

# Personal Account of the 1938 Hurricane

by Dr. Oliver Strong

*Kevin A. Swope of Wayland sent us his grandfather's account of the 1938 hurricane with the following letter which we feel serves as an excellent introduction.*

*This account was found in my grandmother's files after she died in 1995. On the final page the note "written by Dr. Oliver Strong September 1938 from Penzance Point, Woods Hole" is in my grandmother's handwriting, as is the notation "Sept 21, 1938, Penzance Point, Woods Hole" on the first page... Dr. Strong evidently wrote and distributed this account very shortly after the hurricane. Since it seems to have distributed among relatives and neighbors, I would be surprised if you don't already have a copy in the archives.*

*Dr. Oliver Strong's house was at the site currently occupied by the Billings' house at 123 Penzance Rd. The Szent-Györgyi's owned it until about 1993 when it was sold to the present owners and torn down. The cottage he refers to still stands next to the concrete sea wall just south of the main house. His brother Will Strong's house stood on the site presently occupied by the Goodwins at 111*

*Penzance Rd. The house was previously owned for 16 years by the Kanwishers before being torn down about 1983.*

*Mr. William Briggs, whose tragic death forms the centerpiece of Dr. Strong's account, worked for my great-grandmother Mary Fairbanks (Bosworth) Park (1867-1939). (My great-grandfather Franklin Atwood Park had died in June 1938.) The Park house was the Mediterranean style villa at 129 Penzance Rd. presently owned by the Bronners and previously owned by the Lakians. The house was all but demolished and completely rebuilt in extensive remodeling done about 1990 or so.*



Strong's cottage (far left) and main house (on right of center, later Szent-Györgyi). Picture taken from what is now the Penzance Road sea wall. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.



Section of Sketch map of Woods Hole issued by The Bookshop, Woods Hole, in 1926, with addition of locations of several of the houses mentioned in Dr. Oliver Strong's account of the 1938 hurricane. Courtesy WHHC.

*I currently occupy the Briggs' cottage, which although expanded, still stands on its original foundation at 120 Penzance Rd. The Park boathouse was replaced on its foundations at the base of our dock after 1938 but was finally destroyed for good in hurricane Carol in 1954...*

*I thought an edited version of the account might make a good Sprintsail article... My cousin Dorianne Mebane, who works a couple of doors down from the WHHM at the Penikese Island School offices, has told me she has some pictures of the hurricane damage at Penzance... In any case, I thought the WHHM should have a copy if it did not already have one.*

On account of the very unusual character of the storm of September 21st, I am writing a sort of circular letter and sending copies to relatives and others interested in Woods Hole, telling in some detail what I and others here saw. Some of those whom it may reach may be bored and can simply "skip it". As some may not know enough of the lay of the land to appreciate the situation, I am adding a little of the general topography and have decided to add an airplane photo of the greater part of Penzance Point amid some other photos I have



Park garage (now Swope). Car turned around by storm. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

recently taken myself. [Editor's note: We do not have Dr. Strong's aerial photo. We assume Dorianne Mebane's photos are those taken by Dr. Strong.]

We are located on a long (about a mile and a half) peninsula known as Penzance Point, in Woods Hole. Woods Hole harbor, an arm of Vineyard Sound, forms the inner, mainly Eastern, concave side of the Point and Buzzards Bay the outer, convex side to West and North. These two bodies of water are united by the Hole, a narrow passage forming the southern border of the end of the Point.

Penzance Point is connected with the mainland by a rather narrow neck. On this neck are the Hughes, Murray Crane and Frost places, the latter nearest us and on Penzance Point proper. The Point is private, the road being owned by the Trustees of the Penzance Road Trust, of which Mr. Jewett, next to Frost's, is the Treasurer and my brother William is Secretary. Immediately beyond our house is another narrow

neck of lower land connecting with the terminal part of the Point, most of the narrowing due to a salt marsh extending in from the harbor. Beyond this neck is first the Park place, with other houses beyond, the Warbasse place being at the extreme tip. The

Hole forms the southern boundary of these places. The neck and salt marsh lie to the south of our houses, which are about a mile out on the Point and



Park boat house (now gone) against Strong's boat house, 1938. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

which consist of the main house, situated fortunately on a high bank, and a bungalow and garage on low ground and only about twenty feet from the waters of Buzzards Bay. Across the road, which curves around our house to the east, is the Briggs Cottage, both road and cottage on much lower ground. Mr. Briggs was gardener and caretaker at the Parks. He lived with his wife, who is an invalid, and younger son. He was a fine man and we shall miss him very much.

