

THE
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TWO YEARS AFTER A DEVASTATING HURRICANE, A NORTH CAROLINA TOWN IS AGAIN AT THE CENTER OF THE FLOOD

By Doug Bock Clark September 18, 2018



An aerial view of Lumberton, North Carolina, on Monday. The town became a symbol of Hurricane Matthew's devastation, two years ago.

Photograph by Johnny Milano / NYT / Redux

Hurricane Florence was still three days away when civic leaders in Lumberton, North Carolina, held a planning meeting inside the county's Emergency Management Office. Two years earlier, Lumberton had become the symbol of the devastation that Hurricane Matthew had wreaked on North Carolina, killing twenty-

five people and damaging ninety-eight thousand homes across the state. The storm had defied forecasters' predictions and poured nearly nineteen inches of rain into the Lumber River, which was already swollen from a series of freak storms, causing the river to inundate Lumberton overnight. Many of the city's twenty-one thousand residents had fled in time, but an autopsy of the disaster prepared by the National Hurricane Center described fifteen hundred people stranded by the rising waters. Many of them waited more than two days to be rescued by an ad-hoc fleet of pleasure craft and hunting skiffs. Charles Ivey, who was seventy-six years old, fell into water and died in his home while family members were on the way to extract him.

John Cantey, Jr., a city-council member and lifelong resident of the city, recalled wading through waist-high water to urge residents of his south Lumberton precinct, which is predominantly African-American, to evacuate. After Matthew, "we lost about one-third of the population of our precinct," he said—about a thousand residents. As one of the poorest populations in what is arguably the least developed part of the state, which had already endured a generation of economic collapse as the local textile manufacturing and cotton industries hollowed out, most of the people who lived in south Lumberton lacked the resources to rebuild. The state received a grant from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development valued at two hundred and thirty-six million dollars for rebuilding projects across the state, but as of August, 2018, no funds had been disbursed. "We still don't have any money in our hands from the first storm," Bruce Davis, Lumberton's mayor, said, "no matter how many times it's been promised."

Danny Britt, Jr., the district's state senator and a self-described "good ol' boy," had rescued Lumberton residents from Matthew's flooding in his duck-hunting boat. The emergency planning meeting, he told me, was held because "this time, we were not going to get caught off guard." As Florence approached, local officials focussed on a known weakness in Lumberton's defenses. Along with nearly three miles of dikes, the raised interstate protects the city from the Lumber River; during Matthew, water had poured through an underpass of railroad tracks beneath a bridge on the interstate and into south Lumberton. The city had explored constructing metal floodgates on the site, but resources from FEMA were also delayed. "So, we had been pleading with the railroad to allow us to temporarily block up that hole," Cantey said. "The railroad had said, 'If you sandbag it, we'll sue or prosecute you for trespassing.'"

Britt called the office of the North Carolina governor, Roy Cooper, and asked for a special order allowing the temporary levee. “They said they would issue an order or use eminent domain to help us,” Britt said, “but by Thursday night they still had not done anything.” At 11:30 P.M., “I sent an e-mail, with an obituary of Charles Ivey attached, and warned them that any death that occurred would be on their consciences.” The following morning, the state government issued the order. There was another problem, though: all of their pre-filled sandbags had already been disbursed. Britt put out a plea on social media for volunteers to fill five thousand new sandbags. But, even as more than a hundred civilians, forty National Guardsmen, and twenty city employees assembled, a representative from C.S.X., the railroad company, tried to prevent the wall from being built. “I forwarded an e-mail saying the governor had invoked his powers to allow for this,” Holt Moore, Lumberton’s city attorney, told me. Finally, C.S.X. stood down. (A C.S.X. spokeswoman e-mailed a statement saying that the company was coordinating with city officials to minimize impacts from Hurricane Florence, and that she did not have sufficient information to answer questions about the alleged delay.)

By noon on Friday, the edge of the Category 1 hurricane had arrived, drenching the volunteers who were shovelling dirt into bags in the parking lot of a church that had been badly damaged by Matthew. “It was pouring, muddy, and terrible,” Ronnie Locklear, who owns a local car detailer, Ronnie’s Tint & Audio, said. “But this town lost everything last time, and we were trying to prevent that.” Once the sandbags were stacked, two local construction companies used earthmoving equipment to stack dirt, stones, and Jersey barriers on it. By evening, a berm taller than most of the volunteers had been constructed.

The four-hundred-mile-wide hurricane crawled over Lumberton, at a pace often slower than a turtle’s. Forecasters warned of potentially historic inundations of more than twenty inches of rain in surrounding areas. By Saturday, the river was gauged at fifteen feet. As night fell, it was pushing toward twenty feet and nearing the tops of the dikes. Meanwhile, rainwater was pooling in low-lying neighborhoods all across Lumberton. Formal evacuation orders were issued, and Cantey and Britt, the city councilman and state senator, respectively, helped perform swift-water rescues on boats late into the night. Britt estimated that he rescued eighteen people in his flat-bottom boat. Once home, exhausted and in bed, he forwarded Facebook messages that he received to the Cajun Navy, a volunteer rescue service. Cantey, too, stayed up most of

the night, using “eight battery packs” to keep his phone charged as dozens of phone calls and Facebook messages poured in, helping connect about forty stranded people with rescuers.

