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Before the days of helpful hurricane predictions, people living in the path of monster storms were often caught unawares. This image depicts the destruction on Broadway, in Galveston, around the Bishop's Palace (following the catastrophic hurricane of 1900). AP photo, copyright now lapsed, online via Texas Humanities.

Today satellites and flights into turbulent weather allow scientists to gather data about global sea winds. Compiled data helps to create a reasonably accurate picture of developing problem areas. Long before a Category 4 or 5 storm strikes, people living in its path can take precautions.

But ... how sophisticated was the hurricane warning system in 1900?

At the time, the hurricane-prediction system was much more sophisticated - and reliable - in Cuba (where nearly everyone had experienced at least one major hurricane) than it was in America. Since the 1870s, the island had one of the best hurricane tracking systems available. (Follow the link to create an animated hurricane.)

Eyewitnesses who observed storms throughout the West Indies telegraphed each other with personal observations. Father Benito Vines, a Spanish Jesuit priest who was meteorological director of the Royal College of Belen in Havana, had organized the tracking system. He was famous for his ability to interpret eyewitness data. His hurricane predictions saved many lives. People called him "Father Hurricane."

When Father Benito died in the summer of 1893, he left behind a staff of well-trained hurricane-predicting pioneers. Father Lorenzo Gangoite became head of the Belen Observatory. Although the Cubans had much to offer the new U.S. Weather Bureau (which was less than 10 years old in 1900), people in the Bureau disagreed. They refused to accept that Cubans could accurately predict hurricanes - let alone do it better than the Bureau could.

As a monster storm made its way toward Galveston, at the height of the 1900 hurricane season, U.S. weather predictors did not rely on data provided by anyone other than themselves. Some historians believe such arrogance was a contributing factor to the magnitude of the Galveston disaster.

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Benito Vines - Predictor of Hurricanes

Image online, courtesy NOAA's Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory.

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Hurricane Destruction before Weather Predictions

Photo online via Humanities Texas; photo by unnamed photographer taking pictures of the Galveston Storm of 1900 and maintained by the AP. Public domain due to passage of time.

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