



## Irene ranks as year's top story

Storm spawned three in the top 10

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Editor

Like all the years that preceded and those to follow, 2011 in Edenton-Chowan experienced its share of newsworthy milestones.

But, where there's a storm, a rainbow can just as easily counter. And that was often the case here. For every setback suffered, bright news usually followed.

Some stories are simply shocking or so bizarre that they warrant our immediate attention — those that we can't look away. Of course, there are stories that elate or inspire us, feel good articles that instill hope. Then, there are stories that cause anger or sadness. Regardless, most leave a lasting impact.

Significant stories typically have legs, or stories that tend to linger or provide a ripple effect that spawns others. This year's top story was one such example, producing three of the year's top 10 stories published in the Chowan Herald.

**No. 1 - Irene lashes deluge, high winds**

What is sure to be this year's top story for numerous newspapers also marks the Chowan Herald's biggest news story of the year. Thankfully, no one was injured here in the nationally captivating storm and while Irene did not wreak nearly as much as damage as in some neighboring counties, Edenton-Chowan did not totally escape the storm's wrath either.

For days, residents, businesses and government officials planned and braced for the Category 2 Hurricane that churned offshore in the Atlantic before wobbling inland with Irene's eye eventually crossing over Edenton-Chowan Aug. 27. With sustained winds of roughly 65 mph and 11 inches of rain, the area sustained wind and water damages from an 8-foot storm surge. Trees fell and waters flooded en route to days, and in some instances weeks, of recovery and repair.

Thousands were without electricity from a storm that despite being downgraded to a tropical storm by the time it arrived here, damaged 143 homes and five businesses.

Perhaps, the storm's most devastated victims were area farmers. Wind and soggy fields severely damaged crops, or the county's chief economic engine. Projections showed that Irene costs county farmers \$5.6 million. Cotton fared the worst, particularly with what many thought to be the finest crop in recent memory.

**No. 2 - Chowan fires county manager**

Less than one year after county commissioners narrowly decided to remove the interim tag from his title of county manager and give him the permanent job, the board voted to fire Paul Parker on Sept. 6 for "failure to meet expectations."

The first-time manager opted to bolt his duties and leave town while Hurricane Irene was bearing down on Edenton-Chowan



FILE PHOTOS

Hurricane Irene lashed the area with high winds and deluge. Emergency workers had to rescue stranded motorists, as seen here.

when the area was under a state of emergency. With commissioners and county employees working around the clock to ensure taxpayers' safety, Parker returned to Pender County where his wife still lived in the home they shared before he was hired.

**No. 3 - COA, Walker alumni spar ... compromise**

In what seemingly became a political hot potato with all stakeholders looking for someone else to take unpopular action, College of The Albemarle officials and the D.F. Walker Alumni Association reached an amicable truce while county leaders watched from a ringside seat.

Efforts to cut expenses by prompted county commissioners to begin its property consolidation plans by forcing COA to relocate its campus from the Edenton Village Shopping Center to the former D.F. Walker school. The move would save taxpayers \$250,000 annually by eliminating a lease in favor of COA occupying county-owned property.

To do so, however, meant displacing Walker alumni from its meeting venue, held there in part because of the former African American school's history during segregated education. The alumni group interpreted the displacement as another slight of racial injustice at the hands of a county government that keeps renegeing from prior commitments.

Instead, COA was forced to do the dirty work since commissioners kept insisting that the two entities settle their differences. COA wanted complete control of the campus so it could proceed to lay its foundation for an optimistic future for both black and white students.

Walker Alumni thought COA to be greedy since it required every nook of the defunct school, especially a meeting room used to celebrate Walker's heritage.

In the end, both parties decided to compromise. COA got control amid a contractual agreement that the Alumni keep an area reserved for meetings.

**No. 4 - Census: Edenton population shrinks; town disputes**

According to the 2010 U.S. Census, Edenton's population is shrinking. Collected data revealed that the town's population decreased by 390 residents, or 7.23 percent. The drop from 5,394 residents in 2000 to 5,004 in 2010, marked the state's only local municipality to decline over the last decade. Already stingy from a sour economy,



Edenton celebrates its win against Northeastern.

local merchants became increasingly concerned about commerce in a town with a decreasing population.

But, town officials dispute the Census tally, suggesting some new neighborhoods were not accurately included. It's not the first time U.S. Census has erred with Edenton data. In 2000, Census reported the town's population as too high after workers counted dormitory residents at Chowan University as Edenton residents. Adding insult to injury, U.S. Census then used the incorrect 2000 data for comparison in 2010.

State demographers report Edenton's population to be 5,166, or a 2.2 percent increase. Meanwhile, Census data shows Chowan County's population grew by 267 residents, or 1.84 percent.

