

1906 San Francisco Earthquake: Introduction

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THE CALIFORNIA NATIONAL GUARD

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AND

THE EARTHQUAKE AND FIRE

1906

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INTRODUCTION

The rays of the morning sun were reaching westward to bathe the lofty peaks of the Coast Range on the morning of April 18, 1906, when without warning, but swift and sure, the hand of destruction reached up through the thin crust of the earth to destroy, with nature's relentless severity, the proud city of the Golden Gate. Doubly visited by the dread calamities of earthquake and fire, the Queen City of the Pacific lay prostrate. Gashed by yawning fissures, a charred skeleton outspread under a pall of smoke lay the ruins of nearly the entire business section and the most beautiful residential district of the city.

Little reliable information regarding the exact time of the earthquake was available, as few people were about so early. Reports varied from five o'clock twelve minutes six seconds to five o'clock thirteen minutes thirty-seven seconds, A. M., but the more reliable authorities give the time of the beginning of the disturbance as five o'clock twelve minutes thirty-six seconds, A. M., April 18, 1906. The earthquake began with a fairly strong movement of the earth's crust and continued with increasing strength for one minute or a trifle less; then came a violent twisting sickening shock, and quiet was restored about three minutes later. The total duration of the disturbance was about three minutes and thirty seconds.

The earthquake was caused by strain on the earth's crust set up by a slow relative displacement of the land on opposite sides of a fault and practically parallel with it. The fault which was the center of the disturbance in the San Francisco earthquake is located a few miles south of the city. The movement of the earth's crust was from southeast to northwest and varied from seven to twenty-one feet. There was also a vertical displacement of from two to three feet.* The disturbance was of unusual severity and was most violent in the region about San Francisco Bay.

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*State Earthquake Investigation Commission Report, Volume 2, page 3.

Many people were injured or killed in the cities and in some instances persons became mentally deranged. Many people were thrown from their beds and there was a general awakening of all people asleep. In the zone of maximum disturbance, persons awoke and attending to their duties were thrown to the ground. Many heard rumbling sounds immediately before feeling the shock. Some reported having seen the violent swaying of trees. There were several cases of persons suffering from nausea. Animals in general were affected with terror. Buildings were partially or completely wrecked; others were shifted on their foundations. Springs and wells were affected permanently or temporarily. There were landslides on steep slopes, railway tracks were buckled and broken. Large trees were thrown to the ground and in some cases snapped off above the ground.*

The shock, perceptible to the senses extended from Coos Bay, Oregon, on the north to Los Angeles on the south, a distance of about 730 miles; and easterly as far as Winnemucca, Nevada, a distance of about 300 miles from the coast. The territory affected, approximated 175,000 square miles inland from the coast.**

The San Francisco earthquake and resultant fire ranks with the great catastrophes of the world's history. Comparatively small as was the list of killed and injured, the annihilation of the business section of the city and of the most thickly populated residential district, brought to the bread line virtually the city's entire population. The shock left the city powerless to supply light, heat, water, drainage and means of transportation or communication within the city or with the outside world. Because of the breaking of the water mains, about thirty fires which were said to have started on both sides of Market Street immediately after the shock, could not be controlled.***

Within three hours after the earthquake, a continuous line of flame extended along the water front from north of Market Street, south past the Ferry Building to Mission Street and west past Third Street. The Ferry Building at the foot of Market Street and nearly all the piers along the water front were spared by reason of the broad expanse of East Street (The Embarcadero) that separated them from the nearest buildings. Between East and Third Streets, the elements showed no favors.

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*State Earthquake Investigation Commission Report, Volume 1, page 1.

**State Earthquake Investigation Commission Report, Volume 1, page 2.

***San Francisco Relief Survey, By Charles J. L'Connor, page 2.

On both sides of Market Street the flames made a clean sweep. The flames swept steadily toward the west and southwest. From Townsend Street on the southeast to San Francisco Bay on the north seemed a solid mass of flames. West of Third Street an occasional building was spared, some of them, by reason of having private water supplies from deep wells, and others by reason of their fire resisting qualities. The Palace Hotel was one of those supplied by a deep well. It was hoped that the famous hostelry would be saved, but before the danger was past the supply of water was exhausted and the thirty year old establishment was soon a mass of flames.

