

On the evening of February 16, 1853, a blizzard raged across Down East Maine. Not an unusual occurrence for this region at this time of year, but what happened over the course of the night at Bar Harbor was unusual in the extreme and seems like something right out of a Stephen King novel.

The wind during the day had been from the N.E., accompanied with snow, with a temperature of from 15 to 20 degrees above zero. At 6 p.m. the wind had increased to a heavy gale, and at 7 p.m. ceased to blow, and flashes of vivid lightning commenced. In a few minutes more thunder was heard in the N.W., and at 8:30 p.m. the scene was grand and awful beyond description. The lightning was of a purple color, and sometimes appeared like balls of fire, coming through windows and doors and down chimneys, while the houses trembled and shook to their very foundations.

Mrs. E. Holden was near a window, winding up a clock; a ball of fire came in through the window and struck her hand, which benumbed her hand and arm. She then, with all in the house, retreated into the entry. Another flash succeeded, and, in the room from which they had retired, resembled [sic] a volume of fire, whirling around and producing a cracking noise. A similar appearance of fire was seen, and cracking noises were heard in a large number of houses. Some who heard the noise say it sounded like breaking glass.

Capt. Maurice Rich had his light extinguished, and his wife was injured. He got his wife onto a bed and found a match; at that instant another flash came and ignited the match and threw him several feet backwards. John L. Martin received such a shock that he could not speak for a long time.

A great many people were slightly injured. Some were struck in the feet, some in the eye while others were electrized [sic], some powerfully and some slightly. But what was very singular, not a person was killed or seriously injured, nor a building damaged; but a cluster of trees within a few rods of two dwelling houses was not thus fortunate. The electric fluid came down among them, taking them out by the roots, with stones and earth, and throwing all in every direction. Some were left hanging by their roots from the tops of adjacent standing trees—roots up, tops down.

The lightning, after entering the earth to a depth of several feet and for a space some 8 to 10 feet in diameter, diverged into four different directions. One course which it took led through open land,

making a chasm to the depth of several feet, and continued its march unobstructed by solid, frozen ground or any other substance, to the distance of 370 feet; lifting, overturning and throwing out chunks of frozen earth, some of which were 10 or 11 feet long by 4 feet wide; and hurling at a distance, rocks, stones and roots. It really seemed that God's mercy is manifested in sparing our lives amidst such danger and destruction.

--Ellsworth Herald, Friday, March 4, 1853

Another witness was later quoted in the New York Times as saying, "I don't believe there ever were a worse frightened lot of people in the world than the inhabitants of Bar Harbor were that night. That purple ball [of] lightning flashed about and obtruded itself everywhere. There was scarcely [sic] a house that was not visited by it."

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