During the morning of Wednesday, September 21st, there was a warm southeast wind. As it increased someone wondered whether it could be in any way connected with a hurricane reported down Florida way, but was told it was only an ordinary Southeaster.



Warbasse's sloop on dry land. September 1938. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

During the morning I met the Kidder girls near the post office and dated them up for a movie at Falmouth in the evening. They demurred because I had already seen it but I told them I would rather see it a second time rather than the bum offerings at Falmouth for the rest of the week. There was also some talk of trying Buzzards Bay or Wareham. They were to call for me at our house on the Point. I mention all this because it seems so absurd in view of what happened.

At that moment Dr. Stockard showed up and asked me to dine with them, said it would be an unusually good dinner, but I thought it best not to change my Kidder date and accepted for Thursday instead, provided his previous offer of two cocktails held good.

Our tenants had moved out of the house on Monday and Jane and Tommy (Miss Thompson) had moved their immediately useful things from the

bungalow, which they occupied during the summer, into the big house. I had a room in the village but was to dine with them out on the Point at midday.

In the afternoon the wind steadily increased and at about three o'clock I 'phoned to the Kidders saying it was too risky to venture out to the Point in the car, added to the fact that it had begun to rain and they had an open car. It would have taken the roof off if they had put it up, or possibly overturned the car. I 'phoned to Stockard and he said he would not care to try and come out to get me unless the wind went down and to 'phone again at six. This again now seems so absurd.

About this time the electricity went off. Also about this time we noticed the sloping mast of a boat ashore off the Brooks place, nearly opposite Will's place and



Ward's house (later Crowley) aflood. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

that Will's copper shingles were being removed from his roof. We 'phoned to Will, and Lillian said Will had been picking up those he could reach – some were blown into the Bay, but there was little or no leaking because there was a wooden shingle roof under the copper one.

About this time, too, we noticed the Park boat house floating towards Will's dock where it finally came to rest. No material damage to Will's boat, by the way. Then the telephone went out of commission.

All during Wednesday the scene was wild beyond description. Even before the rain, when Tommy went out on the porch, she felt spray from the harbor on her face. The marsh was a lake and everything was indistinct through the mist of flying spray and rain. The surface of the water was torn off by the wind.



Penzance Road heading toward Warbasse's. Draper house to far left. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.



This was the Causeway from Strong's to Park's. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

Later in the afternoon I made my way down our driveway to the bungalow. In front of it, next to the Bay, the waves were beginning to dash over the ground. I went into the bungalow by way of the garage and began to roll up the rugs and put them on chairs. Soon after Tommy joined me and we finished the job. The water was coming under the sills in increasing quantity. We placed some rugs against the sills to diminish the intake – another ridiculous thing.

Shortly after this I had noticed that some waves from Buzzards Bay were beginning to dash over the Park stone wall on to the roadway. Not long after, while we were standing near our garage, we noticed Mr. Briggs wading around there. The water then was

running swiftly from the Bay to the marsh and the wind had shifted to from the harbor, i. e., from southeast more to the southwest and thus rather more from the Bay. At first it did not [appear] to be over Mr. Briggs' boot tops. He hesitated, apparently did not feel sure he could get across from the Parks where he had been. It may be the roadway was begin-

ning to be torn up. The water rose so rapidly that the situation grew serious and his son, who was standing by us on our roadway, waved him back. He turned back and a huge wave knocked him off his feet. He got up, was knocked down again, and floated – or swam – away in the marsh – now a turbulent



What was a road. Draper house to right overlooking Park family marsh into Woods Hole harbor from location of current sea wall. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

lake. I could see his head for some distance and he threw up his arms once or twice and then disappeared. Tommy had brought a rope but he was way beyond reach. In the meantime, King, Will's chauffeur, Eddie Briggs and another man got a skiff from Will's place and launched it on the board walk to Will's boat



Penzance Garage Wharf, Sept. 21, 1938. Copyrighted photo by Linnfield A. Baker, B.S. Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole. 1938 Hurricane Pictures published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, MA.

house on the harbor, near the Briggs' house,

where the water was up to the Briggs' first floor. King made a brave effort to get out in it but could not get beyond the pine tree back of the Briggs House. About this time, Mrs. Briggs was carried up to our house, was put to bed, and only at her own request returned to her house on Friday. Briggs's body, covered with debris, was discovered Friday afternoon on the harbor beach at the Tilney place.

