

# The San Francisco Fire of 1906



**A**t 5 a.m. on Wednesday, April 18, 1906, the city of San Francisco was sleeping. The streets were quiet, the sun was still below the horizon and the city by the bay was tranquil.

By 5:12 a.m., everything had changed.

A massive earthquake, one of the most significant in recorded human history, struck the coast with an estimated magnitude of 8.25 on the Richter scale, shaking people from their beds, leveling houses, splitting streets and shifting the earth for 296 miles along the San Andreas Fault. There was a strong foreshock that preceded the quake by about 20 seconds, and then the main shock hit, lasting for 42 terrifying seconds before finally calming.

Forty-two seconds. That's all it took to bring the West Coast's most populous city at the time to almost complete destruction. The earthquake's epicenter was a mere two miles off the coast of the city, and the shaking was so intense it was felt as far as southern Oregon, Los Angeles and central Nevada.

With the splitting of the earth, natural gas lines ruptured and fires broke out across the city. The earthquake reduced many of San Francisco's most important buildings to rubble, including the post office, the California Theatre and the famous Palace Hotel. More significantly,

however, were the hundreds of tenement buildings housing thousands of people that similarly crumbled in the quake, instantly killing hundreds and injuring thousands more.

A number of the city's most prominent figures died in the earthquake itself, including Fire Chief Engineer Dennis T. Sullivan, who sustained fatal injuries after the dome of the California Theatre and hotel collapsed onto the fire station where he was living. Furthermore, all lines of communication, save a few telegraph lines to New York and India, had been severed, which effectively cut off San Franciscans from communication with their leaders and the world.

As the sun rose over the city and the survivors tentatively ventured out into the wasteland of rubble and debris that had once been their city, it became apparent just how severe the damage was. Thousands of buildings were either partially or completely destroyed, and injured people crawling from the wreckage began desperately seeking relief. Water and sewage from broken mains flooded what was left of the streets, and small fires were beginning to erupt across the landscape.

As the day continued, these small fires began consuming more and more buildings, and soon the out-of-control fires had

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become almost a bigger threat than the earthquake had been. All of the city's 600 firefighters did their best to tackle the flames, but with their water supplies cut off, they were largely powerless against the advancing blaze. Initially, firefighters pumped water from the bay to suppress the growing inferno, but soon the fire had moved too far inland for drafting operations to be of any good, leaving a swath of smoldering destruction in its wake.

Fire department ranks weren't immune from the damage, either. At least one firefighter, James O'Neill of Fire Station No. 4, was killed when the American Hotel crumpled and fell on him while he was outside drawing water for the horses. Many more likely died and were injured that first day, not to mention those that would be injured during the next three days as the fires continued to rage.

By 6:30 a.m., a messenger had arrived at nearby Army base Fort Mason to summon all available troops and dispatch them to Mayor Eugene Schmitz at the Hall of Justice. By 7 a.m., the first troops had arrived and were directed to patrol the streets and shoot anyone seen looting in the rubble. In the following days, some 500 people were shot and killed for "looting," many of whom were simply picking through the wreckage of their own destroyed homes.

At 8:14 a.m., a major aftershock rumbled across San Francisco and up and down the fault line, leveling numerous

buildings already damaged in the initial quake and burying many people who had survived the morning's turmoil. Shortly thereafter, wireless telegraph messages got through to offshore ships, which then steamed into the bay carrying hospital parties, foot patrolmen and other sources of much-needed aid.

For the next three days the fires contin-

ensuing explosions largely began new fires instead of enclosing the original ones, adding fuel to the fire and fire to the fuel.

Many property owners also set fire to their homes and businesses because most insurance policies wouldn't cover damages caused by earthquakes alone. These smaller fires, intended to only burn for a short time and create the necessary

rations to temporarily house and feed the victims, and responded by sending "all tents in the U.S. Army" and 200,000 rations.

On the morning of April 21, 3,000 volunteers led by a few exhausted firefighters extinguished a huge fire that had been sweeping the city's Mission District. Fighting the blaze with knapsacks, brooms and water from one of the only working hydrants in the city, they were able to get an upper hand on the fire and spot the beginning of the end. After running out of available fuel, the remaining fire burned itself out, and San Franciscans finally had a break from the chaos before beginning to rebuild their city.

On April 23, California Gov. George C. Pardee spoke to a newspaper reporter, proclaiming, "The work of rebuilding San Francisco has commenced, and I expect to see the great metropolis replaced on a much grander scale than ever before."

In the end, about 3,000 of the city's 410,000 residents died as a direct result of the disaster, making it one of the worst in American history. Monetary damages have been estimated ranging from \$235 million to \$400 million in 1906 dollars, putting it on par with Hurricane Katrina in its magnitude and death toll. But San Francisco rebuilt from the ground up, making the city bigger and better than it had been before, and once again it became a proud example of American ingenuity and perseverance. *NF&R*

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ued. Incident command centers had to be moved from building to building as their temporary headquarters continued to go up in smoke, one by one. The loss of Chief Sullivan forced an interim chief to take charge, and he dispatched firefighters, untrained in pyrotechnics, to dynamite damaged buildings and thus create a fire-break to contain the separate blazes. The

destruction for an insurance payout, also blazed out of control, and building by building, San Francisco fell to the flames.

For four days, the city burned. Hospitals evacuated patients onto waiting boats. Attendants abandoned the central fire alarm station as fire took the building. William Taft, then secretary of war, received a telegraph requesting tents and

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