

EARTHQUAKE!

Reflections on the Disaster of 1886

By Katherine W. Giles

AUGUST 31, 1886. 9:51 P.M.

Charlestonians were winding down yet another hot summer's day when a cataclysmic earthquake, measuring 7.3 on the modern Richter scale, erupted beneath the city. The massive tremor and subsequent aftershocks shattered buildings, derailed trains, tangled telegraph wires, and spawned fires across the peninsula. Underground wells erupted into geysers, and fissures split the earth, belching noxious-smelling sand and mud into streets and gardens. Terrified residents rushed outside, many clad only in their nightclothes, as the moans of injured and dying neighbors floated through the summer air.

The earthquake of 1886 was the greatest earthquake to strike the eastern United States in recorded history. It was caused by movement at the junction of the Woodstock and Ashley River fault lines, with the epicenter located just south of Summerville. The quake resonated across two million square miles of land and water, from Cuba to Canada. Although scientists have since concluded that South Carolina has experienced seismic activity for thousands of years, the event of 1886 was by far the largest and most destructive. Charleston, which had survived war, occupation, disease, and hurricanes—one nearly devastated the city in 1885—was unprepared for this new calamity, as Captain F. W. Dawson, editor of the *News and Courier*, noted shortly after the quake struck:

The trouble with our people is that they are facing an unknown foe. It is something that they have never been called upon to confront before. When a storm approaches they know what to do; they can calculate the probable damage to life or property, and have some warning of its coming, but here is an unknown quantity as mysterious as terrible. It may come in a moment; it may not come in a hundred years. It may engulf the whole city or simply shake a loose chimney from its foundation. It is the mystery that appalls the people as much as the actual danger.

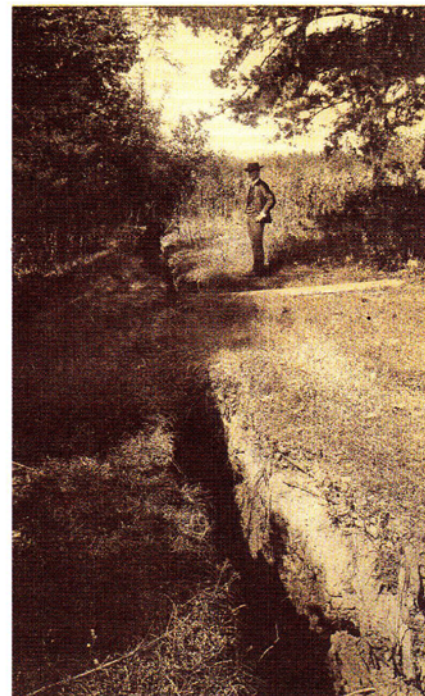
Much of what is known today about the Charleston earthquake was gleaned from the personal accounts of survivors, residents, and visitors who recorded their experiences in diaries, telegrams, and letters. Local newspapers devoted themselves to the crisis, becoming a lifeline for the thousands of people hungry for information

and instruction in the days after the earthquake struck. Many of these articles and letters are preserved today in the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Gut Reactions

In 1886, a young telegraph operator named Charles B. Rittenhouse arrived in Charleston. He came to South Carolina by way of Tennessee, where he had been sent from New York during a southern telegraphers' strike. He was just one of many to receive a rude awakening on that hot August night.

It was getting dusk, and I was getting sleepy when a tremendous jar shook the house, tumbling over my washstand. The walls and the floor shook violently, and I realized it was an earthquake, although this was my first experience with one. I had jumped from my chair and, staggering over the shaking floor toward the door, slipped on a cake of soap that had fallen from the upset wash stand and fell to the floor with my head just about two feet short of the spot where the major part of the chimney crashed through the ceiling of my room and landed. Getting to my feet I jumped through the window on to the roof of the passage-way that led from the kitchen to the steps of the piazza and hung on to the window sill until the trembling of the wall and the rumbling noises had stopped. Re-entering the room, and without putting on any [more] clothes I hurried through the debris, and made my way down the stairs to the small yard at the rear of the house....



A man stands at the edge of a 150-yard-long fissure that appeared near Otranto, along Goose Creek.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

For a few seconds there was complete silence and we stood there wondering what would happen next. Then noises of all kinds started up gradually increasing in volume, yelled instructions, cries of pain and anguish, and then in every direction the dusk was slowly lightening up with glowing fires. I was so abstracted that I had not noticed that we were standing in water about six inches in depth which had gushed up through cracks in the earth.



