

1906 Letter to the San Francisco Health Department

Kristin Schmachtenberg



Burning of San Francisco, Mission District, April 1906.
(National Archives at College Park, MD, 111-AG-10)

On Wednesday, April 18, 1906, an earthquake, measuring 7.8 on the Richter magnitude scale and lasting 48 seconds, erupted along the San Andreas fault with a flash point originating in the San Francisco Bay area.¹ The magnitude of the earthquake was so great that it originally could not be measured on the contemporary Richter scale gauge. The force of the earthquake tore apart buildings and roads, causing water and gas mains to twist and break. The resulting effects of the quake ignited a series of fires throughout the city.

The three major San Francisco newspapers had to pool their resources in order to publish firsthand accounts from ground zero. Thus, the San Francisco *Call-Chronicle-Examiner* head-

lined the next day: “Earthquake and Fire: San Francisco in Ruins,” and the front page article opened with, “Death and destruction have been the fate of San Francisco.”² The early morning quake forever changed the lives of the 400,000 people living in San Francisco at the time, and left an estimated 250,000 homeless.³ The combined damage of the earthquake and fires left little whole or intact in the city of San Francisco.

Despite heroic efforts by city firefighters, military personnel, and the public, the fires burned uncontrollably for three days, destroying more than 500 city blocks. News of the San Francisco earthquake and fire quickly spread to the national newspapers. *The New York Times* reported, “Over 500 Dead,

Jefferson Square refugee camp, April 1906.
(National Archives at College Park, MD, 92-ER-28)



\$200,000,000 Lost in San Francisco Earthquake: Nearly Half the City is in Ruins and 50,000 are Homeless: Water Supply Fails and Dynamite is Used in Vain.”⁴ In addition, *The Washington Post* declared the event one of the “Greatest Disasters of History” long before exact numbers were even tallied.⁵

For the people of San Francisco, the immediate aftermath of the earthquake and fire included shock, panic, and confusion. With the general lack of control and growing numbers of displaced people, crowds began raiding and looting stores. As fear and uncertainty grew, Mayor Eugene Schmitz issued a bold edict, announcing that the U.S. Army and city police could take any measures necessary to keep and maintain order. Army soldiers were posted along San Francisco streets, and “maintained law and order, closed saloons, and evacuated residents.”⁶ Their very presence reassured the public of order in the midst of chaos.

City officials, inundated with requests for aid, quickly realized that they could not meet the immediate needs to feed, clothe, house, and monitor the refugee population, estimated to be more than half the residents of San Francisco. As a result, the army assumed significant control over the recovery process, most clearly witnessed by their operation of 21 official refugee camps within the city. Located in Golden Gate Park,

the Presidio, Fort Mason, Harbor View (Marina District), and other city squares and parks, at their height, these camps housed 20,000 people—nearly 10 percent of the refugees. In the Presidio area alone, four camps housed 16,000 people, and were built and maintained in strict military fashion and order.⁷

In the camps and at commissary food stations, servicemen were responsible for the receipt and fair distribution of food, clothing, and other supplies. However, not all of the rations came directly from army supply sources. Awareness of the basic needs and desperate conditions of San Francisco inspired people across the country to send supplies and donations.⁸

On May 8, 1906, Dr. M. C. Hassler, the chief sanitary inspector of the camp at Fort Mason, sent a letter to James W. Ward, president of the Health Commission, specifically regarding rations delivered to the camp. The Health Commission was, and remains, an agency of the municipal government of San Francisco. It played an important role in providing health care for the city’s homeless: requisitioning medical supplies, reporting on unsanitary conditions, authorizing remedial work, and compiling plans and making cost estimates for sanitation maintenance in San Francisco.

The letter, featured in this article, expressed concern over

HEADQUARTERS
HEALTH COMMISSION
HENRY DURANT SCHOOL
TURK ST., BET BUCHANAN & WEBSTER

San Francisco May 8, 1906. 190

James W. Ward, M. D.

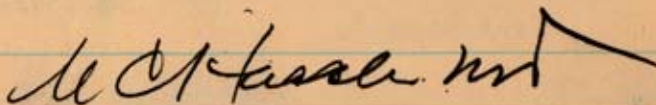
President Health Commission.

Dear Sir:-

I desire to call your attention to rations delivered to refugees at Fort Mason, a sample of which was brought to this office by Mrs. Larson of 1922 Filbert Street. Her rations, for a family of seven, consisted of one bunch of radishes, one head of lettuce, and four potatoes, all of which are unfit for food, by reason of their bruised condition and contamination with either coaloil of some oily substance, probably the result of improper handling; four ship's biscuits (or hard tack), and a package of tea contaminated with dirt, and one piece of meat (about three pounds), which has been fly-blown and is in an advanced state of decomposition.

This food is unfit as a ration, as well as inadequate for a family of seven. I trust that you will call the attention of the authorities at Fort Mason to this matter, to the end that the same may be immediately remedied.

Yours respectfully,



Chief Sanitary Inspector.

Col. Tourney has advised Dr. Ward the army is not issuing fresh vegetables and that the articles mentioned could not have been issued by the commissary department. Dr. Ward states that his department would look into this matter.

food rations received by Mrs. Larsen of Filbert Street, who was living at the camp with her family of seven. The single-page description provides insight into life in the refugee camps. It also prompts questions about how the camps cooperated with local organizations and how the refugees received assistance.

