

## The Winter of 1850-51

By Donald Sutherland

On September 20, 1850, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed of the passing of summer<sup>1</sup>:

*The shortest days and the gradual falling off of the sun to the southward, announces the departure of summer from the presence of the fields and forests of our land. A little while and the leaves will begin to fade, and fall, and wither, and be whirled in circling eddies at the sport of the autumn winds. The melancholy moan which heralds the general decay of vegetation, even now rises and swells in fitful cadences through the streets of the city, attunes itself in the gorges of the hills, and goes sighing through the valleys thereof. Soon the bared trees, and the seared meadows will attest the power of the incoming monarch of the seasons, and the music of the rivulet will be silenced by the wand of the Frost Spirit. The snow will, ere long, spread its jeweled mantle upon the hill-top, and the song birds will depart on their winged journey to more genial climes.*

It had been “three or four years” since the snow had “spread its jeweled mantle” with any degree of frequency,<sup>2</sup> so at this point in time it remained to be seen whether the ongoing snow drought in the New York City area would continue.

Just one day later, as if to christen the start of autumn, “frost and ice” was reported around Lynchburg, Virginia.<sup>3</sup>

On September 26, a hailstorm damaged tobacco crops in Prince Edward and Charles Counties Virginia.<sup>4</sup>

Following the passage of the powerful cold front responsible for the hailstorm, “Snow fell at Conway [New Hampshire] and other places in the regions of the White Mountains” on September 27.<sup>5</sup>

October 1 saw a killing frost affect southern Kentucky<sup>6</sup> and parts of Tennessee.<sup>7</sup> A report from Clarksville, Tennessee estimated that between one-third and one-half of the tobacco crop in that area had been killed by the “severe frost.”<sup>8</sup>

“[O]ne of the heaviest gales of the season” swept “the broad bosom of Lake Ontario” on October 9.<sup>9</sup>

October 16 witnessed the passage of severe thunderstorms through Allegheny, Pennsylvania. “A severe storm occurred in Allegheny...—a number of houses and churches were struck by lightning... The rain was very heavy,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported.<sup>10</sup>

Meanwhile, the newspaper reported that October 17 marked the fifth consecutive week without rain at Norfolk.<sup>11</sup>

Jefferson County, Georgia suffered from frost on October 19.<sup>12</sup>

Western New York State received its first accumulating snow on October 20. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* noted, “[T]he first snow of the season was seen from Syracuse, lying fleecy and white on the Onondaga Hills.”<sup>13</sup>

Additional frost occurred at Columbia, South Carolina on October 21.<sup>14</sup>

A series of storms affected a large part of the eastern third of the United States during the October 25-29 period<sup>15</sup>, including a strong storm during the October 25-27 period. In some parts of New York State, rain changed to accumulating snow. Other parts of the State experienced river flooding.

Around Lake Erie, it was reported, “The northeast gale [October 26] drove several vessels ashore. The Schooner Raleigh was on the beach at Cleveland...”<sup>16</sup>

While the storm was raging in the Ohio Valley and parts of the northeastern United States, unseasonably cold air had poured around its backside to the Gulf States. “There as a severe frost at Natchez [Mississippi] on Friday night [night of October 25], destroying the cotton crop, and doing material injury to the vegetables generally,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported.<sup>17</sup>

During October 26-27, snow was experienced in parts of New York State. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “The first snow of the season fell at Batavia Saturday [October 26] night last, and continued until Sunday morning about ten o’clock with considerable violence. Being quite damp, it so loaded the trees, many of which had not yet been divested of their foliage, as to cause a great deal of destruction to the branches, both of shade and forest trees.”<sup>18</sup>

The news account from Utica observed, “The storm wound up, yesterday [October 27], by an attempt at a snowstorm, and the hills around Utica were covered this morning.”<sup>19</sup>

In spite of the early-season snow, the flooding from the storms remained a major story. On October 29, it was reported from Utica, “We are continually receiving further accounts of the damage done by the freshet [flood] from all parts, North and South.”<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of the stormy weather, conditions were “clear and frosty” at Cincinnati on October 30.<sup>21</sup>

Nashville received its first snow of the season on November 2. “We had a slight fall of snow...just enough to warn us that the winter is approaching, but not enough to whiten the ground,” was the report from that city.<sup>22</sup> Several days later, the weather at Nashville was described as “quite cold.”<sup>23</sup>

The night of November 8 into the early morning of November 9 saw a fast-moving and intense storm lash parts of the northern Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States. The November 9 report from New York City stated, “We had a howling Nor’easter, last

night, with torrents of rain, but old Boreas pretty well exhausted himself before morning, and the rain fountains were dried up entirely.”<sup>24</sup>

Behind the storm, a colder air mass overspread the East. At New York City, the weather was described as “clear and bracing, the temperature being more like that of genuine fall weather than any we have yet experienced.”<sup>25</sup>

