At the Society's public meetings following the epic winter storms in February 2014, attendees were asked to write about their recollections of the memorable events, and two volunteers did so. These are their stories.

## The Winter of 2013–2014

## **Bill Marshall**

People have tried to foretell the weather for millennia. They've read tea leaves, observed animals, consulted aching joints, and fired up supercomputers. The results have always been about as good as flipping a coin.

In October of 2013, AccuWeather, the private forecasting firm, predicted that people in the eastern United States would enjoy a mild 2013–2014 winter and would probably have to wait until February to see a substantial amount of snow. They also said California would get enough precipitation to make its drought worries a thing of the past.

Hardly. The West Coast drought would continue unabated and the northeast would endure a season deemed the most disruptive in 130 years.

On December 8, with the winter solstice still nearly two weeks away, the nation watched the hosting Philadelphia Eagles defeat the Detroit Lions 34–20 during a blinding snowstorm that covered the field with eight inches of snow by game's end as 70,000 football fans shivered in the stadium. The amount was more than in all of the previous winter and twice that of 2010–2011. It was the first of four snowfalls of eight inches or more the season would see in a city that had never recorded more than three storms of six inches or more in one season.

Winter arrived, the storms and cold continued, and Americans began hearing a phrase new to most of them: polar vortex. The phrase refers to the conditions in the Arctic that usually keep most of the extremely cold air there. With the Arctic warming twice as fast as the rest of the planet, however, its ice and snow cover has diminished. That, scientists theorize, has weakened the polar vortex, letting freezing air masses escape and head south, leading to a greater number of extreme weather events in the Northern Hemisphere's mid-latitudes. Europe's bitter winters of previous years made them aware of the phenomenon before Americans.



The cold air masses helped generate the season's heavy snows. Fifteen inches fell January 21, followed by severely cold temperatures rivaling the lowest of the season, which was 4 degrees on January 7. Interspersed among the large storms that winter were numerous "nuisance storms" featuring snowfalls of a few inches, enough to slow down daily life and make cautious school administrators cancel school. The weather in December and January slowed businesses too, but it was nothing Philadelphia's western suburbs hadn't seen before.

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This publication or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher. Contact the Society for permission to use any content in this publication. The Society does not accept responsibility for the accuracy of the information herein. Then came February 5.

On the afternoon of the third, the National Weather Service had issued a winter storm watch for several counties in eastern Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Less than twelve hours later, the watch was upgraded to a warning to counties in Maryland, Delaware, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The service tracked an area of low pressure from the Tennessee Valley on February 4 and said it would arrive in this region the next day. Meanwhile, a cold air mass from the north had settled over the surface of the Interstate 95 corridor. With the warmer air mass moving in above it, an icing event of some magnitude was predicted to hit at least a portion of the area.

Some schools and business closed in advance of the storm, but it turned out not to be widespread, and most of the warnings and advisories were cancelled. Most, but not all. The mid-thirties temperatures meant that instead of snow, the areas north and west of Philadelphia and Trenton got rain. That rain fell on snow from a recent storm still on roadways and tree branches. It froze as it landed. It was an ice storm, and a big one.



From late in the morning throughout the afternoon, that Wednesday's silence was punctured by the dull, thick crack of branches and trees succumbing to the weight of ice as thick as half an inch. Many of those branches and trees fell on power lines already burdened with ice, lines that, unlike those in most advanced nations, have not been buried underground due to the excessive costs cited by power companies. (Since the late-sixties, developments in America feature underground power lines thanks to policies initiated under the Johnson Administration.) The ice caused a high number of trips to emergency rooms thanks to slip and falls and car accidents, shortages of rock salt, school and business closings, and mass transit delays and cancellations. But it was the falling trees that had the most dramatic effect.

In addition to damaging houses and cars, they knocked out power for over 822,000, more than the nearly 640,000 in the 1993–1994 season, and nearly as many as the 850,000 customers who lost power during Superstorm Sandy in October of 2012. For as long as a week, many Easttown and Tredyffrin township residents lived like their 19th-century ancestors, reading by candlelight and warming their houses by burning wood. The romance of that wore off soon, however, as houses chilled and freezing pipes became a concern. Line workers came from far away states to rewire neighborhoods. The buzz of chainsaws and wood chippers went on day and night. PECO's phone line infuriated thousands with a recorded message

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that unfailingly vowed that power would be restored by 11 p.m. the day of the call for the duration of the outage, an issue PECO later promised to address. Some homeowners fled to the guest rooms of friends or to hotels. Others stayed put, fearing that opportunistic burglars would rob their darkened houses. Gas-powered generators chugged through the days and nights of some homeowners, keeping the lights and the furnace on, but at the high cost that comes with burning eight to twenty gallons of gas a day.

The power came back in pieces, dividing neighborhoods. On one side of a street, a family with power cooked large meals in brightly lit kitchens, took hot showers, watched television and snuggled under electric blankets in warm rooms. On the other side of the same street, a family without power bumped around in the dark, ate out, and



Headline from the front page of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2014-02-06

went to bed early and unwashed under piles of cold blankets and bedspreads. Television and internet service often took longer to come back as their providers dealt with their own scheduling problems.

The impact of the eleven days of storms lasted beyond the season. Arborists serviced private clients at least well into the following fall. Gardens needed replanting, lawns reseeding. Beloved shrubs had been murdered by the cold, reinforcing the idea that autumn is the wrong time to prune. The roads were in terrible condition thanks to the 157,000 tons of salt they'd been subjected to (PennDot officials said reserves had been pushed to a crisis-low level) and the later freeze-thaw conditions that produce pot holes. It took almost 16,000 tons of patching material to get the state's roads back in shape, twice the amount used in the two previous years combined.

The implacable winter left, but it took its time doing so. On March 27, Philadelphia reported a low of 23 degrees. As late as April 16, the city had a sub-freezing low. But as always, spring arrived, with its usual April showers and May flowers. April 30 was the wettest day of the year with a torrential 4.5 inches. Summer and fall were unremarkable.

In early February of 2015, as area residents watched temperatures dip into single digits during a season that would again be severe, albeit without the crippling storms of the winter before, the Geneva-based World Meteorological Organization released its findings for the previous year. Globally, 2014 was, by less than one degree, the hottest year ever in a historical record dating from 1880. The finding echoed that of an announcement released in January by two American scientific agencies and one in Japan. Although those on the East Coast know their chosen region makes up only a fraction of the world's total land mass, few would blame them for believing that the planet's thermostat was set low, not high, just as those who had broiled in other lands might have doubted accounts of strong trees felled by ice. As with any extreme event, you had to be there.

> For those interested in more information about these extraordinary events, there is a collection of storm-related articles from *The Philadelphia Inquirer* in the TEHS Archives.



Ice storm damage along Valley Creek on Rt. 252 in Valley Forge National Historical Park. 2014-02-05 photo courtesy of Tim Lander.

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