



## Washington History in the Classroom

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**“Washington History** magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”

**Washington History** is the only scholarly journal devoted exclusively to the history of our nation’s capital. It succeeds the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society*, first published in 1897. *Washington History* is filled with scholarly articles, reviews, and a rich array of images and is written and edited by distinguished historians and journalists. **Washington History** authors explore D.C. from the earliest days of the city to 20 years ago, covering neighborhoods, heroes and she-roes, businesses, health, arts and culture, architecture, immigration, city planning, and compelling issues that unite us and divide us.

The full runs of *Washington History* (1989-present) and its predecessor publication the *Records of the Columbia Historical Society* (1897-1988) are available through JSTOR, an online archive to which many institutions subscribe. It’s easy to [set up a personal JSTOR account](#), which allows for free online reading of six articles per month in any of their journals, or join the Historical Society at the [Membership Plus](#) level for unlimited free access to our publications.



*Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.*



*Residents of Floral Street, N.W., dig out after the storm of February 18-19, 1979, which added 18.7 inches of snow to the 5 already on the ground. Such city-stopping storms defy technological solutions and reduce cities to earlier historical times. Courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Public Library, © Washington Post.*

# Slush Funds

## A History of D.C. Snow Management

*By Bernard Mergen*

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**W**hen the talk is about weather, the District of Columbia is usually vilified for its heat and humidity and its abrupt seasonal change from spring to summer. While it is true that the city of Washington is often uncomfortable in the summer because of its “humiture,” mechanical air conditioning in homes, automobiles, and offices has become almost universal since the 1960s, enabling its residents and visitors to live, work, and play without great discomfort. Winter, the Blizzard of 1996 notwithstanding, is the forgotten season, perhaps because technological control of winter weather is less successful.

With an average of less than 17 inches of snow annually, Washingtonians might well ignore winter. Cities such as Buffalo, Rochester, and Syracuse, New York, average more than five times this amount, Boston triple, New York, and Philadelphia double.<sup>1</sup> Yet snow is important to everyday life in the nation’s capital and to its image.

Even 17 inches of snow falling over three months in a dozen storms can significantly affect people’s lives. The failure of Congress, city administrators, and residents themselves to recognize the effects of snow offers an interesting case study of environmental naiveté. As the geographer John Rooney, Jr., has pointed out, it is cities that fail to confront the “urban snow hazard” that suffer more than cities with greater snowfall but that are well prepared.<sup>2</sup>

An examination of the history of snow in Washington also provides a number of insights into issues of current interest. First, it reveals the changing relationships between urban populations and nature. Too often our concept of the natural environment is limited to parks and wilderness areas, obscuring the fact that even in the “deseasonalized” city, climate, geography, and biology play important roles.<sup>3</sup> Second, once snow is perceived as a hazard in a city, it requires legal, political, and administrative responses. The removal of snow from sidewalks and streets involves countless decisions about how, when, where, and who, decisions that rest on deeply

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held beliefs about technology, time, space, and quality of life. Finally, snow management is part of the ongoing debates over cost-benefit analysis and risk assessment.

Snow management, like the concept of urban snow hazard, is largely the creation of those involved in the technological changes in transportation and the growth of cities in the late nineteenth century. In the years before streetcars and automobiles, snow in cities was an inconvenience, but residents were accustomed to walking or hitching their horses to a sleigh. In cities served by electricity, telephones, mass transit, and the daily delivery of such staples as bread, milk, and newspapers, snow was a threat to civilization, an enemy invader to be fought with all available machines and organizational power.

The blizzard of March 11-14, 1888, which left snow accumulations of one to four feet throughout the Northeast, remains the benchmark for all snowstorms because it demonstrated the vulnerability of overhead wires and urban transit to wet, heavy snow. Newspaper editors in New York and other cities were quick to observe that the snow had "overcome the boasted triumph of civilization . . . our superior means of intercommunication."<sup>4</sup> In the aftermath of the blizzard the cities were quiet, a phenomenon that still has the power to astonish.

