**LESSON LEARNED FROM THE CHARLESTON QUAKE**

**HOW THE SOUTHERN CITY WAS REBUILT**

**FINER THAN EVER WITHIN FOUR YEARS**

**BY PAUL PINCKNEY**

**It was about 9:50 o’clock on the evening of August 31, 1886, that the people of Charleston felt the quiverings of the first earthquake shock ever known in that part of the country. They had just returned from worship and not many had yet retired.**

**The day had been an exceedingly hot one and the evening was unusually sultry, with such a profound stillness in the air that it provoked general remark.**

**The temblor came lightly with a gentle vibration of the houses as when a cat trots across the floor; but a very few seconds of this and it began to come in sharp jolts and shocks which grew momentarily more violent until buildings were shaken as toys. Frantic with terror, the people rushed from the houses, and in so doing many lost their lives from falling chimneys or walls. With one mighty wrench, which did most of the damage, the shock passed. It had been accompanied by a low, rumbling noise, unlike anything ever heard before, and its duration was about one minute.**

**No need to tell of the horrors of that moment or of those succeeding. The fact that lighter shocks continued at frequent intervals throughout the long, dreary night kept the nerves of all keyed to such a high tension that it is not strange that several persons lost their reason.**

**There were no electric lights in those days, and the streets were illuminated with gas. The people gathered in the public parks and squares and there in the dim light brave men and women gave help to the injured and dying. Soon several fires added their horror to this tragedy and much damage was done before they were got under control.**

**It was not until the next day that the people began to realize the extent of the calamity that had befallen them. Then it was learned that not a building in the city had escaped injury in greater or less degree. Those of brick and stone suffered most. Many were down, more were roofless, or the walls had fallen out, all chimneys gone, much crockery, plaster and furniture destroyed. St. Michael’s Church, the pride of the city since 1761, was a wreck, its tall steeple lying in the street. It seemed on the first survey that all public buildings and the principal business blocks were utter ruins. Most of them had to be torn down and were rebuilt.**

**To add to their dismay the people were cut off from the outer world, all wires being down, and it was not until next day that a courier rode to Summerville, nearly thirty miles away, and gave the world its first news of the disaster. At the same time he brought back the cheering message that the world was not utterly destroyed, as many had believed. the rumors current on the outside were to the effect that Charleston and all the coast country had been swept away by a mighty tidal wave and that the Florida peninsula had snapped off from the continent in the general cataclysm and fallen into the sea.**

**But as to the actual extent of the damage to Charleston and the sequel: The number of deaths, according to my recollection, was 96 with a much greater number of injured. I have seen published accounts which placed the number at 83, some of which were caused from exposure, but no reliable statistics are at hand.**

**The property losses were enormous for a city of only about 49,000 inhabitants. the Assessor placed the figures at $5,000,000, but the government commission found $6,000,000 of losses. Later authorities after fuller investigation fixed the total losses from temblor and fire at over $8,000,000.**

**Four years later in 1890, the only visible evidence of this great destruction was seen in the cracks which remained in buildings that were not destroyed. A new and more beautiful, more finished city had sprang up on the ruins of the old in that brief time and the population had grown to nearly 55,000 with a corresponding increase in wealth and activity.**

**“Seven-eighths of the houses were rendered unfit for habitation, many persons were killed and property valued at over $8,000,000 was destroyed. The damage, however, was quickly repaired.”**

**Following the first great shock, the only one which did any damage, lighter and lesser vibrations were felt at intervals for several weeks. These gradually became less frequent and finally ceased, even as the minds of the people ceased to dwell on the disaster as they took up again their ordinary pursuits.**

**Three times in a generation Charleston was nearly obliterated. The civil war left it in ashes, the earthquake left it in ruins, a few years later it was visited by a cyclone which damaged it over $5,000,000. Yet despite all these disasters her brave people have risen superior to every reverse and are daily growing in wealth and power.**

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