

70 years ago: When New England's deadliest tornado ripped through Worcester

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On June 9, 1953, Worcester experienced the wrath of nature at its most deadly.

And 70 years after the Worcester tornado, the numbers still seem unimaginable: 94 killed, 1,288 injured, 10,000 people left homeless, 4,000 buildings leveled and \$52 million in damages – nearly \$600 million, adjusted for inflation.

Those who lived it remember it. Some are still haunted by it.

Assumption University, 500 Salisbury St., will host a Mass at 8 a.m. Friday in remembrance of the victims of the tornado. Also on Friday, Assumption University President Greg Weiner will send out a message at approximately 7:30 a.m. on social media, and the university will ring the chapel bells at 5:10 p.m. *Correction: Greg Weiner is the current president of Assumption University. The name was incorrect in an earlier version of this article.*

At 2 p.m. Saturday, St. Michael's-on-the-Heights Church on Fairhaven Road will host a remembrance service in memory of lives lost and families shattered by the tornado.

One of the deadliest in U.S. history and the deadliest ever to strike New England, the Great Worcester Tornado of 1953, as National Weather Service meteorologists call it, dropped out of the clouds at approximately 4:25 p.m., in a forest a half-mile from the center of Petersham.

Before the tornado left the small rural town, farmhouses and some other homes fell.

Of the eight communities struck by the tornado, Petersham was the only one to escape without deaths or injuries. The next community on its path of destruction was Barre, followed by Rutland and Holden.

Storm turns deadly

Beverly Strong was just 18. She was scheduled to graduate from Barre High School in the middle of June and planned to continue her studies at the Memorial Hospital School of Nursing. Beverly lived with her family on the first floor of a white house on Old Stage Road, while Edward “Eddie” White, an 11-year-old Little Leaguer, lived upstairs with his family.

Beverly and Eddie shared the grim distinction of being the first people killed by the tornado. While they didn’t die together, their lifeless bodies were found

beside each other, near a stone wall in a meadow about 300 yards from the ruins of their home.

After Old Stage Road, the twister moved on across Williamsville Road, Hubbardston Road and across Walnut Hill. From there, the tornado jumped a distance of 5 ½ miles. It came down again in Rutland, just south of Sassawana Road.

Donald Marsh, the town's grammar school principal, and 15-year-old Robert Harding were killed under the rubble of their homes in the center of Rutland.

Marsh's 4-year-old daughter, Linda, was sucked up by the tornado and dumped in a treetop 100 yards away from their home. Rescuers found her there, alive.

The tornado disappeared into the woods behind Rutland Center and into Holden. It crossed Causeway Street and swept into the Pine Hill reservation, across Kendall Road, Kendall Reservoir and Route 31, just south of Holden Center, and continued eastward across Bailey Road, sparing the more populated areas of the community.

At the Winthrop Oaks development in Holden, the tornado demolished about 40 of the 64 homes and heavily damaged most of the rest in what was New England's first prefabricated housing development.

A half-mile east, the tornado tore through another new suburban development, Brentwood Estates, and almost all of the 51 homes were either destroyed or heavily damaged.

In all, 10 Holden residents were killed and 200 injured. Among the dead was 2-week-old Charles Oslund Jr. The victim's mother, Ruth Oslund, rushed out of their home at 361 Main St., carrying her infant son. The wind grasped both of them, carried them 60 yards, wrenched the baby loose from his mother's arms and tossed him another 100 yards. The mother survived. In addition to

the loss of life, Holden suffered more than \$3 million in property damages - about \$34 million today.

The worst was yet to come.

In Worcester, a path of death and destruction

Arriving in Worcester at 5:08 p.m., the tornado left its first urban scars on Brattle and Ararat streets, then whipped through the Norton Co. buildings on Brooks Street. A new \$6 million factory that had opened two months earlier was badly damaged.

Moments later, the tornado destroyed the old Vellumoid Co. plant before turning across West Boylston Street.



Three occupants were killed when the tornado plucked their car off West Boylston Street and sent it crashing across the landscape.

At the combination Assumption College-Assumption Preparatory School – then on West Boylston Street, where Quinsigamond Community College is now – the tornado blew away most of the top two floors of the brick structure and its tower. Two nuns and a priest were killed.

The tornado, estimated at about three-quarters of a mile wide by that point, leveled much of Randall, Fales and Francis streets, as well as Fairhaven Road, before crossing Burncoat Street and continuing east.

Among the buildings heavily damaged on Burncoat Street were Talbot's Variety Store at the corner of Quinapoxet Lane, and the popular Johnson's 41 House, an ice-cream parlor, where Bay State Savings Bank is now.

A large fire consumed three three-deckers and a single-family home on Francis Street. Firefighters could not get to the fire because of fallen trees and debris from homes.

With the tornado possibly reaching F5 intensity, with winds over 261 mph, the storm tore into the densely populated east of Burncoat Hill, including Uncatena and St. Nicholas avenues, where entire rows of homes were swept away.

Afterward, some dazed survivors were found standing amid the rubble while other screaming, bloody victims were being pulled from the wreckage. Nine died in the Burncoat area. Another eight died on St. Nicholas Avenue.

'A day that changed my life'

For the 50th anniversary of the twister, Frederick H. Rice shared his thoughts with the Telegram & Gazette. It was a day, he said, “will remain etched in my mind as a day that changed my life.”

Rice remembered June 9, 1953, starting out as a beautiful sunny day. He had just returned home after completing his junior year at Mount Hermon School in Northfield.

