

The Blizzard of 1888: America's Greatest Snow Disaster

Christopher C. Burt · March 12, 2020, 5:54 PM EDT



Above: A snowdrift tunnel in Farmington, Connecticut, with six feet of headroom. (New York Historical Society.)

New York's Central Park has seen only 4.8 inches of snow during winter 2019-20 as of March 12. With no snow in the forecast, it is possible this winter will end up with the fourth lowest snow total at Central Park in its 152 years of recordkeeping. It's hard to believe that this week marks the 132nd anniversary of New York's—and America's—worst blizzard on record.

Few storms are as iconic as the “Blizzard of ‘88”. It was the deadliest, snowiest, and most unusual winter storm in American annals. No storm of similar magnitude has occurred anywhere in the contiguous United States since. Over 400 perished, including 200 in New York City alone, many literally buried in drifts in downtown Manhattan. On March 13, 1888, the temperature in New York fell to 6°F during the storm—still the coldest temperature ever measured there so late in the season.

Here is a recap of this famous event, adapted from a blog entry I wrote in 2012.

The Winter of 1888: The Children's Blizzard

January 1888 saw the most intense cold wave on record impact the Intermountain West and Northwest portions of the country. This spread eastward during the third week of the month, bringing additional all-time cold records to the Upper Midwest. Some of the all-time lows from January 1888 that still stand today include the following:

