Forecasting the Future: The Early United States Weather Bureau

Robert T. Canning, Colby College

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Advisor(s)
James R. Fleming

Second Advisor
Paul Josephson

Abstract
The national weather service of the United States came into being in 1870 for the practical utility of the American people. The interaction between weather, agriculture, and commerce provided the impetus for the inception of the service. Many historians put forward the notion of an obdurate weather bureau, a scientific backwater with no interest in modernization until after World War II. I disagree with this popular historiography and instead offer a history of the weather bureau's attempts to institute the latest meteorological practices that takes into consideration the burdens and obligations of the bureau, as well as the historical context. For example, Vilhelm Bjerknes founded the Bergen School of Meteorology in 1917 and began extensive study in the theory and practical applications of the polar front and air mass meteorology. American meteorologists eventually adopted these techniques after an appropriate delay for study and implementation. There were other delays within the agency, but for specific reasons and for minimal amounts of time. The growing needs of the nation added to the extensive list of bureau duties, which consistently resulted in conflict and budgetary problems. Yet the history of American meteorology is filled with individuals who took advantage of new technological breakthroughs and who were dedicated to improving and modernizing the agency for the betterment of the service and the science.

Keywords
Weather Bureau, Meteorology, United States

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the public for the purposes of protection, safety, and general information. It is a part of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) branch of the Department of Commerce, and is headquartered in Silver Spring, Maryland, within the Washington metropolitan area. The