Excited crowds watched the flames devour skyscrapers which the day before were the pride of the Pacific Coast. The lack of water made the employment of dynamite necessary in the effort to stay the devouring flames. Explosions were heard on every side, which added to the awful roar of the flames, the toppling of burning buildings, with now and then a mingling of what seemed like the moan of the traveling earth. A large part of the wholesale district, practically all of the retail and shopping district, the principal financial centers, the leading hotels, some public buildings, hundreds of small hotels and lodging houses and large portions of the most expensive and exclusive residential sections were consumed by the flames.

By the morning of April twentieth, the fire was under control. Water mains had been partially repaired and there was at least a hope that the worst was over. The flames had swept westward to Van Ness Avenue and Dolores Street and south to Townsend Street. A few buildings remained standing in the burned district, but only a few. The burned area covered approximately 4.7 acres in the heart of the city. That area embraced 521 city blocks of which thirteen blocks were saved and 508 burned. There was a total of 28, 188 buildings destroyed by the earthquake and fire, and 200,000 people were rendered homeless. The loss of real and personal property was estimated at \$500,000,000, and the insurance collected amounted to about \$200,000,000.*

The known loss of life from the earthquake and fire was 498, with 415 seriously injured. Nine deaths were caused by violence, three of which were brought upon unoffending men by over zealous patrols.*

Those who utilized their knowledge and profited by past experiences noted closely the temper of the people, and they united in asserting that the seismic disturbance would have been forgotten as soon as the damage could be repaired had not the real disaster followed close on the heels of the earthquake.**

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*San Francisco Relief Survey, By Charles J. O'Connor, pages 4,5.

**History of the San Francisco Earthquake, By John P. Young, Volume II, page 829.

To say that the utmost confusion reigned in San Francisco during the three days immediately succeeding the earthquake is putting it too mildly. There were scenes of horror almost beyond the power of words to depict. Death was on every hand. Terror reigned even above sorrow for the dead and dying. Grief for destroyed homes, ruined property and the loss of family and friends. No one knew what might happen next and all seemed to dread the worst. There seemed nothing to turn to. Even the ground upon which their homes had been built was rising and falling for there were several lighter shocks during the day. Added to this were the shrieks of the injured, the weeping of the homeless, the bereaved and the destitute, and above all, the deafening roar of the flames eating their way unimpeded through the vitals of human effort. There were the crashing of falling buildings and the intermittent boom of the charges of dynamite which were being set off by men inexperienced in the use of explosives in a mad effort to foil the greedy flames. Then add to all this the phantom shapes of hunger and thirst which were now making their presence known and one has only a dim pretense of the horror of the situation in the beloved city by the Golden Gate during the twenty-four hours immediately succeeding the first shock.

About noon on the eighteenth the rocking of the earth subsided, thus lessening the causes of terror and dread. People were still fleeing or attempting to flee from what they considered a doomed city. Ferry boats plying between San Francisco and Oakland, Alameda and Berkeley were jammed with people in a mad rush to escape. The highways to the south were crowded with refugees, eager to get away--to reach a place of safety. Where that place might be, they knew not. In the city the fire still raged.

The work of destruction continued almost unhindered. During lulls in the fire, people were seen rushing through the streets toward the ferries. Others strove to reach the higher ground to the west and southwest. The city was wrapped in a thick, stifling cloak of smoke which seemed to be constantly thickening. Added to the plague of the smoke was the stench of gas escaping from the leaking gas mains--sickening and overpowering. In the burning district, gas mains were shooting up geysers of flame. Under such conditions it was no wonder that frenzy and fright seized upon the people and sent them rushing, struggling and fighting along every avenue of escape.

Yet in the midst of death and destruction a splendid spirit of heroism appeared among those who had escaped. All had not become panic stricken under the stress and strain of the occasion. Men

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appeared seemingly from all directions--on foot, in automobiles, and in cabs. Doctors, rich men, poor men, strong men and frail men, eager to do what they could to rescue the wounded and save the dead from being burned beyond recognition in the ruins. Policemen, firemen, and citizen volunteers were there but they were almost helpless. The firemen stood in chagrin before the hydrants while the broken water mains mocked them. The situation was one of bitter irony, but all who remained in possession of their reason turned to with a will and did their best.

