

REDWOOD IN THE 1906 SAN FRANCISCO EARTHQUAKE & FIRES

A PHOTO ESSAY

At approximately 5:12am on April 18, 1906, the residents of San Francisco and surrounding areas awoke to an ominous rumbling that signaled the beginning of one of the worst natural disasters in American history. As destructive and terrifying though the estimated 8.3 magnitude earthquake

was, the fires that raged in many parts of city afterward proved far worse. Most buildings had been made of wood, a material far more plentiful and inexpensive than brick as a result of the city's central place in the coastal lumber trade.¹ Fires accounted for the majority of the resulting damage, leaving approximately 4.7 square miles (the equivalent of 508 city blocks) of San Francisco scorched in their wake.²

The 1906 San Francisco catastrophe was one of the first natural disasters for which documentation through photography and motion picture film was available. As a result, many astonishingly vivid and well-preserved visual records of the event are housed in libraries and archival repositories across the country, including the National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Museum of the City of San Francisco, and the Bancroft Library

of the University of California-Berkeley.

In the collections of the Forest History Society can be found a somewhat different perspective on the 1906 disaster and its aftermath—a photo album prepared by the San Francisco-based Redwood Car Shippers Bureau and now in the Davenport, Peters Auxiliary Photo Collection in the Forest History Society Archives. The album promoted the superiority of redwood as a construction material for its fire-resistant and non-resinous qualities. The album, dated June 21, 1906, shows the destruction from various points in the city where the progress of the fires was apparently halted in the midst of frame, redwood buildings. The album is also viewable on line at: www.foresthistory.org/Research/Redwood/ExhibitEnter.html.

The outcome of the San Francisco disaster did seem to

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substantiate the prior claims of the lumber and insurance industries as to the desirable characteristics of California redwood. An *American Lumberman* article written six weeks after the disaster touted:

*This no longer is a theory but a fact that has been proved by a test which none can dispute as the most severe to which any lumber has been subjected in modern history.... It is hardly possible that this showing will not have the effect of bringing the California lumber into greater favor in all sections to which it now finds its way, and it may be instrumental in opening to it markets which heretofore have not received it with open arms.*³

Whether through shrewd marketing or sheer necessity, the desired effect of promotional efforts like those of the Redwood Car Shippers Bureau was realized. In the midst of the timber boom that followed from San Francisco's massive rebuilding efforts, California redwood was in the highest demand. As Philip L. Fradkin notes in *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself*, "Loggers worked unceasingly during daylight hours. Mills operated on 'full double-time.' The amount of redwood shipped to San Francisco in October 1906 was double that of the same month in the previous year, which had also been a record month."⁴ Demand for other types of wood to help with the reconstruction effort similarly increased, putting unprecedented pressure on regional lumbermen to supply lumber. The short-lived but intensive and indiscriminate logging of forests in northern California, Oregon, and Washington following the earthquake undoubtedly took its toll on the land, a toll that has not been widely examined by historians and other social scientists. The topic of the impact of recovery on the land

and on the timber and lumber industries remains ripe for further investigation.

A century removed from the calamities in San Francisco, we are forced to consider not just the ecological consequences of natural disasters and our responses to them, but also our own roles in compounding such disasters. As we continue to deal with an unnerving string of catastrophic natural events in this century, we must take what lessons we can from the past. □

Elizabeth Hull is the Forest History Society's Technical Services Archivist/Librarian. She created the online photo exhibit from which these photos originate. The accompanying captions are from the original photo album.

