

THE GREAT STORM OF 1857 IN VIRGINIA

The Diary of Edmund Ruffin of Prince George County.

William and Mary Quarterly (Williamsburg), April 1915.

JAN. 18, 1857 SUNDAY

SNOW WITH STRONG WIND & BITTER COLD.

VIOLENT AND CONTINUED NORTH WIND, FORMING THE SNOW INTO DEEP DRIFTS.

WE COULD SCARCELY KEEP COMFORTABLY WARM SITTING BY THE FIRE AS THE TEMPERATURE WAS 7 °F AT 9 A. M. AND 3 °F AT 4 P. M. AND FALLING.

Jan. 19, 1857

The furious north wind but little abated. Snowing ceased in the night. The ways impassable, by snow drifts, & other places the ground was barely covered. The thermometer blown down & broken, so cannot know the temperature this morning.

I passed a wretched night, with cold feet. Yet I went to bed comfortable, with a good fire burning until it burnt out—& with as much covering as could do any good—6 blankets, & 2 more over my feet, which were pulled up when needed, & also a doubled cloak over all, on my knees & feet. Woolen night socks, & over them a woolen wrapper, both well warmed, covered my feet, & yet before the fire had quite burnt out, I was awakened by cold feet, they continued to grow colder until I had fire & arose in the morning. No amount of covering & nothing but external heat can keep me warm in the coldest nights. The snow lies so irregularly owing to the violent wind, that I cannot even guess the depth. Perhaps it may not average 10 inches. But while many places are scarcely covered, in others the drifts are from 3 to 7 feet deep. It is not only extremely laborious to walk, or even to ride in any direction, or pathway, but even dangerous, because of the snow drifts to be crossed. No work attempted today, by Edmund's order, except to feed the live-stock, & to put wood on the fires. Luckily a good stack of wood was on hand, & cut up, before the snow began. We hear that in the overseer's house, & all the negroes' houses, (the latter good framed and new buildings) the entrance of the very fine snow, driven by the wind through scattered crannies, covered all the floors & even the beds. Such a snow storm I have never known before. Clear, & something milder. We needed the mail especially, but did not attempt to send to the Post Office, because of the difficulty & danger, & also under the belief that no mail could have been brought.

20'n.

By using still greater precautions, & especially by keeping the fire burning in my room all night, & a servant sleeping there for the purpose (neither of which did I ever have before,) I kept nearly warm and comfortable. But not entirely so—as at 1 o'clock I felt my feet a little cold. Clear & milder. My sons Edmund & Charles attempted to ride, & with great difficulty, reached the parsonage, on the public road, & but a mile from the farm buildings. The way was barely practicable, the riders having to dismount in several of the deepest snow drifts, to enable their horses to scramble out. For even an empty wheel carriage of any kind, the way was impracticable. Edmund & Mary rode on horseback to Tarbay, for exercise for the latter. And though the short distance is over level & open ground, where there was nothing to accumulate drifts, the passage was difficult for horses, & the small drifts would have stopped walkers. Everything that has to be moved on this farm, except in the yard, has to be carried on horseback. The only firm walking is on the frozen river, over which the ice & snow extend everywhere. I walked out more than a quarter mile, & I believe that the ice

is strong enough to allow walking across. Except the calls made today on the nearest neighbors, at Tarbay & the Parsonage, I suppose that every family has been entirely cut off from all intercourse with others.

21s'.

Warmer. Edmund & Charles rode to the Glebe, but Charles had to leave his horse there, & pick his way on foot, through the fields, to his farm. The public mail road beyond the Glebe was impassable, & had not then been trodden by a foot. A physician attempted to ride farther, but was obliged to turn back, though in sight of his patient's house. Edmund heard the average depth of the snow estimated at 18 inches. He thinks it not much less. Having been confined to the house & yard, & seeing so much ground nearly bare & here the wind was most violent, I had supposed the average depth of the snow much less—perhaps 10 inches deep. But it is not the general depth, but the particular deep drifts, that render walking & riding almost impracticable. I walked to Tarbay, by favor of the frozen snow along the river-shore, & the adjacent hillsides, on which the north wind did not allow much snow to remain. Of course, no mail has reached the Post Office since the snow began last Saturday night. Such obstruction to travelling, even for a day, I have never heard of before, in this region. According to present appearances & prospects, the roads will scarcely be practicable for carriages in a week. No one has attempted even to ride on horseback, except on compulsion. Those who have been compelled to send to the mill, for meal, have sent on horseback, & some on foot—& these have left the road often to avoid the snow drifts, that the travel does not in the least prepare for the subsequent use of wheel carriages.

22nd.

Colder last night, & a light snow. Clear & bright sunshine but with a N. W. sharp wind & the weather colder (apparently) than at any time before. Confined to the house by the cold wind. & very tired of the confinement. Nothing heard from the outside of the farm. I have read everything I can find amusing in our late Reviews & other periodicals, & have been reduced to such poor stuff as the books of "Fanny Fern."

