

# Celebrating Vestal's 190th Anniversary

## 1823-2013

### No. 12—Weathering Adversity

Mother Nature pays no heed to the Farmer's Almanac. Her fickle personality lulls us into complacency then strikes with a vengeance. Early accounts of events such as the Warm January, Pumpkin Freshet, or the Year without a Summer attest to her unpredictable behavior.

A 1934 Binghamton Press article in the October 23<sup>rd</sup> issue documents that a set of books, handed down through generations of weather forecasters, that contain weather records from as early as 1790. The books reveal the summer-like temperatures of January 1790 thereafter referred to as "The Warm January". It was followed four years later in 1794 by a Pumpkin Freshet or "Pumpkin Flood".

"The Year without a Summer" was a weather phenomenon that affected Europe and North America in 1816. Accounts tell us the winter of 1815-1816 was considered mild although snowy. March came in like a lamb but ended with extreme cold and heavy snow setting the tone for the remainder of the year. The snow was almost gone by May but seeds were said to have frozen in the ground. June and July remained cold enough to form ice on creeks and ponds. The temperatures of August were compared to those of March but without the snow. Although the weather moderated somewhat after August, it was too late for surviving crops to mature before fall weather moved in. The strange weather was later attributed to volcanic dust from the eruption of Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, Indonesia.

While snow storms caused travel problems and on occasion brought down a weakened barn, damage from them was relatively small throughout the town. The blizzard of Monday March 12, 1888 was chronicled as "the worst blizzard New York State ever knew". The diary of an Ouaquaga woman records that 5-6 feet of snow fell over 2 days. Four days after the blizzard, on March 16<sup>th</sup>, a Delaware Lackawanna & Western express train traveling between Buffalo and New York City wrecked and burned near the Vestal station injuring 20 of the 30 passengers on board. The blizzard of 1888 was topped by the Great Blizzard of 1966 which paralyzed the Triple Cities and the Southern Tier. A sleet storm on February 17, 1909 dropped 6.8 inches on the area.

Droughts were equally hard on the farmers of Vestal. During a drought that lasted from April 22 to September 25, 1939 only 6.57 inches of rain fell. A drought of shorter duration extended from April 18 to June 7, 1900.

Tornados are less common in the Southern Tier but they were recorded in 1905, 1992, 1998 and as recently as 2012. It was the May 31, 1998 outbreak of tornadoes in upstate New York that resulted in damage across five counties. The tornado affecting Vestal started in Apalachin and followed a path on the south side of the Susquehanna through Vestal, Binghamton, Conklin, Deposit, and Sanford. The highest intensity winds were clocked at 157 mph as it passed through Deposit and Sanford. Damage in Vestal was primarily confined to Tracy Creek, Horan, and Brown roads. The storm reached F2 strength as it struck Ingraham Hill in the town of Binghamton. Straight line winds have also caused damage in Vestal over the years.

Actual hurricanes are extremely rare in this area. Hurricane Hazel that struck on Friday, October 15, 1954 was the first recorded hurricane in the Southern Tier. Hazel traveled north from Virginia on a track just slightly west of Binghamton, over Lake Ontario, and into Canada. The storm in our area lasted for three hours during which winds reached a record-breaking average of 72 mph with gusts of 94 mph. The heavy rains predicted to accompany the storm did not materialize sparing the area of additional damage. Traffic on the western end of Vestal Road was blocked for most of the night when the cupola of Eldredge's barn landed on the road. And then there was Agnes in 1972. The devastation suffered by the Southern Tier on September 8, 2011 was caused by Tropical Storm Lee which leads us to the final and most prolific type of weather in this area....floods.



Roberts Street Under Water in the 1936 Flood.

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The nemesis for those living along the Susquehanna River vale or near one of Vestal's larger creeks has always been, and continues to be, flooding. Native Americans populating the south bank before 1779 experienced floods and our earliest settlers found them to be a typical spring occurrence. The river that you can walk across in summer turns treacherous and deadly in spring when ice and run off overflows the banks or during fall when heavy rains raise water levels in a matter of hours. Yet for early farmers along the south bank, flooding deposited rich soil from upstream that produced abundant crops.

The Pumpkin Freshet of August 1794 occurred when the Chenango and Susquehanna Rivers inundated fields on the river flat, ripping produce from the vines. Reports of the time say hundreds, and some say thousands, of pumpkins were seen bobbing on the strong current. Damage to crops was extensive creating a scarcity of food that winter and the next spring. A second Pumpkin Flood occurred on September 24, 1882.

An account in the Broome Republican newspaper several days after the "Great Flood" of March 17, 1865, read: "Our friends in Vestal must have suffered severely, as we could see from the top of the Major House that the buildings were half or two-thirds under water and families must have suffered." This is the flood that carried away one span of the first wooden bridge over the Susquehanna between Vestal and Union.



Binghamton Press Photo: Vestal Side of Vestal-Union Bridge Minutes before it was Closed to Traffic in 1948.

Other notable floods occurred on March 8, 1902, October 17, 1903, July 8, 1935 and the "greatest flood in history" on March 18, 1936. Newspaper reports of 1936 said both the Chenango and Susquehanna were at their highest levels in history. The Binghamton waterworks was flooded and the Endicott waterworks closed leaving residents with only a one day water supply. Everyone, including those using well water, was advised to boil their drinking water. Health officials quickly established clinics to immunize over 3000 school children against typhoid. The flood of March 22, 1948 once again carried river water polluted with factory and human waste into Vestal's homes.



Binghamton Press Photo: Twin Orchards Floodwall Construction in July 1959.

The New York State Flood Control Commission, which was established in February 1936, held their final inspection in September of 1960, just before disbanding. Over the years various plans were proposed by the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers that included ponding sites to hold high water surface runoff, and levees. The levee in Twin Orchards was slated for completion in December 1960. After 53 years and two major floods in 2006 and 2011, flood protection is being re-examined in an effort to control the mighty Susquehanna.

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Extensive damage is also done along Vestal's major creeks as witnessed in this 2006 photo of damage along Sugar Creek Road in Vestal Center.



Sugar Creek flows into the Big Choconut Creek.

Damage from the Big Choconut Creek was particularly visible along Main Street near the former location of Dewey's Mill, at the Meeker Road Bridge, and at the Front Street Bridge in 2011.

You can look up weather statistics for Binghamton from 1952 to the present at [www.erh.noaa.gov/bgm/climate/bgm.shtml](http://www.erh.noaa.gov/bgm/climate/bgm.shtml)

Sources and additional information about this topic are available at the Historian's Office.