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## *Back on the Map: Princeville Rebuilds After Flood's Devastation*

**W**hen Theresa Richardson went to bed on the night of Hurricane Floyd, she hadn't a clue of a devastating flood that would all but wipe her tiny hometown of Princeville off the map. Like most town residents, she thought the worst of the storm was behind her. The waters of the nearby Tar River had receded during the day, and Richardson assumed the storm would calm by morning.

"I thought to myself that all of the rain was over, but that night took everyone by surprise," says Richardson. "The police and fire rescue came out with bull horns at 3 o'clock in the morning and told everybody to evacuate because the dike had busted. When I came back [from the evacuation], I had lost everything."

But fortunately for Richardson, the story didn't end there. A renter before the flood, she is now a homeowner. Her story illustrates the most remarkable, yet unexpected effect the flood

had on the town of Princeville, population 940. Before the flood, the percentage of households that were owners was 54 percent compared to a post-flood percentage of 60 percent. The 2000 U.S. Census found the post-Floyd population of Princeville to be much reduced,<sup>1</sup> though former residents are gradually returning.

"Those numbers [of homeowners] are rising every day," says Bobby Hopkins, Princeville's town manager. "When a house is rebuilt, those that were have-nots now at least have something." Hopkins says that for many long-time residents like Richardson, Floyd money enabled them to be homeowners for the first time.

"You can ask anybody, and they will say that nothing like Hurricane Floyd has ever hit North Carolina. Having two hurricanes back-to-back [Dennis and Floyd], we received more rainfall in a matter of weeks than we usually



Long Vo

—Princeville, *continued*

receive all year," Hopkins says. "You could say it was a fluke."

Princeville's annual rainfall total is 42 inches, which is the amount of rain the town was inundated with as a result of the two hurricanes. Dennis and Floyd were about two weeks apart, and the sheer amount of rain in such a short period of time created a rift in the protective dike and flooded houses to their rooftops or higher. The dike, which has since been rebuilt, is essentially the only thing between Princeville and the Tar River.

"It took enormous pressure to buckle the dike in addition to it being weakened by kids riding their ATV's (All Terrain Vehicles) all over it," says Hopkins. Today, Hopkins keeps a wary eye on the earthen structure to assure that it is still sound. "One thing I do once a week now is take a walk on the dike to make sure there are no signs of erosion."

The dike, rebuilt against the advice of some experts, looks like nothing more than a glorified hill with grass covering it. It is 30- to 35-feet higher than the Tar River that parallels it, and the river is visible, but quite a distance away. "When people hear the word dike, they expect something more interesting and dangerous, but this is all it is," Hopkins says. "The Army Corps of Engineers considered making the dike higher this time. However, the city of Tarboro would be at higher risk of flooding, so the Corps of Engineers made it the same height and is administering a \$3 million dike study for further recommendation."

After the storm, residents of the Edgecombe County town had the opportunity to participate in a federal buy-out program that essentially would have meant the end of Princeville due to excessive risk of future flooding. But there was the town's history to contend with. Former slaves first settled here in 1865 along the banks of the Tar River under the protection of Union troops at the close of the Civil War. The town was originally known as Freedom Hill, and in 1885, was incorporated and renamed Princeville after one of the town's citizens, Turner Prince. Today, Princeville is the oldest town in the nation owned exclusively by African-Americans.

"[The descendants of] these citizens have been here since the 1800s," Hopkins says. "This is their land, and they take pride in it. Families have raised families here. This is their land, so how can you take that away from them?" After exhaustive debate and deliberation, the Princeville Town Council voted 3-2 to rebuild rather than accept the buyout.

The townspeople who remain seem pleased with the decision. Today, driving through the streets of Princeville, new houses belie the fact that there was ever a disaster, and only the occasional condemned house or crew of volunteer laborers serves as a reminder of Floyd's passing.

Hopkins feels that although Floyd was devastating for families, it actually resulted in a boon for the community. "The flood is sort of like a blessing in disguise," Hopkins says. "Many of the homes were 60-70 years old, 400-600 square feet, and in bad condition. As we ride around today, we see better and larger homes."

After the flood, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rebuilt the dike and added a gate that will close over the railroad tracks where they traverse through the dike. "Before, where those railroad tracks are, a flood would form a river along the tracks and the water would flow directly into Princeville," Hopkins says. "Now we have gates to shut that off." With the new dike in place, Hopkins says that Princeville becomes situated on a 500-year floodplain versus a 100-year floodplain. Being in a 100-year floodplain means that the town has an estimated 1 percent chance every year of being flooded. A 500-year floodplain lessens these chances by five times, making the chance .2 percent that Princeville will be flooded in any given year.

"The decision was made to rebuild, and that is what I am here to do," Hopkins says. "Hurricanes blow down million dollar homes along the coast, and people rebuild. So why not rebuild here?"

With the \$14,299,272 received from the state thus far, Princeville is embarking on a series of projects. The town put together a Princeville recovery and land use strategy plan, which it did not have before the flood. This recovery plan is a comprehensive compilation of



*Susan Lyon,  
resident of Princeville*

*Long Vo*

all the damage that Floyd caused and the recommended restorations and improvements. These recommendations range from the need for new and wider roads to the types of houses that should be built in place of the condemned ones. Without a recovery plan, Princeville would not have been eligible for state or federal funds.

Today, there are four new subdivisions in Princeville. A new elementary school opened in August 2001, and construction began on a new town hall. Hopkins says Princeville also wants to highlight its deep historical roots and rich culture. The old town hall is going to be turned into a new museum and welcome center. "In five years, we will see a whole new Princeville, not because it is not there anymore, but because it will be so new and different," Hopkins said.

Susan Lyon is among those who is already experiencing the new Princeville. When the flood destroyed her home, Lyon had to move in with her children in Richmond, Va. She returned when her house was rebuilt. "It was hard to get back

after you lose everything, but my [late] husband asked me to take care of this place," Lyon says.

Sam Knight, Princeville's city planner, also decided to stay. "Leaving this place was never an option," Knight said. "I was raised here, and all that I know is here." And Knight said that the decision to rebuild was not a difficult one for the town's elected officials. "When your constituents decide they want to come back, you listen or they vote you out." And so by the margin of a 3-2 vote, Princeville is back on the map.

*—Long Vo and Patrick Cash*

#### FOOTNOTE

<sup>1</sup> The population figure 940 is from the 2000 U.S. Census. The 1990 U.S. Census found the population of Princeville to be 1,652, while state projections placed the population prior to the flood in 1999 at 2,157. Princeville Town Manager Bobby Hopkins believes the 2000 figure of 940 is too low.

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*Long Vo and Patrick Cash were Center interns in the summer of 2001.*