

# Firebreak

*How the Maine–New Brunswick Border  
Defined the 1825 Miramichi Fire*





BY ALAN MACEACHERN

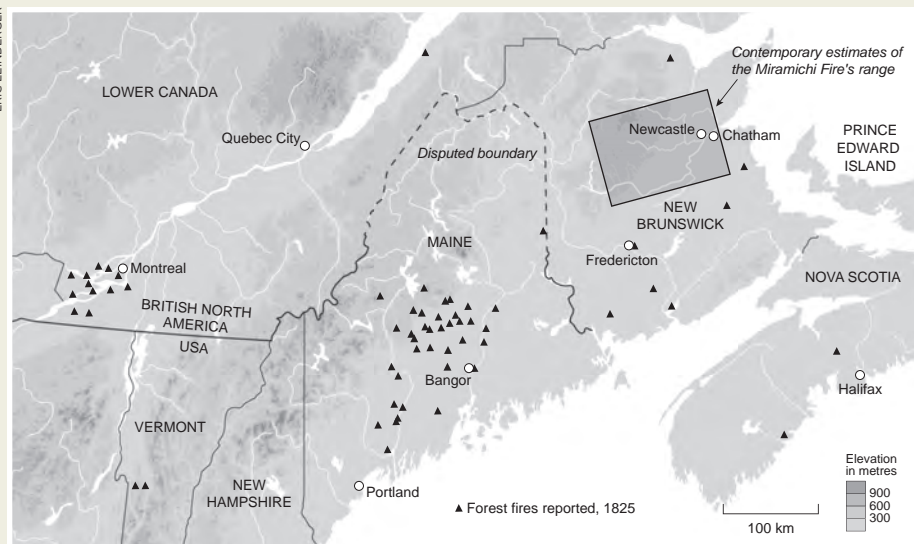
*Wildfires can have a cultural impact that lasts for decades. But what happens when the same wildfire simultaneously hits two cultures divided by an international border?*

**B**orders matter—except when they don't. The past year has offered clear evidence of this truth. COVID-19 swept across the globe, utterly unconcerned with political boundaries. Yet different nations—even different states and provinces—reacted differently to the coronavirus, developing their own homegrown policies to repel the virus from their borders and, once inside, to contain it, and consequently have seen different levels of infection and death. Nature and culture are together defining our COVID-19 experience.

This dual character of borders can be seen throughout forest history, too. On 7 October 1825, a massive wildfire swept across the colony of New Brunswick in British North America, destroying communities along the Miramichi River and killing at least 160 people. When the smoke cleared, the true scale of the conflagration became better known. Early reports estimated—and virtually every account over the following generation confirmed—that the Miramichi Fire burned 6,000 square miles (15,500 square kilometers, or 3,840,000 acres) of northeastern New Brunswick, one-fifth of the colony. That would make it the largest wildfire to have occurred

**The painting *View of Beaubears Island, Miramichi. The Commercial Establishment of John and Alexander Fraser and Co.* was created about the same year as the Miramichi fire. Beaubears Island, once famous for shipbuilding, sits in the Miramichi River just south of Newcastle.**

OIL PAINTING BY R. THRESHER, C. 1825. HERITAGE BRANCH, NEW BRUNSWICK, GH 996.9.1



**Forest fires in 1825 occurred throughout the northeast at different times, but most have been remembered as one single event. Even the fires around Montreal would later be remembered as the Miramichi Fire.**

within the British Empire, one of the largest in North American history, and the largest ever recorded along the Eastern Seaboard.

But the fire was not only burning in New Brunswick. That same day, an estimated 1,300 square miles (3,400 square kilometers, or 832,000 acres) of neighboring Maine was also scorched, making this what is still the most extensive forest fire in that state's history. Not surprisingly, the historical memory of the 7 October 1825 fires in the two jurisdictions have become linked. But never in a straightforward fashion. For example, the fire in Maine also became known as the Miramichi Fire, so the term is now used by Canadian and American writers to refer to the fire in just New Brunswick or just Maine—oftentimes, with no apparent knowledge or acknowledgement of a fire across the border—or both. And yet the 6,000-square-mile figure has become the default estimate of the fire's extent when discussing it in New Brunswick alone and in the two together.

