

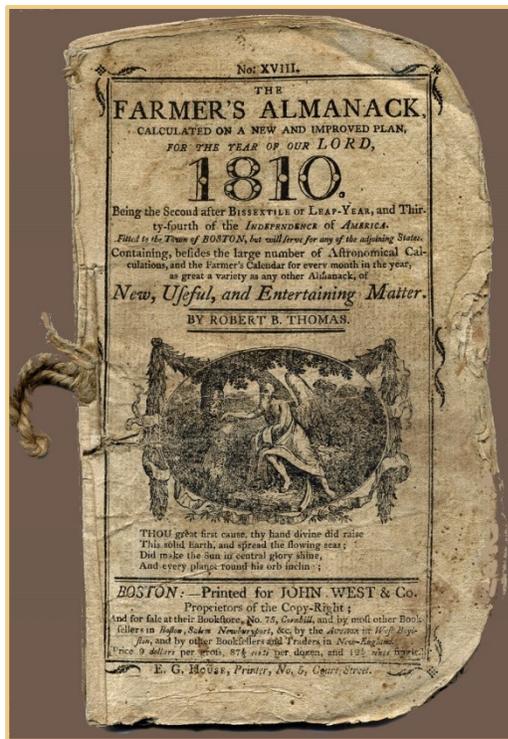
EXTREME SUMMER WEATHER

By Ellen Knight¹

People are always talking about the weather, particularly noting extraordinary conditions, which are not all that uncommon when looking back through history.

In 2021, all before July 4th, there was an early heat wave, followed by more really hot days leading to the declaration of a heat emergency at the end of June. Great and disastrous heat also marked the summers of 1868, 1896, 1901, 1936, and a list of others.²

One of the better documented early heatwaves which impacted Winchester hit on July 2, 1911. Temperatures in greater Boston rose from the 90s on Sunday to over 100 degrees on Tuesday, peaking at about 105 on Wednesday, and dropping to 99 on Thursday. According to the *Winchester Star*, no matter what temperatures Boston reported, in Winchester the “temperature about town during the noon hour on any one of the days was 110.”³



Weather predictions in the Farmer's Almanac, such as this one formerly owned by the Locke family, may have been right some of the time, but they could not always forewarn farmers of unusual changes in the weather.

During the week three victims of heat prostration were identified, though fortunately, unlike other communities, no deaths due to the heat were reported (statewide there were about 1,100 fatalities). While the icemen were busier than ever, the Beggs and Cobb tannery had to close, as did some other firms.

It was the hottest July 4th in the history of the Boston weather bureau.⁴ Nevertheless, townsfolk gathered on Manchester Field for the traditional kids' games (e.g., broad jump, potato race, barrel race, and obstacle race) and a baseball game. The evening's fireworks drew one of the largest crowds ever.

Two days later, the heatwave culminated in a torrential thunderstorm. “The lightning was almost incessant and accompanied by extremely heavy thunder. The flag pole on the common was struck and splintered from top to bottom.” Not only were the streets washed out, the electric trolleys were out of commission for some time.

And after the storms, it turned hot again.

YEAR WITHOUT A SUMMER

The most bizarre extreme summer weather, however, was not hot but cold. The year was 1816, known as the “Year without a Summer.”

That summer was actually part of a three-year global crisis attributed to the eruption of Mt. Tambora in Indonesia in April of 1815. The disruption to major weather systems led to crop failures, epidemic disease, and civil unrest.

In July 1936, an anonymous writer, commenting in the *Winchester Star* on the cold that June when frost was recorded as near as Lexington and Concord, took the occasion to recall the really frigid 1816 summer, alluding to a record kept by Asa Locke (former owner of the Wright-Locke Farm).⁵

“In this record he tells of the year 1816 known as the year without a summer and nothing like it has been known before or since. May was a month of frosts and snow, and ice formed an inch thick on some of the ponds here in town. A man froze to death in Vermont, where a blanket of snow fell ten inches deep in some places, while in New York City three inches of snow fell in one day. On the Fourth of July the ponds were frozen over here in town and frost occurred as far south as Virginia.

“August was no better and the succeeding months were cold, all having frost. Crops were a total loss and people starved to death in many places. Deer, other game and fish were exterminated all over New England as people tried to keep from starving. In the spring of 1817 corn sold for \$5 a bushel right here in Winchester and it was said that one family made a fortune because they always held a large supply for a rise in price.

“The curious feature of it all was that the preceding winter was exceptionally mild. The ground was frozen only a few days and plowing could be done almost all winter on our local farms. Scarcely any snow fell although there were many cold rains. Such conditions are possible but not probable again.”

The summer of 1816 has been well documented and the story told and retold, even in song. Newspapers of that year carried meteorological facts, plus a variety of short notices on the weather, such as Boston’s *Columbian Centinel*’s observance that “Since June commenced there has been frost on eight nights; which has destroyed many of the tender vegetable tribe” and that it snowed for several hours one day.

At that time, there were few residents within the boundaries of what now is Winchester. They all farmed and would have never forgotten that summer of 1816, also known as the “Poverty Year” and “Eighteen Hundred and Froze To Death.”

¹ This article © 2022 by the author Ellen Knight is a revision of an earlier article by the author published in the *Daily Times Chronicle* on. This revision supersedes all previous articles.

² *Daily Times Chronicle* writer Marie Coady reported on “heatstroke and death during the heatwave of 1868” in the July 5, 2002 issue.

³ “Hottest Weather Yet,” *The Winchester Star*, July 7, 1911.

⁴ Among others, the *Boston Post* reported this fact in its July 4 issue. *The Winchester Star*, July 7, 1911, made the same statement.

⁵ *The Winchester Star*, July 10, 1936.