Farther south in Washington, D.C. it was revealed, “We had a heavy frost last night [night of November 8], with the first ice of this season.”<sup>26</sup>

November 16-17, 1850 saw a storm and its aftermath bring fairly widespread snow or flurries to the Northeast. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “Old Winter is beginning to show his ‘frosty pow [paw].’ On Sunday night [November 17], we [New York City] had quite a thick flurry of snow, during the high, cold westerly wind which succeeded Saturday’s storm. On the same night, snow fell to the depth of half an inch at Albany; and there was an initiatory snowstorm at Buffalo on Saturday. All the ‘cloud-capped peaks’ of our Eastern mountains have donned their winter robes of snow and ice.”<sup>27</sup> Prior to reaching the eastern United States, this storm may well have been the “severe snowstorm” that affected parts of Texas according to a report from the Mexican Commission in Texas dated November 25, 1856.<sup>28</sup>

The morning of November 18 witnessed a “killing frost” at New Orleans,<sup>29</sup> while lake effect snows continued in western Pennsylvania. From Erie, it was reported, “We had a snowstorm and a pretty severe gale on the Lake [Lake Erie]...”<sup>30</sup>

Unseasonably cold weather continued for several days after the storm that brought the season’s first snowflakes into New York City. On November 22, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “Very ‘stout’ ice was formed, last night; and the atmosphere of today is worthy of the middle of December. Great coats, cloaks, and mufflers are in demand, and furs have ‘riz’ vastly.”<sup>31</sup>

Boston received its first accumulating snow of the season on November 26 from the same storm. “This morning we were favored with the first snowstorm of the season. Snow commenced falling at an early hour, and continued until the middle of the forenoon, when it changed to rain, which rapidly dissolved the snow which had fallen. The wind during the day has been from the east to northeast,” was the report from that city.<sup>32</sup>

The weather for December 8 was described as “clear and cold” in Washington, DC.<sup>33</sup>

The cold continued. At Albany, it was reported on December 14, “The weather was very cold last night.”<sup>34</sup>

At New York City, the weather was reported to have been in a “wretched state” during the evening of December 16.<sup>35</sup>

Oswego received a heavy lake effect snowfall in the December 16-17 timeframe. The Oswego *Journal* reported, “A storm of great severity came off last night [December 16]. It began during the afternoon and continued until a late hour this morning. The snow fell in considerable quantities, but drifted so much that the railroad train due at 9 o’clock, did not reach the city much before noon.”<sup>36</sup>

Meanwhile, on account of the continuing cold, the Mississippi River was freezing up in parts of the Midwest. *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “A dispatch from St. Louis dated 17<sup>th</sup> instant [December 17] says the Mississippi is full of ice, and that navigation is suspended.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet another storm brought “wretched” conditions to New York City<sup>38</sup> and the Northeast on December 19. “We had a snowstorm from the North [wind direction], the thermometer standing at 16 to 18 degs.,” was the report from Albany.<sup>39</sup> The storm also affected parts of Ontario, with an appreciable accumulation falling at Toronto.<sup>40</sup>

December 20 saw cold conditions covering Canada with some snow in some places. Reports included<sup>41</sup>:

*Kingston*: “[I]t is cloudy and cold, with slight snow.”

*Montreal*: “The weather this morning is fine, with the thermometer 8 degrees above zero. The wind W.N.W.”

*Quebec City*: “[T]he thermometer is 12 degrees above zero, and snow has fallen since yesterday, P.M. [December 19]—Wind strong from the East.”

*Toronto*: “[W]e learn there is beautiful sleighing, and the weather quite snappish.”

During the December 21-23, 1850 period, a major snowstorm buried parts of the Northeast under the heaviest snowfall in “years.”<sup>42</sup> It is likely that secondary development occurred on the Mid-Atlantic coast, perhaps along the Delmarva or New Jersey coast, as there were no reports of significant snowfall from Philadelphia southward.

Buffalo saw heavy snow commence on December 21. The December 22 report from Buffalo indicated, “We have had a severe gale from the north-east, accompanied with a heavy fall of snow, for the last twenty four hours, and it is still raging fearfully. The pressure of the snow has forced in the roofs of several buildings.”<sup>43</sup>

The height of the storm occurred during the night of December 22 into December 23. Accounts on December 23 included<sup>44</sup>:

*Albany*: “We have had a heavy fall of snow and a storm is now raging from the northeast [wind direction]... The storm west is said to be very severe.” During the afternoon, another report from Albany indicated, “The storm is still raging.”

*Boston*: “The northeast snowstorm of last night [December 22], was very severe here, turning to rain towards morning; and it is feared that much damage has been done to vessels off the coast.”

