



The Beatrice Hurricane: 15 September 1903

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The menhaden fishing steamer **Beatrice** was one of the casualties of the hurricane that hit the mid-Atlantic coastline on 15 September 1903. This purse-seiner, owned by the Atlantic Fisheries Company, was caught by the storm when returning to their factory at Cape Charles, VA. She had been built in 1878 by Robert Palmer and Sons, at Noank, CT, and had been lengthened from 105 feet to 135 feet in 1900. She was powered by a 170 hp reciprocating steam engine, but, like most purse seiners of her day, also carried a suit of sails. To take advantage of fair winds, she could set a jib, main, and from a mast stepped on her after deckhouse, a small mizzen.

The hurricane that was to prove fatal to the **Beatrice** and other vessels struck Florida on 12 September, crossing the state from SE to NW. News, as well as weather forecasts, traveled more slowly in those days, and it was not until three days later that the *Virginian-Pilot* newspaper in Norfolk carried a full report of the damage it had caused. The headlines on 15 September declared, "Florida swept by storm that carries death and destruction in its path." Further down the page was noted, "Southern storm

expected to be here today." By then, however, it was too late to give any warning to the **Beatrice**, or any of the other craft then at sea.

The **Beatrice**, commanded by Capt. William Leland of Irvington, VA, had left the dock the previous Sunday night. Along with the fleets from the other fish factories on Chesapeake Bay and the Delmarva Peninsula, she would cruise the coastal waters until menhaden were spotted from the crow's nest. They found large schools, or "places" of them, just beginning their annual southward migration, off the mouth of Delaware Bay. By Tuesday afternoon, the **Beatrice** had a full load and was heading back down the beach for Cape Charles. Following about 6 nmi behind her was the **Atlantic**, another steamer from the Atlantic Fisheries Co., and further astern was the **Alden S. Swan**, from a factory at Harborton.

At around 2100, when off the Blackfish Banks and almost abreast of Assateague Lighthouse, the **Beatrice** ran into the hurricane. Exactly what her captain did to try and weather the storm will never be known, but we know what was done by the

Atlantic, and can conclude that on the **Beatrice** they were doing much the same. The **Atlantic**, caught by the sudden blast of wind and a swiftly rising sea, tried to set her jib to hold her head up to it. This did not work (in any case it was too bad a night to keep any canvas aloft), and her engine - even at 350 hp - was not powerful enough to keep her driving into the seas. She was shipping water over her decks and clear over her pilothouse, but somehow they managed to get her anchor overboard. That held her until the hurricane passed, and she was able to get on her way again. The **Atlantic** had suffered heavy damage, and had lost her seine boats, net, and pieces of her rails.

The **Alden S. Swan**, when the storm struck, turned and beat her way back up the beach, finally gaining shelter at Delaware Breakwater. The **Atlantic**, badly battered, returned to Cape Charles and got her fish out. She then put back out to sea to search for the **Beatrice**, which had still not arrived. After searching all day without any sight of the **Beatrice** or the **Swan**, she put in to Norfolk for repairs. By this time, the *Virginian-Pilot* was reporting that both of these boats were missing and presumed lost.



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The **Alden S. Swan** made it safely to Delaware Breakwater and was reported there on 19 September. The **Beatrice's** fate was to remain a mystery, at least for eleven days. On 26 September, her stern section, including her engine room and after deckhouse, washed ashore at Caffey's Inlet Life Saving Station, just above Duck, N.C. It had drifted 105 nmi from where she had last been seen off the Blackfish Banks. The same day, her bow and the forward part of her hull were reported ashore near Virginia Beach. No trace was ever found of the 28 souls who had been her crew.

Why had the **Beatrice** foundered, when her two consorts, the **Atlantic** and the **Swan**, had safely weathered the storm? The answer may lie in the way she had been rebuilt, three years previous. She had been lengthened 20 feet and had her main deck raised 2 feet. This may have aggravated a weak spot at her midships section where her fish hold was located - menhaden steamers tend to load and unload rapidly, which puts on a lot of hogging and sagging stresses. From her wreck having been found split into two sections, it would seem that her hull had failed in this area.

Life still had to go on, however, and in the days following the hurricane, the fleet was back out on the fishing grounds. There is no record that any monument was built for the **Beatrice** or any memorial service ever held for her crew. Her memory was preserved only by the expression of old timers in the industry, who, when caught in a blow offshore, with night coming on and safe harbor a long ways ahead, would say, "This is as bad as the night the **Beatrice** was lost." ⚓



Steamer **Beatrice**

Editor's note:

*Captain Sherrill is correct that the **Beatrice** was lost at sea due to a hurricane. Although the climatological records are a bit fuzzy, there were actually two storms off the Atlantic seaboard during September 1903.*

The hurricane that struck Florida had already crossed over Florida and was inland over the AL-GA border and in a weak tropical storm status by the September 15.

*The second hurricane was east of the VA Capes on the 15th with peak intensity of sustained winds of 70 - 85 kt. - **Luke***