

Racer's Storm (1837), with Notes on Other Texas Hurricanes in the Period 1818-1886

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Recently, while gathering material on the life of Elijah H. Burritt¹ (early American astronomer and engineer, leader of an emigrant-company to Texas (1837) from New Britain, Conn.) I unearthed many data on our first notable Texas hurricane. The *Racer* Storm² of Sept. 26–Oct. 10, 1837 was on the Texan coast from Oct. 2 to Oct. 6. It was especially destructive at the mouth of the Rio Grande, as also at Galveston Island where a settlement was in process of forming.

Cyclonic tropical storms are not unusual in the Caribbean and Gulf region, and Texas historians will recall many in the recent period—the demolition of Brazos Santiago, Bagdad, and Clarksville at the mouth of the Rio Grande; of Indianola and Saluria not far from Paso Cavallo; and the near-destruction of Matagorda in September, 1854. Several hurricanes, over the years, effected more or less disaster at Galveston³. And to these may be added—to name but a few—the Velasco storm of 1909, and the Corpus Christi hurricane of 1919. In fact, in the years from 1818 to 1886 (my special period of historical investigation), twenty-eight hurricanes are noted as having worked more or less disaster in Texas.

Hurricanes in this region have several times changed the course of history. Cabeza de Vaca's ships were dispersed by a hurricane on October 4, 1527; Jean Lafitte's fleet of four vessels was driven ashore on Galveston Island in a hurricane of September or October, 1818; the *Racer* Storm of 1837, while it put out of commission the Texan man-of-war, *Brutus*,

¹For a useful biographical sketch of this excellent but forgotten astronomer, author of the long-famous "Geography of the Heavens", and brother of Elihu Burritt, "the learned blacksmith", see Albert J. Brooks, "Elijah Hinsdale Burritt, the forgotten astronomer" (*Popular Astronomy*, 44, 293-99, 1936.)

²So named after H. M. S. *Racer*, which encountered the hurricane, and whose log was requisitioned for Reid's study of the storm. [*Cf. Antje's Storm*, after the Norwegian vessel, *Antje*.]

³Dates are Oct. 5/6, 1837; Oct. 5, 1842; Oct. 2/3, 1867, Sept. 8, 1900, Aug. 16/17, 1915, etc.

the privateer *Thomas Toby*, and the prizes *Correo de Tobasco* and *Fenix*, still prevented the descent upon our unprotected coast of the Mexican ships *Iturbide* and *Libertador* in the critical months of 1837.

I shall not deal with the phenomena exhibited in general by the cyclonic tropical storms known as hurricanes, but refer the reader to the handbooks dealing with the subject⁴. . . .

Elijah H. Burritt, with his party of Connecticut mill-wrights and mechanics⁵ left New Haven, in the chartered brig *Jane*, of Saybrook. They cleared port for Texas about Sept. 2, 1837, and reached Galveston in 28 days. By late-sailing they missed five hurricanes that swept the South Atlantic coast in the period from July 26 to Sept. 2. The voyage to Texas was pleasant, without storm of any kind. On Sunday morning, October 1, they came in sight of Galveston Island.

In the meantime, the *Racer* Storm⁶ was approaching the Texas coast at the mouth of the Rio Grande. The storm was first known or encountered south of Jamaica, on August 26/27, 1837. Vessels at Kingston were driven from their moorings by the powerful cyclonic winds, and for two days the streets of Kingston were flooded with water, gaining in intensity, and increasing its rate of translocation⁷. On the 28th of August, H.M.S. *Racer* "took the gale" in the Yucatan Channel, was dismasted, and twice hove on her beam-ends. The storm progressed across the Yucatan penin-

⁴Cf. W. J. Milham, *Meteorology* . . ., 1912, 266-82; W. L. Moore, *Descriptive Meteorology*, 1910, 227-32; G. T. Trewartha, *An Introduction to Weather and Climate*, 2d. ed., 1943, 279-83; I. M. Cline, *Tropical Cyclones* . . ., 1926, *passim*; and the work by Tannehill, cited at the end of this article.