Then there was another side to gaze upon. The vultures, who in the guise of human beings thrive upon human misery and are eager to pounce upon the weak and defenseless, grasped the opportunity to rob and loot. Even the dead were not permitted to escape these beasts in human form. One instance was cited where one of these vultures stated to a soldier performing guard duty, that one of the dead bodies lying nearby was his mother, and he was permitted to go to the body. Apparently overcome by grief, he threw himself across the corpse. The warchful soldier discovered that the goul was chewing the diamond earnings from the ears of the dead woman. A bullet from the soldier's gun immediately ended the goul's career. The diamonds were found in the man's mounth.*

This is only one of the extreme cases. Other crimes almost as bad were reported and no doubt there were many others which were never discovered. The light fingered gentry were there in profusion. Beggars representing themselves as refugees were numerous. There was much pillaging of stores and other business houses. Later on there was considerable looting of camps and supply depots filled with supplies for the refugees. These thieves of every description were summarily dealt with when captured, but many of the culprits escaped. For a time, after the shock the vandals plundered at will. The confusion was so great and the catastrophe so appalling that little attention was given to guarding property, and not until the soldiers appeared on the scene was there any organized effort to terminate the activities of the criminal element.

The street car lines were entirely out of commission and many of those who owned or controlled conveyances of any description were quick to take advantage of the situation. Charges of twenty dollars for carrying trunks a few blocks were common. One merchant was reported to have engaged a teamster with horses and wagon, agreeing to pay him fifty dollars an hour. Men were reported to have offered as much as \$100.00 to be taken to the ferry. Another party paid \$250.00 for a tugboat to take them to Oakland and still another was seen to pay \$2,000 for an automobile in which to taken his family

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*The San Francisco Earthquake and Fire, By James Russell Wilson, page 231.

to a place of safety in the hills south of the city.

Some grocers and general storekeepers whose places of business had not been destroyed acted the role of shylocks by demanding outrageous prices for foodstuffs. One dollar per dozen was their price for eggs. One dollar for a loaf of bread and a dollar for a handful of coffee was the demand. These profiteers thrived for a time, but after the arrival of the soldiers the goods were seized and distributed to the needy ones free of charge, regardless of the remonstrances of the shylocks.

By noon of April nineteenth, San Francisco's Chinatown was a furnace. Earlier in the day the residents of that quarter had their simple possessions bundled for departure. Thousands of the forlorn looking Orientals were in evidence about the ferry building awaiting an opportunity to get out of the city. It was not until the earthquake had shaken the rickety homes of the Chinese to the earth to be destroyed by fire, that the authorities of San Francisco realized what manner of place San Francisco's Chinatown was. Some of the secrets of the much advertised Chinatown, the mecca of all tourists in California, in which 25,000 Chinese were said to live, lay exposed.*

When the ashes were cleaned away after the fire the yawning mouths of tunnels, which the police had long suspected, were revealed. Very few which men had ever seen these underground passages. People who visited the ruins of Chinatown after the earthquake and fire were astonished at the network of tunnels which lay exposed, some of which were estimated to be one hundred feet deep. No one knew to the certainty how many lives were lost there as a result of the catastrophe, but that the number ran into the hundreds was a moral certainty.

The San Francisco daily newspapers, all of which were burned out, were quick to make an effort to resume operations. On Thursday, the day following the earthquake, the morning journals issued a small combination sheet bearing the heading Call-Chronicle-Examiner. This was set up and printed in the office of the Oakland Tribune. The Oakland newspapers had generously offered the use of their plants and equipment to the unfortunate San Francisco publishers and the offer was quickly and thankfully accepted. The San Francisco papers were printed in Oakland for some time after the disaster, but under their own headings.**

Prisoners confined in the city prison on the fifth floor of the Hall of Justice were at first transferred in irons to the basement of the structure. Later they were removed to the Broadway jail and still later they were conveyed to Alcatraz Island, thence across the bay to Oakland and surrounding towns.

*The San Francisco Earthquake, Memorial Edition, By James Russell Wilson, page 173.

