David W Fletcher, ***Apocalyptic Rhetoric in the Old Southwest*** **(Doctor of Arts Dissertation; Murfreesboro, TN: Middle Tennessee State University, 2007)**

CHAPTER ONE:
SIGNS AND WONDERS AND THE NEW MADRID EARTHQUAKES

From December 1811 through February 1812, major earthquakes occurred along the lower Mississippi River near New Madrid in Missouri Territory. The earthquakes, estimated by seismologists to exceed 8.0 on the Richter scale, shook the entire region and caused disturbances as far away as the eastern coast of the United States, southern Canada, and northern Mexico.[1] Two thousand aftershocks followed, and one observer aptly noted that the earth "twitched and jerked like a side of freshly killed beef."[2] Although the earthquakes rocked a sparsely populated area (Fig. 1.1), their reach and consequence stirred the imaginations of those who witnessed, felt, or heard about them.

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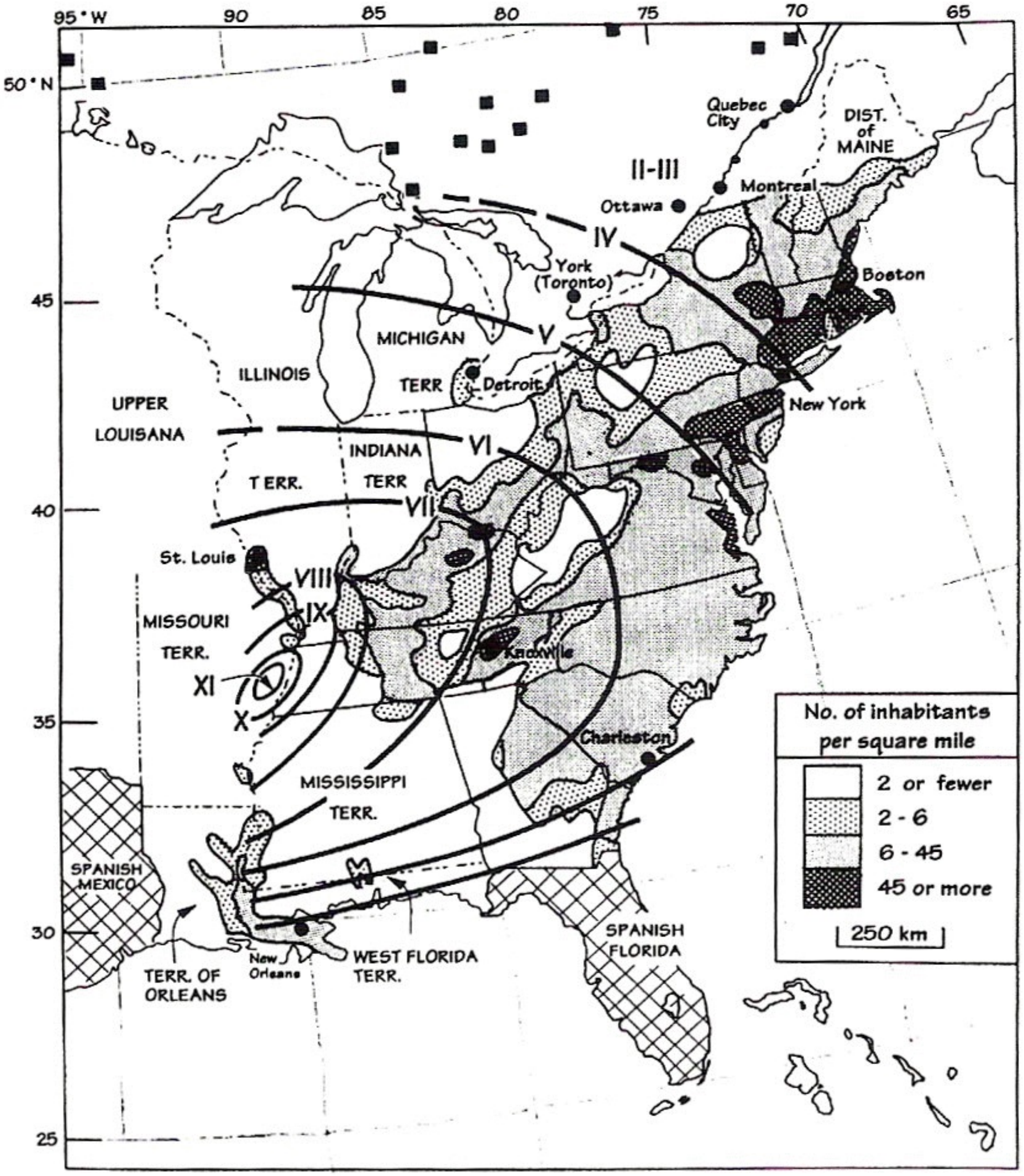
[1] On the extent of the earthquakes, see Myron L. Fuller, *The New Madrid Earthquake (A Scientific Factual Field Account)*, United States Geological Survey Bulletin 494 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912; repr., Marble Hill, Missouri: Gutenberg-Richter Publications, 1995), 13-31; James Lal Penick, Jr., *The New Madrid Earthquakes*, rev. ed. (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 1-14; Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 108-138. For a good description of the destruction, see William Atkinson, *The Next New Madrid Earthquake: A Survival Guide for the Midwest* (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 9-25.

