# **The East Coast earthquake that awakened Jim Crow**

## Post-Civil War Charleston, S.C., was hammered by fire, hurricanes, a tense racial situation – and a 7.3-magnitude earthquake – 125 years ago this week.

### **By** **Randy Dotinga** **SEPTEMBER 1, 2011**

Check a map of earthquake hot spots in the continental United States and you'll see plenty of bright red danger zones: in the West, around the southeast corner of Missouri, and in one small section of the East Coast. It's in South Carolina, where a quake estimated at magnitude 7.3 struck 125 years ago this week, killing dozens and ravaging the port city of Charleston.

In their new book **Upheaval in Charleston: Earthquake and Murder on the Eve of Jim Crow**, Susan Millar Williams and Stephen G. Hoffius explore the aftermath of the destruction and its unhappy effects on relations between the races. I asked them to describe how history changed.

**Q: What was Charleston like at that time, barely 20 years after the end of the Civil War, which had begun just outside town at Ft.Sumter?**

Hoffius: Charleston was hammered by the war. There were regular bombings of the city from James Island, where the Northern forces were, and there was a lot of ruin all through the city. Then the city and state were bankrupted afterward. They had difficulty recovering. Things were kind of getting on their feet but just barely.

**Q: What was the racial situation like?**

Hoffius: The city was 60 percent black and 40 percent white, a level that caused a lot of fear in white people.

**Q: The quake came on top of another disaster, correct?**

Hoffius: The city had been hit by a hurricane in 1885 that really flattened much of the city. They were just in the midst of making repairs in 1886, trying to recover from that disaster, when an even bigger one happened.

**Q: What did the quake do?**

Williams: Almost every building in the city was damaged. It was harder on masonry buildings where the rich lived than on the frame buildings where poorer people lived. People were terrified. They ran out into the streets and looking for any open area, but you've got tangled wire and the streets clogged by falling brick and stone. All of their infrastructure was cut off, and they immediately lost contact with the rest of the world by telegraph.

Hoffius: The city had installed a really state-of-the-art fire prevention system, but the way that it was designed [meant that it] completely collapsed in the midst of the earthquake. All of the horses at the fire stations that hauled the fire wagons were terrified by the earthquake and just took off and ran miles away. Eventually men had to pull the fire engines through the city.

**Q: Did residents think the end of the world had come?**

Williams: Most people thought God was angry that first night. Black people believed that God was angry about slavery. They were singing hymns and saying Judgement Day has come.

White people were terrified of the same sorts of things, but tried to take refuge in their notions of science. Some knew about earthquakes, and it was more comforting to think this was randomly caused by nature.

Hoffius: The other reaction of white people came from those who agreed that God must be mad at them because they'd been sinning. People had been eating ice cream on Sundays and sailing in the harbor, and God was so angry about that.

**Q: Ice cream?**

Hoffius: It was any frivolity or any entertainment on Sundays. The notion was that you should be spending Sunday in devotion to your savior.

**Q: Where did people go?**

Hoffius: They stayed in the parks for days on end. They were in the parks, the cemeteries, the streets. Boats in the harbor took in refugees. Any open space was filled with tents made of sheets and blankets.

**Q: How did the quake set the stage for the harsh segregation of Jim Crow laws?**

Hoffius: It's 10 years after the violent end of Reconstruction in South Carolina thanks to a terrorist campaign by white people and 10 years before the court case Plessy vs. Ferguson, which legalized separate but equal.

The whole country was inching toward Jim Crow, but it wasn't there yet. There were positive signs in the early part of 1886 that black and white would find a way to live together that would be acceptable to both. They could sit on park benches and ride street cars together.

Williams: One of the things that really ratcheted up that conflict was that the nation turned out in force to provide relief after the quake. There was a lot of money to be distributed, and many white people were terrified that this would make people – specifically black people – not have a reason to work.

Hoffius: Three weeks after they put out the call and said, "Send money to Charleston and help us rebuild," they said, "Don't send any more money."

**Q: What were some of the aftereffects of the quake?**

Hoffius: People had a fear and a vulnerability after the earthquake that they didn't have before. People said the city was cursed: They'd had the Civil War, a massive fire, hurricanes on a regular basis, and now we have this earthquake. Clearly no community has been as cursed as Charleston is right now. That fear played a role in bringing on Jim Crow in the years after the earthquake.

Williams: It certainly hardened people's attitude toward African Americans.

Whatever conflicts are going on before a natural disaster tend to intensify. People start off talking about heroism and how it will bring everybody together, and that typically lasts only for a few days. Then whatever people were squabbling about before intensifies.

Hoffius: And what they're often squabbling about is race.