# Beaches to Blazes: Remembering the 1887 Cape Cod Wildfires Ahead of a Potentially Fiery Future

Samuel C. Gilvarg and Andrew L. Vander Yacht

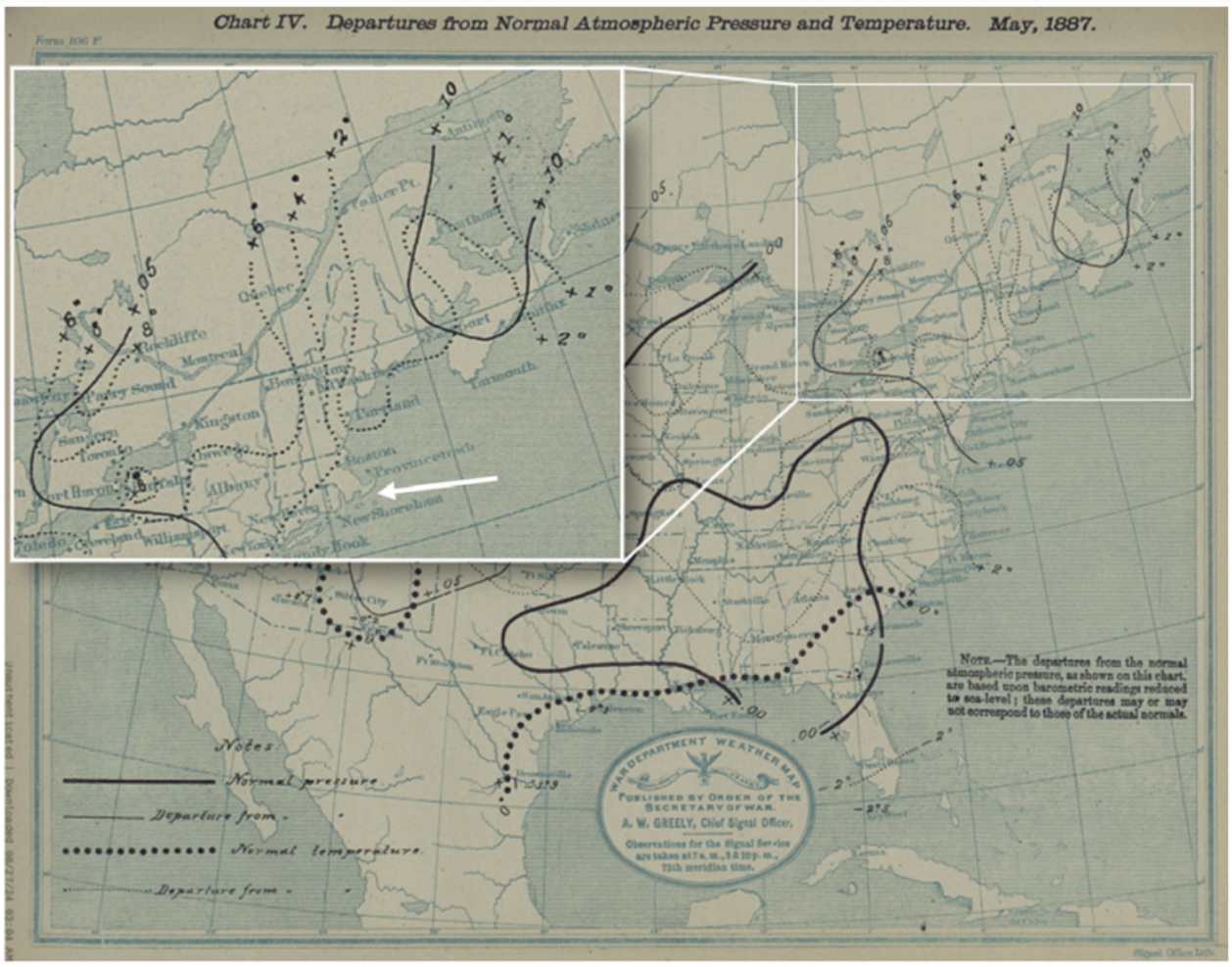
**Summary**

Unseasonably warm and dry conditions in May of 1887 precipitated a series of severe wildfires on Cape Cod (Massachusetts, USA). Although the conflagrations left an indelible impression on witnesses, their memory has largely faded from public conscience. Rekindling related stories affords an opportunity to recognize the true nature of this idyllic landscape: one defined not only by beaches but also the inherent flammability of its disturbance-dependent ecosystems. Such remembrance of fire's historical role on the Cape should also compel evaluations of how to best manage the broader landscape given that climate change will likely soon increase regional fire activity.

Although published on 14 May 1887, the descriptions of wildfires contained in the newspaper would not surprise the twenty-first-century reader: a reporter describing how "huge flames can be seen ... lighting up the sky," while "dense clouds of smoke" ensconce neighboring towns in a caustic haze, evokes the contemporary megafires (i.e., large fires burning with extremely high severity and/or intensity) that are presently a constant headline across the western United States, Australia, the Mediterranean, and other fire-prone regions. However, this report was published in the *Boston Daily Globe* and concerned wildfires in a place better known for its beaches than its blazes—scenic