

## Perkins, Delia: The Waters Came Down <sup>(1)</sup>

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### Delia Perkins: The Waters Came Down

by David Cecelski. "[Listening to History](#) <sup>(2)</sup>," *News & Observer*. Published 4/8/2007. Copyrighted. Reprinted with permission.

I met Mayor Delia Perkins at the town hall of [Princeville](#) <sup>(3)</sup>, a historic little town next to the Tar River, 70 miles east of Raleigh. Founded by former slaves in 1865, Princeville was the first town in the United States chartered by African-Americans.

Floods have always imperiled the town. But despite major floods in 1889, 1919, 1924, 1940 and 1958, Princeville's residents never abandoned the site where ex-slaves first crossed the Tar River, met Union troops and made a home. Princeville's greatest test, though, came with the town's total destruction by Hurricane Floyd's floodwaters in 1999. Mayor Perkins and I drove around town and she talked about the flood, the river and the town's history.

In Delia Perkins's words:



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I've seen people go down to the river. I was born in 1942 and when I was real little, the churches did their baptisms in the river. They would put their white robes on and they put their towels around their heads, and they would go down and be  
I guess Princeville is known best for the river, because of all the times it was flooded over the years. But after all those floods, they were bound and determined that they were going to stay. After the water went down, they came back and reb  
But I've never seen the waters come down like they did in '99. Some people think the dike washed away, but it didn't. The water came over it. The highest part of the water was 24 feet. The only thing that you could see on St. Luke church wa  
On the 15th of September, I was at Town Hall most of the day, because we were having problems getting people out. Right in town, there were drainage problems. The water just started to come up because the groundwater was so high.  
We left Town Hall maybe 5 o'clock in the morning and we were able to drive out. We all went to the parking lot at Parkhill Mall and everybody slept in their cars.  
In the morning, I sent one of my police officers back over. By the time that he got to the police department, he heard the water rushing over the dike. By 12 o'clock that Friday, the town was totally covered with water.  
The senior citizens were the first people that we evacuated. We went door to door. We had the fire department, police department, volunteers.

At first, we were going to go to my church, Eastern Star over in Tarboro, but then we got a call from one of the deacons. He said, 'Delia, you can't come over here. The water is coming up in the back part of East Tarboro.'

So I said, OK, we'll get into the schools. So we called Rev. Bachelor, who's on the school board, and asked him if they were opening up the schools. He said, 'Do you need them open right away?' I told him, 'Yeah, we need them open.' So there were some people that said, well, it's not going to be that bad, so they went home. When they woke up the next morning, their houses were surrounded by water. Helicopters and boats had to go in and get them.

It was like a war zone. You could hear the helicopters off in the distance, and then they would get closer. They would drop people off in a boat and then they would bring them over to the River Bridge.

The shelters were crowded. It was chaos. You had seniors that didn't have medicine. They didn't have any clothes. Then you had children who had just no clue what was happening, so they were running around and playing.

The only time I got upset was when they told me that the police chief and one of the officers had flipped over in a boat. The police chief had a young lady and a baby bringing them back in, and the mama panicked and she turned the boat over. The police chief went into the water to get the baby, but when he started to come up, the mama grabbed him around the neck. Turned out, they were OK, but at that moment, I got very upset.

It was heartbreaking to look at the town once the water went down. It was ghostly. The sheriff drove me through town. When we got down by the cemetery, there were caskets floating. The water would wave and the caskets would beat up against them. We saw trees down, little kids' toys in the trees, clothes in the trees. The houses looked like somebody had put a spider web over them. The houses had this web of muck and stuff from the water stuck to them.

You had these huge red Xs on the doors of the houses, where divers had gone in to see if there were any bodies that didn't get out. They put a cross when they went in, and they crossed it when they got out. That meant there were no bodies.

After the flood, there were days when I would get in my car and just ride and think. What are we going to do? What should we do? I couldn't think clearly with a room full of people and the telephone ringing and people upset, so I would just get out. I questioned why I had to be mayor during the flood. It tested my faith. But my pastor and several other ministers told me it was my time. They just kept telling me that.

I didn't know who FEMA was, what FEMA was. To me it was a day-by-day learning experience. Because when FEMA came in, it was all business. And the business was, 'OK, this town has flooded. It's been underwater 10 days. We are going to rebuild it.' But I said, no, we don't want to do that. They didn't understand that this was a special place, a close-knit place. It was a nice, quiet community where you knew everybody and where you could raise your children. And Princeville's history was important. We wanted to stay and rebuild like our forefathers always did, because no matter how much devastation there was, this was home.

With help from the state, federal government and many volunteers, Princeville has been rebuilt. The town is currently raising funds to renovate the old Princeville Graded School into a historical museum that will share the community's story with visitors.

#### Additional Resources:

[NCPedia](#) [3]: Hill, Michael. "Princeville." 2006. Research Branch, North Carolina Office of Archives and History. <https://ncpedia.org/princeville> [4]

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[Political leaders](#) [9]

[Religion](#) [10]

[Rivers](#) [11]

[Weather](#) [12]

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[Cecelski, David S.](#) [13]

#### Origin - location:

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[Princeville](#) [15]

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