



Alexandria Times

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Out of the Attic

The day that shook Alexandria

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Image: The Willard Hotel flying the presidential flag in the 1920s, indicating the President of the United States was on the premises. Library of Congress.

Many of us remember the earthquake that shook the DC area on Aug. 23, 2011. Among the damage it caused, it forced the closure of the Washington Monument for multiple years. Modern geologists measured that earthquake as registering 5.8 on the Richter Scale. But a much larger one shook our city on Aug. 31, 1886.

Obviously, technology to measure the strength of tremors has improved significantly over time, but our records indicate that the 1886 earthquake rated a 7.3. While the epicenter of the 2011 was in Mineral, Virginia, the 1886 quake radiated from Charleston, South Carolina. Contemporary newspaper accounts paint a panicked picture of local residents.



The Washington Post described four shocks, two of them being quite severe with the first, and strongest lasting approximately 40 seconds. A guest at the Willard Hotel rushed down to the lobby and asked the clerk if “He ever had guests complain about this house shaking.” The response was, “Yes, when we have earthquakes.”

The next day’s Alexandria Gazette chronicled a panic:

“Persons employed in the building where the Republican, Post, Critic and Gazette are published rushed pell mell into the streets while the structure was vibrating from the seismic disturbance. When the floors began swaying gas chandeliers vibrated, and men felt the chairs in which they were sitting move.”

The Washington Evening Star reported that at Albaugh’s Opera House on 15th Street NW and Pennsylvania: “The summer theatre company was singing ‘The Mascot’ when the first shock occurred it was felt distinctly by the persons in the gallery ... many of whom being alarmed hastened to leave.”

Not everyone in the D.C. area was alarmed, however. The Evening Star included accounts from multiple readers who heard or felt a tremor, but dismissed it as being related to the construction of an aqueduct. While the 1886 earthquake caused concern and even panic in this area, it did far worse in the areas near its epicenter. Approximately 100 people died as a result of the quake, mainly in South



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Carolina, and the aftershocks continued regularly for more than a month. A month after the quake, Clara Barton wrote to friends in Chicago that the damage in Charleston had not been exaggerated, and that almost every building had suffered some damage as a result of the seismic activity. The earthquakes of 1886 and 2011 remind us that while flooding is the natural disaster that occurs in our history most often, it is certainly not the only one the residents of Alexandria have experienced over time.

“Out of the Attic” is published each week in the Alexandria Times newspaper. The column began in September 2007 as “Marking Time” and explored Alexandria’s history through collection items, historical images and architectural representations. Within the first year, it evolved into “Out of the Attic” and featured historical photographs of Alexandria.

These articles appear with the permission of the Alexandria Times and were authored by staff of the Office of Historic Alexandria.