[2] "Earthquakes and the New Madrid Fault: Seismic Activity, Maps, Information," n.d., http://www.showme.net/~fkeller/quake/ (accessed 16 April 2006); Fred Roe, "The Great New Madrid Earthquakes," 3 November 2002, http://www.tuppenceworth.ie/biglife/quake.html (accessed 16 April 2006).


95°W
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Quebec City
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York (Toronto)
Boston
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MICHIGAN
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ILLINOIS
UPPER LOUISANA
New York
VI
INDIANA TERR
T ERR.
VII
St. Louis
VIII
IX
MISSOURI TERR.
XI
X
Knoxville
No. of inhabitants per square mile
2 or fewer
2 - 6
6 - 45
45 or more
250 km
Charleston
MISSISSIPPI TERR.
SPANISH MEXICO
SPANISH FLORIDA
TERR. OF ORLEANS
New Orleans
WEST FLORIDA TERR.

Fig. 1.1. Zones of seismic intensity and population distribution at the time of the New Madrid earthquakes of 16 December 1811. Based on calculations of Arch C. Johnston and Eugene S. Schweig, "The Enigma of the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812," *Annual Review of the Earth and Planetary Sciences* 24 (1996): 343, in Jelle Zeilinga de Boer and Donald Theodore Sanders, *Earthquakes in Human History: The Far-Reaching Effects of Seismic Disruptions* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 110.

The earthquakes and the convergence of other remarkable sensations like the Great Comet of 1811 were pivotal events in the Old Southwest. For many they provoked images about the end of the world and sparked fires of spiritual renewal. In the ideological milieu of the frontier world, a world that believed in attributing supernatural meanings to extraordinary or unusual events, notions about divine intervention or magical efficacy prevailed.[3] Cataclysmic events, especially when they were destructive of life or property, often evoked the language of cosmic disturbance, universal upheaval, and world cessation. But these "signs" and "wonders" were not conclusive over a long period of time. Although the memory of the earthquakes lingered for years, the shock of their immediacy was lost. For the long-term, their potency to spellbind fickle mortals was temporary, and their ability to inspire apocalyptic language was fleeting. For the short-term, though, New Madrid residents, travelers in the area, and thousands of others endured a shaking on 16 December 1811 unlike anything they had experienced before.

One traveler on the Mississippi River at the time of the earthquakes was William Pierce. Pierce began his tour of the "Western Waters" from Pittsburgh, and he and his companions set out for New Orleans in a flat-bottomed boat near the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers on Friday, 13 December. By 15 December, just before the eruption of the quakes, he was "about 116 miles from the mouth of the Ohio" or in the vicinity of Little Prairie (near Caruthersville, Arkansas). Pierce recalled, "The night was extremely dark and cloudy; not a star appeared in the heavens, . . . indeed, the sky has been continually overcast, and the weather unusually thick and hazy."[4] A few hours before dawn, all hell literally broke loose. In his letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*, penned on Christmas Day at Big Prairie (near Helena, Arkansas), Pierce recounted colorfully the remarkable things he had seen since the quakes began.

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[3] See the helpful discussions by Jon Butler, "Toward the Antebellum Spiritual Hothouse," *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 225-256; and Peter W. Williams, "Religion, Time, and History: Providence and Prophecy," *Popular Religion in America: Symbolic Change and the Modernization Process in Historical Perspective* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1980), 119-130.

Agitated by the bizarre events, Pierce found it impossible to describe in ordinary language what had happened. He wrote:

> Tremendous and uninterrupted explosions, resembling a discharge of artillery were heard. . . . There was a volcanic discharge of combustible matter to great heights, and incessant rumbling was heard below, and the bed of the river was excessively agitated, whilst the water assumed a turbid and boiling appearance. . . . Never ever was a scene more replete with terrific threatenings of death. . . . We contemplated in mute astonishment a scene which completely beggars description, and of which the most glowing imagination is inadequate to form a picture.[5]

Pierce tried to explain the destructive forces of the earthquakes in language typical of early nineteenth-century science. But he was moved by the unusual happenings beyond "rational" descriptions to personify nature in poetic and even apocalyptic terms. He described the earth's wreckage with vivid, heightened language:

> Here the earth, river, &c. torn with furious convulsions, opened in huge trenches, whose deep jaws were instantaneously closed; there through a thousand vents sulphurous streams gushed from its very bowels leaving vast and almost

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[4] William Leigh Pierce, letter to the editor of the *New-York Evening Post*, 25 December 1811, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes, in the Western States, particularly on the Mississippi River; December 16-23, 1811* (Newburyport, Massachusetts: Thomas & Whipple, 1812), 3-4.