In the meantime we heard that we were cut off from the mainland. About six P.M. I went in an auto with Eddie Briggs and a helper of the Parks towards the entrance to the Point. The water was over the road in front of the Jewetts, next to the Frosts, and I walked over the Jewett lawn to the Frost place. Over the whole Frost place was a deep rapid torrent from Bay to Harbor; of course surrounding the Frost garage where Mrs. Anderson, our helper, lives, and also the main Frost house. Beyond, the water was over the first floor of the Murray Crane house and fur-

ther beyond the Hughes house was evidently also inundated.

I also made another trip to our bungalow. I could only go near it on the high bank to the north and could see a heavy surf pounding the lower part on the Buzzards Bay side of the bungalow and also the whole bank way above the rip-rap.

After dark, when the tide had gone down, I went out again with an electric torch and could enter the bungalow. The whole side towards the Bay had been torn off, except the living room, from which the shingles had been removed. The fact that the shingles were removed from the whole side to roof, above water, and also from part of the South side where there was no surf, indicates that the wind played an important part in making the damage. The wooden floor of the dining room was mostly torn up and gone. Nothing left in the room. The kitchen swept



Bureau of Fisheries. Copyrighted photo by Linnfield A. Baker, B.S. Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole. 1938 Hurricane Pictures published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, MA.



Marine Biological Club House. Copyrighted photo by Linnfield A. Baker, B.S. Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole. 1938 Hurricane Pictures published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, MA.



U. S. Fishery Building during the hurricane. Copyrighted photo by Linnfield A. Baker, B.S. Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole. 1938 Hurricane Pictures published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, MA.



Bureau of Fisheries wharf. Copyrighted photo by Linnfield A. Baker, B.S. Marine Biological Laboratory, Woods Hole. 1938 Hurricane Pictures published by Reynolds Printing, New Bedford, MA.

MASS., FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 30, 1938.

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## Hurricane Damage At Penzance Point



Seas which swept across Penzance in the hurricane wrecked the home of Mrs. W. Murray Crane, inside and out. Exterior shows broken doors and gullied lawn; interior, the drawing room after the sea had subsided. Plans are already being made to restore the house.

(Photos by Fred S. Howard)

clean as a whistle. We found the electric refrigerator on the roadway nearly in front of the Briggs house, gas range in fragments. Other articles were found next day strewn about; some around in the Briggs place and along around the board walk to Will's boathouse, etc. A number of rugs and cushions were recovered. Bed springs, mattresses, upside down in bedrooms. Day beds still in living room, piano lying on its back. There was some crockery on an upper shelf in pantry. The wall between dining room and bedroom intact, but the lower parts of the Dutch doors gone. I have seen one front door somewhere around the main roadway and parts of others. Floors of bedrooms and living room intact and also most of the tile on kitchen floor. Most of the cement floor of dining room and kitchen intact. Cement foundation in front intact in middle but removed at corners. Roof intact and garage entirely uninjured. Nearly all the soil in front of bungalow gone; rip-rap practically intact. Bank above rip-rap to north of bungalow torn away leaving a flat, possibly useful, place. A fine sandy beach from jetty to way north of bungalow and extending beyond jetty.

Mrs. Anderson had a narrow escape. She was in the Frost garage and when she saw the water rising she went to the Frost main house with her boy. There she found five Coast Guard men with cars. She went back to the garage to get something and when she returned to the Main house the water was beginning to flow over the grounds. They decided to go to

Front page picture from September 30, 1938 Falmouth Enterprise reprinted on page 6 of "A Century of Falmouth News 1896-1999," a 22-page supplement published by The Enterprise December 31, 1999.

the Breakwater Hotel on the mainland. One of the coastguards took the boy on ahead and got there but the man unfortunately started to return and was washed away and drowned. When Mrs. Anderson and the others reached the Murray Crane house the water was breast high. They broke in a window on the first floor and were greeted by a flood coming in the back from Buzzards Bay. Two went out for a life line in one of the cars parked by the house and were swept against the wire net around the Frost tennis court. This was torn away (the iron pipes supporting the net and evidently set in concrete, were bent down against the ground) and they then hung on to the stone posts of the Frost entrance, to which a rope was attached but were finally torn away and drowned. Two men by the name of Neal, father and son, went to see about boats, were caught, hung on to a telegraph pole opposite the Hughes place until the father had to let go and was drowned. The others who were left in the Murray Crane houses remained there until the flood subsided. Two of the bodies have just been recovered.

