

1906 Earthquake

The U.S. Army's Role

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Presidio of San Francisco
Golden Gate
National Recreation Area



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PRESIDIO CAMP.

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View looking north from the largest Presidio refugee camp near the site of Letterman Hospital



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On Wednesday, April 18, 1906, at 5:12 a.m., the ground under San Francisco shook violently for 65 seconds. Earthquake damage was severe, but the ensuing fires were truly catastrophic. Burning for three days, they destroyed over 500 city blocks in the heart of the city. Overcome by shock, panic, and confusion, over half of the city's 400,000 people ended up homeless. Army troops stationed at the Presidio, now part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, responded within hours. They maintained order, fought fires, established communications, gave medical treatment, and provided food, shelter and sanitation. The military response is a story of heroism and valor, order and organization, but also controversy as much of the initial Army response was improvised due to the lack of clear guidelines.

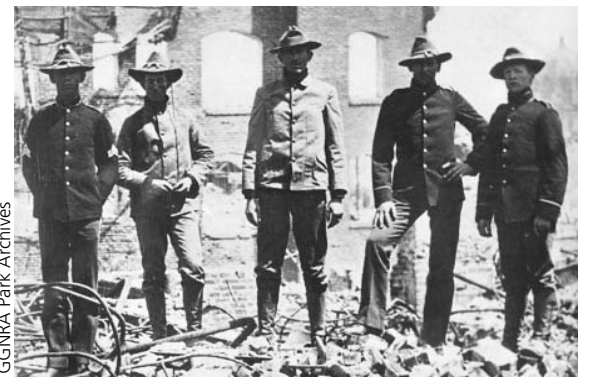
A Call to Action



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As crowds took to the streets in the chaos that followed the earthquake, San Francisco Mayor Eugene Schmitz delivered a controversial edict: "The Federal Troops, the members of the Regular Police Force and all Special Police Officers have been authorized by me to KILL any and all persons found engaged in Looting or in the Commission of Any Other Crime." Within two hours, Army troops marched in to help city authorities maintain order, enforce the mayor's edict, and initiate civilian evacuations as the fires approached. Looters were shot, and by some accounts, poor people and minorities were preferentially targeted. Some citizens also complained that the evacuations were too rash, and that they were not given adequate time to collect their belongings.

Many fires broke out within minutes of the earthquake. They raged through the city for three days, destroying thousands of buildings. Contributing to the fires' intensity were tinder box dry wooden buildings, leaking gas mains, and the lack of water due to broken pipes. With few alternatives, Army Artillery Captain Le Vert Coleman and General Frederick Funston outlined plans to create firebreaks by using dynamite. Their strategy was risky, but with the expanding fire, city officials agreed to let them proceed. Neither the San Francisco Fire Department nor the Army artillerymen were experienced with dynamite, and the explosions often spread the fires, rather than stopping them. The debate continues today regarding the damage caused or prevented by the dynamiting.



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General Funston

On the day of the earthquake, General Frederick Funston immediately ordered the mobilization of troops, took command of local relief and law enforcement, and directed the dynamiting of buildings to create firebreaks. Acting without state or national authority, Funston was later criticized for many of his actions. He was, however, instrumental in the establishment of communications, sanitation, medical facilities, housing and reestablishing general order to a destroyed city, and afterwards was generally regarded as a local and national hero.

Establishing Communications



GGNRA Park Archives

San Francisco was cut off from the rest of the world by the earthquake. All telephone and telegraph lines were severed, making communication with loved ones impossible, and impeding fire fighting and relief efforts. The U.S. Army Signal Corps at the Presidio were put in charge of re-establishing communications. They quickly began mending and stringing communication cables through the

burning city. Within a day they had a direct line between Army headquarters at Fort Mason and the Secretary of War in Washington. The new communication lines, 40 telegraph offices, and 79 phone offices set up by the Signal Corps provided crucial links between the city's seven relief districts, the Mayor's office, Federal offices, and key transportation points. The city depended entirely on military telegraph lines until May 10th.

Providing for the refugees



National Archives & Records Administration

Even as Army troops marched into the city, Quartermaster Major Carroll A. Devol sent a telegram to the War Department requesting relief aid. Almost immediately, trains loaded with supplies began heading toward San Francisco. In the first three days, the Presidio issued 3,000 tents, 13,000 ponchos, 58,000 pairs of shoes, 24,000 shirts. Its on-site bakery distributed large quantities of bread. In addition to distributing food and clothing, the Army ran 21 official refugee camps. These camps were organized and maintained in military fashion, and were among the safest and cleanest of the refugee shelters.

Treating the wounded and preventing disease

With the city's hospitals badly damaged, the Presidio's Army General Hospital and an Army Field hospital sent from the East opened their doors to thousands of civilian patients. As the tens of thousands of newly homeless formed tent camps across the city, sanitation issues arose; an outbreak of typhoid or

other infectious diseases was a genuine fear. Enforcement of sanitation standards fell under the jurisdiction of the Army's Lt. Colonel George H. Torney. His inspectors investigated sanitation concerns and strictly enforced the Army sanitation rules. Through these efforts, there was no epidemic or even significant increase in disease after the disaster.

Life Returns to Normal

The 250,000 left homeless after the earthquake established camps in parks, on military reservations, and amidst the ruins. The army helped organize these



Refugee cottages on the Presidio today

camps into small tent towns, where people quickly established the routines of everyday life; children formed playgroups, and dining halls and camp fires became the center of social gatherings. The camps on the Presidio were the first to dismantle, closing in mid-June. Most refugees moved out as the city rebuilt, while others were housed more permanently in small wooden Earthquake cottages. By 1908, these camps were disbanded as the cottages were moved onto the owners' private property, providing the opportunity for many to own their first homes. The crisis was over.



1906 by Judge Company Publishers

THE EARTH—"I HOPE I SHALL NEVER HAVE ONE OF THOSE SPLITTING HEADACHES AGAIN."

As memory of the 1906 earthquake fades into the past, we must not forget that there will be another BIG ONE.

Will you be ready? Here are some precautions you can take:

- prepare an emergency kit, including food, clean drinking water, flashlight, radio, batteries, first aid kit
- secure heavy items to the wall beforehand, and stay away from windows and tall furniture that could fall on you
- have an out-of-town family contact to call afterwards
- check for broken pipes and damaged wires, and immediately report gas leaks
- remain calm so you can help others, and expect aftershocks