[5] Ibid., 6.

> unfathomable caverns. Every where Nature itself seemed tottering on the verge of dissolution. Encompassed with the most alarming dangers . . . it was a struggle for existence itself.[6]

Pierce wrote about other unsettling occurrences as well. He related the panic of the water fowl, the terror of the Indians, and the confusion of local inhabitants. He had heard how the suddenness and potency of the quakes put the people in the little town of New Madrid in a state of "confusion, terror and uproar." They were so disturbed that "those in the town were seen running for refuge to the country, whilst those in the country fled with like purpose towards the town." This chaotic spectacle of crazed turmoil (see Fig. 1.2) prompted Pierce to summarize his version of the quakes in language of cosmic disturbance. Instinctively, he perceived a coordinated effort of heaven and earth:

> All nature indeed seemed to sympathize in the commotion which agitated the earth. The sun rarely shot a ray through the heavens, the sky was clouded, and a dreary darkness brooded over the whole face of creation; the stars were encircled with a pale light, and the comet appeared hazy and dim.[7]

Pierce ended his letter with an amazing observation. He told the editor, "My dear Sir, I have given a superficial view of this awful phenomenon; not much to convey instruction upon a very interesting subject, as to gratify the curiosity of the public relative to so remarkable an event."[8] If not to be understood as a tactful use of modesty, Pierce's incredulity of the strict accuracy of his own eyewitness account puts doubt on the reliability of his testimony. Alternatively, if Pierce's letter can be regarded as a

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[6] Ibid., 6-7.

[7] Ibid., 11, 12.

[8] Ibid., 13.

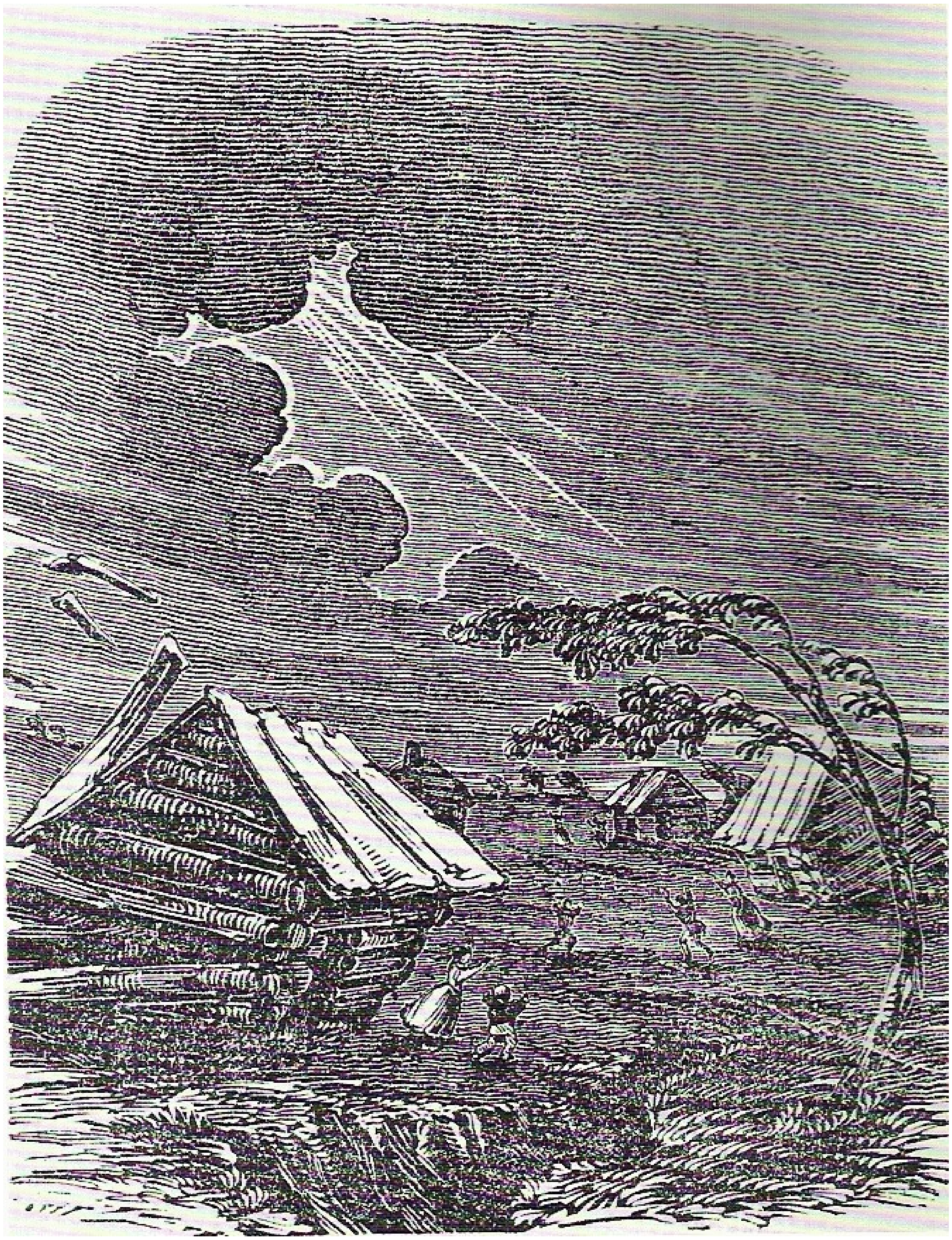

Fig. 1.2. "The Great Earthquake at New Madrid" woodcut, reproduced in Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of the Great West* . . . (Cincinnati: H. Howe, 1851), 237, from Norma Hayes Bagnall, *On Shaky Ground: The New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811 - 1812* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1996), 29.