**No. 5 - Almost...Aces' return to gridiron prominence**

After a long dry spell for a high school once renowned for its gridiron prowess, the Edenton Aces stunned football fans with a sudden resurgence under second-year coach Wes Matterna. Edenton finished 11-1 after a narrow third round 2A playoff loss to eventual state champ Tarboro, which claimed its third straight state title.

Despite the heartbreaking loss, the Aces finished as Northeastern Coastal

Conference champions with an undefeated regular season record. Even when fans thought the win streak would come to an end, the team shocked fans with incredible come-from-behind victories, including an 80-yard drive with 1:17 left to play en route to a 20-17 victory against last year's conference champ and state runner-up Northeastern.

**No. 6 - Bats force 11 to undergo rabies shots**

Hurricane Irene spun another major story in 2011 when it was discovered that a bat-infested D.F. Walker gym used as an emergency pet shelter during the storm led to 11 people having to undergo a series of rabies vaccinations and 15 dogs quarantined for six months — all at county expense.

At least one puppy subsequently died under quarantine after it contracted Parvo while being housed at the Tri-County Animal Shelter.

State law required the action after it was learned that bats swarmed the gym after dark and could have bitten either the people or pets while they slept.

Failure to follow set rules and a breakdown in communication contributed to the embarrassing debacle, especially when it was learned that the infestation had been going on for some time and to the knowledge other county employees.

During that time, the gym had been used routinely for children's recreational activities.

**No. 7 - What a bummer**

Only a year removed from the possibility of dissolving amid financial uncertainty, the community rallied with its support and the Edenton Steamers responded with a record-setting season in the Coastal Plain League. Although the Steamers appeared to be a lock for another Pettit Cup championship, they came up one game short to fall to the Gastonia Grizzlies. The Steamers took a one game lead at Gastonia before returning to the friendly confines of Hicks Field where they needed to win only one of two games. Instead, the CPL's best-hitting, highest scoring team went cold and dropped two straight.

Nonetheless, it was a fabulous season to remember with the Steamers recording its winningest season in team history. The Steamers won 10 more games (44) than any other team in the CPL this season, claiming both the first- and second-half division titles. They led the league in a host of categories - including team batting and team pitching — and broke more than a dozen franchise records, most notably the single season victory mark of 39, set

back in 2005 when they last won the championship.

**No. 8 - Personnel moves**

While County Manager Paul Parker's firing ranks as the most significant personnel move during 2011, there were a few more worthy of listing. On the same day (Nov. 10) that the Chowan County Board of Commissioners voted unanimously to hire Bertie County Manager Zee Lamb as Parker's successor, the board also voted to fire its finance director Lisa Jones as she was fired for failure to perform her assigned duties, thereby ending her 26 years as a county employee. Jones was one of the few remaining staffers from the Cliff Copeland administration. She was serving as Copeland's finance director when the then county manager guided Chowan to the brink of bankruptcy and state takeover in 2008.

In other personnel moves, Chowan lost its tax administrator after the Local Governmental Employees' Retirement System concluded that Gene Rountree had been working as a county employee and not a contractor. The state ruled that he had been double-dipping, earning compensation from the very system while paying him retirement benefits.

Edenton hired a new planner in Katy Van Doninck. Edenton Fire Chief Charlie Westbrook retired at the end of October after 40 years of service.

**No. 9 - Downtown lands new businesses**

Still slogging through a downtrodden economy, Edenton's downtown district has been riddled with store closings. Two vacant storefronts will soon be occupied. Although neither has opened the new locations for 2011, both have signed contracts and the moves are pending.

A Sears Home Store is expected to open sometime next month, filling the former Edenton Furniture Store that closed last year.

Plans call for Creswell Furniture to move a new location into the former Super 10 building.

Both represent welcome news for a downtown that has sustained the loss of businesses due to the economy and in a county that has reverted to a Tier 1 status, or among the state's most economically distressed.

Bank of America closed a downtown branch and Cheros, a popular waterfront eatery, shut its doors in 2011. Griggs Lumber also closed, but the town added Kellogg Building Supply.

**No. 10 - Fund balance reaches \$3.5 million**

While it's not a milestone for a county to have a fund balance, they're required to or face state takeover; it is a significant milestone for Chowan that only three years earlier couldn't pay its bills and sat on the brink of bankruptcy after reckless spending.

Frugal management by the board of commissioners has led the county to bank another \$752,000 in 2011 savings, putting its fund balance at 16 percent of its general fund.

It was just short of the commissioners' goal of 20 percent.

Last year, commissioners banked \$1.8 million, but this year's feat comes during a time of less revenue and rising expenses.

Independent auditors lauded the board of its achievement in the face of such economic adversity.



PHOTO BY RITCHIE E. STARNES

Kandi Deitemeyer, (left) College of the Albemarle president, stands left of Douglas Stallings, D.F. Walker Alumni Association president, at the podium before the Chowan County Board of Commissioners, March 21.