All the low land of Woods Hole was overflowed, from the Gardiners to the Frosts and back over the swamp, baseball field, Gardiner Road, Millfield Street (the street with the Catholic Church on it) eight feet of water on it, just to top of Swain's terrace where Elwyn stayed last summer; Main Street (two feet of water over the bridge), bridge masonry severely damaged, street torn up, one small store next to bridge swept away, drug store on opposite side of bridge badly undermined and almost gone, other buildings undermined, four to seven feet of water in basement of Marine Biological Building damaging furnishings and stock there; part of Bureau of Fisheries dock gone, other docks injured; boats washed up on land everywhere and boat houses destroyed. Mr. Griffin calculates the water near our house reached about nine feet above high tide.

The long bathhouse on Bay Shore beach calmly floated over to Mr. Robert Baker's house, back of the Breakwater Hotel. Two of Captain John Veeder's houses moved, one wedged in between his own dwelling house and the next one. The Cannon house on Gardiner Road, with Mill Pond at the back, is now against the opposite bank of the enlarged Mill Pond, partly submerged. A boat house is picturesquely placed near the town "Angelus" in the Tower Garden bordering Eel Pond, also a boat.

A young man swimming (or rowing) in a yard on Millfield Street struck something submerged and found it was the top of an automobile. The water



Boathouse, with Sprintsail boat in it, next to the Angelus Bell Tower on the Millfield Street shore of Eel Pond, Woods Hole following the 1938 hurricane. High water and wind carried the building and contents from Swift property on School Street next to what is now the WHOI Redfield Building. Photo from Dorothea K. Harrison scrapbook, Courtesy WHHC.

came to just below the rise near the Bob Veeders, who entertained at various times a score of people including Eugenia Rudd (Gardiner) who spent the night with them. Mrs. Walter Garrey (whose house is a one story house on posts) was rescued by Bobbie Chambers in a boat. They broke into the Copeland House – subsequently opened freely to all – and stayed there. Mrs. Garrey had to hang on the roof of her cottage, I heard, before being rescued. Knowlton's house moved into the Garrey yard, intact.

Miss Billings and her mother (one-story house on high basement on Millfield Street) abandoned their house in a boat when the water was rising in first floor, boat capsized, but by means of a clothes post near by they managed in some way to escape. Young Ned Harvey had a very narrow escape while doing rescue work and was about all in when rescued. The Meigs houses were severely damaged and their “studio,” a small separate building, was nearly upside down in their yard. Practically all houses in above locations more or less filled with water, even though intact and not moved.

The flood appears to have first come in from the Sound – there was a high tide – and re-enforced later by a flood or wave from Buzzards Bay coming across the low land at the neck of Penzance Point, the bathing beach and between the Copelands and Gardiners. Frank Lillie saw the water advancing until it reached the base of his house. They were prepared to go to the house back of theirs or, if necessary, to the high ground. The wind had shifted from southeast to southwest and he said if it had shifted to the northwest their house would have gone or been severely damaged.

Looting began soon and not long after the National Guards were called in. There have been guards at the entrance to the Point and at other strategic points along the streets and passes have been required of people not well known. The Warbasse boat was rifled of compass and binnacle. Young DuBois chased away two young men attempting to enter their house on the Point. Miss Goffin saw a truck at the Angelus Tower and heard men inside the hedge say “Here it is,” meaning either the boat house deposited there

or the boat also deposited by the tower. She asked a man to go with her in to the Tower garden and asked them what they were doing. They said “Looking around.” As it was 9:30 at night and pitch dark and they were smoking she asked them to go out as the people did not want any fire risk and told them they had better clear out, which they did. She reported their truck license number to



Bulldozing for new road, 1938. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

the police and not long after they picked up the truck, which was filled with loot.

Returning to the Point, the surface of the road was entirely removed from the Hughes place to Frost's inclusive, and cut with deep gullies in places. The water could hardly have been going through more than two to three hours but it was amazing how it dug holes in various places nearly to a man's head, overturned or broke through heavy masonry walls in some grounds besides undermining and crushing in the ends of the Murray Crane and Hughes houses. Where there was intact sod the surface was undisturbed unless the water got under it. The Frost tennis court and driveway were deeply cut out but not the surrounding sod.

