

Teaching American History Lesson

Grade 11

Length of class period: 65 minutes

**HURRICANE OF 1938**

**From Lorraine Dooley**

**How did the hurricane of 1938 affect the United States? How did it affect your town? Are natural disasters as dangerous today as in 1938?**

**Objectives:** Students will analyze the primary and secondary sources provided and demonstrate critical thinking skills as they work to answer the inquiry questions.

**Materials:** US history textbook, copies of all documents. Additional teacher resources- The Sudden Sea by R.A. Scotti is an excellent book on this topic. Videos describing the storm are also available online from pbs.org.

**Activities:** Pass out copies of the source material. Review and analyze materials in class. This assignment will require additional research to be conducted by the students. It could also be assigned to groups instead of individuals at the discretion of the teacher.

**Assignment:** See handout

**Assessment-** classwork, critical thinking questions, project

**Connecticut Grade Level Expectations-**

Standard 3.1 Use evidence to develop an interpretation of an event. Evaluate a historical event using primary and secondary sources.

Standard 1.6 Explain how environmental factors impact human movement (natural disasters, droughts, etc.)

Standard 2.1 Find relevant and accurate information from a variety of sources to answer a history/social studies question.

Standard 2.5 Create multipurpose visuals to present information.

Standard 3.3 Devise a plan to resolve a local contemporary issue and develop a proposal for implementation.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

### Hurricane of 1938



1. Conduct research and create a timeline of the most powerful hurricanes that have impacted the United States.
2. The hurricane of 1938 was one of the most powerful storms to hit New England. How did it affect your town?
3. Compare and contrast the impact and effects of the hurricane of 1938 with any other storm in US history.
4. How did the government and different organizations respond to the hurricane of 1938? Was it an adequate response or was more help needed?
5. Research and create a list of resources currently available to aid people who may be impacted by a devastating storm in the future.
6. What events were occurring in other parts of the world when the hurricane hit New England?
7. Pretend to be a witness to the storm. Write a journal entry explaining your observations of the storm's effects and the way it impacted people in New England.

Your assignment: Choose one of the questions listed above. You must share your project with the rest of the class.

Options: posters, powerpoint presentation, video, create a newspaper with different news articles

Source material for the hurricane.

## Source 1:

This article is online: [projo.com/news/content/38storm](http://projo.com/news/content/38storm)

Short videos are also available to accompany this article.

### **Recalling the Katrina of its day**

While the Hurricane of 1938 swept away houses and flooded Providence, its severity was less intense than the storm that wreaked havoc along the Gulf Coast.

PETER B. LORD

Providence Journal Environment Writer, 2005

Hope Carpenter was a newlywed living above the family store overlooking the beach in Matunuck in 1938. Like nearly everyone else that sunny morning 67 years ago today, she had no idea a terrible storm was approaching.

While the south coast of Rhode Island took the brunt of the Sept. 21, 1938, hurricane, its force was felt as far as Providence, where the storm destroyed Washington Park Yacht Club, above, and flooded city streets.

Without warning: Wednesday, Sept. 21, 1938, started out like any other normal work day ...

Summer was over and most of the tents and cabins at the family's Roy Carpenter beach colony were empty. Mrs. Carpenter drove to Cranston to visit her mother. Later in the day the two rode out what seemed like a very bad rainstorm. Then at 10 p.m. the back door swung open.

"It was my husband. He looked very distraught. I said what are you doing out on a night like this? He said, 'Hope, there is nothing left at the beach.' "

Hope Carpenter remembers the day the hurricane struck as vividly, she says, as the death of a relative.

Her husband and a few others lashed themselves together with electric cables and crawled away from the shore on their hands and knees to avoid blowing debris.

With memories of Rhode Island's worst hurricane in modern times fresh in her mind, Mrs. Carpenter has been closely following news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and she says she finds it "heartbreaking."

"I look at the children," she says. "It's so devastating. Down at our beach, the houses were seasonal. Just summer homes. Not people's permanent homes."

As devastating as the Hurricane of 1938 was, by most every measure it falls short of Katrina.

The '38 hurricane is considered the most devastating storm to strike New England.

The National Hurricane Center says Katrina will "likely be recorded as the worst natural disaster in the history of the United States."

(But not necessarily the most lethal. In 1900, a hurricane wiped out Galveston, Texas, killing an estimated 8,000 people.)