This house on Beaufain Street sustained damage to the piazza and top floor. Today many buildings boast earthquake rods.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

Charleston resident Robert G. Chisolm's son-in-law, E.T. Horn, was traveling in Pennsylvania when the earthquake struck. Anxious to get news to the young man about his wife and children, Chisolm sent letters and telegrams to Horn as soon as he was able. From a letter dated September 1 at 3 a.m.:

We have gone through a fearful ordeal, but...we all live. A terrible earthquake. We had just had prayers... and in less than 5 minutes the house commenced to rock and...all small articles thrown about...All gas lights went out. I did not know how soon the house would be down on us. At the first cessation I lit my lamp to see after the children.

Your wardrobe had fallen on Chisolm's and Willie's bed. Chisolm was covered with some kind of medicine from your wardrobe, but thank God, not one of them with a scratch. If Hattie's wardrobe had fallen, it must have crushed Bella. I had them all wrapped up as quickly as possible, brought downstairs, when we had another but not so severe (shock). We all moved out of the house.

I am satisfied there is not a family tonight but what are out on the street. All of the mill lot, white and black, old and young, gathered by the croquet ground, and there we have been ever since.

An account from a *News and Courier* staffer echoed Rittenhouse and Chisolm's testimonies:

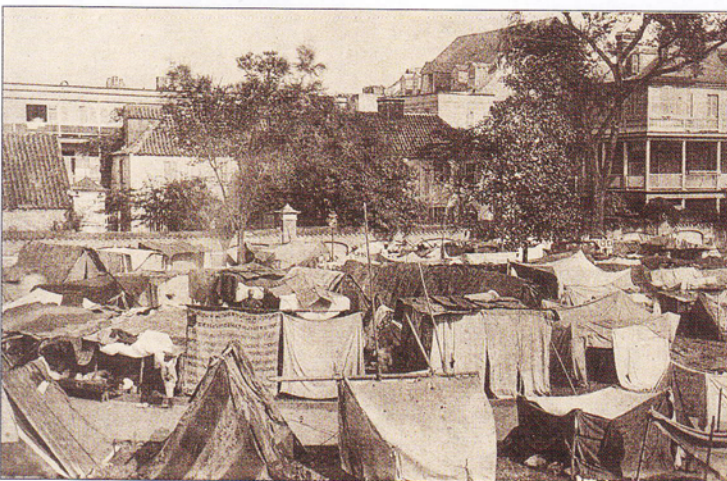
Without a moment's warning, a subterranean roar was heard, buildings shook from garret to cellar, then the fearful noises growing louder and louder, buildings swayed to and fro like trees in a storm, and then came the crash of tumbling houses, and simultaneously mingling with those notes of horror, came the shrieks and wailings of frightened women and children.

Those who rushed into the streets were enveloped in clouds of mortar and brick dust, and wherever the eye fell there were the fragments of buildings, torn and twisted telegraph wires and general havoc. Men, women and children, many in their night apparel, rushed frantically from place to place seeking a spot where they might be safe from danger.

...In many streets the gaslights had been extinguished by the convulsion, and the darkness contributed greatly to increase the fears and the general feeling of uneasiness among the crowds of people who left their habitations to seek safety in the open. In many places prayer meetings were improvised, and at many a street corner could be seen kneeling groups of all ages and conditions, supplicating the Almighty to grant them mercy and protection in the hour of danger.

A strange scene presented itself at the City Hall Park. Here hundreds of people had sought refuge, as no tall buildings were near, the crumbling walls of which might endanger life or limb. Here and there mattresses were laid on the grass on which slumbered infants unconscious of the terrible scenes enacted around them....All through the weary hours, till day dawned, the streets and parks were filled with frightened humanity...

His simultaneous telegram was shorter and came straight to the point: "Terrible earthquake Narrow escape Chisolm and Willie But all safe."



A makeshift camp at Washington Square Park. Fearing buildings would continue to tumble, many residents fled into the city parks.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.

For residents of downtown Charleston, "home" became a tent or other makeshift shelter in one of the city's parks. Marion Square and Washington Square teemed with activity, as whites and blacks alike chose to sleep in the

open air, away from buildings that could cave in. The risk was high, as aftershocks were felt for days. Robert Chisolm conveyed the grim circumstances to his son-in-law in another letter:

Nothing doing in the city. Business stopped. No mails. No banks. No groceries. No ice. Everybody up all night and wide awake today, but not for business. We have shut up the second story and occupy park for sleeping apartment...