One response to the blizzard of 1888 was the reorganization of New York's snow removal system. George E. Waring, Jr., the dynamic commissioner of street cleaning who had created a new image for sanitation workers in the early 1890s by putting the crews in uniform and dubbing them "White Wings," appointed H. L. Stidham "snow-inspector." In good Progressive reformer fashion, Stidham linked snow removal to public health, especially for the tenement population of Manhattan's Lower East Side. "Whether it be winter or summer," Stidham observed, "the people must have this additional room opened up for them, and a delay in the removal of the almost-knee deep snow and befouled

slush is at the cost of much sickness, and probably many lives, each winter."<sup>5</sup> He achieved his goal of removing more snow for less money by instituting a system in which contractors hired their own shovelers and cartmen, allowing city workers to concentrate on crosswalk and gutter cleanup. City Hall patronage was abolished, and street railway companies were required by ordinance to haul away all snow piled up by the sweeping machines. Stidham also introduced horse-drawn plows and the Hudson River ice-scraper on asphalt streets.

Washingtonians may have been studying Stidham's recommendations when the Valentine's Day snowstorm struck the capital in 1899, bringing more than a foot of new snow to the record-breaking amount already on the ground. As in New York a decade earlier, all traffic came to a halt. The *Washington Post* ran stories of suffering throughout the city, but there were no fatalities. Forty-five passengers and employees were trapped by fifteen-foot drifts on the electric railway at Four Mile Run, and food shortages and price gouging were reported. A front-page cartoon showed a woman waving a flag of surrender from the top of the Washington Monument, the tip of which emerged from the snow.<sup>6</sup>

The Senate quickly responded to the urgent request from the District Commissioners, appropriating \$20,000 to pay for the 2,000 men and 500 carts needed to remove the snow. The House took another day to follow suit, many members complaining that their constituents should not have to help pay for cleaning Washington's streets. The responsibilities of the private streetcar lines and homeowners to remove snow from their properties were left unresolved.<sup>7</sup> The problems associated with urban snow removal were not, of course, unique to Washington, but questions about who was responsible and who should pay were complicated by the federal-city relationship. As Howard Gillette has made clear in his recent analysis of

OFFICE SECRETARY BOARD OF HEALTH,  
*Washington, D. C., May 21, 1867.*

THE FOLLOWING IS THE  
**LIST OF NUISANCES,**  
DECLARED BY THE  
**BOARD OF HEALTH:**

- Dead Carcasses, Dead Fish, or Offal of Fish, Heaps of Oyster Shells.  
Offals from Butchers' Stalls and Slaughter Houses.  
Foul or obstructed Drains, Water Pipes, or Water Closets.  
Stagnant or Still Water in Ponds, Marshes, Sewers, or Cellars, Areas or Vaults.
- Foul Stables, Foul Cow Houses or Cow Pens, Foul Privies and Hog Sties, Foul Premises, Alleys, and Gutters, and Foul Slaughter Houses.
- Decaying Vegetables and Fruits of every description, all Animal Substances, whether entire or those portions thereof not used as food, which may be thrown out. The exposure or offering for sale unsound provisions, fruits and vegetables.
- All Rubbish, Shavings, or Refuse Substances of any trade, occupation, or business, which may be prejudicial to public health.
- Filth, Soap Suds in Pools, Drainage from Dye Houses or Soap Factories.
- Over-crowded Tenement Houses.
- Horses going at large with Glanders, Farcey, or any other Contagious Diseases.
- Sources of unhealthy exhalations or odors, so near dwellings as to endanger the health of the occupants.
- Houses or buildings, or portions thereof, in a state of dilapidation or decay, endangering the lives and property of those in the vicinity.
- Inflammable Material, in dangerous proximity to buildings.
- Openings for Stove Pipes unsecured, endangering the property, health or comfort of the surrounding inhabitants.
- Snow, Ice, or any other obstruction in gutters, preventing the free flow of water therein.

