

*The San Francisco Earthquake of 1906 still resonates today as we mark its centennial. Forest Service Region 5 historian Pamela Conners discovered this when she found this letter from forester E. T. Allen to Gifford Pinchot about the efforts of local Forest Service personnel to provide relief to earthquake survivors. She found the letter shortly after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita struck the Gulf Coast in 2005 and the federal government was still trying to cope with those disasters.*

# A FIRST-HAND REPORT

## CONCERNING THE FIRE AND EARTHQUAKE SITUATION IN SAN FRANCISCO, 1906

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**F**or more than 100 years, the U.S. Forest Service has responded to catastrophic events besides wild fires, including most recently the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks on September 11, 2001, and the hurricane season of 2005. One of the first major non-wildfire catastrophes Forest Service personnel ever

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responded to was the San Francisco earthquake on April 18, 1906. In this letter to Chief Forester Gifford Pinchot written only days after the earthquake, forester Edward T. Allen documented the difficulties of responding to the earthquake and resulting fires that ravaged the city and left between 200,000 and 350,000 without food or shelter. The initial lack of coordinated effort and the struggles over which agency was in charge of relief efforts has a familiar ring to them.

At the time of the earthquake, Edward Allen was California's state forester. Chief Pinchot had recommended him in 1905 after Allen worked for Pinchot's Bureau of Forestry and the General Land Office as a boundaryman and conducting various forest studies. Allen continued serving as a part-time federal forest inspector while state forester. In June 1906, just two months after the earthquake, he returned full-time to the newly constituted U.S. Forest Service. Among his many achievements with the agency,

Allen is credited with writing the first *Use Manual* and (along with William C. Hodge, Jr.) designing the Forest Service insignia. Allen was a founding member of the Society of American Foresters and remained active in forestry matters until his death in 1942.

Allen's letter mentions—in order of appearance—Marshall, Cox, Kent, Hatton, Lull, Ayres, Von Wernstad, Wheaton, Smith, Wilson, and Flintham. Robert B. Marshall was the geographer in charge of the United States Geological Survey's Topographic Mapping Office in Sacramento when the earthquake struck. He was ordered by survey director Charles D. Walcott to assist with relief work on behalf of the Department of Interior. As will be seen, Marshall's recollection of certain events after the earthquake was at odds with Allen's. Marshall eventually became the survey's chief geographer. His plan for a system of storage reservoirs along the Sacramento River, proposed in 1919, envisioned making California "the world's greatest garden." Though it took

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BY PAMELA CONNERS

several years for the state legislature to embrace the idea, Marshall eventually became known as “The Father of the Central Valley Project.”

Cox is most likely William T. Cox, another of Pinchot’s hand-picked boundarymen, who eventually became Minnesota’s first state forester. Kent is probably William H. B. Kent, who worked with several others to create the first forest reserve working plan around 1902. He was selected by Pinchot (along with Allen, Smith Riley, and H. J. Tompkins) for leadership positions in the Department of Interior’s Division of Forestry before the transfer of the forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture. A forest assistant at the time of the earthquake, he began work under Allen shortly after the earthquake as an inspector. Kent’s penchant for drinking earned him the nickname of “Whisky High Ball” Kent, a play on his initials. Gerard B. Lull, another Forest Service boundaryman in April 1906, was appointed to succeed Allen as state forester in 1906. Ayres was probably Robert W. “Bummer” Ayres, a 1904 Yale Forestry School graduate, who was probably working as a boundaryman. Stuart J. Flintham, a Cornell forestry school alumnus working as a boundaryman, became Stanislaus National Forest’s second supervisor in 1907. Pinchot, who was displeased with the way he interacted with people, fired Flintham a year later and replaced him with Ayers, who served in that position until 1919. Flintham became a high-profile and well-respected forester for Los Angeles County in Southern California and eventually the county’s first fire chief. There is no information on Hatton, Von Wernstad, Wheaton, Smith, and Wilson available. The letter has been transcribed complete with all punctuation and grammatical errors.

