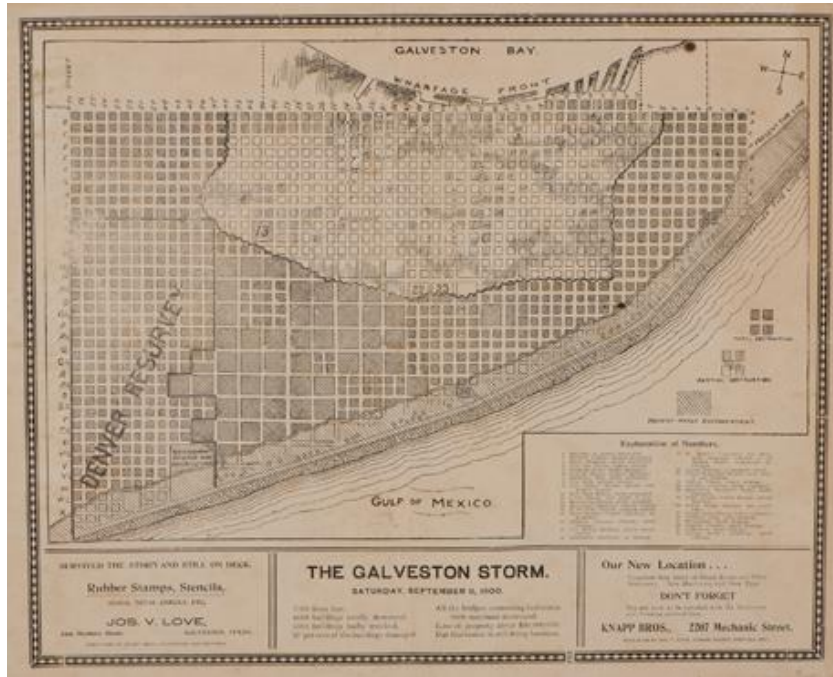


Remembering Those Who Made An Unwitting Sacrifice

The 1900 Storm is the deadliest natural disaster in our nation's history. Storm conditions were evident at local beaches around noon on Saturday, September 8, 1900. By 3 pm waves crashed through beachside neighborhoods. By nightfall winds reached an estimated 120 miles per hour or more, and storm surge was as deep as almost sixteen feet. The hurricane ended at 11:30 pm. At daybreak Sunday hundreds of bodies littered Galveston Island and the mainland or floated in adjacent waters.



This map graphically shows the extent of destruction. Most Galvestonians died south of Broadway.

Walter Jones, the mayor of Galveston, estimated the loss of life at 5,000. Disposal of remains was a necessary but daunting task to prevent the occurrence of disease. On Monday, September 10, a tugboat pulled a barge loaded with approximately 750 bodies from Galveston harbor into the Gulf of Mexico. Laborers buried the weighted bodies at sea, although hundreds of corpses soon floated back to shore. Hundreds more were concealed beneath piles of debris. The dead began to bloat in the September warmth, making identification impossible. In some instances survivors were able to identify remains by jewelry. Burial in the soaked ground was for the most part impossible, so workers burned the bodies on wood pyres.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration in 2011 estimated that at least 8,000 people died in the 1900 Storm. This estimate jibes one of 8,000 victims made nearly a century earlier by the Galveston Central Relief Committee. A complete tally of the dead can never be made. For one thing, the Galveston's population had swelled beyond the count of 37,800 residents made in the June 1900 census. Crowds visited the local beaches that September, lured by the prospects of surf bathing. Other people were in town on business or to see relatives.

The 1900 Storm was a giant scythe, claiming everyone who had not left their homes for downtown. Many families died, including one or both parents and children. There were few orphans. In areas closer to the Gulf, few survived to tell what they had seen. Residents who could have reported the loss of their neighbors themselves died. In such chaotic conditions, word of mouth became the main venue for collecting the names of the dead and missing.

According to a map published later in 1900, the greatest loss of life occurred in a giant swath south of Broadway. Ward 7 apparently suffered a particularly high number of casualties. Extending west from 29th Street to 57th Street, the ward included the beachfront and adjacent neighborhoods. So much debris from wrecked houses accumulated that it created a barrier that protected downtown Galveston and much of the East End.



*Marie Dorian, born January 30, 1897; died September 8, 1900.
Her portrait represents the many children who died in the hurricane.*

Some photographs taken in the aftermath of the hurricane show a large debris field in the southern part of the city. Others show a bare outline of streets where neighborhoods once stood. The devastating losses can be easily imagined in these instances.

On September 11, 1900, newspapers including the *New York Times* began to print lists of the dead. They appealed to the public to report people who died or were missing. Updated lists appeared as more information became available. *The Galveston Daily News* published its final tally of 4,263 people on October 7, 1900. *The Houston Daily Post* printed a more extensive list - 4,967 names - on September 27, 1900.

In most cases, only the names of the deceased were given, although some names were accompanied by additional data, such as the name of a spouse, age, occupation, or address. Many names were misspelled; many more were duplicated. Nevertheless the lists of dead provide a starting point for an effort to learn more about the victims.

Who were they? What were their familial relationships? Where were they born? What were their occupations? The Rosenberg Library has many historical sources, such as Galveston city directories, tax rolls, mortuary and cemetery records, and records of local churches that may provide answers. The library also subscribes to such online databases as HeritageQuest (for the 1900 federal census), Newspaper Archives, and Ancestry.com.

An example will suffice, Richard Fellsman, a blacksmith, died with his wife and five children. According to the 1899 - 1900 local directory, he was a blacksmith and wheelwright, conducting business at 2914 Broadway. Fellsman resided with his family at 4527 Broadway. The 1900 Galveston County census gives further data. Fellsman (here spelled Felsman) was born in Germany in August 1856. He immigrated in 1887. He was married to Martha Fellsman (age 34). They had five children: Otto (age 11), Ferda (9), Elya (7), Clara (5), and Richard (10 months).

Rosenberg Library staff has begun compiling information about named victims. The project will eventually result in a database accessible to the general public. There is the potential of gaining insights that may aid future efforts to collect the names in major disasters.

More than a century has passed since that fateful day and evening in 1900. The victims made an unwitting sacrifice that eventually culminated in the Seawall and grade raising which protect Galveston today. Their identities deserve to be understood.

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