**G. M. DOVE, M. D.,**  
Secretary Board of Health.

*In 1867 snow and ice made the official list of nuisances, or health hazards, published by the local Board of Health. HSW*

urban policy in the District of Columbia, the commission form of government never kept pace with the city's physical growth, and Congress continued to dole out inadequate amounts of money for emergencies such as snow removal.<sup>8</sup>

In 1895 Congress passed an act that required "the owner or tenant of each house or other building, or lot or lots of ground in the cities of Washington and Georgetown" to remove, "within the first four hours of daylight after every fall of snow," all the snow from the sidewalks opposite their premises, and to strew them "with ashes, sand, sawdust, or some suitable substance that will insure or contribute to the safety of pedestrians." Those who failed to comply could be fined one dollar, or the commissioners could assess a special property tax to cover the cost of snow removal. Two years later a similar act was passed that extended responsibility for sidewalk snow removal to real estate agents selling unoccupied property.<sup>9</sup>

This act was repealed by the act of February 10, 1904, which retained the responsibility of tenants and owners for snow removal from sidewalks adjacent to their property and increased the penalty to a five-dollar fine or five days in jail. The commissioners were required to remove snow in front of public buildings and squares, but no money for this purpose was appropriated. Within three months the act was challenged and held unconstitutional by the Court of Appeals, because it (1) imposed an unreasonable burden on apartment house tenants, (2) an imprisoned violator could not clean his walk of subsequent snow, (3) no similar penalty was imposed on the commissioners, (4) no provisions were made for removal from sidewalks in front of vacant improved property, (5) it was therefore unjust to penalize owners of unimproved property, and (6) trustees of property owned by minors could not be held responsible.<sup>10</sup>

That the court's reasons have an Alice in (Winter) Wonderland quality is not sur-

*In the late 1890s, laborers on Pennsylvania Avenue at 15th Street shovel snow into horse-drawn carts for hauling to less-traveled areas. Courtesy, Robert A. Truax.*

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prising. Many cities faced opposition from property owners when they tried to legislate snow removal ordinances using their police powers. Most state courts upheld the local laws, but some did not, and as late as 1927, when the Supreme Court of Maine affirmed a Portland city statute requiring all owners, tenants, and occupants of buildings bordering on any sidewalks to remove snow within three hours of a storm's end, the decision was hailed as an important victory in the municipal administrator's struggle to manage snow.<sup>11</sup>

In 1905 and again in 1910, the District's commissioners attempted, but failed, to assert their authority to compel owners to clear snow from pavement adjacent to their property. In *Coughlin v. District of Columbia*, decided March 22, 1905, the Court of Appeals declared that only Congress had the authority to make regulations for the removal of snow. The commissioners appealed for such legislation in 1910, noting that it would require 12,000 men working four hours to clear away a three-inch snowfall from the city's estimated 550 miles of paved sidewalks, but Congress failed to act. Seven years later the commissioners estimated that a six-inch snowfall would require 50,115 men and 19,162 teams. The Street Cleaning Department employed 350 men and 90 teams.<sup>12</sup>

There matters rested until the snowstorm of January 27-28, 1922, which dumped more than two feet of snow in a single storm and caused almost 100 deaths when the roof of the Knickerbocker Theatre at 18th Street and Columbia Road, N.W., collapsed. Saturday, January 28, was comedy night in the fashionable theater, and the second showing of George M. Cohan's "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford" was just beginning when disaster struck.