Cape Cod, Massachusetts. Remembering the seemingly forgotten fires of 1887 should remind a region that considers itself ostensibly insulated from wildfires that fire was—and may yet again be—a socially and ecologically influential force.

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**Print date:** 17 November 2026 02:32:16




Map from 1887 depicting abnormally high atmospheric pressure and warm temperatures—factors that promote wildfire activity. Small, dotted lines delineate areas of greater temperature, and solid non-bold lines delineate areas of greater atmospheric pressure, relative to climatic normals. The Cape (indicated by an arrow) was experiencing atmospheric pressures well above normal, and the highest pressure observed in the country during May was recorded near Falmouth (30.09 inHg).

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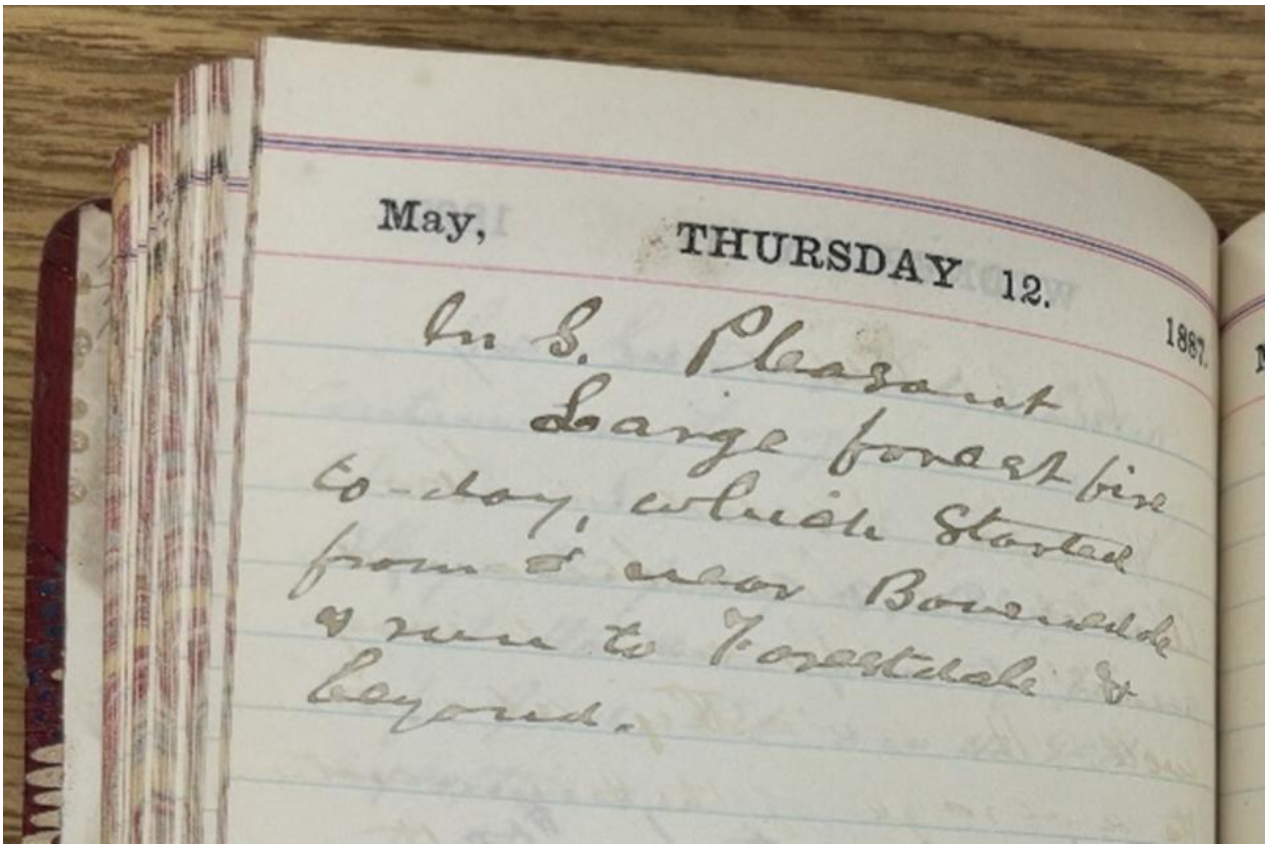
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The proximate cause of at least six distinct fires that erupted on 11 May 1887 was abnormally warm and dry weather. Records from the United States Signal Service for May indicate that the region received around 60% of expected rain and was around 4°F (c. 2.2°C) warmer than the monthly average for the period. However, the immediate cause of each individual fire varied: one was reportedly caused by "huckleberry parties" who were perhaps burning to promote a tasty fruit that is encouraged by fire—an ordinarily benign practice that could have led to large fires under dry conditions.