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Sacramento, April 25, 1906

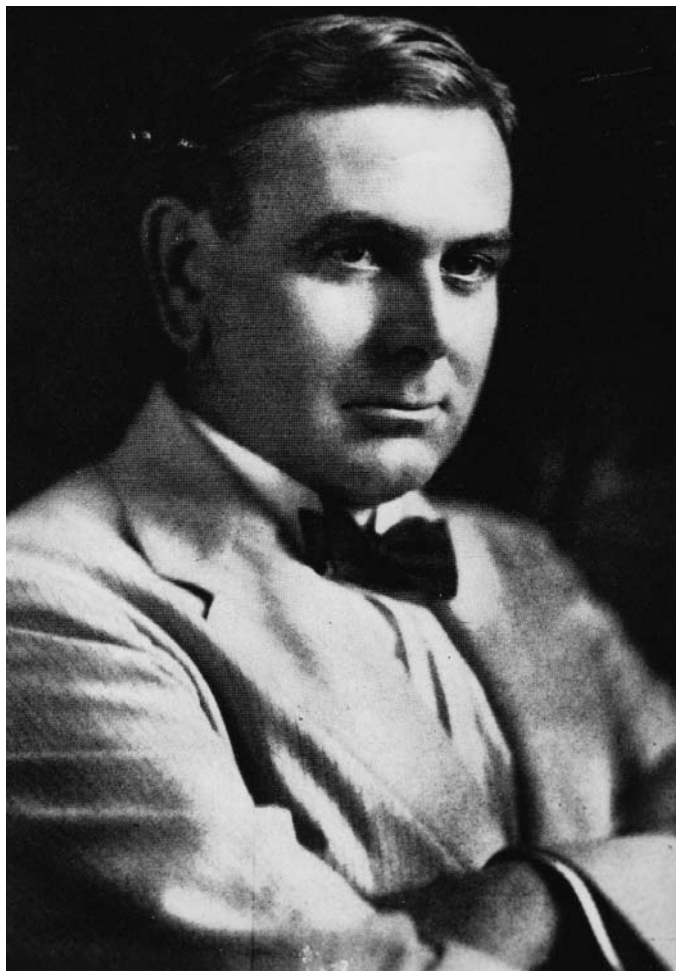
The Forester,  
Washington, D.C.

Sir:

I have the following to report concerning the fire and earthquake situation in San Francisco, and the action of the Forest Service in the matter. This is the first opportunity I have had to reach my office or, indeed, to take the time to write.

The earthquake, which occurred at 5.15 a.m. April 18, was disconcerting enough in Sacramento, but did no damage because the town is built on deep yielding soil which acted like a cushion and turned the shocks into sickening swings rather than the sharp quick jars which destroy buildings. It was difficult to keep ones feet for some time, and very generally induced nausea, but nothing was wrecked.

For this reason we did not apprehend the disaster which had overtaken the nearby cities, and when later in the day all sorts of rumors spread about the condition of San Francisco, we supposed them exaggerated. There was no direct telegraph or telephone communication with bay points, and we suspected the roundabout messages by way of Chicago of being ill-founded. Early in the afternoon it seemed quite certain that much havoc had been created by the shock itself, but it was late at night before we learned absolutely that the fire was serious.



Edward T. Allen, around 1917. Allen had a Forrest Gump-like ability to be present for some of the most important historic events in Forest Service history.

My father and mother were in the city, having gone to see my Mother’s relatives and to consult a physician about my father’s condition, and naturally my first concern was about them, especially because of my father’s tendency to become excited. I therefore took the first train the morning following and, after all sorts of delays, succeeded in getting a pass through the military lines and into the city about an hour before dark. All that night and the next day I spent finding my people and getting them through the ruins to the ferry and to Sacramento, where I arrived late Friday night. Finding the town overrun with refugees, destitute, starving and utterly exhausted, I went home only long enough to put the old folks to bed and went to work with the local relief committee for the rest of the night and most of the time since.

In the meanwhile, I was in San Francisco. Mr. Marshall who has charge of the Geological Survey locally, had volunteered his help to the Governor’s office, suggesting an expedition to San Francisco to help the destitute to make themselves comfortable. Food shortage was inevitable for a time but this was the least serious feature. The streets, burned ground, and vacant lots were swarming with homeless of all ages and conditions, distracted and exhausted. Many were unclad, most had no bedding, and few knew how or had the strength to fix up anything like shelter or places to cook the little food available. It was Mr. Marshall’s



*The Pleasanton area of San Francisco as seen the day after the earthquake at 12 noon.*

plan to help this class make camps or shelters. He found that it was impracticable to try to get into the city independently, so he arranged with the Sacramento Relief Committee to get his part in by boat from here on Saturday. Saturday morning I consulted with him about our entering the same work. He said his arrangements were made and that the boat was about to start, and that the thing for me to do was to take it up with the Committee to secure passports to follow when the men should arrive.

I therefore went to the Committee and told them we had six to ten available trained campers, at least, and that I would wire you to permit them to volunteer, *provided*

(a) That the Committee would insure getting them where they could work.