NOTES

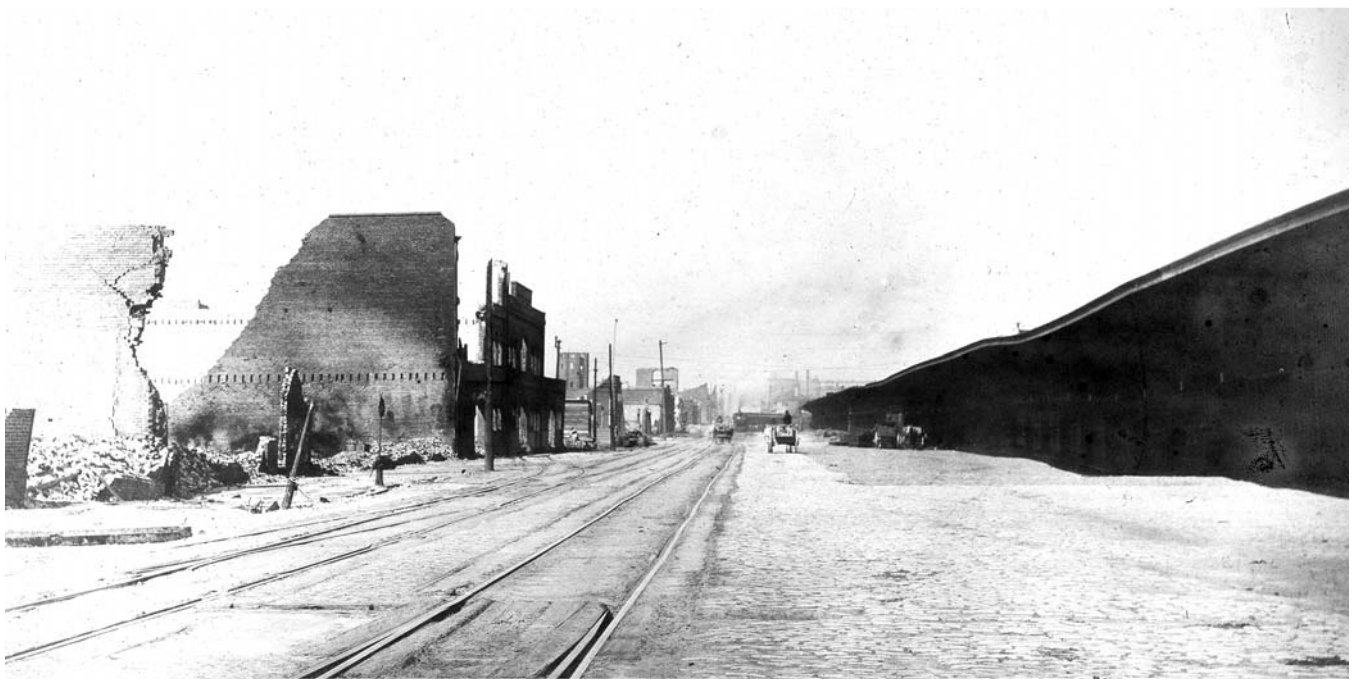
1. Kerry A. Odell and Marc D. Weidenmier, "Real Shock, Monetary Aftershock: The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and the Panic of 1907," *Journal of Economic History*, Vol. 64, No. 4 (December 2004): 1002–1027. The earthquake immediately triggered selling on the New York Stock Market and depressed the market. Insurance payouts from European-based companies after the earthquake had an impact on international financial markets and triggered the Panic of 1907, one of the shortest but harshest in U.S. history.
2. Philip L. Fradkin, *The Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906: How San Francisco Nearly Destroyed Itself* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006), 187.
3. "Redwood's Claims as a Fire Resistant Substantiated," *American Lumberman* (May 26, 1906): 25.
4. Fradkin, *Great Earthquake and Firestorms of 1906*, 246.



All the structures opposite and west of these buildings shown in this picture, for a distance of more than two miles, were destroyed by the fire of April 18th, 1906, which was stopped opposite these Redwood houses on East Street, which is 150 feet wide.



All the structures opposite and south of the buildings shown in this picture, for many blocks, were destroyed by the fire of April 18th, 1906, which was stopped opposite these Redwood houses on Golden Gate Ave., which is 68 ft. 9 in. wide.



At the great fire of San Francisco all buildings were destroyed for a distance of more than two and a half miles north and in front of these Redwood freight sheds, the latter remaining intact. Townsend Street is 82 ft. 6 in. wide.



