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A Science Service Feature

? WHY THE WEATHER ?

By Dr. Charles F. Brooks
of Clark University

A WINTER HURRICANE

A tropical cyclone sweeping the Atlantic coast of the United States in December is almost unprecedented. The recent storm originated in the northwestern Caribbean late in November, passed through Yucatan Channel, blew across and flooded southern Florida, and then roared up the Atlantic coast early in December. At sea winds of hurricane velocity were reported. Since the Weather Bureau began systematic observations of tropical hurricanes in 1878 none has affected the Atlantic coast of the United States during the winter months. In late November, 1888, however, a hurricane swept our coast and did considerable damage. In the fragmentary record of tropical storms chronicled from 1493 to 1855 on this side of the Atlantic there are but six which touched our coast in winter: Dec., 1830, Jan., 1831, Nov. 30 and Dec. 21, 1836, Dec., 1839, and Jan., 1855.

Why we should have had this storm is unknown at present. However, since tropical cyclones do form where there is an abundance of warm humid air that has been set into rotary motion, we can surmise something. We may guess that ocean surface temperatures in the western Caribbean were above normal. They were so at Colon, Panama, in October. We may safely believe also that the unusually cold weather of late November in the South, with freezing temperatures extending even into Florida, provided a contrast in temperature and an air movement favorable to developing low pressure over the warm water and to starting the whirl. Finally, it is likely that the large mass of cold air over the eastern United States at the time the storm crossed Florida was responsible for some of the intensification of the storm as it came up the coast.

(Tomorrow: Pressure Waves Control Weather)
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