

The 1906 San Francisco Earthquake and Fire Online Exhibit



"The last stream of water on Market Street. Lasted five minutes."

Roy D. Graves Pictorial Collection

Room Three: A Firestorm From Hell

Broken Water Mains

San Francisco experienced its first major casualty when Fire Chief Dennis Sullivan was mortally wounded by earthquake debris (the California Hotel's cupola had crashed through his apartment ceiling). Not only was Sullivan a respected, experienced leader, he had conceived a master plan in the event of a major conflagration. John Dougherty, his hastily appointed replacement, unfortunately possessed neither the instincts nor the knowledge needed to confront the 1906 disaster.

Dougherty had another factor working against him as well: the earthquake had ruptured San Francisco's underground water mains. There were just 850,000 gallons of water to fight the fire that now engulfed the entire eastern side of the city. As this first photograph showed, firemen stood little chance with a water supply that "lasted five minutes." Given the limited resources, the new Fire Chief had only two options when it came to water: he could either try to use the reserve housed in outdated cisterns, or he could commandeer Navy ships to pump salt water in from the Bay. Both of these choices were slow and required department coordination that was seriously impaired – there were no working fire alarm or telephone systems. However, these methods would have to do until another solution could be found.