All the structures opposite and east of the buildings shown in this picture, for many blocks, were destroyed by the fire of April 18th, 1906, which was stopped opposite these Redwood fronts on Dolores Street, which is 100 feet wide. The last building on the left, with white front and with a cross at the peak of the roof is the Old Mission Church and is more than 130 years old.



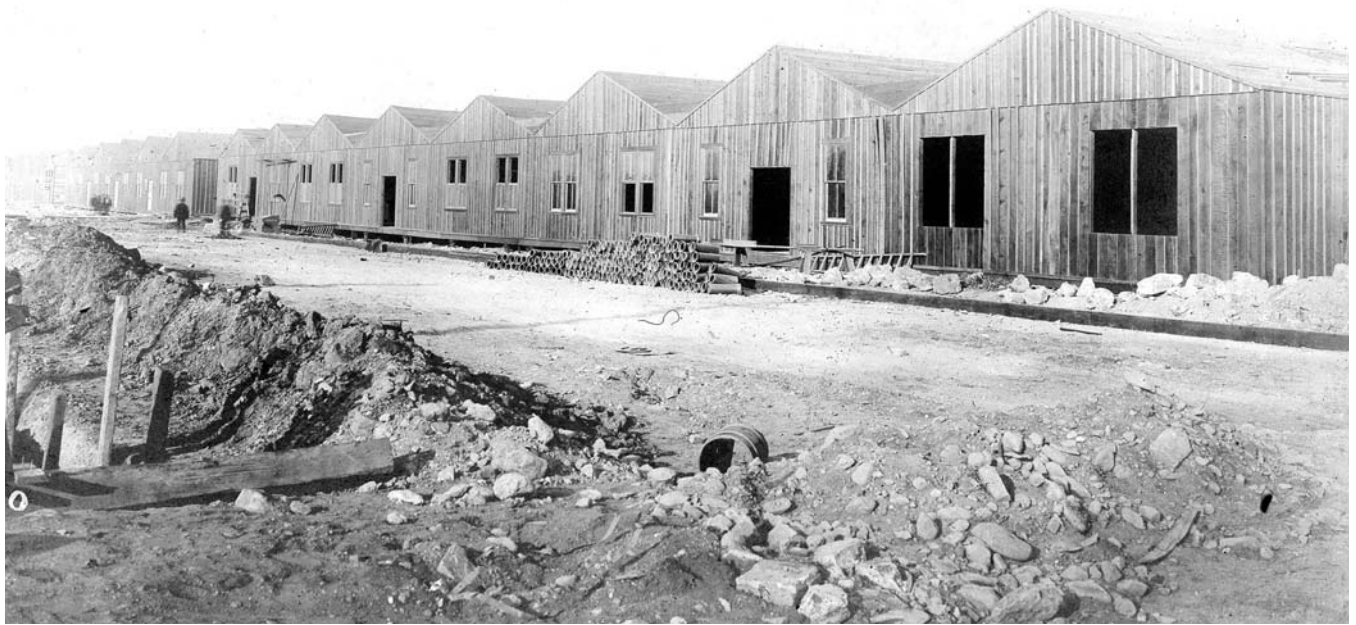
All buildings on Mission Street, north and east of these houses, to San Francisco Bay, a distance of more than two miles and a half, were destroyed by the great fire that was finally stopped at these Redwood fronts. The standing telephone poles are also Redwood. Mission Street is 82 feet 6 in. wide.



All the structures opposite and east of the buildings, shown in this picture, for a distance of more than two miles, were destroyed by the fire of April 18th, 1906, which was stopped opposite these Redwood houses on Van Ness Ave., which is 125 feet wide.



All structures opposite and north of the buildings shown in this picture, for many blocks, were destroyed by the fire of April 18th, 1906, which was stopped opposite these Redwood houses on 20th Street, which is only 64 feet wide.



Twenty-three Redwood warehouses, with frontage of 700 feet, erected since the fire by some of the largest jobbing houses on the Pacific Coast.



The new, temporary structure of Wells Fargo & Co. Express, which was erected since the fire of April 18th, 1906, and which is located in the burned district on south [sic] side of Golden Gate Ave., is all of Redwood exterior finish.