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## NORTH FLORIDA AND THE GREAT STORM OF 1873

by MARY LOUISE ELLIS

**T**HE autumn of 1873 seemed full of promise for the people of north and central Florida. Luck and the weather, two critical elements of life for an area dependent on farming, were favorable so far. The cotton bolls were ripening on schedule, and high yields were predicted. Farmers paid close attention to the weather, and hoped that the frequent thunder showers would not threaten their prospects of making a good crop. As the summer faded, first luck, then the weather, changed—and the changes dealt a ruinous blow to an agricultural region still mired in the hard times of Reconstruction.

The initial piece of bad luck appeared in the cotton fields. An infestation of boll worms plagued farmers late that summer, eating up potential profits as it spread across the South. The caterpillars destroyed from one-third to one-half of the crop in many areas of Florida and south Georgia.

While farmers and planters in the southeast battled the cotton boll worm with assorted techniques, the great banking houses in New York struggled to survive the convulsions taking place in the financial world. The Panic of 1873 erupted on September 8, bringing ruin to many. Although news of the panic and bank failures undoubtedly worried the farmers of north Florida, their main concern was with matters close to home, particularly the harvesting and marketing of their crops.

For much of September, the unsettled weather made them anxious. A prediction in the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* was not reassuring: "The weather looks a little stormy now and then. The autumnal equinox is coming on. Old Sol will enter the first point of Libra about the 23rd [of September], when you may look out for squalls."<sup>1</sup> By the time of the equinox, any chances for a

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1. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, August 19, 1873.

good crop year were ended by a savage hurricane which left much of the cotton, corn, and sugar cane wasted in the fields.

The storm ripped across north Florida and south Georgia on the morning of September 19. Accounts from the big bend counties and east to St. Augustine establish it as one of the most destructive ever to have hit that area. While north Florida was still dazed by its "equinoctial gale," a second storm, and then a third, swept the state. The three tropical disturbances occurred within a period of less than three weeks: September 19, 23, and October 6.<sup>2</sup> The most severe, that of September 19, was definitely a hurricane. The other two, although less destructive, were probably powerful enough to earn that classification. The two later disturbances were a part of the unusual disruption in the weather pattern, and will be considered first.

On September 23, the Tampa area was hit by a storm which followed a diagonal course north-northeast, and headed out over the Atlantic below St. Augustine. It was evidently not severe because the press took little notice of it. The *Tampa Guardian* referred briefly to recent "beating showers and driving winds."<sup>3</sup>

The October 6 storm was of greater magnitude. The heavy winds took shape in the Atlantic, and came across the Lesser Antilles around September 25. Continuing westward, the storm pursued a long track, skirting just below the Dominican Republic and Cuba. It tore at the southern edge of Haiti, demolishing houses and uprooting trees. A number of Haitians were killed. One account reported "considerable loss of life and serious damage to shipping." The storm crossed the tip of the Yucatan Peninsula, before curving sharply back toward Florida. Early on the morning of October 6, it hit Punta Rassa (near Fort Myers), then veered across the state to reach the Atlantic near Melbourne. Few contemporary accounts survive, but those available indicate that the effects of the hurricane reached almost the entire length of the state.<sup>4</sup>

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2. United States Department of Commerce, *Tropical Cyclones of the North Atlantic Ocean, 1871-1977* (Washington, 1978) 35.
  3. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 7, 1873, quoting *Tampa Guardian*, September 29, 1873.
  4. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 21, 1873; U.S. Department of Commerce, *Tropical Cyclones*, 35. For general information on hurricanes and their stages of development, see Robert H. Simpson and Herbert Riehl, *The Hurricane and its Impact* (Baton Rouge, 1981), 97-120.