⁵E. H. Burritt brought with him: Ezekiel Andrews, jr., mill-wright, Nathaniel H. Andrews, steam engineer, Nathan H. Andrews, wagon and carriage maker, Jabez Cornwall (Burritt's brother in law), Samuel M. and Nelson Hart (consins), two of his sisters, Emily and Eunice, and a brother, William Burritt, and H. H. Douglass and Edwin Belden, and their families. Several of the members of the company died within a few months of their arrival in Texas of malaria; and all of the survivors left Texas within two years. The project which united the New Britain company was the incorporation and establishment of the "Texas Steam Mill Company." [See Gammell, *Laws of Texas*, 1, 1418ff.]

⁶The authentic account of the *Racer* Storm is Reid, 1841 [given in the Bibliography.] I regret that extended search did not make it available to me.

⁷The hurricane is a great cyclonic storm, with a circular velocity of from 75 to 130 miles per hour, and a rate of translocation of the center or "eye" of the storm of from 8 to 20 miles per hour.

sula, reached Matamoros on the second of October, and slowly recurved toward the northeast in its rough parabolic curve. It was at the mouth of the Rio Grande and in the Matamoros region for the days October 2 to 4. At the mouth of the river the great waves engendered by the hurricane drove all the vessels ashore, and destroyed the Mexican custom-house there. At Galveston the hurricane drove nearly all the vessels ashore on the 5th and 6th, leaving them high and dry. The storm was on the Sabine River on the night of October 5/6, at New Orleans on the 6th, and (taking Baton Rouge and Natchez in its stride) reached Pensacola Bay on the night of the sixth of October. It crossed the Carolinas and continued out into the Atlantic as late as the 10th of October. For this reason the date of the *Racer* Storm is stated as "September 26 to October 10", which includes all dates between its inception and dissolution⁸. Casual mention of the damage inflicted on the town of Galveston (then undergoing a "boom" by a New York company) is found in a number of contemporary writings⁹. Several longer and more circumstantial accounts also are found. In the *Telegraph and Texas Register* of Houston, the following account appears in the issue of Oct. 11, 1837¹⁰:

The late accounts from the seaboard are of the most distressing character. A tremendous gale appears to have swept the whole line of the coast and destroyed an immense amount of property. It commenced on the 1st and increased in violence until the 6th. At Velasco four houses were blown down; the whole country for miles around inundated and all the vessels in the harbor, consisting of the brig "Sam Houston," and the schooners "DeKalb," "Fannin," Texas," and "Caldwell," were driven ashore, the last named has since been got off and cleared on Sunday last for New Orleans. At Galveston the waters were driven in with such violence that they rose 6 or 7 feet higher than ordinary spring tide. They inundated a large portion of the east end of the island, and compelled the soldiers of the garrison to desert their barracks and seek shelter on the elevated ground near the intended site of Galveston City. The large new warehouse of Mr. [Thomas] McKinney and the new customhouse were completely destroyed and the goods scattered over the island. The brigs "Perseverance," "Jane,"

⁸See W. C. Redfield (*Amer. Jour. Sci. & Arts*, (II), 1, 166-69; also I. R. Tannehill, *op. cit.*, 1938, 123, 154, 158, 159.) Since Redfield's account is abstracted from Reid's original description (*op. cit.*, 1841, 138-46), I have followed Redfield when Redfield and Tannehill are in conflict.

⁹See S. H. Everitt, 1839; A. B. Lawrence, 1840; and Edward Stiff, 1840, in the "Literature cited"; *The New Yorker*, 4, 523, 526, and 587, 1837, tell of the *Racer* Storm in Texas.

