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The Mississippi Disaster

by Michael Worley



An Interstate, Multilocal, Government, Hurricane Disaster Response

by Morgan Gilreath



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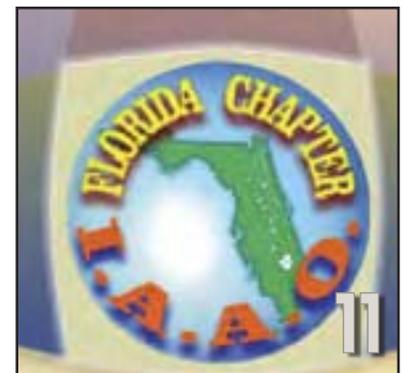
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Cover photos of damage in Mississippi caused by Hurricane Katrina courtesy of Mike Worley

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Katrina

The Mississippi Disaster

by Michael W. Worley

*Hurricane photo courtesy of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
All other photos by Michael W. Worley*

August 29, 2005, was a day that changed the lives of thousands of Mississippians forever. Bumper-to-bumper traffic had been streaming past our home and into the Jackson area for two days; families from New Orleans, Gulfport, Biloxi, and points beyond. The hotels were packed, the Coliseum in downtown Jackson was jammed, churches and other charitable facilities were plugged, and still the traffic came, pouring through Jackson and rolling northward toward Memphis. We had seen this several times before, so it was no surprise to us. And we were certain that, on the following day, the traffic would turn and stream southward, returning to the Coast. Little did we know we would soon be sitting in the center of the greatest natural disaster in U.S. history.

At 11:00 a.m., the eye of the hurricane slammed into the face of Mississippi's Gulf Coast beach, demolishing everything in its path. Her counterclockwise rotation made Katrina the perfect storm to obliterate Mississippi's coastline—and obliterate it she did. Driven by 147 mile per hour northbound winds, the surge of seawater (see figure 1) from the eastern eye wall of the storm swelled to twenty and thirty feet in height, smashing through homes, offices, stores, restaurants, shopping centers, hotels, and churches, leaving only bare concrete slabs in its wake.

Katrina was an equal opportunity destroyer. Her giant seawall spared no one in its path—the wealthiest, poorest, strongest, and weakest—all suffered equally, the grief and helplessness that can come only from losing everything. One man said he saw the richest and the poorest residents of the Mississippi Coast standing together in the same food line. A rag-tag group of local men with chainsaws, clearing a rural roadway, encountered a car deliberately pulled into a ditch behind a hill, in an attempt to escape the destructive violence of the

hurricane. The three people they found inside the car were all unharmed. An older lady in the small town of Prentiss was home alone, huddled against an outer wall of her home, when five giant pine trees smashed through the roof, destroying the entire house. She escaped uninjured. A lady in rural Stone County gathered pieces of vinyl siding, discarded by the storm, and used them to spell the word “ICE” in the pasture behind her home. Then she watched, as a passing military helicopter banked and turned. It landed in the pasture and tossed out enough bags of ice and cases of water for the entire rural neighborhood. Stories like these were not exceptional in the aftermath of Katrina; they were commonplace, along with tens of thousands of other, unique stories we will never hear.



Figure 1. Massive flooding caused by the storm surge inundated coastal counties and added to the destruction

A bridge in Harrison county was completely destroyed by the force of the hurricane.





No one in Mississippi was fully prepared for the power of Katrina's winds or the vast breadth of her violent, destructive bands (see figures 2-4). When she was finally downgraded to a tropical storm near the center of the state, she left virtually every home and business in the southeastern quadrant of Mississippi without electricity, phone service, or potable water. People were literally dazed as they ventured out of their neighborhoods the following day, observing the bizarre scenes. Fallen trees had flattened cars and split houses down the center. Downed trees crisscrossed highways and roadways. In towns small and large, power lines were strewn like spaghetti across streets and through yards. All over southeast Mississippi, debris from the storm littered everything in sight.

Getting the Job Done

For the first five days after the hurricane, assessors and appraisers throughout

southeast Mississippi were paralyzed. When the roadways were cleared, gas-line shortages became an immediate problem for everyone. The lines were so long, people were spending the night in their vehicles to avoid losing their place in line at opening time the following day. Gas stations that had fuel had no power, and stations that had power were quickly drained dry by populations that had almost doubled in size. Stores were without electricity and closed, so water,

No one in Mississippi was fully prepared for the power of Katrina's winds or the vast breadth of her violent, destructive bands

ice and other immediate necessities were unavailable. The assessment employees who were able to report for work found their courthouses and office buildings without power and closed down. Every family we knew had only a battery-operated radio to try and learn what was happening between Jackson and the Coast.