An anonymous reporter for the *Washington Post* concluded the lead story with this dramatic depiction:

Only this is known: There was applause and laughter following a particularly clever comedy situation. There was a crash that struck terror into the hearts a-trill with merriment. There was a gust of wind, a rushing of air that blew open the closed doors of the theater—and then, after one concerted groan, there was silence—and Crandall's Knickerbocker theater, previously the temple of mirth, had been transformed into a tomb.<sup>13</sup>

Although the catastrophe overshadowed other snow removal problems, they were connected. The president of the Federation of Citizens' Associations appealed to all citizens to do their duty and clear snow from in front of their premises. Streets blocked with snow were blamed for delaying emergency vehicles. Morris Hacker, superintendent of the street-clean-

ing department, told reporters that he had only 200 men for snow shoveling but planned to recruit 450 more. Senator Dillingham of Vermont blamed members of the House District Committee for pigeonholing his bill to compel District householders to remove snow from in front of their properties. The chairman of the House committee responded, "This is an act of Providence, and the only thing to do is for the District commissioners to go to work. If they need more money it will be provided," and the chairman of the appropriations subcommittee scoffed, "This talk that the commissioners are afraid to go ahead and clean up the snow for fear Congress will censure them for creating a deficiency sounds like moonshine to me."<sup>14</sup>

A bill similar to that of 1895, but one that allowed property owners up to eight hours to remove snow, passed February 6, 1922, and technically remains in effect, although a personal injury suit brought in 1948 when a boy slipped on the uncleared side-

**A Memorial to the Victims of the Greatest Calamity in Washington's History**

**Which Occurred Saturday Night, January 28th, 1922**

A shock to the entire nation when roof of Knickerbocker Theatre, 18th and Columbia Road, caves in crushing out lives of ninety-five Men, Women and Children while terrible blizzard adds to horrors of the catastrophe.



The President, Congress, and Nation bow their heads in grief and extend their sympathies to the bereaved families.

Knickerbocker Theatre.—Exterior view, made day after accident, showing four walls standing. Eighteenth and Columbia Road Northwest, Washington, D. C.

**Price - - - 35 Cents**

walk in front of a private home resulted in a U.S. Court of Appeals ruling that the sidewalk was actually public property, and the responsibility for keeping it clean could not be shifted to the owner of adjacent property.<sup>15</sup>

More interesting than the traditional buck passing between Congress and District officials is the juxtaposition in the contemporary *Washington Post* of the stories cataloging the 1922 Knickerbocker disaster with photographs of children and attractive young women playing in snowdrifts in the streets. One young woman was shown trying to free her car from a drift, while the steps to the house behind remain snow covered. Only one photo showed a man clearing snow from a street. The same focus on the snow as an opportunity to have fun can be seen in a commemorative booklet, *The Storm*, by Martin A. Olmem. The earlier emphasis in newspaper reports on blizzards that challenge modern civilization gives way to an implicit criticism of that civilization for having dehumanized life. Snow begins to be seen as a cosmic reversal of machine-age order, providing an opportunity for a carnival.<sup>16</sup>

Congress provided more than statutory support for snow removal. The *Post* reported in September 1922 that the city had purchased ten new snow plows and four new trucks to “pull [sic]” them. The 22 horse-drawn plows that had been used in the past were “now in mothballs or whatever else is used to preserve snow plows from the kind of insectivora that would prey on such an unresponsive article, but they’re there and one of these days will be brought out ready for use just as last winter’s overcoat or furs is salvaged from hock or tar bag.”<sup>17</sup> The reporter’s jocular tone erased the painful memories of January’s disaster and assured readers that technology and organization could clear the streets of any amount of snow.

Motorized plows became an annual acquisition. A report on a storm in January 1925 mentioned the city’s 33 snow plows, although they were deemed inadequate to the task of clearing 8 inches from the streets. Six years later Morris Hacker, now supervisor of city refuse, had 6 hydraulic loaders, 30 snowplows, 60 trucks and 30 horse carts to clear 17 miles and plow 120 miles of streets, 80 percent of which were in the business district. No plowing was done on residential streets. By comparison,

