

Floyd's gone, flooding remains

Second hurricane in three weeks drenches area; recovery begins

Hurr # 2 48

By Russell Woolard
News Editor

The early part of Thursday morning was spent weathering Hurricane Floyd's assault on eastern North Carolina.

The rest of the day — and the next few days after that — were earmarked for cleaning up and assessing the storm's soggy and destructive legacy.

Floyd, which at one time packed winds of 155 mph, charged ashore near Cape Fear about 3 a.m. Thursday. It was barreling through the Pamlico region roughly four hours later. It left quickly — more so than forecasters initially thought it would — and that may have kept the damage from being as bad as it could have been.

Nevertheless, eastern North Carolina residents woke up to considerable flooding that made several roads impassible; trees that, thanks to winds of between 80 mph and 90 mph at their peak, went down and took power with them, and damage and debris that will take some time to clean up.

"There a lot of damage out there," said Daden Wolfe, Beaufort County's emergency management coordinator, who surveyed several areas of the county Thursday afternoon. "There are a lot of trees down, and a lot of power lines."

Wolfe hopes to have an estimate of the monetary damage Floyd caused by Friday. He also expects to make a decision on the county's three emergency shelters, which remained open as of Thursday afternoon and dealt with at least 860 people who were moving to safety by about 8:30 p.m. Wednesday.

But on Thursday afternoon, officials were addressing two major priorities: getting all the water out of the roads, and getting the lights back on. And the persistence of the former problem made it difficult for them to tackle the latter.

The entire Pamlico area got a lot of water, although some places got more than others. Radar estimates from the National Weather Service's Newport office indicated that the area north of Washington got 10 to 12 inches of rain, while parts of Martin County got between 10 and 15 inches. Also, the Pamlico, Tar, Cape Fear, Neuse and Roanoke rivers crested well above flooding range, and in Greenville, the Tar crested near 25 feet.

In Aurora, Mayor Joe Hooker said the area received a little less water than during Tropical Storm Dennis, although several areas were without power.

