

# THE WASHINGTON & JEFFERSON SNOWSTORM

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## Early American Winters 1604-1820

George Washington maintained a separate diary at various times during his private and public careers which he called "An account of the weather." The first entries of this type appeared in January 1767, and the last was penned almost a third of a century later on the day preceding his death in December 1799. (1)

Washington's chief concern with the weather related directly to its effect on his agricultural interests. When away from his beloved plantation at Mt. Vernon, he usually requested his overseer to send a weekly summary of recent weather conditions so that he could judge its effect on the progress of his crops. Many of these diaries have been preserved in the Library of Congress though they were not published when the great mass of Washingtonian was collected and printed at the first president's bicentennial in 1932. Many important meteorological events were witnessed and described by Washington, and his statements on these give the facts an air of authenticity.

Fortunately for the climatological history of the District of Columbia area, our first president-to-be was home at Mt. Vernon in late January 1772 when the greatest snowstorm in the history of the middle and lower Potomac Valley occurred. His diary entries from January 26th to 29th supply a graphic account of the event:

January 26— Raw, cold, and cloudy with the wind though not much of it Northerly

January 27— A snow which began in the night and was about 5 or 6 inches deep this morning kept constantly at it the whole day with the wind hard and cold from the northward

January 28— The same snow continued all last night and all this day with equal violence the wind being very cold and hard from the Northward drifting snow into banks.

January 29—Fine pleasant morning without any wind—but before 11 o'clock it clouded up & threatened snow all the remaining part of the day—being full three feet deep everywhere already. (2)

In his regular diary Washington described the day of the 27th as "dreadfully bad" and complained that he was confined to his home on both the 27th & 28th. The following day he related that "with much difficulty rid as far as the Mill, the snow being up to the breast of a Tall Horse everywhere." (3)

In a subsequent letter, dated 21 February, Washington wrote: ". . . would be shut up for ten or twelve days, by the deepest snow which I suppose the oldest living ever remembers to have seen in this country." (4)

Evidence from other sources has been gathered to indicate that George, indeed, was not telling a lie about the storm or the depth of the snow. The *Maryland Gazette* of Annapolis, the nearest newspaper published to present-day Washington, commented on 30 January 1772:

The winter has in general been very mild until Sunday evening last when it began to snow, which continued without intermission until Tuesday night. Yesterday morning we had again the appearance of fine moderate weather, but in the evening it began to snow very fast which continued all night ; tis supposed the depth where not drifted is upwards of three feet, and it is with utmost difficulty people pass from one house to another. (5)

To the south at Williamsburg the deep snow prevented many of the county burgesses from reaching the Virginia colonial capital, so the meeting of the General Assembly had to be postponed. (6)

The local *Virginia Gazette* complained about the stoppage of the postal service from the North ; it was not until 5 March, five weeks after the storm, that it was able to carry news from a northern source. (7)

Our southernmost check-point for the storm is Bethabara, North Carolina, near present-day Winston-Salem. The Moravian Brethren had established an outpost there in the 1750's and chronicled all the important events, meteorological and otherwise, which befell their frontier community. The Bethabara Diary indicates that rain commenced about 0900 on 26 January 1772 and turned to snow in the evening. Snow fell all the following day, piling up a cover of six inches; toward night clearing set in and it froze. (8)

Thus, precipitation commenced in North Carolina about twelve hours before it reached Mount Vernon in northern Virginia, a distance of about 250 miles.

That the storm reached westward to the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia is well-known to anyone who has visited Monticello and read the historical marker on Jefferson's honeymoon cottage. The owner of that grand weather observation point had been married on New Year's Day of 1772. After a leisurely journey from Charles City during which they stopped with friends along the way, Jefferson and his bride neared their home on the afternoon of the 26th. Most biographers state that Jefferson arrived at Monticello on 25 January. In view of the above meteorological evidence, it appears that he returned from his honeymoon late on the 26th, the evening of the day on which the big snow commenced. A light fall had started and soon so increased in intensity that the bridal couple were forced to abandon their carriage at Blenheim, about eight miles from Monticello, and to pursue the remainder of the way on horseback over a mountain trail, all the while the storm increased in fury making progress very difficult. (9)

As his daughter in later years related, "they arrived late at night, the fires all out and the servants retired to their houses for the night. The horrible dreariness of such a house, at the end of such a journey, I have often heard both relate." (10)

In his *Garden Book* entry for 26 January Jefferson made note: "the deepest snow we have ever seen. in Albemarle it was about 3. f. deep." (11)

In later years he referred to this storm several times as exceeding anything that he recorded in his regular *Weather Memorandum Book*, which commenced in 1776 with the purchase of a thermometer on 1 July at Philadelphia. (12)

The writer happened across another reference to this storm which confirms the measurement of Washington and Jefferson and also indicates that the snow pattern was quite similar to that of the "Knickerbocker" storm of 1922.\* In the columns of the Philadelphia *United States Gazette* for 27 June 1818 appeared a letter recalling big storms and severe winters of the past.

It was written by a resident of Winchester, Virginia, at the northern head of the Shenandoah Valley, and originally appeared in the *Winchester Gazette*. For 1772 the correspondent remembered: The fall of this present winter until the 27th January, the most pacific winter ever known since the memory of man. On the 27th and 28th of this month there fell a snow exceeding all ever known for the space of a hundred years. I measured it and it was 2 feet 9 inches deep. (13)

\* The Knickerbocker Storm, Washington's greatest of the modern era, deposited a 28-inch blanket on 27-28 January 1922, exactly 150 years to the day after the Washington & Jefferson Storm. It was so named from the collapse of the overburdened roof of the Knickerbocker Theater which killed more than 100 movie patrons.

Contemporary weather reports from farther north indicate that the snow canopy of 1772 was much like that of 1922 in that the very deep snowfall did not reach much farther north than the Mason-Dixon Line. Good instrumental records for 1772 are at hand for Philadelphia. At 0900 on the 27th of January the temperature was 18°, wind northeast, and barometer 30.50 inches—it commenced to snow an hour later. After a stormy night the snow had ceased to fall by 0900 on the 28th, but the total snow accumulation was not considered noteworthy. (14)

1. George Washington. Ms. Account of the weather 1772. (LC.)
2. Idem.
3. The diaries of G. Washington. 1748-1799. John C. Fitzpatrick, ed. Boston & NY, Houghton Mifflin Co., 1925.
4. The writings of George Washington. John C. Fitzpatrick, Wash., D.C., GPO, 1931.
5. Md. Gaz. (Annapolis), 30 Jan 1772.
6. Va. Gaz. (Williamsburg), 6 Feb 1772.

7. Ibid., 5 March 1772.
8. Moravians in N.C., 2, 669.
9. T. Jefferson. Ms. Weather memorandum book. (LC.)
10. The life of T. Jefferson. Sarah N. Randolph, ed. N. Y., Harper & Bros., 1871. 44-45.
11. T. Jefferson, Garden Book, 33.
12. T. Jefferson. Ms. Weather memorandum book.
13. Winchester (Va.) Gazette in U.S. Gaz. (Phila.), 27 June 1818.
14. Thomas Coombe. Ms. Register of the weather Anno 1772. (Amer. Phil. Soc.