

A storm by any other name . . .

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■ Back before they called them tornadoes, twisters were known to strike anyway.

On Feb. 19, 1884, a violent storm did extensive damage to the southern sections of Chester and Lancaster counties.

There was no TV weather forecaster, or any other way, to warn the people to watch out for tornadoes. In fact, the newspapers recounting the events did not use the word tornado, but used the terms "cyclone" or "violent winds." One reporter said the wind "dipped from one location to another."

It was 7 p.m. when the storm hit the town of Chester, which had a population of 1,899 in the 1880 census. Chester was not much larger than Rock Hill or Lancaster, but it drew customers, mostly farmers, from a much larger trading area. Three railroads merged there. There were 87 stores in town.

An untold number of homes lost part, or all, of their roofs, had siding ripped off, chimneys toppled, fences down, trees uprooted, etc. The Baptist church, which had just finished celebrating 50 years of growth, was blown down. The blacks' Baptist church also was demolished. The large bell of the Presbyterian church was carried some distance by the wind.

On the hill in the center of town the roofs came off R. Brandt's Jewelry Store and the National Bank Building. The jail house roof blew off, causing the inmates "to cry aloud in their distress."

Roofs were partially lost from a number of stores. The town bell fell into a narrow alley between the Brandt and Davega buildings. That was fortunate for both stores were open with a number of customers present.



Nearby history

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Chester did not have a great deal of industry but what it had was extensively damaged. The old "rickety" former carriage factory was blown away. The third story of the oil mill blew off. It was said that the tin roof blew a quarter of a mile away.

Purvis Alexander's blacksmith shop collapsed on J.L. Love and his son, who had been camping nearby and who had taken shelter in the shop. They had only slight injuries but elsewhere in the county, two people were killed when buildings collapsed.

There was considerable damage to the cemetery. Dr. A.P. Wylie's marble monument was "irreparably damaged."

Out in the country there was much damage to farm houses, barns, stables, and fences. It was especially bad 3 or 4 miles below Blackstocks. The track of the storm (tornado) was described as 40 to 400 yards in width. It covered almost the same ground as a similar storm in July 1883. Lands were badly eroded.

Near Lowreysville (now Lowrey) the storm chased a train for 2 miles with the tornado gaining until it was only 300 yards behind the frightened passengers.

Then, fortunately, the track veered away from the course of the tornado, which went past without damage to the train or tracks. But W.H. Abell, a nearby farmer, who had just moved into his new house two months before, felt his home tumble around him and his family. Five people in the house were injured. Joshua Abell's new barn was completely wrecked and every farm building went down.

The storm crossed into lower Lancaster County doing similar damage. There was probably an accompanying waterspout. A man found two fish, a pike and a jack, each about 8 inches, lying on the road alive, "quite two miles from any stream."

U.S. Congressman J.J. Hemphill received a telegram requesting \$200,000 of federal relief funds. Hemphill replied that the federal government could give no aid unless the state could not provide any. Apparently no aid ever came from either source. A few weeks later the newspapers reported that Chester town damage, estimated at \$25,000, was fairly well cleaned up, window panes were replaced and that people were busy with repairs on the buildings.

Some of the costs of replacement resulting from storm damage in the town of Chester were: the bank roof at \$150; the third story of the oil mill at \$2,000; the roof of Nicholson's Hotel at \$300 and the bell of the Presbyterian church, valued at \$1,000.

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