

“Myths of the New Madrid Earthquakes”

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Missouri Earthquake Summit
March 21, 2024



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MEMPHIS

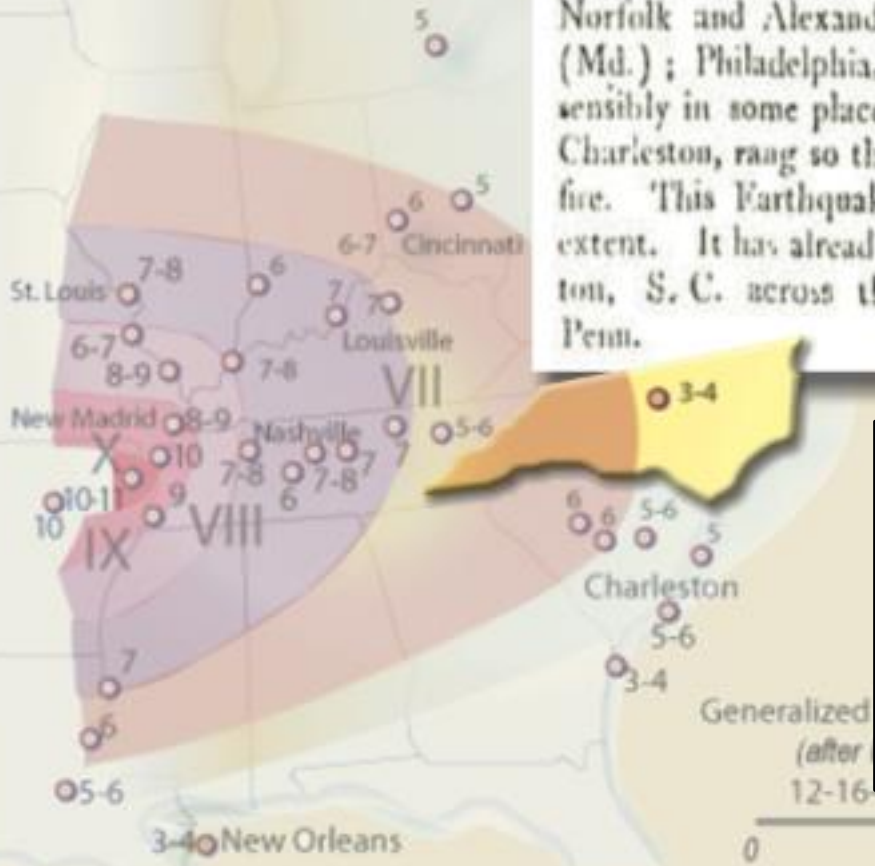
Center for Earthquake Research
and Information

Myths of the New Madrid Earthquakes

- * Over time accounts of the New Madrid earthquake have taken on a mythic dimension. A blend of fact and fiction have grown up about New Madrid events starting with the earthquakes themselves and continuing to the present.

Volcanoes? Really? In North Carolina?

Two or three shocks of an Earthquake,
Have been felt in Charleston, and Columbia, S. Carolina; at Raleigh, (N C.); in Richmond, Norfolk and Alexandria, (Vir.); Georgetown, (Md.); Philadelphia, &c. &c. (The houses shook sensibly in some places, and the Church bells in Charleston, rang so that some supposed there was fire. This Earthquake has been of extraordinary extent. It has already been noticed from Charleston, S. C. across the mountains to Pittsburg, Penn.



John Clark Edward
fictitious account caused
confusion and led to the
suppression of other New
Madrid accounts in
contemporary newspapers

Bells Ringing in Boston, Genesis of a Modern Myth

Samuel L. Mitchill: Gathers early reports of the earthquakes but does not cite sources. **No mention of bells ringing in Boston.**

Myron Fuller: Fuller describes the earthquakes effects regionally. He first describes the effects in what he terms the "Atlantic Coastal and Piedmont Plains", noting the earthquakes were felt slightly at Washington, Baltimore and "**even at Boston.**" He credits his description of the effects to the article by Samuel L. Mitchell in 1814 that cataloged New Madrid felt reports from contemporary sources.

Fuller: The New Madrid Earthquakes, USGS Bulletin 494 1912. , p. 29 An extensive catalog of felt reports but gives no sources. A search of his article **does not mention the earthquake being felt at Boston.** So it seems Fuller might have added an error when he was citing earlier sources.

