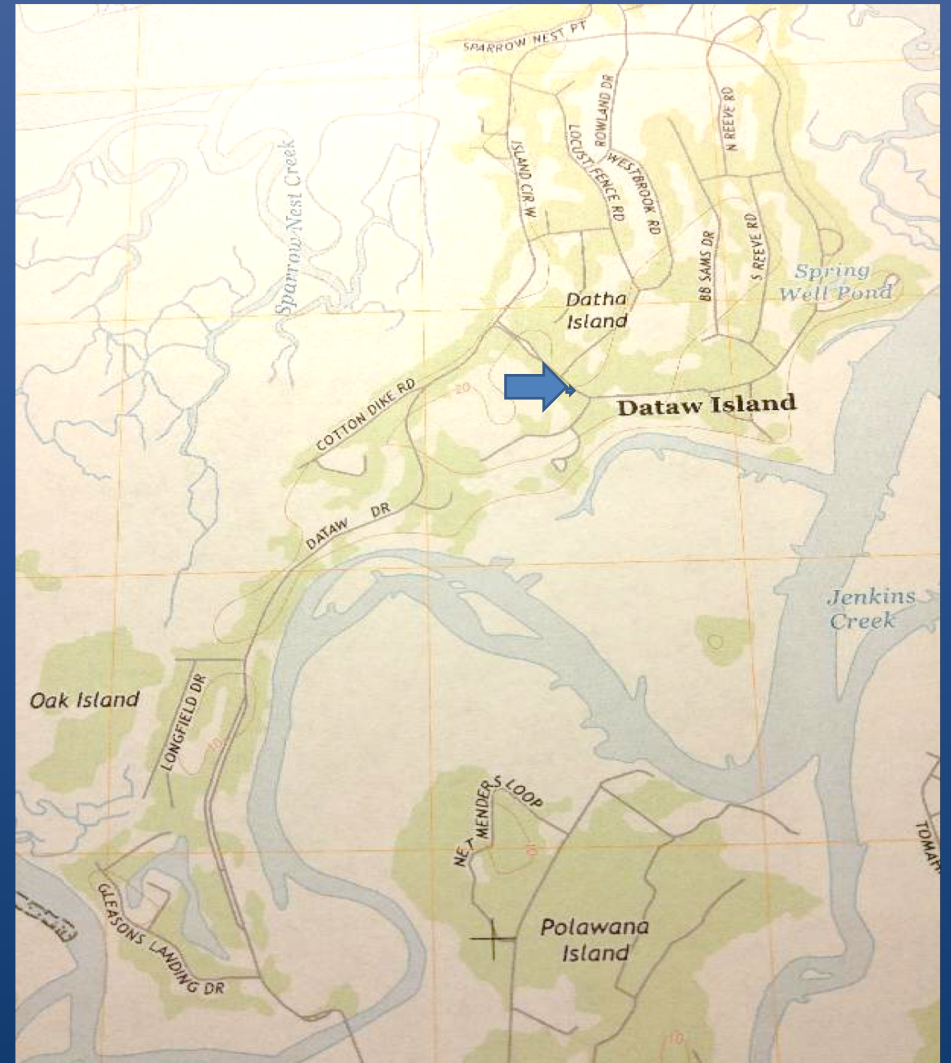


## THE STORM HITS (CONTINUED)

- A few years ago NOAA said that modeling with their SLUSH (Sea, Lake, and Overland Surges from Hurricanes) program indicated that 30' of tidal water could have occurred.
- Datha Island's high point prior to the ALCOA development was 22 feet above sea level at about the present intersection of Island Circle East and Country Club Drives. Most of the island has elevations of 10-15 feet.
- High tides in August can run 6-8 feet. A surge of 15-16 feet over a high tide would cover most the island. A tidal wave of 30' would cover everything.

# DATAW ISLAND TOPOGRAPHICAL MAP SHOWING ELEVATIONS

The high point of the island is a little over 22 feet at about the intersection of Island Circle East and Country Club Drive.



