

Great Earthquake and Fire of 1906: Its Effects on Chinatown

FAQs for inquiries and website

What was the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906?

What were some of the major events of the earthquake and fire?

How did the earthquake affect Chinatown and the Chinese American residents of San Francisco?

What were other effects of the earthquake and fire on the Chinese population?

How did the city of San Francisco respond to the needs of the city's Chinese American population after the 1906 earthquake and fire?

Who were the major players in the decision to relocate Chinatown?

How did the Chinese resist relocation?

What was the city's final decision on relocating Chinatown?

What was the great San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906?

The California earthquake of April 18, 1906 ranks as one of the most significant earthquakes of all time. **Deaths:** > 3,000 **Injuries:** ~225,000 **Property Damage:** \$ 400,000,000 in 1906 \$\$

At almost precisely 5:12 a.m., local time, a foreshock occurred with sufficient force to be felt widely throughout the San Francisco Bay area. The great earthquake broke loose some 20 to 25 seconds later, with an epicenter near San Francisco. Violent shocks punctuated the strong shaking, which lasted some 45 to 60 seconds. The earthquake then spawned a fire that burned for four days.

What were some of the major events of the earthquake and fire?

April 18, 1906

San Francisco was wrecked by a Great Earthquake at 5:13 a.m., and then destroyed by the seventh Great Fire that burned for four days. South-of-Market tenements collapsed as the ground liquefied beneath them. Most of those buildings immediately caught fire, and trapped victims could not be rescued.

U.S. Post Office at Seventh and Mission Streets was damaged by the earthquake. All telephone and telegraph communications stopped within the city. A major aftershock struck at 8:14 a.m., and caused the collapse of many damaged buildings. Another fire broke on the southwest corner of Hayes and Gough. It would become known as the "Ham and Egg" fire, and would destroy part of the Western Addition, the Mechanics' Pavilion, City Hall and then jump Market Street at Ninth. At nine o'clock, under a special message

from President Roosevelt, the city was placed under martial law. Two earthquakes hit Los Angeles just before noon, about ten minutes apart. Hearst Building at Third and Market streets caught fire at noon. Entire area in the Financial District, behind the Hall of Justice, was on fire by 1 p.m. Postal Telegraph operators transmitted their last message to the outside world as army troops ordered them from the building at Market and Second Streets at 2:20 p.m. because of the approaching fire. Dynamiting of buildings around the U.S. Mint at Fifth and Mission streets began at 2:30 p.m. Fire swept up Nob Hill at 9pm.

Mayor Schmitz appointed the Committee of Fifty at 3 p.m. at the Hall of Justice, and gives "shoot to kill" order: "Let it...be understood that the order has been given to all soldiers and policemen to [shoot down] without hesitation in the cases of any and all miscreants who may seek to take advantage of the city's awful misfortune."

April 19, 1906

Governor Pardee arrived in Oakland at 2 a.m. St. Francis Hotel at Union Square caught fire at 2:30 a.m. Secretary of War Taft at 4 a.m. ordered 200,000 rations and hospital, wall and conical tents sent to San Francisco from San Antonio, Monterey and Vancouver. "Call," "Chronicle" and "Examiner" printed a combined newspaper today on the presses of the "Oakland Herald."

The Great Fire reached Van Ness Avenue during the evening. The army dynamited mansions along the street in an attempt to build a fire break.

April 20, 1906

The fire burned as far as Franklin St. by 5 a.m., then attempted to circle south. Gen. Funston wired War Department at 8:30 p.m. on status of the fire. His telegram said most casualties are in the poorer districts, South of Market St.

April 21, 1906

The fire that swept the Mission District was stopped at 20th and Dolores Streets by three-thousand volunteers and a few firemen.

April 22, 1906

Father Ricard at the University of Santa Clara wrote to the San Jose Mercury: "The earthquake period is gone. People should fearlessly go to work and repair mischief done and sleep quietly at night anywhere at all."

April 23, 1906

Imperial decree on the 30th Day of the Third Moon from Empress Dowager of China to send 100,000 taels as a personal contribution to the relief of the San Francisco sufferers.

President Theodore Roosevelt declined the offer, as well as donations from other foreign governments.

How did the earthquake affect Chinatown and the Chinese American residents of San Francisco?

On Wednesday, April 18, 1906, Chinatown suffered damage from the initial shock of the earthquake. However, the actual destruction of Chinatown resulted later from the raging fires that spread rampant throughout the city. Many Chinese, like others all over the city, scrambled to gather belongings and flee the danger of the encroaching flames. Chinese refugees quickly flooded relief camps in San Francisco and Oakland.