20° at Eureka, California on Jan. 14

-24° at Lakeview, Oregon on Jan. 15

-6° at Roseburg, Oregon on Jan. 16

-28° at Boise, Idaho on Jan. 16

-42° at Missoula, Montana on Jan. 16

-36° at Ely, Nevada on Jan. 16

-30° at Spokane, Washington on Jan. 16

-41° at St. Paul (Minneapolis), Minnesota on Jan. 21

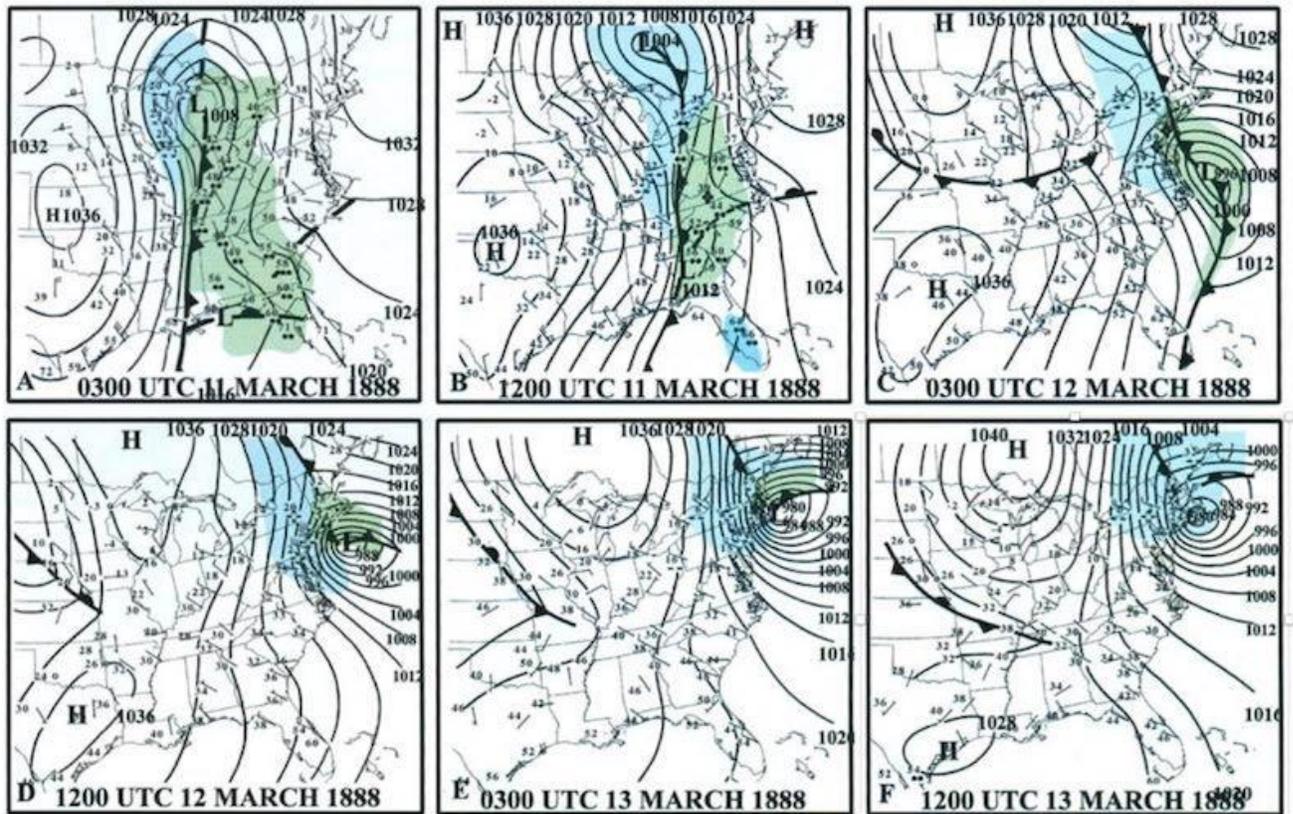
-36° at Green Bay, Wisconsin on Jan. 21

The coldest temperature during the month was -56.8° at Poplar River, Montana, on January 15. Of course, there were very few weather stations in the far west and Rocky Mountain areas in 1888, so many other locations would probably have had record low temperatures if they had had observation sites at that early point.

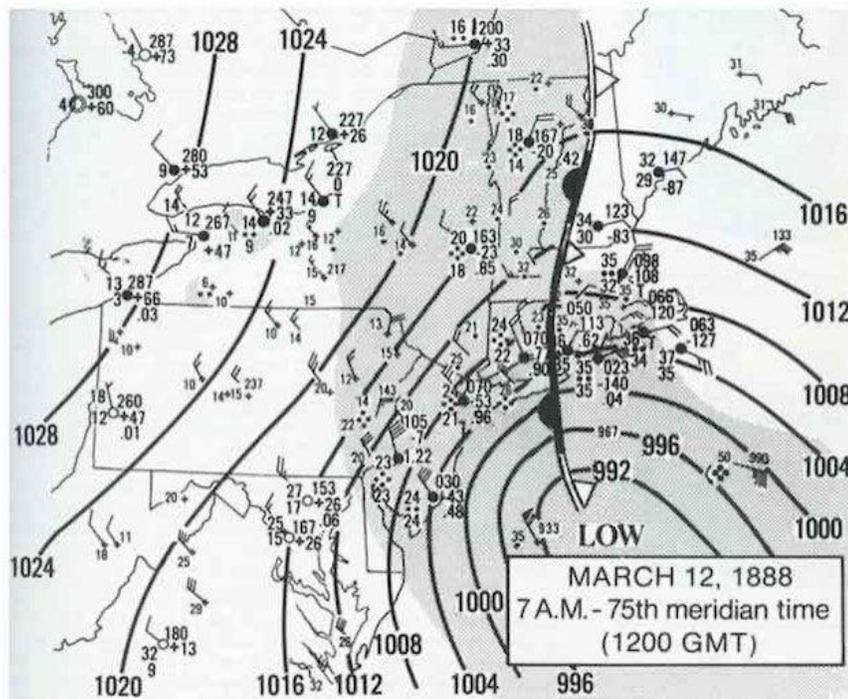
The cold wave was preceded by a phenomenal blizzard in the upper Plains and Midwest on January 12-13. Known as the Children's Blizzard (as immortalized by David Laskin in his superb book of the same name), the storm led to the deaths of some 200-250 settlers from exposure, mostly children trapped in the storm on their way home from isolated prairie schools in South Dakota and Minnesota. Ironically, this was probably the second deadliest blizzard in U.S. history, aside from the East Coast storm that arrived just a few weeks later.

The Great Blizzard of March 12-14, 1888

As Paul Kocin and Louis Uccellini noted in their classic compendium *Northeast Snowstorms*, the Blizzard of '88 was unique for several reasons. Firstly, most severe winter storms that affect the Northeast are preceded by an outbreak of cold air across the eastern U.S., usually centered over northern New England or southern Canada.



