

# Flight or Flight? To adapt or relocate in Princeville, North Carolina



An aerial view of flooding in Princeville, NC, after Hurricane Matthew, which dumped 6-20 inches of rain in October 2016. Photo: Hank Heusinkveld, Public Affairs Specialist, USACE-Wilmington

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## Summary

Princeville, North Carolina, the first U.S. town chartered by formerly enslaved people, faces an existential challenge due to flooding. The town has suffered multiple major hurricanes, with Hurricane Floyd (1999) and Hurricane Matthew (2016) causing particularly severe destruction. Following these disasters, residents and officials have debated whether to rebuild in place or relocate to higher ground. Bureaucratic delays, economic instability, and conflicting priorities between historical preservation and managed retreat have delayed recovery efforts. Despite recent federal and state funding approvals for relocation and flood mitigation projects, many adaptation projects remain incomplete, and Princeville's future remains uncertain.

## Keywords

climate adaptation  
disaster response  
FEMA  
flooding  
managed retreat  
recovery  
relocation

## Background



Photo: Carolina Public Press

Following the American Civil War and the abolition of slavery in 1865, a group of formerly enslaved Black people established a settlement known as “Freedom Hill” along the Tar River in North Carolina. White residents of nearby Tarboro had deemed the flood-prone land unsuitable for development. Two white plantation owners initially held the deeds to the land, but because its vulnerability to flooding made it undesirable for cultivation, they did not attempt to displace the settlers. Eventually, they sold the land at reduced rates. By 1880, the settlement had grown to 400 residents, and after years of advocacy, it was formally incorporated as Princeville in 1885,

named after Turner Prince, a carpenter who built many of the town’s early structures. Princeville became the first U.S. municipality chartered by formerly enslaved people. Over the years, Princeville attracted Black residents seeking political and economic freedoms unavailable in majority-white Tarboro. Unlike their neighbors, Princeville's residents could elect their own leaders, establish businesses, and move freely, solidifying its identity as "The Town that Defied White Supremacy" (Town of Princeville, n.d.).

However, Princeville has remained highly vulnerable to flooding. Located within the 100-year floodplain of the Tar River, the town has suffered at least nine major hurricanes and floods since the Civil War. A devastating flood in 1919 triggered a population decline as many residents relocated to higher ground in East Tarboro. After Hurricane Hazel, which caused severe damage in 1954, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (ACE) constructed a three-mile levee along the riverbank, completed in 1967. Rising 37 feet at the river’s edge and sloping toward the town, the levee initially provided a sense of security. For decades, Princeville’s residents believed the flood threat had been mitigated, and an entire generation grew up without fear of the Tar River overrunning its banks.

### **Hurricane Floyd (1999) and Its Aftermath**

In September 1999, Hurricane Floyd made landfall in North Carolina as a Category 2 storm. The levee had been designed to withstand storms of this magnitude, but it was bad timing. Hurricane Dennis had saturated the ground and raised water levels just ten days earlier, compounding the flooding. The Tar River swelled to 42 feet above normal, breaching the levee and submerging Princeville under ten feet of water for nearly two weeks. Fortunately, due to advanced warnings, all residents evacuated, and no lives were lost; however, nearly all of the town’s 1,000 residential structures were damaged or destroyed.

The disaster drew national attention, Jesse Jackson visited to provide support, singer Prince donated \$37,000 for relief, and President Bill Clinton signed Executive Order 13146, establishing the President's Council on the Future of Princeville. Initially, federal officials proposed converting Princeville into a national park and relocating its residents, but the town strongly rejected this, determined to preserve its history and community. Instead, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and ACE presented two options: reinforce the levee or accept federal buyouts for relocation. The town could only choose one option, leading to a deadlock among its four-member board. Mayor Delia Perkins cast the deciding vote against buyouts, opting to stay in place, rebuild homes, and reinforce the levee.