The worst break was where Briggs lost his life. The whole low-lying ground was cut out and deposited in the marsh, including the masonry wall constructed by Park as protection against the sea. Fortunately we have in Woods Hole Messrs. Sidney Lawrence and Son, road builders, etc. with a good organization. They repaired the road at the neck in about twenty-four hours, of course, only dirt, and in another forty-eight hours had a dirt road across the gap between us and the Park place. The high tide nearly got them though before they had the dirt sides covered with stone riprap. Even more will have to be done to make it permanent. Luckily my brother Will was still here and played a leading part in getting things under way. Mr. Jewett also helped materially and the town said they would have the dirt part done by them because



Road destruction where hurricane waters swept across narrow causeway between Woods Hole's Great Harbor and Buzzards Bay. Murray Crane house at beginning of Penzance Point in the background. From Hurricane, the Complete Historical Record of New England's Stricken Area, September 21, 1938.

it was their job to restore some kind of communication.

Of course we were without electricity, both light and heat (oil-burner) except for cooking as we have "tank gas" for the latter. Also no telephone. Both were restored by the afternoon and evening of the 25th inst. The Warbasses have only recently electricity and no 'phone today (the 28th). The water came within four feet of undermining their foundation. Candle light is dismal but we had some good electric torches and finally got kerosene for some lamps we happened to have. Wood fire in the fireplace was adequate for heat. Water was never cut off entirely but it might have been if Will had not discovered a part of the



Park family house; sea wall damaged. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.

water main bridging a gap and about to give way. Parts of the village are still without electricity.

Of course we could go on indefinitely picking up interesting accounts of other's experiences. I am confining this to what we saw on the Point, together with some incidents I ran across in talking to people I know. Nor can any photograph give an adequate idea of the general appearance of things, with water logged houses, debris of all kinds strewn on and along familiar village streets, the strange appearance of parts of the road on the Point, boats and boat houses washed up along the shores, etc. Much of the removed portions of our bungalow are in the bushes along the road between the washout and the Briggs house, still more in the Briggs yard and along the side of the pocket where Will's boat house is. Jane, Tommy and Mrs. Anderson have been busy picking up stray articles and Jane was quite overjoyed by the recent discovery by one of the men working at the

Brooks place of some valuable linen they had left in the bungalow all folded up and tied up in a laundry bag. The linen was still folded up but there was no laundry bag!

Railroad along the shores damaged, mails arrive by bus and are irregular.

Later (September 29th) the remaining bodies were recovered. Mr. Neal's was found on the shore at Vineyard Haven, across the Sound; another body of a Coast Guard was found five miles out at a shoal; another on Nobska Beach and the remaining one floating near the Bureau of Fisheries.

Although some of the reports of damages to the Cape have given a grossly exaggerated idea of its extent, you see things do happen on it. Maybe sometime we will revisit New York for a quiet uneventful time. I may add that at present our plan is to spend the

winter here but not necessarily to the exclusion of occasional visits to the Great White Way. In fact I had planned to make a short visit soon but of course cannot get away now.

Well, if it were not for the loss of life it all might be regarded as a great and thrilling experience in spite of property damage. The only storm comparable to it hereabouts in New England appears to be one which occurred in 1815!

To all of you, with best wishes.

Subsequent Addenda to the above:

The water did not get near our main house. It is entirely uninjured by wind or water.

The young man mentioned on page four [*of Dr. Strong's letter*] was young Lawrie Riggs, who was row-

ing on Millfield Street. His boat capsized and while swimming his foot struck the top of the submerged automobile,

Young Ned Harvey (page five) was on the wharf near the Yacht Club House, to attend to the boat. When the water came from the Sound he made his way to the tennis court on the Frost place, and hung on to the net around the tennis court, and was swept from that into the harbor. He got on a Herreshoff boat, which was nearly submerged, floated on that to the red (?) spindle, tried to swim back, was helped by using a floating barn door to rest on and finally landed on the Bureau of Fisheries porch in a dazed condition and all in.

Young Borden who was at first with Young Harvey also had a narrow escape.



Park family home (later Bradley, Lakian). Current sea wall built to right hand side of photo. Courtesy Dorianne Mebane.