# STORM SUMMARY

- In the 1893 Hurricane “Season” ten hurricanes made landfall in the U.S. or its Territories.
- The 1893 “Season” was one of two on record (other in 1998) when four Atlantic hurricanes were active on the same day – Aug 22, 1893.  
(Puerto Rico – New York City – Nova Scotia – Savannah/Sea Islands)
- The 1893 Sea Island Hurricane made landfall at Savannah on Aug 27 and passed over the Sea Islands on Aug 28.
- Wind speeds reached 100-120 miles per hour; NOAA has estimated that the storm was at least a Category 3 by today’s measurement, probably higher.
- The storm maintained hurricane force winds for about 15 days of its life.

# THE IMMEDIATE AFTERMATH





## AREA DAMAGE

- Unfortunately there are no first hand written reports documenting the damage to Datha Island. The Beaufort County Library has a collection on the storm that includes twenty photographs of the damage. These are either of Beaufort City or ships and boats that where sunk or grounded. There are no pictures of the Sea Islands. The city photos show considerable building and wharf damage along the waterfront.
- Witnesses at the time claimed: “The Sea Islands appeared as if a conflagration had swept the earth and destroyed or withered everything.”
- There were reports from other islands that the majority of houses in various locales were wrecked or washed away.
- As in our 2016 Hurricane Matthew, the live oaks were the major tree survivors. Many figured prominently in human survivor stories since they provided perches for people to avoid the rising waters.

## DATHA DAMAGE

- Here on Dataw we still have some evidence of what was and was not washed away.
- The live oak at the Sams cemetery obviously survived as did the two oaks that frame the golf cart path between Gleason's Landing and Longfield Roads.
- The B.B. Sams house ruins survived, although it's hard to say how much further damage was done by the hurricane.
- The Sams cemetery was not washed away but oral tradition says part of the old slave cemetery on Cotton Dike Road was.
- Oral tradition also says that the Lewis Reeves Sams house at the north end of the island was washed away by the rising waters on the Morgan River.

## AREA CASUALTIES

- Although the storm did long term damage to the economy of the area –phosphate, cotton and rice production were essentially brought to an end - the major impact of the hurricane was on human life.
- Estimates of deaths range between 1000 and 3000 which would place it as either the fourth or fifth largest killer storm in US history.
- The Beaufort County coroner deputized a number of individuals to gather information on the dead. In the first week after the storm the preliminary count had already reached 752.
- Almost all victims drowned and as such many bodies were probably never recovered.
- The deaths almost all occurred in the rural black population on the Sea Islands; what records there are claim only three deaths in the towns and each was a white person.
- One of the observations common to most of the articles describing the devastation is the large numbers of domestic animals that were drowned. Since the islanders were by and large farmers, they all kept animals for subsistence as well as labor.

