Cleveland Abbe Biography

Cleveland Abbe

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Contents

Cleveland Abbe Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

Often referred to as America's first weatherman, Cleveland Abbe organized and promoted a nationwide network of weather reporting services that used new rapid modes of communication to notify various locations of approaching weather conditions well in advance of their arrival.

Born in New York City, Abbe studied atmospheric physics at the City College of New York from 1861 to 1864, then traveled to Russia to study astronomy at the Pulkova Observatory near Leningrad until 1866. After his return to the United States, he went to the Cincinnati Observatory, serving as director from 1868 to 1870. There he set about establishing a system of weather observations and warnings using the telegraph. Under the auspices of the Cincinnati Chamber of Commerce he operated a weather forecasting service on a trial basis from August through October 1869. Beginning on September 1, 1869, his rudimentary forecasts were posted daily at the Chamber office and sent to about thirty subscribers.

Spurred by the popularity of those forecasts, Congress established the United States Weather Service in 1870 under the auspices of the Signal Corps. Abbe helped guide the initial plans and was named the Service's meteorologist the following year, issuing forecasts nationally three times daily. In 1891 the service was reorganized under civilian control as the United States Weather Bureau, and Abbe remained as its meteorologist until he retired at seventy-seven. He is credited with the creation of the first weather maps, which served a more informational than analytical need.

In 1902, Abbe started a training course for Bureau personnel at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. As a result of his contributions to the field of meteorology, the United States became the world leader in weather reporting and forecasting.

Abbe is also credited with establishing the four time zones that span the continental United States. Before the zones' inception, every town and county in America had its own local time. The nearest things to a unified time system were train timetables. Time zones were essential for a meaningful national weather reporting system as well as for railroad travel.

By the time of Abbe's death in 1916 and during the years following, European meteorologists surpassed Americans with their innovations. However, the United States Weather Bureau and its successor, the National Weather Service, never lost their role as the most important weather reporting force in the world.