New Madrid Earthquake

Essential Question: How did the New Madrid Earthquakes affect the land and people of Tennessee?

On December 16, 1811 residents of New Madrid, Missouri were jolted awake when an earthquake with a magnitude of 7.5 or greater ripped through their town. The force of the earthquake was so strong that it caused church bells to ring in Charleston, South Carolina and chimneys to fall in Cincinnati, Ohio. The region was struck with two more major quakes on January 23 and February 7.

The quakes caused huge fissures, or cracks in the earth's surface. Coal and sand were ejected into the air. The heaving earth even caused the Mississippi river to reverse its course for a time. The quakes caused the formation of Reelfoot Lake. The lake formed when water rushed in to fill a fissure formed by the earthquake. Residents also reported other natural phenomena including earthquake lights which are caused by pressure on underground quartz crystals.

Residents of the region were terrified by the earthquakes and aftershocks. The United States was on the verge of war with Britain and many viewed the earthquakes as a sign of troubles to come. According to witness Mary Morriss "some thought the end of the world was come and time would be no more." Eliza Bryan wrote that "the screams of the affrighted inhabitants running to and fro, not knowing where to go or what to do - the cries of the fowls and beasts of every species - the cracking of trees falling, and the roaring of the Mississippi -formed a scene truly horrible." While the reported death toll was less than 100, the true death toll was likely much higher. Isolation and poor communication made reporting less than accurate. Many residents moved away from the area making once thriving communities ghost towns in a matter of months.

For years scientists believed that the quakes were a one-time event. However, recent scientific research has shown that the region has experienced significant quakes in the past and could experience more in the future. The U.S. Geological Survey estimates that the risk of a 6.0 magnitude earthquake striking the region in the next 50 years is 25 to 40 percent. Unlike the 1811-1812 earthquakes, a Midwest earthquake today would affect millions of people.

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New Madrid Earthquake

Write a short newspaper article on the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812. Use the graphic organizer below to plan your article.

Who?

What?

Where?

When?

How did the earthquakes affect people?

How did the earthquakes affect the land?

Sample Headline