

The New Madrid Earthquake

<http://www.hsv.com/genlintr/newmadr/acnt1.htm>

This actual eyewitness account of New Madrid Earthquake was submitted by Tracy Houpt.

The following letter was found in a book entitled, "Lorenzo Dow's Journal," Published By Joshua Martin, Printed By John B. Wolff, 1849, on pages 344 - 346.p

New Madrid, Territory of Missouri, March 22, 1816

Dear Sir,

In compliance with your request, I will now give you a history, as full in detail as the limits of the letter will permit, of the late awful visitation of Providence in this place and vicinity.

On the 16th of December, 1811, about two o'clock, A.M., we were visited by a violent shock of an earthquake, accompanied by a very awful noise resembling loud but distant thunder, but more hoarse and vibrating, which was followed in a few minutes by the complete saturation of the atmosphere, with sulphurous vapor, causing total darkness. The screams of the affrighted inhabitants running to and fro, not knowing where to go, or what to do - the cries of the fowls and beasts of every species - the cracking of trees falling, and the roaring of the Mississippi - the current of which was retrograde for a few minutes, owing as is supposed, to an irruption in its bed -- formed a scene truly horrible.

From that time until about sunrise, a number of lighter shocks occurred; at which time one still more violent than the first took place, with the same accompaniments as the first, and the terror which had been excited in everyone, and indeed in all animal nature, was now, if possible doubled.

The inhabitants fled in every direction to the country, supposing (if it can be admitted that their minds can be exercised at all) that there was less danger at a distance from, than near to the river. In one person, a female, the alarm was so great that she fainted, and could not be recovered.

There were several shocks of a day, but lighter than those already mentioned until the 23d of January, 1812, when one occurred as violent as the severest of the former ones, accompanied by the same phenomena as the former. From this time until the 4th of February the earth was in continual agitation, visibly waving as a gentle sea. On that day there was another shock, nearly as hard as the proceeding ones. Next day four such,

and on the 7th about 4 o'clock A.M., a concussion took place so much more violent than those that had proceeded it, that it was dominated the hard shock. The awful darkness of the atmosphere, which was formerly saturated with sulphurous vapor, and the violence of the tempestuous thundering noise that accompanied it, together with all of the other phenomena mentioned as attending the former ones, formed a scene, the description of which would require the most sublimely fanciful imagination.

At first the Mississippi seemed to recede from its banks, and its waters gathering up like a mountain, leaving for the moment many boats, which were here on their way to New Orleans, on bare sand, in which time the poor sailors made their escape from them. It then rising fifteen to twenty feet perpendicularly, and expanding, as it were, at the same moment, the banks were overflowed with the retrograde current, rapid as a torrent - the boats which before had been left on the sand were now torn from their moorings, and suddenly driven up a little creek, at the mouth of which they laid, to the distance in some instances, of nearly a quarter of a mile. The river falling immediately, as rapid as it had risen, receded in its banks again with such violence, that it took with it whole groves of young cotton-wood trees, which ledged its borders. They were broken off which such regularity, in some instances, that persons who had not witnessed the fact, would be difficultly persuaded, that it has not been the work of art. A great many fish were left on the banks, being unable to keep pace with the water. The river was literally covered with the wrecks of boats, and 'tis said that one was wrecked in which there was a lady and six children, all of whom were lost.

In all the hard shocks mentioned, the earth was horribly torn to pieces - the surface of hundreds of acres, was, from time to time, covered over, in various depths, by the sand which issued from the fissures, which were made in great numbers all over this country, some of which closed up immediately after they had vomited forth their sand and water, which it must be remarked, was the matter generally thrown up. In some places, however, there was a substance somewhat resembling coal, or impure stone coal, thrown up with the sand. It is impossible to say what the depths of the fissures or irregular breaks were; we have reason to believe that some of them are very deep.

The site of this town was evidently settled down at least fifteen feet, and not more than a half a mile below the town there does not appear to be any alteration on the bank of the river, but back from the river a small distance, the numerous large ponds or lakes, as they are called, which covered a

great part of the country were nearly dried up. The beds of some of them are elevated above their former banks several feet, producing an alteration of ten, fifteen to twenty feet, from their original state. And lately it has been discovered that a lake was formed on the opposite side of the Mississippi, in the Indian country, upwards of one hundred miles in length, and from one to six miles in width, of the depth of ten to fifty feet. It has communication with the river at both ends, and it is conjectured that it will not be many years before the principal part, if not the whole of the Mississippi, will pass that way.

We were constrained by the fear of our houses falling to live twelve or eighteen months, after the first shocks, in little light camps made of boards; but we gradually became callous, and returned to our houses again. Most of those who fled from the country in the time of the hard shocks have since returned home. We have, since the commencement in 1811, and still continue to feel, slight shocks occasionally. It is seldom indeed that we are more than a week without feeling one, and sometimes three or four in a day. There were two this winter past much harder than we had felt them for two years before; but since then they appear to be lighter than they have ever been, and we begin to hope that ere long they will entirely cease. I have now, sir, finished my promised description of the earthquake - imperfect it is true, but just as it occurred to my memory; many of, and most of the truly awful scenes, having occurred three or four years ago. They of course are not related with that precision which would entitle it to the character of a full and accurate picture. But such as it is, it is given with pleasure - in the full confidence that it is given to a friend. And now, sir, wishing you all good, I must bid you adieu.

Your humble servant,
Eliza Bryan

There is one circumstance which I think worthy of remark. This country was formerly subject to very hard thunder; but for more than twelve months before the commencement of the earthquake there was none at all, and but very little since, a great part of which resembles subterraneous thunder. The shocks still continue, but are growing more light, and less frequent. -E.B.