Scholars argued that Princeville's decision to rebuild after Floyd illustrates the importance of community self-determination in post-disaster recovery. "Community members know what is best for their community and how to do it, and that communities' opinions about options post-disaster should be valued." Princeville's residents felt a deep-rooted connection not only to each other but also to their ancestral history and the land itself.

In the aftermath of Floyd, many displaced residents lived in trailers or campers on their properties while rebuilding. Over time, a combination of returning and new residents helped restore the town's population to pre-Floyd levels. At the time, concerns about future floods were minimal. Major rebuilding occurred in the belief that the storm was unlikely to be repeated, as many assumed Floyd was a "hundred-year storm," interpreting that such an event was unlikely to recur within their lifetimes. In fact, the term means that such storms have about a 1% chance of occurring each year. Yet, the Army Corps had assured Princeville that the levee would be repaired in a few years, and most returning residents trusted that a reinforced levee would prevent future catastrophic flooding.

However, over the next decade and a half, the promised repairs to the levee never materialized, and in the spring of 2016, the results of ACE's assessments revealed that the levee was even weaker than initially thought. Floyd had "revealed flaws and vulnerabilities in the levee design that were originally overlooked." Reducing flood risk from a "Floyd event" storm would involve either raising the existing levee and/or constructing a ring levee around the entire town at a cost of \$200 million, which is "more than can be justified and more than the state or community can afford." Furthermore, a new levee would exacerbate flooding in neighboring Tarboro, creating an unacceptable trade-off. Officials argued that they could not reduce flood risk in one place, only to increase it in another. Consequently, building a new levee was no longer an option; however, without it, "each occurrence of flooding would bring another round of suffering and hardship to the community." Compounding this vulnerability, climate change is intensifying storm frequency, and engineering studies confirm the Tar River's rising flood risk.

## **Hurricane Matthew (2016)**

Just months after the new levee project was abandoned, Hurricane Matthew struck as a Category 1 storm in October 2016, bringing 12 inches of rain and devastating the town once again. The existing levee failed, and 10 feet of water rushed into the town, “effectively filling it like a bowl.” The town hall, fire station, public works building, senior center, elementary school, museum, and historic structures were all flooded. 350 households sustained major damage, and minor damage was felt by many more, with costs totaling \$2,744,209 and averaging \$11,065 per household. 653 residents registered with FEMA, with 510 being eligible, and receiving \$3,175,135 in cumulative assistance. 418 of 604 housing assistance applicants were approved, totaling \$2,104,752. 448 of 552 applicants for “Other Needs Assistance” were approved, totaling \$1,070,383. FEMA provided temporary housing support for approximately 18 months.

Princeville’s population, about 2,188 in 2015, was 96% African American, majority female, with a median age of 41. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities, including high poverty levels (40% receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance (SNAP) benefits), limited access to transportation (23% lacking a car), and poor health outcomes (ranking 98th out of 100 North Carolina counties), compounded the recovery challenges.

### **Following Matthew, officials debated three options:**

1. Staying and rebuilding elevated homes on Princeville’s historic land.
2. Accepting government buyouts for individual relocation.
3. Moving the entire town to higher ground.

Once again, Princeville’s leadership initially favored rebuilding, following their historic “stay put” strategy. This is who we are. This is sacred ground. Our forefathers shed blood, sweat, and tears here,” said Mayor Bobbie Jones. Moreover, Princeville was already at risk of insolvency; hence, the town’s leadership was incentivized to keep residents in the town. However, this time, the board voted to allow residents to decide on buyouts themselves. Most wanted to return to their homes, if possible, but some accepted FEMA buyouts and left Princeville, leading to the “slow and painful departure of businesses and residents over time.” This resulted in the “checkerboarding effect”, with scattered vacant lots disrupting the town's fabric and reducing tax revenues.