Describing the October 6 storm, the Tallahassee *Floridian* noted, "There was a heavy blow at St. Augustine. The cyclone was predicted at Washington and the observer at the station in Jacksonville notified, but the storm passed South of that city." The Jacksonville *Union* reported that the storm was "terrific" at St. Augustine, and that "Up to 12 o'clock yesterday [October 8] no telegraphic communication with St. Augustine, Palatka, Ocala, Cedar Keys, Punta Rassa or Key West" had been received for two days. Other accounts mentioned strong winds at Cedar Key, but little damage.<sup>5</sup> At Palatka, the chief result of the heavy winds, other than the downed telegraph lines, was that all the oranges were blown from the trees. Optimistic Palatkans hoped to gather the fallen fruit and sell individual oranges for one and one-half cents each.<sup>6</sup>

In Key West wharves were wrecked, several small houses destroyed, and fruit orchards ruined. Fort Taylor, the Custom House, and the Navy Depot were all damaged, and part of the county courthouse was blown away. The injury to the dilapidated structure was lamented only because it was partial: "We are truly sorry it had not made a complete finish of it; the old shell is a disgrace to the city." E. C. Howe's salt processing works was hardest hit. His salt ponds, several houses, and 10,000 bushels of salt were destroyed. Howe estimated his loss at \$8,000. On the day following the storm, several damaged ships entered Key West for repairs. One steamship crossing the Gulf on its voyage from Galveston to New York lost its captain and three crewmen to the powerful waves. Damage to property, although considerable at Key West and Punta Rassa, was of less consequence further up the state.<sup>7</sup>

Such was the course of the two lesser storms of 1873. The most important had occurred on September 19, 1873. For the hinterland of north Florida it was the most destructive hurricane between the end of the Civil War and the beginning of the

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5. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 14, 1873, quoting Jacksonville *Florida Union*, October 9, 1873.

6. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 21, 1873.

7. *Ibid.*, quoting Key West *Dispatch*; Ivan Ray Tannehill, *Hurricanes: Their Nature and History, Particularly Those of the West Indies and the Southern Coasts of the United States* (Princeton, 1950), 256, states that during the October 6 storm, there were "many disasters at sea," and that Punta Rassa was completely destroyed by ninety-mile-per-hour winds.

twentieth century.<sup>8</sup> The disturbance, termed an “equinoctial gale,” evolved over the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico, approximately 100 miles north of the Yucatan Peninsula. Traveling north-northeast towards Florida, the eye was about forty miles southwest of Apalachicola by 7:00 a.m. on September 19. The Dog Island lighthouse was shattered as the storm roared past the barrier islands off Franklin County’s coast. It struck land near the mouth of the Aucilla River in Jefferson County, and moved across Florida and southeast Georgia to Savannah. There it headed up the South Carolina shore, nudged the coast of North Carolina, and finally blew out to sea.<sup>9</sup> The passage over land diminished the force of the storm. Still, damage from the winds, clocked at about sixty miles per hour in Savannah, and driving rains was heavy throughout Georgia and the coastal regions of the Carolinas. In its wake the hurricane left a wide swath of destruction unequalled in the memories of the area’s citizens.<sup>10</sup>

Tallahasseeans went to bed on Thursday, September 18, unaware of the impending catastrophe. A report issued by the War Department in Washington, D.C., that afternoon gave a benign forecast: “For the South Atlantic and Gulf states east of the Mississippi River, cloudy weather, rain and northern to easterly winds, increasing in force in the latter, south of which a disturbance of some character now exists.” Even this minimal advance warning was unavailable to the people of north Florida—by the time the forecast appeared in print, the storm had come and gone.<sup>11</sup>

But as darkness settled on Tallahassee that Thursday evening, there seemed little cause for concern. Shortly after midnight, the rain began, and by two o’clock the downpour was accompanied by a stiff wind blowing steadily from the northeast. By seven o’clock the wind was of such force that it was uprooting trees, knocking down fences and chimneys, and peeling back the

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8. For brief accounts of significant hurricanes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Tannehill, *Hurricanes*, 148-238.

9. U.S. Department of Commerce, *Tropical Cyclones*, 35; Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 14, 1873.

10. *Charleston News and Courier*, September 22, 1873; *Savannah Morning News*, September 22, 1873. For an explanation of the changes which occur in a hurricane after it passes over land, see Simpson and Riehl, *The Hurricane and its Impact*, 248-67.