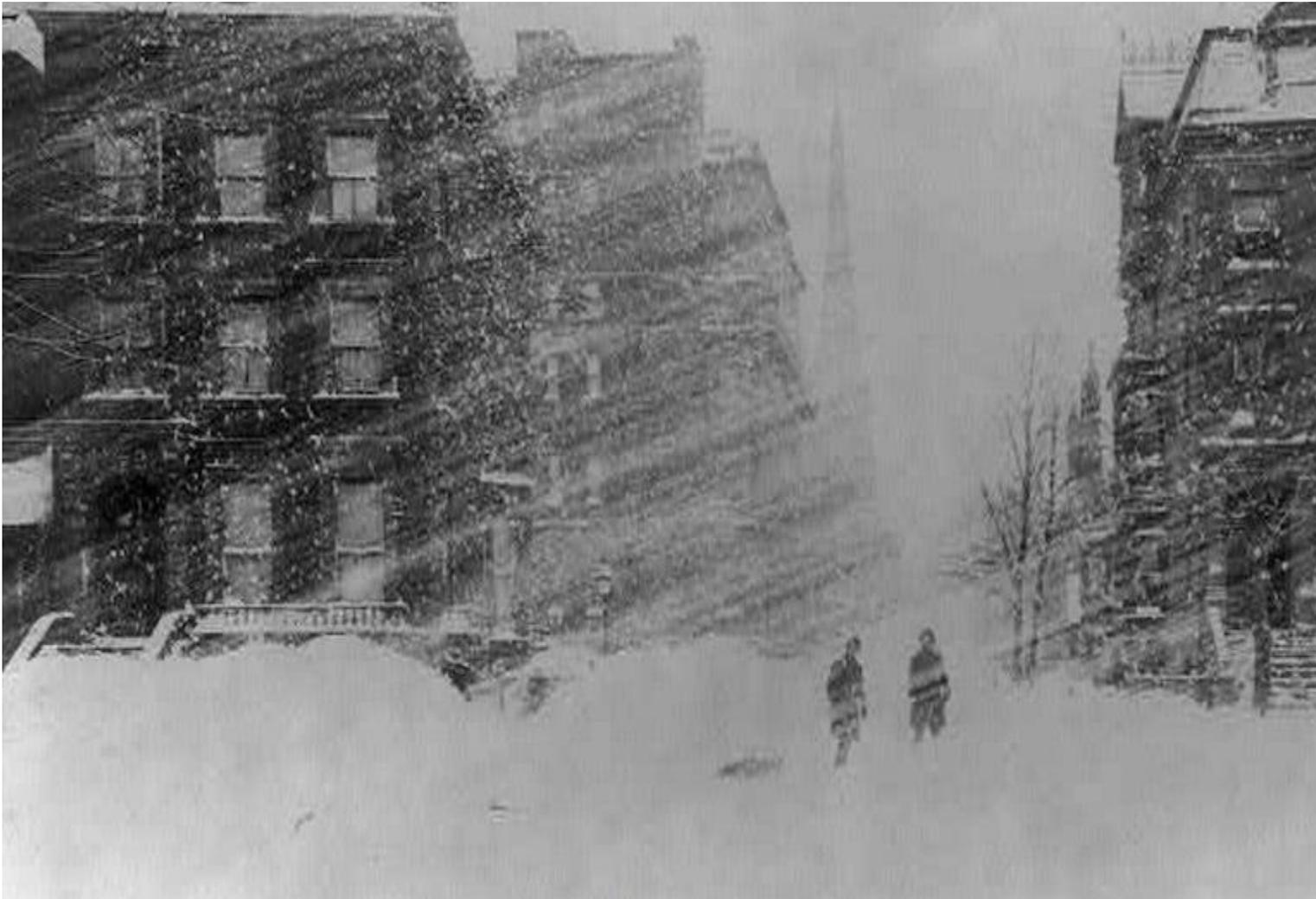
Synoptic maps for March 11-13, 1888, showing the evolution of the Blizzard of '88. (From "Northeast Snowstorms" by Paul Kocin and Louis Uccellini [American Meteorological Society], used with permission)



A detailed synoptic map for 7 a.m. EST on March 12, 1888, as the Blizzard of '88 began to reach its peak intensity in New York City. (From "Blizzard: The Great Storm of '88" by Judd Caplovich [VeLo Publishing], used with permission)

In New York City the rain turned to snow at 1 a.m. on Monday, March 12, when the temperature fell to freezing. Blizzard conditions quickly developed as the wind rose to a sustained 50 mph.

By 8 a.m. Monday, the city was completely immobilized by the blinding, drifting snow and howling winds. All telegraph communications went down. There was no subway at the time, and the elevated rail line ground to a halt, with one train derailing and killing several passengers and crew.



