

AMERICAN EXPERIENCE: *Blackout*

Premieres Tuesday, July 14, 2015, 9:00-10:00 p.m. ET on PBS

New York City, 1977. A city in turmoil suddenly plunged into darkness.



(BOSTON, MA) — As July 13, 1977 dawned hot and humid, New Yorkers prepared themselves for another sweltering day. But high temperatures weren't the only thing making them sweat: the crime-ridden city was on the verge of bankruptcy; unemployment was high; police and firefighters had been laid off; municipal services, including sanitation and after-school programs, had been cut; and a serial killer named Son of Sam was still on the loose, keeping everyone on edge. That evening, a severe thunderstorm hit, and lightning struck a power line in Westchester County; when that line went out, the demand was increased on the surrounding lines. As Con Edison engineers struggled to control the cascading effects of the downed lines, their only choice was to start shedding load, disconnecting customers from the grid in order to prevent a catastrophic failure of the system. But despite their efforts, the lights went out, plunging some seven million city residents into darkness. *Blackout*, executive produced by Mark Samels and directed by Callie T. Wiser, premieres on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE on Tuesday, July 14, 2015, 9:00-10:00 p.m. ET on PBS ([check local listings](#)).

Told through the memories of ordinary New Yorkers who lived through the events, including first responders, journalists, shop owners, and those inside the pressure-packed control center of Con Edison on West End Avenue, *Blackout* examines what happened when the lights went out.

That night, in the city that never sleeps, the divide between the haves and the have-nots became ever more apparent. In some neighborhoods, there was conviviality, as diners at the Windows on the World restaurant in the World Trade Center were treated to free champagne and allowed to remove their jackets and ties. Helpful citizens took to the streets to direct traffic. Impromptu block parties broke out, and bartenders served patrons in T-shirts and shorts. Upper East Side residents had candlelit dinners on the roof.

But in the poorer neighborhoods of the city's boroughs, the power outage spurred near-immediate mayhem under the cover of darkness. As employees at Con Edison struggled to restore power to the elaborate system, people smashed windows and ripped security gates off storefronts, carting off washing machines, sofas, Pampers, TVs, refrigerators – whatever they could carry. By the time the power was fully restored more than a day later, more than 1,600 businesses had been looted, over 3,700 people had been arrested, and firefighters had battled more than 1,000 fires.

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“The 1977 blackout reminds us of how easily we take things for granted,” says Mark Samels, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE Executive Producer. “We expect the lights to turn on, the garbage to be picked up, and the trains to run – all these systems keep our daily lives going. But when a city is plagued by crime, unemployment, reduced services, and growing anger, an event like a blackout can be the spark that ignites a fire. The thin crust of civilization is suddenly gone and we discover that urban life is much more fragile than we thought.”

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About the Participants (in alphabetical order)

Vincent Dunn was a firefighter for the New York Fire Department’s 7th Division in the Bronx at the time of the blackout.

Charlie Durkin was the Chief System Operator for Con Edison in July 1977.

Jack Feinstein was working for Con Edison as the Assistant Chief System Operator in July 1977.

Joshua Freeman is a professor of history at Queens College, City University of New York, and the CUNY Graduate Center. His book *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* discusses the 1977 blackout and the socioeconomic factors surrounding the event.

Jonathan Mahler is a writer for *The New York Times Magazine* and the author of the best-selling book *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bronx Is Burning: 1977, Baseball, Politics, and the Battle for the Soul of a City*, a 2005 *New York Times* Notable Book.

Patrick Marshall was a New York City police officer assigned to the 83rd Precinct in Bushwick at the time of the blackout.

Bruce Porter is a journalist and author of *Blackout Looting!: New York City, July 13, 1977*.

Joyce Purnick was a *New York Post* reporter who covered the blackout. She later joined *The New York Times* and wrote the “Metro Matters” column for ten years.

Ernesto Quiñonez is an associate professor in the Department of English at Cornell University and a novelist who has written about growing up in Spanish Harlem (East Harlem), the neighborhood where he lived at the time of the blackout.

Alan Rubin was an electronics storeowner in Manhattan, whose business, Radio Clinic, was looted during the blackout.

Carl St. Martin was a medical student who helped in a hospital during the blackout.

Chris “Doc” Vanager is a graffiti artist who grew up in the East New York neighborhood of Brooklyn at the time of the blackout.

Elzora Williamson owned Trophies by Syl with her husband, a Brooklyn sporting goods and trophy shop that was looted during the blackout.

Kevin Zraly was the wine steward at Windows on the World restaurant on the 107th floor of One World Trade Center when the blackout struck.

About the Filmmakers

Directed by	Callie T. Wiser
Produced by	David Murdock Callie T. Wiser
Edited by	Chad Ervin
Story by	David Murdock
Telescript by	Sharon Grimberg
Cinematography	Jason Longo Edward Marritz
Original Music by	Gary Lionelli
Co-Producer	Christine Turner
Associate Producers	Alessandra Bellizia Matt Gavin

American Experience is a production of **WGBH Boston**

Senior Producer	Susan Bellows
Managing Director	James E. Dunford
Executive Producer	Mark Samels

Callie Taintor Wiser (Producer/Director) most recently produced and directed *Klansville, U.S.A.* for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. Prior to that, Wiser was the producer for the Emmy-nominated *The Amish*, and writer/producer/director for the Emmy-nominated *The Amish: Shunned*, both of which premiered on AMERICAN EXPERIENCE. She began her career in documentary journalism working on a number of films for FRONTLINE before embarking on a freelance career. Wiser's other work for AMERICAN EXPERIENCE includes producing the three-and-a-half-hour documentary *George H.W. Bush* and co-producing the first two episodes of the six-part series *God in America*, a co-production of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE and FRONTLINE. She is a native of Tennessee and graduated from the University of North Carolina, where she was a Morehead Scholar. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts.

Mark Samels (Executive Producer) was named executive producer of AMERICAN EXPERIENCE, PBS' flagship history series, in 2003. Under Samels' leadership, the series has been honored with nearly every industry award, including the Peabody, Primetime Emmys, the duPont-Columbia Journalism Award, Writers Guild Awards, Oscar nominations, and Sundance Film Festival Audience and Grand Jury Awards. Prior to joining WGBH, Samels worked as an independent documentary filmmaker, an executive producer for several U.S. public television stations, and as a producer for the first co-production between Japanese and American television. He is a graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and holds honorary degrees from Emerson College and Elizabethtown College.

About AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

For more than twenty-seven years, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE has been the nation's most-watched television history series. It has been hailed as "peerless" (*The Wall Street Journal*), "the most consistently enriching program on television" (*Chicago Tribune*), and "a beacon of intelligence and purpose" (*Houston Chronicle*). On air and online, the series brings to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America's past and present. Acclaimed by viewers and critics alike, AMERICAN EXPERIENCE documentaries have been honored with every major industry award, including thirty Emmy Awards, four duPont-Columbia Awards, and seventeen George Foster Peabody Awards; the series received an Academy Award® nomination for Best Documentary Feature in 2015 for *Last Days in Vietnam*.

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