In my recent book about this event,<sup>1</sup> I trace the history of Maine's Miramichi Fire as a means of

demonstrating how the international border has distorted understanding of the broader event.<sup>2</sup> Because Maine suffered less devastation than New Brunswick and no known deaths, its experience of the fire has always been overshadowed by that of its neighbor's. But because Canada has in turn long been overshadowed by the United States—nowhere more so than in the United States—the Miramichi Fire has received less attention than comparable, strictly American disasters, such as the Peshtigo Fire in 1871, which was less than a third of the size of New Brunswick's Miramichi Fire. The international border ultimately served as a cultural firebreak, dispersing the blaze and diminishing its renown.

### SUMMER OF FIRES

The Miramichi Fire is dated to 7 October, but it began well before that in Maine. The summer of 1825 was one of the hottest, if not the hottest, of the nineteenth century in northeastern North America.<sup>3</sup> And this came at the end of an unusually cool period; the 1815 eruption of the Tambora volcano in Indonesia had spread a cloud of

ash and dust throughout the global atmosphere, making the late 1810s the single coldest segment of the Little Ice Age.<sup>4</sup> The cool, wet weather checked forest fires and allowed combustible vegetation to accumulate, producing perfect conditions for an eventual conflagration. In the heat of the summer of 1825, fires blazed in patches all the way from Lake Superior to Nova Scotia.<sup>5</sup>

By late August, there were already reports of fire throughout the south-central heart of Maine, in communities from Bowdoinham in the west to Bangor in the east.<sup>6</sup> “In every town and on almost every farm for some weeks past,” in the words of an account from Norridgewock in Somerset County, “the woods have presented one continued sheet of fire and devastation.”<sup>7</sup> Because there was somewhat earlier and more settlement in Maine's interior than in New Brunswick's, its rural folk were likely more familiar with forest fires. As a result, settlers in the Pine Tree State took more precautions against fire than their New Brunswick neighbors would. Wooden fences were torn down. Swabs were tied to long poles, ready to blot out fires on the roofs of cabins. Barrels of water were stationed outside homes. Spare clothes and bedding were buried, just in case.<sup>8</sup> The Norridgewock article noted that such safeguards had so far prevented the invader from doing much damage, but the danger persisted, “and nothing can remove it but (what we have not seen for a long time) a good wholesome, soaking rain.” That did not come, and on 8 September a Bangor reporter—writing as fire ran within his town—told of a 30-mile “sea of fire” burning along both sides of the Penobscot River. The roaring of the flames sounded like thunder and could be heard 15 miles away.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers reported that fires blazed in communities throughout Penobscot and Somerset Counties, centered in what is now Piscataquis



County.<sup>10</sup> Although the fires were said to be “more extensive than ever known before,”<sup>11</sup> they were defined almost exclusively in terms of the towns they threatened, not a more general range.

The fire season then went quiet for a time, before roaring back with a vengeance. “The light rains in September checked the fires,” a Maine newspaper would report a month later, “but the hot weather since has dried the ground, and the strong wind on Friday night last [7 October] sent them raging as severely as ever.” On 7 October, Maine and New Brunswick were both hit with the winds of what may have been a hurricane’s remnants. Smouldering fires flared up all over, worse than ever. A Captain Loring sailing off Portland, in Maine’s southwest corner, saw the “reflection of a large fire upon the sky” extending to the north toward Penobscot.<sup>12</sup> There was news out of Kennebec County that the countryside was on fire for more than 100 miles. A whole series of communities throughout Somerset and Penobscot Counties in the center of the state were listed repeatedly in the press as having suffered badly.<sup>13</sup>

Yet the nature of Maine’s suffering was fundamentally different from that faced in New Brunswick. Consider a newspaper account of how the fire entered Bangor on 7 October. After describing circumstances identical to those experienced in the Miramichi communities—the wind shifting suddenly (as the storm front passed over) and flames bursting suddenly out of the woods—the author concluded, “But the most distressing part of our relation is yet to come. Twelve buildings with most of their content were totally destroyed.”<sup>14</sup> The Maine fires resulted in the loss of pines and property, but not persons. So, when word reached the wider world of the more extensive disaster that had befallen the Miramichi region, the Maine ones were quickly

eclipsed. As a result, there was actually less in the North American press that fall about Maine’s 7 October fires than there had been about the almost certainly smaller ones earlier in the summer. In public memory, however, Maine’s two distinct 1825 fire periods merged, their total ranges all becoming subsumed by 7 October.

