



The Telegram

The forgotten storm

More than 4,000 reported to have died off Newfoundland in 1775



The ocean around Northern Bay Sands beach was calm when this photo was taken this week, but in September 1775, the waves quickly turned into storm surges from a devastating hurricane that's believed to have killed as many as 4,000 people off the province's shores and on land.

— Photo by Terry Roberts/The Compass

Alan Ruffman, a Nova Scotia geoscientist, has been watching recent stories about the devastating effects of hurricane Igor in Newfoundland with interest.

"In some respects, I suspect Newfoundland has not had a hurricane or post-tropical storm as serious as Igor, since 1775," Ruffman said this week in a phone interview.

The semi-retired geoscientist still spends a lot of time doing research as honorary research associate with Dalhousie University's earth sciences department and as president of Geomarine Associates.

In 1996, he wrote an extensive article for *The Northern Mariner* on what was dubbed "The Independence Hurricane of 1775" because it first struck North Carolina in the U.S. as opening manoeuvres of the War of Independence were in progress.

Ruffman said some newspapers estimated that as many as 4,000 people died when high winds and seas hit the Avalon Peninsula, including sailors and fishermen jiggling squid. The islands of St-Pierre-Miquelon lost about 400 men at sea.

In his research, Ruffman refers to the *Annual Register* for 1775 that said the winds began to rise on Sept. 11.

"At St. John's, and other places in Newfoundland, there arose a tempest of a most particular kind — the sea rose on a sudden 30 feet; above 700 boats, with all the people belonging thereto, were lost, as also 11 ships with most of their crews," the register reported.

"Even on shore they severely felt its effect, by the destruction of numbers of people and, for some days after, in drawing the nets ashore, they often found 20 or 30 dead bodies in them; a most shocking spectacle! At Harbour Grace, no fewer than 300 boats were lost."

Continued on next page ...

Rev. Lewis Anspach, in his 1819 "History of the Island of Newfoundland" also referred to "a most terrible gale of wind" that hit Harbour Grace and Carbonear, driving all vessels in the harbours from their anchors and causing inhabitants of the north shore to suffer with "still greater severity."

Anspach said upwards of 200 fishing boats and their crews were lost.

Ruffman, who has also done a lot of research on the 1929 tsunami in Newfoundland, said there was some confusion about the September 1775 storm, which came to his attention because of work done by Michael Staveley of Memorial University's geography department. He said Staveley looked at what was believed to be a tsunami and was the first researcher to point out that it, in fact, was a bad storm, not a tsunami.

"And with that very large storm came a very large storm surge," Ruffman said. "That storm surge most certainly overwhelmed Placentia Bay in 1775."

And, from recent news reports, Ruffman said there seems to be common characteristics between the 1775 hurricane and last week's Igor.

Referencing Staveley's research, Ruffman quotes a dispatch by Rear Admiral Robert Duff, Governor of Newfoundland, to the Earl of Dartmouth informing him the fisheries and trade in Newfoundland "received a very severe stroke from the violence of a storm of wind."

Duff said two of His Majesty's armed schooners, one stationed on the "banks" and the other on the northeast coast of the province, were wrecked, but fortunately only two people belonging to the crews of these vessels were lost. He estimated the damages "cannot be less than 30,000 pounds."

Ruffman said the 1775 storm had what's called a "trapped fetch," with two types of wind — the circular velocity of the storm itself and then the forward velocity of the storm moving across the surface of the Earth.

"When you're on the right-hand side of the storm, the circular velocity and the forward velocity add together and that's what give you the very serious winds and the very large storm surge," Ruffman said.

"If you're looking down the track, the right-hand side has the two winds adding together, the left-hand side of the track has the two winds working in opposite, but it tends to have more rain."

A BBC Weather Centre website says a "great number" of the 4,000 people killed off Newfoundland in September 1775 were seamen from Britain and Ireland.

"The most haunting account we get from this storm is when it struck Conception Bay. Vast numbers of fishing boats were in the bay as the squid catch was late that summer, but the men were oblivious to the growing winds and the sudden approach of the storm. The sea is said to have risen 20 feet higher than usual, putting the vast quantities of boats in the bay at great risk. The boats really had little chance against this severity of weather at sea, and all but one are said to have met their deaths — a total of 300 men," the account on the BBC site reads.

"After this appalling weather system had moved on and died down, the beaches were littered with the corpses of the dead sailors, and it has been said that for many years afterwards bones were still being washed ashore."

Author, storyteller and Telegram columnist Dale Jarvis references this in his book, "Haunted Shores."

Jarvis said "scores of boats were hurled to their doom on Northern Bay Sands" and when the winds and rains abated, "the beach was found to be littered, full of dead bodies."

Local settlers were said to have buried the water-logged corpses of the ill-fated men in a mass grave on a bluff overlooking the beach. But, for many years afterwards, Jarvis said the bones of drowned men continued to wash ashore at Northern Bay Sands as a gruesome reminder of the Independence Hurricane.

Many residents claimed they could hear the cries of the drowning men, which became known as "the hollies."

The word "holly" has even made its way into the Dictionary of Newfoundland English, denoting the cries of dead fishermen heard on stormy nights.

Ruffman said there are also stories in Newfoundland folklore about the only survivor at sea in the 1775 storm being a young boy who sailors tied to a mast of a ship, who was adopted by an Irishman in Northern Bay.

Newfoundland is used to winter storms and the tail end of hurricanes in the fall, but Ruffman said, "I think what happened in 1775 was obviously very, very exceptional and still is not fully understood."

While people today have the benefit of weather forecasts and storm warnings, Ruffman said the victims of the 1775 hurricane seemed to be completely caught off guard.

Ruffman said his research hasn't been able to answer some questions about the 1775 storm, such as whether it came on the east or west side of Bermuda before arriving completely unannounced in Placentia Bay, St-Pierre-Miquelon and up through Conception Bay. He said it's sad that no one has continued this historic research.

dss@thetelegram.com (mailto:dss@thetelegram.com)