

Facing hurricane floodwaters, US town takes lessons from the past

September 17 2018, by Sébastien Duval



A cross is seen in flood water at a cemetery in Grifton, North Carolina

Hidden in North Carolina's coastal plain, Contentnea Creek is a local treasure, a place to fish, paddle and birdwatch—but after Hurricane Florence's torrential rains, the stream has morphed into a menace.

Waters in this tributary of the Neuse River are now dangerously close to the small bridge providing access to the tranquil, [rural village](#) of Grifton, population 2,500.

Deadly Hurricane Florence has weakened. But authorities warn the danger is far from over, with swollen waterways threatening [catastrophic flooding](#).

Residents in Grifton are scrambling to prepare for the worst, having taken a hard hit from past monster storms Floyd in 1999 and Matthew in 2016.

Bridge access will likely be cut Wednesday, when it's predicted that waters bloated by pounding rains unleashed by Florence, since downgraded to a tropical depression, will peak.

The creek has already begun overflowing its banks in some spots, but for now emergency personnel are largely on standby.

"People who needed to be evacuated were evacuated," said Justin Johnson, Grifton's fire chief. "We continue to patrol the area, but people have already been through Hurricane Matthew and know what to expect."

Matthew roared into the Eastern Seaboard in 2016, making landfall in Florida before slowly marching up the US East Coast.

The northward turn took several states, including North Carolina, by surprise; unprepared for severe flooding, 26 people died.

But this time, local authorities have appealed to the US National Guard for relief operations help.

On guard

Sergeant John Brandt and his team were deployed to Grifton, where they've been camped out for several days in a room in the local fire department barracks.



A car is partially submerged in floodwater near a house in Grifton, North Carolina

"The Fire Department crews are mostly volunteers, but their professionalism is amazing. They are well trained," Brandt said from the cabin of his rescue vehicle.

"It's great for North Carolina to have all these great resources helping to keep the death toll low."

As even higher floodwaters loom, the National Guard reserves are lending a semblance of reassurance to locals, whom Brandt said have been "really accommodating."

A mailbox peeks out from the floodwaters along with the top of crosses at a cemetery. Pointing out in front of the deluged road that passes by, Brandt says yesterday the area was still passable.

A few prefabricated cottages at the edge of the stream appear abandoned, and Brandt says many of them were condemned post-Matthew.

"They were bought by the FEMA and supposed to be destroyed in the next couple of weeks," he said from behind the wheel.

But perhaps even more than the still fresh memory of Matthew, that of 1999's Floyd has Grifton residents like Denise Harper on guard.

"After Floyd, we got cut off, there was nowhere to go, water everywhere, the military had to come to bring us some food," the nurse said.

"A lot of people have evacuated already. It's worrying to watch the water slowly rising."

Area authorities have set a curfew from 9:00 pm to 6:00 am to minimize risks at night, but according to the town's mayor Billy Ray Jackson, these measure are not always enough.

"You can put mandatory evacuations and curfews in place, the problem

is to enforce them. You'll always have people thinking they can ride it out," he said.

"And those people are the first ones to call for help when in trouble, putting other [people](#)'s lives at risk."

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