### **PROVIDING RELIEF, PLACING BLAME**

The border played an important part, too, in how people who learned of the forest fires that autumn responded. News of the conflagration in New Brunswick, and the fact that it had left hundreds dead and thousands homeless on the eve of a Canadian winter excited sympathy and generosity across the Western world.

An impressive relief effort was born, and Americans were notably generous. Spurred by newspapers’ publications of subscription lists, a competition arose among major American cities to see which would give the most. “Boston had done most nobly” and “Philadelphia has at length taken the field,” a New

York newspaper noted, but it was happy to report that its own city had raised \$3,884 in a single day.<sup>15</sup> Thirty-five Boston churches collected money for the Miramichi region, and the schooner *Billows* sailed twice to Halifax with provisions.<sup>16</sup> Besides food, clothing, and supplies, Americans sent at least \$20,000 in cash to aid the sufferers in the British colony.<sup>17</sup> This, only a decade after the two nations had fought the War of 1812, and while they were still

disputing the Maine–New Brunswick border. In fact, the relief effort in the United States was frequently promoted as a way to confirm and fortify America’s close relationship with Great Britain and its colonies.

The *Billows* did not stop in Maine to help victims of the fires there, it should be noted. Although there were Mainers who had lost property, who had been left homeless, no charity drive was organized to help them recover. One U.S. newspaper, after describing aid to the Miramichi, tentatively asked “whether assistance is not more needed by the sufferers in Maine,” but no answer was given. This suggestion was the closest anyone came to saying that Americans should care for Americans first.<sup>18</sup> The scope

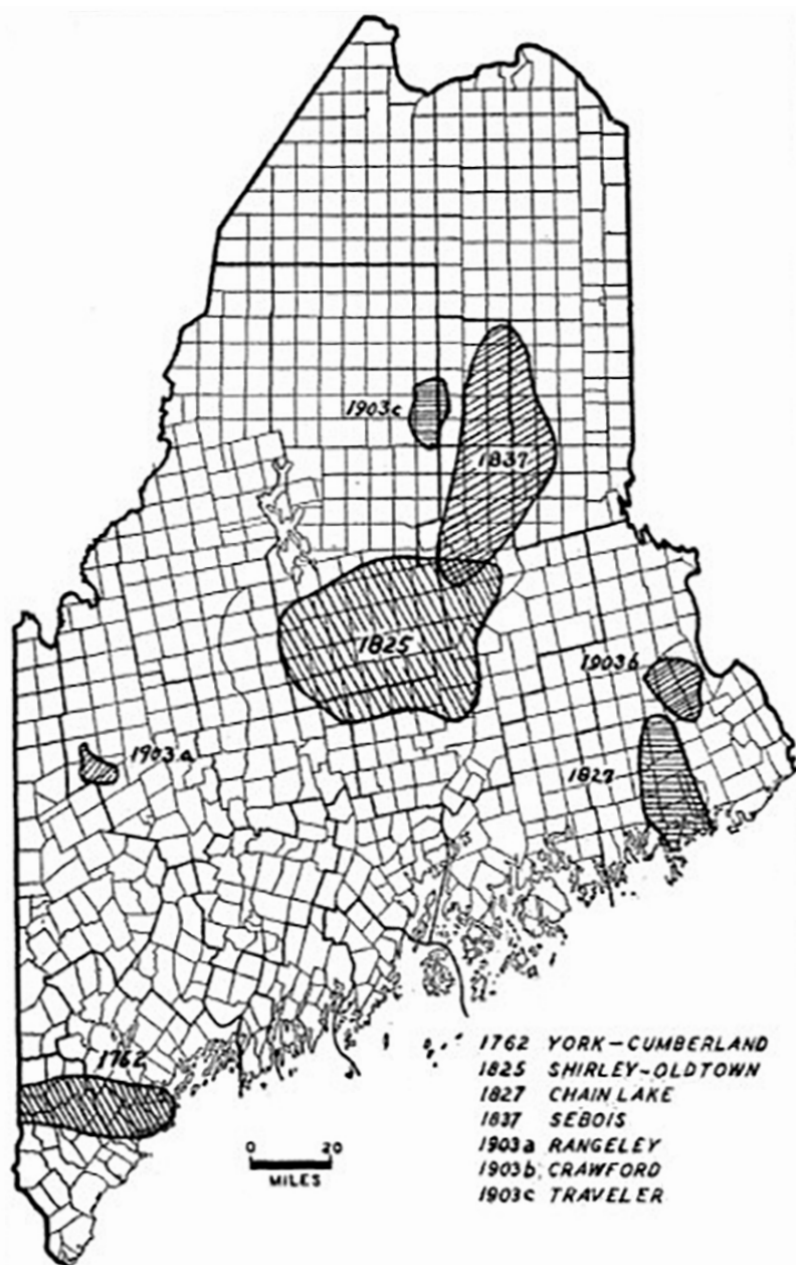
of the disaster in the Miramichi region simply eclipsed that in Maine. Even residents of Eastport, Maine, well aware that forest fires had wreaked havoc in their own state, raised \$400 to help the New Brunswick survivors.<sup>19</sup>

