

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin Ambrose, Dan Henry, Andy Weiss. *Washington Weather: The Weather Sourcebook for the D.C. Area*. Fairfax: Historical Enterprises, 2002. 252 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9639502-4-6.

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The Capital in a Storm

Washington Weather: The Weather Sourcebook for the D.C. Area is exactly what it claims to be: a reference for explaining the causes of local weather and a directory of information on many of its more extreme historic manifestations. The book is filled with averages, extremes, totals, storms, winds, heat, cold, rain, snow, ice, flowing water, and all manner of interacting weather patterns. It is an enthusiast's book for armchair storm chasers, prepared with evident fun and fervor by a trio of local weather devotees. Kevin Ambrose, a computer systems engineer, has published two photograph compilations, *Blizzards and Snowstorms of Washington, D.C.* and *Great Blizzards of New York City*. Dan Henry is a professional broadcast meteorologist, working for Washington television station WJLA, and Andy Weiss is a former high school science teacher.

The book begins with a synopsis chapter on the weather of the Mid-Atlantic from colonial times to the mid-nineteenth century. It draws together early general descriptions and impressions before marching through a selection of noteworthy cold spells, snowstorms, hurricanes, and floods mentioned in the accounts of Sir Walter Raleigh, the Jamestown settlers, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and others. "Colonists documented the weather in diaries, letters, and personal journals," the authors note, which explains the book's largely anecdotal approach to this early history (p. 13). Observations on "The 'Dreadful Hurricane' of 1667," "The Great Fresh' of 1771," "The Year without a Summer' in 1816," and

"The Great Snowball Battle of Rappahannock Academy, February 25, 1863" make for entertaining reading.

After this introduction, the authors organize the book by weather type, with chapters, in turn, on winter storms, cold waves, severe weather (i.e., thunderstorms, tornadoes, and hail), tropical weather, floods, and heat waves. Each chapter starts with a section explaining the causes and mechanics of weather phenomena around the national capital. "Winter Storms and Blizzards" begins by defining winter precipitation types, nor'easters, and the jet stream. "Severe Weather" describes the atmospheric conditions that generate lightning and spawn tornadoes. In other places the authors define the various standard weather warnings, note some of the modern equipment used in weather detection (e.g., Doppler radar), and give safety tips. These meteorology lessons are didactic and informative. They read much like pages from a high-school textbook, particularly given the colorful, if often artless, illustrations that support the text. These "high quality weather graphics" will be familiar to television weather-report viewers (p. 251); they were drawn especially for the book using the same graphics system that supplies bold colors, large, simple type, and generous amounts of cutesy symbols to hundreds of TV broadcasters around the world everyday.

Additional custom weather maps illuminate the second part of each chapter, the catalog of notable and extreme weather events. This is the meat of the book,

where the authors report record and average temperatures, rain and snowfall totals, wind speeds, flooding levels, destruction amounts, death tolls, and sundry anecdotes. A typical entry, from the chapter "Floods," is "The Flash Flood of July 22, 1969." It begins, "A cluster of slow-moving thunderstorms passed through the area during the evening of July 22, 1969, producing 4.38 inches of rain at National Airport. Of that amount, 3.29 inches fell in one hour." What follows details the track of the storm ("moved southeast away from the District"), its damage ("twenty cars were found in Four Mile Run after the flooding subsided"), and some of its effects ("the Major League All-Star baseball game at RFK Stadium ... was postponed as the dugouts filled chest-deep with water") (pp. 211, 216). Eight other floods from 1889 to 1996 are described similarly. "Winter Storms and Blizzards" contains the most entries, detailing twenty-nine events between 1888 and 2000. Sidebars in this chapter look at the off-the-mark forecast that preceded a March 1888 blizzard, the Knickerbocker Theater collapse in 1922, and the Air Florida flight 90 crash in 1982. Other interesting digressions, like "Washington's Historic Lightning Rods" and Professor Bernard Mergen's chronology of D.C. snow management, 1895-1996, appear elsewhere in the book.[1]

The book's strongest and most entertaining aspect is its profusion of photographs. Amidst the pictures of snow piled on and near the city's familiar sights; tornado, hurricane, and flood damage; and raging and standing waters, there are many interesting views of people coping with the interruption and diversion that extreme weather brings to everyone's lives. Men shoveling snow into a waiting wagon. Smiling boys on Chain Bridge watching the raging water just a few feet beneath them. A student on a snowy bench in LaFayette Square whose newspaper reads "Spring Is Here." Skaters on the Potomac. The ancient and recently toppled Wye Oak. While the color photography of recent weather events is frequently the authors' own work, the book's historic black-and-white photography is drawn extensively from the rich collections of the Washingtoniana Division of the D.C. Public Library, particularly its *Evening Star* photo collection. Other views come from the Library of

Congress and the NOAA Library. A good number of interesting historic Weather Bureau daily maps are also reproduced from the NOAA.

Although the authors pay great attention to explaining the causes of weather as they are currently understood, there is almost nothing in their book about what was believed about weather in the past or about the history of weather forecasting. Some description of outmoded weather theories, or developments by the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. Army, and the Weather Bureau in the nineteenth century, or of the massive impact of broadcast media and computer modeling in the twentieth, would have provided a welcome context for understanding the book's catalog of events and the effects weather had on Washingtonians in the past.

Washington Weather is an entertaining and informative book for the general reader interested in understanding weather systems in the region and browsing through interesting storms from the past. It is not the final word on the subject. Its checklist approach to major weather events is particularly strong on events from the second half of the twentieth century. Although it arguably contains a complete list of extreme weather for the second half of the twentieth century, the book is by no means a complete account of significant events in the second half of the nineteenth. For example, its catalog of significant floods begins only at 1889, thereby omitting, among other floods, the important freshet of February 1881 that prompted Congress to order and fund the dredging of the Potomac Flats, leading to the creation of Potomac Park. In fact, the history of bridge repair and improvement in nineteenth-century Washington is largely linked to freshets and ice. The authors rarely draw connections—and many of them there must be—between weather and the social, cultural, and physical development of the city. While this may have been beyond the book's scope, it leaves an ample field that other writers will, one hopes, explore.

Note

[1]. Bernard Mergen's chronology was reprinted in *Washington History* 8, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1996): pp. 4-15.

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