



When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes

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On December 15, 1811, two of Thomas Jefferson's nephews murdered a slave in cold blood and put his body parts into a roaring fire. The evidence would have been destroyed but for a rare act of God -- or, as some believed, of the Indian chief Tecumseh.

That same day, the Mississippi River's first steamboat, piloted by Nicholas Roosevelt, powered itself toward New Orleans on its maiden voyage. The sky grew hazy and red, and jolts of electricity flashed in the air. A prophecy by Tecumseh was about to be fulfilled.

He had warned reluctant warrior-tribes that he would stamp his feet and bring down their houses. Sure enough, between December 16, 1811, and late April 1812, a catastrophic series of earthquakes shook the Mississippi River Valley. Of the more than 2,000 tremors that rumbled across the land during this time, three would have measured nearly or greater than 8.0 on the not-yet-devised Richter Scale. Centered in what is now the bootheel region of Missouri, the New Madrid earthquakes were felt as far away as Canada; New York; New Orleans; Washington, D.C.; and the western part of the Missouri River. A million and a half square miles were affected as the earth's surface remained in a state of constant motion for nearly four months. Towns were destroyed, an eighteen-mile-long by five-mile-wide lake was created, and even the Mississippi River temporarily ran backwards.

The quakes uncovered Jefferson's nephews' cruelty and changed the course of the War of 1812 as well as the future of the new republic. In *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards*, Jay Feldman expertly weaves together the story of the slave murder, the steamboat, Tecumseh, and the war, and brings a forgotten period back to vivid life. Tecumseh's widely believed prophecy, seemingly fulfilled, hastened an unprecedented alliance among southern and northern tribes, who joined the British in a disastrous fight against the U.S. government. By the end of the war, the continental United States was secure against Britain, France, and Spain; the Indians had lost many lives and much land; and Jefferson's nephews were exposed as murderers. The steamboat, which survived the earthquake, was sunk.

When the Mississippi Ran Backwards sheds light on this now-obscure yet pivotal period between the Revolutionary and Civil wars, uncovering the era's dramatic geophysical, political, and military upheavals. Feldman paints a vivid picture of how these powerful earthquakes made an impact on every aspect of frontier life -- and why similar catastrophic quakes are guaranteed to recur. *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards* is popular history at its best.

When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes Details

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From Reader Review When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes for online ebook

Ray S says

A surprisingly thorough documentation of the human impact of the New Madrid earthquakes, about which I had heard just a little, and a clear explanation of the geological tectonic factor that caused them. I always wondered why a huge earthquake could take place in the middle the country instead of on the West Coast, and now I know. The author mixes in quite a bit of early 19th century history from both a white and Indian perspective, to his credit.

Jerry Smith says

Hmmm - not bad but somewhat unsatisfying as a book as, in my opinion, the author tried to pull together several disparate strands with the context of the new Madrid Earthquakes as the backdrop. It just about works but frankly, the earthquakes themselves almost seem to take a back seat to the history of the settling of the frontier. That's OK, since it is an interesting topic in itself, but I wanted to know more about the earthquakes themselves and it seems as though that was a little lacking here.

Normally I read books like this for the historical context so it may seem churlish to make such an observation, but in this case the balance seems a little wrong. It may be my fault - after all the last few words of the title are the only place where the earthquakes are mentioned (although the title itself is suggestive of it).

The murder is interesting in itself, as is the history of the New Madrid settlement, but the tremors themselves, and the fact that there is a major fault line in the middle of the US that has been largely forgotten, seems to me to be the most interesting aspect of the whole area, and this is not really developed in any detail. Unlike Simon Winchester's most excellent "A Crack in the Edge of the World" this book fails to really explain the geology and why it is so important and why we should pay attention. The descriptions of the events themselves are most interesting, but again lack great detail in my opinion.

Worth reading, I certainly learned a lot, but I felt the structure and emphasis weren't quite as good as I had hoped.

James (JD) Dittes says

This is a short, readable history of a pivotal decade in American history, when the Mississippi was the far west, and Americans struggled with Native Americans for control of what is today's Midsouth and Midwest. The episode of the book's title is only referred to in a couple of accounts. I really enjoyed Feldman's recounting of Tecumseh and his threat to the Creek Indians that he would "stamp his foot" in retaliation for their failure to join his confederacy. Also making an appearance in the book are villain and spy, James Wilkinson, and Nicholas Roosevelt, scion of the Roosevelt family. There is a little bit of everything in this short work: seismology, the War of 1812, first attempts at the steam boat, and river rafting.