At New York City, temperatures briefly grew milder as the center of the storm passed close to the City. The December 24 edition of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed, “Yesterday morning the atmosphere was like that of June—the air warm and balmy; this morning, the temperature is Greenlandish, with a howling Nor’wester of petrifying frigidity. The difference of temperature in twenty-four hours is many degrees—but how many, we have omitted to note. The balance, however, is decidedly against comfort; and rousing fires, red hot stoves, Mackinaw blankets, double padded top-coats, fur caps, and mufflers, are in the high ascendant today. Frost-bitten ears and ‘plum noses’ are the fashion.”<sup>45</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of the briefly milder readings, New York City also received a big snowfall—its biggest in years. “The snow from the late storm is piled up into immense heaps, in the city and vicinity. Many of the fences and small out-buildings in the open country are completely buried up; and the roads are almost impassible. We have not had such a fall of snow for years,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported.<sup>46</sup>

Northern New England also received a heavy snowfall. The December 25, 1850 issue of the *New Hampshire Patriot* revealed, “The first great snowstorm of the season commenced here on Sunday evening [December 22] about 8 o’clock, and the snow continued to fall till late in the afternoon of Monday, when some fifteen inches had fallen. It was very cold and the wind blew hard, and during Monday night it piled the snow up badly.”<sup>47</sup>

As the storm passed by the New York City area on December 23, it drilled much colder air back into the City and swept away the briefly milder temperatures, which peaked at 52°<sup>48</sup> before morning. “Early in the forenoon..., the weather took a change for the colder, old Boreas unlimbered his blow-pipes, and, like an excited urchin, ‘got in a gale.’ By mid-day, the full strength of his lungs was in motion, and he howled forth his wintriest melodies with snow-shower accompaniments, and indulged in an occasional crash as he lodged in some unlucky roof or dilapidated chimney. He lashed the waters of our bay into huge waves, which visited havoc upon the unlucky small craft at our wharves. In short, the old roarer kicked up a general ‘fuss,’ and ‘broke things’ with as perfect recklessness as if they ‘didn’t cost nothing.’”<sup>49</sup> As the colder air poured back into the region, the temperature fell seven degrees from the high in a matter of “a few minutes” and plunged to 14° by day’s end.<sup>50</sup>

By 7:00 in the evening of December 23, the snow ceased falling at Albany, but gale-force winds persisted until the following morning.<sup>51</sup> Skies cleared and very cold conditions prevailed. The morning of December 24 saw the temperature at –2° at Albany and –4° at Watervliet, New York.<sup>52</sup>

Reports for December 24 included<sup>53</sup>:

*Providence*: “The weather clear and cold, and good sleighing.”

*Rochester*: “The weather here is clear, but quite cold.—Storm entirely over...”

*Syracuse*: “The snow here is two feet deep, and the weather very cold...”

From Buffalo, it was reported, “The gale of yesterday [December 23] has abated. The weather is fine, but intensely cold, with a larger amount of snow than at the corresponding time for many years: much drifted. Many roads in the vicinity are completely blocked up. Sleighing in the city has been splendid for the last fortnight [two weeks]... Thermometer this evening, 11 above—this morning 22 above zero.”<sup>54</sup>

At Boston, the weather was described as “very cold; fine sleighing.”<sup>55</sup>

In the wake of the big snowstorm, the New York City area experienced frigid readings on December 25.<sup>56</sup>

December 31 witnessed a continuation of the cold weather. At Franconia, New Hampshire, the coldest December on record concluded with the mercury starting the day at an icy  $-32^{\circ}$ .<sup>57</sup> The harsh winter weather was not confined to the eastern United States. Up to the middle of the month, the winter at New Mexico was characterized as having been “unusually severe” with a “great deal of snow” having “fallen throughout the valley of the Del Norte.”<sup>58</sup>

On December 31, a snow squall provided a fresh blanket of snow in New York City. “Never since ‘the evening and the morning were the first day,’ did the inhabitants of Brooklyn enjoy a happier ‘New Year’ than the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, 1851. On Tuesday evening [December 31], many misgivings were entertained as to what kind of weather would usher in the new year, and many a pious ejaculation was offered that the young Prince of Time might send snow as his herald, to prepare the way before him. The sky looked murky all the forenoon, and towards evening a snow shower enveloped the earth in a garment of white, so that on the morning of the first day of the year, all the harness which yokes Old Winter to his icy car was in perfect order... Sleights were flying in every direction, and the furs ‘which warmed a bear’ gave comfort to many who would have looked very bare without them.”<sup>59</sup>

In western New York State, New Year’s Day saw heavy lake effect snow. “There has not been a train from the East since early yesterday morning [January 1, 1851], and none left this place. Snow is piled up in mountains on its track,” was the report from Buffalo.<sup>60</sup>

On January 2, the weather at Albany was described as “cold..., the thermometer, this morning, being at zero.”<sup>61</sup>

