

Nearly lost to a flood 17 years ago, a saturated North Carolina town struggles to survive

By NIGEL DUARA OCT 10, 2016 | 6:50 PM | PRINCEVILLE, N.C.



Floodwaters in Nashville, N.C. (Chris Seward / Charlotte Observer)

Donnie Leonard tied the last ring of rope around his fire chief's chest, cinched it with a tug and watched the older man wade into the dark, rushing water.

The woman was 12 feet away, her sedan submerged to its windows. She was screaming.

Leonard, 30, gripped the rope tight and leaned back, putting all of his weight on the backs of his feet.

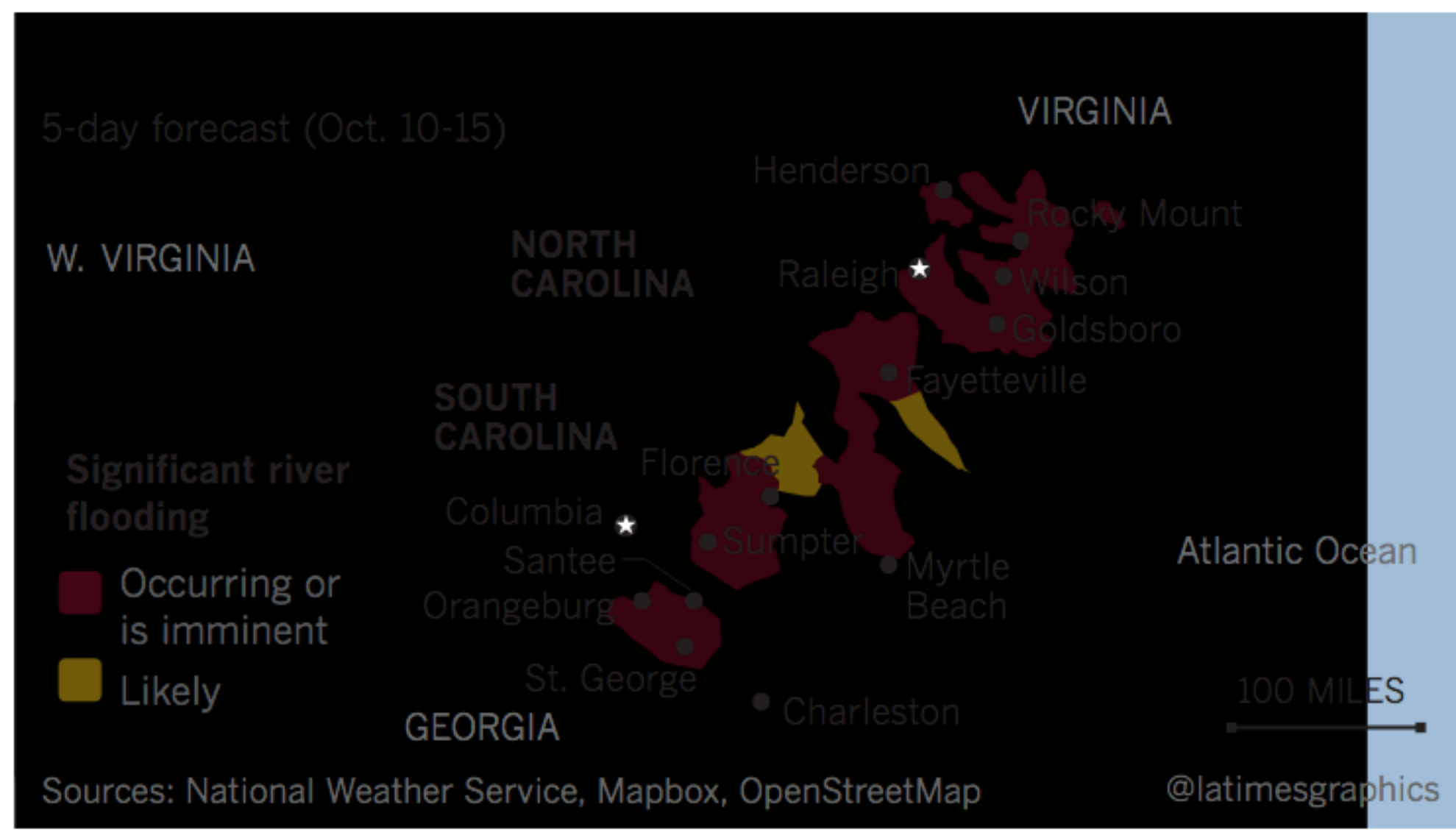
The currents tugged at Princeville Volunteer Fire Chief James Powell, who bulled ahead and scrambled to reach the stranded woman. He handed her a vest with lights on it, but she was unable to fasten its clamps. While fumbling with the vest, Powell was almost swept away himself.

He signaled Leonard and three other firefighters to pull him back to shore. Together on the same bank, they watched the floodwaters push the sedan 20 yards further away into a stand of trees.

They no longer heard screaming.