What were other effects of the earthquake and fire on the Chinese population?

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was still in effect. Although all Asians were affected, 97 percent of the immigrants processed through Angel Island were Chinese. After the earthquake and fire of 1906 destroyed records that verified citizenship, many Chinese residents of California were able to claim citizenship for themselves and dozens of "paper children."

How did the city of San Francisco respond to the needs of the city's Chinese American population after the 1906 earthquake and fire?

As the Chinese exited Chinatown, city officials sought to prevent them from returning. In a poorly planned evacuation, Chinese refugees were shuttled to various relief camps all over the city. A temporary camp on Van Ness prompted relocation to the Presidio because city officials argued that the site would prove difficult to dismantle once the Chinese settled again in a location so close to the original Chinatown. The Chinese presence at the Presidio Golf Links greatly displeased neighbors "where the summer zephyrs would blow the odors of Chinatown into their front doors." The Chinese refugees were transferred, again, the next day to a more remote location on the Presidio near Fort Point.

The earthquake and fire afforded a convenient excuse by city officials to claim Chinatown for profitable commercial development. Within six days of the Great Fire, a committee General Relief Committee was appointed to focus on relocating the Chinese permanently. They soon adopted a plan to [move Chinatown to Hunters Point](#).

The idea was not new. Industrialist John Partridge proposed an "Oriental City" at Hunters Point before the earthquake, and it had the support of Mayor Schmitz. [Telegrams sent by the War Department](#) to General Funston, and the pending arrival of the Chinese consul-general from Washington, may have also been deciding factors in the quick establishment of a committee to "assist" the Chinese.

Who were the major players in the decision to relocate Chinatown?

After the 1906 earthquake and fire, a committee comprised of Abraham “Abe” Ruef; James D. Phelan; Jeremiah Deneen; Dr. James W. Ward, president of the Health Commission, and Methodist minister [Dr. Thomas Filben](#), chairman, was appointed to take charge of the question of the permanent location of the Chinese quarter.

From a strictly political standpoint this was a remarkable committee because Abe Ruef and James D. Phelan were arch-enemies. Ex-Mayor Phelan had helped spark the graft investigation which would ultimately led to Ruef serving time at San Quentin State Prison. Ruef was the undisputed “boss” of California, and served as the Southern Pacific Railway’s political point man in San Francisco.

Their common ground was abiding racism and hatred for the Chinese. The Committee on the Location of Chinatown began, with the help of General Funston, to concentrate the few Chinese left in San Francisco in preparation of moving them to Hunters Point. But more politically astute members of the committee were concerned that San Francisco, ridding itself of the Chinese, would also lose its [lucrative Oriental trade](#).

How did the Chinese resist relocation?

The relocation committee did not anticipate stiff resistance from the government of China. Chow-Tszchi, first secretary of the Chinese Legation at Washington arrived in Oakland within a few days of the earthquake and met with Chung Pao Hsi, China’s consul-general in San Francisco. They, in turn, met with Governor Pardee in Oakland, and told him of the Empress-Dowager’s displeasure with the relocation plan, and that the government of China would [rebuild its San Francisco consulate](#) in the heart of old Chinatown.

"I have heard the report that the authorities intend to remove Chinatown, but I cannot believe it," the Chinese delegation stated. "America is a free country, and every man has a right to occupy land which he owns provided that he makes no nuisance. The Chinese Government owns the lot on which the Chinese Consulate of San Francisco formerly stood, and this site on Stockton street will be used again. It is the intention of our Government to build a new building on the property, paying strict attention to the new building regulations which may be framed."

Governor Pardee was asked for letters to General Greely, General Funston and Mayor Schmitz, authorizing those officials to grant to the properly accredited Chinese representatives the right to enter the guarded section and care for the distressed Chinese as well as provide for the protection of their burned places of business. The letters were given them, and, armed with this authority, the party returned to San Francisco.

What was the city’s final decision on relocating Chinatown?

Chinatown then, as today, occupied some of the most valuable real estate in San Francisco, with its sixteen-square-blocks set between Nob Hill and the financial center of

the West. Stiff resistance from the government of China, and the fear of losing trade with the Orient, [ended this relocation scheme](#), and rebuilding of Chinatown soon began.

Sources:

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National Park Service (Presidio): <http://www.nps.gov/prsf/history/1906eq/chinese.htm>