*This booklet is one of a number commemorating the devastating Knickerbocker Theatre disaster of 1922 when more than two feet of snow fell, caving in the packed theater's roof. Courtesy, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Public Library.*

the slightly smaller city of Hartford, Connecticut, used 18 snowplows and 4 mechanical loaders to clear 22 miles and plow 170 miles, 90 percent in the business district.<sup>18</sup> Washington struggled to keep pace with national trends in snow management in the 1930s. Parking bans from 2 to 8 a.m. were announced for some streets, "to make it possible to plow snow up on the curb so as to open traffic the full width of the street. Without this ban a serious traffic condition would exist following a heavy snow due to the narrowed width of roadway left for traffic after bulky windrows of snow have been placed against automobiles parked at the curb." The city promised to plow snow from 308 miles of main thoroughfares and boulevards and completely remove snow from 25 miles of streets in the business districts using 1,550 men (185 "regular white wing forces," the others "extra hired men"), 250 trucks, 120 plows, and 15 mechanical loaders.<sup>19</sup>

The new snow management plans were tested February 7, 1936, when more than 14 inches blanketed the area. Predictably, although 4,000 men were hired to shovel, editors proclaimed snow removal inadequate, blaming Congress for its failure to appropriate sufficient funds and city authorities for their "puny efforts." The *Washington Post* was whimsical: "Despite the New Deal, streamlining, electric razors and all the other devices conceived to frustrate Nature, our local snowfall sifted through to affect almost every phase of Washington life. . . . Everything was deplorably inefficient; in fact quite refreshingly so," while the *Washington Times* targeted the parking ban because the city failed to remove snow from many of the

posted streets. A year later the prohibition on parking was declared illegal by a District Police Court judge, who found it "arbitrary and unreasonable."<sup>20</sup>

While Washington responded to winter weather one crisis at a time, other snow-belt cities developed more sophisticated snow management. The four main issues that emerged nationwide in the 1920s and 1930s were (1) determining the costs and benefits of snow removal, (2) the selection of appropriate plows and other snow removal equipment, (3) the use of chemicals to break up ice on streets and sidewalks, and (4) the establishment of legal authority to enforce snow removal from private property. Washingtonians, preoccupied with the problems of conflicting federal, local, and private responsibilities, neglected the first three areas, although the city added more equipment. In 1954, as the city approached its greatest population, and its suburbs were also rapidly expanding, public discussion finally recognized the complexities of snow management. A four-inch snowfall in early January of that year caused schools and government offices to close and provoked the *Washington Post* to editorialize that "the cost to the Federal Government of dismissing employees an hour and a half early (figured on the basis of 220,000 employees in the metropolitan area at an average hourly wage of \$2.13) was in excess of \$700,000," implying that it would have been more cost-effective to spend \$50,000 for snow removal.<sup>21</sup>

Chemical war on snow also began in the 1920s in many cities. Salt and calcium chloride (CaCl) replaced sand and ashes. Authorities in Washington had rejected the use of salt because of possible damage to pavement and to underground conduits for streetcars, but in December 1956, when the city agreed to pay the D. C. Transit System for plowing and removing some of the



city's snow, the contract included money for 15 trucks rigged with sand and salt spreaders in addition to the 80 already owned by the city.<sup>22</sup>

The war years saw an increased use of salt in the name of saving manpower and tires, since trucks had to spread only one layer of salt as opposed to three or four of sand. The campaign to use chemicals to defeat an enemy, in this case snow, accelerated in the 1950s, paralleling in many ways the marketing strategies used to sell DDT and other pesticides as simple panaceas for pest control. Calgon, Inc., of Pittsburgh, manufacturer of the polyphosphate Banox, and the National Aluminate Corporation of Chicago, maker of Nalco 8181-C, convinced hundreds of city governments to add their products to the salt spread on streets, claiming that the compound prevented corrosion to automobiles. The rapid expansion of suburbs with thou-

sands of miles of streets and connecting highways meant that municipal governments needed a quick, but not too dirty, fix to propitiate millions of new car owners. City dwellers were accustomed to industrial grime, but post-war suburbs were intended to be smokeless utopias of pastel hues. Thus, Banox was artificially colored green, to signal that streets were protected "both against traffic mishaps and car damage," and to blend with the neatly trimmed and chemically treated lawns that symbolized the deseasonalized and oasis communities of "light snowfall cities."<sup>23</sup>