Then the power workers began arriving from all across the United States. Convoys of trucks, carrying emergency provisions and rescue workers, clogged the main roadways to the Coast. It was impossible to travel under those circumstances, so the personnel who began getting electrical service first huddled in their offices, planning their strategies to deal with the human suffering and property damage. As electrical workers began moving out of the area, debris cleanup crews arrived: Dump trucks and front-end loaders blocked the flow of vehicles, slowing traffic to a standstill.

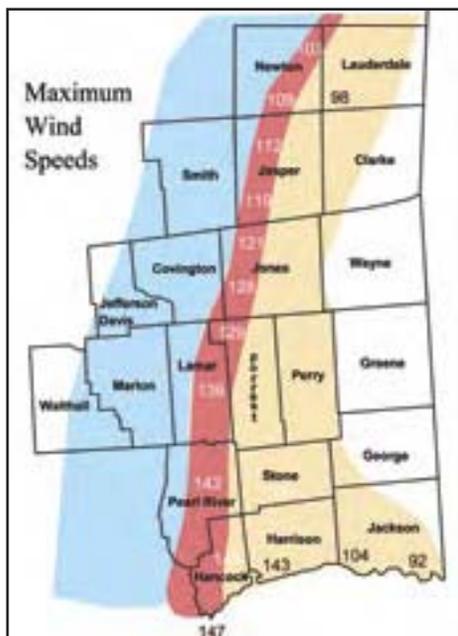


Figure 2. Maximum wind speed of Hurricane Katrina as it made its way inland.



Figure 3. Detail of wind speeds in Pearl River and Stone counties





Just getting around was still a considerable challenge.

With temperatures hovering in the low nineties, humidity above 80 percent, and no power to run air-conditioning systems, mold began growing inside every building that had been soaked by the storm. Residents returning to their homes, found themselves in need of, not only ice, water, and food, but also bleach. The homes of many residents were overtaken by mold, so the owners began ripping out crumbling drywall, piling it at the front of their lots, joining an estimated 800,000,000 cubic yards of other debris scheduled to be picked up by Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA)-funded cleanup crews. But there was no replacement drywall to be found at building supply outlets—no plywood, no oriented strand board (OSB), no gasoline—everywhere they looked, residents encountered logistical nightmares.

After five days, our power returned, and we began watching the television coverage of Katrina's wrath. We saw a tremendous amount of footage about New Orleans and a brief report from time to time about the Mississippi Coast, but nothing about Mississippi's interior counties. Knowing some of the counties

...where the news reports had stopped, Hurricane Katrina kept going, wreaking havoc across more than 15,000 square miles of eastern Mississippi.

must be having serious problems, with a full tank of fuel and two spare jugs strapped into the bed of my pickup, I drove to Hattiesburg to check in with the assessor and find out what the county's situation was. As I entered the city limits, driving toward the assessor's office, I couldn't believe my eyes. The extent of damage from the storm was overwhelming. The streets were barely passable, with traffic winding, snakelike, around piles of debris and cut tree stumps extending into the rights-of-way. Trees were down in front yards, backyards and on houses along the entire route—and Hattiesburg was located seventy miles from the Coast! When I walked into the assessor's office, the county's chief appraiser looked at me and threw both arms out to his sides, palms facing upward. I couldn't have said it better myself. At that moment, I realized, where the news reports had stopped, Hurricane Katrina kept going,

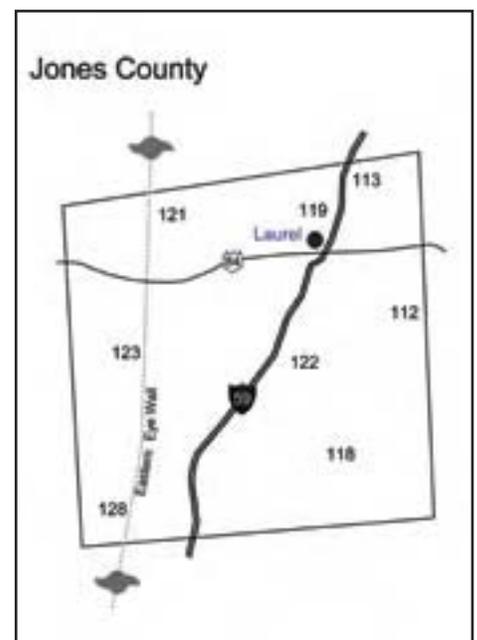
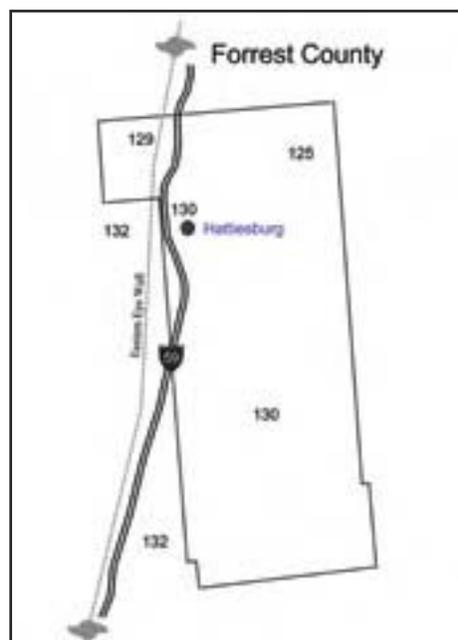
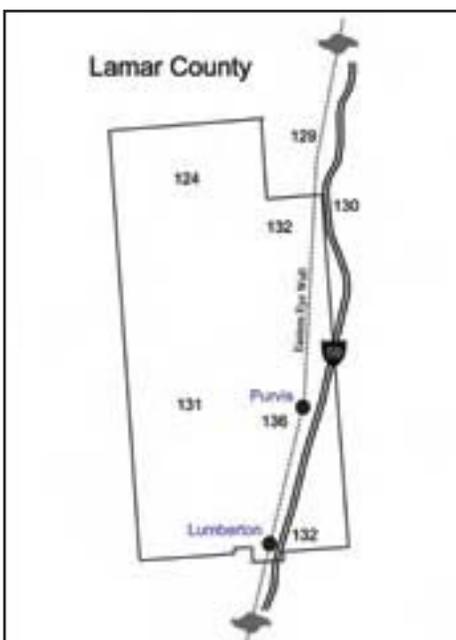


