



THE YEAR WITHOUT A SUMMER

Soon it will be summer. Time to swim and garden and run barefoot in the sun. Did you know that there was once a year so cold that Vermonters called it the year without a summer? The year was 1816. Vermonters also jokingly called it eighteen-hundred and-froze-to-death. But this year was no joke. Some say it snowed during every month of the year. Town histories also refer to it as the starving year, the poverty year, and the **scarcity** year, because of the hardships the cold weather caused.

To understand why cold weather was such a problem, it helps to know that Vermont in 1816 was an agricultural society. Most people farmed. Even ministers were given fields to farm as part of their pay. Also, blacksmiths, millers, and others depended on farmers for their business.

Unlike today, Vermonters in 1816 raised most of their own food. A poor growing season could mean they would run out.

Eighteen-sixteen did not start out that cold, but there were frosts in May. Farmers began to be frightened. When would it be warm enough for spring planting? Some went ahead and planted their corn, expecting the weather to warm up.

On June 5, spirits rose as a heat wave spread across New England. But then a northern cold front struck.



When cold, dry air from Canada met the warm, moist air of New England, thunderstorms boomed in the sky. Rain fell. The temperature dropped sharply. Farmers' hopes dropped, too. Temperatures in northern Vermont and the mountains fell to freezing. The rain changed to heavy flakes of wet snow. Ebenezer Eaton of Danville wrote:

“From the sixth to the tenth - Freezing as hard five nights in **succession** as it usually does in December. On the sixth, water froze an inch thick . . . The shoots of leaves of forest trees, which are just putting forth, and corn and garden vegetables . . . were mostly killed.”

By June 10, Craftsbury had a foot of snow. Montpelier had drifts up to a foot and Lunenburg had six inches. The snow soon melted, but cool temperatures stayed. There were several frosts in July and August. By September 28, Middlebury reported a low temperature of 32 degrees.

“It is extremely cold for the time of year. The late frosts have entirely killed the corn. It is not probable that enough will get ripe for seed for next year. There is not **sufficient** hay to winter cattle upon and nothing with which to fatten them this fall.”

Vermont Journal, Windsor,
October 7, 1816



Vermonters bought corn from farmers in New Hampshire. They traded maple sugar for fish caught in the Missisquoi at Swanton. Some survived by eating “hedgehogs, green nettles, and clover tops.” Many Yankee Vermonters were grateful to their Scots neighbors for bringing hardy, cold-resistant oats into the Vermont diet.

The failure of corn created another problem. There would be no seed crop for the spring of 1817. Any seed corn available was expensive.

The winter of 1816-17 was also cold and, again, there were frost and snow in June. Vermonters wondered, has the climate shifted for good? But it did grow warmer and farmers were able to raise a crop.

Some Vermonters had had enough. They had survived the War of 1812, which had cut off their trade with Canada, and a terrible spotted-fever **epidemic** in 1813 and 1814. But the cold weather was the last straw. They left Vermont to try their luck out west. Others stayed, **determined** to make it through the hard times. The memory of “eighteen-hundred-and froze-to-death” was with them for many years. Even today, a late spring or a freak June hailstorm will remind people of Vermont’s year without a summer.



VOCABULARY

scarcity - shortage

succession - one after another

sufficient - enough of

epidemic - sudden spread of sickness

determined - wanting to keep trying

