

1906 San Francisco Earthquake

Personal Accounts

Courtesy, California Historical Society.

de Laveaga, Edward I (diary)- MS 3470

"But worse than the sight of the wrecked City Hall were the flames which were fast eating their way to Market Street. When I got down to Fifth Street, the fire seemed at or about Howard. When I neared 3rd Street the flames were just crossing Mission Street. This was about 7:45 A.M. I went down to Madison and Burkes' to get the carpenter. The office was in a commotion. Everyone seemed crazy. They were moving out as they realized that their building was doomed. I hurried down to Father's office to try and save some of his papers, but they would not let me pass: the flames were eating their way between Battery and Sansome Streets. I heard that Andrew's office was almost on fire so I rushed home to tell him and help him try and save some of his things. The streets were crowded with people. [...] My whole attention was fixed on the fire and so I did not take much note of the damage done by the earthquake. The damage, however, seemed to me so slight. [...] the buildings down town seemed to have stood it remarkable well, with the exception that some of the brick and stonework was shaken off. Baldwin and Howell's offices and Cordes Furniture Company seemed in pretty bad condition. I did not notice many other buildings that had suffered. [...] Most of the buildings that suffered severely were old buildings that ought to have been condemned or buildings that stood on made land. [...] The water main sustained the real damage [...] We learned afterwards from the papers that the breaks in the pipes in nearly every case occurred on made land."

[at approx. 9pm that night...]

"Father and I walked back along Market Street. The south side looked like the ruin of some ancient city. A few walls stood here and there, it looked terrible. North side of Market was standing so we walked up Market to Taylor. When we reached this corner it was about 11pm and the north side was untouched."

[That area caught flames after midnight.]

"The Call, The Chronicle, Flood, St. Francis, Alexander, Kolb, Merchants' Exchange, Mills, Fairmont, Spring Valley, Shreve's, Monadnock, Butler and many other smaller buildings are all that are left to remind one of the business part of San Francisco."

Einstein, Lesley - Berkeley - MS 3472

"Took the 6:53 A.M. S.P. [Southern Pacific] train [via FERRY], all power having been shut off and so they Key Route was not able to run."

[...] "As soon as the boat came in we rushed in to get breakfast. The boat was crowded with commuters, few spectators going over; Key Route commuters using their tickets on S.P. Train because of the crowd."

"By the time we got halfway over, there was little joshing in the crowd, for we were beginning to see the real danger that San Francisco was in because of the fire, which we could see in various spots, both north along the water front and far south of Market."

"We landed at about 7:45 A.M. and immediately walked up Market Street and saw the effects of the earthquake. Buildings were badly shaken, whole fronts often lying in the middle of the street, which itself was badly shaken up, having sunken in places fully four to six feet; cobblestones all uneven, cracks all over, the tracks all crooked and in places being six to ten inches above the level of the street. At California Street we turned off because of fire up Market, skirted along the various streets, over piles of bricks, through wires, along holes, dodging up one street and into another to escape the fires that were raging, unopposed all around. In this way, we got to Sansome and Pine..."

Elkus, Charles deYoung (dictated in 1956) - MS 3473

"Around this time the flames were coming up from Mission towards the Call Building at the corner of 3rd and Market. As I walked around, there was very little damage that one could see. The building fronts showed very little, if any, effect..."

[...] "I omitted to say that while I was downtown I was told that I could not go over to the Elkus Company Building on Battery Street."

Enewold, Elmer E. - Conreid Metropolitan Opera Company - Palace Hotel - 3478

"We marched down Geary to Mkt to Montgy and up Montgy. Just as we turned off Mkt. to Montgy the Palace and Grand Hotel took fire..."

Fisk, Charles - MS 3474

[sometime before 6am]

"...I was dressed and ready to go out [...] I took a walk downtown. The wooden buildings as a rule showed few signs of damage but opposite almost every brick building was covered with blocks of masonry, loose bricks and plate glass. In some cases, the faces of the buildings had fallen off for two or three stories, others had collapsed entirely and only the bottom of the walls remained. About [?half?] of the plate glass windows in the shops were broken..."

