

Dealing with Disaster through Compassionate Giving: San Francisco Earthquake Survivors Write to President Theodore Roosevelt, January 3, 1909

Michael Hussey

On January 3, 1909, Emily Hamilton and Louis Overstreet wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt begging his “leave to work under your Committee for the relief of the sufferers of Italy.” The two were engaged and were willing to rush their marriage plans if the president needed them. “[I]f we receive a favorable reply from you, we shall be married at once and travel and work together.”¹ Their letter was prompted by the powerful

earthquake that struck the Sicilian city of Messina and southern Italy at 5:20AM on December 28, 1908. Estimates differ, but the earthquake caused somewhere between 72,000 and 200,000 deaths throughout Italy. The earthquake generated tsunamis with waves reaching nearly 40 feet in height in Sicily and the Italian mainland. The combination of the earthquake and the tsunami devastated Messina, the mainland city of

Regio di Calabria, and much of southern Italy. Aftershocks continued into 1913.² Survivors were in desperate need of food, shelter, and clothing. Some were relocated to other parts of Italy; others immigrated to the United States.

T.G. Balsito of Brooklyn, New York, himself an Italian immigrant, wrote to President Roosevelt that a “terrible calamity” had befallen the country of his birth.



Bread Line after the San Francisco earthquake,
1906 [ARC 306190]

State

Department of State, Berkeley, Cal.
2001 Berkeley

JAN 12 12 51 PM 1909
January 3, 1909.

Honorable Theodore Roosevelt,
President of the United States,
Washington, D. C.



Chief Clerk's Office
RECEIVED

Dear Sir,

We, the undersigned, respectfully beg leave to make application for positions to work under your Committee for the relief of the sufferers of Italy.

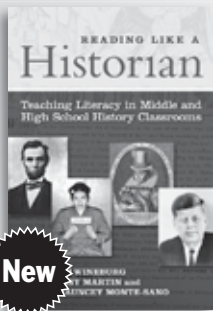
We are Californians, educated in the public schools and the State University at Berkeley, California. We worked for some time with the Red Cross and Relief Funds Committee and the Rehabilitation Committee of San Francisco after the earthquake of 1906. We found it a work of absorbing interest and were awarded with success. And now we would be glad to throw our most earnest efforts into the relief of our Italian brothers.

We are now engaged to be married and if we receive a favorable reply from you, we shall be married at once and travel and work together. We feel that we could accomplish a great deal more in the work in this way. Herewith we attach our individual statements.

Respectfully yours,

Emily F. Hamilton.
Louis F. Ouellet

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The purpose of his letter was not—or at least not only—to express his sorrow, but to “volunteer his services free of compensation” to help with relief efforts. The president, wrote Balsito, could “summon me at any hour.”³

Emily Hamilton and Louis Overstreet did not have the same type of connection to Italy, as did Balsito. Yet, they and many others shared a common reaction upon simply hearing of a great tragedy. They wanted somehow to be of help in relieving the suffering of the victims of a natural disaster. Hamilton and Overstreet mention no connection to Balsito or Italy in their letter, which is featured in this article. However, they did have something powerful in common with him and the residents of Messina, Regio di Calabria, and many other Italian towns. At 5:13AM on April 18, 1906, these Californians, “educated in the public schools and the State University at Berkeley” also experienced and survived a highly destructive earthquake. Then, their response was to work with the Red Cross and Relief Funds Committee and the Rehabilitation Committee of San Francisco to help those left homeless and hungry. Nearly three years later, they were eager to do the same in Italy.

Ultimately, the State Department responded to the couple that it appreciated their offers and would contact them should an opportunity for their service arise. The more immediate needs of the Italian people could be met through the Red Cross, however. This organization raised hundreds of thousands of dollars through donations both large and small. William Norton Griffith of Tomkins Cove, NY, contributed \$1 to “aid the Italian earthquake fund.”⁴ A church in Dunn, Washington, sent a check for \$11.65 “for the earthquake sufferers.”⁵ The Indianapolis Police Department donated \$225.50. These donations, all recorded in State Department files, were illustrations of the same impulse in reaction to the tragedy of a deadly natural disaster: compassion and a need, somehow, to help.

When teaching about natural disasters, it is easy to find data—and certainly, data helps our students to make important com-

parisons. It is also easy to find startling images and film footage—and such materials may serve to motivate our students towards preparedness. Including a letter such as the one written by Hamilton and Overstreet within a study of natural disasters may inspire students to action. Just as the young couple wanted to help, so do many of our students. As educators, we can help them find ways to do so. One of the simplest is alerting them to relief organizations such as the following:

The American Red Cross
www.redcross.org

UNICEF (United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund)
www.unicef.org

CARE
www.care.org

Note about the document and photo

Emily Hamilton and Louis Overstreet’s letter is File 17192/67-69 within the series Numerical and Minor Files of the State Department (General Records of the Department of State, Record Group 59) at the National Archives at College Park, MD. All other letters referred to in this article are also from File 17192.

The photograph “Bread Line after the San Francisco earthquake, 1906” is from the records of the Committee Papers of the Senate Committee on Printing of the 60th Congress, 12/1907-03/1909 (Records of the United States Senate, Record Group 46).

Note

1. File 17192/67-69; Numerical and Minor File; General Records of the Department of State (RG 59).
2. [See: http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquake/world/events/1908_12_28.php and <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/rescue/peopleevents/pandeAmex99.html>].
3. File 17192/52; Numerical and Minor File; RG 59.
4. File 17192/46-47; Numerical and Minor File; RG 59.
5. File 17192/61-62; Numerical and Minor File; RG 59.

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