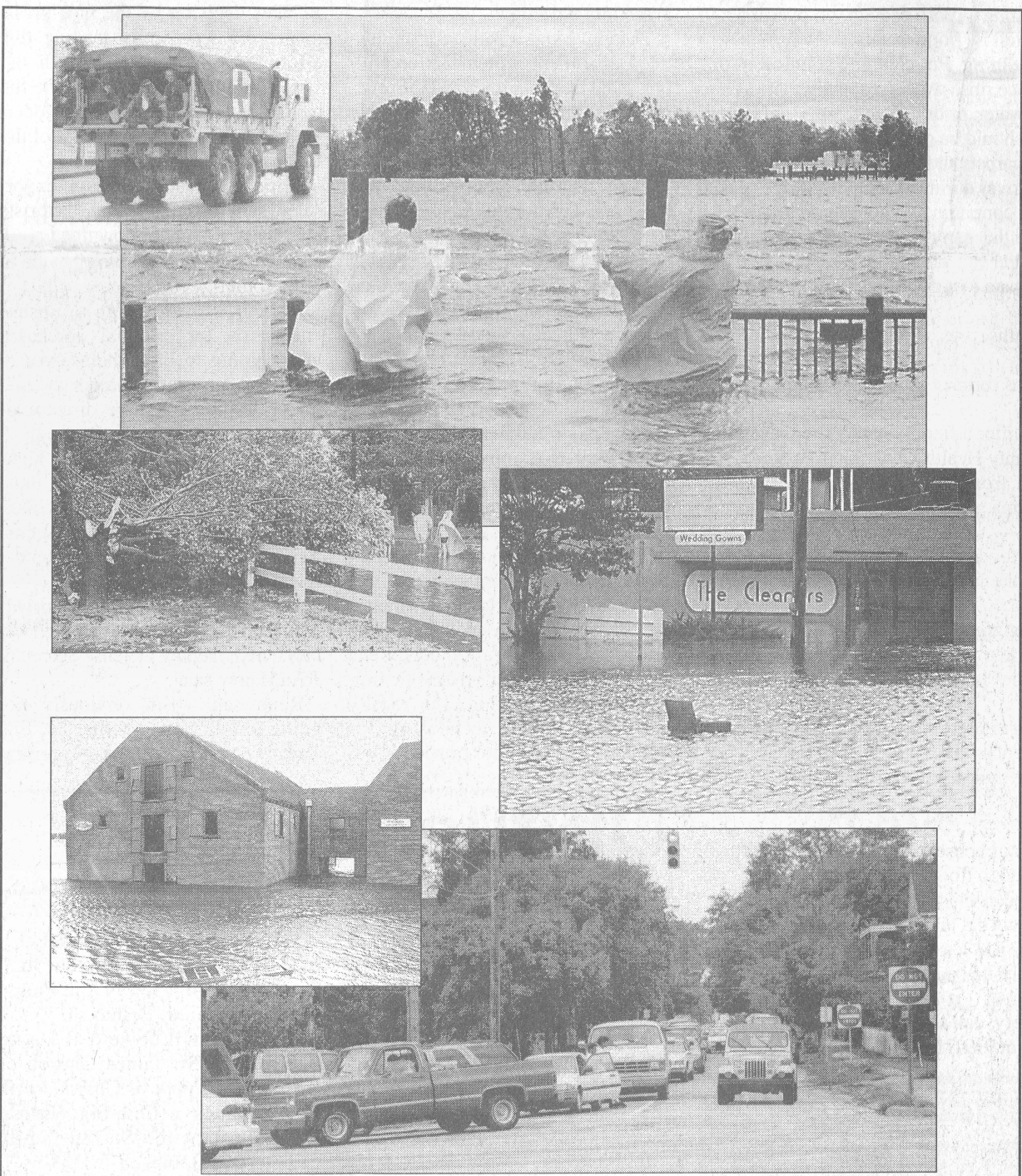
It was the opposite in Belhaven, which, according to officials, got an estimated 7.5 feet of water. And in Chocowinity, several rural roads such as Possum Track Road and Gray Road were impassible for periods.

Hyde County may have been one of the hardest-hit areas.

The county got between 1 to 3 inches of rain, but a storm surge estimated at nearly 5 feet put water in several buildings, including the county courthouse and Sheriff's Department.

Roads were flooded, trees were down and communications were cut off; Hyde County emergency management officials communicated with other officials by satellite phone.

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It was tough going (top photo) in Washington on Thursday for cars and other forms of transportation. The young man on the bicycle used duct tape to secure trash bags around his legs in an effort to keep them dry. The black-and-white photographs show (clockwise) two people wading at Stewart Parkway; floodwaters attacking The Cleaners; traffic looking for dry routes to destinations; the Carolina Wind site getting soaked; and flooded yards, a common site in Washington in recent days.

Associated Press

KINSTON — Hurricane Floyd wiped out a dozen Oak Island beach homes and sent floodwaters surging through North Carolina's coastal plain before dashing north Thursday.

Except at Oak Island, Floyd's ground zero, wind damage was relatively light. But flooding was so bad up and down Interstate 95 that that in Nashville, National Guard troops used helicopters and even jet skis to rescue stranded residents. Major flooding occurred in Goldsboro, Rocky Mount, Wilson, Kinston, Kenly and other east-central communities.

President Clinton said North Carolina will be declared a major disaster area after Gov. Jim Hunt told him the state cannot afford to wait several days for damage assessments and said his wife battled high water to help save their neighbor's home.

Clinton said a disaster declaration without damage assessments is unusual "but it's also fairly unusual for your wife to be waist-deep in water" helping a neighbor.

