

Year without summer: 200 years ago, the season passed the province by

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August 9, 2017

New Brunswick

New Brunswick crops were devastated in 1816 when summer sun couldn't pierce volcanic ash



Shane Fowler · CBC News · Posted: Aug 09, 2017 6:00 AM AT | Last Updated: August 9, 2017

In 1816, also known as the year without summer, the sun was dimmed in New Brunswick by volcanic ash thrown into the stratosphere. It prevented most crops from growing in the province that year. (Shane Fowler/CBC)

Much has been made about this summer's weather: too much heat, too little rain and very dry conditions.

But this year marks the 200th anniversary of the return of summer to New Brunswick, after the season skipped the province the year before.

In April 1815, the Tambora volcano in Indonesia erupted. The soot, debris and ash in the air that followed dimmed the sun to the point where many crops couldn't grow in Atlantic Canada.

- **Cold and rainy weather delays farming operations**
- **Pembroke farmer scrambling to sell surplus veggies**

"By 1816 and 1817 you're seeing 30 centimetres of snow in Quebec in June, and you're seeing frost and ice in August on the ground in New Brunswick," said Rhona Hoyt, a senior exhibit co-ordinator at Kings Landing Historical Settlement. "It was bad."

The year without a summer devastated crops. Wheat wouldn't grow. Corn froze in the ground. The only thing hardy enough to survive was rye, and that was only after trial-and-error plantings that stretched well past the typical planting season.

"All across the northern hemisphere the crops failed," Hoyt said. "People were affected. They didn't have crops, they couldn't feed their animals, they couldn't feed their families."

No photos of the volcanic eruption or the massive crop failures exist since the camera had yet to be invented.

Historic articles

Articles from the New Brunswick provincial archives tell of chaotic first-hand accounts of those who had to survive the year without a summer on much less food than was typical.



Rhona Hoyt, senior exhibit co-ordinator at Kings Landing Historical Settlement, says the failure of crops 201 years ago devastated farmers across the world. Riots broke out in New Brunswick as people struggled to feed their families. (Shane Fowler/CBC)

On June 7, 1816 Rev. Fredrick Dibblee of Woodstock wrote in a diary account: "Cloudy and Cold as Winter. Snow Squalls all Day. The snow fell last night so as to cover the ground, terrible indeed, never knew snow in summer before, never was there such weather. People ploughing and harrowing with their great coats on."

On June 11 that year, farmer Thomas Mills of Maugerville wrote: "Cucumbers killed by the frost — very little grass. The cattle can hardly subsist."

The 200-year-old newspaper articles from the New Brunswick Royal Gazette show the fledgling government of the 33-year-old colony of New Brunswick had to bail out counties sending money to those in greatest need.

"A barrel of flour which was one dollar became thirty dollars," said Hoyt. "Beef and livestock actually declined because people were selling off their animals because people couldn't afford to feed them."

In the winter that followed the New Brunswick courts banned the export of any food harvested in the province to try to protect people from starving.

It even went so far as to mandate the size and price for loaves of bread to discourage price gouging. The "shilling wheaten loaf" was mandated by law to weigh "two pounds four ounces" in Fredericton as of April 5, 1817.

"In Europe a lot of people died and there was famine, there were riots," Hoyt said. "And a year later some of that happened here. Not as much, but it did happen."

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