

2/19/1812 -- letter from John C. Edwards of Asheville, NC, dated 12/19/1811

Gentlemen,--I take the liberty to transmit the following account of an earthquake which happened on the night between the 15th and 16th inst.

For several nights previous, the Aurora Borealis brilliantly illuminated the sky with its trembling corruscations; the late appearance of a splendid comet, and the blood-like color of the sun for several days, had alarmed a great many superstitious people. They talked of war; and when the news of Governor Harrison's dear-bought victory arrived, it brought to their recollection all those appearances which are still believed (as these are now) to have been the awful precursors of that bloody war by which we gained our independence.

On Monday morning, about one o'clock, the inhabitants were roused from their peaceful slumbers by a dreadful sound: some waggons who were up the time it began, said it resembled, but was louder, than if 100 waggons were driven at full speed down the mountain. This gave us considerable alarm: the timid took to prayer, expecting every moment (as they say) to hear the sound of the last trumpet. The more courageous ventured to open their doors to discover what occasioned the noise. A sudden trembling of the earth caused fresh terror and alarm, from which we had not time to recover when we felt a violent shock which lasted about 3 minutes and was attended with a hollow rumbling noise, and ended with a dreadful crash leaving behind a strong sulphurous stench.

For the remainder of the night, all was still and calm, but was spent by us in trembling anxiety. When the wished for morning came, we were happy to find no lives were lost, but while some of us were in the street, congratulating each other on our happy escape, we were again alarmed by a much louder noise than any we had heard before. It was quickly followed by a more violent shock, which gave the earth an undulating motion resembling the waves of the sea. Two of those who were standing with me, were thrown off their feet, the rest of us with difficulty kept from falling, while two or three cows that were near us were unable to stand, and testified their fear by their loud bellowing, which with the cries of the women and children, and the terror that was depicted in the countenances of the men, presented a scene of terror I am unable to describe.

It is somewhat strange that its effects were more violent in the vallies than on the mountains: a tan yard, in a valley near this place, had several vats displaced--the edges of some were raised 3 feet above their former level, and others were moved partly round, and left in a zig-zag manner. It would far exceed the bounds of this letter to describe all of the phenomena produced by this awful convulsion of nature: rocks moved, hills shook, houses shattered, \&c.

A wonderful change has taken place in the manners of the people. I believe so many fervent prayers never were put up in this place as were on that fearful night and morning. I think what has been done may be termed a revival in religion.

I have just seen a gentleman from Knoxville, who passed Sunday night with Mr. Nelson at the warm springs: from his account his situation was more terrifying than ours. For several hours previous to the shock, a most tremendous noise was heard from the neighboring mountains. At intervals it was quiet, but would begin with so much violence, that each repetition was believed to be the last groan of expiring nature. The shock at that place did but little damage, except to a few huts that were built near the springs for the accomodation of

invalids. The fulminating of the mountains was accompanied with flashes of fire seen issuing from their sides. Each flash ended with a snap, or crack, like that which is heard on discharging an electric battery, but 1000 times as loud. This induced him to believe that the earthquake was caused by the electric fluid.

In the morning it was observed that a large stream of warm water (temperature Fah. 142 degrees) issued from a fissure in a rock on the side of the mountain, which had been opened the preceding night. While they were examining it, another shock was felt which lasted two minutes. Although perfectly calm, the tops of the trees appeared to be greatly agitated, the earth shook violently, and the water of the warm springs, at that time overflowed by French Broad River, was thrown up several times to the height of 30 or 40 feet.

Several masses of stone were loosed from their ancient beds and precipitated from the summits and sides of the mountains. One in particular, well known to western travelers by the name of the Painted Rock, was torn from its base and fell across the road that leads from hence to Knoxville: it has completely shut up the passage for wagons. A great many people who were moving westwardly, are in a pitable situation at this inclement season, being unable to proceed until a new road is made round the rock (no easy task): in this they are cheerfully assisted by their neighbors.

I have been for three months in those dreary regions, examing a mine of Cobalt. The ore is rich: it abounds with arsenic. In May we intend to calcine the orre and prepare it for exportation, or perhaps manufacture it into smalt. The mine is within a few miles of Mackeysville.

John C. Edwards