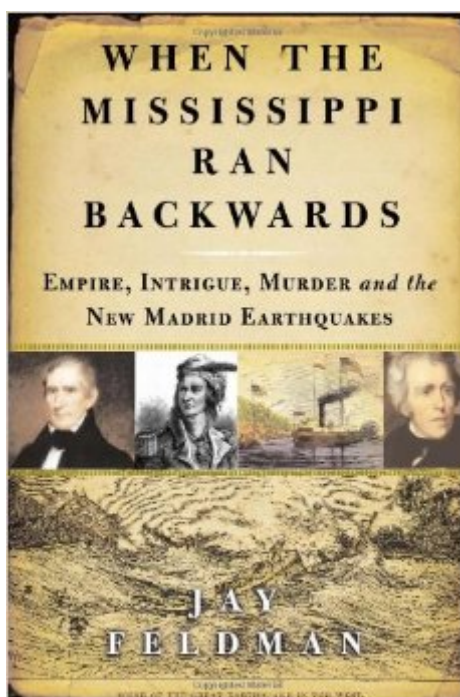


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# When The Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, And The New Madrid Earthquakes



## Synopsis

On December 15, 1811, two of Thomas Jefferson's nephews murdered a slave in cold blood and put his body parts into a roaring fire. The evidence would have been destroyed but for a rare act of God - or, as some believed, of the Indian chief Tecumseh. That same day, the Mississippi River's first steamboat, piloted by Nicholas Roosevelt, powered itself toward New Orleans on its maiden voyage. The sky grew hazy and red, and jolts of electricity flashed in the air. A prophecy by Tecumseh was about to be fulfilled. He had warned reluctant warrior-tribes that he would stamp his feet and bring down their houses. Sure enough, between December 16, 1811, and late April 1812, a catastrophic series of earthquakes shook the Mississippi River Valley. Of the more than 2,000 tremors that rumbled across the land during this time, three would have measured nearly or greater than 8.0 on the not-yet-devised Richter Scale. Centered in what is now the bootheel region of Missouri, the New Madrid earthquakes were felt as far away as Canada; New York; New Orleans; Washington, D.C; and the western part of the Missouri River. A million and a half square miles were affected as the earth's surface remained in a state of constant motion for nearly four months. Towns were destroyed, an eighteen-mile-long by five-mile-wide lake was created, and even the Mississippi River temporarily ran backwards. The quakes uncovered Jefferson's nephews' cruelty and changed the course of the War of 1812 as well as the future of the new republic. In *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards*, Jay Feldman expertly weaves together the story of the slave murder, the steamboat, Tecumseh, and the war, and brings a forgotten period back to vivid life. Tecumseh's widely believed prophecy, seemingly fulfilled, hastened an unprecedented alliance among southern and northern tribes, who joined the British in a disastrous fight against the U.S. government. By the end of the war, th --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The great American earthquake was the one that hit San Francisco in 1906, and has since been celebrated in song, story, and cinema. Most people have forgotten a worse series of earthquakes that struck in three months starting in 1811. The New Madrid earthquakes not only were stronger, but they covered a much wider area. Now when we get real-time coverage of earthquake disasters, we have lost the history of this one. In *\_When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes\_* (The Free Press), Jay Feldman has told the story of the earthquakes themselves, but they occupy only a fraction of the book. Much of his work is an examination of how the earthquakes changed American history. There are some characters within it who were simply affected by the earthquakes in peculiar ways, and some of the connections Feldman draws to larger events are tenuous, but this is an entertaining look at a particular event that did befall the young nation. The earthquakes that rocked the Midwest began on 16 December 1811, and were completely unexpected. They were calamitous for the people in the region, but one of the reasons that they are so little remembered is that there were few people there to be shaken. The chief story here is about, of all things, the war between the American government and the Indians. The main character in the story is the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, who threatened to stomp his feet from a distance and shake down the houses of Indians who opposed him. The earthquake was timed to do so, increasing his prestige and allowing him to lead the tribes as a unified force. The town of New Madrid itself was the brainchild of Revolutionary War veteran George Morgan, who wanted to make his fortune on land. All his planning went for naught, for the town was destroyed by the earthquakes. The brothers Lilburne and Isham Lewis were nephews of Thomas Jefferson, but were failing on their farm in western Kentucky. One night in drunken anger at their slave George who had broken a pitcher, they killed him with an ax in front of their other slaves to teach them all a lesson. Eventually justice was done, but only because the earthquake uncovered evidence of the crime. Inventor and engine-builder Nicholas Roosevelt and his intrepid wife Lydia took his steamship, the *\_New Orleans\_*, from Pittsburgh with the goal of making steam the transportation of the Mississippi. Against all predictions, they succeeded. The boat was on the Mississippi River when the first earthquake hit, and proved its mettle. It was big and strong enough to withstand the raging water, while smaller boats were lost. The long and colorful reign of the Mississippi steamboats had begun. Feldman has told these stories well, and has attempted to make

