

The Xenia, Ohio Tornado of April 3, 1974 (F5, 34 dead, 1150 injured)

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April 3, 1974 started out as a great day. I was completing my senior year of college at Central State University in Chemistry. That morning, I got up and headed over to the Banneker Hall, the Science Building for classes. As I came out in the early afternoon, I noticed strange cloud formations (puffy cotton balls shaped with a golden undertone) all over the sky. Things were very quiet, no birds, no crickets, no extraneous noises, etc. I thought that very strange for the campus, but decided to head back over to my Dormitory, Broaddus Hall, which was across campus to the southeast of the Science Building. After studying for a while I wrote a letter to my brother who was attending Wittenberg University in Springfield, Ohio. I was going to head over to the Post Office across campus to mail him the letter. I then turned on the television to see Gilligan's Island and suddenly the WHIO-Channel 7 (Dayton, OH) interrupted the program and said that a tornado had been sighted outside of Cincinnati moving about 50 mph. I didn't think much of it at the time, since we were some distance from Cincinnati.

I heard a great commotion at the front of the dormitory where students had congregated looking out the window. I was the floor proctor and went to see what the fuss was all about. I saw a huge massive black cloud several hundred feet up into the air and over a quarter of a mile wide. Most of the foreign students had never seen a tornado and didn't know what to do. They thought there were birds flying around it but I recognized that the tornado had destroyed buildings and that it was debris circling up and into it. It looked like it was moving slowly as it came directly down U.S. Route 42.

I yelled to the students to get down to the basement floor hallway immediately that was 2 floors down rear stairs. After making sure everyone was off the floor and out of their rooms, the campus was engulfed by the blackness of the tornado. Its winds sounded light a freight train roaring and slamming into the building. I made it to my room and hid in the closet, as I was not able to make it off the floor. I could hear the rage of the tornadic winds (later found to be over 200 mph) and the building shaking. I was screaming for my life but couldn't hear myself due to the winds. Out of the corner of my eye I could also see part of the Science building collapse from the storm. I tried to get out of my room but the vacuum coming down the hall was too strong for me to open the door. Within minutes the tornado had hit and left the campus. I finally was able to get down to the basement where other students were. We stayed there all evening. Someone had a radio and followed the weather reports, since more tornadoes were spawned that evening. *Our whole world stopped at about 4:40 PM on April 3, 1974.*

After coming out and surveying the destruction, it was unbelievable. More than half of the campus buildings had been hit hard by the tornado. There was debris everywhere and people were injured. Trees were impaled in buildings, roof ripped off, cars smashed into horrible twisted metal. There had been a track meet that day in the stadium and, unfortunately, they did not know of the tornado approaching until it was too late. People lost their homes, their lives, and my graduation was seriously in doubt.

The Post Office had been destroyed and the people in it killed. Many people had tried to get into Xenia to get their children, but they ran right into the tornado's path, and many lost their lives in their cars. The highway road was blocked with debris and few were able to get out. We were without water, power. The Dabney Cafeteria at Central State University was able to provide some food. We felt cut off from the world. I went to the Science Bldg., yelled for someone, but it was too dangerous to enter. One person, who had made it to Dayton, had said that the campus had been destroyed. We knew we were alive but no one else knew. Checks from the University were found as far away Cleveland, Ohio. I now realized that had I gone over to the Post Office that day, I would have possibly been killed also. Finally, the National Guard was able to get water to us about a couple of days after the tornado. My older brother, Lucious, came to pick me up. I was devastated when we reached Xenia to see that its downtown and Arrowhead section had been completely obliterated, as if it had been bombed out. I was so very thankful that I lived through the devastation of this tornado, but my life was altered forever that day. I was forever concerned about the weather and became a severe weather watcher.

PRESENTER'S BIO

Thomas Plant was born in Villa Rica, Georgia on his family's farm and was raised in Dayton, Ohio where he attended primary and secondary education. He attended Central State University in Wilberforce, Ohio, where he received his B.S. in Chemistry in 1974. On April 3 of 1974, Mr. Plant was witnessed the destructive power of the Xenia, Ohio Tornado first hand and has been a severe weather watcher since that time. He attended graduate studies at the University of Lowell in synthetic organic chemistry.

Mr. Plant has worked for Hercules the Alleghany Ballistic Laboratory in Rocket Center, WV and Hercules Imperial Pigment Plant in Glens Falls, NY, and as a consultant in synthetic organic chemistry. He has worked as an environmental consultant for seven years with NUS Halliburton Environmental Corporation (now Brown and Root) as a regional quality assurance representative for EPA's Superfund Field Investigation Team (FIT) Program for litigation and cost recovery efforts at uncontrolled waste sites throughout the New England Region. He has worked for 17 years in public health concerning environmental health issues, particularly childhood lead poisoning and regulatory enforcement. Mr. Plant's interests continue to be wide ranging and he currently lives and works in Boston.

In 1991, as Treasurer of the Langham Four Corners Development Corporation, Mr. Plant helped build the Langham Court Affordable Housing Development in the South End of Boston. In 2001, he did a collaborative research project with The Massachusetts Institute of Technology Urban Studies Department, *Mapping the Industrial Archeology of Boston, a GIS project*. In 2005, he received the Henry L. Shattuck Award for Public Service and was honored at the World Trade Center Boston, Massachusetts. In 2010, he received the Public Sector Award from the Lead Action Collaborative for the reduction of childhood lead poisoning in Boston. r. Plant has also served as a Commissioner on the South End Landmarks Commission, Boston Landmark Commission, City of Boston; President of the Roxbury Highlands Historical Society; as a Governor and Secretary of the Shirley-Eustis House Association, Roxbury, Massachusetts; President of the First Church in Roxbury, and as a board member of Discover Roxbury.