¹⁰I have copied this as given in B. C. Stuart (*op. cit.*), in the absence of a *verbatim et litteratim* copy of the original. Since our font lacks italics, ships-names are in "quotes".

and "Elbe" were driven ashore, and are complete wrecks; the "Phoenix" is also ashore, but slightly injured, and may be easily set afloat again. The schooners "Select," "Henry," "Star," "Lady of the Lake," and the prize schooner "Correo," are ashore, some of them high and dry. The "Tom Toby" (privateer) is a wreck, and the "Brutus" (Texan naval schooner) is considerably damaged. The schooner "Helen" is the only vessel which has received no damage. So far as we have been able to learn only two individuals have perished. . . .

Stuart, in his reprint of the above, also includes the following eyewitness account by Col. Amasa Turner, but from what printed or manuscript source I am unable to determine:

. . . There were about 30 vessels in Galveston Harbor when the great storm commenced on October 1, 1837. It began with a wind from the southeast and held to that quarter mostly for three days; then it veered a little to the east and so continued until the sixth day, filling the [Galveston] bay very full and making a 4-foot rise at Houston. On the evening of the 6th the wind veered to the northeast and blew very strong. The schooner, "Tom Toby," a privateer, parted her cable and went ashore on Virginia Point. About sunset the wind, veering all the time to the north, and, if possible, increasing, brought the large volume of water from the bay on to the island with such force and violence as to sweep everything in its course. On land every house, camp, sod house and inhabited structure was swept away, except the old Mexican customhouse. Only one of the vessels held to its moorings.

In *The Hesperian, or Western Monthly Magazine* of 1838¹¹ is a vivid account by "R", a citizen of Ohio, who came to Texas with 60 others in March of 1837. He describes (*inter alia*) Galveston Island as the rendezvous of Lafitte [in great detail], the prices of products in Houston, the condition of the government, his visit to San Antonio, and the products of San Antonio. Regarding the suitability of Galveston as a port of Texas, he said

. . . But unfortunately, almost the whole side [of the island] is liable to inundation. In the month of October, [1837,] during the storm which laid waste the whole southern coast, from Mobile to Vera Cruz, and still further south, it was my lot to witness vessels of considerable tonnage floating over the foundations of the future city. . . .

And he continues in his narrative:

When the storm commenced, our vessel (the "Phenix") [a captured Mexican vessel of 274 tons] was secured by two large anchors, which grappled with a death grasp the foundations of the deep. But they gave to the tempest like a reed, and notwithstanding two large cannon were fastened to the hausers and thrown overboard, the vessel could not be kept to her moorings; and when the storm abated, she had drifted seven or eight miles, and was within a few yards of the beach. It appeared to me all the while as if the heavens were making battle with the earth. . . . For three days and nights the very bottom of the

¹¹"R", "Original papers and notes on Texas, by a citizen of Ohio." *Hesperian* . . . , 1, 50-60, 428-40, 1838; 2, 30, 109, 189, 288, 417, 1839. The quotation is from v. 1, p. 353.

seas appeared to be stirred up by the violence of the winds, and during all this time darkness brooded over the deep. . . . It seemed as if the elements at last exhausted themselves by their own fury; and the calm which succeeded was as perfect as the storm had been sublime and awful. . . . Eight vessels were upon dry land, and some of them were a quarter and a half mile from water. One of the national vessels [the "Brutus"] was nearly split in two, and a privateer's man of war [the "Thomas Toby"] was capsized upon the beach. Brigs and schooners were seen scattered in all directions, with shattered masts and rigging torn to tatters. The "Phenix," owing to the skill of the captain, and the admirable discipline and perseverance of the men . . . and the assistance of the cannon, which dragged heavily on the bottom, was the only vessel in the harbor that escaped without serious injury. The scene upon land was equally terrible. The brig "Jane," of Saybrook, [Conn.], was dashed against a large three story ware-house [of T. F. McKinney & S. M. Williams] which had just been enclosed, and the whole fell with an awful crash into a heap of promiscuous ruin. Not a stick of its timbers after the gale subsided could be seen. . . . The new [Texan] custom house was swept from its foundations, and but two houses in the whole island survived the wreck. Human suffering in the meantime was immense. Men, women, and children were seen floating upon boards, logs and small boats, for days and nights, in every part of the island. But one life . . . was lost, which must be regarded as providential, when we consider the great destruction of property, and the imminent perils which were encountered everywhere. The scene upon the island after the storm was over, was one of utter desolation. Provisions, furniture, and goods of all kinds, had either been swept off, or were found in a ruined condition, scattered over the island; and the houseless inhabitants were seen wandering about in despair, gathering something from the wreck to hide their nakedness, or save them from starvation. . . .