Although earlier snowstorms had stalled traffic in Washington, the 14-inch accumulation February 15-16, 1958, was notable for its effect on commuters. Headlines in the *Washington Post* focused on driving conditions more than the traditional stories of stranded pedestrians and starving birds. A new five-part Emergency Traf-

*A commuter takes a broom to his snowbound car during the great snow of February 15-16, 1958, which dropped up to 17 inches on the area. Courtesy, WD, DCPL, © Washington Post.*

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fic Plan was put into operation, requesting the cancellation of all unnecessary travel, the prohibition of parking on principal streets, and the closing of federal and District offices. In the words of Superintendent of the Division of Sanitation William A. Xanten, "The entire metropolitan area is in for a severe case of 'stay put.'" The newspapers tallied the number of traffic accidents and emergency calls to the American Automobile Association.<sup>24</sup>

"Stay put" remains the basis of snow management in the District, despite the frequent changes of superintendents and the names of the bureaus they head. Today, almost 40 winters later, the wry 1962 observation of columnist Mary McGrory that "the District government tries to cope with the snow through stern regulations" is still true. The often unclear or overlapping responsibilities of governments in the Capital area and the relatively mild climate make this inevitable. From the Inaugural Day snow of 1961 through the even heavier snowfalls of January 1966, February 1979 and 1983, and January and November 1987, Washingtonians have fashioned an image of themselves as hopelessly inept at driving in the snow, intermittently successful at removing it, and explicitly proud of their ability to laugh at themselves and seize the opportunity to play.<sup>25</sup>

Each snowfall that caused the closing of government offices triggered an avalanche of editorial comment on the cost and the amount that could be saved if the city invested in enough snow removal equipment to keep streets open in even the severest storms.<sup>26</sup> The President's Day snow of 1979 and the February 12, 1983, storm, which brought accumulations of more than 18 and 16 inches, respectively,

were treated more philosophically by the press. They reasoned that the amounts were so unusual that they could not have been removed more efficiently. Moreover, the storms came on or near holidays and brought relatively less inconvenience. Besides, the city, like the nation, was experiencing the recreation boom and enjoying more snow-based activities. With the perfect timing that marked his genius, urban planner and historian Frederick Gutheim called for "Livable Winter Cities," where snow would be left untouched in selected neighborhoods for aesthetic effect and for recreation.<sup>27</sup> "Scores of people schussed to work on skis," wrote one reporter of the first snow, while an observer of the later storm commented that President Reagan could see "more than 1,000 people in sweaters, parkas, and wool caps circling the Ellipse on cross-country skis in the Winter Festival being held there."<sup>28</sup>

The façade of good cheer cracked when another major snowstorm of the season hit Washington on January 23, 1987. Although the snow unleashed "playful streaks in many adults" according to the *Washington Post*, it also forced families to spend time together, exacerbating domestic problems. Several Washington-area psychoanalysts were interviewed, one of whom observed that "in some ways, being stuck in the Great Blizzard is like forced psychotherapy on a massive scale." The contrast between the unplowed streets of the city and the successful removal of snow from the suburbs caused the paper's editorial writers to snap. Under the headline "Breakdown—Total Breakdown," the *Post* asked sarcastically, and with a thinly veiled reference to rumors of Mayor Marion Barry's drug habits, "What did the city government use to get rid of the snow—spoons and matchbooks?"<sup>29</sup>