Yet many believed it could have been far, far worse. Floyd, a monster storm that at one time packed 155-mph winds, was called the storm of the decade by some. More than 20,000 people evacuated the barrier islands as it approached. Shelters took in 37,000.

"We're most fortunate, most fortunate," said George Lemons, a National Weather Service forecaster in Raleigh, adding that Floyd lost punch before coming ashore and then hugged the coast.

On Oak Island, few would agree with Lemons. Co-Mayor Joan Altman said half the island's beachfront homes would be condemned, at a cost of \$50 million. About a dozen were destroyed outright, with only debris remaining: steps leading to nowhere, pieces of deck, a refrigerator, a set of golf clubs.

The waterlogged I-95 corridor told another story. The highway itself was closed at Smithfield by floodwaters. A flooded creek in Goldsboro cut the city in half. Streets were impassible in Rocky Mount, Wilson and Nashville. In Raleigh, Crabtree Creek rose out of its banks and flooded low-lying areas in the heart of the city.

Because of flooding, curfews were announced in Burgaw, Wilson and Nashville and Pender County to the east, where dozens of roads were underwater.

Outside Kinston, several families paddled bass boats to their mobile homes, which lay under several feet of floodwaters from Southwest Creek, which empties into the Neuse River.

"My dad is crying right now at my brother's home," said Betty Cox after returning from a boat trip to her parents' mobile home to retrieve her father's heart medicine.

"He has no flood insurance, and he's lost his car and his trailer. He's all to pieces. Everything that he's worked his whole life for is now under water," she said.

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Staff photos by Rusty Walker and Elmo Carawan

"Some of the apartment buildings near the river were under 4 feet of water," said Pete Nunnery, chief warrant officer with the N.C. National Guard. "Houses were damaged, and trees were on top of trailers. (Local officials) sounded kind of stressed out this morning."

All the water, connecting with ground already soaked by Tropical Storm Dennis nearly two weeks ago, was the last straw for many trees, which fell upon power lines throughout the area. As a result, many people throughout the region were still without power late Thursday afternoon. In Washington, the storm left 8,000 customers without power, and the entire town of Belhaven was without power for much of Thursday.

Crews worked throughout the day to get the lights back on, and they made some progress: by 6 p.m. Thursday, the number of customers without power in Washington was down to about 3,000. But the going proved tough. In many areas, trees had not only taken down power lines, they blocked the roads as well. Workers sometimes had to cut the fallen trees into sections and clear the roads before they could work on the lines. And in the case of roads that were flooded over, crews were unable to get to the power lines until the water subsided.

"The high water in the area is causing a lot of problems with restoring certain services," said Carolyn Stroud, Washington's public affairs director.

It was the same story in much of the rest of the Pamlico area. The N.C. Highway Patrol said that some major bridges in Beaufort County were still closed as of midafternoon Thursday. Among them: the Washington-Chocowinity bridge on U.S. Highway 17; the bridge near Old Ford on U.S. 17 between Washington and Williamston and the Chocowinity overpass on N.C. Highway 33. That overpass was rendered impassible because of the threat of collapse; soil eroded from the base of the bridge because rain runoff generated a landslide.

Also, the section of U.S. 17 leading from Cliff's Seafood in Chocowinity to Washington was flooded. Traffic along West Main

Street in Washington and the U.S. 17 entrance was backed up with motorists waiting for a chance to cross.

Officials throughout the region planned to devote Thursday night to clearing the rest of the water out of roads. But in Washington, officials said parts of John Small Avenue and Park Drive may still be deeply flooded by Friday morning. They advised commuters to consider alternate routes to work. Meanwhile, the countywide curfew imposed in Beaufort County was lifted effective at 6 a.m. Friday.

"A lot of people will be getting back to their jobs, and we've got to allow them to do that," Wolfe said on Thursday. "We think most of the water will be gone by tomorrow."

It looks like the weather is going to cooperate, at least for a while. Robert Frederick, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Newport, said no rain is in the forecast for the next few days.