Under the cover of darkness ahead of the coming sunrise on January 3, a new snowstorm overspread the New York City area. “Our people will have a sleighing this time, without doubt,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed, “Snow commenced falling a little before daylight this morning, and has continued until good sleighing is ensured.”<sup>62</sup>

After a number of years with infrequent snowfalls, New Yorkers were more than eager to embrace the renewed onslaught of winter’s finest crystals. “Our citizens will not be backward in improving the opportunity, especially as so few chances have been offered to them for the last three or four years,” the newspaper added.<sup>63</sup>

Across most of New York State, at least some snow was reported. Accounts of the snowstorm included<sup>64</sup>:

*Albany*: “Thermometer 15 above zero, and cold increasing. It snowed quite fast this A.M., but nothing has fallen during the last eight hours.”

*Buffalo*: “Snowing fast.”

*Syracuse*: “Thermometer 14 above zero. We have had about 3 inches of snow within the past 24 hours. It is now 2 feet deep on the ground.”

Apparently, the bulk of the storm slid to the south of above-mentioned region. On January 4, the report from Petersburg, Virginia indicated, “A violent snowstorm has been prevailing here and at the South, all day. The telegraph wires are down in consequence.”<sup>65</sup>

January 5 witnessed a reinforcing shot of frigid air, with the temperature dropping to a bitterly cold  $-20^{\circ}$  at Franconia.<sup>66</sup>

A few days later, the cold retreated and “a week or more of unseasonably warm weather” set in across the eastern United States.<sup>67</sup> On January 12, the weather at New York City “was of a spring-like character, and drew forth immense numbers of our good citizens to enjoy it.”<sup>68</sup>

On January 17, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported a return of more seasonable cold. “[T]he Frost King...—his frigid Majesty has resumed the scepter, and this morning the temperature is a gain of a Labradorian pattern.”<sup>69</sup>

Conditions around the Northeast on January 17 included<sup>70</sup>:

*Albany*: “Sky clear, wind W.N.W.”

*Boston*: “Growing colder; N.W.; thermometer 39.”

*New Haven*: “Clear, fine; ther.40.”

*Ogdensburg, New York:* “It blew a gale from the south all last night [January 16]. This morning the thermometer was 36, at evening 37. The gale had cleared the river of ice.”

*Oswego:* “We had rain last night [January 16], but it cleared off this morning with a westerly wind, which has prevailed all day, blowing a light gale. Cloudy this evening; ther. 30.”

*Providence:* “Wind N.W.; ther. 38.”

*Utica:* “Much colder than for several days, yet today has been the finest of the season; wind W.; ther. 31.”

Farther west, January 18 saw subzero cold in parts of the Midwest. At Milwaukee, the temperature fell to  $-2^{\circ}$  and was accompanied by “a strong wind.”<sup>71</sup>

Nonetheless, temperatures remained sufficiently mild so that New York City received a “heavy fall of rain” on January 20, which resulted in the flooding of low-lying streets.<sup>72</sup>

On January 25, the weather at Buffalo was reported to be “quite warm.”<sup>73</sup>

The unseasonably mild weather persisted in and around New York City, which inspired the January 27 issue of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* to ponder, “Could it be that we have been in a state of torpor, and permitted the winter season to glide past unnoticed! Something must be in it, for we saw geraniums putting forth their buds yesterday, and if spring is not come, then they must have been mistaken too.”<sup>74</sup>

A violent storm lashed the region on January 28-29<sup>75</sup> with heavy rain.<sup>76</sup> Much colder weather followed.

January 30-31 proved to be brutally cold days. At New York City, the weather was described as a “terrible state of the atmosphere. Thermometer at sundown [January 30]...at 6 degrees above zero; at sunrise this morning not to be found.”<sup>77</sup>

On January 30, the temperature at Kingston, Ontario fell to  $-25^{\circ}$ .<sup>78</sup>

In New England, the cold was almost as severe. Low temperatures for January 31 included<sup>79</sup>:

Boston:  $-6^{\circ}$

Calais, Maine:  $-20^{\circ}$

Kittery, New Hampshire:  $-12^{\circ}$

Newbury, Vermont:  $-17^{\circ}$

Portland:  $-18^{\circ}$

The night of February 1 in Albany was described as “intensely cold.”<sup>80</sup>

On February 3, approximately 36 hours prior to her arrival at Halifax, the Royal Mail steamship *Canada* encountered “fields of ice.”<sup>81</sup> The ice fields ranged from three to ten feet thick.<sup>82</sup>

On February 8, the U.S. revenue cutter *Forward* registered a temperature of zero degrees while offshore near Boston.<sup>83</sup>

Warmer weather then pushed into the eastern U.S. On February 12, it was reported that the ice on the Hudson River was “breaking up fast” at Albany.<sup>84</sup> Earlier heavy rains, along with an ice jam, had caused flooding along the Susquehanna River at Pittston, Pennsylvania.<sup>85</sup>

