

Researching Colleton County's Late 19th Century Natural Disasters

Colleton County Memorial Library Resource Guide

Several major natural disasters had a great impact on Colleton County in the later part of the 19th century. These events included the **Cyclone of 1879**, the **Great Fire of 1885**, the **Earthquake of 1886** and the **Hurricane of 1893**. Except for the Great Fire of 1885, which primarily affected Walterboro, these disasters impacted people throughout the county. Learn more about these disasters and their effect on Colleton County and its communities with the resources below or by visiting the Colleton County Memorial Library and its South Carolina Room.

This resource guide is an introduction to the sources available to those interested in learning about the four major natural disasters which impacted Colleton County in the late 19th century.

The Cyclone of 1879

Walterboro, SC, the afternoon of April 16, 1879

Basic Facts

- Affected Colleton/Charleston Counties including the area that is now Dorchester County
- The tornado was a part of one of several storms to hit the town overnight
- 24 mile path that started near Salkehatchie Swamp and ended near Givhans Ferry
- 11 deaths (8 in Walterboro alone) and many injured
- Tracked northeast across the residential section of Walterboro
- 60 of 90 dwellings rendered uninhabitable & all seven churches destroyed.
- Business section was largely untouched.
- Based on wind estimates and descriptions of destruction it is likely that this tornado was the equivalent of a strong EF-4 or an EF-5 rating.

Resources for learning about the Cyclone of 1879

Primary Sources

The Report on the Walteborough, S.C., Tornado by Sergt. H.J. Penrod, Signal Corps in the Annual Report of the Chief Signal Officer to the Secretary of War for the Year 1879 available through the **National Oceanic and Atmosphereice Administration Central Library Online** at https://library.oarcloud.noaa.gov/docs.lib/htdocs/rescue/cso/cso_001/AR_CS0_1879.PDF (pdf page 858) is **THE most important resource regarding the cyclone of 1879**. This multi-page report includes interviews with local residents in the days after the tornado, descriptions of the tornado's path and the destruction wrought, lists of the injured and, most importantly, a map of the path of the tornado through Colleton and Charleston counties and a map of the path of the tornado through the town of Walterboro.

"A Cyclone's Power," *The Abbeville Press & Banner* (Abbeville, SC) for May 14th, 1979, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

Civil War Widow's Pension Files for Bella Washington of Walterboro - The cyclone is referenced in the deposition of Mrs. Guillumine Pinckney. Pension files housed in the National Archives, copies can be requested from Walterboro Historian Elizabeth Laney at wborohistorynotes@gmail.com.

"Death from the Heat" and "Local Dots" from *The Colleton Democrat* for June 18, 1879 (pg 4, columns 1 & 2), accessed through Digital Reel: Colleton's Online Historical Archive at colletonlibrary.org/e-content.

"Destructive Tornado," *The Yorkville Enquirer* (Yorkville, SC) for April 24, 1879, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

"Destructive Tornado at Walterboro," *The Weekly Union Times* (Union, SC) for April 25th, 1879, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

"Local Dots," *The Colleton Democrat* for August 29, 1879 (pg 3, column 2), accessed through Digital Reel: Colleton's Online Historical Archive at colletonlibrary.org/e-content.

"Walterboro in Ruins - Great Loss of Life and Property," *The Newberry Herald* (Newberry, SC) for April 23rd, 1879, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

“Walterboro in Ruins! - Terrible Tornado!,” *The Orangeburg Times* (Orangeburg, SC) for April 25th, 1879, accessed through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

The Witsell Narrative - written account of the family’s experience of the Cyclone of 1869 as posted by Ancestry.com user AWitsell on his public family tree.

“The Wreck of Walterboro” *The Andersonville Intelligencer* (Andersonville, SC) for April 24th, 1879, accessed through the Library of Congress’s Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>)

Photographs

There are roughly six images showing the aftermath of the Cyclone of 1879 in the town of Walterboro, SC. The images were likely taken in the first days after the tornado swept through the town.

The images are reproduced in several locations including in an exhibit at the Colleton Museum & Farmer’s Market at 506 E. Washington Street and inside the book “Colleton County, SC A Pictorial History” at the Colleton County Memorial Library. The original images are held by the Colleton County Historical & Preservation Society (<https://cchaps.com/>).

Secondary Sources

Colleton County, SC: A Pictorial History by the Colleton County Historical and Preservation Society contains images of the tornado's destruction and historical information about the event.

Cyclone of 1879 Infographic from the Walterboro, SC - History Notes Facebook page (@wborohistorynotes) compiled by Walterboro Historian Elizabeth Laney gives basic facts of the Cyclone.

