

The Seawall's First Test: Galveston's 1909 Storm

Wednesday July 21, 1909

Again Galveston would have been destroyed if it had not been for our Sea Wall. O how thankful we should be. No lives were lost and few homes damaged. The damage was wholly outside the Wall.

-- excerpt from Evelyn Hildenbrand's Ball High School "Class Notes," preserved in the Rosenberg Library's Galveston and Texas History Center

Although the hurricane of Wednesday, July 21, 1909, had little impact on Galveston and Galveston Island beyond the beach and the jetties, nevertheless it is important as the Seawall's first test. The Seawall had been built to protect Galveston from a repeat of the massive destruction and loss of life in the 1900 Storm. The 1909 hurricane also precipitated brief controversy over the wisdom of building structures along the Seawall's beach side. This issue would not be resolved in favor of building beach structures until after the 1915 Storm.



Surf Bathhouse ca. 1909 Storm

Making landfall south of Galveston, the 1909 hurricane shredded Murdoch's Bathhouse (built in 1901) and the Breakers (1906), littering Seawall Boulevard with piles of lumber. Other beach attractions, such as the Galveston Fishing Club pier (1901) at the foot of 20th Street, also were lost. The Surf Bathhouse (1908) sustained damage. The *Galveston Daily News*, July 22, 1909, recorded that the Seawall had faced "as terrific a test as it will ever be called to bear... The Seawall paid for itself today." East of Galveston, Bettison Pier (1903) and the newly-completed Tarpon Fishing Pier, both sited on the north jetty, were also destroyed. The pilot boat *Texas* rescued 38 people from the Bettison pier but was unable to save a handful of victims at the Tarpon Pier. These included Captain Robert L. Bettison, a sea captain, and Gussie Bettison, his wife. Their bodies were found at La Porte.

Crowds of onlookers visited the Seawall to see the debris. Galveston County commissioners permitted individuals to cart away piles of lumber on wagons and carts. Temporary bathhouse accommodations had to be found quickly to serve Gulf bathers. Electric Park (1906), the Crab Pavilion (1905), and Seaside Hotel (1907) were to provide needed space for visitors to change into their bathing attire.



Seawall debris ca. 1909 storm

The destruction of the bathhouses generated sentiment for and against rebuilding them on the beach side of the Seawall. Supporters contended that these were insured buildings expected to last only until the next hurricane. However, the *Galveston Daily News*, July 22, 1909, editorialized: "...it has a bad effect on the town to have these houses in the gulf destroyed every decade." Opponents, including the president of the Galveston Chamber of Commerce, argued that the bathhouses should only be built north of the Seawall.

Although dramatic photographs of destroyed bathhouses were of national interest, they reflected adversely on Galveston. As well, photographs of wreckage strewn along the Seawall were believed to misrepresent the storm's minor impact at Galveston. Joseph M. Maurer, a local photographer, and J.M. Purdy, owner of Purdy's Bookstore, declined out-of-town orders for photographs and postcards. They believed that the hurricane did not justify distribution of images of the destruction.



Recovery with horse and dray - 1909 storm

The owners of the Breakers decided to build anew, completing their bathhouse in 1909. Rebuilding of Murdoch's was deferred until 1911. Both bathhouses, as well as the Surf, would subsequently be lost in the 1915 Storm. Murdoch's reappeared once again in 1916, only to be severely damaged in Hurricane Carla (1961) and subsequently demolished.

Murdoch's Bathhouse - 2011 at Galveston.com

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