11. *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, September 19, 1873.

tin roofs from homes and buildings. For two hours the gale raged, until between nine and ten, when “it died away and calm ensued.” Some people went outside briefly, thinking the storm was over, but suddenly the wind began pummeling the town again. For two hours more the storm blasted in from the northwest. Finally, shortly after noon, it began diminishing rapidly. The rain stopped, and the remaining clouds scattered. By mid-afternoon the sun was shining.<sup>12</sup>

Then the cataloging of damage began. Although the section from Tallahassee to the coast had experienced the brunt of the storm, the smaller communities across the big bend region also suffered. Hamilton and Suwannee counties lost much of their cotton and cane crop. In Jefferson and Gadsden counties damage was extensive. Crops, livestock, and farm buildings had been destroyed.<sup>13</sup>

A report filed with the *Savannah Morning News* by one “RIENTI” summed up the feelings of Jefferson County citizens: “We had hoped that, with the advent of our newer-fashioned troubles— carpet-bagism, with its myriad miseries, we might have been spared the infliction of these old-time plagues. But not so—the storm . . . equalled in severity and destruction any that has occurred within the memory of that mythical individual—the oldest inhabitant.” “RIENTI” wrote that the storm “swept like a besom of destruction” through the region, greatly injuring the timber: “This generation will not recover from the loss in this respect alone.”<sup>14</sup>

In Georgia, Bainbridge, Thomasville, Quitman, and Cairo were hard hit. Heavy rains were reported as far north as Macon. A number of railroad accidents in south Georgia caused fatalities when portions of the tracks were washed out.<sup>15</sup> Georgia farmers lost equipment, crops, and livestock. In Decatur County the loss of “many hundreds” of cotton bales was reported, with total damage estimated at \$25,000.<sup>16</sup> Thomas County lost nearly 1,000 bales, while citizens of Thomasville estimated damages there at about \$10,000.<sup>17</sup>

12. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 23, 1873.

13. *Ibid.*, September 30, 1873.

14. *Savannah Morning News*, September 24, 1873.

15. *St. Augustine Examiner*, October 4, 1873; *Savannah Advertiser Republican*, September 21, 1873.

16. *Athens North-East Georgian*, October 3, 1873.

17. *Thomasville Times*, September 20, 1873.

The toll exacted by the storm was even greater in Florida. Coastal settlements had been ravaged by the hurricane as it moved inland. It hit Apalachicola in the early morning hours, and a number of substantial buildings were destroyed. Henry Hoare, clerk of the steamer *Farley*, which was caught on the Apalachicola River when the storm hit, described the damage he saw. The winds were so strong that "the cabin had to be lashed to the lower deck to prevent its being blown off." The wind literally blew the bark off the cypress trees, "as cleanly as if shaved by a knife." When the *Farley* reached Apalachicola later in the day, Hoare recorded that, "The tide ran over the wharf and flooded all the stores on Water Street. . . . A great many fish were blown ashore and not a few big moccasins were killed on the wharf." Some people took advantage of the opportunity, to gather "strings of fine trout." Small fishing and oyster boats were turned over and strewn about, while four lumber barges were blown ashore. One steam sawmill was wrecked, and two others damaged extensively. Eight warehouses, some of brick, were flattened, as were fifteen brick store buildings and at least twenty homes. The city had a number of citrus trees, many of which were laden with fruit. Hoare observed that "all the orange trees . . . in the place are down. . . . The streets are full of oranges."<sup>18</sup>

According to Hoare, no lives were lost in Apalachicola, but its citizens endured great personal and financial losses— the estimate ranged from \$150,000 to \$200,000.<sup>19</sup> Commission merchants in Savannah published an appeal for donations to aid the stricken city, and netted \$75.00. A Savannah editor regretted the sum was not larger, and explained that "but for the great stringency in the money market just now, a much larger amount would have been realized."<sup>20</sup>

As the violent winds continued along the Florida coast, the waters of the Gulf were whipped inland, rising twenty feet at the

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18. Savannah *Morning News*, September 25, 1873, quoting Columbus *Sun*.

