

EARTHQUAKES OF 1886

An earthquake of 7.7 magnitude on the Richter scale hit Summerville and Charleston in the evening of August 31, 1886. Summerville, a small town west of Charleston, was wiped out and 7 of 8 of all Charleston buildings were rendered uninhabitable. One of four buildings were completely destroyed. Around 80 lives were lost in Charleston.

The earthquake was felt as far away as Canada, New Orleans and Bermuda. Accounts of how the quake affected people in our area are particularly interesting in light of the fears and uncertainty recently experienced following the events of September 11, 2001.

On September 6, 1886 a Fort Mill correspondent to the Yorkville Enquirer wrote about the after shocks still being felt six days later: "Many of our people have been visibly affected by the matter. Some have been unable to sleep; some have refused to stay in their houses; some have prayed and professed conviction and conversion, while others could neither pray nor sing"

The worst damage in Fort Mill was to Unity Presbyterian Church which "has been cracked from top to bottom at one end, and about half way at the other end."

A Rock Hill correspondent described the night of Tuesday, August 31 this way: ". . . our people were very much frightened and panic stricken, running from their houses into the streets, some in their night clothes, the colored people crying at the tops of their voices."

Five shocks within 7 hours had Yorkville citizens in a similar state. The Enquirer reported that the first shock lasted 2 minutes. "The shaking of houses were not confined to a few buildings . . . every house in the village was affected. . . some of the larger wooden buildings were so shaken that their timbers creaked as if in danger of giving way. . . ." (Charlestonians reported that their wooden buildings withstood the quakes far better than brick or stone structures.)

And it was not just houses and their contents that were damaged. On Sept. 13th the Fort Mill correspondent wrote that the earthquake, coupled with a dry spell, had greatly damaged the cotton crop. The stress caused half grown bolls to drop off the cotton plants.

The Chester correspondent to the Enquirer on Sept. 15th reported that Chester had had a public meeting to raise money on behalf of the Charleston sufferers. It took little time to collect over \$200. Then two baseball clubs, the Hill and the Valley, played a match game and contributed the attendance fee (\$30) to aid the "poor and distressed" of Charleston. (The Hill club won—28 to 10.)

The following week it was reported that the Knights of Honor of Chester had contributed \$20 to add to the \$25 collected by the Odd Fellows.

Churches collected, too. Chester's Presbyterian congregation collected about \$125 to send to the Presbyterian churches of Charleston and the Baptist Church of Chester sent \$85 to the Charleston Baptist Church.

Rock Hill, Fort Mill and Yorkville also had fund-raising drives for the Charleston victims.

Nearly a month had passed when another shock came from the direction of Charleston. This quake was not nearly as strong as the one of August 31. There were no lives lost and no serious damage of property except at the Custom House. Still, the shocks were felt as far as Washington, D. C. and Columbus, Ohio.

On October 25th the Fort Mill correspondent reported: "On last Friday morning, about 5 o'clock, several of our citizens found themselves standing on the cold floor and listening to the music of the earthquake. Again at 2.47 P. M., the town was considerably shaken by a shock which lasted several seconds and gave rise to no little terror on the part of nervous people."

And from Yorkville: "Dick Latta, the old colored man who has been playing the violin for a number of years, and has afforded so much amusement for the young people, has thrown up "the fiddle and the bow," since the earthquake, never to play any more. . . . Dick says he must henceforth be a better man."