



The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906: The Story of the Deadliest Earthquake in American History

Charles River Editors

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*Includes accounts of the earthquake and fires

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“[I]t does not seem to have affected any one with a sense of final destruction, with any foreboding of irreparable disaster. Every one is talking of it this afternoon, and no one is in the least degree dismayed. I have talked and listened in two clubs, watched people in cars and in the street, and one man is glad that Chinatown will be cleared out for good; another's chief solicitude is for Millet's 'Man with the Hoe.' 'They'll cut it out of the frame,' he says, a little anxiously. 'Sure.' But there is no doubt anywhere that San Francisco can be rebuilt, larger, better, and soon. Just as there would be none at all if all this New York that has so obsessed me with its limitless bigness was itself a blazing ruin. I believe these people would more than half like the situation.” – H.G. Wells

On April 18, 1906, most of the residents of the city of San Francisco were sound asleep when the ground started to shake around 5:15 a.m., but what started as fairly soft tremors turned into a violent shaking in all directions. The roar of the earthquake unquestionably woke up residents, at least those fortunate enough not to be immediately swallowed by the cracks opening up in the ground. The earthquake lasted about a minute, but it had enough destructive force to divert the course of entire rivers and level much of the 9th largest city in America at the time.

Unfortunately for San Franciscans, the worst was yet to come. During the earthquake, the city's gas mains and water mains were ruptured, which had the effects of starting a number of fires and preventing the residents from being equipped to fight them. Without water to truly fight the blaze, the city's officials actually resorted to demolishing buildings in hopes of containing the fire, and witnesses reported seeing San Franciscans trapped in the burning buildings being shot by authorities instead of letting them burn alive. The fires lasted three days, and by the time they were done, 80% of the city was in ruins, about 60% of the residents were homeless, and an estimated 3,000-6,000 were dead. In fact, the fires were so devastating that contemporary San Franciscans called the disaster “The Fire.”

Although the resulting fires may have done the most damage, the widespread destruction made clear to city leaders that the new buildings would need better safety codes and protection against subsequent earthquakes. The city reinforced new buildings against earthquakes and fixed older surviving buildings to better deal with future earthquakes, and the city also created the Auxiliary Water Supply System to prevent a repeat of the 1906 disaster.

At the same time, there was a determined sense of resolve to rebuild San Francisco into a bigger and better city, and financial assistance flowed to the shattered city from all across the country. Even as refugee camps were set up in parks and sheltered people for a few years, the U.S. Army and other volunteers helped provide for the people, and despite suffering damage amounting to the equivalent of over \$6 billion in today's dollars, California governor George C. Pardee was right when he predicted, "This is not the first time that San Francisco has been destroyed by fire, I have not the slightest doubt that the City by the Golden Gate will

be speedily rebuilt, and will, almost before we know it, resume her former great activity."

The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906: The Deadliest Earthquake in American History chronicles the deadliest natural disaster in California's history and one of the most important seismic events on record. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about the San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 like never before, in no time at all.



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