In a letter to his father dated September 7, after he returned to Charleston, E. T. Horn requested what was to become a highly sought-after item:

I hope my Father will send some tents to me; I have many applications for them. They are afraid to sleep in the houses. Brick houses are at a discount...The destruction has not been overtold. Nearly every brick structure is seriously cracked...The people show a good deal of courage. The whole town is actively putting things to right. Businesses go on. Families are cheerful while camping in the streets, under carpets, sails and the like.

Newspapers nationwide sounded the call for aid, focusing heavily on the importance of continuing trade with the port city. Charleston welcomed an influx of relief from across the United States and from foreign governments,

nearly \$800,000 (\$18 million today). Even Queen Victoria sent her condolences. New Jersey donated its own militia's tents to the earthquake survivors, a shipment accompanied by this note from Governor Leon Abbott:

The Constitution of the State of New Jersey does not authorize the lending out of tents of the militia, but it is probable that if those who framed the Constitution had thought that any such danger as that which has overwhelmed our brothers in Charleston was possible, some such provision would have been made. Take the tents, we will amend the Constitution later.

Fair Warning

While the citizens of Charleston reeled with shock, hindsight revealed that an early—and largely ignored—warning came from Summerville four days before the massive quake. A local newspaper reported:

The information before its publication in the News and Courier yesterday morning was received throughout the community with a smile of incredulity. The people from Summerville who fled to this city on the first train played the role of "Cassandra" to perfection, inasmuch as though telling the truth, they could get no well-bred Charlestonian to believe them on affidavit. The stories, therefore, of the war dance of the pine trees, the great flood in Pike Hole, the mysterious disappearance of chimney tops, shattered window panes, mysteriously



This dramatic illustration by artist J. Keppler depicts various contributions arriving to aid the fallen city of Charleston, languishing amid the earthquake's rubble. In these pre-FEMA days, the generosity showered on the city totaled nearly \$18 million.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society

slammed doors and shutters, acrobatic bedposts, and all the things that must be well shaken before taken, were put down as another one of the alleged miracles and phenomenas of the pineland Munchausen. The verifications of the Summerville convulsions, however, came about in kind, if not in degree, in Charleston yesterday morning at about a quarter to 5 o'clock. A very pronounced shock was given to the whole community at that hour, and the gravity was only exceeded by the comedy of the situation. People were roused from that peaceful and stony 4:45 A.M. sleep, which only an earthquake can break in so delightful a midsummer night resort as Charleston. The first was a faint tintinnabulation of gate bells, with an obligato of...dogs and a general accompaniment of peripatetic china and crockery in the pantry. The earthquake was then at its heighth or depth as the proper technical term may be, and nine-tenths of the slumbering inhabitants, male and female, went forth to the rear windows clad cap-a-pie in their gowns de duit to await developments. By the time, however, that all this had been accomplished the earthquake, which had another engagement at Summerville, "disappeared" entirely, and was well out of sight.

(This Charleston tremor preceded the larger quake to come.) Ironically, it was from Summerville that the earliest reports of the earthquake left South Carolina. Charles Rittenhouse recounts a nerve-wracking trek in search of functioning telegraph lines:

Early the next morning I made my way to the Telegraph Office...there was a huge crowd inside and outside, and I saw the Manager and his Assistants taking in messages that were to be sent at the first opportunity. He was telling them that the wires were all down. I suggested to the Manager, Mr. O'Driscoll, that he let me have the messages he had and take them by train to some outside



Goose Creek residents pause amid the rubble of St. James Episcopal Church, which was caved in by the force of the earthquake.

From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.



Rolling stock such as this passenger train operated by the South Carolina Railway Co. were derailed, both by the earthquake itself and by dislocated tracks.