The mayor, in the tradition of East Coast politicians, was away during the storm. By ignoring the advice attributed to Mayor Richard Daley of Chicago—"just keep the streets clean and the buses moving and

you can steal anything you want”—Barry joined Daley’s successor Michael Bilandic, John Lindsay of New York, Stanley Makowski of Buffalo, Michael Dukakis of Massachusetts, and dozens of other politicians whose names are eponyms for snow storms of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>30</sup> Mayor Barry apologized for his administration’s failure to clear the streets, but tried to excuse himself by observing: “I didn’t bring it [the snow] here.” This was his second and more profound error. Nature, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas has shown, is often dragged into the moral code.<sup>31</sup> Meteorological disasters acquire political dimensions beyond issues of bureaucratic inefficiency. In what was perceived as a crisis, Washingtonians found political corruption in the piles of dirty and unremoved snow.

Barry announced a new snow removal plan in fall 1987 with an eight-page flyer explaining the parking ban and snow



*A plow clears the streetcar rails on Pennsylvania Avenue, March 1960. Courtesy, Robert A. Truax.*

*Shoppers on F Street wait for the green light four days before Christmas, 1966. The snows of Washington traditionally cause major disruptions in the local economy. Courtesy, WD, DCPL, © Washington Post.*

removal laws and new red and white street signs that read:

**SNOW  
EMERGENCY  
ROUTE  
NO PARKING  
DURING  
EMERGENCY**

Where many cities use graphics—snowflakes in Bozeman, Montana, a snowplow in St. Paul, Minnesota, a snowman in St. Louis, Missouri—Washington, a city of big memos and little snow, used words.<sup>32</sup>

Barry’s plan was tested sooner than anyone anticipated by the foot of snow that fell on Veterans Day 1987. Since none of the jurisdictions in the area was prepared, the District escaped blame for snarled traffic and school closings. By the time the next heavy snowfall occurred, March 13, 1993, the city had a new mayor, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments had instituted a plan that released government workers in four half-hour increments based on the distance they lived from the federal city. The *Washington Post* praised the city for “setting the pace in the snowplowing marathon.” Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly was so pleased with her record on snow removal that she made it an issue in her re-election campaign. A flyer mailed to all District voters pictured a snowplow with the claim that her opponents—former Mayor Barry and Councilman John Ray—had incorrectly identified it as an ambulance. The absurdity of her ploy was reflected in her defeat at the polls.<sup>33</sup>

“All climates are local,” writes the French historian Fernand Braudel, which means, I think, that we must be careful not



to generalize too much from singular events and circumstances.<sup>34</sup> Washington's winter weather provides ample evidence that seasonal inconvenience does not significantly affect our basic beliefs about our ability to control nature. Yet snow cannot be completely banished from our consciousness. Like the proverbial cloud no larger than a man's hand, the memory of winter snows floats on the horizon as a reminder that the cycle of anticipation of, preparation for, experience with, recovery from, and recollection of snow is a universal human condition.<sup>35</sup>

Snow reduces cities to earlier historical times. A heavy snowfall confines or eliminates automobile traffic and strips bare the shelves of supermarkets. The transient nature of much of metropolitan Washington's population—tourists, political sojourners, recent immigrants from tropical zones—also contributes to the capital's unique responses to snow. Situated on the edge of the snow frontier separating the snow-covered North from the snowless South, the city is a mecca for nivaphobes

and nivaphiles alike, the former lamenting their inability to control the weather, the latter delighting in their participation in an American experience. Daily reports on television, radio, and in newspapers remind us of our national as well as local weather.

Mayor Barry is not the first city official to rely on a snow removal plan called spring.<sup>36</sup> His view that snow-blockaded streets are essentially nature's problem, not man's, is widely held, as is his belief that image overcomes reality. Snow has always been seen as a kind of litter in the streets, refuse for the sanitation department to remove. Nature's bounty is also nature's toll, a paradox that neither funds for slush, nor slush funds can solve. ☞

