

JAMAICA EARTHQUAKE 1907

Contributed by Michael Rego



Club Hotel, corner of Hanover & Harbour Streets, Kingston, 1907

14 January 1907

Without a warning the earth began to shake and tremble at 3:35 Monday afternoon. The shock which came from the west-ward lasted exactly 36 seconds. The whole city like a ship in a choppy sea and buildings reeled and fell. Eastward a dense cloud of dust rose and enveloped Kingston in semi-darkness. The shocks were most destructive along the harbour front where entire streets were levelled and crowds of frightened, shrieking people streamed northwards towards the race course, hundreds with heads and bodies cut and bruised, streaming with blood. Those who escaped with slight injuries reported that large numbers of persons were buried under the fallen stores and tenements.

As the dust lifted, pillars of smoke arose in Harbour Street, near the parish church and soon afterwards flames shot into the sky. It was then perceived that fire would complete the work of the earthquake. In half an hour the flames were spreading from block to block in the business section. The fire department was unable to stay the conflagration, owing to the inadequate supply of water, the earthquake having broken the mains. Fortunately a north east wind confined the conflagration to the southern portion of the city. The fire raged all night and ultimately spent its force Tuesday forenoon.

The buildings in the upper portion of the city were uninhabitable and the residents sought refuge in the public parks or on lawns adjoining the wrecked houses. It was a pitiable sight. Thousands of persons were made homeless and hundreds were enduring agony from broken heads and limbs under the open.

The city doctors were busy all night amputating limbs and dressing wounds. The worst cases were taken to the public hospital where the staff doctors attended to them, but many expired before morning.

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Many Dead Incinerated

The work of rescuing the entombed people continued on Tuesday and Wednesday, and fully 400 corpses were recovered, but many more were burned to ashes in the fire.

Attempts at looting were made by a rabble, but the military guards stationed at the principal corners succeeded in restoring order.

Efforts, are being made by the government to clear the debris from the streets, but the labourers are afraid of the ruins and of further shocks, and, consequently, progress is slow.

On Monday night fifteen distinct shocks were felt, but they did no damage. On Tuesday there were twenty shocks and on Wednesday there were ten.

Among the buildings utterly destroyed are the Supreme Court, Colonial Bank, Nova Scotia Bank, the Merchants' Exchange, the city council office, the Parish church, St. George church, the Roman Catholic Cathedral, the Savings Bank, all Myrtle Bank Hotel, the Constant Springs Hotel, the Jamaica Club, the Masonic Temple, Training College, Hope College, the railway terminus, customs buildings, Cable Company's office, all the newspaper offices, except that of the Daily Telegraph, which is severely damaged but escaped the fire; the Salvation Army Temple, and the offices of the Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, and Congregational churches, and schools.

Not a Sound Building Left

In brief, not a sound building remains in the entire area of Kingston and less than a dozen homes can be occupied and the entire business section is wiped out. The loss cannot fall short of \$5,000,000.

Among the killed are Sir James Fergusson, of Kilkerran, Scotland; Major Hardyman, of the West India Regiment; Lieut. Lamont of the same regiment; A. MacDowell Nathan, one of Jamaica's merchant princes; Solicitors Bradley Verley and J. W. Middleton, Ainsley Mordecai, Twaites, D. I. Motta, Edgar DeCordova and Charles Sherlock, all merchants of Kingston; the Cuban Consul, General Perez and Doctors B. C. Gibbs and Motta.

The whole of Jamaica felt the shock but no serious damage was done beyond a radius of 12 miles from Kingston. Some houses were cracked in Spanish Town, the fortifications of Port Royal were abandoned by the artillerymen and engineers, the western part of the town is partly submerged, sixteen 9.2 inch guns are displaced and the barracks are in a dangerous and shaky condition.

Up-Park Camp, north of Kingston, was also destroyed and about 40 sick soldiers were burned to death before they could be removed from the hospital.

[The Daily Telegraph, St. John, N. B., Saturday Morning, January 19, 1907]

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Sir James Fergusson



Governor of New Zealand 1873-1874

Sir James Fergusson, 6th Baronet, The Rt. Hon. Sir James Fergusson, Bt GCSI, (1832–1907) was a British politician, and governor of South Australia, New Zealand and Bombay.

He was born on 14 March 1832 in Edinburgh, the eldest son of Sir Charles Dalrymple Fergusson, fifth baronet of Kilkerran in Ayrshire. He was educated at Cheam public school, Rugby, England, and the University of Oxford. He entered the Grenadier Guards in 1851 and served in Crimea. He was wounded at Inkerman and later succeeded a friend, who was killed in the same action, as Conservative MP for Ayrshire.

Fergusson was elected Member of Parliament for Ayrshire and represented

the county in parliament from 1854-1857 and 1859-1868. He was admitted to the Privy Council in 1868. He was Governor of South Australia from 1868-1873, the Governor of New Zealand but resigned in 1874, then Governor of Bombay between 1880 and 1885.

Following his retirement, he returned to the House of Commons, as MP for Manchester North East 1885-1906, his positions included under-secretary for the Foreign Office and Postmaster-General.

Sir James was killed in an earthquake in Jamaica in 1907.

Fergusson was a director of the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company, the National Telephone Company and similar enterprises. In 1907 he attended the conference of the British Cotton Growing Association at Jamaica, where on 14 January in a violent earthquake Fergusson was killed while walking in the street near his hotel. He was buried in a churchyard near Kingston.