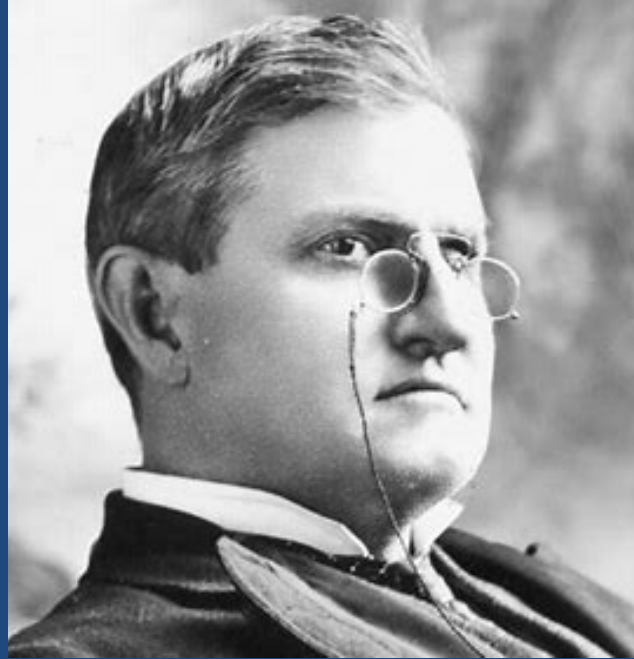
## DATHA CASUALTIES

- In the coroner's report the Datha area is listed with 37 deaths but there are no published stories detailing the deaths of these victims as exist for some in other sea island areas. As the weeks after the storm moved on, bodies continued to be recovered.
- Burials were generally done quickly and without ceremony due to concerns over sanitation and disease. They also were usually done at the spot where the bodies were recovered and often in common and unmarked graves.
- During the building of the current Dataw Island community by Alcoa, four graves were discovered in the Curisha Point area. But there is no way of telling if these contain victims of the Great Sea Island Hurricane.
- Using our estimates of the Datha population of 60-100 at the time, it would appear that 40-60% of the island's residents were killed.

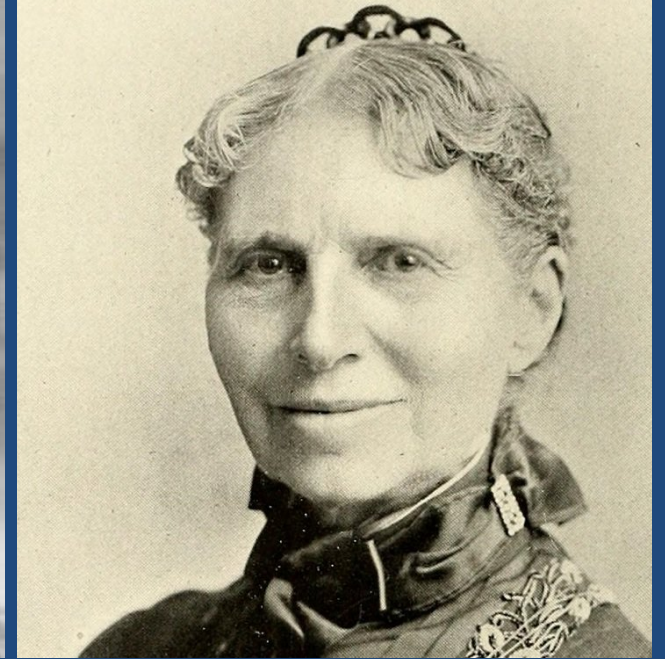




Robert Smalls



Ben "Pitchfork" Tillman



Clara Barton

# RECOVERY

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# FIRST RESPONSE

- In 1893 there were no standing governmental organizations at either the state or national level to deal with the aftermaths.
- On Monday August 30, assessments of the damage began and it was over whelming on the Sea Islands.
- There was a massive kill off of farm animals; the destruction of over 50-75% of the homes; the ruination of crops of sweet potatoes, corn and cotton in the fields; the contamination of wells; and the flooded fields everywhere.
- Coupled with this was the lack of communication/transportation. Boats, the primary source, had virtually all been destroyed or washed away.
- Even so it appears that community leaders in Beaufort reacted quickly to address the issues they encountered. Besides making plans for their own damaged holdings, they formed the Sea Island Relief Committee to seek outside assistance and organize the reconstruction. This included the mayor as well as the well-known Robert Smalls.

# ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

- As previously mentioned there was no established role for government at the state and national effort. The governor of South Carolina was notified by telegraph the night of August 31. He immediately dispatched a doctor to the area to assess the situation. Based on what he learned he issued a call for “all classes of people” to make contributions of food, clothing, money and other “necessaries of life”.
- However, other than to continue to make public appeals for assistance that’s about where he stopped. There was no immediate aid provided by the state and when the legislature was appealed to later in the year they went into December adjournment without taking action.
- There was similarly no immediate assistance given by the federal government; the thought was if the government stepped in here it would have to likewise do something for other areas of the country who were suffering from a widespread national depression.
- The Secretary of War did provide some tents for temporary housing but claimed he did not have the authority to provide rations to civilians; and the Navy did provide some ships/boats for the relief effort.
- Finally, the following spring the Department of Agriculture provided seed for crops.

