Ten years ago, Hurricane Irene made its mark on the Adirondacks as a whole, and in particular the Ausable River Valley. Today its effects are still seen, both in the great scars left by landslides on the mountains, and in the psyches of the people who lived through it.

In commemoration of the 10-year anniversary of this event, Jay Community News has compiled an archive of remembrances describing the flood, and also creating a permanent tribute to the many people who pitched in to undo the damage. We hope this archive is useful both now and in the future to document the awesome power of nature and the equally awesome power of people to help each other in times of need.

Adirondack Almanack
“Remembering Irene, 10 Years Later: The Flooding of Styles Brook”
by Lorraine Duvall, August 8, 2021

Ten years ago, Tropical Storm Irene's torrential rains devastated the Ausable River Watershed. I tell my story of the first day living near one of its tributaries.

During the afternoon of August 28, 2011, we watched a ditch uphill from our house become a raging stream on our property that borders Styles Brook. The gravel on our driveway washed away. It was not until our closest neighbor from Highland Farm called late afternoon that we realized the seriousness of the rain storm from Tropical Storm Irene. Our neighbor asked if we wanted to stay at their house after informing us that a nearby bridge had just succumbed to the roaring waters of Styles Brook.

We were flooded-in, though. Styles Brook, normally 10 feet wide that passes under a nearby culvert, had overflowed to about 400 feet, which covered the town.

Photo by Lorraine Duval
road that leads from Styles Brook Road to our driveway.

Styles Brook originates in the Jay Mountain Wilderness area descending 2187 feet until it reaches the East Branch of the Ausable River at 766ft at a bridge on Route 9N – halfway between the Hamlets of Keene and Upper Jay. Approximately eight to eleven inches of rain fell over a ten-hour period August 28, 2011 causing devastation across the Ausable River watershed. The Towns of Keene and Jay were hit the hardest.

The flooding water of Styles Brook subsided the next morning, allowing us to survey the damage. We maneuvered our truck on the town road around the foot-deep potholes caused by the force of the water the day and night before cascading over and around the culvert. We reached Styles Brook Road, and saw that the bridge upstream was impassible.

We were pleased, however, that the gravel road leading toward town showed only slight damage from the storm. After a mile passing through the woods, we continued down Styles Brook Road for two miles (which by this time is Macadam), dodging washed-out portions until we could go no further because the road was washed-out. The road parallels the brook, which plunges 747 feet from Highland Farm, then flattens out before it reaches the state highway, Route 9N. The raging brook had cut a ten-foot swath out of the road, eliminating any hope of reaching the state highway.

The next day I met the four environmental researchers who were renting a cabin at the juncture where the road was washed-out. They were from North and South Carolina and Tennessee doing an invasive species study along the Ausable River watershed. They told me their story.

The four had spent the afternoon of the Irene storm taking photos and videos of the torrent of water over the falls, and the trees and houses that toppled into the brook.

They shared their experiences:

“We could feel the boulders crashing past the cabin. It was so insane, like thunder.”

“In the afternoon the trees started falling in. Fif-

Photo by Lorraine Duval
ty-foot trees were falling down in front of us. And then the house was gone.”

“It was the coolest, but most destruction thing I’ve ever seen. The craziest thing – changed so fast.”

They took a nap after they saw the house go down. “We were hung over. It was still raining.”

Lying in bed the four thought about leaving, but did not know if they could get up the hill. They had seen the road washed away just below them.

Earlier they had moved their cars to higher ground and talked about staying in the cars all night not knowing if the house would be flooded.

The caretaker at Highland Farm drove down in the evening with his ATV and insisted the four come up to the farm on higher ground and stay overnight. They did, which is where I met them the next morning.

At first they wanted to remain in the cabin because they were cooking dinner. Then changed their minds. “We saw everything we could see, our camera stopped working, we were soaked.”

