

Museum Around the Corner

Georgetown County Historical Society

The evening of August 31, 1886 was like many Lowcountry summer nights in Georgetown, but there was nothing usual in the events of that night, beginning at 9:50. The Georgetown Times of September 8, 1886 begins thus:

“Nothing unusual had been observed except the intense sultriness and profound stillness of the atmosphere. Some persons had just retired; others were in the acting of doing so; others still were seated on their piazzas, engaged in social converse. Suddenly a faint vibration of the houses was felt, accompanied almost simultaneously by a low rumbling sound, like the angry mutterings of distant thunder. To the writer, who was seated on a piazza facing the southwest, the sound seemed to come from that quarter. After the first shock of stupefied amazement had passed, the real nature of the phenomenon became all too apparent. The roar increased in volume and the vibrations grew more rapid and violent, until the houses swayed and rocked like ships in a storm. It was as though they had been rudely clutched by some invisible hand and shaken furiously to and fro. The timbers creaked and groaned, bells rang and lamps tottered wildly on their pedestals, while the glittering pendants of hanging lights, clashing against each other emitted fantastic music. The people, terror stricken and confused, rushed madly from their houses into the streets, instinctively seeking some place where they would not be menaced with instant death by the collapse of their homes.”

“Those who were in the upper stories of their dwellings describe the sensations produced by the shock as terrifying in the extreme. It was with the greatest difficulty that they could remain standing. Placques and picture frames were vigorously shaken and, in many cases, dashed to the floor. The plastering in several houses were cracked and shattered and showers of displaced mortar fell to the floors. The bell of the Episcopal Church was rung by the shock.

The first shock was followed by three others in rapid succession, occurring respectively at 9:55 P.M., 10:10P.M. and 10:20 P.M. The last named convulsion was almost as severe as the first, but of shorter duration. No less than eighteen distinct shocks were counted during the night, some of them very slight and none equaling the first in force or duration.”

In today's terms, the initial tremor measured at 6.9 to 7.3 at the epicenter of Charleston. Over the next six days, at least 36 tremors were felt, most slight, but six almost as severe as the first one. Afraid to reenter their homes, most residents set up makeshift tents in their yards, some sleeping on their porches to gain quick evacuation should the need arise.

Damage locally was limited to chimneys partially being thrown down, walls badly cracked, plaster from pillars and columns dislodged in chunks, and much crockery was destroyed. There was no report of windows being broken. The bell in Prince George Church rang out.

Then, word came of the extreme destruction and desolation of Charleston. At least 70% of the buildings were totally destroyed, railroad tracks twisted, and sixty people lost their lives. Georgetown had fared far better.

Some of the interesting incidents that were reported were that about a week before the earthquake struck, sailors in Winyah Bay saw a meteor fall and crash into “Big Marsh” causing a dazzling electrical light show. At the corner of King and Prince Streets, a sand crater was formed about eight feet in diameter. Two others were found in different parts of the town. At Pawleys Island, negroes reported that moments before the earthquake hit, the waters of the creek became very agitated as if fish were jumping about in the darkness. A young lady running from one house to another is positive she saw the fowls falling from the trees in which they had roosted.

Although there was no loss of life and very little damage to property this time, Georgetown county has seen her share of natural disasters with hurricanes, fires and floods. We have time and again reinvented ourselves and will probably need to do it again in the future, but through our common love of our town, we will continue to recover and add the stories that make us who we are.