
Introduction

Before I was a historian, I was a firefighter in San Francisco. I learned to climb hundred-foot aerial ladders, slice holes through burning roofs with a chain saw, rescue panicked swimmers from the surf, and provide basic life support to unconscious victims. The fire academy instilled confidence that I could handle any emergency scenario. But I was unprepared for the emotional impact of the crises I encountered. Each real-life emergency told a story greater than the immediate effects of physical trauma. Fires and medical emergencies catch victims off guard. They interrupt routine and, for a moment in time, stop daily life—often for just a few hours but occasionally forever.

As a firefighter responding to 911 dispatches, I regularly found myself at the center of people's private lives. Emergencies of any size or sort exposed victims to unexpected examination. I walked into the lives that people really lived, not the versions that they put on display for relatives, friends, or neighbors. After all, there is no time to tidy up after dialing 911. I learned some of the intimate details that made up victims' daily experiences, often by seeing the condition of their homes or observing the emotions of close friends and family. I also witnessed how victims and their families struggled to make sense of their loss as they reimagined their future. While fires or medical emergencies unhinged their daily lives, their options for recovery (both real and imagined) remained firmly attached to their current social circumstances, especially their socioeconomic status and education, family, and cultural background. I was struck by how individual emergencies exposed social relationships and realities that many of us either ignore or take for granted, and I wondered

what a large-scale disaster would disclose about the people and places where it occurred.

With this in mind, I found new meaning in San Francisco's 1906 disaster when I later was studying history at Stanford. From a historical perspective, catastrophes such as earthquakes and fires present an excellent vantage point for understanding the past because they interrupt both time and space. As historian Steven Biel explains, catastrophes render the "'normal' workings of culture, society, and politics" visible.¹ These disruptions are complicated, especially for the historian who relies on physical evidence. The 1906 fires in San Francisco, for example, wiped out City Hall records as well as personal papers and cherished photographs stored in thousands of homes. But even as this catastrophe destroyed vast quantities of physical evidence, it also produced a tremendous amount of new data. Need made this so. Newspaper accounts, relief reports, political debate, photographs, and personal letters to family and friends constitute a sizable body of evidence on turn-of-the-century San Francisco. Urban catastrophes also spur the imagination. San Francisco's earthquake and fires forced communities and individuals to define their losses and, perhaps more important, envision their place in the rebuilt city. Relying on the various records compiled in the wake of the disaster, my study of 1906 San Francisco offers both a snapshot of the turn-of-the-century urban environment and an expansive view of how survivors understood the world in which they lived.

San Francisco's well-known earthquake and fires stripped the ninth-largest American city bare. The 7.8-magnitude earthquake awakened city residents just before dawn. For most San Franciscans, Wednesday, April 18, 1906, started at 5:12 A.M. with sixty-five terrifying seconds of violent shaking and ended with an unknown number of dead family members and neighbors, as well as hundreds of thousands of people trapped in a city surrounded by water. Three days of relentless, raging fires defied the possibility of a coherent emergency response. By the following Sunday, 98 percent of the city's structures in the most populated 521 blocks lay in ruins, from the landmark mansions on Nob Hill to Chinatown to the working-class flats south of Market Street.

At first glance, the calamity appeared to affect all segments of the population equally because it transformed all of the city's survivors—the wealthy and poor, the Chinese and native-born—into refugees. It is likely that most San Franciscans stood in the long food-relief lines at one time or another, seeming to confirm the newfound belief in post-disaster social equality. As the *San Francisco Newsletter* described the disaster, "It did not discriminate between tavern and tabernacle, bank and brothel."² But the egalitarianism of disaster relief existed largely in the imagination of the press. Rosalie Stern, a prominent San Franciscan married to the president of Levi Strauss and Company and one of the few limousine owners in the city at the time, reminds us of how social status endured despite disaster. When Rosalie arrived with countless other survivors at San Francisco's Presidio to find supplies and shelter, she

was given special recognition. As she stepped out of her car, a relief worker called to her by name, ushering her in ahead of the masses of refugees waiting in long lines for assistance.³ As fires burned the city, Rosalie, like other high-profile San Franciscans, left the disaster zone with her social status intact. Instead of breaking down social barriers, the disaster and subsequent relief efforts put new emphasis on preexisting social differences, an outcome that would have long-term consequences for San Franciscans.

While 250,000 residents fled the city by ferry, train, car, and foot, at least 100,000 remained. Thousands huddled together in parks, in vacant lots, and on beachfronts. The disaster in general, and relief policy in particular, made San Francisco's tragedy a national event. American National Red Cross policy experts soon arrived on the scene to offer the latest theories for rapid recovery. Basing relief housing and funding criteria on traditional social hierarchies, policy makers reinforced pre-disaster social status by advantaging property owners over non-property owners, failing to support Chinese survivors, and evaluating poor and working-class refugees by middle-class standards.

The powerful influence of the disaster relief stemmed from the fact that the earthquake and fires destroyed *both* public and private property. The calamity left the public/private boundary—so important to contemporary understandings of social order—in shambles. This disruption of the private realm pushed domestic life into public space. Policy makers gained access to the private lives of relief recipients because so many San Franciscans lived in public parks or tended their makeshift kitchen stoves on city streets. Moreover, widespread fears of social disorder empowered civic leaders and relief agencies to redefine and rebuild the urban landscape. Despite its reinforcement of familiar social hierarchies, disaster relief was not a one-sided, “top-down” affair that served only elite interests. The temporary loss of a clear public/private boundary gave rise to a much more complex disaster story.

