

Charleston Still Bears Scars Of 1886 Quake

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At 9:50 in the evening of Aug. 31, 1886, Charleston was startled by a low rumbling followed by a sharp tremor. Then a great roar was heard. The roar increased in volume and was accompanied by violent vibrations.

Chimneys, walls and buildings fell. The people were terrified. Some panicked and rushed out of their houses to be crushed by falling masonry.

Then there was silence. It lasted eight minutes. During this time, people began to leave their houses and move into the streets. Once again a series of tremors came, accompanied by a roaring sound. Fortunately, this time the eruption was less intense. But still buildings and structures fell, causing more panic and despair.

Many felt that the end of the world was at hand. This was the second great disaster to hit Charleston in less than a year. In the fall of 1885, a cyclone had swept the city causing over \$1.5 million in damage. Although this calamity was felt as far north as Boston, Charleston bore the brunt of the damage.

With the tremors and shakes came fires in various parts of the city. No fire department could

operate under the conditions, and the blazes went unchecked.

Before sunrise of the following day, the city was to experience several more tremors, coming at greater intervals and diminishing in violence. The streets became piled high with debris. The air was filled with cries and shrieks of fear and pain. Voices could be heard of those searching for their loved ones.

As dawn broke over the city, the people were able to view the extent of the damage caused by the earthquake. Although it was estimated that only 20 lives were lost, the damage to buildings was devastating. Many simply crumpled.

Over 90 percent of the brick buildings suffered damage to some extent, with the wooden buildings faring a little better. It was estimated that not one Charleston building escaped damage. Property damage was a staggering \$5 million. The steeple of Charleston's famed St. Michael's church sunk 18 inches, although it did not fall.

Ironically, even with all the damage and suffering, there was one consolation. The quake came at night. If it had come during the day, more people would have been out in the street, and the

loss of life would have been far greater.

By 8:30 of the morning of Sept. 1, a total of eight shocks were recorded.

Stunned by the calamity, Charleston struggled to get back to normal. Since railway lines and telegraphic communications were dislocated, all communication with the outside world was severed. The parks and open squares were filled with the sick, wounded and dazed. The dead were laid out for identification. The injured were treated as best as they could be.

There was an effort to help those who had been affected by the earthquake. Even though \$640,000 was collected, the effect of the catastrophe was awesome. At this time there was no insurance for damages caused by earthquakes and no government designation of "disaster area." The entire loss fell on those directly affected by the earthquake.

The city gradually recovered. For a long time many Charlestonians felt a sense of foreboding that another catastrophe was imminent. Some people experienced nausea as slight tremors continued from time to time. Even today, effects of the earthquake are seen on some of the buildings of the city.