

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire Online Exhibit



[Earthquake damage to dwellings and storefronts. Larkin and Turk Sts.]
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Room Two: The Day Our City Trembled

Bad Construction

San Francisco was destined to see its buildings fall not only because it was built near a fault line, but also because the city was poorly constructed. Certain buildings, though, suffered more damage than others did because of surface instability rather than because of structural weaknesses. Wood frame homes, when well constructed, absorbed the earthquake shocks well. Many wood homes, however, had poorly constructed chimneys that toppled, maiming and destroying homes. Many of the city's brick buildings were of inferior quality because bricklayers did not wet the bricks before applying the mortar, making the brick walls weak and prone to crumbling. Many of these same brick buildings were also built with floors and roofs that were improperly anchored to the building walls, allowing roofs to cave in, crushing the brick walls in the process and spewing bricks onto the sidewalks and streets. Stone buildings without steel frames showed the same poor craftsmanship with their weak connections between the stone walls and interior floors. Steel-framed structures, however, fared the best as these buildings' steel beams had great elasticity, allowing the buildings to sway without distorting their form.

While much of the most horrific earthquake destruction occurred on the made land South of Market, there were many structures that rested on more solid soil that also experienced significant damage. This scene at the corner of Larkin and Turk Streets, north of Market Street, shows how poor bricklaying held up against the earthquake's tremors. The second-story brick façade has peeled away, causing the apartments to look like rooms in a doll house as their arranged contents are revealed to passerby on the streets below.