A street scene in New York City during the Blizzard of 1888. (C.H. Jordan/Library of Congress)

Walking in the streets became not only impossible but also deadly. Of the 200 people who perished in New York City, most were found buried in snowdrifts along the city's sidewalks. One of these victims was Senator Roscoe Conkling, a New York Republican Party kingpin and aspirant for the U.S. presidency. He died as a result of "over exposure" from trying to walk from his Wall Street office to the New York Club on Madison Square.

Refugees filled all the hotels. The venerable Astor Hotel set up 100 cots in its lobby when it became apparent by sunset that day that venturing outside was still impossible. The temperature had fallen to 8° by sunset, the wind was still howling and snowdrifts up to 20 feet filled the streets of the city.

DATE/TIME	TEMP (°F)	WIND	PRESSURE	CONDITIONS
3/11 noon	42°	12 mph ESE	29.98"	cloudy
3/11 6 pm	38°	13 mph ENE	29.81"	rain
3/11 midnight	33°	25 mph NE	29.73"	rain
3/12 6 am	24°	50 mph WNW	29.62"	snow
3/12 noon	14°	33 mph NW	29.48"	snow
3/12 6 pm	12°	45 mph NW	29.50"	snow
3/12 midnight	8°	50 mph N	29.40"	snow
3/13 6 am	6°	40 mph WNW	29.24"	cloudy
3/13 noon	9°	25 mph NW	29.28"	p. cloudy
3/13 midnight	12°	20 mph NW	29.42"	clear

Weather observations at Central Park, NYC, March 11-13, 1888.

The storm was even more severe in areas north and east of New York City. Fifty trains became stranded between Albany and the city, as well as on Long Island, in New Jersey, and in Connecticut. Many were derailed after trying to plow through drifts measured up to 38' in Connecticut (this drift measured in a rail line cut near Cheshire). Drifts up to 40 feet were reported in Bangall, a small town in Dutchess County, New York. Many of the 200 fatalities attributed to the blizzard outside of New York City consisted of passengers and train crews that attempted to walk to nearby towns after their trains became stalled or derailed.

Several ships foundered at sea, lost to 90-mph winds, huge seas, and ice accumulations on deck that caused them to roll over from the top-heavy weight.

How much snow fell?

The maximum point accumulation from the storm was 58" at Saratoga Springs, north of Albany, New York. Albany itself recorded 47" and nearby Troy measured 55".



A massive snowbank in Saratoga Springs, New York, which reported the region's highest snow total during the Blizzard of 1888. (Saratoga Springs History Museum)

New York City's official accumulation at Central Park was 21", but up to 36" was reported in parts of Brooklyn and Queens. In Connecticut, New Haven reported 42" and Hartford at least 36" (this figure is estimated; the official weather site for Hartford was located on a hill where only 19" was recorded since high winds blew the most of the snow away).

State Snowfall Maxima from the Blizzard of 1888

New York: 58" at Saratoga Springs

Connecticut: 50" at Middleton

Vermont: 48" at Bennington

New Hampshire: 42" at Dublin

Massachusetts: 40" at North Adams

Pennsylvania: 31" at Blooming Grove

New Jersey: 25" at Rahway

Rhode Island: 20" at Kingston

Maine: 20" at Boothby

Map of snow accumulations from the storm. (From *Northeast Snowstorms*, by Paul Kocin and Louis Uccellini)

When the storm stalled off the southern New England coast, warm Atlantic air was advected inland over northern New England diminishing snow accumulations from Boston northward. The line between cold and warm air became very defined. At one point late on Monday night, March 12, the temperature stood at 4° in Northfield, Vermont while it was 34° in Nashua, New Hampshire, just 60 miles east. (Paul Kocin)

How the storm changed America

The blizzard was the first widely photographed natural disaster in U.S. history. The deadly high-line rail disaster led the city of New York to plan its vast subway system, now one of the most extensive in the world. The breakdown of all communications from Washington, D.C., northward resulted in the burying of telegraph, and later, electric lines across many parts of the Mid-Atlantic and Northeast regions (although overhead power lines can still be found in many areas).

REFERENCES: The best book about the storm is *Blizzard! The Great Storm of '88* by Judd Caplovich (VeRo Publishing Co., 1987). Much of the material in this post originates from this fine work.

Northeast Snowstorms (Volume I: Overview and Volume II: The Cases), Paul J. Kocin and Louis W. Uccellini (American Meteorological Society, 2004).

"Cold Waves and Frosts in the United States," Weather Bureau Bulletin P (U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, 1906).

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