

The January 3-4, 1859 Snowstorm

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Introduction:

January 3-4, 1859 saw a major wind-whipped snowstorm bury the coastal and interior Northeastern United States. A foot or more of snow was recorded from New York City to Boston while more than 2 feet fell in interior sections from Hartford, Connecticut to Goffstown, New Hampshire. Drifts rose to more than five feet in places, including parts of New York City. Travel and mail was disrupted by the storm.

The Snowstorm:

The snowstorm arrived in the Northeast during the afternoon on Monday, January 3, 1859.¹ By evening, the snow had become heavy in New York City.² As the storm headed northeastward, the snow overspread the region moving into Massachusetts during the predawn hours of Tuesday, January 4 and Maine during the latter part of Tuesday morning.³ By early Tuesday morning, much of the Northeast was in the midst of a howling snowstorm.

This was a widespread storm that affected the entire region and some areas to the south, as well. "From all points, north, south, east and west [of New York City] we hear of the effects of the storm, which has been a widely extended one."⁴

Tuesday morning dawned with heavy snow and strong winds in New York City. *The New York Times* reported, "The storm, which commenced with such violence on Monday afternoon, continued all night; and, on Tuesday morning it was still snowing and snowing."⁵

Although the snow stopped falling past mid-morning⁶ in New York City, the storm's fury continued unabated into the afternoon before ending farther north and east. News accounts of the snowstorm included the following⁷:

Boston, Massachusetts, January 4, 1859—4 pm: "The storm has somewhat abated and the wind moderated. About 12 inches of snow has fallen, which has badly drifted."

New Haven, Connecticut, January 4, 1859—4 pm: "The storm has been very severe here. The...snow is two feet deep."

Hartford, Connecticut, January 4, 1859: "The snow is nearly three feet deep, and still falling."

Springfield, Massachusetts, January 4, 1859—5 pm: "The snow is two feet deep, and still falling."

Worcester, Massachusetts, January 4, 1859—7 pm: "Fifteen inches of snow has fallen here since 3 o'clock this morning."

Springfield, Massachusetts, January 4, 1859—11 pm: "The snow is from eighteen to twenty inches in depth."

As the storm wound down in the Northeast, the landscape had been transformed by the heavy snowfall that had been whipped into high drifts. "The snow had fallen during the night to a depth of over fourteen inches [in New York City], and the first morning exclamation of many a youth, upon opening his eyes to the scene, was doubtless, a jubilant one, at the prospect of capital sleighing."⁸

Brooklyn had been blanketed by a foot of snow and severe drifting was reported. The January 5, 1859 edition of *The New York Times* reported, "In Brooklyn, the average depth of the snow...was twelve inches; and in some places it had drifted to a depth of five and even six feet."⁹

Interior Connecticut into New Hampshire saw the heaviest snow. Middletown, Connecticut received 26" while Goffstown, New Hampshire was buried under 30" in a 12-hour period on January 4.¹⁰

Those looking for transportation to go to work and their daily lives were initially inconvenienced. "In the early morning, the City [New York City] cars and omnibuses labored heavily through the drifts, and four horses to a vehicle were often incapable of moving along the ponderous machine."¹¹ However, conditions rapidly improved thanks to the relatively mild readings¹² that followed the end of the storm. "After the first trip the cars ran pretty regularly. Private sleighs were out all day in abundance; but upon Broadway the sleighing was soon annihilated by a quantity of salt which was sprinkled over the thoroughfare from the Battery to Fourteenth Street."¹³

The liberal use of salt to melt the snow brought a complaint to *The New York Times*. A subscriber complained, "What right have the stage proprietors to sprinkle salt the whole length of Broadway in order to remove the snow, and thus spoil the sleighing for the use of private citizens? Is not Broadway a common thoroughfare for all?"¹⁴

Not all transportation recovered as quickly as the omnibuses. The Long Island Railroad Company was unable to bring its trains into operation on Tuesday while the City Railroad Company was sufficiently cleared of snow "for horses to drag an occasional car-load of passengers," except on the Greenpoint Line, which was not in operation that day.¹⁵

Interstate transportation and the mail were hit harder. "Railroading has been seriously impeded, and the few trains that have arrived have been considerably behind time. No train has yet arrived from Portland, or Springfield, and there is nothing in from New York today," was the report from Boston.¹⁶

By Wednesday, January 5, 1859, transportation was improving and the weather was tranquil. The telegraphic report from Boston revealed, "The railroad and steamboat travel so greatly disarranged by the snow-storm, is again beginning to assume

regularity... The Portland train was about 30 hours coming through. The tracks are now about clear."¹⁷

Even as New York City struggled with the snowstorm, a beneficial side to the storm was noted by *The New York Times*. The newspaper reported that the storm allowed "thousands of poor people" to earn money shoveling the snow and that more than \$30,000 in income resulted from "this charity."¹⁸

In the end, the January 3-4, 1859 snowstorm was another major 19th century snowstorm of note for the Northeastern United States. It affected a large part of the region, including the big cities of the Northeast while focusing its heaviest snow on interior sections where more than two feet of snow fell.

Endnotes

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- ¹ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ² "A heavy fall of snow set in last evening, commencing about 7 o'clock...", *The New York Times*, January 4, 1859, p.4.
- ³ "The Weather At The East—Obstruction Of Trains," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁴ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁵ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁶ "At ten o'clock...the snow ceased to fall...", in "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁷ "The Weather At The East—Obstruction Of Trains," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁸ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ⁹ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹⁰ David Ludlum, *Early American Winters: 1821-1870*, Boston, MA: American Meteorological Society, 1968.
- ¹¹ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹² "...the clouds cleared off, and lo, the sun came out with a genial warmth that resembled a Spring rather than a Winter's day," in "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹³ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹⁴ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹⁵ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹⁶ "The Weather At The East—Obstruction Of Trains," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.
- ¹⁷ "Resumption of Travel at the Eastward," *The New York Times*, January 6, 1859, p.5.
- ¹⁸ "The Snow-Storm," *The New York Times*, January 5, 1859, p.1.