On February 14, a steamer that arrived at St. John’s, New Foundland reported having passed through “four hundred miles ice.”<sup>86</sup>

The February 17 edition of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “The ice has broken up at Albany but the river [Hudson River] remains closed three miles below.”<sup>87</sup>

An early-season outbreak of severe weather saw a tornado nearly destroy Fayetteville, Tennessee, after which “Rain...fell in torrents and impenetrable darkness prevailed.”<sup>88</sup>

On February 25, the Hudson River at Albany remained unobstructed by ice.<sup>89</sup> “We learn from the *Jour of Com.* that navigation has been suspended seventy-one days, vis: from Dec. 15<sup>th</sup>, to Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>.—This, we believe, is the shortest period, with a single exception, for twenty years. In 1842, the river opened Feb. 24<sup>th</sup>, having been closed only fifty-seven days. In 1848 and 1850, the suspension continued for seventy-three days,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported.<sup>90</sup>

The unseasonable warmth continued through much of the first week of March.<sup>91</sup>

On March 6, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed, “The fine weather is beginning to attract some lovers of fresh air to the heights [Brooklyn Heights].—Yesterday, lots of little children, whirling their hoops and flying their kites, were to be seen in clusters, like beautiful little rose buds in the garden of life, enjoying the only remnant of heaven’s bounty not forfeited at the fall—that is, the holy innocence of childhood—with a zest and spirit of enjoyment that make the heart glad to contemplate.”<sup>92</sup>

On March 7, a snowstorm moved into the northern Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States. From New York City, it was observed, “[T]he mercury in our thermometer began to descend and came down to the snowing point [32°] before ever it pulled up. In the evening the feathers descended in a regular shower, and continued to fall during the greater part of the night; and today there is nothing to be seen but a uniform blanket of white.”<sup>93</sup>

Perhaps shocked by the return of winter, the March 12 issue of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* wrote of the month of March, “This is a rude, uncouth, ill-behaved dame, whose breath is

chilly; whose garments are loaded with dust; whose step is anxious and angular; and whose locks are sprinkled with the frosts and snows of old winter, whose paramour she is. She is a regular blower and no mistake.”<sup>94</sup>

Winter assaulted the Northeast yet again during March 16-17. On March 17, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported, “Yesterday’s [March 16] storm was of the most dismal character, and it is followed up today, by another ‘of the same sort,’ only a little more so.—Snow, rain, hail, sleet, mud, sposh, and slush, are the delightful characteristics of this doleful-hued day. The music of this March is played with a northeast bassoon; and it is so dirge-like in its cadence that we are fain to wish it a literally dead March.”<sup>95</sup>

On March 19, the same newspaper added, “For the last three days the weather has been of the most unpleasant description. The sky hung over us like a great umbrella that won’t keep out the rain, and the streets were so slippery that it was easier to go two steps backwards than one forward. This present month of March has behaved itself very much like those deceitful lovers who are ‘April when they woo—December when they wed.’ At its entry it looked all kindness and suavity, and kicked old January downstairs, indignant at the cruelties of its rain (reign) while now that it has usurped the rains (reins) of Time itself; there is nothing but the most furious driving of rain, hail, and snow. In fact, during Sunday and Monday [March 16-17] the rain fell so incessantly that we had some serious antediluvian misgivings, and had half a notion of building a little ark of our own...”<sup>96</sup> Low-lying areas in New York City experienced some flooding.<sup>97</sup>

Spring arrived on March 21, but winter’s fury was not yet fully exhausted. A “severe gale and storm” that was “seriously felt” along coastal areas, including Long Island, especially eastern Long Island, and the Long Island Sound, battered the Northeast.<sup>98</sup>

The Greepoint *Watchman* reported the following of the storm’s effects in that part of Connecticut<sup>99</sup>:

*The late Equinoctial storm, we perceive, has produced considerable damage in many places heard from. Though the wind increased to a gale, and we were eventually visited with a severe snowstorm, with an uncommonly full tide, yet in this immediate vicinity there was, we believe, but very little damage done. The wharves were washed a little with the tide, and one vessel was driven from her moorings, at the main wharf, and drifted across the Ferry to Shelter Island, but was finally secured, without much damage.*

*We learn that considerable damage was done at Sag Harbor—that the wharf, which is very much exposed to the sea with the winds to the north-east, was very much injured... The tide rose to such a height, that it broke over a large dyke at the west of the village, and flooded the lower part of several streets, on that side of the village filling the cellars, and completely surrounding a number of houses with water.*

Even as the violent storm was pounding the East, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* described the past winter as having been “rather open and mild” in New York City and as having

“about the usual amount of cold weather, and as much sleighing as in the average of seasons” in the interior sections of southeastern New York.<sup>100</sup>

