



The Crowbar Chronicles and Other Tales

THE CROWBAR CHRONICLES

The analysis of historical earthquakes often relies heavily on archival accounts describing the effects of shaking on structures and people. Newspaper articles are among the most common, useful, and easily found sources of information. Dramatic earthquake effects are almost certain to have made the news during historic times; the challenge for modern seismologists is not to be overly swayed by articles that focus on the most dramatic rather than the representative effects in a region. At the other end of the spectrum, rarely does a historical newspaper explicitly note that an earthquake was not felt in a certain area: it is not news when nothing happens. When earthquake effects are subtle, the vexing question is often, did they go unreported entirely?

Reading historical newspapers, one soon realizes that some early newspapers—those that focused on commercial and/or political subjects—did not seem to consider it within their purview to report on earthquakes at all. Most newspapers, however, clearly found felt earthquakes newsworthy. Even if an earthquake was simply felt in an area, with no other effects, one-sentence articles commonly appeared in local papers: “The shock of an earthquake was felt in this place yesterday around 6 o’clock in the morning.” These mini-articles were often reprinted in other newspapers. In early America, at least, earthquakes were clearly uncommon enough to be noteworthy. Still, where shaking in a certain location was at the ragged edge of perceptibility, i.e., only felt by a few people in an area, one suspects the observations sometimes went unreported.

On the morning of 9 February 1843, the *Daily National Intelligencer* in Washington, DC, reported that an earthquake was felt in that location on the previous morning. The following day the same newspaper published a letter from Captain Buckingham: “I saw a notice in your paper this morning giving an account of a supposed shock of earthquake which was felt yesterday, about twenty minutes past ten o’clock. I believe it was felt nowhere except the vicinity of the Navy and War office buildings, and I think I can account for it. I had occasion to open the reservoir that contains water for the use of the Departments, and found, on trial, that the stone that covers it was frozen

down, and I took a heavy bar of iron that I had with me for the purpose of lifting off the cover, and beat hard upon the stone to loosen it, which jarred the ground all round it; and, in the state of the frozen ground at the time, I am inclined to think the sensation felt in the War and Navy Departments was occasioned by it. If you think this of any importance, and worth the publishing, you can do so, but I leave it to your own judgement.”

The editors judged the account worth publishing. The article was rerun in other newspapers, including the *Baltimore Sun* on 11 February. Thus was the gauntlet thrown. Individuals who might not have otherwise bothered to write letters to local

newspapers responded, in some cases providing a level of detail not commonly included in accounts of weakly felt earthquakes. On 13 February the *Baltimore Sun* published a letter. “Capt. Buckingham and his crow-bar will have to knock under, and he will have to make the ‘amends honorable’ to that respectable bit of shaking of the metropolis received on Wednesday last. There was an earthquake. We have the concurrent testimony of gentlemen in Washington acquainted with the manner of getting up those things in foreign countries, of gentlemen in Baltimore, of

the *Lynchburg Republican* of Virginia, and of the Charleston papers, who all say that a short time before ten o’clock on Wednesday last, there was an earthquake extending through all this region of the country. We shall be positively *shocked* if Capt. B. holds out any longer. Capt. B. should remember that this question is an important one—scarcely less momentous in its consequences than the price of putty.”

The *National Intelligencer* published a long report on 11 February. One citizen, “A.Z.,” wrote in to opine, “I was very much amused with the communication in the *Intelligencer* this morning... Your correspondent ascribes the trembling motion felt in the public Departments to his beating on the cover of a reservoir with an iron bar! This is truly a philosophical mode of account for the shock, and, in the absence of any other explanation, would certainly be very satisfactory. I have, however, heard it traced to the action of the House of Representatives in making ‘the immortal bill No. 548’ the special order of the day for Tuesday next.” This gentlemen did go on to note, “But, to be serious, there was certainly a very unusual motion felt by several of our respectable citizens on the morning of the 8th instant, and until it can be explained entirely to my satisfaction upon some other principle, I shall be constrained to believe it was the shock of an earthquake.” Other letter-writers offered their

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own accounts, including an account of a person who was in bed in his residence near the General Post Office in Washington, DC, at the time of the earthquake and “felt a singular movement of the bed, as if it had been raised and lowered with a gentle undulating motion.” An account also appeared in the *Baltimore Patriot*, reporting that the earthquake was distinctly felt by two gentlemen on North Charles Street in Baltimore: “The shock was so sensible that they both rose simultaneously and uttered the exclamation, ‘an earthquake.’ It occurred precisely 5 minutes past 10 o’clock.”

Captain Buckingham was, it seems, a man of honor. By 16 February the *Baltimore Sun* reported that “Capt. Buckingham, on the subject of that earthquake at Washington... has ‘given in.’ He believes there was a real earthquake, and the crow bar had nothing to do with it. That question is settled.”

A postscript to The Crowbar Chronicles is that the modern seismologist begs to differ with the “price of putty” remark. The rumbling in question turns out to have been caused by the Lesser Antilles earthquake of 8 February 1843; credible felt reports at 2,800+ km emerge as intriguing and important observations that bear on the magnitude of the 1843 earthquake. The modern seismologist thus owes a debt of gratitude to Capt. Buckingham and his crowbar for, shall we say, bashing out detailed observations that might have otherwise been lost to the frozen sands of time.

PLAY OUT THE HAND!

Captain Buckingham’s letter brought other amusing if not useful stories out of the woodwork. On 18 February the *Cleveland Daily Herald* ran a commentary: “Our very good friends at the *National Intelligencer*, having said there was an Earthquake, seem determined to stick to it. They now find it was felt all along

on their right and left—This return of Earthquake reminds us of an anecdote, told of the estimable and well remembered Major Kirkpatrick, formerly of this city.—It is well known, or believed that he was inaccessible to fear—the opposition of man, the intervention of accidents or the war of the elements themselves were alike incapable of causing emotion or alarm in his bosom. At the time of the Earthquake at this place in 1811, Major K. was amusing himself at a game of Euchre in which he delighted to indulge, with some of his friends. The shock at this moment was so severe as to cause his friends to spring to their feet and make for the street. ‘Play out the hand—play out the hand,’ said the Major. ‘Earthquake, Major—Earthquake,’ said someone. ‘Well, let it quake, you can’t stop it.’”

DUCK, COVER, AND HOLD ON (TIGHT TO THE PERSON NEXT TO YOU?)

The beginning of the year 1843 was an auspicious time for earthquakes in proximity to the eastern and central United States. In addition to the Lesser Antilles event, the central United States was rocked on 4 January of that year by what is believed to be a large, late aftershock of the 1811–1812 New Madrid sequence. The following article was published in the *Plattsburgh Republican* on 11 February, 1843: “*Effects of Terror*.—A young lady and her lover, at the time of the earthquake shock in Louisville, so lost all presence of mind in their alarm, that they fell to kissing furiously, and were quite shocked when all was over.”

The modern seismologist has no comment. ☒

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