Judy says

Absolutely fascinating book. I had no idea of the size, extent, or time of the New Madrid earthquake. I've heard about it pretty much all my life, but I always assumed it was one big jolt and a few aftershocks.

Wow, was I wrong. And Feldman sets the New Madrid disaster in the context of its times, which only adds to the interest level. It gets a little less interesting in the final chapter or so, when it talks mostly about the War of 1812, but the rest of the book is thumbs-up all the way.

If there was a way to give half-stars, I'd give it 4.5.

Grampus says

I've heard of the New Madrid fault and the earthquakes there in 1811-12. It was an interesting read to learn more details of the event but nothing extraordinary.

Laurie says

A very readable and interesting book about historical events occurring before, during, and after the New Madrid earthquakes. Provides a review of the political and social climate along the Mississippi river frontier, the Indian battles, War of 1812, and the impact of the steamboat revolution. A bit repetitive at times, but that helps a reader like me who sometimes has trouble remembering all the characters and timelines

Sara says

I read this book after having visited New Madrid. I got curious about the history of that area and while this book meanders into much surrounding territory, so do the Mississippi and Ohio rivers - it's all interesting and history that I didn't know much about previously. Feldman writes in an engaging way and it seems to be well documented.

Bonnie says

It is amazing that such a major geologic event as the New Madrid Earthquakes could be so forgotten. I had heard of the lake created by an earthquake, but I didn't realize that the quakes continued on for several months and had such consequences. The geology aspect is what caught my attention, but the related history was equally fascinating.

This book uses one event to tie together several larger topics: the Indian Wars of the Mississippi River Valley (I usually think of the West when I think of Indian Wars), steamboat transportation, and slavery. This is a period of history that I didn't know much about - or maybe I did when I was in school, but had forgotten! Although the connection seems a bit thin at times, it works. The images the author created in my mind's eye

will stick with me - a young couple on a steamboat surviving a huge backward surge of the Mississippi River, the gruesome murder of a slave, the botched cover-up, and the inspiring Indian leader, Tecumseh, who nearly united his people to change the course of U.S. history.

Katie says

This book wasn't exactly what I expected, but how many pages could you expect to write about an event that happened in 1811 in a place where only a few hundred people lived? I liked the author's approach though....trying to tie in all the stories of the various groups for whom the Earthquakes were a significant historical event - explorers, pioneers, Native Americans, and enslaved Africans. Also, I'm a little bit fascinated about this time period when Ohio and Indiana were still considered "the West," so I really enjoyed the book's many vignettes.

Kkraemer says

The day of the first New Madrid earthquake was the kind of day we've all seen in movie trailers: the spewing of water and sand into the air, the buildings collapsing, sinkholes, the land folding in on itself, buildings being subsumed by the earth, trees uprooting, tsunamis, birds screeching, people dying

and it all actually happened.

In this book, Feldman takes us back to a time and place that few know much about, the turn of the 19th century. He talks about the American settlers, their farms and their markets; about slavery and its impact on the west, about the building of the steamship, and about the Native American efforts to stop the land grab. He shows how all of these things are affected by one unimaginable earthquake (with unimaginable aftershocks).

The best story, though, is that of the world's worst human being who had the world's worst luck. He committed a crime, hid it, and the earthquake brought it to light...so he hid it again, and an aftershock brought it to light.

Socially, economically, politically, and geographically, the aftershocks of what happened in the early 19th century reverberate today. What an interesting book.

Fred Forbes says

Some years ago I took my son to Jefferson's Monticello and stopped at the research building near the entrance, wanting to check and see if they had anything on our family line which descends from his sister Lucy. She married Charles Lilburne Lewis (her first cousin) who moved the family to western Kentucky. I was thrilled to see a book had actually been written about this family but was a bit dismayed when I read the title "Jefferson's Nephews, A Frontier Tragedy" by Boynton Merrill Jr. This was my first exposure to the story of how my uncles Lilburne and Isham Lewis killed a slave named George and burned his remains and walled them up inside a chimney.

The discovery of this murder came about due the the events chronicled in the book by Feldman, namely the New Madrid earthquake which caused the chimney to crumble and expose the bones. Rather than face trial, Lilburne and Isham Lewis decided on a suicide pact in the family graveyard. Lilburne shot and killed himself and Isham decided to run, and was later killed in the Battle of New Orleans. (Under an assumed name but I have not been able to determine what that was.)