“We were evacuated,” one continued. “I live off the coast of South Carolina and never been evacuated before I came to New York. Hurricanes are not a big deal for me.”

The house was never flooded, water came just up to the foot of the steps. The force of the water had carved out another path, diverting the stream from the front of their house. Two others downstream were destroyed, neither occupied at the time. A woman in the house across the brook spent the evening and the night on the second floor with her cat, as the water rushed through the first floor. She was on the phone trying to find help, until the power went out. No one could rescue her until the morning.

Ten Years Later:
Losses and Lessons of Irene

An Original Film of the Storm, Produced and Edited by Carol Blaksee-Collin and Jimm Collin

This amazing little film includes commentary by affected community members, and a panel discussion about the destruction and then the community’s own recovery efforts. It was produced to mark the 10 year anniversary of the storm.


Adirondack Community, Sponsored by the Keene Valley Library

Jery Huntley, project coordinator

The Adirondack Community story project, sponsored by the Keene Valley Library, has collected stories and podcasts about Tropical Storm Irene. They can be found on www.myadirondackstory.org.

Look under “Catastrophes” for first-hand accounts of Hurricane Irene experiences from Erin Pelkey, Naj Wikoff, Lorraine Duvall, Linda Deyo, Martha Gallagher, Marcia Mosey, Dan Mason, Val Warner, Linda Rasco, and Jon Brown: https://www.myadirondackstory.org/catastrophes

Check out “Podcasts” for two on Hurricane Irene: https://www.myadirondackstory.org/podcasts

Respect Our River, Tropical Storm Irene 10th Anniversary Forum, Aug. 18, 2021 at Keene Valley, NY

These remarks were presented at this forum organized and hosted by the Keene Valley Congregational Church in collaboration with the Ausable River Association.
On August 27th 2011 my family and I enjoyed an idyllic day in Burlington, Vermont, ending with one of the most beautiful sunsets I can remember ever seeing. Perhaps it should have forewarned us because it was in fact Red sky except I always thought that meant sailor’s delight and not sailor’s warning. How could we have known that the rain storm that was predicted would break all records.

I was the president of the Wells Memorial Library board at the time and our treasurer, Phyllis called me and told me that she could see that the library was surrounded by water. The next morning we drove through debris on route 9N to a library that was no longer surrounded by water, but the handicap ramp was completely askew and as I tried to enter the building the door got stuck on the silt that was left behind from when the river literally ran through our little building. I could see water still standing in the basement all the way up the stairs eerily reflecting filtered sunlight.

It was another idyllic August day after a biblical event. Volunteers poured in much like the river water and everyone from board members, neighbors and Friends of the library to Capital district home Depot employees, a Waldorf School from Saratoga college students and more came to sweep, dig and carry out thousands of ruined books.

Author Kate Messner and her husband Tom, the meteorologist from the Plattsburgh news station were driving by one of the days that we were in the process of doing just that. As an author, Kate was moved to see so many books ruined and not only did she and Tom come and help out, but she reached out to publishing houses and author friends and the Bookstore Plus for support and we received donations of triple the number that we had lost allowing us to refill our shelves and also benefit from one of our best book sales ever.

We were fortunate in that we had some flood insurance and the opportunity to write a library construction Grant in addition to getting matching funds from the Lake Placid Education Foundation and the then newly formed Adirondack Community Trust. We rebuilt, refurbished and some say came back better than ever thanks to the masterful renovation by the Brewer Brothers and new bookshelves from Dan Vincent. We were closed from the end of August until January and until the recent pandemic, we’ve been open and welcoming visitors to a reborn library ever since.

By the Numbers

Peter Slocum

This fact sheet was presented at the forum.

STORMS AND THE RIVER

Irene was not the first large storm to ravage the upper Ausable Valley in the towns of Keene and Jay. Working to replace the Walton Bridge from Hulls Falls Road, people realized this was only the most recent of a series of crossings that had to be rebuilt. The most famous event was the “Freshet of ’1856,” a stupendous storm that tore out bridges, mills, homes, farms, and almost everything else for miles downriver. Rebuilding the economy took more than a decade, and life was changed forever.

