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The President's Day storm of 1979

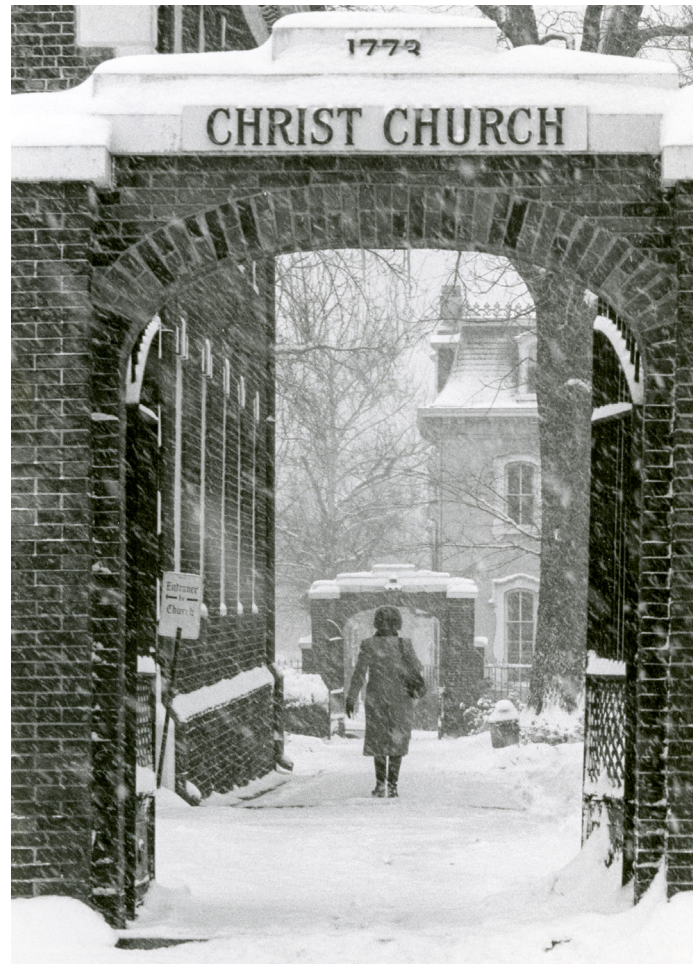
This Out of the Attic originally ran in the Alexandria Times on Feb. 1, 2018.

We've become numb to hyperbole about weather events in the mid-Atlantic region. Names like "bomb cyclone," "Snowmageddon" and "Storm of the Century" roll off the tongue to the modern reader as regular events.

However, one of the worst snowstorms in Alexandria history had the modest title of the President's Day snowstorm of 1979. Perhaps the fault lies with the storm itself, which defied forecasts that assumed that it would miss the area.

Four inches fell on the evening of Feb. 18, 1979, which was significant, but nothing to be alarmed about. The snow stopped around midnight, and forecasters predicted that only an inch or two would fall on Feb. 19. Instead, up to 20 inches fell the next day, making it the biggest snowstorm in the area since the Knickerbocker Storm of 1922.

The storm had damaging effects beyond the time and effort needed to dig out from a storm on people's holiday. A fire swept through six townhouses on South Fairfax Street and the snow and freezing temperatures hampered the efforts of the firefighters. The snow not only slowed the trucks' attempts to reach the



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blaze, but the cold froze the breathing apparatus the firefighters tried to use to navigate the smoky houses. The blaze was estimated to cost \$300,000.

One owner had only bought his townhouse four weeks earlier, and had not yet moved in. In an interview, he noted wryly that he had planned to reno-

vate his 80-year-old building, but fire wasn't his preferred method of doing so.

Elsewhere in the city, the storm stranded an ambulance carrying a cardiac patient. A second ambulance sent to rescue the first also became stranded, and hospital workers were forced to carry

the patient by foot through the snow. The patient arrived at Alexandria Hospital in satisfactory condition.

The end of the snowfall didn't mean that Alexandria's worries were over, though. Concerns about roof collapses due to the weight of the snow meant that employees at two federal buildings at Cameron Station were sent home early two days after the storm.

In the rush to get out of the storm's fury, many people abandoned their cars in the middle of the road, making efforts to clear the streets slow and aggravating. The city estimated that it towed more than 150 cars in the two days that followed the storm.

Partly due to the ferocity of the storm and its aftermath, meteorology is very different than it was 45 years ago. Weather tracking is much more sophisticated, and forecasters err on the side of predicting more, rather than less severity in their forecasts.

Perhaps rather than scoff at the hyperbole used in storm-naming today, we can recognize the role of the plainly named President's Day storm of 1979 in how we think of weather.

Out of the Attic is provided by the Office of Historic Alexandria.