dependable source for the earthquakes (e.g., because he included a lot of fascinating details "collected from facts"), then he assuredly bore witness to his own emotional upheaval. To be sure, Pierce wrote hastily from notes that were made in haste, so his narrative appears to be arranged logically in some places but jumbled up in other places. This can be accounted for quite simply. Pierce himself was disquieted by the earthquakes, and this led him to embellish his report with ideas of cosmic upheaval. He confessed to the *Evening Post* this lack of strict, rational analysis or, as he called it, "a superficial view . . . not much to convey instruction." For apocalyptic language nothing less should be expected than this mood of ambivalence and uncertainty.

Another witness to the power of the shocks and their devastating effects was John Bradbury, a Scottish naturalist who had come to America to study and collect botanical specimens for the Liverpool Philosophical Society. Like Pierce he had to resort to apocalyptic language to describe the significance of what he saw. On 14 December, Bradbury and his party arrived at New Madrid where he disembarked to pick up some supplies. His impression of the small outpost was one of disappointment, since he "found only a few straggling houses . . . [and] only two stores . . . very indifferently furnished."[9] The next morning they left New Madrid, passed the first or Upper Chickasaw Bluffs (near Osceola, Arkansas) in the course of the day, and by evening came in view of *Chenal du Diable* or Devil's Channel (i.e., Devil's Race Ground), a dangerously shallow point on the river. Because the sun had set already, Bradbury wisely instructed his French crew to moor the boat with its cargo of 30,000 pounds of lead to a small island about five hundred yards from the channel's entrance. There, in the middle of the river, the crew ate supper and settled down for the night.

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[9] John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811* . . . (Liverpool, England: Smith and Galway, 1817), 196.

At approximately two o'clock the next morning, Bradbury was roused from his sleep "by a most tremendous noise, accompanied by an agitation of the boat so violent, that it appeared in danger of upsetting." He scurried past four of his frightened boatsmen to the door of the cabin where he saw "the river as if agitated by a storm" and heard "the crash of falling trees and the screaming of wild fowl on the river." After the initial shock, Bradbury secured some "papers and money" and scrambled ashore to assess the damage. By candlelight he measured one "really frightful" chasm about four feet deep and over eighty yards long and continued to work with the crew throughout the night to safeguard their resources and their very lives.[10]

As the aftershocks persisted, he took note of the violence–loud noises, screeching birds, shaking and jarring, and crumbling riverbanks–and the panic and confusion of his crew. Surely Bradbury himself was disturbed by the situation and the extreme terror felt by his patron and the boatsmen. He noticed that "the men appeared to be so terrified and confused, as to be almost incapable of action," and he recorded over and over in French their agitation–*"O mon Dieu."* After daybreak as he and his companions watched canoes and small boats–lacking their passengers but not goods and belongings–float down the foamy, timber-filled river, he felt keenly their narrow escape from death. For Bradbury this sight was "a melancholy proof" that the people and crafts they had passed the previous day had succumbed to the earthquakes.[11] But his acquiescence to a superstitious rationale for the earthquakes seemed to indicate that the scientist's critical judgment had been clouded by his direct experience of the powerful forces at work.

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[10] Ibid., 199-201.

On 17 December, the day after the big shocks, Bradbury and his crew talked with twenty or so people who had gathered to pray in a log cabin near the Lower Chickasaw Bluffs (close to Memphis). He "found them almost distracted with fear" and saw "a bible lying open on the table." The weary, rattled people told the river travelers about ruptures in the earth from which many "had fled to the hills." One man, whom Bradbury portrayed as "possessing more knowledge than the rest," informed them that the earthquakes had been caused by the recent comet "that had appeared a few months before." The man then described the cosmic origin of the earth-shattering phenomena. The comet had:

> two horns, over one of which the earth had rolled, and was now lodged betwixt them: that the shocks were occasioned by the attempts made by the earth to surmount the other horn. If this should be accomplished, all would be well, if otherwise, inevitable destruction of the world would follow.

Incredibly, Bradbury judged the man "confident in his hypothesis, and myself unable to refute it, I did not dispute the point."[12] Either the Scotsman politely chose not to negate the man's folklore, or he himself had been shaken by the quakes to the point of irrationality. Perhaps Bradbury recognized above all else the "catch" or "escape" clause in the man's pronouncement–"If this should be accomplished . . . if otherwise . . ." This customary feature of apocalyptic language preserved the ambiguity of its predictive aspect and protected the utterance from failure, since one condition or the other would take place necessarily. All the same, Bradbury passed along this cosmic anecdote as a workable but apocalyptic reason for the origin of the earthquakes.

