

The Year Without a Summer

Material for this article came from a collection of letters, recently gifted to The Society, written by Sarah Townsend Hale to her nephews Hosea and Hiram Townsend in Ohio. Liberties have been taken with spelling and punctuation.

Everybody, as you know, is talking about the weather. One hot summer! But take yourself back almost 200 years, 1816 to be exact, and you would have experienced the opposite, *the year without a summer*, when there was a killing frost in every summer month. In that year local farm fields were cemeteries of cornstalks. A severe drought had left them brown, withered and dead, with starvation lurking about.

There were suggestions early in the spring of a cool summer. Mid May had unusually low temperatures accompanied by frosts as far south as Virginia. In the Berkshires “the ground froze hard and high wind May first. Scarce a green thing to be seen, very cold need a good fire,” reported Sarah Townsend Hale to her nephews in Ohio.

After a warmer start to June it quickly turned colder with a mix of rain and snow in Quebec and light snow in the Adirondacks. On June 7th, 12 inches of snow blanketed portions of New England sparking the talk of famine for the first time. Sarah further reported, “there is much said about the scarcity of fodder [for the animals] which tis very dear.”

June was bad enough but July started out no better. A killing frost crossed New England destroying corn, bean, cucumber and squash crops. Fortunately, hardier wheat, rye and potatoes did much better. On June 20th, Sarah wrote “We have a most extraordinary season as yet such never known here before. Grass very thin & late, corn small & much curled . . . where there is any, looking as if it would never come to anything. It appears unaccountable that there is anything, ground froze hard middle of May & the 7th of June hard snow . . . 6th of June & everything cut down with frost. 1st of July frost.”

Milder weather continued well into August when another frost hit, damaging crops further. On August 20th a powerful cold front crossed the Northeast bringing violent thunderstorms and reports of temperatures falling as much as 30 degrees within minutes. The summer growing season came to an end on August 28, aborted by yet another frost which brought ice to local lakes.

The impact of the season was severe, with too little food for animals taken in for the winter season. Fortunately there were enough grains and potatoes harvested to prevent a full blown famine but hardship did occur with Sarah writing, “the season is so cold & backward winter grain was not harvested till 8 and 10 August . . . and the spring wheat & rye till the last week . . . in September. The corn does not ripen.” The result was grain tripled in value and the shortage forced farmers to sell their cows and pigs, driving the price of meat down. Beef fell over 50 per cent and pork 75 per cent. The following year, 1817, marked a major migration of locals westward to New York and beyond.

What was the cause of this weather? Religious fundamentalist blamed sinners and some even blamed the scientific experiments Benjamin Franklin had done with lightning rods. But the likely cause was the eruption of Tambora volcano on the island of Soembawa in Indonesia on April 15th, 1815, a year previous. The eruption was a super colossal event which killed nearly 10,000 people immediately and another estimate 80,000 from starvation and illness. According to estimates 1.7 million tons of dust were put into the atmosphere, reaching North America about 12 months later.

A year of poverty, 1816, *the year without a summer*, came to an end.

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