

The second worst tornado in U.S. history hit Natchez in 1840. It killed 317 people and injured 109. This is the only recorded tornado in the U.S. that killed more people than were injured. Several of those that died as a result of the tornado are buried in the Natchez City Cemetery.

The image to the right is the tombstone of one of those that died, and it reads in part:

SACRED
To the memory of
John Saunby Smith
who fell in the tornado
at Natchez
May 6, 1840 aged 33 yrs.



The [Concordia Sentinel](#) recently ran an article on the tornado and they gave us permission to post the article.

The Great Natchez Tornado of 1840

Deadly twister forms in southern Concordia Parish leaving 20 miles of destruction, more than 300 dead

By Stanley Nelson
Sentinel Writer

On the night before the monster slammed into town, lightning ripped through heavy clouds dumping more than three inches of rain throughout much of Concordia Parish and Adams County.

As the sun rose over the horizon on the morning of May 7, 1840 -- a Thursday -- the Natchez planters knew that work across the Mississippi might involve limited, if any, planting in their Concordia Parish fields.

Vidalia was just a small town on the river and the Jim Bowie sandbar fight 13 years earlier was already a legend. While the plantation dollars dominated the economy, Concordia still was a land made up primarily of small farmers, craftsmen, masons, blacksmiths, laborers and others struggling to make a living.

On and along the river between Vidalia and Natchez, activity flourished, especially under-the-hill in Natchez and just as much on the river itself where scores of vessels -- steamboats, flatboats, skiffs - - were amassed in great numbers, including many itinerant boatmen who traded everything from furs to whiskey.

The steamboat Prairie, which only a few years earlier had its reputation tarnished when it reportedly failed to assist a sister ship which was on fire, was among the vessels in the crowded port.

Everyone unaware

As the morning turned into noon, not a soul in Natchez or Vidalia was aware of what was on its way.

What was coming is known today as the Great Natchez Tornado of 1840, which is ranked as the second deadliest twister ever recorded in the United States.

But unlike today, there was no National Weather Service in 1840 and no warnings of what was to come. Because of that, no one was prepared.

After noon a nasty thunderstorm -- loud and windy with a driving rain -- fell upon Natchez and Vidalia. A few moments later, 20 miles southwest over the fields and forests of Concordia in the Deer Park and Slocum area, a killer tornado began to form out of that same storm system. The deadly twister would grow even greater in size and strength within seconds of touching down. The sound of its devastation could be heard for miles away.

Massive trees were uprooted, huge timbers cracked and split, debris filled the atmosphere and anyone, even animals, in the path of the monster did everything possible to get out of the way.

Tornado follows river

The tornado tracked northeast, centering itself along the Mississippi seven miles south of Natchez, "stripping the forest from both shores," according to one weather expert who studied the storm.

There were no two-way radios, no telephones, no cell phones, no means of communication to warn the residents of Natchez and Vidalia of what was on the way. The cooling rain from the thunderstorm drew residents to their covered porches and some walked the streets despite the rain. Many were preparing to eat; aware of the dangers any thunderstorm presented but unaware what was racing up the river toward them.

Those on the river were the first to hear what must have been a thunderous roar. "The dinner bells in large hotels had rung and most citizens were sitting at their tables," wrote the *Natchez Free Trader*.

Slams into Natchez

Shortly before 1 p.m., a mile-wide tornado -- raging with timber, water and debris of every nature -- slammed into Natchez and Vidalia.

As the river churned with massive waves and whitecaps, flatboats and men were tossed into the air like sardines. Crews on boats and passengers were swallowed into the river, others were dropped onto land.

The central and northern portions of Natchez were slammed by the funnel as, according to one account, "the air was black with whirling eddies of walls, roofs, chimneys and huge timbers from distant ruins...all shot through the air as if thrown from a mighty catapult."

Along the Natchez and Vidalia banks, homes, stores, steamboats and other vessels were completely destroyed. Houses in the towns burst open.

"Our devoted city is in ruins," the *Free Trader* reported, "...while the dead remain unburied and the wounded groan for help."

While many people were eating lunch, the paper wrote, "a storm burst upon our city and raged for half an hour with most destructive and dreadful power. We look around and see Natchez, yesterday

lovely and cheerful Natchez, in ruins, and hundreds of our citizens without a shelter or a pillow. Genius cannot imagine, poetry itself cannot fill up a picture that would match the ruin and distress that every where meets the eye."