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[11] Ibid., 199-202.

[12] Ibid., 205-206. For testimony to the comet, see "New Madrid–references by specific subject," n.d., http://www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium/subject.html (accessed 16 April 2006).

In their acceptance of apocalyptic warrant for the earthquakes, eyewitnesses like Pierce and Bradbury were not alone. Following the initial upheavals, George Crist of Nelson County near Louisville confessed, "Everybody is scared to death. . . . A lot of people thinks that the devil has come here. Some thinks that this is the beginning of the world coming to a end." After more shocks in February 1812, Crist feared, "If we do not get away from here the ground is going to eat us alive. . . . We are all about to go crazy–from pain and fright." He moved away later with no regrets: "As much as I love my place in Kentucky–I never want to go back."[13] Among common folk, supernatural conjectures about the cause of the earthquakes wavered between demonic involvement and righteous indignation. Many believed the quakes signaled the imminence of the world's end, and this led to panic and a desire to escape. As Crist remarked, because he and his family did not want to experience any more tremors, they moved away to what they believed to be a safer place. This uneasiness, even of those who lived a distance from the epicenter, showed the extensive power of the earthquakes, their role in affecting people's apocalyptic consciousness, and their influence on migratory patterns.

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[13] George Heinrich Crist, unknown documents, 16 December 1811, 23 January and 8 February 1812, and 14 April 1813, submitted by Floyd Creasy, a descendant of Crist, to "The Virtual Times: The New Madrid Earthquake," n.d., http://hsv.com/genlintr/newmadrd/accnt3.htm (accessed 16 April 2006).

Religious leaders especially noticed this uneasiness among settlers in the region. Preachers attested significant numbers of baptisms and conversions, since sinners wanted to avoid further outpourings of God's wrath. In the immediate vicinity of the quakes, membership in the Methodist Church increased the following year by a whopping fifty percent. Preachers labeled these end-of-the-world converts "earthquake Christians."[14] Peter Cartwright, a Methodist preacher who had moved to the Cumberland region from Virginia, noticed that the severe earthquakes in the winter of 1812 "struck terror to thousands of people, and under the mighty panic hundreds and thousands crowded to, and joined the different Churches."[15] At Nashville he experienced the following reaction during a turbulent aftershock:

> Early the next morning I arose and walked out on the hill near the house where I had preached, when I saw a negro woman coming down the hill to the spring, with an empty pail on her head. . . . When she got within a few rods of where I stood the earth began to tremble and jar; chimneys were thrown down, scaffolding around many new buildings fell with a loud crash, hundreds of the citizens suddenly awoke, and sprang into the streets; loud screaming followed, for many thought the day of judgment was come. The young mistresses of the above-named negro woman came running after her, and begging her to pray for them.

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[14] See "Arkansas Stories: The Great Earthquakes of 1811," n.d., http://www.arkansasstories.com/newmadrid-earthquake-two.html (accessed 16 April 2006); Louisa Dalton, "Do old glaciers cause new earthquakes in New Madrid, Missouri?" 7 March 2001, http://www.stanford.edu/dept/news/pr/01/glacier37.html (accessed 16 April 2006); and "The Arkansas News: Massive Earthquakes Shake Mississippi River Country," n.d., http://www.oldstatehouse.com/educational_programs/classroom/arkansas_news/detail.asp?id=443&issue_id=32&page=4 (accessed 16 April 2006).

[15] Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright* (1856; repr., Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1956), 126.

> She raised the shout and said to them, "My Jesus is coming in the clouds of heaven, and I can't wait to pray for you now; I must go and meet him. I told you so, that he would come, and you would not believe me. Farewell. Halleluiah! Jesus is coming, and I am ready. Halleluiah! Amen." And on she went, shouting and clapping her hands, with the empty pail on her head.[16]

Sentiments like these that saw in the earthquakes a sure sign of the imminent end of the world and the salvation of righteous believers came predominantly from church-goers and preachers on the frontier. The catastrophic earthquakes and the concurrent comet presaged for Christians the end of the world and the beginning of divine judgment–for the saints a time of shouting hallelujahs in anticipation of meeting Jesus and for sinners "a time of great horror."[17] But the impression of apocalyptic ideas and their lasting effect was uncertain and unpredictable.