The New Madrid earthquake, named for the town on the Mississippi River, was the strongest ever recorded in the Eastern U.S. estimated at magnitude 7.5-8.1 and this book tells the tale of the time when "The Mississippi ran backwards". It incorporates the legend of Techumseh, the Indian chief who supposedly "caused" the quake, the history of steamship travel on the river, the story of the War of 1812, the issue of Indian relations, a bit of history and the geology behind earthquakes as well as the story of the murder above. For a relatively small volume of about 300 pages, it sure packs in a lot. Well written and interesting book.

Sarah says

Growing up in Chicago where earthquakes are extremely rare, we talk about the New Madrid (not pronounced like the city in Spain at all but more like MAD - as in "I'm mad at you," RID - as in "get rid of that.") fault as if it belongs to us when it is really hundreds of miles away. The New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-12 were devastating, landscape changing and life changing events which occurred just as Americans were expanding westward but all most people know about them is that the Mississippi ran backwards!

Feldman's book is truly a social history of the westward expansion and the early growing pains of American society rather than an exposition about the earthquakes. This is the typical formula for social histories in that the author chooses an event as a metaphor for a turning point in social or cultural history. Barbara Tuchman was well known for this with her books *The Guns of August* which is more about how technology changed early 20th century culture and *A Distant Mirror* which was about the transition from medieval warrior culture to the more sophisticated and materialistic Renaissance.

Feldman's book is about out with the old and in with the new. It's about leaving colonial culture behind and expanding west with new ideas and new ways of doing things. New Madrid was originally planned as a modern, humanistic settlement on the Mississippi - quite a radical idea for the time. Also Nicholas Roosevelt was taking the first steamboat down the Mississippi at this time. How many of us can imagine that there was ever a time when there weren't steamboats on the river?

Feldman is also clearly a follower of the Frederick Jackson Turner thesis about the importance of the frontier in American culture. The westward expansion gave us (Americans) this idea that we could reinvent ourselves if we could tame the land and that we didn't have to be anybody we didn't want to be. This is still part of our cultural identity whether we live in Boston or Wyoming.

Finally, Feldman does give us some idea of the plight of Native Americans as the white Americans move west but rather than focus on their suffering as most current histories do, Feldman gives us an excellent view of how the pan-Indian movement tried to organize and resist the westward expansion. In general, our histories look at Native Americans as primitive and disparate groups who fought off the ugly Americans in tipis. Of course, the real picture is more complex than that and there were some very sophisticated Native American politicians such as Tecumseh who tried to reverse the trend.

The New Madrid earthquakes changed the world as many people knew it in those days but it was only one of many big changes. The westward expansion opened up new possibilities and changed the way Americans saw themselves.

Clare says

This was a fascinating look at a natural event that took place in 1811 at the New Madrid fault. The quake itself was violent enough but what makes it even more astounding is that it was followed, for months, with thousands of aftershocks. The author uses eyewitness accounts and news articles to show the power of this event and also gives us a background about other historical happenings of the time.

Jeff Jelleys says

New Madrid: Nightmare of the Modern Emergency Manager.

Ask most Americans where earthquakes happen and they will probably point you to California. But, while not as prolific as the Golden State's temblors, there are other areas of the country where earthquake danger lurks – the Cascadia Subduction Zone of the Pacific Northwest and Charleston, South Carolina, for example. And smack dab in the middle of the American heartland, deep beneath the Mississippi River valley lies the New Madrid Faultline. On December 16, 1811, the fault shuddered, releasing a catastrophic series of more than 2,000 quakes – three of which would have measured more than 8.0 on the Richter scale.

Only the scarcity of population in the area kept the New Madrid Earthquake from being one of the world's worst natural disasters.

With *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards*, historian Jay Feldman plays archeological detective, piecing together from a relatively scarce trove of records the story of one of North America's greatest earthquakes and the destruction wrought along the Mississippi River valley. And while first-hand accounts of devastation may be slim, there's actually a lot more detail to be had than I would have imagined. Feldman weaves a rather gripping account of the horrors unleashed on the little frontier settlement of New Madrid and upon the numerous boats plying the Mississippi River when the ground rumbled.

Feldman also makes up for the paucity of information on the earthquake itself by using the disaster as a locus point against three other historical threads: the U.S. government's ongoing war with the Native American Chief Tecumseh, the maiden voyage of the first Mississippi steamboat *New Orleans* (which would famously ride the backflowing current of the Mississippi northwards as the New Madrid Earthquake temporarily reversed the river's flow), and a hideously macabre murder on the eve of quakes perpetrated by none other than Thomas Jefferson's nephews. It would have been all too easy for this material to feel simply like filler, but I found the Feldman's painting of the age – of frontier wars, scientific advancement, and murder – compelling, richly detailing the time period in which the quakes occurred, and creating context that gave the disaster a compelling context.