Finally, we have an account of the storm as written in a letter by a member of the party ¹² to Elihu Burritt, of New Britain.

. . . The sight of shore [at Galveston] afforded us no little satisfaction. This was Sunday morning [Oct. 1], the commencement of the equinoctial storm. Through anxiety to get in we ventured too far and soon found ourselves on a sand bar, exposed every moment to be dashed to pieces. . . . We were in this situation two hours or more—no help, no hope from shore, as the sea run high. . . . As soon as we were off the bar we put out to sea, where we were upon the raging ocean, riding upon the wings of the wind. . . . Lying safely, as we supposed, near shore, for a week [Oct. 2-7] we had the most severe storm of wind and rain that had ever been known upon the island. The wind blew into a hurricane, the rain fell in torrents, and the sea rose so high that the whole island was overflowed. The storehouse [of Thomas F. McKinney], which cost forty or fifty thousand dollars, was carried past us the first of the evening, also every house upon the island. I never heard the wind blow before; I never saw a dark night before. Some of our company had been anxious in the first of the storm to get into this big storehouse for safety. . . . We longed for twelve o'clock to come, as the sailors told us the wind would probably

¹²The excerpt is from a 14-page letter written by Emily Burritt to her brother, Elihu Burritt of New Britain. Emily was born August 12, 1798; she later (in Texas) married Capt. Robert Taylor, and died in Galveston in 1839. Lillie Burritt Skinner, who published the *Christian Advocate* article, was a grand-niece of Emily Burritt

abate; but it only increased. Our captain and mate had gone to Houston, leaving the brig in charge of one of the passengers, who pretended to be capable of directing. To the sailors' unwearied exertion we owe our lives. . . . They cut the masts, which almost capsized [the boat.] We held on with both hands. The washing of the sea, the dashing upon the sand, the giving away of the floor beneath our feet, the berths giving away around us, the wrenching of timbers over our heads, the cracking of all parts of the brig, threatened us with sudden death. We expected every time the sea washed over us to be swept away. . . . At four o'clock the wind only increased. . . . The light of day [Oct. 6] enabled the sailors to cut the rigging so that [the brig] righted and made her bed in the sand. As soon as the day appeared we went upon deck to view the destructive scene; not a house stood upon the island, where there were numbers [before]. Twelve others beside us were driven up high and dry, one nearly three fourths of a mile on dry ground. . . . The island was covered with all kinds of provisions and clothing. . . . Four days after this [Oct. 10, 1837] we went on to Houston. . . .

I now append a list of the chief tropical storms that affected Texas during the years 1818-1886, inclusive. This list summarizes and extends the several lists published by Blodget (1857) and Tannehill (1938). In parentheses following the dates of the hurricane, I have placed the authors listed in my bibliography who have written on the given hurricane. When known, the full duration of the storm is given first, followed by a statement as to the date when the storm entered the Texas coast.