Across the Atlantic Ocean, the winter had been notably tame. The newspaper reported, “In England and France the weather has been so very mild that the ‘oldest inhabitant’ is not able to find a parallel to it. The lawns have been clothed with a mantle of green throughout the season, and violets, hyacinths, and other early flowers have been constantly in bloom in the open ground.”<sup>101</sup>

Several days later, springlike warmth returned. The March 26, 1851 issue of *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported of the change in weather, “The weather is now of the most pleasing kind, gentle, mild and agreeable; and in a short time the whole beauties of the spring will be unfolded before us. The trees are already beginning to put forth their buds, and in passing through Hicks Street [Brooklyn] we observed that the flowers in the little beds, in the areas in front of several houses, have put forth their glittering leaves—lovely children of the spring.”<sup>102</sup>

April 8 saw some rain and gusty winds during the evening in New York City.<sup>103</sup>

A few days later, during the April 12-16 period, one of the most famous storms of the 1850s pummeled the Northeast. It was during this storm, that Minot’s Lighthouse at Scituate, Massachusetts toppled into the angry Atlantic Ocean.

Ever since it was first put into use on January 1, 1850<sup>104</sup>, there were concerns about its safety. In March 1850, the Lighthouse’s first keeper, Isaac Dunham wrote that the Lighthouse was reeling “like a Drunken Man” during a storm and quit his position in October 1850.<sup>105</sup>

Even Captain William Smith, the Lighthouse’s designer didn’t exactly give it a ringing endorsement when he wrote, “[I]nasmuch as the light has outlived nearly three winters, there is some reason to hope that it may survive one or two more.”<sup>106</sup>

Following its having been devoured by the hungry Atlantic Ocean, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* recounted, “For a long time the condition of the structure—which has been well termed the ‘Eddystone of America’—has been most insecure, and at each successive storm fears were entertained that it would be torn from its tottering fastenings; and it has been a mater of wonder to us that measures were not taken by the government to strengthen it, or, if that were impracticable, to abandon it altogether, and not continue to imperil the lives of brave men, two of whom are now numbered as its victims.”<sup>107</sup>

The Boston *Journal* published the following account based on information from one of the Lighthouse’s assistant keepers<sup>108</sup>:

*The late storm commenced on Saturday [April 12] morning about 2 o’clock, the wind blowing from the northeast, accompanied by a heavy snow, and prevented it from being seen. During the day the storm increased and on Monday morning the oscillation of the*

*lighthouse became so great, from the action of the sea, that the inmates could with difficulty keep upon their feet; and...were frequently knocked down. They were finally obliged to retreat to the store-room, the next below, their cooking utensils having been broken, and it being impossible to remain where they were. Here they remained for four days, without sleep, and compelled to live upon dry bread and uncooked meat. The chimneys in the lighthouse were continually being thrown out, and of course broken, and the difficulty of ascending to replace them may be inferred from the fact that the person who was compelled to perform this hazardous duty was several times thrown from the ladder in consequence of the vibration of the building, caused by the storm. The spray ascended to the receiving deck, a distance of some fifty feet, thoroughly soaked the provisions and every and thing contained in that division, making it necessary to secure or remove them to the store-room below.*

On April 15, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* reported of the weather in New York City, “The weather for several days has merited anything but praise. It has been as sour as a newly married pair in the fourth month. It has been rough, chilly, harsh, uncomfortable... The sun has shone, but his beams have been as cold as moon beams in winter, or as the heart of a maiden at 40; and cloaks, overcoats, plaids and furs are as much the fashion as they were in January.”<sup>109</sup>

With either the storm stalling or even backing closer to the Coast for a time or a fresh storm following on the heels of the storm that began Saturday [April 12], Minot’s Lighthouse eventually was defeated by the elements after its heroic struggle described in the *Boston Journal*.

On April 18, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* informed its readers, “Our readers will recollect that some weeks since we published a thrilling description of ‘Minot’s Lighthouse in a Gale,’ and only two or three days ago a paragraph relating to its unstable condition, and the perils encountered by its inmates. We have now to finish its history. It was washed away on Wednesday night [April 16], and two young men, Joseph Wilson and Joseph Antonio (a Portuguese), brave and faithful fellows, perished with it. The keeper, Mr. Bennett, most fortunately, was absent from the light when the storm came on, and the weather was too rough for him to reach it in an attempt made on Tuesday afternoon. He was thus providentially saved.”<sup>110</sup>

The storm was particularly fierce on April 15, and it was described as having “committed terrible havoc among the shad fikes” in New York City’s “bay and rivers.”<sup>111</sup>

On April 21, the newspaper recalled the stormy stretch observing, “During the past week the weather has been remarkably inclement for the season, rain falling without intermission; which yesterday [April 20] changed to sleet and snow.”<sup>112</sup>

