

Revere House Radio

Season 2 Episode 8

Extreme Weather for Paul Revere

Hi everyone. Welcome to Revere House Radio. I'm your host, Adrienne Turnbull Riley. It's often said that if you don't know what to say to someone, talk about the weather. It's viewed as a rather bland topic that most people can have observations about. Today, weather intersects both the mundane and the existential as we grapple with the causes and solutions to climate catastrophe. But has weather always been so consequential? I thought today we could discuss some rather dramatic weather events that happened during Paul Revere's lifetime, what their consequences were, and how people reacted to them. One little disclaimer before we jump in, severe weather events have been happening forever, and the ones I talk about today are by no means the only major weather events we've had in the Northeast, or even during Revere's lifetime. There's a reason a particular type of storm has the name nor'easter, but I don't want to be mistaken as saying that the extreme weather the globe is experiencing right now is nothing special. Climate change and global warming are having a real material impact on humanity. I simply chose a handful of events that happened during Revere's lifetime or have some connection to Boston and the North End, which helped narrow my scope of research. Alright, with that said, let's get started. In 1755, when Revere was just 21, there was a rumble throughout the Northeast. Well, it was more than just a rumble. Seismographers today estimate that the earthquake of Cape Ann, which is just north of Boston, was a 6 to 6.3 on the Richter scale, with the epicenter being about 25 miles east of Cape Ann in the Atlantic. Hundreds of homes in Boston were damaged, mostly the brick structures such as chimneys. While we don't know exactly where Revere was living at this time -- he wasn't yet married to Sarah -- we do know he was in Boston. In fact, he had just started operating as a business owner in his late father's silver shop. Did all his hanging tools fall off the walls? Did he run to find his mother, Deborah, and make sure she was safe? We'll never know what he did specifically, but in a general sense, we know what many people's reactions were. Many felt that such an event was a message from God that they were sinners and needed to repent. On the other hand, some also interpreted the safety of most Bostonians as a sign that God had spared them. Jeremiah Newland wrote a long poem titled "Verses Occasioned by the Earthquakes in the Month of November 1755." You can read the whole thing on the Massachusetts Historical Society's website, which I'll link to in the show notes. Newland discusses God's wrath in orchestrating the earthquake and also God's mercy in sparing lives and buildings. The moral of the poem is to repent of one's sins and turn back toward God. The very last stanza reads, "and don't I say/forget that day/the 18th of November/on Tuesday morn/the Lord did warn/let us always remember." One final note about this earthquake, which took place in November: Earlier in 1775 there was a devastating earthquake in Lisbon, Portugal, destroying

much of the town and killing many. When Newland uses the plural "earthquakes" in the title of his poem, he is referring to this European catastrophe. Fast forward to 1780. By this point, Revere is now living in his North Square home with his second wife, Rachel. The colonies are deep into the Revolutionary War, though most of the action has moved away from Boston by this point. Still hearts must have trembled when the day progressed from a hazy May morning to total darkness over the course of a few hours. May 19, 1770 would become known as New England's "Darkest Day." But what would cause such a dramatic blackout? Like the earthquake mentioned above, many thought that God was sending some sort of message, or perhaps the Apocalypse was beginning. Many people gathered in churches and listened to ministers preach repentance. Some went to the taverns to try and drink away their fears. Candles were lit to see. Animals didn't know what to do, and there were some reports of chickens going to roost because they thought it was night. The real cause: massive wildfires in Ontario, Canada mixed with fogs blown in from the ocean. Clearly, the smoke and fog combined to great effect. Fortunately, the actual event was relatively short-lived. By the next day, the darkness had been blown away and the sun rose as normal. This may remind some of you in the northeast of large fires in Canada in July 2021. Here in Boston, where I live, the sky was hazy for days on end, and even the air smelled like smoke at some points. Jumping ahead from 1780 another 10 years or so, we find a little breather from the catastrophes. In our collections, we have a copy of the 1791 Massachusetts Magazine to which Revere subscribed. Conveniently, they tracked the weather in there. So what was the weather like in August 1791? On August 20, as I record this, Boston was 57 degrees at 7am, 72 at 1pm, and 58 at 9pm. The conditions were fair. Today's weather, 230 years later, is in the upper 70s, and the conditions are cloudy and humid. Fast forward about another 10 years to October 1804, and we have a weather event that affected all of the local coast, and particularly our friends at Old North Church. On October 9, 1804 there was a massive hurricane that struck the East Coast, and in some parts involved heavy snowfall as well. Many seafaring vessels were destroyed and many people were killed, mostly those on ships or very near the coast. Revere was living by this point in his Charter Street home here in the North End, and he also had his copper rolling mill and house down in Canton, Massachusetts. Though we're not 100% sure which resident he was at when the storm hit, it is most likely that he was in Boston, not Canton. Either way, he would have rushed to check on his foundry and the corner of Lynn and Foster streets, and been dismayed to see the roof had been taken off by the strong winds. He soon moved his bell-making operations to Canton as well after this. If he was in his Charter Street house like we think he was, he may have heard or felt the crash of Old North steeple above the wind and rain. The steeple toppled over due to intense winds and completely demolished the private residence next door. Thankfully, the occupants of that home happened to be out of town at the time, and so no one was hurt by the fall. The steeple could not be repaired, but the architect Charles Bulfinch redesigned a steeple for the church completed in 1806. Unfortunately for that steeple, it was again toppled in 1954 by Hurricane Carroll. The steeple that you see today is a stylistic combination of both the original and the Bullfinch steeple. Finally in today's episode we have the dramatically named "Year Without a Summer" of 1816. It started in Indonesia with the eruption of a volcano called Mount Tambora on April 5. This eruption was so violent that it killed many

1000s of people locally. Then the debris and ash started spreading around the world through the stratosphere. Eventually, it covered pretty much all of Europe and North America. Crops failed, cold rain and even snow fell on much of New England during that summer. Prices of food for both humans and animals skyrocketed. Revere was 81 in that year. He wrote his official will in November of 1816 - perhaps he was spurred on by the previous summer? He was no longer actively working, but I assume he was very concerned for the well-being of his children and what their future held. In 1816 the five children who were still alive were Mary, Joseph Warren, Harriet, Maria and John. For all he or anyone else knew, the world was now permanently colder and darker. We now know that the Earth recovered once the sun blocking ash eventually fell out of the sky. But at the time, there was no way of knowing that. By the end of Revere's life, he had encountered some pretty wild weather events, some of which we're familiar with today. Though our weather prediction and tracking technology would seem worlds away from those in the colonial period, many can relate to the feelings of fear and trepidation that come with severe weather. We still experience many of the same tragedies of property damage and loss of life when extreme weather comes our way. I hope you found this brief account of some colonial weather events interesting, and perhaps will think of the 18th-Century people living through what we still do today. In this way, the weather can be a connector through time to those who came before. And as we move into the fall season, here stay tuned to Facebook, Twitter and our website for upcoming events. As a reminder, if you want to read a transcript of an episode, go to PaulRevereHouse.org/extras for those. This has been Revere House Radio. Thanks for listening. And remember, if you don't like the weather, wait five minutes.