In the weeks immediately after the 7 October conflagration, discussion in the press focused on the suffering.

With relief efforts

underway, though, talk soon turned to what might have caused the fires. Again, the answers were different on the two sides of the border. In New Brunswick, since the fire had swept eastward from the wilderness interior to the more settled coast, there was really no way of determining its original cause. This did not prevent commentators from casting blame, however. Some pointed to lumberers who burned piles of slash as part of their operation. Others pointed to

**Although there were Mainers who had lost property and were left homeless, no charity drive was organized to help them recover. The scope of the disaster in the Miramichi region simply eclipsed that in Maine.**



This map of historic fires in Maine, published in 1948, reflects how the memory of the Miramichi fire had changed over eighty years. The fires were shown as being in a compact area. Compare it to the maps on page 23, which shows the actual locations of fires in 1825.

settlers clearing farmland. Others pointed to Mi'kmaw carelessness. (White sources, having ignored how the Indigenous population of New Brunswick had experienced, suffered because of, or died in the Miramichi Fire, only referenced the Mi'kmaq in

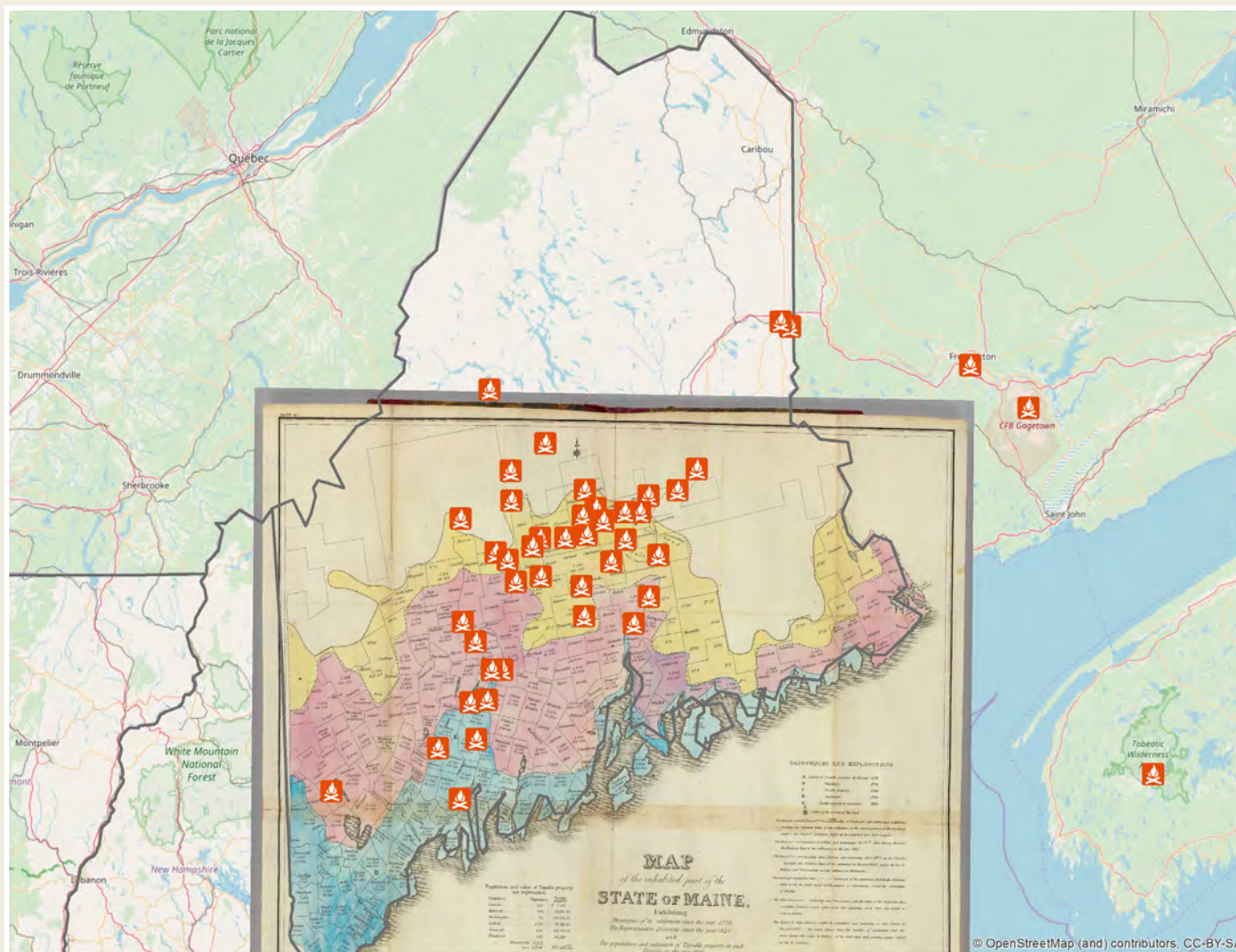
terms of blame.<sup>20</sup>) Still others pinned the fire on natural causes: lightning, spontaneous combustion, or the Earth having been brushed by the tail of a comet.<sup>21</sup>