The Bells did NOT Ring in Boston

Bell reports from Charleston printed in Boston newspapers—

Boston Columbian Centinel reported effects at Charleston

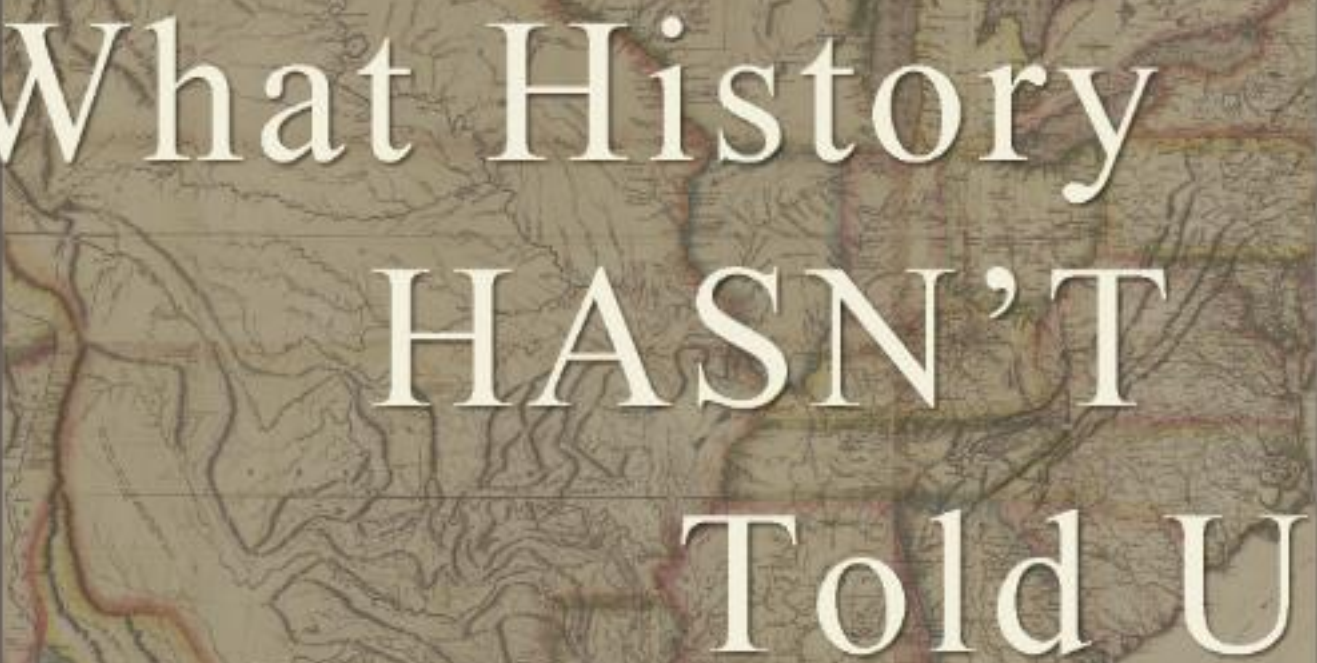
(New Madrid Compendium Database

18120101_namad_2_159) Boston Centinel, January 1, 1812 P.2,, Col 4. .