The '38 hurricane killed nearly 700 people around New England, including more than 300 people in Rhode Island and Southeastern Massachusetts.

The death toll for Katrina is creeping toward 1,000 and officials think more bodies will be found.



Journal file photo

Outside City Hall and the Biltmore Hotel, the streets of Providence are left flooded by a massive storm surge in the Hurricane of 1938.

The '38 hurricane was equivalent to a Category 3 storm with sustained winds of 121 miles an hour.

Katrina was approaching Category 5, with wind speeds peaking at 175 mph as it approached land.

The storm surge from the '38 hurricane rose 12 to 16 feet above sea level. It was made worse because the storm was moving so fast and it arrived at the same time as the autumnal high tide.

Katrina's storm surge ranged from 20 to 30 feet above sea level and flooded vast areas of Mississippi and Louisiana.

The '38 hurricane destroyed more than 2,000 houses. It wiped 44 cottages off Westerly's Napatree Point and swept clean Warwick's Conanicut Point, Island Park in Portsmouth, Jerusalem, Galilee and Misquamicut.

Katrina's impact on housing still needs to be determined, but the Federal Emergency Management Agency says it has already inspected 54,800 damaged houses.

The '38 hurricane did an estimated \$300 million in damage.

Some estimates predict the bill for Katrina will exceed \$200 billion.

In 1938, Providence flooded with up to 14 feet of water, submerging hundreds of cars and buildings.

Katrina flooded 80 percent of New Orleans in 20 feet of water.

Another big difference between the two storms is the difference in warnings.

The Hurricane of 1938 was reported by a vessel at sea eight days before it made landfall. It was a powerful storm, Category 5, but then weather observers lost track of it.

Moving west northwestward north of Puerto Rico, it approached Cape Hatteras, N.C., on Sept. 21.

At that point, it accelerated rapidly and sped north at 60 to 70 mph. It hit New England late in the afternoon.

After the storm, there were widespread complaints about inadequate forecasting by the National Weather Service. The complaints led to an overhaul of the service.

Katrina was precisely forecast by a more modern weather service, using models and radar and monitoring devices. Most complaints now are focused on inadequate government preparations for the storm and inadequate response after it happened.

When Hope Carpenter thinks about future Rhode Island storms, she says she fears any hurricane damage will be worse because the coastline is much more developed.

The 350 cabins in Roy Carpenter's look old fashioned, but Mrs. Carpenter says they're intertwined with electric wires and cables.

"It would be quite a mess if we have one now," she said. Nearby neighborhoods have been converted from rustic cabins to expensive, year-round houses.



Journal file photo

A pedestrian struggles through downtown Providence during the Hurricane of '38 as water surges through the streets.

To say a bad hurricane now will be more destructive than the '38 hurricane is not to diminish what happened 67 years ago.

Rhode Island native R.A. Scotti, who in 2003 wrote *Sudden Sea: The Great Hurricane of 1938*, said in one published interview that she was amazed at the accuracy of survivors' memories.

"The hurricane of 1938 was a storm of such extreme power and fury that the memory of it is permanently etched on the minds and in the hearts of those who endured it," she said. "When I began to interview survivors for my book and heard their amazing stories, I was skeptical. I assumed that like the minnow that grows into a great white shark in a favorite fish tale, memories of the hurricane had become overblown with the years. But as I researched the storm, I realized that the memories were as accurate as they were vivid. The hurricane of 1938 was so extreme, it is almost impossible to exaggerate its impact."

David R. Vallee, hurricane program director for the National Weather Service office in Taunton, said he's marking the anniversary today by giving a presentation to a group of insurance underwriters. He calls his slide show, "The Realities of New England Hurricanes," and he stresses that it is not fiction.

Vallee said he would not attempt to compare the '38 hurricane with Katrina. They were very dissimilar.

But, he says, "I look at Katrina and I say: Can we be without water and power for three weeks? Can we be without means to transport ourselves for weeks? Can we have natural gas shortages? Can we have houses pulled off their foundations?"

"The answer is yes!"