On Sunday morning, the rains momentarily slackened. More important, the sandbag levy had held. The river was still rising, though, approaching the twenty-five-foot high-water mark set by Hurricane Matthew. Police had closed the interstate and most of the surrounding roads. Holdouts in billowing raincoats wandered between buildings whose windows were spiderwebbed with tape. Groups paused to gawk at a store with its wooden façade ripped off. Across from the boarded-up Carolina Casket Sales, the Lumberton Recreation Center had a freshly printed Red Cross sign taped to its doors; the night before, it had been converted into a shelter, as others overflowed. About a hundred and thirty people had checked in.

Inside, people stretched out on bleachers, many of them with T-shirts draped over their faces. The only sounds came from three laughing children, whose rain boots squeaked on the basketball court. Candice Musselwhite, a thirty-five-year-old nurse, had been there since early morning, tending to the new arrivals. “This is going to be such a burden on everyone’s health,” she said. “Besides the obvious immediate effects, there’ll be missed hospital visits, lost medication—it’ll just go on and on.”

VIDEO FROM THE NEW YORKER

Witnessing Hurricane Florence

Musselwhite was interrupted by a tall man in a hooded sweatshirt and basketball shorts. “Excuse me,” he said. “I don’t want to be a snitch, but see that lady and those two kids over there? Well, the bathroom had just been cleaned, but they done gone fucked things up. There’s toilet paper and mud everywhere.”

In the parking lot, Shamonique McCormick, a twenty-eight-year-old construction worker from south Lumberton, sprawled in the driver’s seat of her lovingly maintained 1977 Chevrolet Caprice, smoking a cigarette through an open window. Sassy, her pit-bull-mix puppy, who was not allowed inside the shelter, bounced around a plastic storage bin on the front passenger seat. “It’s just like last time,” she said. “I lost my house, clothes, family pictures, and important documents.” She gestured at the clothes and shoes filling the back seat. “This time at least we had some warning, but, if we get more floods like this, I’m gone.”

That afternoon, Wayne Horne, Lumberton’s city manager for the past fourteen years, who is “long past retirement age,” gave me a tour of the city. Police waved us through blockades of patrol cars into south Lumberton, and we passed a KFC and Ronnie’s Tint & Audio, both eerily deserted, and several public-housing complexes, where a few shirtless men leaned out of open windows. At the water plant, which had flooded last time, workers had bulldozed together a berm of dirt and concrete highway dividers.

Spread along the river, eleven industrial pumps, each the size of a shipping container, were forcing thirty thousand gallons of water a minute back over the dikes. Cranes were hoisting two more machines into place. “It’s helped a lot that we were able to anticipate things this time,” Horne said. “But there’s still so much uncertainty.” Not long afterward, Lumberton’s chief of police called to say that the temporary levee had been breached.

As we drove back toward higher ground, pickup trucks hauling Cajun Navy airboats raced by. Beside the road, police officers were going door to door, ordering people out. We parked near the bridge connecting north and south Lumberton, where a brown torrent raged just a few feet below the concrete span. An elderly couple picked their way through the water inching onto the sidewalks, carrying plastic grocery bags stuffed with possessions. They stopped and stared at tree branches, soda bottles, and a mattress being swept downstream. A few minutes before, it had finally stopped raining, but the whole watershed was still rushing into the Lumber River. The couple kept walking slightly uphill.

That evening, the improvised levee gave way entirely. The Lumber River began pouring into west and south Lumberton, as it had two years before. Around midnight, the river crested a foot higher than it had during Matthew. Cantey spent the night organizing the airboat rescue of fourteen people, while Britt delivered extra cots to overflowing shelters.

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The next day, Monday, the sun glittered on brown and white water gushing through the levee. “Once a portion of the sandbags washed away, the water just started to eat away, eat away, eat away at it,” Cantey said, “and finally it was all over.” The church where the volunteers had filled the sandbags was flooded up to the first story.

Semitrucks plowed gingerly through hundreds of yards of standing water up to the tip of their hoods on the interstate. The Coast Guard was rescuing people in the Mayfair neighborhood, as brackish water crept up toward the windows. Britt was out in his duck-hunting boat, performing rescues in south Lumberton. “Most areas look as bad as Matthew, and some look worse,” he said. “At least the temporary berm held back the water for a while, though, so people had more time to evacuate.” Forecasts expected that the Lumber River’s flow would drop only a few feet in the coming days, as swollen tributaries continued to drain into it. “We’ll get through this,” Britt said. “Whenever tragedy strikes, Lumberton comes together stronger.”

From a raised portion of the railroad tracks, Cantey looked out across flooded south and west Lumberton. He estimated that hundreds of people were either trapped by the waters or remaining in place to protect their homes from looters. A day earlier, when the fire chief told Cantey, “The Lord won’t give us more than we can handle,” Cantey had answered, “I don’t know, Chief. The Lord seems to think I can handle a lot.” Eight months before Florence, he had used his savings to rebuild his house, which was again flooded. “It makes a person think,” Cantey told me. “To be honest, even I’m considering leaving south Lumberton [for a more elevated part of the precinct]. I don’t think half of my two thousand residents will come back this time.”

Doug Bock Clark is a writer whose first book, “The Last Whalers,” was published in January, 2019. [Read more »](#)

Video

Witnessing Hurricane Florence

As the storm made landfall on Friday morning with downgraded winds, the real threat may be yet to come.

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