(The murder and dismemberment of the poor slave named George is particularly compelling – a real life echo of Poe's *House of Usher* -- as the very walls of the Kentucky plantation crumble to give-up evidence of the horrific crime, the courthouse itself trembling with aftershocks during the trial. Only the battles with Tecumseh feels just a bit too long in tooth by book's end).

Verdict: The historical fat may be a bit thick for the diehard 'disaster-book-buff' but for the armchair historian *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards* is a wonderful read. For the modern emergency manager,

chapter eight of the book – when ‘all nature was in a state of dissolution’ – is must reading and should send chills down the spine as one considers the ‘what if’ of a similar catastrophic quake hitting the same area of the country – now far more densely populated – today.

*P.S. Live in the mid-Mississippi River Valley? Get ready for the next New Madrid Earthquake – **yes, it could happen!** – now. Check out the Central United States Earthquake Consortium (at <http://cusec.org/>) or the The Great Shakeout! (at <https://www.shakeout.org/>) for real-life resources!*

Mason says

For some reason, I neglected to fully process the subtitle, "Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes."

If you're looking for an unexpected take on the first decade of the nineteenth century, this is adequate but not satisfying. If, like me, you want a healthy dose of geology spiced with history, definitely read something else.

Aligd848 says

Loved this book. Intertwined several historical events, stories, and personages including the Indian Chief Tecumseh, Andrew Jackson, Nicholas Roosevelt, scoundrel/murderous family members of Thomas Jefferson, the back story of "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too", and places I have visited and known into a fascinating tale all tied to the series of disasterous New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-1812 centered in southeast Missouri. Highly recommend it.

Karen says

I teach geology, and I've long wondered about the New Madrid faultline and the big earthquake that occurred there in the early 1800's. I know way more about the San Francisco 1906 earthquake because I was raised in the Bay Area, and I'm familiar with the San Andreas fault. That's actually why I became interested in geology. Everyone always worries about the West Coast having earthquakes, not realizing the middle of the country has an faultline just as dangerous to worry about...

This book is a mix of genres. It is a lot of history, some biography, and some geography in order to tell the whole story of not just the quake but the impact that the 1811/1812 quake and shocks had on a variety of characters in a historical context. The author brings alive how interconnected everything is...one domino falls and it impacts so many other things. In this case the quake altered the Mississippi River, caused a murder to be discovered, it led to some changes in where towns were placed along the river, and impacted the 1812 War between the British/Native Americans and the U.S.

The writing was excellent, with a lot of very good research that made the book very readable and brought a long forgotten time back to life. What I really appreciate is having a lot more knowledge about the New Madrid Fault (there were some good maps in the book) and about the future potential and probability for another quake to happen. The next one will be much more devastating as this area is a lot more populated...

Ann says

I was really really disappointed. The earthquakes are so often overlooked in American history surveys so I was excited to find a book dealing with the topic. And the sections about the quakes and their aftermath were fascinating. But the arguments by the author to cite the earthquakes as a contributing factor to the War of 1812, the collapse of Tecumseh's confederacy and Thomas Jefferson's position on slavery were tenuous, no that's too positive a word, how about fantasmacorical? (I made that one up!) Seriously - two dissolute nephews of TJ heinously murder a slave and that has what to do with the great scope of things? It's a tragic story, but has NOTHING to do with TJ and his position on slavery. NOTHING. TJ had no connection to the crime, or its cover up, or the ultimate undoing of the pair by the quakes. The author was using TJ sorta' like a loss-leader at Walmart. I do not recommend this book for anything other than the section directly dealing with the quakes. His historical analysis is shoddy and his conclusions asinine.

Robert Melnyk says

Fairly interesting book about the early days of the American Republic, westward expansion, Indian conflicts, the War of 1812, and how the New Madrid earthquakes impacted all of these events. We all know about the fault lines in California, and the potential for earthquakes in that region, but little is ever said about the fault lines in the middle of the country that generated some of the worst earthquakes in the country's history in the early 1800's.

Karry Macdonald says

Growing up in California I knew all about earthquakes. I studied them in school, experienced them at home, etc. I knew they occurred around the Pacific Ocean in the "ring of fire". What I didn't know was that our country's Midwest area experienced a very large earthquake which actually changed the course of the mighty Mississippi River. This book is a wonderful read. There is historical information, both the earthquake itself but the other stories which became connected to this event. I highly recommend this book.