"We'll have dry weather with northwest winds, and that will help get rid of some of the standing water," Frederick said. "But the ground is still saturated, so it's still going to take some time."

Through much of the area on Thursday, there were signs of attempts to return to some semblance of normality. Beaufort County public schools will remain closed Friday (with hopes of opening on Monday). Washington crews planned to pick up solid waste and recyclables on regular Friday routes, make up Thursday routes on Saturday and adopt a regular schedule for collecting storm debris.

Also, many area residents could be seen driving on still-flooded roads and playing in streets soaked with water — somewhat to the chagrin of local officials, who have urged people to stay inside and not risk harm to themselves or others until the water is mopped up.

"There's a problem with children playing in the floodwaters, which is dangerous," said Ms. Stroud. "There's the danger of drowning, plus the water is not clean. It's not something they need to be in contact with."

Executive editor Rusty Walker and staff writer Alison Paul contributed to this report.

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Tabitha Moore burst into tears when her family returned in a boat from their mobile home without the family dog, Sheba. "They couldn't get to him," she said.

Rocky Mount got 15 inches of rain, 12 inches was reported in Goldsboro and Roanoke Rapids and 10 inches in Wilson — all areas drenched with more than 8 inches of rain by Tropical Storm Dennis less than two weeks ago. At least 15 inches fell in Wilmington.

Four deaths — all traffic-related — were blamed on Floyd, which knocked out power to more than 800,000 residents in the eastern half of the state. Throughout the day, utility crews labored to restore power. Many businesses and nearly all schools in the eastern half of the state closed for the day.

In Duplin County, state environmental officials responded to a 2-million-gallon hog waste spill at Lanier Farm. Officials said the spill threatened Rockfish Creek, which feeds into Northeast Cape Fear.

Nearly the entire state felt Floyd's power during its sprint north. Even Grandfather Mountain in the Blue Ridge Mountains reported a strong wind gust that officials there attributed to Floyd. Elsewhere, gale-force winds were common.

Still, it could have been worse.

"It's a lot less serious than everybody anticipated, and that's not good. The fools won't leave next time," said Art Glidden, owner of Art's Place grill in Kitty Hawk.

Floyd barged ashore about 3 a.m. Thursday with 110-mph winds. It charged up the coastal plain, crossing into Virginia inside of eight hours.

Besides demolishing the homes at Oak Island, wind-driven waves tore out a chunk of pier at nearby Long Beach. In Beaufort, winds toppled the steeple

of the First Baptist Church. Winds tore the roofs off two motels at Nags Head.

Authorities said two people were killed in a traffic accident in Rowan County and another in Edgecombe County.

The fourth victim reportedly was swept away when he drove around a barricade and into floodwaters near Greenville. State emergency management spokesman Steve Glenn said the victim clung to a guardrail as law enforcement officers frantically tried to reach him, but their efforts were to no avail. Two patrol cars were lost in the rescue attempt, he said.

Weather forecasters said Thursday that river flooding may well be what Floyd is remembered by the most in the coming days. Some coastal plain rivers could reach record flood stages.

"Some of the rivers in that part of the state will probably reach levels they've never been before," Lemons warned, adding that the Tar and Neuse rivers were most vulnerable.

Chris Mooring of the National Guard said helicopters had to pluck people off roofs in Nashville, where streets turned into rivers and rising water cut off some parts of town.

Guardsmen helped evacuate people in homes and businesses threatened by floodwaters.

A Roanoke Rapids couple was pinned beneath a tree that crashed onto their house around dawn, and rescuers had to saw through the floorboards to get to them.

Outside People's Fellowship Church in Rocky Mount, Dave Grogan directed traffic Thursday at a detour and warned of 8-foot-deep water ahead.

"We spent the night here last night because we didn't know what the storm would do," he said. "Looks like we'll stay here tonight because everything's soaking wet."