HURRICANES IN TEXAS, 1818-1886

- 1818, date? (Hall, Stuart, Tannehill.) Galveston Island, probably Sept. or Oct. Col. W. C. D. Hall (1820) saw wrecks of four ships of Jean Lafitte, beached on the island by the hurricane two years before.
- 1829, Sept. 10? (Bonsignes, Blodget, Tannehill.) Bonsignes' dates are to be accepted with reservation [v. infra.] He does not date the storm exactly; Tannehill gives date with query. An inundation at the mouth of the Rio Grande; Bonsignes lists it as "one of the worst."
- 1831, Aug. 10-18. (Redfield, Berlandier, Blodget, Tannehill.) "The Barbadoes Hurricane." Very destructive at the mouth of the Rio Grande (Bonsignes); unloaded-goods at Brazos Santiago dispersed by waves to a great distance, and a schooner there was beached high and dry. Entered Texas Aug. 18. (Berlandier.)
- 1834, Sept.? (Bonsignes, Lopez, Blodget, Tannehill.) South Texas, esp. mouth of the Rio Grande. Considered by Bonsignes as one of the destructive storms.
- 1835, Aug. 12-18. (Berlandier, Redfield, Blodget, Tannehill.) "Antigua-Texas Hurricane." At Matamoros and present site of Corpus Christi on Aug. 18; at Brazos Santiago, storm drove vessels-unloading completely out of the water, and one was driven by the waves three miles inland from the place where anchored. This hurricane failed to turn eastward after striking the coast.
- 1835, Sept. 18. Tannehill lists without further data. The "Nautical Magazine" for 1848, p. 528, gives the following, which I reprint

- since it seems to be lacking from more available accounts: "On the 18th of September, [1835] during the night, Matamoras . . . was damaged by a dreadful hurricane. Many houses fell, three hundred damaged. The violence of the storm was tremendous; nothing could resist it: trees were twisted and torn out of the ground, and carried away. The rain was heavy; the river rose to a fearful height. Four lives only were lost; but more dreadful was the destruction of both lives and property in the Brass[*o*]s de San Jago, and in the B[*o*]ca del Rio. Many vessels [were] stranded and dismasted. There was not a house standing in the Bonita or the [Boca Chica]."
- 1837, Sept. 27–Oct. 10. (Berlandier, Lopez, Redfield, Blodget, Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) "Racer's Storm". All of the east coast of Texas from Brazos Santiago to (present) Sabine Pass. On Oct. 2/3 at Matamoras; destroyed town of Brazos Santiago, and inundated coast for many miles inland; Oct. 5/6 at Galveston. Five vessels beached at Velasco, and many at Galveston. [See main body of this article.]
- 1838, date? (Bonsignes, Blodget, Tannehill.) Listed, without date, by Bonsignes as flooding the lower Texas coast at Brazos Santiago. Is it possible that we have here another error of recall of Bonsignes—that he is confusing the "Racer" Storm with the year 1838? [In his report to Lt. Webster, Bonsignes does not ignore the **Racer** Storm.] Blodget and Tannehill have included this 1838 hurricane only on Bonsignes' report. The "Nautical Magazine" for 1848, p. 529, notes what may be Bonsignes' hurricane: one of Nov. 1, very severe at Vera Cruz, in which 3 U. S. vessels were lost (two of them with their crews.)
- 1839, Nov. 5. Tannehill lists at Galveston; Blodget does not include. A mislaid datum also locates disturbances at this date on San Luis Island, and in the Gulf of Mexico.
- 1840, date? Another dateless record of Bonsignes, not corroborated by Lopez or Berlandier [the latter a most careful and trustworthy observer.] Ascribed to lower Texas, with villages destroyed at the mouth of the Rio Grande. It is not stated whether it extended elsewhere in Texas. Can Bonsignes be confusing this with "Antje's" Storm? [Bonsignes has ignored that storm.]
- 1842, Aug. 30–Sept. 9. (Redfield, Lopez, Blodget, Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) "Antje's Hurricane." Struck the Mexican coast about halfway between Tampico and Brownsville (Sept. 8), and on Sept. 9 was "wasting" 60 miles inland from Tampico. The coast of the mouth of the Rio Grande (and from Tampico to Corpus Christi) was inundated.
- 1842, Oct. 5. (Blodget?, Redfield?, Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) Blodget and Redfield believed this to be the same as the Oct. 2–10 hurricane (the "Gulf of Mexico–Bermuda Storm") but Tannehill believes the two distinct. At Galveston the wind was not so high as in the **Racer** Storm, although there was considerable damage to buildings and shipping.
- 1844, Aug. 4–6. (Bonsignes, Lopez, Berlandier, Blodget, Tannehill.) Mouth of the Rio Grande; 'very little rainfall, the most terrible and destructive storm. Some 40 lives lost. The sea was forced three leagues over the beach, and the Mexican government ordered the customhouse to be removed to Point Isabel. Not a single house remained at Brazos Santiago or at the mouth of the river.' (Berlandier)
- 1854, Sept. 15–19. (Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) "The Great September Hurricane of 1854." Matagorda, Galveston, and upper Texas coast. Greatest damage at Matagorda (Sept. 18); no inundation of the town, but nearly all houses destroyed by the wind, two persons