Following the unusually late appearance of snow in the New York City area, the warm-up brought cheer to New Yorkers who were weary of the prolonged unseasonable cold. “The weather for the past week has banished the shadows of discontent from every

countenance, and imparted a brighter hue to every cheek,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* observed.<sup>113</sup>

The proverbial curtain finally descended for good on Winter 1850-51 in May. The May 10, 1851 issue of the Vermont *State Banner* reported, “The mountains all around us are white with snow, and have remained thus for a week past. Considerable rain has fallen in the valleys, and although cold, it has caused the meadows to look fresh and green.”<sup>114</sup>

## APPENDIX

### **Winter 1850-51's Cold vs. Modern Daily Record Temperatures<sup>115</sup>:**

*January 31, 1851:*

Boston: -6; Modern record: -8, 1920

Portland, Maine: -18; Modern record: -17, 1948

### **Monthly Mean Temperatures and Extremes for New Haven<sup>116</sup>:**

December 1850: 28.7; Highest: 52; Lowest: 4

January 1851: 29.5; Highest: 53; Lowest: 0

February 1851: 32.0; Highest: 50; Lowest: 1

March 1851: 38.5; Highest: 68; Lowest 19

### **Monthly Mean Temperatures for New York City<sup>117</sup>:**

November 1850: 45.2

December 1850: 33.2

January 1851: 32.1

February 1851: 33.7

March 1851: 39.7

April 1851: 49.1

Temperatures are from Fort Columbus Marine hospital on Governors Island.

### **North Atlantic Oscillation (NAO)<sup>118</sup>:**

September 1850: -1.68

October 1850: -1.28

November 1850: +1.31

December 1850: +0.25

January 1851: +2.32

February 1851: +0.00

March 1851: +1.06

April 1851: -0.35

May 1851: +0.11

June 1851: +0.72

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> “Passing Away,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, September 20, 1850.
- <sup>2</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 4, 1851.
- <sup>3</sup> “Storm in the South—Damages to the Tobacco Crop,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 1, 1850.
- <sup>4</sup> “Storm in the South—Damages to the Tobacco Crop,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 1, 1850.
- <sup>5</sup> “The First Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 22, 1850.
- <sup>6</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 9, 1850 and “The First Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 22, 1850.
- <sup>7</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 10, 1850 and “The First Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 22, 1850.
- <sup>8</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 10, 1850.
- <sup>9</sup> “A Thrilling Incident,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 16, 1850.
- <sup>10</sup> “Severe Storm in Alleghany,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 18, 1850.
- <sup>11</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 18, 1850.
- <sup>12</sup> “From The South,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 25, 1850.
- <sup>13</sup> “The First Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 22, 1850.
- <sup>14</sup> “From The South,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 25, 1850.
- <sup>15</sup> An October 29, 1850 report from Oswego, New York stated, “For the last four or five days, the rain has fallen in torrents, and without intermission” in “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 29, 1850.
- <sup>16</sup> “Gale on Lake Erie,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 30, 1850.
- <sup>17</sup> “Frost, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 31, 1850.
- <sup>18</sup> “Snow at the West,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 31, 1850.
- <sup>19</sup> “Great Flood and Destruction of Property,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 29, 1850.
- <sup>20</sup> “The Canal Break,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 30, 1850.
- <sup>21</sup> “Frost, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, October 31, 1850.
- <sup>22</sup> “Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 28, 1850.
- <sup>23</sup> “Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 28, 1850.

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- <sup>24</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 9, 1850.
- <sup>25</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 9, 1850.
- <sup>26</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 11, 1850.
- <sup>27</sup> “Snow,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 20, 1850.
- <sup>28</sup> “Interesting From The Mexican Commission,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 8, 1851.
- <sup>29</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 19, 1850.
- <sup>30</sup> “Storm on the Lakes,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 20, 1850.
- <sup>31</sup> “Winter,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 22, 1850.
- <sup>32</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, November 28, 1850.
- <sup>33</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 9, 1850.
- <sup>34</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 16, 1850.
- <sup>35</sup> “Concert By The Blind Performers,” *The Brooklyn DailyEagle*, December 17, 1850.
- <sup>36</sup> “Severe Snow Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1850.
- <sup>37</sup> “Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1850.
- <sup>38</sup> “The Berean Ball,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1850.
- <sup>39</sup> “Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 20, 1850.
- <sup>40</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 21, 1850.
- <sup>41</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 21, 1850.
- <sup>42</sup> “Great Snow Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 27, 1850.
- <sup>43</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 24, 1850.
- <sup>44</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 24, 1850.
- <sup>45</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 24, 1850.
- <sup>46</sup> “Great Snow Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 27, 1850.
- <sup>47</sup> “Great Snow Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 27, 1850.
- <sup>48</sup> “The Weather at Franconia, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 10, 1851.
- <sup>49</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 24, 1850.
- <sup>50</sup> “The Weather at Franconia, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 10, 1851.
- <sup>51</sup> “The Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.