But in Maine, much more direct blame was laid. Throughout the

summer of 1825, Maine's land agent sent men throughout the state's northern interior in search of unlicensed logging operations. Near such sites they often found cut meadow hay, which was fodder for the lumbermen's draft animals, and as such was fuel for the whole enterprise. So agents burned it. In mid-September—after the state's first wave of fires—a letter appeared in a Bangor newspaper purportedly from Penobscot Indian leader John Neptune, accusing the state's agent and his man Ezekiel Chase, a captain in the Revolutionary War, of causing the fires that had devastated the state: "What meanum states agent send Captain Chase to burnum hay when everything so dry—Indian two township all burn up before rane come—Indian lossum all timber and hay—... When indian havum all timber and hay nobody burnum hay—now state gettum all indian land but two township, then he settum fire to drive all indian off."<sup>22</sup> After 7 October, this accusation spread to include the fire of that day. White squatters in eastern Maine charged the state's agents with setting the blaze not to displace Indigenous people but to disrupt their timber operations.

It hardly mattered that the specific agents mentioned had an airtight alibi, having not been anywhere near where the fires burned on 7 October. The idea that the state's own officials had caused the state's worst fires was so delicious that it became woven into public memory. A half-century later, the sprawling *History of Penobscot County, Maine*—a book written by numerous anonymous contributors whose entries utterly contradict one another—took turns confirming and denying the accusation. One author reasoned, for example, "It is very certain that, if it had not been for the lawless acts of the timber and hay thieves, there would have been no occasion of complaint against the Land Agent for burning their hay"—and,





**Reported forest fires in Maine, 1825, overlay on Moses Greenleaf's *Map of the Inhabited Part of the State of Maine (1829)*. Greenleaf's map shows the northward spread of settlement, the lightest shaded band representing land settled between 1800 and 1820.**

regardless, “The utmost care was enjoined.”<sup>23</sup> The story’s details blurred over time. In 1899, the *New York Times* précised the 1825 Maine fire as an expulsion of Acadians: “two special constables” were bent on evicting “French Canadians” and “after turning the families out, set fire to the houses and haystack.” Soon “the biggest forest fire ever known in the State was sweeping north, burning off more than fifty townships of old-growth pine and doing more than \$10,000,000 damage to the State lands.”<sup>24</sup>

Like so much about the Miramichi Fire, it is impossible to know the truth for sure, whether a small fire set by government officials caused or contributed to the fires that bedeviled

Maine that year. But it is striking that no one writing in or about the New Brunswick fire in either contemporary or subsequent accounts ever pointed at Maine’s land agents as its cause. Although Maine was to New Brunswick’s west, although the winds and fire traveled west to east, the border was too formidable for blame to jump it.