## Relocation Efforts

The North Carolina State Government would not sanction rebuilding within a floodplain, and so, recognizing the need for a sustainable solution, they proposed relocating essential services to higher ground. In August 2017, experts from across the country formed the Hurricane Matthew Disaster Recovery and Resilience Initiative (HMDRRI) and convened in Princeville for a “Community Design Workshop” to engage residents in planning the relocation, ensuring the new development reflected Princeville's heritage while providing a safer living environment.

The state purchased a 53-acre parcel of land on the outskirts of Princeville at a higher elevation. Plans included moving the town hall, fire station, and other critical facilities to this location. Additionally, FEMA funding was secured to develop 50 new affordable housing units, with the hope of attracting private developers to build more units in the future. Efforts have also been made to integrate green infrastructure and flood mitigation strategies, including the creation of open green spaces to absorb stormwater runoff and reduce flood risks. The relocation effort aims to provide both safety and economic revitalization by offering modern infrastructure while maintaining the town's historical legacy.

### **Actions Taken:**

- The North Carolina Office of Recovery and Resiliency (NCORR) pledged \$850,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to repair the original levee and four floodgates damaged by Hurricane Matthew.
- NCORR allocated \$3.5 million to develop infrastructure on the 53-acre parcel, where FEMA is funding the construction of a fire station, town hall annex, and other essential facilities.
- Pending environmental approval, NCORR will build 50 public housing units on the new parcel of land, with plans to attract private developers for additional housing.
- The town has pursued partnerships with non-profit organizations and private enterprises to enhance economic development and ensure long-term sustainability.

## Ongoing Challenges and Systemic Barriers to Recovery

Despite the ambitious plans, Princeville's path to recovery has been slow. More than seven years after Hurricane Matthew, many residents still struggle to rebuild, and the town's future remains uncertain. A primary obstacle has been the bureaucratic process for accessing federal and state recovery funds. Though FEMA, HUD, and NCORR have allocated millions for relocation and infrastructure, the actual disbursement of funds has been painfully slow. For instance, Princeville waited three years (2020-2023) to receive an \$11.2 million FEMA grant for its 53-acre site, forcing officials to scale back original proposals due to budget constraints.

Many individuals and families still await aid, exacerbated by socioeconomic vulnerabilities and a multi-tiered funding process that creates inefficiencies. Some residents have waited years to receive aid and have given up entirely on navigating the application process. Consequently, only a fraction of planned home elevations and buyouts have been completed, leaving a landscape of abandoned and deteriorating structures. This "checkerboarding" effect continues to disrupt the town's social and physical continuity, raising concerns about the new site's ability to sustain a strong community presence. Moreover, Princeville's dependency on external funding for basic infrastructure maintenance, such as water and sewer systems, poses long-term sustainability risks, especially given its weakened commercial sector. Without a strong local economy, the town is reliant on continued state and federal assistance, which is not guaranteed indefinitely. Finally, there are still significant tensions surrounding the debate on managed retreat vs. historical preservation in Princeville. Many residents remain deeply attached to the town's original site and do not wish to move to the new parcel of land. They hold a strong attachment to place, viewing it as sacred ground that embodies the resilience and legacy of their ancestors, and are resistant to relocation.

## Looking Ahead

Princeville's recovery exemplifies the broader challenges faced by disaster-prone, historically marginalized communities across the United States. While significant progress has been made in securing funding and planning for relocation, systemic barriers continue to hinder full recovery. Addressing these issues will require a concerted effort from federal, state, and local agencies, alongside sustained community engagement to ensure that residents have a voice in shaping the town's future.

### Discussion Questions:

1. How should disaster-prone communities balance historical preservation with managed retreat?
2. Should governments invest in rebuilding in high-risk areas, or should they prioritize full-scale relocation?
3. What role should federal and state agencies play in funding long-term resilience projects?
4. How can disaster recovery programs be designed to be more equitable and accessible to vulnerable populations?
5. Can Princeville maintain its identity while adapting to the realities of a changing climate?

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