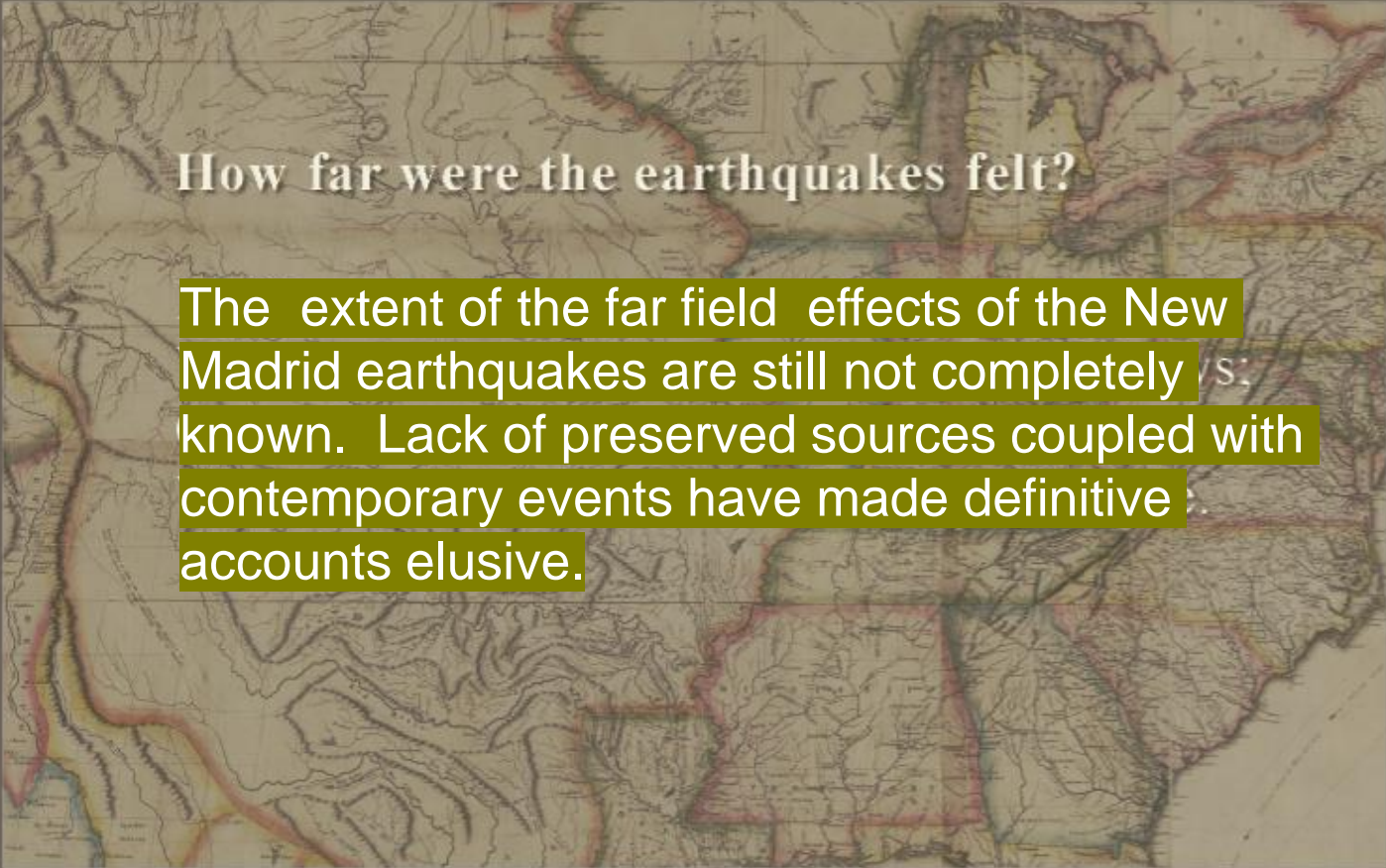
Did the Mississippi River Run Backwards?

- * At Little Prairie, the Mississippi is said to have formed an eddy, and presented a retrograde motion, and in 15 or 20 minute afterwards it resumed its course, and rose about five feet.
- * Lexington Statesman 2/1/1812, New Madrid Compendium Far Field Database
- * "the banks were overflowed with a retrograde movement rapid as a torrent."
- * Eliza Bryant to Lorenzo Dow 1816, New Madrid Compendium



What History HASN'T Told Us

John Melish, Map of the United States (1816),
source: Library of Congress



How far were the earthquakes felt?

The extent of the far field effects of the New Madrid earthquakes are still not completely known. Lack of preserved sources coupled with contemporary events have made definitive accounts elusive.

A New Madrid Quiz

*Here are some questions to test your New Madrid earthquake knowledge



QUESTION:

Many accounts were written by eyewitnesses. One of the most notable, and unusual for the time was written by a woman.

Who was she?

Answer:

Eliza Bryan, 1780 – 1866, was one of the most important eyewitnesses of the New Madrid earthquakes.

At the time of the quakes she was 31 years old and living with her mother who was maintaining a boarding house.

Eliza, a lifelong resident of New Madrid, died in 1866.





QUESTION:

What famed naturalist witnessed the earthquakes effects in Kentucky?

Answer:

John James Audubon, 1785 –1851,
the American Naturalist, who
pioneered a catalogue of birds in
North America.





QUESTION:

What was the name of the steamboat making the first voyage down the Mississippi River?

Answer:



The steamboat New Orleans was the first powered vessel to navigate on the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. It conducted its' epic cruise in the midst of the New Madrid earthquakes.

"At the Little Prairie 30 miles lower down the steamboat was brought to by the cries of some people who thought the earth was gradually sinking, but declined to take refuge in the boat until they could collect their friends."

From the New Madrid Compendium, at www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium

Credits

- * Support: University of Memphis, Center for Earthquake Research and Information
- * Research: Dr. Nathan K. Moran
- * For more information visit these links:
- * CERI : <https://www.memphis.edu/ceri/>
- * New Madrid Compendium:
<https://www.memphis.edu/ceri/compendium/index.php>