Perhaps Irene did not have so profound an impact, but it surely represents a continuing reality for the immediate and long-term future. Irene exceeded the so-called 500-year flood level for the Ausable River.

COMMUNITY RISING

While Irene visited incredible destruction upon the East Branch of the Ausable River Valley on August 28, 2011, it also unleashed an amazing display of community cohesion – neighbors helping neighbors with money, with labor, with advice and with moral support.

This totally volunteer effort was able to put checks into the hands of local business and homeowners on the Friday after the Sunday storm. Money poured into the area from around the country. The state and federal governments spent far more and did essential
long-term rebuilding work. But the local community jumped in quickly, wisely and strategically.

Partnering with committees in both towns, the Adirondack Foundation made 204 grants to help the owners of 104 homes, 14 businesses (including self-employed contractors) and four civic projects. Not a single business in either Keene or Jay was forced to close (not all of them needed Foundation funds). None of the 39 Keene homeowners who received help was forced to leave town.

At least 1,320 donors gave more than $800,000, roughly $600,000 for Keene and about $200,000 for Jay. This doesn’t count the thousands of others who gave at block parties, pig roasts, local concerts, restaurants and local business.

LOCAL AID

The Keene-based volunteers of the Upper Ausable Community Association worked to identify people in need and distribute money that poured into The Adirondack Foundation treasury. Since those volunteers knew most people in Keene, they were able to work with their neighbors, sometimes even helping reluctant families to apply, and maintaining confidentiality. A volunteer committee created a simple one-page application, and encouraged people to apply for help with everything from tearing out drywall, replacing wiring and windows and plumbing, rebuilding house frames, and new furnaces.

Some of these funds helped the Keene Volunteer Fire Department purchase land for its new station, to replace the one wiped out when Irene turned Gulf Brook into a destructive wall of water.

Local highway crews worked round the clock for days, to reopen roads and access drives, clear away debris and stop the river and brooks from causing even more damage as the week wore on. In one case, a crew rescued a cancer patient desperate to get to treatment far away. Irene was responsible for an estimated 58 deaths nationwide, but none in the upper Ausable Valley.

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

The Federal Emergency Management Agency aid managed by the state and county governments, provided $5,105,673 for home assistance in Essex County. These funds included property buy-outs – three in Keene and 35 in Ausable Forks and Jay.

FEMA does not provide money for businesses in disasters like Irene. Some businesses can eventually get government-backed loans, but those loans do not provide immediate crisis aid.

FEMA reimbursed $3.4 million worth of road and bridge repair just in the Town of Keene. The last project is underway on Gulf Brook in Keene right now. New York State also contributed millions of dollars, covering costs usually billed to local communities.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Recovery. The spontaneous outpouring of support, and the local aid that went to hundreds of families and businesses, was made possible by thousands of individual acts. As important, there were local non-profit organizations in place and ready to act. Without those groups, the generosity would not have reached its target nearly as quickly or as effectively.

Keeping those or similar organizations in place is critical. When the Keene Valley Grocery fire occurred in 2018, this same combination came together almost overnight to help the business rebuild.

The River. The East Branch of the Ausable River running through Keene and Jay and Ausable Forks is clearly vulnerable to similar events in the future. In fact, studies of the Lake Champlain basin forecast more major storms and 10% to 15% more rain in coming years. These climate change effects require vigilance, and ecologically effective and intelligent preparation, including natural riverbed protections. Living with the river in this valley does not mean dikes and concrete dams. It means natural adaptation. The River is why these communities exist in the first place.