19. *Ibid.* The 1873 storm was not the first to cause extensive damage in Apalachicola. In late August 1837, a hurricane flooded the town, demolishing many brick buildings. Property damage was estimated at \$200,000. For a full account, see Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 9 and 16, 1837.

20. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, October 7, 1873 letter in *ibid.*, September 23, 1873.

St. Marks lighthouse, "driving the keeper into the tower."<sup>21</sup> The Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* published a letter from the customs officer in St. Marks, Captain Gustave Jaenicke, who detailed events in Wakulla County that Friday morning: "St. Marks was destroyed by inundation and by a hurricane." The water rose eighteen feet above the high water mark. Captain Jaenicke helped evacuate his fellow citizens from their rapidly disintegrating homes, carrying women and children to a railroad boxcar. Even as he struggled to aid his neighbors, Jaenicke saw humor in their desperate situation: "A thousand times I wished that on such occasions women would wear pants and seaboots, and leave all kinds of *je ne sais pas quoi* aside. . . . It would be less trouble to transport them safe." The wind was so fierce that the boxcar full of men, women, children, and dogs "rolled along the track (there was no need pushing, the gale did all the work)."<sup>22</sup>

The wet, shivering carload of refugees waited out the storm at the railroad turntable. As they looked back down the tracks toward the town, they saw only "an endless ocean." After several hours the storm lessened and the waters began to recede. Jaenicke waded down the ridge of track to assess the situation. He found little left. The post office, churches, several stores, warehouses, and more than twenty homes had been demolished. The hospital was badly damaged, and nearly all boats docked at the wharf or anchored in the river were gone, as was the wharf itself. Some twenty families were homeless: "They are grouped together in the wrecked dilapidated huts . . . [and] saved nothing but the rags on their bodies." While neither federal, state, nor local relief organizations were available in 1873, the suffering of the people of St. Marks did not go unalleviated. The civil authorities in Tallahassee sent \$100 worth of provisions, for which Jaenicke expressed thanks. He went on to point out that "it would be good business and an act of humanity [if] some energetic, enterprising man . . . [should] erect [a] half dozen little houses on each side of the railroad and rent them . . . to the homeless."<sup>23</sup>

At Cedar Key twelve houses were destroyed. A native Georgian sailing up the Gulf coast from Clearwater was caught by the

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21. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 23, 1873.

22. *Ibid.*; see also Savannah *Morning News*, September 25, 1873.

23. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 23, 1873; Augusta *Chronicle*, September 24, 1873, quoting Tallahassee *Sentinel*, September 20, 1873.

storm at Chambers Mills. The mill's losses amounted to \$4,000. When his boat reached Cedar Key, the traveler found the railroad and bridges torn up and many boats lost or damaged. Debris was everywhere. While it was "impossible . . . to estimate the damage," the observer told his Georgia readers that "the cedar firms lost heavily, their cedar being strewn in every direction."<sup>24</sup>

Elsewhere along the coast the winds and high water destroyed fishermen's huts and boats. At St. Teresa Beach, where some vacationers lingered, "drifting sand filled the air." The wind blew with such force that "strong men were not able to withstand it and . . . were swept to a distance of many yards." One man tried valiantly to maintain the standards of chivalry, when, as he escorted a lady to a more secure house, he was "lifted off his pegs by the wind, carried over a fence [and into] the bushes, leaving the lady standing alone. Gathering himself up, he crawled towards her, saying, 'Hold on, Mrs. - , I'm coming back.'"<sup>25</sup> Boats and large trees were wrecked, but few cottages were badly damaged, and no lives were lost. One St. Teresan, "A.M.C.," was moved to poetry following the gale, and told how "on the beach in earnest prayer, Have gathered all the party there To hymn to God— Their praises for his watchful care."<sup>26</sup>

Others were less fortunate. Several residents of Leon County on a fishing outing at Shell Point, on the coast, were trapped by the storm on Friday morning: "Two colored men, . . . William Spencer, a prominent citizen [of Tallahassee], and Edmund Shakespeare of [Leon] County, . . . took refuge upon a small log house on the beach." Although urged to flee by nearby fishermen, they chose to remain. Quickly surrounded by turbulent waters, the men, together with Shakespeare's small grandson, fought to stay alive as the cabin broke up in the powerful waves. Spencer "could not swim and was undoubtedly drowned." Shakespeare and his grandson clung to a tree. The grandfather survived, "but the little fellow was washed off and drowned." Those who fled the beach "had to wade through water almost up to their necks

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24. *Atlanta Daily Herald*, October 2, 1873, quoting *Macon Herald*, September 24, 1873.

25. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, September 30, 1873.

26. *Ibid.*

for several miles” to reach safety. “They had a severe tussle for it but the natural and inherent love of life nerved them up.”<sup>27</sup>

The hurricane lashed Tallahassee and Leon County. The Capitol building took heavy water damage which “flooded the Senate and Assembly Halls . . . the Supreme Court room, the Clerk’s office, the Comptroller and Secretary of State’s offices.” It was estimated that repairs would cost in excess of \$2,000. The grounds of the Capitol were strewn with uprooted trees, and fences were flattened.<sup>28</sup> Work on the damaged areas was evidently begun promptly. One year later a visitor from Alabama noted the Capitol had a fence made of “common plank, not even painted.” His description of the building and grounds failed to mention any assaults by the storm.<sup>29</sup>

Like the rest of the area, Tallahassee was not prepared for the storm. Merchants remained open despite the roaring gale outside. At one store, that of George Meginniss, clerks rescued much of the merchandise when winds ripped away the building’s roof. Meginniss estimated that the damage to his building and goods would amount to \$10,000.<sup>30</sup> Other commercial establishments fared less well. Mrs. Lamb’s millinery shop was inundated; the blacksmith’s shop was “mashed flat as a pancake.” Mary Archer’s City Hotel was severely damaged when a telegraph pole smashed into one side. One resident of the hotel was injured by falling debris.<sup>31</sup>

As many as forty homes were destroyed, and many others lost chimneys, porches, and out-buildings. On the upper story of the Hogue family’s residence, the porch railing was torn off, and several columns were blown away. Witnesses recalled that when the kitchen chimney fell through the roof, “it caused the cook and others to everlastingly skeedaddle.”<sup>32</sup>

The Tallahasseeans who braved the early morning winds and rain to shop as usual at the city market, found themselves

27. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1873. Edmund Shakespeare was among the first of Tallahassee’s newly-freed slaves to marry. On December 12, 1865, he married Rachel Jackson. See Leon County Marriage Record, Box X, 195, Leon County Courthouse, Tallahassee.

28. Augusta *Chronicle*, September 24, 1873, quoting *Tallahassee Sentinel*, September 20, 1873.

29. Montgomery *Daily State Journal*, September 9, 1874.

30. Augusta *Chronicle*, September 24, 1873, quoting *Tallahassee Sentinel*, September 20, 1873.

31. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, September 23, 1873.

32. *Ibid.*

stranded in that “low open building.” The *Floridian* described the terror of the shoppers when “an old cotton gin standing in a corner was lifted [by the wind] and sent whizzing through the house, narrowly missing the heads of two of the butchers. (Beef was slow of sale that morning.)” The building suffered no ill effects, but its occupants were fearful of being crushed by the fall of giant oaks nearby. One man was blown down and “had to be carried home.”<sup>33</sup> Elsewhere in Tallahassee residents tried to find some refuge. An observer wrote that “one could . . . see men, women and children fleeing helter skelter in every direction, not knowing where to seek shelter and expecting every minute to be their [last].”<sup>34</sup>

The rural areas around Tallahassee were devastated. Most farmers had not yet harvested their corn, sugar cane, and cotton. Many lost their entire crop. G. G. Gibbs, whose farm was three miles northwest of town, lost his gin house, two new gins, threshing machines, and other equipment. A large oak tree fell on his house, smashing a portion of it, and his “worm-rail fence, twelve rails high, was destroyed (acres of it) also his plank fence.” His cotton, “just hanging ready and nice for picking . . . well he can’t find a boll of it!”<sup>35</sup> On many farms, laborers’ cabins were shattered, adding to the number of homeless families. One plantation lost fourteen such cabins, and various accounts told of farms on which all workers’ homes were lost.

