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BEDFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY *stories*

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The Winter Hurricane - 1888

The Blizzard of 1888 was an important event in Bedford's history as it demonstrated some of the changes and preparation necessary to keep people and infrastructure safe during a dramatic winter weather event. We have little written history in our archives of what transpired in Bedford during or after the Blizzard, but from the articles below we can imagine what it must have been like. The family of John C. Clark, an original descendant, donated the photos below and we can see from these images what Bedford looked like after the storm.



"The 11th, 12th and 13th of March 1888, were three memorable days in the history of the Hudson Valley. When people awoke on the morning of the 11th a fine snow was falling and the wind whistled the tune of an ordinary storm. Hour by hour it increased in violence. The snow drove before it like sand and by noon of that day, people felt that a storm of the first magnitude was in progress. Night fell and the fury of the gale was unabated. By the morning of the 12th the blizzard had developed into a tragedy.

News trickled in by telegraph that miles of trains were stalled down the line of the New York Central Railroad and that hundreds of people were imprisoned in those trains without food and in some cases without heat. And all day long on the 12th the Arctic hurricane raged and roared while the snow piled into drifts that covered every familiar landmark, so that all localities looked alike. On the morning of the 13th the storm was still raging but with declining severity and by evening the elements finally gave over and calmed down during the night to clear weather."

From the old Highland Democrat by W.H.H. MacKellar



THE BLIZZARD of '88
Even the Leatherman was delayed

"The Blizzard" March 12, 1888



Over three days in March, 1888, one of the worst blizzards in American history hit the Northeast killing more than 400 people and dumping as much as 55 inches of snow in some areas. New York City ground to a near halt in the face of massive snow drifts and powerful

winds from the storm. At the time, approximately one in every four Americans lived in the area between Washington D.C. and Maine, the area affected by the Great Blizzard of 1888.



On March 10th temperatures in the Northeast hovered in the mid-50s. But on March 11, cold Arctic air from Canada collided with Gulf air from the south and temperatures plunged. Rain turned to snow and winds reached hurricane-strength levels. By midnight on March 11, gusts were recorded at 85 miles per hour in New York City.

Along with heavy snow, there was a complete whiteout in the city when the residents awoke the next morning.

Despite drifts that reached the second story of some buildings, many city residents trudged out to New York's elevated trains to go to work, only to find many of them blocked by snow drifts and unable to move. Up to 15,000 people were stranded on the elevated trains; in many areas, enterprising people with ladders offered to rescue the passengers for a small fee. In addition to the trains, telegraph lines, water mains and gas lines were also located above ground. Each was no match for the powerful blizzard, freezing and then becoming inaccessible to repair crews. Simply walking the streets was perilous. In fact, only 30 people out of 1,000 were able to make it to the New York Stock Exchange for work; Wall Street was forced to close for three straight days. There were also several instances of people collapsing in snow drifts and dying, including Senator Roscoe Conkling, New York's Republican Party leader.

Many New Yorkers camped out in hotel lobbies waiting for the worst of the blizzard to pass. Mark Twain was

in New York at the time and was stranded at his hotel for several days. P.T. Barnum entertained some of the stranded at Madison Square Garden. Even "The Leather Man," who had walked a circuit of 365 miles every 34 days for three decades, was



St. Matthew's Church

reportedly delayed four days by the blizzard. The East River, running between Manhattan and Queens, froze over, an extremely rare occurrence. This inspired some brave souls to cross the river on foot, which proved a terrible mistake when the tides changed and broke up the ice, stranding the adventurers on ice floes. Overall, about 200 people were killed by the blizzard in New York City alone.



But New York was not the only area to suffer. Along the Atlantic coast, hundreds of boats were sunk in the high winds and heavy waves. The snowfall totals north of New York City were historic: Keene, New Hampshire, received 36 inches; New Haven, Connecticut, got 45 inches; and Troy, New York, was hit by 55 inches of snow over 3 days. In addition, thousands of wild and farm animals froze to death in the blizzard.

In the wake of the storm, officials realized the dangers of above-ground telegraph, water and gas lines and moved them below

ground. In New York City, a similar determination was made about the trains, and within 10 years,

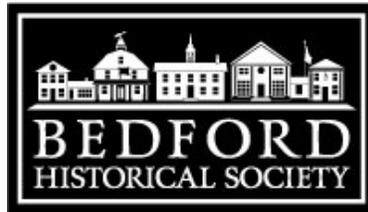
construction began on an underground subway system that is still in use today.

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