
It would be easy for a book detailing Florida’s hurricane past to become repetitive, with endless listings of peak gusts, barometric pressures, storm surges, and damage totals. Fortunately, the majority of Florida’s Hurricane History rises above mere statistics, using personal accounts and striking pictures to bring the state’s countless encounters with tragedy to life.

The book takes a look back at the recorded hurricanes in Florida for the past 450 years, from the first storms experienced by Spanish settlers to Hurricanes Erin and Opal in 1995. This “history,” however, is not a canonical list of all recorded hurricanes in Florida. Instead, it is a deliberately incomplete history of Florida hurricanes, with the author focusing on the storms that made a lasting impression on the people that experienced them or for the damage and fatalities they caused during their existence.

The first three chapters are designed to give the readers a brief background on how hurricanes form, describe the elements that make hurricanes dangerous, and explain how hurricane forecasting has changed over the centuries. Though the teasers on the back cover indicate that the book will “explain hurricane dynamics and hurricane forecasting,” the book only scratches the surface on these subjects. Since the true focus of the book is on the impacts hurricanes have on Florida, the layman’s description given for these topics is adequate.

In chapter 1, the basic atmospheric and oceanic ingredients needed for hurricane formation are given along with a basic climatology of the Atlantic hurricane season. Hurricane formation and dynamics are covered by general discussions on Coriolis effects, vertical shear, and steering currents. Finally, a climatology of Florida hurricanes is given, describing how early (and late) season hurricanes often affect the Gulf Coast of Florida more, while the Atlantic coast can see Cape Verde-type hurricanes during the peak of the season.

The next chapter discusses the impacts of landfalling hurricanes. After an overview of the Saffir–Simpson scale and the usage of barometric pressure to gauge the intensity of hurricanes, each major threat associated with hurricanes is described in detail: high winds that turn every loose object into a deadly projectile and whose force grows quadratically with speed, the crushing storm surge that inundates coastal and low-lying areas, excessive rainfall that can flood coastal and inland regions alike and can linger for days after the hurricane has weakened, and tornadoes that spawn on a hurricane’s outer fringes, bringing sudden and violent destruction.

The final introductory chapter gives a brief history of hurricane forecasting. Over the span of 250 years, our study and forecasting of hurricanes has advanced dramatically from the ancient lore of sailors, celestial omens, and observing animal behavior. The pioneering observations of Benjamin Franklin in the 1740s and the Cuban hurricane warning system of Father Benito Viñes in the late 1800s are leads to the formation of the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1891 and U.S. hurricane forecasting services in 1898 to protect naval vessels during the Spanish–American War. However, hurricane forecasting was relatively ineffective until reconnaissance flights began in the 1940s, and radar and satellites went online in the 1950s and 1960s, respectively. Today, with the advent of computer modeling and Doppler radar, hurricane forecasting has improved significantly, and casualties due to hurricanes in the United States have dropped dramatically.

The next four chapters, comprising the vast majority of the book, are a detailed account of over 100 hurricanes that have left their mark on Florida’s history. Before 1800, Florida was largely unpopulated and unexplored. Thus, documented records of hurricanes are scarce, but the records that do exist indicate the vital role hurricanes played in the settling of the territory. Florida hurricanes changed the course of several battles, destroyed hundreds of vessels, and stranded thousands of people in the dangerous wilderness. In fact, it was the presence of the hurricane that kept Florida relatively uninhabited by Europeans until the 1800s. As the nineteenth century progressed, more and
more settlers came to the new territory (state after 1845), and the hurricanes kept coming too. New settlements were commonly destroyed and rebuilt. However, hurricane reports were still spotty until the U.S. Weather Bureau was formed in 1871.

With the advent of more detailed reports, the tone of the book changes as well. Many of the early storm records were stories found in the journals of sailors and settlers. Without formal documentation of the storms, the author uses a more relaxed, anecdotal approach to detail each hurricane. With the advent of the Weather Bureau reports, each hurricane is detailed in its own subsection (or, in some early cases, all the hurricanes in a year are grouped together). Each subsection is similar in structure. The course of the storm is described first, along with metrics to gauge its intensity, like maximum winds, pressure, and storm surges. Damages caused by the storms are next, and finally personal accounts and historical writings about the storm are given.

Of course, some storms are given much more attention than others. The hurricane of 6 October 1873, while causing a 14-ft storm surge along the southwest Florida coast and destroying the town of Punta Rassa, only gets a paragraph due to scant information. However, the most famous storms to affect Florida—including the Miami hurricane of 1926, the Keys hurricane of 1935, Donna in 1960, and Andrew in 1992—are given extremely detailed discussions befitting their fury and impact.

What makes the text exciting to read are the personal accounts of tragedy and triumph during and after these powerful storms. The author, through the personal accounts and startling photographs, brings the storms to life and the horrors that they left in their wake. Especially horrifying is the Lake Okeechobee Hurricane of 1928, which spilled the lake over its levees, drowning over 1800 people in a matter of hours. Without these vivid accounts of survival and sorrow, the book would be reduced to boring statistics.

A few minor additions would have benefited the text. Though the reasoning for using inches of mercury is understood, the use of both units of measurement would have been simple and beneficial. Also, despite the technological advance seen in the latter half of the twentieth century for imaging hurricanes, there are only two satellite images of hurricanes in the text. More satellite pictures and some radar images would have been a nice addition. But overall, Florida’s Hurricane History is a compelling look back into the state’s relationship with the tropical cyclone and it reminds us of the dangers that loom ahead in the future from these storms.—Mark Bove.

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Bakersfield, Calif., Dec. 20—Charles H. Hatfield, professional “rainmaker,” has failed in his contract to produce one and one-quarter inches of rain for the cattlemen of Kern County. Under the agreement signed on November 6, Hatfield was to receive $2,000 if he produced that amount between November 20 and December 20, and $4,000 if he got a one and one-half inch downpour. Although he succeeded in producing a smaller amount, his cloudmaking device was broken and he has departed for other fields.—New York Herald-Tribune.