In 1840, there was no Red Cross, no National Guard, no Presidential disaster decree, no mobilization of doctors and emergency personnel from other cities to fly by plane and helicopter into the heart of a disaster area and save lives. The townsfolk did the best they could.

Under-the-hill destruction

Under-the-hill, desolate and in ruin, was a site the paper said "sickens the heart...all, all, is swept away, and beneath the ruins still lay crushed the bodies of many strangers. It would fill volumes to depict the many escapes and heartrending scenes."

A Mrs. Alexander was rescued from the ruins of the Steam Boat Hotel, where she was found "greatly injured with two children in her arms and they both dead."

The paper reported that "the destruction of the flat boats is immense; at least 60 were tossed for a moment on a raging river and then sunk, drowning most of their crews. The best-informed produce dealers estimate the number of lives lost by the sinking of flat boats at 200! No calculation can be made of the amount of money and produce swallowed up by the river. The Steamboat *Hinds*, with most of her crew, went to the bottom, and the *Prairie* from St. Louis, was so much wrecked as to be unfit for use. The steamer *St. Lawrence* at the upper cotton press is a total wreck."

Steamboat disaster three years earlier

Only three years earlier, the *Prairie* flirted with disaster during a race with the *Ben Sherrod* on May 8, 1837, a few miles from Natchez. During the race, the boilers on the *Ben Sherrod* overheated and set on fire 60 cords of wood creating an instant inferno. All members of the deck and engine room crew were reportedly drunk.

As the fire spread, scores of people jumped into the water with the captain unable to steer the boat to the bank because the wheel ropes burned in the fire. The steamer *Alton* raced to assist but ended up running down survivors in the water.

All the while, the *Prairie* continued on to Natchez, never assisting the burning *Ben Sherrod*. More explosions followed on the *Ben Sherrod*, the last when 40 barrels of gunpowder ignited, creating an explosion heard for miles.

Seventy-two people died in the mishap and the *Prairie's* reputation was suspect by the time the tornado hit Natchez.

In addition to the destruction on the river, most homes and buildings in Natchez were flattened.

Destruction in Louisiana

Word from across the river in Concordia Parish wasn't much better.

"There is no telling how widespread has been the ruin," wrote the *Free Trader*. "Reports have come in from plantations 20 miles distant in Louisiana, and the rage of the tempest was terrible. Hundreds of (slaves) killed, dwellings swept like chaff from their foundations, the forest uprooted, and the crops beaten down and destroyed. Never, never, never, was there such desolation and ruin."

More dead than injured

Today, most government agencies -- the National Water Service, Federal Emergency Management Agency and others -- put the death toll at 317 and 109 injured, the only tornado where the dead outnumber the injured.

Most of the fatalities were on the river, an estimated 269, with 47 deaths in Natchez and one in Vidalia. However, few dispute that the death toll was likely much higher. The numbers take into account the likely deaths along the Concordia plantations which bordered the Mississippi.

The tornado's destruction on land and water was estimated at \$1,269,000 in 1840 dollars. That would translate today into about \$21 million.

How strong was it

So destructive was the storm that a piece of a steamboat window was reportedly carried 30 miles. Government weather agencies have no idea where on the Fujita scale of F1 to F6 the tornado would rank, though it seems likely that its devastation would certainly equal an F5, the highest ever recorded, which carries winds of 207-260 mph.

The weather service says that in an F5 strong frame houses will be "lifted off foundations and carried considerable distances to disintegrate," missiles the size of automobiles will fly through "the air in excess of 100 meters," trees will be debarked and steel re-enforced concrete structures will be badly damaged.

Could it have been an F6, a scale never recorded since the system has been put in place? An F6 has winds of 319-379 mph.

Here's what an F6 would do, according to the government weather experts: "The small area of damage they might produce would probably not be recognizable along with the mess produced by F4 and F5 wind that would surround the F6 winds. Missiles, such as cars and refrigerators would do serious secondary damage that could not be directly identified as F6 damage. If this level is ever achieved, evidence for it might only be found in some manner of ground swirl pattern, for it may never be identifiable through engineering studies."

Only one deadlier

Only one tornado -- the Tri-State Tornado of March 18, 1925 -- was deadlier than the one in Natchez in 1840. That tornado, an F5, traveled through Missouri, Illinois and Indiana, killing 695 and injuring 2,027.

In Natchez, the Free Trader probably best summarized 164 years ago the feeling of the survivors, who well knew how such a storm could be created.

The paper wrote: "Twas the voice of the Almighty that spoke, and prudence should dictate reverence rather than execration. All have suffered, and all should display the feelings of humanity and the benevolence of religion!"