**The San Francisco Earthquake, Memorial Edition, By James Russell Wilson, page 156.

The freaks of the earthquake were many. Wide fissures were made in the streets. Street railways were twisted out of line. Sewers and water pipes were bursted. Railroad tracks throughout the San Francisco Bay district were twisted and out of line. The Valencia Hotel on Valencia Street, a four story wooden building sank into the basement, a pile of splintered timbers.*

Many beautiful homes were laid in ruins. Among them were the Stand mansion, the C. P. Huntington residence and the Henry Crocker residence. The old Mark Hopkins residence which was being used as an art school by the University of California, and the Will Crocker residence containing the finest collection of art on the Pacific Coast were demolished.

Some of the noted hostelrys destroyed by the fire were the celebrated Palace Hotel, the St. Francis Hotel and the Fairmont Hotel. The United States Sub-Treasury was destroyed but the United States Mint with nearly \$200,000,000 in coin and bullion stored in its vaults was but slightly damaged. The City Hall was severely damaged by the earthquake but escaped the flames. Damage to State property was estimated at \$1,000,000. The Academy of Sciences, the Grand Opera House, Hall of Justice, and Mechanic's Pavilion were all destroyed.

Among the noted business buildings to be destroyed were the Flood Building, the Mills Building, the Spreckles Building, the Crocker Building, the Phelan Building, the Merchant's Exchange, the Emporium, the Union Trust Building, the Parrott Building, and the Telegraph Building. The homes of the three Daily Newspapers, the Call Building, the Chronicle Building and the Examiner Building were also among those consumed by the devastating flames.

One of the most picturesque and stubborn fights of the entire three days of fire fighting was made on Telegraph Hill. More than a hundred houses, occupied mainly by Italians were perched on the southern and eastern slopes of that pinnacle. The hill was attacked by the fire on the north and west sides. There was no chance for assistance as there was no water pressure and every available man was busy in the valleys below. There was a well with a pump on the top of the hill and residents organized a bucket brigade. The little band of fire fighters were slowly driven back, but they did not quit. At a critical moment the water in the well was exhausted. Then the Italian residents called for assistance, crashed in the doors of their cellars and began to roll out barrels of red wine. Sacks and bedding were

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*The San Francisco Earthquake, Memorial Edition, By James Russell Wilson, page 36.

soaked in the wine and used for beating out the fire and hung over the exposed parts of the cottages. The wine accomplished the almost impossible. The homes were saved.

Toward the end of April it was discovered that the Government fortifications at the entrance to the Golden Gate had not escaped injury from the earthquake. At Lime Point the emplacements on the big guns were twisted and cracked and the concrete floors and walls of the emplacements showed unmistakable evidence of not having withstood the shock. Conditions were equally bad at the old fortifications back of Fort Point. The great thirteen inch guns on both sides of the Golden Gate, and constituting its main defense, had been rendered practically useless. The heaving of the earth had destroyed the delicate adjustment upon which the heavy guns were operated.*

The experience in San Francisco was a testimonial for the modern steel building. A score of these structures were in the course of construction in the city and none of them suffered from the earthquake shock. The completed modern steel buildings were found to be almost intact. In almost every instance, the earthquake seemed not to have damaged them. Cornicis and trimmings fell, but the steel frames were in plumb and as strong as ever. The damage by earthquake did not compare with loss by fire. In all but a few of the modern steel structures the interior woodwork was destroyed by the flames.

At about 3:00 P.M., April eighteenth, at the call of Mayor Eugene Schmitz, a number of citizens of San Francisco assembled in the Hall of Justice for a conference. Out of this gathering originated the celebrated Committee of fifty appointed by the Mayor.**During the deliberations at the meeting, the approach of the fire compelled the Committee to move, first to the Plaza across the street from the Hall of Justice, thence to the Fairmont Hotel. Plans for dealing with the critical situation existing in the city were outlined by the Committee and speedily put into execution on the ensuing day.

The knowledge of the existence of the Committee inspired a degree of confidence among the sufferers. The self-imposed duties of the committeemen had an uplifting effect upon the members themselves and it manifested itself at their meeting held at the North End police station to which they were obliged to withdraw owing to the destruction of the Fairmont Hotel by fire. At noon on the nineteenth the fire again drove the Committee members westward to Franklin Hall on Fillmore Street, near Sutter. This hall was

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*The Doomed City, By Frank Thompson Searight, page 131.

**History of San Francisco, By John P. Young, pages 836, 838.

occupied by the Committee during the ensuing days during which the regular City Government practically ceased to function; the duties of the city officials devolving upon the extra official body appointed by the mayor.