Regardless of origin, the fires elicited a community-wide response. With limited access to steam fire engines, locals fought the fire with shovels and whatever other equipment they could acquire. They also frequently lit "backfires"—burns intentionally set in advance of an approaching wildfire to consume fuel and slow the

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wildfire's advance. This action likely saved the village of Bourne from destruction. However, despite heroic efforts, the fire spread 20 US miles (c. 32 kilometers) to the south and threatened the town of Falmouth. By the next day, the fires had yet to be contained and over 50,000 acres had burned.




An excerpt from the diary of a local official, Ebenezer S. Whittemore, referencing the blazes. He notes that were was a "large forest fire today, which started from near Bournedale" and then exploded "to Forestdale & beyond." Future residents of the region would go on to experience other large fires, perhaps most notably a blaze in 1938 that killed three firefighters. The region was also rocked by fire in 1957 and 1963.

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Only with the help of over 1,000 men were the fires largely extinguished by the next day (13 May). In total, over 75,000 acres burned and thousands of dollars in property damages accrued. Although no lives were lost, the *Boston Daily Globe* later described the fires as "the most disastrous in the memory of man." This statement is made more remarkable given that the 1887 Cape Cod fires were part of a broader collection of wildfires that erupted across the northeastern and midwestern United States during the late nineteenth century. For these burns to stand out in an era marked by wildfires illustrates their cultural impact. Additionally, the close proximity of these fires (around 50 US miles or 80 kilometers) to a major metropolitan center, Boston, likely amplified their cultural resonance. However, descriptions of the fires as being almost apocalyptic must be tempered by the recognition that what was bad for people is not necessarily ecologically disastrous.

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A prescribed burn on Cape Cod in 2019. This fire was set in an ecosystem compositionally similar to the woods that burned in 1887. Both dominated by the fire-dependent pitch pine—a tree that only successfully establishes after disturbance and can survive fire with its thick bark—and that actually encourages fire with is flammable sap. Other common species include huckleberry and blueberry—species that can resprout after fire because of their extensive network of below-ground stems. Without disturbance like fire, these species are often outcompeted by more shade-tolerant species.