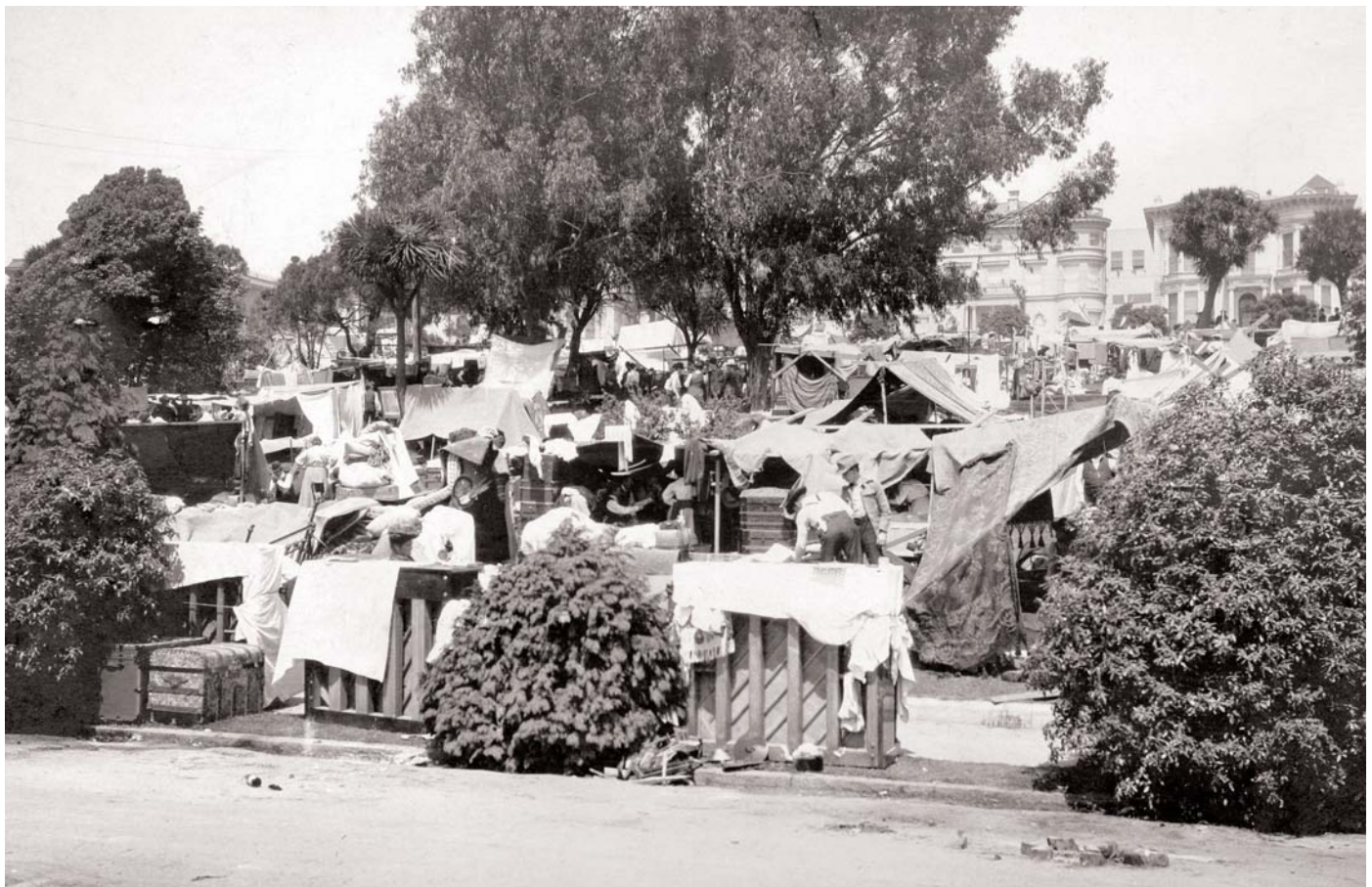
(b) That the Committee would ask me for their assistance, since I did not want to take the responsibility of getting them in unless they were needed.

It seemed to me there were two main points to consider—could we get into the city and work without interference from the military and, if not, were we needed badly enough anywhere else to make it pay.

The Committee jumped at the offer, but turned the proposition in effect. They said all advices indicated that from 10,000 to 15,000 refugees would be dumped in Sacramento within the next two or three days, and that this city would be swamped. No soldiers were available, all being ordered to the bay cities, and that Sacramento would be without tents or camps to handle the crowd; all this making it imperative that we get every possible man who could be of use in camp work. The Committee wanted the men to be brought here and then, if not needed, to be sent on to San Francisco.

I had my doubts about this, but thought it well enough to mobilize here anyway, so wired you to authorize the men. I knew





W.C. MENDENHALL, U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY PHOTOGRAPHIC LIBRARY

*Refugee camp at Jefferson Square, San Francisco, on April 20, 1906.*

there was work in the city if we could get there, and this they insured. Bear in mind, that all this time it was impossible to communicate with anyone in San Francisco by wire or telephone, and that the Committee was the official source of information.