### THE MANY MIRAMICHI FIRES

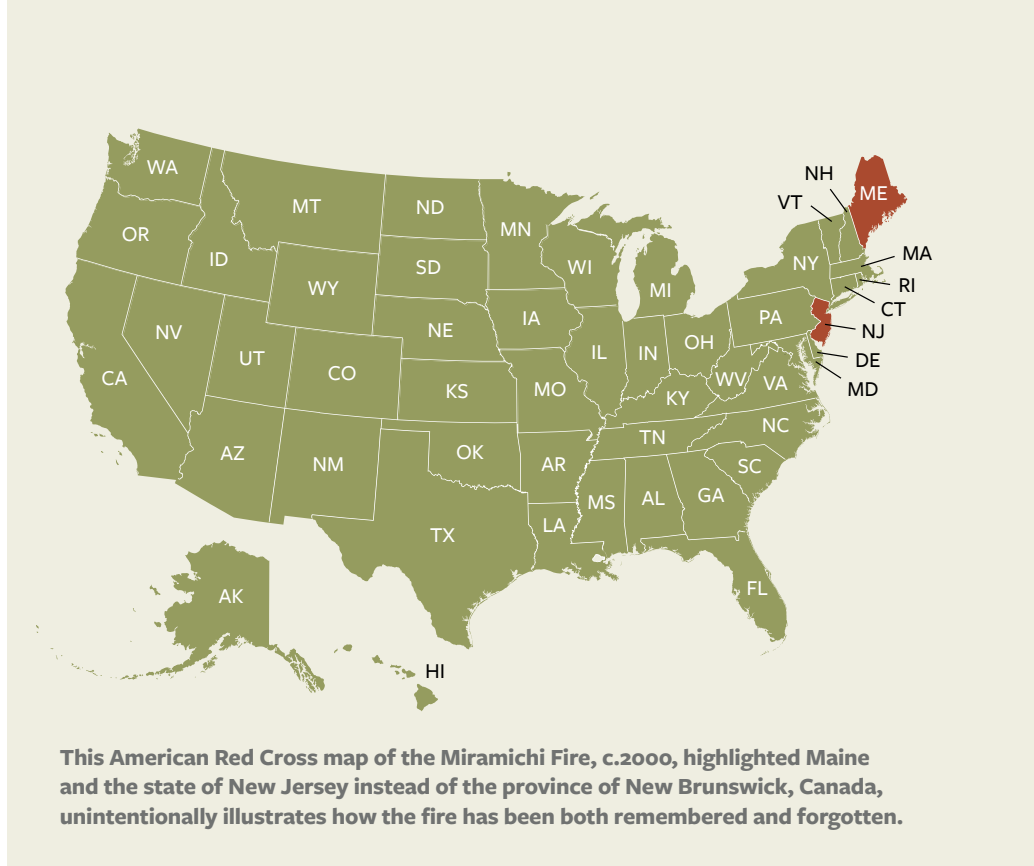
Nonetheless, once it was understood that Maine and New Brunswick had each experienced massive forest fire events on the very same day, it is little wonder that some assumed that they were connected—that they were not fires at all, in effect, but a single

fire. “This devastating element,” in the words of one newspaper article, “hurried through the wildernesses of Maine on the Atlantic and swept onwards on the blast of the hurricane, until stayed by the waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.”<sup>25</sup> It became routine in early accounts to mention the fires in Maine when describing the 1825 conflagration as a means of showing the scope of the disaster. But

the death and destruction along the Miramichi River utterly overshadowed what happened elsewhere. As a result, no writer of the day attempted to map the fire's path between Maine and New Brunswick.<sup>26</sup>

The closest anyone came to trying was the writer "W," in a series for the Miramichi newspaper *Chatham Gleaner and Northumberland Schediasma* in 1831. A survivor of the great fire, "W" traced its route back through New Brunswick, all the way to the colony's extreme southwest corner, right on Maine's doorstep.<sup>27</sup> "W" was actually the *Gleaner's* own reporter, Robert Cooney, who published a history of northern New Brunswick the following year. In that book, Cooney focused strictly on the Miramichi component of the blaze so as to position the fire as the defining event in the history of that part of the colony. He was successful—his book is still the most quoted material on the fire—and so the writer who came closest to connecting New Brunswick's fires with Maine's was also the writer who, more than anyone, solidified its range as principally on the Miramichi.