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- <sup>52</sup> “The Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.
- <sup>53</sup> “The Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.
- <sup>54</sup> “The Weather in the East,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.
- <sup>55</sup> “The Weather in the East,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.
- <sup>56</sup> “Holiday Excursions,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, December 26, 1850.
- <sup>57</sup> “The Weather at Franconia, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 10, 1851.
- <sup>58</sup> “From Santa Fe,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 10, 1851.
- <sup>59</sup> “New Year’s Day in Brooklyn,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 2, 1851.
- <sup>60</sup> “Snow in the West,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 3, 1851.
- <sup>61</sup> “Intense Frosts,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 3, 1851.
- <sup>62</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 4, 1851.
- <sup>63</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 4, 1851.
- <sup>64</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 4, 1851.
- <sup>65</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 6, 1851.
- <sup>66</sup> “The Weather at Franconia, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 10, 1851.
- <sup>67</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1851.
- <sup>68</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 13, 1851.
- <sup>69</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1851.
- <sup>70</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 17, 1851.
- <sup>71</sup> “Destructive Fire,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 20, 1851.
- <sup>72</sup> “The Rain Yesterday,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 21, 1851.
- <sup>73</sup> “Navigation, &c.,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 27, 1851.
- <sup>74</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 27, 1851.
- <sup>75</sup> “Balls Last Night,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 29, 1851.
- <sup>76</sup> “Storm—Shipwreck,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 30, 1851.
- <sup>77</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, January 31, 1851.
- <sup>78</sup> “Extreme Cold Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 10, 1851.

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- <sup>79</sup> “Cool Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 4, 1851.
- <sup>80</sup> “Fire,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 3, 1851.
- <sup>81</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 6, 1851.
- <sup>82</sup> “The Ice Fields Fallen In With By The Canada,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 8, 1851.
- <sup>83</sup> “Naval,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 12, 1851.
- <sup>84</sup> “State of the Hudson,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 13, 1851.
- <sup>85</sup> “Great Ice Flood,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 14, 1851.
- <sup>86</sup> “Latest News,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 15, 1851.
- <sup>87</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 17, 1851.
- <sup>88</sup> “Tornado in Tennessee,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 1, 1851.
- <sup>89</sup> “The River Open to Albany,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 26, 1851.
- <sup>90</sup> “The River Open to Albany,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, February 26, 1851.
- <sup>91</sup> “A Change of Programme,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 8, 1851.
- <sup>92</sup> “The Heights,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 6, 1851.
- <sup>93</sup> “A Change of Programme,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 8, 1851.
- <sup>94</sup> “March,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 12, 1851.
- <sup>95</sup> “March,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 17, 1851.
- <sup>96</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 19, 1851.
- <sup>97</sup> “The Rains,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 19, 1851.
- <sup>98</sup> “The Late Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 26, 1851.
- <sup>99</sup> “The Late Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 26, 1851.
- <sup>100</sup> “The Winter,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1851.
- <sup>101</sup> “The Winter,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 21, 1851.
- <sup>102</sup> “Spring,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, March 26, 1851.
- <sup>103</sup> “Pretty, Isn’t It?” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 9, 1851.
- <sup>104</sup> “Minot’s Ledge Light,” at <http://www.lighthouse.cc/minots/history.html>.
- <sup>105</sup> “Minot’s Ledge Light,” at <http://www.lighthouse.cc/minots/history.html>.
- <sup>106</sup> “Minot’s Ledge Light,” at <http://www.lighthouse.cc/minots/history.html>.

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- <sup>107</sup> “Minot’s Rock Lighthouse Carried Away,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 18, 1851.
- <sup>108</sup> “The Minot Lighthouse in the Late Storm,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 16, 1851.
- <sup>109</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 15, 1851.
- <sup>110</sup> “Minot’s Rock Lighthouse Carried Away,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 18, 1851.
- <sup>111</sup> “Shad,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 18, 1851.
- <sup>112</sup> “The Weather,” *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 21, 1851.
- <sup>113</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, April 26, 1851.
- <sup>114</sup> Untitled, *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, May 22, 1851.
- <sup>115</sup> Modern records through February 29, 2004 from the National Weather Service.
- <sup>116</sup> David Ludlum, *Early American Winters: 1604-1820*, Boston: American Meteorological Society, 1966, pp.272, 276-277.
- <sup>117</sup> Sources of information: Unclew (WWBB) and Roger Brickner.
- <sup>118</sup> Reconstructed Monthly NAO Index Back to Dec 1658 at [ftp://ftp.ngdc.noaa.gov/paleo/historical/north\\_atlantic/nao\\_mon.txt](ftp://ftp.ngdc.noaa.gov/paleo/historical/north_atlantic/nao_mon.txt).