- killed. Saluria was destroyed. The steamer "Kate Ward," with her crew, was lost in Matagorda Bay. Little damage was done at Galveston.
- 1866, ?Oct. Tannehill lists one at Galveston, but gives no data.
- 1867, Oct. 1-3. (Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) Mouth of Rio Grande, and Texas coast to Galveston and beyond. Course of storm much like that of "Racer" hurricane of 1937. Bagdad and Clarksville at mouth of the Rio Grande destroyed (Oct. 1); Galveston flooded (Oct. 2/3), with several lives lost and property and shipping losses of a million dollars.
- 1871, June 1-4. (Frazier, Tannehill.) Texas coast, not specified by Tannehill; low barometer and very heavy sea, with rainfall, at Galveston. (Frazier, p. 457.)
- 1871, June 9/10. (Frazier, Tannehill.) Galveston. Considerable property damage, but no loss of life.
- 1871, Oct. 2/3. (Stuart, Frazier, Tannehill.) Galveston extensively flooded, with heavy wind from the east, and severe losses in shipping.
- 1874, July 2-4. Gulf of Mexico, Indianola. [Not the disastrous 1875S16 Indianola hurricane, q.v.] Tannehill lists without comment.
- 1874, Sept. 3-6. (Frazier, Tannehill.) Gulf coast of Texas, moved n.n.w. into Texas. Little or no damage at Galveston.
- 1875, Sept. 14-19. (Frazier, Tannehill, ch. ii, xiii.) "Cuba-Gulf-Indianola Hurricane." Course somewhat resembled that of "Racer" Storm. The hurricane's center passed over Indianola (Sept. 16); three-fourths of the houses at Indianola were wrecked, and 176 lives lost. One of the most destructive hurricanes on the Texan coast. Considerable damage was done at Galveston, and several blocks of land were carried out to sea from the Island. (Frazier, p. 457)
- 1879, Aug. 20-23. Yucatan, Texas Coast. Tannehill lists without details.
- 1880, Aug. 7-13. (Tannehill.) Yucatan, Matamoros. Manifested in Texas?
- 1885, Sept. 17-21. (Tannehill.) Brownsville-southern Louisiana-Georgia.
- 1885, June 13/14. (Tannehill, ch.xiii.) Inundation at Sabine, Texas, for several miles inland.
- 1886, Aug. 13-20. (Tannehill, ch. ii, xiii.) "The Second Indianola Hurricane." East Caribbean-Cuba-Indianola. Very severe in Cuba; destroyed Indianola (Aug. 19/20.)
- 1886, Sept. 11-21. (Tannehill.) Brownsville. Passed inland Sept. 21/22. The hurricane path included Dominica, Yucatan, and the Texan coast at Brownsville.
- 1886, Oct. 8-13. (Tannehill, ch. xiii.) At Sabine Pass. Inundated Johnson's Bayou and Sabine Pass twenty miles inland, with much property damage and the loss of 150 lives. The hurricane came from western Cuba, and passed into extreme east Texas.

Later notable Texan hurricanes were the Galveston "Flood" of Sept. 8, 1900; the Velasco storm of July 22, 1909; the August 28, 1909 hurricane at Brownsville; the Aug. 16/17, 1915 Galveston hurricane; the Corpus Christi storm of Sept. 14, 1919; the 1921 Mexican hurricane that in southwestern Texas caused torrential rains (Sept. 8-10) and record-breaking floods.

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