“The Wreck of Walterboro”: The Cyclone of 1879 & other Disasters of the Late 19th Century, a PowerPoint presentation by Walterboro Historian Elizabeth Laney

The Earthquake of 1886

Southeastern South Carolina on Tuesday, August 31, 1886 at 9:50PM

Basic Facts

- Affected Charleston, SC and surrounding areas including Walterboro, SC but with impacts as far away as Augusta, GA
- Epicenter near Summerville, SC
- Magnitude 6.9 - 7.3
- The main quake lasted just a few minutes but aftershocks terrorized communities throughout the night and the following week
- Many dwellings and other buildings were damaged with many people in Walterboro and other cities sleeping outside in tents for weeks afterwards
- No deaths in the Walterboro/Colleton area. 110 deaths overall in affected areas

Resources for learning about the Earthquake of 1886

Primary Sources

Civil War Widow's Pension Files for Sophia Sanderson, Celia King and Bella Washington of Walterboro - Numerous depositions by these women and their neighbors reference "The Big Shake" when trying to recall birthdates, marriage dates, etc. Pension files housed in the National Archives, individual depositions may be requested from Walterboro Historian Elizabeth Laney.

"Earthquake Rumbblings," The Manning Times (Manning, SC) for September 15th, 1886, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) - Specifically references Walterboro about mid-way through the article.

Report to the SC Office Board of Health, 30 Sept 1886 from Charles Witsell, M.D. from the Report of State Officers, Board and Committees to the General Assembly of the State of South Carolina at the Regular Session Commencing November 23, 1886, Vol 2. Accessed through Google Books:

https://books.google.com/books?id=eGYbAQAIAAJ&newbks=0&printsec=frontcover&pg=PA137&dq=%22Walterboro%22+%22earthquake%22+%221886%22+%22board+of+health%22&hl=en&source=newbks_fb#v=onepage&q=%22Walterboro%22%20%22earthquake%22%20%221886%22%20%22board%20of%20health%22&f=false - From the Colleton County Board of Health referencing the earthquake and its effects on the town.

Photographs

The Lowcountry Digital Library (lcdl.library.cofco.edu) contains numerous historical documents and photographs of the 1886 earthquake. Do a keyword search for "1886 Earthquake".

Secondary Sources

The 1886 Charleston, South Carolina, Earthquake - A 1986 Perspective by Otto W. Nuttli, GA Bollinger and Robert B. Herrman, a US Geological Survey Circular 985, available online: <https://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/1986/0985/report.pdf>

This is a great scientific overview of the earthquake a century after its occurrence.

City of Heroes: The Great Charleston Earthquake of 1886 by Richard N. Cote contains a reference to Walterboro on pg. 74.

Low Country Quake Tales by Joyce B. Bagwell references Walterboro and surrounding areas.

The Hurricane of 1893

Southeastern South Carolina Sunday, August 27th - Monday, August 28th, 1893

Basic Facts

- Category 3 with winds up to 130 mph
- Made landfall between Savannah, GA and Beaufort, SC midday August 27th.
- Moved out of the Lowcountry by midday August 28th.
- Moved through the area over a 24 hour period with a brief lull about 11 pm as the eye passed over.
- Fences and trees blown down with the Great Swamp, Jones Swamp and Island [Ireland?] Creek bridges were swept away.
- No injuries in Walterboro/Colleton County but as many as 2,000 death around BEaufort and in the Sea Islands of South Carolin.

Resources for learning about the Hurricane of 1893

Primary Sources

"A hurricane sweeps Colleton county..." under the title "The Press & Standard - August 30, 1893" in *The Press & Standard* (Walterboro, SC) for 22 Jul 1931, accessed through Digital Reel at colletonlibrary.org/e-content.

"Fearful Storm" *The Edgefield Advertiser* (Edgefield, SC) for 31 Aug 1893, accessed through the Library of Congress's Chronicling America Historic Newspaper Archive (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>) - Mostly about Charleston but a good contemporary article about the hurricane.

"It's still hot..." under the title "Smooks - A.P. Smith, Cor." in *The Press & Standard* (Walterboro, SC) for 04 Aug 1949, accessed through Digital Reel at colletonlibrary.org/e-content. Contains the author's own recollections of the hurricane near the end of account.

"Monday, August 11..." under the title "Bells - Mrs. Lena Ulmer" in *The Press & Standard* (Walterboro, SC) for 21 August 1958, accessed through Digital Reel at colletonlibrary.org/e-content. Contains the author's own recollections of the hurricane in the middle of the narrative.

Photographs

The Lowcountry Digital Library (lcdl.library.cofco.edu) contains numerous historical documents and photographs of the 1893 hurricane. Do a keyword search for "1893 hurricane".

Secondary Sources

Lowcountry Hurricanes: Three Centuries of Storms at Sea and Ashore by Walter J. Fraser

The Great Sea Island Storm of 1893 by Bill Marscher

Various posts, Beaufort District Collection Blog - *Connections*,
<https://beaufortdistrictcollectionconnections.blogspot.com/search?q=1893>