[...] "As one got further down town things began to look more serious. There were large fires burning unrestrainedly in every direction, and lots and lots of buildings with collapsed roofs and fronts torn off, shops

without windows. [...] It was difficult for any vehicle to pick its way along the streets as they were covered with masses of fallen wire etc. Market Street towards the ferry seems to have settled and the sewer gratings pavements etc are forced three or four feet above the street level showing the interior of cellars, etc. Such buildings are not burning and collapsing. As it is only 2 hours since all this happened it is difficult to get reliable information. It was at about 5 o'clock that the shock occurred and it is now quarter to eight—time for me to take breakfast and go to work. Our building is encircled by fire. Well dear Mother I will now close."

Goerlitz, Ernest - Conreid Metropolitan Opera Company - Palace Hotel - MS 3478

[walked from Palace to St. Francis]

"Only on this walk did I realize the enormity of the damage done by the earthquake." [...] (btwn 9 & 10am Ferry Building heard to be surrounded by fire)

Hancock, William - Letter 5/29/06 "To Mary" - MS 3480

[...] (leaving on Sausalito Ferry for SF) "As the steamer moved out we saw San Frisco overhung by a wall of black smoke, and as we approached the jetty there came another shock which made the steamer tremble as tho she had struck a rock. Drawing nearer, there were the projecting jetties all in ruins, the massive roofs (like those at the quays in Belfast) flat on the top of wagons and merchandise, and in some cases actually in the docks between the jetties. There just in front of us the [fire?] block Tower at the foot of Market Street (precisely like the Albert Tower at the foot of High Street Belfast) with part of the sides gone, and the steel frame works and stair case all visible, the great clock stopper; the the hands pointing at 5.15. On landing I found the open space like that between the beaudoru House and Douegall Quay Belfast and paved with asphalt, all broken up, with tremendous cracks and undulations just like sheets of black ice.

I had intended going up Market Street, but it was enveloped in flames & smoke and guarded by Military who allowed no one to pass.

I therefore struck off to one side and began to go round the city out side the fire limit. Then I cam upon Evidences of the havoc worked by the earthquake. I dwell specially on this because for some reason or other the Papers tried to throw everything as far as possible on the fire. I came to great chasms in the Streets in one case where a whole tramn [/tracer?] & horses, if they were used, could have gone down & been invisible. The lines [rail lines?] in places were actually twisted in the most extraordinary way. Telephone posts smashed in two just like matches, and an iron lamp post lying on the ground, snapped off precisely like a clay pipe!

(Draw Hartley's attention to that, because I saw nothing amongst the lot I saw which so forcibly exhibited the fearful violence of the earthquake). All along my route where even if it was the case of a brick

edifice, there were ruins greater or less, and it was necessary to keep in the middle of the street to avoid tottering ruins."

Bennett, C.W. Despatch from H.M. Consul-General in San Francisco 25th April 1906 - MS 3481

"Sir, I have the honor to report that at 5:18 on the morning of Wednesday the 18th instant, a violent Earthquake shock occurred in San Francisco. The direction of the shock was from East to West and it was accompanied by a strong up and down movement which did immediate damage. The disturbance lasted 48 seconds. On looking from the window of our Hotel, which was badly shattered—two men in fact to right and left of our rooms were killed—I saw the whole City enveloped in a pall of dust caused by falling buildings and within five seconds of the end of the shock twenty or thirty fires broke out all over the lower parts of the City."

Hutchinson, Alice - Sunday Morning tour through SF ruins - MS 3482

"We rode up in an express wagon up Market which has sunk in some spots a foot or more, it is filled ground, you know. In fact, all along in front of the ferry building it has sunk a foot. The part that was built on huge piles as foundation is higher than the rest. That is the result of the earthquake."

Musson, George Bernard - MS 3494

Hard to read not many specifics for city; Musson was captain of the British steamer S.S. Henley, which was in the port of San Francisco at the time of the disaster.'

"The shock threw me from side to side in my bed and I thought our engines were blown up until I reached the deck and even in that short space of time smoke was breaking out from 100 places in the town & of course all water conduits were destroyed [...]. The city was a network of electric wires & the falling buildings throwing them down killed many poor souls & started fires before the currents were switched off."

Storey, George A - MS 3506

"Chinatown is nothing more than a pile of bricks and the frame residence section is swept clean as though done by a tornado. With the exception of, on the made ground, below Sansome St. most of the damage was done by the fire, not the earthquake, but in that section the earthquake damage was terrible. In places the cartracks are from one to two feet above the rest of the street which has sunk to that extent on both sides."