Like the Methodists, the Baptists enjoyed quick evangelistic growth during this time of nature's fury. But a good number of these new believers turned away from the church once the earthquakes subsided. At a funeral service in the fall of 1811, Reuben Ross, a Baptist elder from Stewart County, Tennessee, observed a great light in the northwestern sky just as the casket was put in the grave at dusk. The comet caused "a deep sensation" among the startled mourners who believed they saw a "harbinger of impending calamity." When the earthquakes came later, many converted and according to Ross became "earthquake Christians."[18] Many who "got religion" in a hurry during the shockwaves lost it soon after the rumblings stopped. Ideas about the end of the world and its imminent destruction commanded their attention only as long as the immediate physical evidence of the earth's trembling backed up the apocalyptic claims. And some disagreed with apocalyptic expectations on grounds of strict "logical" reasoning. One rustic individual inferred that the end was not imminent. Powerful shocks had "rudely bounced" him "from his bed in the darkness," but he was certain that "Judgment Day" could not come at "night."[19]

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[16] Ibid.

[17] James B. Finley, *Autobiography of Rev. James B. Finley, or, Pioneer Life in the West*, ed. W. P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Cranson and Curtis, 1854), 238.

[18] James Ross, *The Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires and Rodgers, 1882), 201, 204.

Other settlers were not so fickle in their response to the earthquakes. As a result of his experience, Jacob Bower, a Pennsylvania emigree who lived in Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, got convicted permanently. He reminisced about "the ever memorable morning" of 17 December 1811:

> When most people were in their beds sound asleep, there was an Earthquake, verry violent indeed. . . . I expected immediate distruction [and] had no hope of seeing the dawn of another day. Eternity, oh Eternity was just at hand, and all of us unprepared; just about the time the sun arose, as I supposed, for it was a thick, dark and foggy morning, there was another verry hard shock–lasted several minutes terible indeed. To see everything touching the earth, shakeing–quivering, trembling; and mens hearts quaking for fear of the approaching judgment. Many families ran together and grasped each other in their arms. One instance near to where I lived, the woman & five children, all gathered around her husband, crying O my husband pray for me, The children crying, Father, pray for me, O, pray for me, for the day of Judgment is come, and we are unprepared![20]

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[19] Mary Trotter Kion, "Great American Plains: Earthquake in the Year 1811," 2 November 2001, http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/great_american_plains/81962 (accessed 16 April 2006).

[20] "The Autobiography of Jacob Bower: A Frontier Baptist Preacher and Missionary," in William W. Sweet, ed., *Religion on the American Frontier: The Baptists 1783-1830* (1931; repr., New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 191.

Bower maintained that the tremors continued for about two years but were hardly noticeable, and Deists and Universalists "in those days were scarce." When the quakes eased off, many who "converted" became uninterested in church and religion. For his part, Bower remained steadfast, took up preaching, and surmised that the earthquakes produced fewer apostates than the revivals he knew about. He wrote:

> It was frequently said by the enimies of religion, the Baptists are all *skakers*, that when the Earth is don shaking, they will all turn back, and be as they were before. But . . . I have witnessed about nineteen revivals of religion 11 in Kentucky, 6 in Illinois, and 2 in Missouri. And I have the pleasure of being aquainted with many, who were brought in, the time of the Earthquake, and these were as fiew, and perhaps fiewer apostates among them, as any revival I have ever seen.[21]

Perhaps in this assessment Bower reflected his own fidelity to Christian ministry more than anything else, but he did raise an important point about one difference in the revivals and the earthquakes. The earthquakes, unlike the revivals that operated under the aegis of church leaders and had some human controls, came suddenly without warning and caught people by surprise. This had the obvious effect of literally shaking people to act, to do something in response to the earthquakes. How people reacted often depended on what they believed about the earthquakes. They had a variety of options from which to choose, because interpretations of the earthquakes differed.

At the onset of the earthquakes people were curious and wanted to know how and why the earthquakes occurred. The exceptional amplitude of the tremors–by one estimate felt in twenty-seven states–resulted in many newspaper reports across the United States and Canada (e.g., in St. Louis, New Orleans, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, New York,

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[21] Ibid., 200.

Quebec, and Montreal).[22] Variant descriptions came from cities, towns, and rural areas, even though the essential features of the quakes were the same. Some people wondered about the "how" or the nature of the quakes. Jared Brooks of Louisville, Kentucky, crafted a rudimentary measuring device to keep a tally on the earthquakes and classify them according to intensity. Brooks apparently was satisfied with the empirical aspect of his attempt at primitive seismology and did not speculate on any nonphysical cause of the quakes. But the experiment itself called into question unstudied explanations, whether natural or supernatural, as something deficient.[23] Others investigated the "why" or rationale of the earthquakes. In his "Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes," Senator Samuel Mitchill from New York collected extensive evidence and summarized the particulars in ten principal points. He concluded that he gave enough data to satisfy the proponents of three major hypotheses used "to explain the awful phenomena of earthquakes . . . the *mechanical* reasoner . . . the *chemical* expositor . . . [and] the *electrical* philosopher."[24]

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[22] Otto W. Nuttli, ed., "Appendix–Nuttli 1973 Paper, Contemporary Newspaper Accounts of Mississippi Valley Earthquakes of 1811-1812," February 1972, http://www.eas.slu.edu/Earthquake_Center/SEISMICITY/Nuttli.1973/nuttli-73-app.html (accessed 16 April 2006); R. Street, "A Contribution to the Documentation of the 1811-1812 Mississippi Valley Earthquake Sequence," *Earthquake Notes* 53, no. 2 (April-June 1982), http://www.eas.slu.edu/Earthquake_Center/SEISMICITY/Street/rstreet.html (accessed 16 April 2006).

