



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
2007 Volume IV: The Science of Natural Disasters

The New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812: Shaking Our Misconceptions about Earthquakes in United States History

Guide for Curriculum Unit 07.04.09

by Ralph Russo

This unit will use the historical example of the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812 to expose students of high school history to the causes and effects of earthquakes. It should at the very least displace some common misconceptions about the nature of earthquakes in the United States.

The frequency of earthquake activity on the West Coast reinforces the misconception that earthquake events in United States history occur only at places like the famous San Andreas Fault. However, a closer look at the geological profile of the United States and the history of seismic activity in the United States reveals that earthquakes are a realistic natural disaster on the eastern seaboard as well as in the nation's interior. My unit will examine the New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812 as historical and geological events that will lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the geological profile of the United States. Subsequently, the unit will explore the history of earthquakes across the continental United States, basic earthquake concepts and terminology, the potential for future seismic events, and the implications for specific communities in areas subject to earthquakes.

(Recommended for U.S. History and Earth Science, grades 7-12.)

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