the geology of the area plain. He goes into detail on general seismology, a useful summary of how earthquakes happen. At the time, no one had any idea, ascribing them to electrical forces or volcanoes. Though the physics was mysterious, that did not keep some from being sure what had caused the earthquakes: the hand of God. Preachers and revivalists swarmed to the area to harvest souls, and succeeded, temporarily. One preacher noted that when the danger was passed, the newcomers to his church left it and resumed their previous sinful ways. In 1990, much was made of the prediction of a new New Madrid quake, foretold by a non-seismologist who somehow got lots of media attention. The real seismologists were embarrassed, but were certain nothing was going to happen on that particular day, and nothing did, at least seismologically. The devout did get to show signs like "NEW MADRID SAVE YOUR CITY FAST AND REPENT" and the commercially astute sold tee shirts. The prediction was wrong for that particular day, but it won't be wrong forever. The same forces that caused the disaster almost two hundred years ago are continuing to build, and the next quake will not have a sparsely-populated, economically backward region to work upon.

Good book...a solid 4, leaning a little toward 5...The book is about the New Madrid Earthquakes, yes, but it is also about much more...the molding and shaping of America...the New Madrid Earthquakes are used as a backdrop for a candid human discussion of the times....Relationships with the Indians, the Westward movement, Manifest Destiny, the slavery issue with all of its horrors, the Westward migration in hopes of a better life that wasn't always there...the beginning of steamboating and its impact on the opening of the West...Human treachery, intrigue and promise all against the backdrop of the New Madrid Earthquakes...Taken as a whole this book is about a cataclysmic time in America, a time of remarkable change...all of the issues coming together at one period of time...all of those issues have been resolved..The West has been won, Slavery Abolished, River traffic and commerce taken for granted...Only one remains: the New Madrid faults that caused the cataclysmic earthquakes...They are still there, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting...They are not done with us yet...Good Book. Very good Book Club Discussion Book.

Starting on December 16, 1811 and lasting into the calamitous year of 1812, a series of earthquakes leveled towns, settlements and Native American villages along the drainage of the Mississippi centered near New Madrid in what is now Missouri. This catastrophic series of quakes (at least three near or greater than 8.0 on the modern Richter scale) occurred during the land speculation and grabbing of the early 1800s and killed an untold number of people. The legendary "prediction" of the great Shawnee chief Tecumseh that he would stamp his foot and the earth would

move if the tribes did not join him in an alliance against the whites had come true. This then set off a war fought within the American War of 1812 with Britain and continuing beyond it. Indeed Tecumseh and his allies had much to grieve them, as unscrupulous land speculators and settlers took over Native American land with little or no payment and by dealing with tribes who often had no exclusive ownership of the land they sold. All of this turmoil and more are caught in "When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes" by Jay Feldman. Feldman has interwoven numerous threads of history that revolved around the great quakes, the most damaging, but least known, earthquakes in the history of the United States. The account is full of interesting characters- Tecumseh of course, but also George Morgan (the founder of New Madrid), the evilly inclined James Wilkinson (who robbed everyone he could and held allegiance to no one but himself), the Prophet (Tecumseh's brother), William Henry Harrison (the "hero" of Tippecanoe and future President of the United States), Nicholas and Lydia Roosevelt (involved with Fulton and others in the development of the steamboat), John James Audubon (famous bird painter and naturalist), Andrew Jackson ( "hero" of the Creek War and future President of the United States) and many others. In all this is a rich tapestry of history and natural events that set the stage for "manifest destiny", the Civil War and modern America. All of the people involved are vividly described and events show that Native American and people of European descent were both capable of horrible acts of barbarity. However, Tecumseh stands out as a great leader (even begrudgingly noted by his nemesis William Henry Harrison), the Roosevelts as plucky and innovative (Lydia was pregnant and still traveled with her husband on the early steamboat New Orleans, actually giving birth just a month and a half before the great quake), Harrison as a scheming liar (correctly stated by Tecumseh, proving that a liar and thief could even then become President of the United States and that in fact a properly spun near Pyrrhic "victory" like Tippecanoe could make you popular enough to be elected to high office), and Jackson as destroyer of both Native American friend and foe alike (as it served his purposes). A good read and I think a necessary one for anyone who would understand our modern world and how we got here.

This is a real page-turner. Though it is a carefully-researched piece of fairly straight-up history, the author has woven a complex fabric, a tapestry revealing an little-known time in American History. He has included several personal stories of historical figures whose destinies were altered by the New Madrid earthquakes without pandering to the maudlin or the sensational. Every element is appropriate to the development of the tale and I read it with appreciation for the writing and the author's art as well as for the insights and information the book provided. I recommend this one

highly as a really good read.

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