[23] Fuller, *The New Madrid Earthquake*, 22-26, 33.

[24] Samuel L. Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes which occurred on the 16th day of December, 1811 etc.," *Transactions of the Literary and Philosophical Society of NY*, Vol. 1 (May 1814): 281-307; transcribed by Susan E. Hough, May 2000, http://pasadena.wr.usgs.gov/office/hough/mitchill.html (accessed 16 April 2006).

After the shocks died down and the excitement of the immediate disruptions faded away, the earthquakes began to take on new meanings in the memory of individuals and society in general. There was of course the customary use of the earthquakes by Christian evangelists as a rhetorical tool to warn sinners of impending judgment and to persuade them to get saved. But not everyone was inclined to accept supernatural explanations of the earthquakes prima facie. Empiricists like Brooks stayed busy well after the initial shocks with physical observations and record-keeping. Politicians such as Mitchill obliged diverse popular opinions, put forth considerable information about what had happened, and simply ignored supernatural hypotheses. Even poets, who tried to make sense of it all through nonliteral, metaphorical elucidations, did not feel compelled to invoke divine fiat. In this spirit, Henry Schoolcraft waxed poetic and scribed:

> And the earth, as if grasped by omnipotent might,
> Quaked dreadful, and shook with the throes of affright,
> Deep northwardly rolled the electrical jar,
> Creating amazement, destruction, and war;
> The rivers they boiled like a pot over coals,
> And mortals fell prostrate and prayed for their souls:
> Every rock on our borders cracked, quivered, and shrunk,
> And Nackitosh tumbled, and New Madrid sunk.[25]

This mixed utility of the earthquakes accentuated their multi-causal nature as well as their unknown origin, but apocalyptic imagery in depictions of the earthquakes did not disappear. Based on the understanding of the earthquakes as "signs" and "wonders," memory of them persisted and new meanings for their outbreak were found. Travelers who came afterwards to the lower Mississippi region took note of their impact on people's memory and the physical landscape. One of these visitors, Charles Latrobe, contended in his travel notes that portents like the splendid comet, rivers flooding, unprecedented sickness, and a spirit of restlessness "combined to make the year 1811 the Annus Mirabilis of the West."[26] Latrobe, a London-born Moravian gentleman, toured the United States beginning in 1832, and his version of the earthquakes personified the earth as alive, distressed, and hungry. He said:

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[25] Henry R. Schoolcraft, “Transallegania or the Groans of Missouri,” from *Journal of a Tour into the Interior of Missouri and Arkansaw . . . in the Years 1818 or 1819* (London: Richard Phillips and Company, 1821), quoted at “Local History Website of the Southern Missouri State University Department of History: Schoolcraft’s Journal,” n.d., http://history.missouristate.edu/FTMiller/LocalHistory/Schoolcraft/schcrftpoem.htm (accessed 9 August 2006). In Appendix A, compare “A call to the people of Louisiana,” an apocalyptic ballad about the earthquakes that was composed by an unknown author about 1812.

> The vicinity of New Madrid seems to have been the centre of the convulsion. There . . . the earth broke into innumerable fissures. To the present day . . . slight shocks . . . are there felt . . . strange sounds may at times be heard, as of some mighty cauldron bubbling in the bowels of the earth. . . . Thousands of acres with their gigantic growth of forest and cane were swallowed up, and lakes and ponds innumerable were formed. The earth in many parts was observed to burst suddenly open, and jets of sand, mud and water, to shoot up into the air. . . . Islands disappeared, and in many parts the course of the river was completely changed. . . . The gaping earth unfolded its secrets, and the bones . . . hidden within its bosom for ages, were brought to the surface. Boats and arks . . . were swallowed up. . . . And finally, you may still meet and converse with those, who were on the mighty river of the West when the whole stream ran toward its sources for an entire hour.[27]

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[26] Charles Joseph Latrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833*, vol. 1 (London: R. B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), 102. Compare John D. W. Guice, "1811-Year of Wonders in the Mississippi Territory," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 1 (June 1999): 167-170; and Jay Feldman, "A Time of Extraordinaries," *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes* (New York: Free Press, 2005), 3-22.

[27] Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, 110-111. Compare Eliza Bryan, letter to Reverend Lorenzo Dow, 22 March 1816, in *History of Cosmopolite* (Philadelphia: J. B. Smith, 1859), 344-346, quoted at "New Madrid Eyewitness Accounts," n.d., http://www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium/eyewitness/bryan.html (accessed 16 April 2006).