In the course of my research, I documented contemporary reports of fires throughout northeastern North America that late summer and fall—including around Montreal, where, remarkably, the fires of 1825 would also be remembered as the Miramichi Fire. (See page 20) In New Brunswick, the reports were focused on the colony's northeast, and in Maine, in the state's very center. That was how history has come to understand the fires. (See page 22) Renowned Maine forester Austin Cary, for example, noted seventy years later that though the blaze in the state was named for a Canadian location, it was "a different fire, being separated from the other by many miles."<sup>28</sup> Mid-twentieth century American logger-turned-historian Stewart Holbrook downplayed it as



"a Canadian fire," before discussing it solely in terms of its impact in Maine.<sup>29</sup> Fire historian Stephen J. Pyne is unusual in writing about the fire on both sides of the border—although it is worth noting he does so separately, in two distinct national histories.<sup>30</sup>

But the belief in discrete Maine and New Brunswick fires may be a product more of reporting than of reality. There is a lovely 1829 map by Maine cartographer Moses Greenleaf showing the northeastward progress of colonization of the state after the American Revolution. (See page 23) Superimposing reported 1825 fire locations on this map reveals that most of the burns occurred in settled territory and that there were relatively few reports of fires beyond. These findings are only to be expected, for two reasons. First, land clearing, timber cutting, wood heating, cooking, and other trappings of human settlement all increase the potential for fires that get out of hand; generally speaking, where there are fewer people, there are fewer fires. But second, places that

are more settled, particularly those with newspapers, are more likely to record their experiences; where there are fewer people, there are fewer reports of fire. Since the entire region between Maine's and New Brunswick's fire zones was lightly populated and had no newspapers, we may reasonably wonder if fire burned parts of it and went unreported. We may also reasonably wonder if two massive fires that burned in the same environmental and climatic conditions on the very same day less than 200 kilometers apart were not, in fact, connected.

Natural disasters, and perhaps all historical events, undergo a process of spatial and temporal consolidation as they move into the past: boundaries become firmer. But because the Miramichi Fire was centered in two core areas—central Maine and northeastern New Brunswick—and because these were on two sides of an international border, the areas drew apart and consolidated separately. The fact that the fire resulted in far more deaths and damage on the Canadian



side meant it became known by a Canadian name. Rather than sharing memory of this natural disaster, both nations lost track of its dimensions on the other side of the border, diminishing its memory in both.

In the early twenty-first century, the American Red Cross's website disasterrelief.org contained information about historical natural disasters. (See previous page) Its list of forest fires began, as most such lists do, with the 1825 blaze. There was even a helpful accompanying map of the United States, with Maine and New Jersey singled out. The site's creators presumably believed that a fire that torched the state of Maine and the neighboring British colony of New Brunswick had instead torched Maine and the town of New Brunswick, New Jersey, some 400 miles to the south.<sup>31</sup> This error seems a fitting illustration of how the Miramichi Fire, a forest fire that joined two nations, has been simultaneously remembered and forgotten.

---

*Alan MacEachern (amaceach@uwo.ca) teaches environmental history at Western University in London, Ontario. He was the founding director of NiCHE: Network in Canadian History & Environment and is the author most recently of The Miramichi Fire: A History (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).*

