

The Great Windfall of 1845

“The old track of the cyclone, known as the " Great Windfall of 1845," is an interesting study. It is but a few miles from Childwold Park, and is well worth a visit. This tornado occurred September 20, 1845, commencing in Upper Canada and extending 200 miles in a direct line, almost due east, to Lake Champlain. At three o'clock in the afternoon it was at Antwerp, Jefferson County, N. Y. ; at five, it swept across the Saranac ; and at six, it was at Burlington, Vt. At noon of that day persons on the shores of Lake Ontario, at Coburg, in Canada, noticed a violent ebb and flow of the lake at short intervals. The out-rushing tide was so strong that, in one place, a steamer could not make port. The phenomenon was supposed by many to be the effect of an earthquake ; but it was probably due to the action of this cyclone upon the surface of the lake.

“The windfall commenced its work near Antwerp, passed eastward, and seems to have been more violent in some places than in others, the most marked destruction of timber occurring about six miles north of Lake Massawepie. Although forty-seven years have elapsed, the path of the cyclone is still to be seen here, extending for twenty-five miles in length and varying from a half to over a mile in width. Its appearance was described by those who observed it at a little distance, as awfully sublime, it being a cloud of pitchy blackness from which vivid lightnings and deafening thunders incessantly proceeded, while the air was filled to a great height with materials carried up from the earth, and branches torn from the trees. Torrents of rain and hail fell along the borders of the track, and much damage was done by lightning. It entered the county in Fowler, crossed that town, and passed into Edwards, where it entered the uninhabited forest, and was not further witnessed.”

Excerpt from the Annual Report of the New York (State) Forest Commission
Published by The Argus Company, printers [etc.], 1892

“The Windfall Road has a history. It once linked the farms of pioneer settlers in the area, who came shortly after the Civil War. They were attracted by a clearing in the forest a half mile or more wide and 25 miles long, from Cook Pond ENE across the Grass River to Sevey Corners and on into Franklin County. This was the path of the Great Windfall of September 20, 1845, the most severe tornado ever recorded in northern New York.

“After the mass of uprooted timber had dried, some hunter, impatient with its impenetrability, set fire to it. Nearly 20 years later a traveler, Nathaniel Coffin, described the result of the fire and rot in his *Forest Arcadia of Northern New York*: “We at length saw through the gloom of the forest the opening of the great windfall, which, under the burning rays of a meridian sun, contrasted with the darkness of the woods upon its borders, shone like a band of gold . . . The broad savannah of the windfall, bare of trees and covered with wild grasses, rose and fell, as far as the eye could reach, in graceful undulations.” But the families that settled the western end of the windfall in the 1860s and 1870s did not find the land as fertile as it had looked to them and to Coffin. Except for a settlement of trailers and hunting camps at Cook Corners, no one lives on the Windfall Road today. Only cellar holes mark the locations of the old farmhouses.

“Reforestation and natural growth have made the path of the windfall hard to trace. But along this section of the Grass [River], at least, the aspect is still somewhat as Coffin described it over a century ago: the wild grasses undulate in the breeze, and the savannah shines like a band of gold in contrast to the darkness of bordering woods.

“The storm’s ENE course can still be traced by local names: the Windfall Club at Cook Corners, the Windfall Road, the Windfall House at Sevey, three Windfall Brooks, and two Windfall Ponds. One of the latter is less than 2 m. WSW of Long Pond Mountain. Much of the Mountain’s timber must have been laid flat by that tornado.”

Paul F. Jamieson, *Adirondack Canoe Waters, North Flow*, published by the Adirondack Mountain Club, Glens Falls, New York, 1975

“The ‘great windfall of 1845’ stretches across the central part of the north third of the town, and, until fire followed, the devastation wrought by it visualized what must have been the most terrific storm that ever touched Northern New York. It developed on the Grasse river in St. Lawrence county, and forked at about the Franklin county line, one arm sweeping straight across township nineteen, and the other passing to the north of where Derrick now is. Its path was from a half mile to a mile in width, and it is told that not a single tree was left standing in its track. All were snapped off or uprooted, with a resultant tangle of trunks and limbs and tops that was impenetrable. The hunters of the time had had trails across the tract, and, desiring to continue them, set fire to the slash. Ten years or such a matter afterward, when Cyrus P. Whitney, the surveyor, first saw the locality, on a hunting trip, these fires had made it as bare as a pasture; but it has since become pretty well covered by second-growth timber.”

History of Altamont, New York, FROM: HISTORICAL SKETCHES OF FRANKLIN COUNTY AND ITS SEVERAL TOWNS, BY: FREDERICK J. SEAVER, PUBLISHED BY J. B. LYON COMPANY, ALBANY, NY 1918