The comment on the bottom of this letter documents the involvement of the federal official, Lieutenant-Colonel G.A. Torney, chief surgeon of the army's Department of California, and commanding officer of the Army General Hospital at the Presidio. Torney was chief sanitary inspector in charge of enforcing sanitation standards in both official and unofficial camps throughout the city. His note explained the army's limited supplies of rations, and the firm belief that the rations

discussed in the letter could not have come from any military commissary.

Though the camps were temporary, the residents formed communities within them based on shared experiences and the desire to regain a degree of normalcy in their daily lives. The communal setting encouraged children to be part of play-groups, and dining halls were transformed into centers for social gatherings and the exchange of information. Though the camps were generally positive in their effect, Mayor Schmitz expressed concern that the excellent conditions and locations would make it hard for people to want to leave.⁹ They did leave, however, but the clean-up and rebuilding process took almost five years.

TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1 Draw a six-column chart on the board and label the columns: Type of Disaster, Location, Resulting Physical Damage, Economic Impact, Social Impact, and Political Impact. Lead a class discussion in which you ask students to identify various types of natural disasters and their results. Solicit responses from students that will enable you to complete the chart.

2 Distribute copies of the document to students or project it on an overhead. Ask one student to read it aloud while the others follow along. Lead a class discussion by posing the following questions: What type of document is it? What is the date of the document? Who was the intended recipient? Who created it? For what purpose? (It may be useful to encourage students to complete the Document Analysis Worksheet available from the National Archives at www.archives.gov/education/lessons/worksheets/written_document_analysis_worksheet.pdf.)

3 Inform students that the featured document was written 20 days after a major natural disaster. Ask students to consider clues in the document (e.g., location or conditions) and refer back to the chart they completed in Activity 1 to determine what type of disaster it was. After they conclude that it was an earthquake, share additional information from the background essay with them and emphasize that the disaster included a major fire.

4 Tell students that much of the notoriety of the San Francisco earthquake rests with the fact that it was the first natural disaster of its magnitude recorded through photography. Ask students to draw or describe a photograph to illustrate the featured document. Then show students the images that accompany this article and assign each student to research and select three additional images of the event available online from the National Archives in the ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc/, by conducting a key word search on "San Francisco earthquake." (More than 130 images are available from this source.)

5 Explain to students that at the time of the earthquake, the three major San Francisco newspapers had to pool their resources in order to publish first-hand accounts from ground zero. Assign students to work in groups of three to produce the front page of a 1906 newspaper reporting on the earthquake and fire. Direct them to include at least three photographs (from Activity 4), and write three articles for their paper. Suggest to students that the content of the articles reflect the issues included in the chart completed in Activity 1.

6 Assign pairs of students to take on the role of employees at the Heath Commission or as army officials whose job was to determine appropriate rations for the displaced citizens. Ask them to determine how much and what types of food would have been appropriate for a family of seven for one day. Then, combine two pairs of students and ask them to compare their lists and refer to the U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines for daily nutrition and determine to what extent their lists meet the government recommendations. (The guidelines are available online from the USDA at www.healthierus.gov/dietary-guidelines/index.html.) This activity could be extended to include student research into rationing efforts during World Wars I and II.

7 Lead a class discussion about emergency preparedness. Ask students to what extent they think the residents of San Francisco in 1906, such as the Larsens mentioned in the featured document, could have prepared for the earthquake and the fires that followed. Then remind them of the disasters they addressed in Activity 1, and ask students how they and their families might prepare for such events today. Encourage them to make a plan. The Ready America website from the Department of Homeland Security at www.ready.gov/america/index.html and the Are You Ready? website from the Federal Emergency Management Agency at www.fema.gov/areyouready/ may be of interest.

In the beginning, the refugee camps provided, and more importantly symbolized, the first step in the process of rebuilding the San Francisco area. The combined San Francisco earthquake and fires were described as one of the worst disasters of the twentieth century. At the time of the earthquake, only 478 deaths were reported by officials as a way to shield the public from the true horror of the event. Since then, the death toll has been revised, with a conservative estimate placing the total at around 3,000 people, but some studies have placed the count as high as 6,000.¹⁰ The total cost of the damage endured by San Francisco was estimated at \$400 million in 1906; in today's economy that figure would triple. 📷

Note: The document featured in this article comes from Health Commission, April–May 1906; Committee and Related Records Reports; Records of the Office of the Surgeon General (Army), Record Group 112; National Archives and Records Administration-Pacific Region (San Francisco). In addition, the included photographs also come from the National Archives and are available online in the ARC database at www.archives.gov/research/arc/.

Notes

1. U.S. Geological Survey, "Largest Earthquakes in the United States: (San Francisco, California, 1906)" neic.usgs.gov/neis/eq_depot/usa/1906_04_18.html.
2. The Virtual Museum of the City of San Francisco, Earthquake and Fire Newspaper Clippings, *The Call-Chronicle-Examiner*, San Francisco, April 19, 1906, www.sfmuseum.org/press/clip.html.

3. National Park Service, "The 1906 Earthquake and Fire," www.nps.gov/prsf/history/1906eq/.
4. *The New York Times*, April 19, 1906; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The New York Times* (1851-2002), 1.
5. *The Washington Post* (1857-Current File); Apr. 19, 1906; ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *The Washington Post* (1877-1989), 2.
6. National Park Service, "The 1906 Earthquake and Fire: Law Enforcement," www.nps.gov/prsf/history/1906eq/.
7. Ibid, "The 1906 Earthquake and Fire: Relief Efforts."
8. Ibid, "The 1906 Earthquake and Fire: Relief Camps."
9. Ibid.
10. Berkeley Seismology Laboratory, seismo.berkeley.edu/seismo/hayward/seismicity/hist_1906.html.

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