At the meeting of the Committee in the Franklin Hall on the nineteenth, details of a plan for dealing with the situation were worked out. Every conceivable requirement was considered and provision made to meet it. Sub-committees were appointed for the following purposes:*

- Relief of the hungry
- Housing
- Relief of sick and injured
- Drugs and Medical Supplies
- Relief of the Chinese sufferers
- Transportation for refugees
- Citizen police
- Auxiliary Fire Department
- Restoration of City Water Supply
- Restoration of Light and Telephone Service
- Restoration of Abattoirs
- Permitting fires in dwellings
- Resumption of transportation
- Resumption of Civil Government
- Resumption of Judiciary
- Resumption of retail trade
- Resumption of wholesale trade
- Sanitation
- Finances

The original committee of fifty were made special officers by the Mayor with full power to represent him, and with power to requisition men, supplies, vehicles and boats for public use. For the first time since the disaster in the early morning of the eighteenth the work assumed some semblance of system.

The services performed by the members of the committee of fifty and of the sub-committees working under them and the energy and intelligence displayed in the performance of the practically self-allotted tasks of the members, would fill many chapters. To these men, the city of San Francisco owes a debt of gratitude.

On Thursday, April nineteenth, a steady stream of refugees rolled along the streets terminating at Golden Gate Park. Large numbers crossed the bay to Oakland and other east bay cities. It was almost impossible to obtain conveyances of any description at any price in San Francisco and those who were so fortunate as to have saved some of their effects and desired to move them, were unable to do so.

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*History of San Francisco, By John P. Young, pages 838, 839.

Under the terrifying influence of the shock and the raging fire, few adults heeded the demands of appetite on the eighteenth, but on the following day these demands asserted themselves. Large numbers of people gathered in the parks and open places in the western part of the city, and on the hills back of the Mission were destitute of provisions. Corner groceries had been swept bare of everything eatable. Fortunately, before the need became too pressing, supplies were pouring in from every direction.

Trainloads of provisions had been rushed to the city from nearby points. Depots were opened and large quantities of food were distributed. By the twentieth the citizens' Committee had completed arrangements for bread to meet the needs of all. Volunteers were eager to assist. There was an extraordinary exhibition of unselfishness. Men of wealth and position obeyed orders with alacrity. Physicians devoted themselves to all who needed succor.*

By evening of April twentieth, although fires could be seen in various places, the assurance was general that there was no further danger of its spreading to the district beyond Van Ness Avenue and to a large part of the Mission District.

The financial institutions of the City were badly crippled. Not by loss of funds, but because their funds, securities and records were stored in vaults buried in the debris and access to them would not be possible for many days. Cash to meet maturing obligations was not available. No paper or securities were accessible. Under these circumstances only one course which seemed practical was followed. Governor Pardee declared April nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first legal holidays and on the latter date he proclaimed their continuance for thirty days. This enabled the financial houses to deal with the problems confronting them.**

On Saturday, April twenty-first, the Post Office resumed delivery of mails. A registration bureau was established and became a sort of clearing house for those who had temporarily ceased to have any address.

Not alone had San Francisco suffered from the earthquake. Oakland was severely shaken, several lives were lost and comparatively few chimneys remained standing in the city. Berkeley fared little better than did Oakland. Alviso, Hayward, Salinas, Castroville, Pajaro, Monterey, Hollister, Gilroy, Niles, Alameda, San Rafael, Napa, Suisun, Vallejo, Martinez, Tomales, Stockton, Merced, Los Banos, Sacramento, Pacific Grove, Watsonville, Healdsburg, Geyserville, Cloverdale, Hopland, Ukiah, Pleasanton, Benicia, San Pablo, San Quentin, Sausalito, Pinole, Redwood City, Santa Cruz, San Jose, and Santa Rosa were damaged; some severely and others slightly.***

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*History of San Francisco, By John P. Young, Page 841.

**History of San Francisco, By John P. Young, page 845.

***The Doomed City, By Frank Thompson Bearight, pages 69, 70.

No sadder information was received than that the State Asylum for the insane at Agnew, near San Jose had collapsed and ninety-six patients killed.* The Leland Stanford University at Palo Alto was severely damaged, but fortunately, due to the early hour at which the earthquake occurred, no lives were lost.