# THE AMERICAN RED CROSS

- By the third week after the storm even the full magnitude of the Sea Island damage had taken shape plus there was a growing awareness that the storm also had a devastating impact on the farming areas of the northern part of Beaufort County. At this time Governor Tillman made an appeal to the American Red Cross to provide assistance.
- The ARC had been established by Clara Barton in May of 1881 and had already become known for its response in the Great Michigan Thumb Fire of 1881 and the Johnstown Flood of 1889.
- Interestingly Clara Barton was familiar with the Sea Islands and their people since she had spent nine months working in a hospital on Hilton Head during the Civil War.
- ARC personnel were dispatched to Beaufort in late September and Miss Barton, age 72 at the time, was designated by the governor to take charge of the relief operation in early October. For the next eight months the ARC and Miss Barton coordinated the provision of food and other supplies to over 40,000 people.
- The ARC representatives oversaw a program whereby native workers dug over 37 miles of drainage ditches that permitted farming activity to begin in the spring of 1895. They coordinated the building of docks, established medical services, and provided the materials for the Sea Islanders to rebuild their homes.
- All of this was carried out with the receipt of aid from the country's private citizenry. To Miss Barton's dismay there was little to no governmental help.



# MEDIA ATTENTION

- Once the telegraph lines were reestablished to Charleston and then New York, the press responded by spreading the news on the conditions left by the storm as well as the governor's and others' appeals for relief.
- But there is some thought that early storm coverage was rather low key and not given front page status since those principally impacted were the black ex-slaves of the Lowcountry.

## THE RACE FACTOR

- It is interesting to see how often race seemed to be an issue. The fact that the major impact of the storm was on the black population of the Lowcountry was offered as a reason why early newspaper reporting tended to understate the severity of the storm or bury the story altogether.
- The fact that the governor, “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, was a Democrat, a racist and not sympathetic to the Sea Islanders, may explain his failure to get too involved with relief activities.
- This partisan political attitude also was apparent at the state and national legislative bodies who used the excuse that the ongoing national depression left no funds available for this type of spending.
- It is also interesting to note how many of those involved with relief efforts left written records warning against granting too much charity since it would encourage laziness and dependency. Relief should only be given to those willing to work to improve their conditions.
- As the clean-up went on complaints from white upland farmers mounted. They felt that all relief efforts were being focused on the black Sea Islanders, whereas they were experiencing the same loss of food due to crop damage.

# THE FUTURE

- The storm ended the period of economic prosperity for Beaufort County that had been on the rise since the end of the Civil War. What followed was thirty years of decline.
- The immediate impact was the decline and ultimate loss of the phosphate industry. At the time of the storm the industry provided 3000 jobs for the county. The storm wrecked most of the facilities and equipment associated with the mining operation. Although a few mines rebuilt, competition from other areas of the country signaled the demise of the local industry by the early 1900's.
- The importance of the Port Royal Navy Yard continued throughout the 1890's and Spanish American War. However, the storm raised concern about the overall suitability of Port Royal Sound for the expanding US Navy. A major change of direction occurred when ex-governor Tillman became a US senator. It was felt his long time hostility to the Low Country and its residents became a factor as he worked with the Charleston community to expand Navy operations and facilities there.
- As far as the Lowcountry black community was concerned, they appear to have reverted to their small farming activity. The 1900 Census of Datha and St Helena Township records many of the pre-storm families with virtually every household being that of a farmer.
- Major change at Datha was still ninety years in the future.

## IN SUMMARY

- The hurricane that hit the Sea Islands on August 27, 1893 still ranks as number four or five in all time deadliness to hit the USA mainland since it resulted in close to 3000 deaths.
- The storm was a Class 3 by today's standards with winds approaching 120 miles per hour and pushing as much as a 30 foot tidal surge.
- The population that felt the wraith of the storm was the black farmers on the remote islands. Over 70% of their homes were destroyed.
- The respective state and federal governments played a very minor role in relief efforts with the main effort carried forward until the following summer under the direction of the American Red Cross.
- The destruction of life and property resulted in an economic setback to the area that didn't alleviate for at least 50 years.



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