About 2,000 years ago, a Roman emperor named Nero sent his servants on an important mission. The men trekked into the mountains. They braved avalanches. They faced thieves and wolves. The men were in search of a treasure that was prized throughout the world. It wasn’t gold or silver or diamonds. It was ice.

Before there could be ice cream, there had to be ice. And its history is more fascinating than you might imagine.

By Lauren Tarshis

Today, ice is so common you barely notice the clinking of the ice cubes in your glass of lemonade. Thanks to the freezer in your kitchen, your family can keep meat and vegetables frozen for months.

But until the middle of the 1800s, ice really was a rare treasure.

To get it, you had to do what Emperor Nero did: Find it in nature and haul it back home.

Teams of men (often slaves) would be sent to find ice on a blustery mountain or frozen river or lake. They would use saws and sharp metal tools to hack away big blocks of ice. These blocks were loaded onto sleds or wagons and hauled away by horses. Nero kept his ice in special pits dug into the ground, where the blocks would stay frozen for months.

Ice for Rich People Only

Over the centuries, “ice harvesting” became more common. By the 1700s, many rich people in Europe and America had icehouses on their properties. These were small buildings where ice harvested in the winter could be kept cold until summer.

During hot months, this precious ice could be used to keep foods fresh. And, more deliciously, it could be used to make ice cream.

But in the 1700s, ice—and ice cream—was a luxury, something only the wealthy could enjoy. And no matter how rich you were, you couldn’t have ice unless you lived in a place where there were freezing-cold winters or ice-topped mountains. A millionaire in steamy South Carolina could buy a pile of diamonds. But no amount of money could buy an icy drink or a bowl of ice cream on a sweaty summer day.

There was simply no way to make ice in hot weather. And nobody had yet figured out how to transport ice over very long distances.

But a Boston man named Frederic Tudor changed that.

Harvesting Ice

In 1805, Tudor got the idea of using ships to bring ice from chilly New England to sweltering places in America and beyond.

His big breakthrough was a new tool for harvesting ice. It was a special sled with sharp blades. A horse would drag the sled back and forth across a frozen pond or river until it had created a checkerboard pattern. Men could easily pry the big ice cubes out with metal bars and load them onto wagons. Since all of the cubes were the same size, they could be packed together very tightly. This kept the ice colder. Tudor also figured out that a thick coating of sawdust insulated the ice, protecting it from the heat and slowing melting.

Incredibly, his ice could survive journeys that lasted months.

The Ice King

By the 1830s, Tudor’s ships were delivering ice to Southern states, the Caribbean, and even India. He became a millionaire and was known as America’s “Ice King.”

Tudor’s ice changed America—and the world. Many more people could keep their food fresh in summer. Fewer died of food poisoning. Hospitals used ice to cool patients with high fevers, saving many lives. And ice cream became one of America’s most popular foods.

By the 1940s, most Americans had electric refrigerators and freezers. They no longer needed to buy ice, because they could make it at home. The name Frederic Tudor melted into history.

But the next time you take a lick of an ice cream cone on a hot summer day, you might want to thank him.

Turn the page to find out more!
Jacob Fussell had a problem—a sour, stinky problem. It was the mid-1800s in Baltimore, Maryland. Fussell had a business delivering milk and cream to people around the city. Often, at the end of a week, Fussell had gallons of unsold cream left over. Within days it would spoil, and then he would have to throw it all away.

Fussell hated wasting all that cream. And that’s what gave him an idea that would change America: to open an ice cream factory.

A Treat for the Rich

Humans have been eating frozen sweets for thousands of years. Ancient Egyptians and Romans made delicious desserts out of slushy ice mixed with ground-up fruit.

But it wasn’t until the 1600s that an Italian cook figured out how to create the treat we know as ice cream. The trick was to add milk to the mix and then stir and blend it for hours as it froze. This caused the mixture to become thick and creamy.

The recipe for “cream ice” spread across Europe. By the 1700s, rich Americans were enjoying ice cream. George Washington was a big fan. He had an icehouse on his Virginia farm. That way his cooks could make his favorite ice cream treats all summer.

In 1809, when James Madison became president, his wife, Dolley, became famous for serving ice cream at White House dinners. But back then, only wealthy people got to enjoy ice cream. The main ingredients—ice, cream, and white sugar—were expensive and hard to find. Plus it took hours of shaking and stirring and chilling to turn sweetened cream into a frozen delight.

New Invention

Making ice cream got easier in 1843, when a woman named Nancy Johnson invented the “artificial freezer.” Now, instead of shaking and stirring, you could mix the ingredients by turning a metal crank.

Even so, making ice cream was an exhausting chore. It took hours of cranking to make a few scoops. Many exhausted ice cream makers wound up with aching muscles and fingers so sore they could barely hold their dishes of ice cream.

Ice Cream Factory

Fussell changed all this in 1851. He was the first to make ice cream in large quantities and sell it at a low price. He set up America’s first ice cream factory, in Pennsylvania. At first he made much of the ice cream himself, with the help of a few workers using hand-cranked machines.

He packed his product into jars and delivered the ice cream on horse-drawn wagons directly to customers. Business boomed. Within the decade, Fussell opened factories in Baltimore and New York.

As the years passed, new technology made ice cream-making more and more efficient. Steam-powered ice cream machines replaced those cranked by human hands. Electric freezers meant no more blocks of ice had to be hauled off of lakes or rivers.

Hundreds of Flavors

Meanwhile, ice cream swept across America like a delicious frozen wave. By 1920, even small towns had ice cream parlors where kids could enjoy creations like ice cream sundaes and banana splits.

Fussell helped make ice cream the all-American food it is today. Walk into any supermarket and you’ll find freezers bulging with hundreds of different ice creams and frozen desserts.

Who knew a story about spoiled cream could have such a sweet ending?