1811 quake caused stir in Louisiana
Mississippi River reversed its flow

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By STEVE CULPEPPER
Advocate staff writer

The week before Christmas 1811, word of an earthquake filtered down from Natchez to New Orleans.

The editor of the Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser included a short reference to the event in his Dec. 21 issue and pondered the significance of the earthquake and its possible cause.

"The Comet has been passing to the westward...perhaps it has touched the mountains of California, that has given a small shake to this side of the globe—or the shake the Natchezians have felt may be a mysterious visitation from the Author of all nature, on them for their sins—wickedness and the want of good faith have long prevailed in that Territory."

At the time, the Gazette editor had no way of knowing that 500 miles up the Mississippi River from New Orleans, two of the most powerful earthquakes on record had struck, or that the effects felt in Natchez and much of central and northeastern Louisiana also were felt as far as Boston.

The editor of the Gazette pondered further: "Sodom & Gomorrah would have been saved had three righteous persons been found in it—we therefore hope that Natchez has been saved on the same principle."

As news came down the river, readers in New Orleans learned that while Natchez only just felt the quake, areas of Arkansas, Tennessee, Missouri, Kentucky and Illinois were devastated.

The quakes continued to wrack the New Madrid Fault in December, followed by very strong quakes in January and February 1812. Towns such as New Madrid crumbled into the river. Graveyards coughed up their remains during one of the quakes, the river actually flowed backwards, according to contemporary accounts.

It’s not clear how many lives were lost. The new Louisiana Territory was the far western frontier of the United States in the early 19th century and few eyewitness accounts survive.

Most of the descriptions came from newspapers such as the New Orleans Gazette.

On June 14, 1812, the Gazette carried another news item: "The earthquake that was felt at Natchez on the 16th of December has been severely felt above and below the mouth of the Ohio—we may expect detailed accounts of the damage soon. Travellers who have descended the river since, generally agree that a succession of shocks were felt for six days; that the Mississippi was much agitated; that it frequently rose three and four feet and fell again immediately; and that whole islands and parts of islands in the river sank."

The last story of the earthquake in the Gazette ran on Jan. 20, 1813, and brought news of the greater force of nature felt farther north on the river.

"We have the following description of the earthquake from gentlemen who were on board a large barge, and lay at anchor in the Mississippi a few leagues below New Madrid, on the night of the 15th of December."

"About two o'clock all hands were awakened by the first shock; the impression was, that the barge had dragged her anchor and was grounding on gravel; such were the feelings for 60 or 80 seconds, when the shock subsided. The crew were so fully persuaded of the fact of their being aground, that they put out their sounding pole, but found water enough."

"At seven next morning a second and very severe shock took place. The barge was under way—the river rose several feet; the trees on the shore shook; the banks in large columns tumbled in; hundreds of old trees that had lain perhaps a half-century at the bottom of the river appeared on the surface of the water; the feathered race took to the wing; the canopy was covered with geese and ducks, and various other kinds of wild fowl; very little wind; the air was tainted with a nitrous and sulphurous smell; and every thing was truly alarming for several minutes."

John James Audubon described the earthquake in his journals. He was on horseback, riding through the "Barrens of Kentucky" when he saw "...a sudden and strange darkness rising from the western horizon."

Audubon wrote that, used to the local violent thunderstorms, he "took no more notice of it, as I thought the speed of my horse's might enable me to get under shelter of the root of an acquaintance, who lived not far distant..."

After about a mile, he heard what he thought was "the distant rumbling of a violent tornado, on which I spurred my steed, with a wish to gallop as fast as possible to a place of shelter; but it would not do, the animal knew better than I what was forthcoming, and instead of going faster, he nearly stopped. I rematched him to another on the ground, with as much precaution as if walking on a smooth sheet of ice."

"I thought he had suddenly fainted, and speaking to him, was on the point of dismounting and leading him, when he all of a sudden fell a-groaning piteously, hung his head, spread out his four legs, as if to save himself from falling, and stood stock still, continuing to groan."

"I thought my horse was about to die,