



News Release

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Exhibit Recalls Historic
Quake on 125th Anniversary

Columbia, S.C. ---Most people think of the West Coast when they think of earthquakes in the United States. But a new exhibit that opened Oct. 8 at the South Carolina State Museum points out that the second biggest quake in U.S. history occurred right here in South Carolina.

The Great Charleston Earthquake 1886 tells the story of the monster temblor that hit Charleston at 9:51 p.m. Aug. 31, 1886.

“The quake was felt by two out of three people in the entire country,” said Director of Education Tom Falvey. “The shock lasted nearly one minute, an eternity for an earthquake.”

More than 100 people were killed, and almost every building in Charleston was damaged. The effects of the quake were felt as far north as Maine (where a ship’s captain saw a “black wall” rising on the water that lifted the schooner to a “fantastic height” and broke its mast), as far west as Iowa (where the audience in a Dubuque opera house stampeded, thinking the building was about to fall), and south to Louisiana.

The reaction caused by such an extraordinary event was predictable. A man running out of a bar was crushed by a block of sandstone. People ran through the streets naked or in their nightclothes, bare feet cut by broken glass and brick shards. Fires raged across the city.

The homeless problem created by the quake was massive, said Falvey. “Almost everyone in the city abandoned his damaged home to sleep outside in parks, cemeteries,

back yards, on buses, ice wagons and railroad cars. Even ships in Charleston Harbor became shelters for the homeless.”

At least 40,000 people were tenting (with supplies streaming in from all corners of the world) by Sept. 3, and camps sprang up on every inch of open ground.

In the exhibit, co-produced with the South Carolina Emergency Management Division, museum guests will see photographs of the destruction and simulate quakes of various strengths with the museum’s large shake table. A curious South Carolina-made machine known as the “Ray Charged Copper Battery,” —advertised as being capable of capturing and storing earthquake rays for healing energy—also is on display.

“We’d like people to understand that this event occurred during a very different time in history. In 1886, very little was known about earthquakes, including the causes of quakes and how to design and build structures to withstand them. This is a fascinating look at people and their reactions to disaster in late 19th century society.”

The Great Charleston Earthquake 1886 can be seen in the museum’s 401 Gallery through late April.

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CUTLINE FOR EARTHQUAKE EXHIBIT

The Charleston earthquake or 1886 rent the earth, damaged or destroyed nearly every building in Charleston, and was felt by two of every three Americans. This photograph shows the gash in the ground caused by the quake.

[Click here to view/download hi-res photo](#)

Photo courtesy S.C. State Museum

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