Letter of Captain John Davis
(Mississippi river account)

Otsego Herald
March 28, 1812

Sweet Springs, Feb. 18, 1812

Mr. Pleasants - The following letter I received today from Capt. John Davis, of this place, and have sent you a rought draught, which if you have no previous account, please to publish it in your paper. Your's respectfully,

A. CAPERTON

Natchez (M.T.) Jan. 5

Dr. Caperton - You have in my former letters from New Madrid, a description of my journey to that place; and on my voyage down the Mississippi to this place, I shall give you an alarming detail of an earthquake.

We arrived at night on the 15th of December, at the 25th island, and on the 16th, at ten minutes past 2 o'clock A.M., we were surprised by the greatest emotion that can possibly be supposed on the boat, which I could compare to nothing more picturesque than that of a team of hourses running away with a wagon over the most rocky road in our part of the country. There were forty boats in the company, and each thought his boat adrift and running over the sawyers, but a man on board a boat lashed to us hinted it to be an earthquake. An old navigator of the river just above us hailed us, and said it was occasioned by the banks falling in. We were under a bluff bank, which immediately cast off, and fell in about a quarter of a mile, which drew us into the current on the right side of the islands, which was much the shallowest, where we stayed till day; but in the intermediate time we experienced about fifty partial shocks, which shook our boats with great agitation. At 7:12 (?) we heard a tremendous distant noise, and in a few seconds the boats, islands, and mainland became perfectly convulsed, the trees twisted and lashed togehter, the earth in all quarters was sinking and the water issued from the center of the Twenty-Fifth Isle, just on our left, and came rushing down its side in torrents, and on our right there fell at once thirty or forty acres ~~of~~ land - some say 300 acres - but as I was till then perfectly collected, and, although then much alarmed, was less so than any person in the company. The shocks at this time became frequent at about every fifteen minutes; the water rose from the first shock till about 8 o'clock that day; seven or eight feet perpendicular, and the current ran seven or eight miles per hour, as we ran from the Twenty-Fifth Island and landed on Flour Island, a distance of thirty-five miles in five

hours and twenty-five minutes, and lost half an hour endeavoring to make a landing at the lower end of Nine-Mile reach, which place and Ten-Mile reach were in perfect commotion. The logs, which had sprung up from the bottom of the river were so thick that it appeared almost impossible for a boat to find passage. There were three boats sunk, two of which belonged to Mr. Thos. Atwell, and laden from Kentucky, in value about $3,000; the other a family boat. The logs and roots we passed had the sand and mud on them, which, probably, for many years lay in the bottom of the river, and which gave the appearance of timbered fields from the Nine to Ten - mile reach, so that it appeared as if the order of nature had been reversed. We experienced frequent shocks of earthquakes for eight days, and I have heard of no place more convulsed than where I was.

Comments

1. *This letter is also listed in Cramer, etc. (1814), pg. 179.*

2. *Davis reference to nine- and ten-mile reach must be a mistake; tied up at Flour island (No. 33 on Cramer's map of the Mississippi), Davis must have been referring to Long Reach).*

Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum (1814). The Navigator, pub. by Cramer, Spear and Eichbaum, Robert Fergunson & Co. Printers, Pittsburg, PA, eight edition.