“In the early afternoon, my sister Dorotha and I walked from our home at 16 Longmeadow Ave. to the Burncoat Street School to play tennis,” Rice said. “She had completed her freshman year at Commerce High and was proud that she had made the junior varsity tennis team. We cut the tennis short because Dotty had a babysitting job in one of the duplexes on Pocasset Avenue, about four blocks from our home.”

Then, a little before 5 p.m., the day turned dark.

“About that time, we watched the winds increase until the Bjorks’ two-car garage, across the street, did a strange thing,” he said. “The large square roof lifted straight up in the air about four feet and levitated for a second as the wind swept away the side walls. The roof then crashed to the ground.”

Rice noticed that the darkened sky was filled with debris and that the storm had gone a few streets to the east, in the area where Dottie was babysitting.

He ran to where he thought the house stood and found a “gaping hole” that minutes before had been a picture window.

Rice feared the worst for his kid sister, and he found it.

“Digging around in the debris I found the baby, who was unhurt, and handed him out the window,” he said. “I also found my sister, who had been sitting with her back to the window and never saw the storm bearing down on them. Her neck was badly bruised and was starting to swell, so we freed her from the wreckage and carried her out to the front lawn.”

Rice asked for someone to stay with his sister. He took off running to tell his mother that Dottie was hurt and to the house of a doctor who lived in the neighborhood.

“Doc grabbed his black bag and the two of us ran down Clark Street, climbing over downed trees and power poles,” Rice said. “He gave her a shot of morphine, but I could tell by the expression on his face that he didn’t hold out much hope for her.”

After his sister was transported in a truck to the hospital, Rice said he looked around his ravaged neighborhood for someone else that might have needed some help.

Rice met a woman with a dead baby in her arms.

“In her delirium, she wanted to make sure that her baby was properly identified, so I found a pencil and a scrap of paper and printed the baby’s name as she dictated it to me,” he said. “I then tied the paper to the baby’s shoestring and placed the body on the front lawn in what was becoming a temporary morgue.”

In addition to his family planning his sister’s funeral, Rice would learn that his father’s brother had died in Concord, New Hampshire, the following day.

Bus picked up, thrown against building

The tornado headed toward Great Brook Valley Gardens and the Curtis Apartments — home for 825 families and constructed out of \$5 million worth (about \$57 million today) of brick, mortar, steel and glass.

The tornado killed 15 people in Great Brook Valley, including two passengers on a 12-ton bus that was picked up, rolled over several times and thrown against the newly constructed Curtis Apartments like it was a child’s toy.

Elaine Forhan was on that bus.

“It started hailing and the bus stopped at the end of a row of buildings, which were the last buildings at Great Brook Valley,” Forhan told *The Evening Gazette* for the 30th anniversary of the tornado. “Then the bus driver got up

and told everybody to get under the seats. ... Just then I could see the funnel, It looked just like in 'The Wizard of Oz' and it sounded like a loud, loud freight train. I was small and I was able to get under my seat, with my head facing the aisle.”

Forhan vividly remembered the sensation of rolling.

“What was actually happening was that the bus had been picked up by the tornado and it was twisting around 40 feet up in the air. Then there was a thud,” she recalled, “I thought we’d hit a tree, but that’s when the tornado threw the bus against the wall. I guess it came to rest on its side.”

When Forhan emerged from the crumpled bus, she said, Great Brook Valley looked like a war zone.

“A woman run up to me and handed me her baby and asked me to hold it whole she searched for her other child,” she recalled. “There was an elderly woman up in a tree. Another woman was lying with a gash from her thigh all the way down her leg.”

After she reunited the mother with her baby, Forhan ran all the way home. Finding her house completely destroyed, she thought everyone in her family was dead.

It turned out that her family had been invited to her aunt’s house near Green Hill Park that evening. They were safe.

From Great Brook Valley, the tornado continued to the Brookside Home Farm, also known as the Poor Farm, destroying it, killing six of its residents and causing the loss of its herd of 80 Holsteins.

In Worcester, the tornado took the lives of 59 victims, injured 800 and caused an estimated \$32 million-plus in property damages - about \$363 million today.

But it wasn't over. The tornado still had 21 more people to kill and three more communities to ravage.

Final victims killed in Southborough post office

Next, the storm moved through Shrewsbury, just west of the center of town. Monadnock Road, Maple Avenue, Hapgood Way, St. James Road and Crescent Street were particularly hard-hit. It crossed Route 9 at South Street. Before barreling into Westborough it had claimed a dozen more lives and injured 100 people. Damages suffered in Shrewsbury was more than \$3 million (\$34 million today).

The tornado plowed down Gleason Street and Fisher Street to Route 135 in Westborough, leaving hardly a building standing in its wake and killing six, including four victims at the Aronson Farm on West Main Street, and injuring 130. Property damages in Westborough was estimated at \$3 million-plus.

The tornado continued into Southborough, where it claimed its last three victims at the Fayville Post Office.

Then, 84 minutes after it began, the tornado lifted into the clouds, ending its 46-mile rampage from the westernmost edge of Worcester County to its easternmost edge.

Rescue workers arrived quickly to help search for lost residents and assist with cleanup of the widespread destruction. The National Guard was called in to help and to provide security. Many from throughout the region volunteered in hospitals, shelters and other locations where victims were taken.

Local hospitals were overwhelmed and there weren't nearly enough ambulances to transport all the injured. Patients were arriving by cars, pickup trucks and even hearses.

In the days that followed, the Red Cross distributed more than \$900,000 (\$10 million today) in aid to those in need.

Tests done on damaged steel towers along the New England Power line concluded that the winds must have been greater than 300 mph and as high as 375 mph to have twisted the metal the way they did.