## Source 2:

# THE GREAT HURRICANE OF 1938

The following are memories from people who lived through the storm:

**Mildred Bernier, 79, of Norwich:**

"I went to St. Patrick's School. I remember in the basement (where the bathrooms were) the water was dripping through the wall. It gave me an eerie feeling. It was so humid. I remember my father coming to school to pick me and my brother up. When we got home, the wind was blowing very bad. We lived down by the Yantic River and the water — it got higher and higher. It never came into the house — just as far as the cellar door... The next day it was a great mess. All the apples were off the trees. All the debris came down off the river. We were fortunate, considering what other people went through."

**Robert Krodel, 83, of Norwich, retired funeral home owner:**

"I was a poor guy living on welfare in Taftville. Thirty-eight hurricane? I'll tell you what I remember. I was in school. It started lightning, thundering and trees were falling down, but the teacher said you all had to go home now. Providence Street was lined with beautiful trees, and as I was walking, they were falling. Unbelievable. The next day I went down to the river by Ponemah Mills. We saw chicken coops floating down the river. Then the bridge caved in. ... At that time, I made a vow that I would never build a house in a flooded area. When I got out of the service, I built a house on the tippity top of Harland Road."

**Norman Peltier, 81, of Norwich, retired Air Force officer and high school teacher:**

"It was windy," he said, laughing, of his memory of the hurricane as a boy in Taftville. "I remember I was in the gutter sailing match sticks (down the overflow). Trees were flopping over. The house right next to ours had a tree fall on it and cave it in. It was like that for years. A limb fell on ours, but it was repairable. I didn't know it was a hurricane."

**Mary Koziol, 87, was in high school and living in Griswold when the hurricane struck:**

"I remember we rode on a bus home from school, and Bud Jodoin was driving down (Route 12), and he had to let us off quite a ways down the road because he couldn't get through any farther. Branches were coming down.

"The little youngsters were actually blowing across the road. Not blowing hard, but staggering against the wind. The wind was pushing them, so the oldest of everybody picked up the littlest ones and carried them."

They didn't have far to walk. Koziol said that when she got home, her mother was boarding up windows. Her father worked as a night watchman and wasn't home.

A couple of days later, she walked downtown with two of her sisters and saw the old Congregational Church, the stained glass windows broken, some bricks missing.

"I felt badly," she said. She saw other houses with roofs partly gone, so you could see inside the rooms, she said.

**Antonia Brown, 85, of Baltic:**

"Well, we lived on Main Street (Baltic.) We had water in our home about eight inches. It was 14 days before we could move back in our house again. We walked over to the river and watched stuff go down the river. A bridge washed away."

**Carmen Tedeschi, 77, of Norwich. He was living on Washington Street at the time of the storm:**

“I remember the '38 hurricane well. I had an uncle who was crippled. He was sitting out on the porch. My father — he is only 4 foot, 9 inches tall — he had this big umbrella and he went to bring my uncle inside. And he was like Mary Poppins. He came right off the floor. Yeah, I remember the hurricane of '38.”

**Deborah Straszheim/Adam Bowles**

**Norwich Bulletin (Sept. 21,2008)**

**New England’s worst storm of the 20th century was the hurricane of 1938. Here are the highlights of that storm:**

Struck at high tide, which coincided with the highest astronomical tide of the year, pushing a storm surge of 12 to 15 feet.

Winds of more than 120 mph blew across coastal regions. The Blue Hill Observatory, in Milton, Mass., recorded a sustained 5-minute wind of 121 mph and a peak gust of 186 mph.

Parts of interior Connecticut and Massachusetts not only bore the brunt of high winds, but also experienced severe river flooding. Rain from the hurricane combined with heavy rains earlier that week produced up to 17 inches.

Caused 564 deaths and more than 1,700 injuries.

Nearly 9,000 homes and businesses were destroyed with more than 15,000 damaged; 2,600 boats were destroyed and 3,300 damaged.

Property damage was estimated at more than \$400 million.

**Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration**

### **Source 3: Connecticut State Library**

Aerial pictures of hurricane damage (Connecticut State Library) Many more images are available on their website.





**Source 4: Boston Globe**



Boston Globe photo file  
([Boston.com/news/globe/magazine/galleries/2005/0724/hurricane/hurricane1938](http://Boston.com/news/globe/magazine/galleries/2005/0724/hurricane/hurricane1938))

**Source 5: Norwich Bulletin**

Norwich firefighters use a row boat to get through flooded Franklin Square in Norwich, CT.

[www.norwichbulletin.com](http://www.norwichbulletin.com)

“Infamous Storm seared in memory” by Adam Bowles