Latrobe also believed the year's concentration of wonders–comet, floods, and earthquakes–pointed to a supernatural explanation. Latrobe, however, moved beyond incredible and inexplicable occurrences to what could be postulated and explained reasonably. While conceding the emotional appeal of fabulous events that were beyond human control, he hinted at their value for replication by humans on the same landscape the earthquakes had touched. He summed up his argument:

> It was at this very epoch in which so many natural phenomena were combining to spread wonder and awe, that man too, in the exercise of that power with which his Creator has endowed him, was making his first essay in that region, of an art, the natural course and further perfection of which was destined to bring about yet greater changes than those affected by the flood and earthquake: and at the very time that the latter were agitating the surface, the very first steam-boat was seen descending the great rivers, and the awe-struck Indian on the banks beheld the Pinelore flying through the turbid waters.[28]

By transferring the "power" of radical change from divine to human initiative, Latrobe shifted the responsiveness of humans in general (i.e., "wonder and awe") to the Indians particularly (i.e., "the awe-struck Indian"). He thereby broadened the meaning of the concurrence of these wonders to include pro-settler and anti-Indian goals and designs. As a result, he regarded the pangs of the earth and the portents in the heavens to be providential signs for the westward trek of explorers and settlers particularly through new technologies like the steam engine that had been developed about the same time. This more complex reading of the earthquakes by Latrobe fit with the circumstances of the time as the country pressed further westward during the 1830s.

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[28] Latrobe, *Rambler in North America*, 103.

Before Latrobe, others had been alert to these signs of the times. One writer to the *Connecticut Mirror* chided New Englanders for their lack of responsiveness. "Had such a succession of Earthquakes as have happened within a few weeks been experienced in this country five years ago, they would have excited universal terror," the writer quipped. The contributor believed the "extent of territory" shaken by the earthquakes was "astonishing" and suggested a ready explanation: "What power short of Omnipotence could raise and shake such a vast portion of this globe?" For this Christian interpreter of events, the evidence was too weighty to withhold judgment. He wrote:

> *The period* is portentous and alarming. We have within a few years seen the most wonderful eclipses, the year past has produced a magnificent comet, the earthquakes writhing the past two months have been almost without number–and in addition to the whole, we constantly "*hear of wars and summons of wars*." May not the same enquiry be made of us that was made by the hypocrites of old–Can ye not discern the signs of the times?"[29]

Another unnamed contributor to the *Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser* posted a shrewd observation almost two weeks prior to the initial outbreak of earthquakes in December of 1811. The anonymous contributor remarked that:

> Fires, storms, tornadoes, freshets, duels, murders, and assassinations, have been more active . . . in the current year, than in any within the recollection of the oldest member of our society. Some of the *augurers* think those events are only the forerunners of greater calamities; that the wandering meteor called the Comet has been universally acknowledged by all nations of the harbingers of evil [*sic*, as the harbinger of evil]. Much as the deist and free-thinker may laugh at the signs and omens looked at and respected by the ancients, yet the evidence is strong in

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[29] "Signs of the Times," *Connecticut Mirror* (Hartford), 10 April 1812, quoted in Nuttli, "Appendix–Nuttli 1973 Paper, Contemporary Newspaper Accounts of Mississippi Valley Earthquakes of 1811-1812."

> favor of the doctrine. Unfortunately for us, there is a science lost to the world . . . Astrology.[30]

This writer gave no hint about personal religious persuasion apart from belief in the "science" of astrology. This belief unquestionably went beyond traditional Christian teachings about God's transcendence over the world and providential care of its creatures. Astrological cults had their own ideas about control of the world and their own set of rituals performed by priestesses and priests (i.e., "augurers") to explain the dark secrets of the cosmos and foretell the future. This cut hard against Christian claims that the "word of God" was revealed and the "keys of Death and Hades" were held by Jesus and his apostles exclusively.

But even from a Christian perspective the anonymous contributor to the New Orleans newspaper was right about one thing. Astrology was an ancient practice with centuries of tradition in support of it. With a heritage that possibly exceeded that of Christianity, Deism, and "Free-thinking" combined (at least by a standard of longevity), astrology could do what progressive and rationalistic ideology could not do–grasp and make sense out of the mysteries of the universe. According to this contributor's cosmic assessment, the "wandering meteor" and other strange occurrences were ill omens of some dark disaster for humanity despite the disbelief of scoffers and the ridicule of rationalists. What "greater calamities" might occur remained unclear and undefined by the writer. In its uncertainty, the apocalyptic language of this non-Christian corresponded to the apocalyptic rhetoric of many Christians. In its foresight of the earthquakes' imminence, it echoed the predictions of the famed Shawnee chief Tecumseh who two months earlier had prophesied the comet and the earthquakes and ascribed cosmic meaning to what was happening across the continent. But the "greater calamities" came and went, and the end of the world did not come. For all these apocalyptic visionaries, the value of their insights would have to wait until another catastrophic moment.

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[30] *Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser* (New Orleans), 4 December 1811, quoted in "Nicholas Roosevelt's 1811 Steamboat New Orleans: Louisiana Gazette," n.d., http://www.myoutbox.net/nrlgaz.htm (accessed 16 April 2006).