23rd.

I walked across the river on the ice, to Berkeley landing, from the beach nearest to this house. With the usual liberal measure allowed for distances on water, this broad part of the river is generally called 3 miles across. But it is certainly less, & from the time I made, I do not think the distance more than 2 miles. I walked over in 55 minutes, & returned in 60. I designed to have visited the family for an hour or two. But hearing, at the shore, that all were from home, I returned immediately, after leaving my card. The ice was generally rough, but

some spots (newly formed since the cessation of the violent wind in the night of Jan. 18th,) being smooth. Some patches of dry & thin snow. The ice had numerous cracks, made by the rising & falling of the tide, & the sound of cracking was heard uninterruptedly. In one place, the ice settled perceptibly, with cracking, as I was on it. But it was so thick, that my weight did not make the least addition to the settling or cracking. No doubt the passage was very safe. But we are so unaccustomed here to ice so solid, & still more to any one venturing to cross a wide & deep river, that my walking over was a very unusual performance. Except in the case of the sailors of a vessel frozen in, & who walked to the shores to obtain food &c. I did not hear of any walking across the river last winter, when it was hard frozen—*nor in the many preceding milder winters, during my proprietorship & residency here.* But though very few persons would now dare to walk across _____ & still fewer except under strong necessity—& though certainly none ought to incur an apparent risk, without necessity—I am inclined to believe that a horse might have been supported on most of the ice over which I passed today, notwithstanding its numerous cracks. I was well wrapped up to guard me from cold, & my feet especially well covered. I found the clothing & the exercise sufficient to keep me warm enough. I am not very much fatigued by the walk of at least 4 miles on the ice, but I had several falls, & by two of which I was hurt considerably for a while. I carried a light but strong staff of 7 feet long, with a headless nail driven partly into the lower end, to prevent my slipping, & also to offer some aid in case of the ice breaking. However, I had very little dread of the latter contingency—& if it had happened, I would not have been in much danger of drowning, but in great danger of perishing by freezing, if remaining wet for half an hour in the present temperature. The ice on all the shallow water, & in the bay on this side, was as described above. But that over the ship channel looked less trustworthy. From the greater effect there of both the wind & tides, all the ice had been broken up, & mostly in small pieces, during the snow storm—& all this ice has been formed since the night of 18th. This ice is full of the fragments of the previous cover of ice, very distinct from the new portion in which they are imbedded. But both the old & the new there is perfectly transparent. Sent to the Post Office, only to hear that no mail had yet arrived—& that no wheel-carriage, or sleigh, had been on the main public & mail road. We have so little snow, that few persons, in the country, or for business, ever use a sleigh. But on this snow, because of its scarcity or absence in many spots, & the deep drifts in others, sleighing would be impracticable. We have now lost all three mails for the week—& have no prospect that the next mail can come. Yet this post

office is but 16 miles from Petersburg & the main railroad route, which must have been cleared of snow some days ago.

24th

Rode to the Glebe, & thence to Ruthven to dinner. The road so deep in snow in many places that I had to leave it (following preceding tracks), crossing fences into the adjacent fields. Found, as expected, that Julian's thermometer also had been broken by the storm. Mildred has been detained much over her designed stay at Ruthven—but she & the other ladies there having had a pleasant time, while confined to the house.

25th

Sunday. No attempt to get to church—as it would certainly have been fruitless. Milder.

26th.

Still no mail. Only one cart had passed along the main mail road, & that had been compelled to return, because unable to proceed.

27th.

Very mild. Thawing _____ & no freezing by bed-time. Left Ruthven for Beechwood. A sale appointed for today had served to draw out sundry neighbors, to see other persons, & hear some news. I found some of these on my route, & heard something from abroad. Mr. Mark's thermometer showed 12° below zero, on the morning of the 23rd. This was 2° colder than I ever knew before. Mr. Dunn had been compelled to ride to Petersburg on that day. Heard that the railway to Washington had not been then made practicable & of course no northern mail, except from Richmond. 4 men in Petersburg & in the vicinity had been exposed to the weather of the night of the 18th & 3 were frozen to death, & the fourth is expected to die. One of these was D^r. Cox, a physician, riding in a buggy from Petersburg to his farm in Chesterfield. He was unable to open the gate, or to reach the house on foot, & died close to it. His companion (Traylor) is alive, but is worse than dead. All these cases were probably the results of more or less of intemperance. But two negro men, supposed sober, were frozen to death, in different places of this county, in that dreadful Sunday night in attempting to visit other houses but a few hundred yards distant. The snow & snow ice over the hard ice on the river mostly thawed, & in soft wet sludge, or water, before night. Edmund still confined to the house by his cold.

28th.