Along with the ruin of farm buildings, came the injury and deaths of livestock. Horses, cows, and mules died. At Verdura Plantation, Benjamin Chaires lost seven mules, while on F. R. Cotten’s nearby farm, several more were killed. Cotten reported that his entire cotton crop was ruined, a loss he put at \$10,000.<sup>36</sup>

At least fifteen cotton gins in the immediate Tallahassee area were wrecked. Later reports from around the county raised the total to approximately thirty. Besides destruction of the gins, much cotton which was waiting to be baled was lost when the

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33. *Ibid.*

34. *Ibid.*

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

lint rooms at the gins were knocked down, "scattering their contents over the earth and amid the boughs of the trees."<sup>37</sup>

The New Orleans Cotton Exchange estimated that at least one-third of the crop in middle Florida was lost. Already burdened by the boll worm, rust disease, and rot, the farmers now had the added effects of the storm. The situation, according to one editor, was "well nigh overwhelming . . . every particle of cotton in bloom has been blown out and beaten into the sand . . . so badly damaged as to prove an almost total loss. . . . The prospect is indeed disheartening. . . . We are at a loss to find any words of consolation."<sup>38</sup> A few weeks later, growers were encouraged to try to gather up some of the cotton which had been blown away, in the hope that it would "bring a very fair price if freed of sand."<sup>39</sup>

While few lives were lost, Leon County had been heavily damaged. Within the city limits of Tallahassee, damage was estimated at \$20,000 to \$30,000. For the county as a whole, the figure ranged from \$100,000 to \$200,000.<sup>40</sup>

The hurricane was powerful. It is almost certain that Tallahassee endured winds of eighty to 100 miles per hour with periods during which the winds ranged from 100-150 miles per hour. Such force accounted for the large number of buildings which were demolished. Yet another cause for the wide area of great damage may have been tornadoes, which often accompany hurricanes.<sup>41</sup> There were several references to "trees twisted off," and at least one actual tornado was witnessed on a farm near Wilmington, North Carolina, where it "leveled everything and killed cows," as the storm completed its trail of ruin and headed east over the Atlantic Ocean.<sup>42</sup>

Some guesses can be made about the technical aspects of the hurricane that struck north Florida, but a Georgia editor made clear the overwhelming nature of such storms to his upland

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37. Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger*, September 30, 1873.

38. *Augusta Chronicle*, September 24, 1873, quoting *Tallahassee Sentinel*, September 20, 1873; *Tallahassee Weekly Florida*, September 23, 1873.

39. *Tallahassee Weekly Floridian*, September 30, 1873.

40. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1873.

41. Interview with Mike Rucker, Tallahassee, Florida, February 22, 1983.

42. *Charleston News and Courier*, September 23, 1873, quoting *Wilmington Star*; Simpson and Riehl, *The Hurricane and its Impact*, 216-18, discuss hurricane-related tornadoes.

readers: "On the coast their occurrence forms epochs in the march of time, and the inhabitants use them as dates and mile-stones in estimating past events."<sup>43</sup> From Jefferson County, "RIENTI" voiced the pervading sense of calamity in the immediate aftermath of the storm: "We have borne a great deal, suffered much, but those of us who are young cannot afford to give up . . . but struggle on to the bitter end, a better fate may be in store for us. But I am constrained to say, God pity those whose paths have already turned down the rugged hill of life, the prospect does not invite hope."<sup>44</sup>

"RIENTI" spoke from the accumulated despair of nearly fifteen years of hard times, and others shared his pessimism. A Tallahassee editor declared that "it will take years for Florida to recover from the blow."<sup>45</sup> Without doubt, Floridians who witnessed the terrible equinoctial gale of September 1873 never forgot it.

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43. Macon *Georgia Weekly Telegraph and Georgia Journal & Messenger*, September 30, 1873.

44. Savannah *Morning News*, September 24, 1873.

45. Augusta *Chronicle*, September 24, 1873, quoting *Tallahassee Sentinel*, September 20, 1873.