At San Jose the damage was more severe. Two buildings in that city were destroyed by fire as a result of the earthquake, several other buildings were wrecked by the shock and had to be rebuilt and a large number of buildings were damaged, but not beyond repair. The number of persons killed in that city was nineteen.

Company B of the Fifth Infantry, National Guard of California, stationed at San Jose, reported for duty almost immediately after the shock and on the following day was reinforced by Company H, Second Infantry, N.G.C. These two companies worked in conjunction with the local police and rendered excellent service. Company B was highly commended by the civil authorities of San Jose for the efficient services rendered in the emergency.** A line of pickets surrounded the business district where walls and plate glass windows had been demolished by the earthquake and guards were stationed to protect private and public property within the city. The need for additional military assistance in San Jose having passed, Company H of the Second Infantry was relieved from further active duty May ninth and ordered to return to its home station. Company B of the Fifth Infantry remained on active duty at its home station until May nineteenth when it was relieved from duty in the field and dismissed.***

In Santa Cruz, the damage was slight and was confined principally to the local power and lighting system. The Fourth Division of the Naval Militia stationed there, performed guard and patrol duty in the city the night of April eighteenth by request of the Mayor.

At Santa Rosa, the catastrophe, though less in extent, was greater in degree than that of San Francisco. There were sixty-four lives lost and fifty-one persons seriously injured.† The city differed from most towns of similar size in that it was more compactly built. All its business houses were closely grouped about the center, where the county Court House stood, so when that group of business blocks was tumbled into blazing ruins, there were no suburban stores to supply the pressing needs of the moment. The entire business district of the city was destroyed. Sanitary conditions in the little city remained good and under an energetic local relief committee all homeless people were provided with shelter. Communication .oOo.

*Adjutant General Report 1906, page 55.

**Adjutant General Report 1906, pages 8, 40.

***Adjutant General Report 1906, pages 59, 62.

†Report of Major-General A. W. Greely, U. S. A., page 15.

with the outside world was speedily re-established and foodstuffs were shipped in. These matters were handled entirely by the local relief committee.

By 9:30 A. M., April eighteenth, Company E of the fifth Regiment of Infantry stationed at Santa Rosa was on duty in its home city. Arms, ammunition, and uniforms had been rescued from the ruins of the armory and guards were posted at the County Treasury, Banks and in the business district of the city. Company C of Petaluma was ordered to the assistance of Company E and arrived at Santa Rosa at 2:50 P.M. of the eighteenth.* Companies C and E in conjunction with the local police performed guard and patrol duty in the city and handled the situation in a most creditable manner. Company C was relieved from active duty May sixteenth and Company E was relieved May twenty-third.

Berkeley was practically uninjured by the earthquake, but it became a refuge for more than a thousand refugees from San Francisco. Relief supplies were forwarded to the Berkeley relief committee from the general supplies shipped to San Francisco. The relief was ably and satisfactorily handled by a local committee, the only military assistance required having been rendered by Company A, Veterans Reserve, N. G. C. That company performed guard duty in the city, guarding refugee camps and supplies until May thirteenth when they were relieved.**

Oakland and Alameda fortunately escaped serious injury from the earthquake and were spared the calamity of fire. The two cities were filled with refugees from San Francisco, the number having been variously estimated from 50,000 to 100,000.

The situation in Oakland was promptly taken in hand by an energetic relief committee. Large quantities of relief supplies were shipped direct to the East Bay City and whenever these were deficient in quantity, they were supplemented by supplies billed to San Francisco. The need of troops in the East Bay district became apparent at once and Governor Pardee, who had established temporary headquarters in the city hall at Oakland, ordered one battalion of the Second Infantry, one battalion of the Fifth Infantry, and Troop D Cavalry, to be stationed there. The First Regiment of Infantry was also ordered to report for duty in the Bay district and arrived in Oakland April twenty-second and twenty-fourth. Upon arrival of the troops of the First Infantry in Oakland, the battalion of the Second Infantry which had been stationed in that city, was ordered to San Francisco. The troops of the National Guard on duty in Oakland and Alameda were relieved at various dates from May 12 to May 25, 1906.

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*Adjutant General Report 1906, page 8.

**Adjutant General Report, 1906, page 11.