All looked encouraging, then, until about three Sunday morning, when to my horror, the Survey party sent a man back to report that the expedition had failed and was returning. He hardly knew what the trouble was, except that the military authorities at the Presidio<sup>1</sup> had turned them back. I went at once to the telegraph office and wired all the men to stop for further instructions, but this message failed to catch any of them before they had started. Later we found that Marshall had landed at the Presidio wharf, left his steamer load of tents and provisions in charge of a guard and the Captain, and gone to the military headquarters to report and get authority.<sup>2</sup> The officers in charge told him the army was running things to suit itself and efficiently and there was no need for civilian help, and that he had better go back to Sacramento. Finding that he could do nothing in this way, he started back for the boat with the intention of trying some other scheme, only to find that the soldiers at the wharf had forcibly confiscated his entire outfit. He barely got enough provisions for a lunch and had to see the rest shipped out all over the city to the military camps. Then there was nothing to do, of course, but to come back. He was homeless like everybody else.

Then our men began to arrive. Cox had been here all the time, working night and day with the refugees here. The outsiders who came were Kent, Hatton, Lull, Ayres, Von Wernstad, Wheaton, Smith, [and] Wilson. The Committee here was still

having a hard time with the refugee crowd, but so far managing to house everybody in halls, pavilions and churches. Seeing danger of being swamped any hour, it called on me to establish a camp at Sutter's fort. I agreed on one condition, that they would pass two men into the city for me to report on the chance of doing independent work there by sneaking in singly through the regular ferry with Red Cross or other passes, and, if we could do more this way, we were to help with the Sacramento camp only as much as we wanted to.

This went, and Kent and Lull went to the city, while I arranged to fit a camp with commissary, sleeping quarters, laundry, baths, etc., to go at it the next morning. The next morning, however, a local man who wanted the glory, persuaded the Committee that he was the only man to handle the thing and they told us they didn't want us to take charge, although they would like to have us help out generally. Next Kent and Lull got back, after a very hard trip, and reported that the conditions in the city were improving rapidly, and the difficulty of working independently of the army so great, that they did not advise trying to go in. I saw no use in our staying here to do messenger work for the Sacramento Committee, so I sent the men back into the field, all getting away last night or this morning. Flintham came in last night, having received the call late, and is here today.

The tents are coming in today, perhaps 10 or 12 of them, and are in great demand, but I shall not let them go unless I know what is to become of them.

The whole plan has failed utterly. It has been somewhat expensive, although not so much so as you would expect, because



Richmond District refugee camp between Geary and Lake streets in San Francisco, 1906. Designed as temporary housing, these refugee cabins are an example of the impact of the earthquake on the regional lumber industry.

many of the men were to pass through here anyway soon and Kent managed to make a great deal out of seeing them here. Yet I do not see that anyone is at all to blame except the Sacramento Relief Committee and the Army. There was, and is yet, a great deal of suffering which we could do more than any other class of men to alleviate. There was every reason to believe it would grow worse instead of better, as it has. So far as Marshall or I could learn from the authorities, they not only would give us a chance, but wanted us badly. But the friction between civil and military, and the general lack of organization in the relief work, kept us from reaching the city where we were most needed, and the Sacramento situation did not become as serious as everyone expected it would. Anyway, it was better to do our best than to do nothing, and it is always better to take precautions which may not be needed than to need them and not be ready.

Very respectfully,

E. T. Allen



*Pamela Conners is the former historian on the Stanislaus National Forest. Pam would like to thank Cheryl Oakes, Forest History Society librarian; Aaron Shapiro, Historian for the U.S. Forest Service, Washington*

*Office; and William Gillespie, archaeologist on the Coronado National Forest, for their research assistance.*

## NOTES

1. The Presidio is the army base located on the northern tip of San Francisco on the Golden Gate Straits.
2. According to Adelena Marie Fontaine, a Geological Survey stenographer in Sacramento at the time, at 8 a.m. on April 20, the *San Joaquin*, loaded with relief supplies and USGS topographers, landed at the Presidio of San Francisco, where it was greeted with cheers. The military officer who met the boat immediately asked about baby food and milk and was overjoyed by Marshall's reply of "a carload." Volunteer stevedores, soldiers, and citizens helped the USGS men with unloading the shipment. Elizabeth M. Colvard and James Rogers, *Facing the Disaster: How the Men and Women of the U.S. Geological Survey Responded to the 1906 "San Francisco Earthquake"* (Reston, VA: U.S. Geological Survey, 2006): 2, 5.