Irene Reflections

By Lorraine Duvall, presented at Sunday Church Service, August 22, 2021

“The sun shines not on us but in us. The rivers flow not past, but through us. Thrilling, tingling, vibrating every fiber and cell of the substance of our bodies, making them glide and sing. The trees wave and the flowers bloom in our bodies as well as our souls, and every bird song, wind song, and tremendous storm song of the rocks in the heart of the mountains is our song, our very own, and sings our love.”

— John Muir
Yesterday I received an email with information about a nature-based children’s curriculum that provides spiritual experiences to help children “Honor, protect, serve, and be in awe of Mother Nature.”

When my grandkids were young, I provided them with experiences of the Adirondack waters in its different forms – paddling our canoes on Chapel Pond, tipping the boats over so they could gain respect for their vulnerability and relationship to this natural phenomenon, walking through the rushing water in Styles Brook, and swimming in a water hole on the East Branch. Sometimes we’d just sit and watch the brook rushing by as we ate a snack.

We’ve provided a number of experiential opportunities through the Creation Justice Church initiative to experience this awe – Forest bathing, silent canoe trips. The Tropical Storm Irene events were meant to do this, to help us experience the awe as a natural power of nature.

In Wednesday night’s program, Respecting the River, the panel and film showed us the destruction of a fiery river, and of family, friends, neighbors, and strangers coming together and helping one another. The tour of the Ausable river on Friday gave us a real feel for how the efforts of the Ausable River Association were grounded in working with the natural characteristics of river waters to help mitigate future disasters. This morning’s service is meant to put us in touch with God’s creation, an acceptance and reverence for the power of our waters. Of how communities came together.

What can we learn – not only remediation solutions to such a storm, but, for me, acceptance and reverence for the power of nature. Environmentalist John Muir writes that every life-form, and every rock formation is ‘throbbing’ and ‘pulsing’ with the divine. Our river is always ‘throbbing’ and ‘pulsing’ with the divine. As I paddled on the West Branch of the Ausable River yesterday I felt the divine pulsating while dodging the boulders in the river, marveled at the colors of the early fall flowers hanging on the bank, quietly watched a dozen turkey vultures perched on the branches of a dead tree, and became enchanted with the circles in the river the fish made when they feasted on the bugs on the surface of the water.

We are learning to consult the earth and its waters as our teacher, to allow the wildness of the natural world to awaken us – to get in touch with the wildness of the divine within ourselves.

During Irene, the river spoke to us with a shout, rather than a whimper. The waters roared over Styles Brook Falls, tore-up Routes 73 and Route 9N, washed houses down the river, and found paths it had never taken before.

Muir writes, rivers flow not just past us but through us … every bird song, wind song, and storm song is our song.

Irene is our song.

Adirondack Explorer
“Looking back at Irene, 10 years later”
by Tim Rowland, August 22, 2021

Two major floods hit the Ausable River valley in 2011, one in April, one in August. This wall at Fred’s Auto Repair near Au Sable Forks shows the high-water marks. Photo by Kenneth Aaron/Explorer file photo

This coffee shop was among the businesses damaged by Tropical Storm Irene. Photo by Tom Woodman.
The Daily Gazette
“Irene 10 years later: Adirondacks still bear scars of ‘perfect storm’”
by Zachary Matson, August 24, 2021


Produced by Jim and Carol Blakeslee-Collins

Mountain Lake Journal
“Tropical Storm Irene: Ten Years Later”
August 27, 2021

“As New York dodged a bullet from Henri, we look at back at the damage caused by another tropical storm, Irene, 10 years ago this week that damaged or destroyed more than 200 homes and businesses and devastated a handful of communities in the Eastern Adirondacks. We take you back and show you the story our Jack LaDuke did on September 1, 2011 on the destruction in Adirondack communities ravaged by Irene’s wrath.”

https://mountainlake.org/tropical-storm-irene-ten-years-later/

My Reflections of the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Irene
by Randy Douglas, former Town of Jay Supervisor, and Essex County Board of Supervisors Chairman

These are my reflections of the 10th Anniversary of Hurricane Irene, the costliest and most devastating disaster to ever hit the towns of Jay and Keene. Over the last few days, former Keene Supervisor Bill Ferebee and I have done numerous interviews with local and national media regarding our remembrance of that dreadful day and the recovery efforts after.