Figure 4. Detail of wind speed in Lamar, Forrest, and Jones counties



wreaking havoc across more than 15,000 square miles of eastern Mississippi.

For the next three weeks, I drove the roads of fourteen counties, meeting with assessors and appraisers in each county whenever possible, assessing and documenting Katrina's effects on properties located in the path of the storm. Beginning at the eastern center of the state, where the National Weather Service downgraded the hurricane to a tropical storm, and traveling southward to the Coast, I witnessed thousands of acres of timber destroyed by the storm. In every county I inspected, homes and businesses were lost, both from Katrina's sustained

winds and from tornadoes spawned by her outer bands.

Of the eleven interior counties I visited, five appeared to have been hit the hardest. Lamar and Stone counties will not be able to update property damage and repairs accurately until the end of 2006. Damage and destruction in Jones, Forrest, and Pearl River counties was so widespread, records for those counties will most likely not be updated and accurate until the end of 2007.

Predictably, as I progressed southward damage and destruction gradually became more prevalent, until I finally reached the coastal counties, where I

experienced a major shock. The brief footage I had seen on the national news had done nothing to prepare me for the vastness of the devastation from the surge of Katrina's giant seawall. An ocean of bare concrete slabs, debris piles as tall as two-story buildings, casino barges on the wrong side of U.S. Highway 90, houses atop houses...the totality of the obliteration was truly mind boggling. It was impossible to guess when the three coastal counties might return to some semblance of normal existence.

The Volunteers

Without much fanfare, volunteer workers began arriving from around the state and beyond. Those who could give, contributed financially, and those who could not, showed up on the Coast ready to go to work. Our division provided the services of our field appraisers to the coastal counties, and certain assessing offices across the state have done so, as well. We are aware of other help that will be coming in the near future, and for that, we are all grateful. The situation on the Coast, especially in Hancock and Harrison counties is simply indescribable, and county officials there need all the help they can get.

Shortly after the storm passed through, Morgan B. Gilreath, Jr., Volusia County Property Appraiser from Florida assembled a team of professionals who traveled to the Mississippi Coast to assist several small towns in their recovery. In his field notes, Mr. Gilreath described the devastation as well as it can be described. His



A building stripped to the floorboards by the force of the wind



compelling account can be read in the article immediately following this one.

Under the leadership of Governor Haley Barbour, Mississippians all over the southeast part of the state have quietly begun picking up the pieces, literally, and putting their lives back together. The poorest state with the biggest heart has been pounded, and she is down, but not out. I met with and spoke to many Mississippi residents during this assignment, both private citizens and public employees, and *not a single one of them complained* about his or her personal situation.

The county assessors and residents of Mississippi's three coastal counties will not ask for your help. Therefore, it is entirely appropriate that we do so on their behalf. If you would like to offer a per-



Garage flattened by the power of the storm

sonal donation to assist coastal residents with their recovery, please visit the Web site set up by the Governor's Commission on Recovery, Rebuilding and Renewal, at www.mississippirecovery.com/. There you can give to the general recovery fund, or to any one of a number of le-

gitimate charitable organizations listed under Contacts. Professionals who would like to inquire about donating their time and professional expertise to assist the coastal counties may contact these assessors at the following numbers:

Hancock County, Jimmie Ladner, Jr., 888/409-6651

Harrison County, E. T. (Tal) Flurry, 228/865-4077

Jackson County, Luther B. (Benny) Goff, 228/769-3070 ■

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Houses collapsed by trees and flying debris provide powerful reminders of the destructive forces of nature