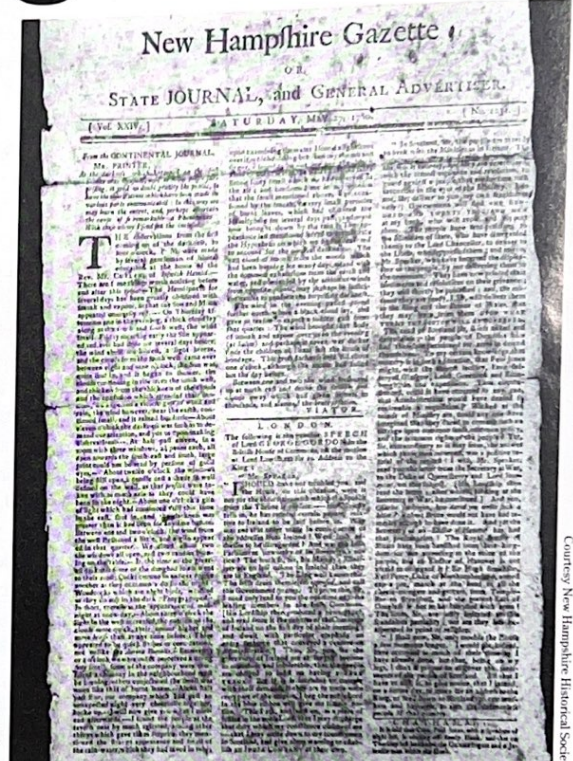


# Discovering the Dark Days



Courtesy New Hampshire Historical Society

**R**esidents of most of New England saw the sun briefly in the morning on May 19, 1780, not to see it again until the next day. The sunshine was not obscured by clouds or foul weather, but by an occurrence that remains incompletely explained.

The event was recorded in the Antrim, N.H., town history: "The early morning of May 19 was cloudy, showery and cool, with some thunder and lightning. But, about 10 o'clock when the artisans were busy in the shop and mill, the women spinning weaving, and the farmers hurrying with their spring work in the field, it began to grow dark. Soon the wild birds screamed and flew to their nests—the hens went to their roosts—the cattle came up to their stalls uttering strange cries—the buds and opening leaves on the trees were colored almost to an indigo blue ... Many were so much in fear that they could not eat! Lights were seen in every house and,

out of doors, people carried torches to light their steps. Hosts of people believed the end of the world had begun to come; men dropped to their knees to pray in the field."

The exact cause of this event is still not clear but is believed to have been caused by a combination of massive smoke clouds from the west and a stalled cold-air mass off the coast. For at least a few days prior, sooty and ash-laden air was reported in wind blowing from the northwest.

The night before the "Dark Day" or "Black Friday," the wind shifted, coming from the east, and bringing in cold, moist air. Through reading various town histories, three sources were named: forest fires, burning peat bogs in Labrador, and volcanic activity. Modern study has ruled out a volcano. A forest fire was the probable cause, but the exact location has never been determined.

The dark day seemed to cover most of central New England, spreading as

The Dark Days as recorded in the New Hampshire Gazette of May 27, 1780

far west as the Hudson River. It is possible it stopped just offshore ("observed 15 leagues beyond Cape Ann") and affected Maine and northern portions of Connecticut and Rhode Island.

Lucia Weinhardt, a historian from Maine, describes the event as starting closer to noon. As the darkness approached, "...boats moved to shore and work stopped as people watched the sky with amazement. Whale oil lamps and candles were lighted..."

At the onset of darkness, one observer reported seeing a distinct layer of blackness in the sky that advanced over the land between the ground and upper clouds. In addition to the blackened sky, a light rain fell occasionally, coating the ground with a "sooty scum" and pieces of burnt leaves.

An excerpt of a poem dedicated to

## History

the event was recorded in the town history of Chelmsford, Massachusetts:

"Twas on a May-day of the far old year  
Seventeen hundred eighty, that there fell  
Over the bloom and sweet life of the Spring,  
Over the fresh earth and the heaven of noon  
a horror of great darkness...  
Birds ceased to sing, and all the barnyard fowl  
Roosted: the cattle at the pasture bars  
Lowed, and looked homeward...  
The black sky."

Amidst the panic of the populace, some amusing anecdotes were recorded. Abraham Davenport, a Connecticut legislator, declared during a meeting just after the darkness set in:

"Mr. Speaker, it is either the Day of Judgment, or it is not. If it is not, there is not need of adjourning. If it is, I desire to be found doing my duty. I move

that candles be brought, and that we proceed to business."

Rev. Mather Byles of Boston, beseeched by the servant of a very frightened lady to explain the terrible darkness, replied, "Tell your mistress that I am as much in the dark as she is."

Depending upon the location, some areas reported clearing toward the end of the day, while others reported no relief until the morning of May 20. People knowledgeable about astronomical happenings from their almanacs anxiously waited for the full moon to rise that night at 9 p.m., but in most places it never appeared. Some sightings of the moon were noted a few hours after midnight. All accounts mention a change in wind direction from the northwest just prior to the clearing. "Day dawned bright, and the sun never came up on a lovelier morning than that of May 20th," was the report from Weare, New Hampshire.

Many churches declared "fast days" in the months afterward, and some towns voted that May 19 always be ob-

served as "a day of fasting and prayer."


It should be noted that this event occurred after an extremely harsh winter, with inhabitants of New England just starting to enjoy their delayed spring. The winter of 1779-1780 was one of the most severe of the 18th century. Stories abounded about places with snowdrifts of 23 feet, and "loaded teams" of horses passing easily over walls and fences. The commons in Haverhill, Mass., had to have an arch built through the snowdrifts to allow horses to pass.

This was but one of numerous dark days recorded in New England's history. One of the most famous was the "Yellow Day" on Sept., 6, 1881, also affecting the Mid-Atlantic region. Around 3 p.m., a dark, yellowish haze came over the sky, prompting school to be let out early. As with other dark days, fowl went to roost, and cocks crowed.

Axel Graumann, a meteorologist at the National Climatic Data Center, found in their historic records not one, but several fires north and west of New England that most likely contributed to the phenomenon. That summer, there was an extensive drought across North America, as reported in weather logs from Detroit to Buffalo. The ground was described as "dry as ashes to a depth of six feet." The Detroit weather report described "destructive forest fires" north of the area on Sept. 5 and 6. From the Canadian province of Ontario came the following report on Sept. 3: "Great fires raging in the vicinity of Kingston, Ottawa, Gravehurst, Odessa and Bellville, Ontario."

The dark days seem to occur with some unique weather combinations during spring and fall, possibly caused by a greater temperature difference between the land and sea. Certainly, there's more chance for forest fires in the early fall after summer droughts. A recent dark day was recorded in this century on Sept. 24, 1954. It was caused by forest fires in northern Alberta, Canada. While forest fires no longer rage out of control, it is still possible that we could see a dark day in our lifetime, given the right permutations of nature on the ground and in the air. ■

*Kathleen Langone/At Large*



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