To me it was the hardest emotional issue I have ever faced, as emotional as a death in the family. First, the immediate response is still so vivid in my mind as I remember working with our amazing local emergency service departments, the three fire departments within the Town of Jay, Au Sable Forks, Jay, and Upper Jay, the Au Sable Forks Ambulance Service, and our Town of Jay Public Works Department lead by Chris Garrow. These public service volunteers and workers literally put their own lives on the line to save others with amazing heroic rescues that sometimes get lost in the whole scope of the natural disaster itself. We received assistance from all our neighboring towns’ Emergency Services, Highway Departments, and municipal elected leaders, including Black Brook, Wilmington, Chesterfield, Au Sable, Peru, Willsboro, and Keene, to name just a few. I remain forever grateful for everyone’s team effort.

I looked back over the last few days with my friend Bill Ferebee, reminiscing over coffee and a visit on his house porch, and I can’t think of anything we could have done differently. Yes, we made mistakes, but everything we did and every decision we made had to be made quickly. We both know we did so with the best interests of our two towns’ residents’ well-being in our hearts. We received lots of credit for our leadership and, oh yes, some criticism along the way, which comes with the territory as an elected official. However, all the credit goes to everyone who assisted in all capacities.

It was a true North Country effort of looking out for each other during the worst of times. As I’ve said numerous times over the years, it was truly neighbor helping neighbor, and immediately upon daybreak of August 29th, it could be clearly seen. There were no jurisdictional lines, no political lines, and no property lines. I witnessed firsthand neighbors who had long lasting feuds assisting each other, removing mud and salvaging whatever they could from their homes and businesses during the worst of times. Differences among people were put on hold so everyone could start to get their lives somewhat back in working order.

I am most thankful and proud of our Town of Jay Board members at the time 10 years ago: Amy Shalton, Gerry Hall, Tom McDonald and Archie Depo, as they trusted me and my decisions and assisted me in any way they could. My office staff of clerk Carol Greenley, and my office manager Susan Richards, clerk Jamie Rose Douglass, and historian Sharron Hewston, Town/County Attorney Dan Manning and all of our DPW Department employees worked day and night for weeks without a day off, with many of them having their own homes damaged by flooding and wind damages from the hurricane.
I remember thinking to myself that no one said “that’s not my job to do,” as all appointed employees and elected officials did whatever needed to be done to start our recovery efforts. Our housing director Patti Hathaway, our Town Clerk Bea Pelkey, and tax collector June Taylor, and codes officers Tom Worthington and John Hudson all took on supporting roles that were definitely out of their normal scope of duties to assist in any way needed. They all stepped up, and their efforts were second to none.

I’m also very thankful for the assistance of my colleagues on the Essex County Board of Supervisors, and all Essex County employees who came and assisted, never expecting anything in return— they just wanted to help in any way possible. All our county department heads worked day and night for months to assist in recovery efforts. The immediate response also saw help from all fire departments from Essex, Clinton, and Franklin counties. The collaboration between Don Jaquish, Eric Day, the emergency service directors for Essex and Clinton counties, along with my appointed Town Emergency Service Director Dan Deyoe, and the National Guard were just so professional.

The help we received immediately afterward from the local Red Cross, our resident volunteers, and all of the local Fire Departments’ auxiliary teams, the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, the National Guard and all the resources provided by AVCS Superintendent Paul Savage, the United Way team led by John Bernardi, and ACAP’s Alan Jones and Ellen Gordon were responsible for making sure our people had all the resources needed to get by in the short term while I focused on the long term recovery plans.