Deadly flooding has returned to this old North Carolina slave town, a place of just 2,000 people that was all but swallowed 17 years ago in the floodwaters of Hurricane Floyd. This time, it was the remnants of Hurricane Matthew that were to blame.

At least 21 people have died in the storm-related flooding in the Southeast, more than half of them in North Carolina. Rainfall — as much as 16 inches in places — began on the coast and mixed with the runoff from new storms to overwhelm ground already saturated from a wet summer. The resulting surge poured downriver, flooding creeks and tributaries more than 120 miles inland.



Thirty-one North Carolina counties have been approved for federal disaster declarations, from coastal resort towns to cities unaccustomed to flooding, including Fayetteville and the state's capital, Raleigh.

When rivers began to swell late last week, Deena Leonard, Donnie's wife, nervously prodded him.

"Don't worry. Hey, look how sunny it is," Donnie said.

"The river don't care how much sun there is," Deena replied.

Evacuations in low-lying areas started over the weekend, beginning with Princeville, and accelerated with the approaching floodwaters. On Monday, Lenoir County ordered a mandatory evacuation of houses and businesses near the oft-flooded Neuse River. They urged residents to remember their history.

"If your home or business flooded during Hurricane Floyd, you need to take immediate action," Lenoir County Department of Emergency Services said in a statement to residents.

Hurricane Floyd struck this region a ferocious blow in 1999, causing quick-rising rivers to flood their banks and swamp whole towns. Even today, the high-water mark for deadly flooding is still referred to on local newscasts as "Floyd level."

In Princeville, the flood is more than a memory. Residents live with it daily, in the markers showing the flood level above lampposts, in the weed-ridden empty lots that once held trailers, and in the hand-built homes that were abandoned after the storm, rotted to their foundations.

Built by freed slaves in 1865, the first year of their emancipation, the town holds the distinction of being the oldest black-founded city in the nation. The streets of its downtown carry the names of its founding families: Suggs, Black, Bethel.

Its founders chose a lush river valley, which provided good cropland but carried significant risk. The Neuse River is prone to flooding, and it empties into a basin. At the bottom of the basin is Princeville.

Catastrophic, record flooding after Hurricane Floyd destroyed nine out of every 10 buildings in Princeville. Only seven homes in the city were covered by flood insurance.



Demonte White, 21, in front of his inundated home in Tarboro, N.C. (Nigel Duara / Los Angeles Times)

The ensuing rush to rebuild came with the typical coterie of disaster-related fraud, especially contractors who took money up front and abandoned their work.

When recovery efforts ended, the financial toll on residents mounted. Many families were still paying their original mortgage in 1999, and were forced to take on additional loans to rebuild. Some, like James Earl Whitehead, 67, are still paying off both.

"We got in debt and we never did get out," Whitehead said.

Now, Whitehead said, he hopes the home "that owns me" is still intact when he returns. Whitehead, like many of the evacuees of Princeville, took shelter in the nearby town of Tarboro while he waited to see whether his home would survive.

Local historian Tony Suggs worries that some people in Princeville took the wrong message from the 1999 floods.

"You got people who had shacks, really shacks, with water leaking up through the floor," Suggs said. "And after the storm, they had a double-wide trailer" from disaster-relief funds.

The flooding halved the town's residents, though some returned. Then the transplants began to arrive, some related to residents, others looking for cheap land to start anew.

"None had any stake in the community, so they can just leave," Suggs said. "And they do."

Those who stay to rebuild will, in some ways, be helping to found a new town once again, Suggs said. Others consider the town to have essentially died in 1999.

"It's already gone," said Demonte White, 21, whose grandmother lives in Princeville and whose own home in Tarboro was halfway underwater on Monday. "You see it right away when you [are] there. Princeville *been* gone."

If the town continues to flood, it may not be worth saving, said Sarah Johnson, owner of a radio station in Tarboro.

"Personally, we should erect a historic monument and maybe those people shouldn't consider going back to that town," Johnson said.

Floodwaters crept into Princeville on Friday night. Some people instinctively fled, driving to higher ground in nearby Rocky Mount or to the shelter provided by Edgecombe County and the Red Cross.

Some stayed, and some tried to brave the rising waters.

One of them required a rescue.

Donnie Leonard continued to call out into the darkness, the only reply the sound of rushing water.

Then, faintly, a voice. The men on the shore cheered.

The women had escaped the car and hung on to a tree branch. Powell shouted that he was calling for a water rescue from Rocky Mount. Five men in a boat arrived within an hour and pulled her in.

Firefighters dropped the woman back at her home in Princeville. Two days later, on Sunday, Edgecombe County officials ordered a mandatory evacuation of the town.

Donnie Leonard drove past the rescued woman's house on his way out of town. But she refused to evacuate.

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UPDATES:

6:50 p.m.: The article was updated with staff reporting.

5:46 p.m.: The article was updated with details from Princeville, N.C.

The article was originally posted at 9:10 a.m.