## NOTES

1. The essay that follows is derived from my *The Miramichi Fire: A History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2020).
2. On New England and the Maritime provinces as an integrated region, see John G. Reid, *Essays on Northeastern North America, Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008); Stephen J. Hornsby and John G. Reid, eds., *New England and the Maritime Provinces: Connections and Comparisons* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).
3. David Ludlum, *The Country Journal New England Weather Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 63. See also United States, Meteorological Register for the Years 1822, 1823, 1824, and 1825, from *Observations by the Surgeon of the Army at the Military Posts of the United States* (Washington, DC: E. DeKrafft, 1826).
4. C. R. Harington, ed. *The Year Without a Summer? World Climate in 1816* (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Nature, 1992), esp. 127, 255–56, 266–78; and K. R. Briffa, P. D. Jones, F. H. Schweingruber, and T. J. Osborn, "Influence of Volcanic Eruptions on Northern Hemisphere Summer Temperatures over the Past 600 Years," *Nature* 393, no. 6684 (1998): 450–55.
5. *Charleston* (South Carolina) *Courier*, 12 December 1825.
6. Hallowell report, August 31, 1825, in *Portsmouth New Hampshire Gazette*, September 6, 1825; *Providence Rhode-Island American*, September 9, 1825.
7. Norridgewock report, September 6, 1825, in *Newport Rhode-Island Republican*, September 15, 1825; and William Collins Hatch, *A History of the Town of Industry, Franklin County, Maine* (Farmington, ME: Press of Knowlton, McCleary & Co., 1893), 218.
8. Rev. Amasa Loring, *History of Piscataquis County, Maine, from its Early Settlement to 1880* (Portland, ME: Hoyt, Fogg, and Donham, 1880), 400.
9. Bangor report, September 8, 1825, in *Middletown* (Connecticut) *Sentinel and Witness*, September 21, 1825. The 30-mile figure was repeated in, for example, *Saint John New Brunswick Courier*, October 1, 1825.
10. *Augusta* (Maine) *Chronicle*, September 28, 1825; *Baltimore* (Maryland) *Niles' Weekly Register*, September 24, 1825; and *Halifax Novascotian*, 26 October 1825.
11. *Baltimore Niles' Weekly Register*, September 17, 1825.
12. *Kennebec Gardiner* (Maine) *Chronicle*, report, October 11, 1825, in *Boston* (Massachusetts) *Columbian Centinel*, October 15, 1825. On Maine's September weather, see *Boston Columbian Centinel*, September 17, 1825; and *Danville* (Vermont) *North Star*, October 4, 1825.
13. *Baltimore Niles' Weekly Register*, October 22, 1825; *Quebec* (Lower Canada) *Gazette*, October 27, 1825; *Hallowell* (Maine) *American Advocate*, October 29, 1825; *Canadian Courant and Montreal* (Lower Canada) *Advertiser*, November 2, 1825.
14. *Concord* (New Hampshire) *Patriot*, December 12, 1825.
15. *N.Y. (New York) Albion*, reprinted in *Canadian Courant and Montreal Advertiser*, December 10, 1825.
16. *Montreal* (Lower Canada) *Herald*, November 30, 1825; and Merle Curti, *American Philanthropy Abroad* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1963), 13–14.
17. *Report of the Commissioners for Ascertaining the Losses Occasioned by the Late Fires in New Brunswick* (Fredericton, NB: G. K. Lugin, 1826), 21.
18. *Salem* (Massachusetts) *Gazette*, November 18, 1825.
19. *Eastport* (Maine) *Sentinel*, 22 and 29 October 1825.
20. "Mi'kmaq" refers to the Indigenous people. "Mi'kmaw" serves as both the singular of Mi'kmaq and as an adjective when preceding a noun (e.g. "Mi'kmaw treaties").
21. Survivors did not know then that in windy conditions embers can carry up to one mile or farther and that fires can travel up to 6 miles per hour in forests, which would have helped spread the fire.
22. *Bangor* (Maine) *Register*, September 15, 1825. Neptune was said to have dictated his letter to a "St. Johns indian" and the *Register* published it "verbatim et literatim." For broader context on this episode, see Jacques Freland, "Tribal Dissent or White Aggression?: Interpreting Penobscot Indian Dispossession between 1808 and 1835," *Maine History* 43 no.2 (August 2007): 124–70, esp. 150–51.
23. *History of Penobscot County, Maine* (Cleveland, OH: Williams, Chase, & Co., 1882), 622.
24. "How Maine Got Birch Trees," *New York Times*, August 14, 1899.
25. *Halifax Acadian Recorder*, reprinted in *A Narrative of the Late Fires at Miramichi, New-Brunswick* (Halifax: P. J. Holland, 1825), 32. See also *New York Albion*, November 5, 1825, reprinted in *Canadian Courant and Montreal Advertiser*, November 12, 1825.
26. Late in the century, Maine forest commissioner Charles E. Oak argued that the Maine and New Brunswick fires were distinct and, in the words of historian John Francis Sprague, "spread from opposite directions." Sprague, "Forests, Forest Fires, Fish and Game," *Sprague's Journal of Maine History* 11, no. 3 (1923): 117.
27. "W," "Forests of New-Brunswick, No. 4," *Chatham* (New Brunswick) *Gleaner and Northumberland Schediasma*, September 20, 1831.
28. Austin Cary, "Early Forest Fires in Maine," *Report of the Forest Commissioner of the State of Maine*, 1894; reprinted in *Report of the Forest Commissioner of the State of Maine*, 1902 (Augusta, ME: Kennebec Journal Print, 1902), 32.
29. Stewart Holbrook, *Burning an Empire: The Story of American Forest Fires* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1943), 59.
30. Stephen J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982), 56–7; and *Awful Splendour: A Fire History of Canada* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 127–32.
31. This American Red Cross website no longer exists but is archived with the map link broken at the Internet Archive: <http://web.archive.org/web/20050310050329/http://www.disasterrelief.org/Library/WorldDis/firestuff/imagepages/fire32.html>.