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### Slush Funds

*Bernard Mergen, pp. 4-15*

1. Sources vary, but see for example, "How to Enhance Your 'Wintermobility,'" *The American City* 82 (Nov. 1967): 34, and Peter R. Chaston, "1975-1985: Snowiest Major Cities," *Weatherwise* 39 (Feb. 1986): 45. On snow in cities generally, see Blake McKelvey, *Snow in the Cities: A History of America's Urban Response* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 1995).
2. John Rooney, Jr., "The Urban Snow Hazard in the United States: An Appraisal of Disruption," *Geographical Review* 57 (Oct. 1967): 538-59.
3. The concept of the deseasonalized city is advanced by Professor Andre Guillerme, director of the Institut Français d'Urbanisme, University of Paris VIII, who argues that technology allows society to regulate the seasons through heating, lighting, and air conditioning systems. "The Disappearance of Seasons in the City," paper read at the meeting of the American Society for Environmental History, Pittsburgh, Pa., Mar. 7, 1993.
4. *New York Times*, Mar. 13, 1888, 1-3; Robert S. Kyff, "Their World Came to a Halt," *Hartford Courant*, Mar. 13, 1988, quotes similar sentiments. For local photographs, see Kevin Ambrose, *Blizzards and Snowstorms of Washington, D.C.* (Merrifield, Va.: Historical Enterprises, 1993).
5. H. L. Stidham, "The Removal of Snow," in George E. Waring, Jr., ed., *Street-Cleaning and the Disposal of a City's Wastes: Methods and Results and the Effect Upon Public Health, Public Morals, and Municipal Prosperity* (New York: Doubleday, 1898), 91. On Waring's contribution, see Martin Melosi, *Garbage in the Cities: Refuse, Reform, and the Environment, 1880-1980* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1981), 68-69.
6. *Washington Post*, Feb. 14, 1899, 1.
7. *Washington Post*, Feb. 15, 1899, 10.
8. Howard Gillette, Jr., *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); "Snow Funds," *Evening Star*, Jan. 9, 1909. I thank my colleague Howard

Mergen, continued

- Gillette for the reference.
9. W. H. McClenon, "Removal of Snow and Ice in District of Columbia: History of Attempts by Congress and the D.C. Commissioners to Impose Burden upon Real Estate," typescript, Feb. 7, 1918, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Public Library.
  10. Ibid.
  11. A. L. H. Street, "The City's Legal Rights and Duties," *The American City* 37 (Sept. 1927): 395.
  12. "Removal of Snow and Ice from Sidewalks of the District of Columbia," Senate Report No. 937, to accompany S. 4988, Dec. 19, 1910, letter from president of Board of Commissioners in response to a Senate Resolution, Dec. 29, 1917, WD, DCPL.
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  18. "How 92 Cities Handle Their Snow-Removal Problems," *The American City* 44 (Mar. 1931): 144-47.
  19. "Information on Snow and Ice Control in the District of Columbia," undated typescript (stamped 1941), WD, DCPL. See *Washington Post*, Nov. 25, 1930, on the parking ban.
  20. *Washington Post*, Feb. 8, 1936, 1; *Washington Times*, Feb. 27, 1937, 10.
  21. *Washington Post*, Jan. 13, 1954, 10. On cost-benefit analysis of snow removal, see, for example, "Does It Pay to Clean City Streets in Winter?" *The American City* 24 (Feb. 1921): 149; V.R. Burton, "Cost Analysis of Snow Removal in Michigan," *The American City* 34 (Apr. 1926): 386-93; John H. Nuttall, "What Shall We Do With Snow and Ice?" *The American City* 44 (Feb. 1931): 102-103; "Don't Forget Snow Removal," *The American City* 45 (Nov. 1931): 53-56. Burton's model for computing the costs of snow removal includes such variables as topography, wind direction, temperature, depth, and type of snow. Nuttall, a consulting civil engineer in Philadelphia, worked formulas for determining the amount of snow that could be melted in sewers of various dimensions and calculated the weight of dry snow, wet snow, slush, and dirty snow.
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  31. *Washington Post*, Jan. 30, 1987, A1. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
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