The immediate assistance from President Barack Obama, U.S. Senators Gillibrand, and Schumer, Congressman Bill Owens and, soon after, Congresswoman Stefanik, Governor Andrew Cuomo, State Senator Betty Little, and Assemblywoman Teresa Sayward was so desperately needed and so very much appreciated. My dear friend Assemblywoman Janet Duprey whose district did not even include Jay or Keene, came and spent numerous days assisting my staff. She even accompanied me in showing Senator Chuck Schumer around our devastated area and was so helpful in filling him in on anything I may have missed during his visit.

I have a great respect for fellow Board of Legislatures/ Supervisor Chairs and longtime friends from neighboring counties Dan Stec (Warren), Billy Jones (Franklin), Jim Langley (Clinton), and Bill Farber (Hamilton), as their friendship, assistance, and guidance following the hurricane I will hold near and dear to my heart forever.

I remember being so thankful to the local and national chambers of the Red Cross, the National Guard, and the Army Corps of Engineers, FEMA, Social Security offices, Small Business Administration, and all the local and public health officials, amongst other county, state, and federal agencies who set up shop in our community center to assist all our residents and businesses who were desperately seeking help. A disaster such as Hurricane Irene is truly a testament that we can all put politics aside for the good of the people. We had volunteers that came from as far away as California, and from all over the country. Yes, that day we sadly lost 24 homes that belonged to longtime residents. All had to make that dreadful decision to either rebuild or take the state/federal buyout. I supported the buyout because I did not want our people to have to worry every time it rained. Yes, we lost tax base, but I could live with fact that these residents that I represented were no longer going to be in harm’s way the next time the Au Sable river got angry. We lost generations of families’ dwellings from this decision and that saddens me, but I still believe it was the right thing to do.

Many people don’t realize that, in all, the total damages between the Towns of Jay and Keene was over $25 million. At the time, our annual budgets for both towns combined were less than $4 million.

This is where the scary part came in for me as the CEO of the Town of Jay.

With the assistance and guidance of Dan Manning, I had to make the decision to borrow $3 million to do the immediate repairs, as we had major damages to our water and sewer systems, damages to many roads, bridges, sidewalks, youth facilities, etc. The local community bank had to trust me and my word that I could get it paid back. At the time I had no guarantees that the state and federal government reimbursements would be coming. Most state and federal government financial resources are reimbursed only if you can show that the money spent was only on the disaster at hand, and every dime had to be accounted for. Yes, it was a reimbursement program that sometimes took months and years. We were able to pay Community Bank back with no interest as they were truly a community bank
during desperate times. I am very thankful for all the resources provided by the state and the federal government for the immediate public safety response and for all the funding they provided to make both the Towns of Jay and Keene whole again, because not one dollar in recovery and rebuilding efforts during Mr. Ferebee’s and my time as your town supervisors was placed on the local annual budget.

The motto of building back smarter and better with the guidance of the U.S Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Ausable River Association hopefully protects us from the next natural flooding disaster that may come our way. I could go on and on about my reflection of the effects Hurricane Irene had on both me personally and the Town of Jay that I love so much.

I like best to remember that, yes, it was one of the saddest days in our town’s history, but one of the proudest days of my life in public service. I want to say I’m sorry if there is anyone I missed mentioning in this reflection.

31I also want to once again thank everyone in the Town of Jay for having the trust in me during a very difficult time for us all. It was an honor and a privilege to work for and serve as your Town of Jay Supervisor, and Essex County Board of Supervisors Chairman for almost 12 years. Lastly, I thank my loving family, my wife Peggy, daughter Savannah, and son Shane for being so understanding for my time spent in service for Jay and Essex County. In closing I want to say good luck to all the candidates running for local office, as it’s not easy to put yourselves out there especially with social media today. I have had lengthy conversations with both supervisor candidates Garth Rogers and Matt Stanley and I have offered both of them my full support in any way needed after the residents have voted. May God Bless you all, and the Town of Jay and thanks to the JCN for allowing me to reminisce about one of the most trying times of my life.