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place from where they could be sent on. He agreed and directed another operator (Scott) to go with me. We gathered up a large stack of private messages most of them simply saying "We are safe" and dispatches from reporters to their newspapers, and went to the Railroad Station. We were told that the tracks had been disrupted in many places and that no trains had yet been sent out since the night before. I saw an engine with steam up on a track in the yard, apparently about to start out, and ran into the office of the Train Dispatcher and asked his permission for Scott and I to ride in the Cab, explaining our errand. He consented, and we proceeded getting along nicely for three or four miles, although very slowly, when the engine stopped and we saw that the rails had spread. Two men, that had accompanied us, together with the Engineer and the Fireman got out and straightened the rails, and we proceeded, stopping at other places for the same reason, or going very carefully over places where the Engineer saw small crevices in the earth. Then we came to a very wide crevice where the rails had been badly twisted, and it was obviously dangerous to cross, and that repairs would take a long time, so Scott and I started to walk, and Oh! how hot it was.

After walking about ten miles we came to Summerville, a small town with a railroad station with Telegraph instruments inside but there was no agent or operator in sight....I immediately started to find a "live wire" among those running into the switchboard, while Scott went skirmishing for something to eat, we just then having discovered that neither one of us had had anything to eat since the previous evening...

By grounding one of the wires towards Charleston, and thus cutting off that end of the wire, I was fortunate enough to get a current, and discovered I was on a wire to Washington, D.C. When the operators along the line heard me they broke in and asked me for news. I said



Shortly after the earthquake struck, fires ignited by fallen lamps and candles roared to life. One such fire gutted these buildings at the intersection of Warren and King Streets, near Marion Square.

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“Now boys, keep quiet. Let me have this wire exclusively. Listen and you will hear the news”. I asked Washington to connect me to New York. After getting the connection I started to rattle off the messages....This was the first news that the outside world got from devastated Charleston.

Aftershocks

When the dust and sand finally settled, Charlestonians were left to pick up the pieces. Conservative estimates put the number of immediate deaths at thirty people, with more than sixty dying later from their injuries. The total property damage tallied in at nearly six million dollars, \$137 million dollars by today’s standards, far eclipsing the damage caused by the violent hurricane of 1885. Brick buildings constructed on “made land” (fill land, built up over marshes, ponds, and creeks, accounted for nearly one-sixth of the city) suffered the worst damage. More flexible wooden houses and buildings erected on natural, or “unmade,” land fared better. Among the non-residential buildings damaged by the tremors and fires were the U.S. Court House, the police station, the Medical College, Roper Hospital, the Unitarian Church, St. Michael’s Church, St. Philip’s Church, Hibernian Hall, and the post office, as well as shops, warehouses, cotton mills, and other businesses.

On January 9, 1887, the Reverend John Johnson stood before the congregation of St. Philip’s Church. He reflected on the church’s long history in Charleston, and how it had suffered through the fires, bombardments, hurricanes, and the earthquake that assailed the city. While the bulk of the sermon addressed the generous contributions that allowed St. Philip’s to rebuild after the catastrophe, Johnson also shared his personal experience upon visiting the sanctuary in the dark hours after the earthquake struck:



A man poses for a photographer in a ruined street, as others work amidst the rubble of a collapsed building. Clearing the streets of debris cost the city an estimated \$1,380, which translates to \$31,500 today.

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When I visited St. Philip’s Church with your sexton to examine its interior, a few hours after the great shock, we had first to clamor over the wreck of the roof piled up in the southern porch. As we together entered the vestibule, lighted by a candle, making darkness visible, and passed up the middle aisle toward the chancel, a small object at my feet attracted my attention. I stooped and picked it up. It proved to be a perfect little flower, which had fallen from among the stucco, or plaster, ornaments of the vaulted ceiling overhead. I took it home and have kept it, for the lesson it would teach us all—“cast down but not destroyed.” Again, as I turned away from the chancel, and was passing to the vestibule, my eyes lifted upward, caught sight of the bright stars shining down through the large break in the roof of the south gallery. An unwonted, an unwelcome, sight to a beholder in its bare reality of sense and substance, but oh, how grateful, how familiar, in their emblematic lesson for the children of God, seemed the stars to me that night! Through loss to gain! Through toil and turmoil to rest! Through darkness to light!

By the autumn of 1887, reminders of the earthquake’s devastation were all but gone. Charleston had rebuilt and was thriving, “once more risen from her ashes, and...again the Queen City of the South.” Today, tourists strolling the streets of downtown Charleston remark on the metal stars and discs adorning the walls of many historic buildings. These ornamental caps hide the earthquake rods that were installed during the city’s reconstruction, serving as small yet everpresent reminders of the disaster that struck on a quiet summer evening so long ago—and that someday may yet strike again.

