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## A History Mystery: The Mystery of the Dark Day

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The people of New England thought the end of the world was coming. The year of 1780 was not going well. That winter had been long and very cold. The American Revolution dragged on into its fourth year with no end in sight. It seemed that the British might be winning. On May 12, the city of Charleston, South Carolina, had been taken by the British. Benedict Arnold, a friend of General George Washington, turned traitor. Washington had few troops left. Most men were needed at home to plant crops to feed their families, not away at war. On May 18, there had been an eclipse of the moon. The afternoon of May 18, 1780, was unusual. The sky was a strange yellowish color. The clouds seemed dark and heavy. A bright but odd red-tinted light filled the afternoon sky. The sun was a dull red.



The next day was even stranger. A thick darkness gradually fell throughout the morning hours. The sun disappeared, and by midday, it was as black as night. Lunches were eaten by candlelight. Birds stopped singing, and many were found dead on the ground. Cows headed for home. Roosters crowed at mid-day. By 5:00 p.m. it was darker than midnight. The full moon that night was covered up. No stars could be seen in the sky.

Some people panicked. Did these things mean the end of the world was coming? Did the Dark Day mean that the war against Great Britain was cursed with bad luck? Was the American dream of independence doomed? Many people were fearful. Had Judgment Day come? What was happening?

On May 20, 1780, the sun came up again. Life returned to normal. Everyone had ideas about what had caused the Dark Day. Some believed the eclipse had caused it. Others said no, eclipses of the moon don't cause the sky to go dark in the daytime. Some thought it had been caused by an eclipse of the sun. Others said no, eclipses of the sun don't last that long. They can be predicted, too, and no eclipse had been predicted for that day. Some thought it had been caused by a comet. Some thought that a planet had passed between the Earth and the sun. Others had other ideas about the cause - such as volcano eruptions or dust storms in the West. But none of these things were reported.

There were clues. There were reports that the air smelled sooty. A man in Massachusetts reported that black scum was found on still waters. He said the black scum smelled like burnt leaves. He believed "smoke from the woods" caused the problem. As it turns out, he was right.

In 2008, scientists believed they solved the mystery of the Dark Day. They were studying tree rings from trees growing in southern Canada. The tree rings showed that a huge fire had burned in the spring of 1780. Many old trees showed fire damage dating to that time. The writings of George Washington and others reported details that fit the forest fire theory. The red sun and the strange yellow sky, along with the smell of soot and the sooty scum on water, were clues that a large fire had created a lot of smoke and ash. Thick smoke would have drifted over

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much of New England and blocked the sun. Cloudy skies held the smoke near ground level. After two hundred twenty-eight years, the mystery was solved.

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## Questions

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. Which of these was NOT a cause of people's fear?
- A. That winter had been long and very cold.
  - B. George Washington turned traitor.
  - C. On May 12, the city of Charleston, South Carolina, had been taken by the British.
  - D. It seemed that the British might be winning the American Revolution.
2. What famous person mentioned in the story wrote details about that Dark Day?

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- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. Which of these is NOT a fact about the Dark Day?
- A. Some birds were found dead on the ground.
  - B. Candles were needed at midday.
  - C. The war against Great Britain was cursed.
  - D. Some people said the air smelled sooty.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. What direct effect did the clouds in the sky cause?
- A. A bright but odd red-tinted light filled the afternoon sky.
  - B. Smoke was held close to the ground.
  - C. Most men were needed at home to plant crops to feed their families.
  - D. none of the above
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. What evidence did scientists find in 2008 that explained the Dark Day of 1780?
- A. Black scum was found on still waters.
  - B. Some birds were found dead on the ground.
  - C. Trees in Canada showed fire damage dating to that time.
  - D. none of the above
6. What is the root word in "fearful," and what does it mean?

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