Thawing last night & all this day. Light drizzle. Julian hearing yesterday that the mail had been brought as far as the Court House, sent there for his papers,

& sent them to us this morning. We thus received the paper for 9 days at once _____ & scarcely any news, except the numerous accounts of the incidents of the snow storm, & of disasters therefrom. The roads are still blocked up & impassable everywhere heard from. The railways had been impassable for from 2 to 4 days ___ & no entire opening northward yet. Sunday more deaths reported, and others barely escaped, from freezing. The temperature correctly observed in Petersburg, on the morning of the 23rd, reported to be 14° below zero—& in Richmond 13°—& in different other places of the vicinity, still lower marks, & in one case as low as 20° below zero. I doubt these latter statements, but fully believe in the report from Petersburg. One of the negroes reported yesterday as frozen in Prince George, was in Hanover. And 4 whites (one a small boy) in a wagon, were frozen to death in that county. In Richmond & Petersburg, (the only towns from which we received papers,) there has been a general cessation of ordinary labor & business. No supplies or customers from the country. The passenger & mail trains on the Central Railroad, (on which the great N. & S. mail is transported,) remained, with all its freight, blocked up within 6 miles of Richmond, for two days & nights, & could not be there reached, & the passengers relieved, by carriages, not even by messengers on foot, sent with food. The mail to this office has not been brought yet—nor even attempted to be brought by the only means, that is, on horseback, & frequently through the fields, where the snow is too deep in the roads. It is not so strange that so many lives have been lost, as that there were so few. The great violence of the wind & intense cold & the continued driving snow on the night of Sunday (18th) prevented the slaves visiting as is their usage. If the storm had not abated, many more of sober negroes, as well as of drunken whites would have perished. The danger of the former was so great on this farm, that it was a mercy that all escaped. The negroes' houses were built in several different places, the better for health & comfort. If any one of the residents of one house had visited another, in that night, he might have sunk in a snow drift, where no cry for help could have been heard, though within a few hundred yards of a dwelling.

Jan. 29th.

Mr. Sayre arrived, to the great joy of his wife, & of all of us for her sake especially. With her feeble state of health, & weak nerves, she had been as wretched because of Mr. Sayre's absence, & not hearing from him, as if he had been exposed to all the horrors of the storm & cold. As might have been counted on with confidence, he has been quite safe & comfortable, & only shut in by the snow, & came as soon as a way was practicable. As it was, his carriage (hired in Petersburg at double

price,) was the first that came near so far. For the last 7 miles the road was abandoned almost entirely, & the carriage was driven through the fields, & sometimes through woods. The railroads from Richmond to Washington were only opened on yesterday. Got a late newspaper by Mr. S., but with no important & definite news. Glad to learn there that had been no disaster, & no suffering from the storm, at Malbourne. The public roads there were at last made passable by the road laborers, called out by the surveyors of the roads. Here, no surveyor had moved, & perhaps has not thought of it—because working on the roads to remove or treat down snow was never heard of, or needed, heretofore. Unless it is done, no public road can be travelled by carriages for a week or more, & neither the church or the post-office will be accessible along the roads by carriages.

Feb. 2nd.

It would seem from the annexed statement of a Petersburg paper, (*if to be relied on,*) that the degree of cold were very different, at different hours of the same morning—& this may serve to account for the various statements of different observers of thermometers, on the morning of the cold 18th. It is reported in the Norfolk paper that a man walked across Hampton Roads, from Old Point Comfort to Willoughby's Point, & thence, on the ice, to Norfolk. Though the ferry steamers were kept running, (by breaking the ice ahead) still most of the persons who passed between Norfolk & Portsmouth walked across on the ice. Persons also walked across the Chesapeake bay, at Annapolis, where it is 12 miles wide—& from Edenton to Plymouth, 20 miles, across Albemarle Sound.

[ANNEXED CLIPPING FROM A PETERSBURG
NEWSPAPER.]

THE COLD ON FRIDAY.

"We are indebted to a friend who resides on Bollingbrook street, for the following report of the state of the Thermometer on Friday at the hours indicated, by observations carefully made by himself :—

At 5:30 A. M.	15 °F below zero.
At 7:00 A. M.	17.5 °F below zero.
At 7:30 A. M.	22 °F below zero.
At 8:00 A. M.	20 °F below zero.
At 8:30 A. M.	16 °F below zero.
At 9:30 A. M.	23 °F below zero.

At the last named hour the Thermometer was put in the sun and showed 5° below zero. These observations were taken on Bollingbrook Street in a Northern exposure. In the more elevated parts of the city it was about 2° warmer.

The above statement fully establishes the fact that the cold exceeded in intensity any, within the memory of the present generation—and it may, we doubt not, be truly asserted that it never has been equaled in this part of the world. So Friday, January 23, 1857, will be memorable, (we hope in all time to come) as the very coldest day upon record."