

Two Natural Disasters

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This year marks the 100-year anniversary of South Carolina's greatest natural disaster.

On Aug. 31, 1886, an earthquake devastated Charleston. Many other cities in South Carolina and to the north felt its effects, but Charleston suffered the most. Damage to Charleston property was estimated at a staggering \$5 million. About 90 percent of the buildings were affected to some extent, while 20 persons lost their lives.

It was the greatest earthquake ever to hit the Eastern United States. And it was the second great disaster Charlestonians experienced in a year.

The first occurred on the morning of Aug. 25, 1885, when a hurricane originating in the West Indies threatened to reduce the city to ruins.

The night before, nothing had indicated the approach of a storm of any kind. In fact, the weather report issued by the Signal Service Office in Washington at 1 a.m. on the Aug. 24 read, "For the South Atlantic States, local rains, variable winds, near stationary temperatures."

But a little after midnight, there was, as one observer later reported, "a peculiar something, a feeling in the air," foreshadowed by the first whispering of a wind. Then the winds got stronger, waking many Charlestonians from their slumber.

By 1:30 a.m. winds blew at 25 mph; by 4:30 a.m., they had increased to 35 mph.

The storm broke in a fury. Dense, low-moving clouds poured forth buckets of blinding, driving rain. By 7 a.m., winds had increased to more than 50 mph, and were still increasing in force two hours later.

Many of Charleston's buildings felt the brunt of the storm. The gilt ball and weather vane of St. Michael's Church, for example, fell heavily to the sidewalk on Broad Street.

Then incredibly, the storm subsided almost to a calm, which lasted only 10 minutes.

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The wind then changed direction, this time causing great damage along the Ashley River. Roofs, trees, fences, and even wharves could not withstand the storm's fury. One iron steamship, the Glen Rivet, was torn from its moorings and driven up the Ashley River, where it collided with a bridge nearing completion.

It was not until a little after noon that the storm finally ended. The widespread destruction could now be seen. During the week following the storm, more than 10,000 cartloads of plant debris were hauled from the streets, in addition to the huge amounts that were washed away by the tremendous rainfall following the storm a day or two later.

Sullivan's Island was a disaster zone. The whole island was under water, and many of the residents took refuge in the upstairs of their houses. Some houses were actually lifted and moved a considerable distance.

Fortunately for the island, the wind changed suddenly about two hours after high tide, sweeping out to sea the water that had been swept into the harbor after daylight. This timely change saved many from death and the island from total destruction.

Damage to Charleston was estimated at \$2 million. After hitting Charleston the hurricane moved eastward and into the Atlantic Ocean.

Charleston struggled to get back on its feet, as offers to help came from the federal government and many other states.

Within a week, Charleston's daily life was almost back to normal. The debris had been removed; roofs patched up; the harbor rebuilt and the railroad lines repaired.

Little could Charlestonians guess that the hurricane was but a prelude to an even greater catastrophe destined to occur a year later.