2019 Sam Gilvarg

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Despite the evident contemporary impact of these fires, memory of the event has largely been extinguished today—something emblematic of widespread disregard of fire's historical and ecological role in the region. A quiescence of fire beginning in the early twentieth century has likely contributed to the belief that fire did not have a substantial influence here: however, this recent absence is actually an outlier that stands in stark contrast to the Cape's fiery past. Analyzed patterns in fire scars within tree-ring chronologies, charcoal or pollen deposition across sediment cores, local Indigenous knowledge, and fire-adaptive traits exhibited by once common plant and wildlife species all demonstrate a non-ignorable influence of fire on regional forest development. Historian Stephen Pyne notes how the Cape is "among the most flammable landscapes in America" because of its vegetation and refers to Cape Cod as "Cape Flame." Written accounts by early colonists further attest to this, noting Indigenous peoples' use of fire to attract game, promote desirable plants, and clear travel routes. Early European settlers continued to use fire management for agriculture until widespread

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agricultural abandonment in the nineteenth century.



This photo depicts land managers burning an overgrown forest on Cape Cod—efforts that have increased in recent years. Actively using fire and fire-surrogates (mechanical treatments like forest thinning) offers a means to build a more fire-resilient landscape on Cape Cod. Trained professionals conduct these practices to realize a range of socioecological objectives, including a reduction in the risk of large wildfires and the promotion of rare plants.

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Forgetting wildland fire's regional legacy led to the idea that it could be completely excluded, and governmental agencies nearly did just that in the early twentieth century (i.e., the "Smokey Bear" era) but not without catalyzing widespread ecological change and future challenges. Alongside driving declines in disturbance-dependent biodiversity, fire's removal has promoted forests densely packed with flammable vegetation—leaving the region inherently more susceptible to wildfires of ahistoric severity. This risk will only increase: climate change will likely substantially increase regional fire activity. As such, managing the Cape for blazes in addition to beaches should be a priority. The extremely active recent fire season of Fall 2024 relative to recent baselines

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illustrates this risk.

Using prescribed fire to moderate the risk of wildfires threatening people while simultaneously promoting biodiverse and resilient ecosystems offers a different path forward. Prescribed fire is the application of fire under predetermined weather and forest conditions to accomplish specific management objectives. It can be employed to address hazardous fuel loads and declines safely and effectively in disturbance-dependent biota. The 1887 fires illustrate the potential for the Cape's forests to burn and should spur stakeholders to prophylactically manage the landscape accordingly. Moreover, the lesson learned here can be applied to other regions that have experienced recent fire deficits. Mining the historical record for clues regarding where such fires could rekindle may thus prevent future human tragedy.

**Further readings:**


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**How to cite:**


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ISSN 2199-3408

Environment & Society Portal, *Arcadia*

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**About the authors:**

**Samuel C. Gilvarg**
Samuel C. Gilvarg is a PhD student studying fire ecology and the ecology of vector-borne diseases at SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. Gilvarg's scientific research explores how the "One Health" approach can be employed to address problems that exist at the interface of human health, animal wellbeing, and environmental conservation. Additionally, Gilvarg is an environmental historian who specializes in both the study of nineteenth-century wildfires and the American Civil War. Gilvarg holds a BA (Environmental Studies & History concentration) from Gettysburg College and a MS (Conservation Medicine) from the Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.
https://orcid.org/0009-0008-6402-3312

**Andrew L. Vander Yacht**
Dr. Andrew L. Vander Yacht is an Assistant Professor of Applied Forest and Fire Ecology in the Department of Sustainable Resources Management at SUNY ESF in Syracuse, New York. He teaches silviculture, fire ecology and management, and forest management for wildlife. His research spans similar topics and seeks to understand how disturbance, particularly fire, affects biodiversity and how this knowledge can inform modern land management. Dr. Vander Yacht earned a BS in Biology at Hope College (Holland, MI), MS (Wildlife Science) and PhD (Natural Resources) degrees from The University of Tennessee, and worked four years at Michigan State University.
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3296-6163

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