The brief break in the public/private boundary offered the city's peripheral social groups unprecedented opportunities to gain access to the public realm. Thousands of San Franciscans required immediate aid, and those who responded to this need, such as the middle-class white women and Chinatown business leaders who volunteered their services, gained new political leverage. As in the aftermath of the 1900 Galveston Flood, when relief work acted as a catalyst for middle-class women's civic activism, in 1906 women's work extended far beyond the confines of the home as middle-class women volunteers took on new responsibilities that led to their continued involvement in the political realm.⁴ Poor and working-class women created new opportunities as well, as they took to the streets in protest to demand changes in relief policy. Meanwhile, Chinatown leaders gained economic and political influence by turning to their own national and international networks to oppose politicians and policies that threatened to excise Chinatown from the rebuilt city. These groups and contested spaces figure prominently in the account of the catastrophe presented here.

CONSTRUCTING DISASTERS

Most books on the 1906 disaster simply recount the city's annihilation and the residents' terror. San Francisco's first "instant histories" provided graphic details of the event to readers far from the American West. In fact, the disaster generated such public interest that at least eighty-two books were printed before the end of 1906.⁵ Such immediate disaster histories were not a new phenomenon; in fact, similar publications trailed the 1871 Great Chicago Fire.⁶ But the accounts of San Francisco's misfortune benefited from technological innovations, which allowed publishers to include spectacular photographic images that made most of the text seem more like extended photograph captions than historical accounts.⁷ Kevin Rozario's study of American disasters from the seventeenth century to the present points out that, as a result of its growing appetite for sensational disaster stories, the American public devoured this material.⁸

San Francisco's instant histories presented the classic story of the fall of a great city and the rise of an even better one. As early as 1906, authors ended their thrilling tales of catastrophe with predictions of resounding urban recovery. "Will San Francisco rise again? Most certainly it will," reassured author Charles Morris in 1906.⁹ These initial publications set the tone for future historical accounts of San Francisco's dance with death. The fifty-year disaster anniversary prompted a new round of publications that recapitulated the original instant histories.¹⁰ While the more recent centennial anniversary brought to the surface deeper questions about the calamity's social impact, the original fall-and-rise narrative remains tethered to this disaster story.¹¹

Like the newspapers of the time, instant disaster histories sold human-interest and sensationalistic stories to a seemingly insatiable public. But they also forged a disaster narrative—a story, whether published or oral, that makes sense of a calamity—that followed a prescribed pattern of development and conclusion. San Francisco's fire narrative was based on a "seismic denial," as Ted Steinberg phrases it.¹² By denying the seismic aspect of the disaster, politicians and business leaders rendered San Francisco no more vulnerable than any other city and touted its rebuilding as a sound investment. Urban fires were ubiquitous in the United States during the nineteenth century. Many established businessmen could remember Chicago's remarkable rebound after Mrs. O'Leary's infamous cow kicked over a lantern in 1871. And more recent proof of urban resurgence was offered by Baltimore's rapid recovery from fire in 1904.¹³ In San Francisco, the "fire only" version quickly became the city's prevailing disaster story.¹⁴ The May 5, 1906, edition of *Harper's Weekly* is but one example of the often repeated disaster narrative. "There seems to be no doubt," the magazine reassured its national audience, "that, in the case of San Francisco, most of the devastation was immediately caused by conflagration rather than by earthquake."¹⁵

The seismic denial narrative, in effect, dismissed other perspectives on the disaster. This simplified tale of ashes-to-resurrection overshadows the

collective and individual survivor stories from San Francisco's varied neighborhoods and families, stories that shift our perspective to significant undercurrents of the catastrophe. In this book, I shine a steady light on disaster survivors in an attempt to connect their personal experiences to the prevailing disaster narrative and broader public debates over disaster relief. These stories reveal not only how those in positions of power can manipulate a catastrophic event to push political agendas but also, more importantly, how multiple voices helped forge the social and political landscape of the post-disaster city.¹⁶

I turn to new historical evidence to tell the story of disaster relief. For years, most historians have relied on the 1913 *San Francisco Relief Survey*.¹⁷ This published volume is the only comprehensive source of relief documents; the American National Red Cross accumulated a voluminous trove of San Francisco records, which included refugee registration, relief applications, and administrative memorandums, but subsequently lost track of it. In addition, relief casework files disappeared when San Francisco's Associated Charities destroyed its records in 1916. But an influential relief administrator and a relief camp commander carefully preserved many of these documents—including relief committee meeting minutes, camp reports, and correspondence with refugees—records that, before this study, no historian or writer had ever examined. I use these documents to better understand the complex debates about nascent relief policy and, perhaps more important, how that policy was put into practice. The interactions among relief policy makers, providers, and recipients reveal the underlying social dynamics in San Francisco and expose some key themes of the national debates about aid and welfare for suffering Americans in general.

Eyewitness accounts, either self-published or reported by local newspapers, provide another familiar source of information about the 1906 calamity.¹⁸ But interpreting the diverse experiences of disaster survivors through such accounts can be tricky. On the surface, they present a universal disaster experience; read more critically, however, they reveal key differences among neighborhoods and social groups. For example, few but the wealthier survivors were afforded the privilege of self-publishing eyewitness accounts, and the selection of personal stories printed in San Francisco's newspapers might have been influenced by the political leanings of publishers.¹⁹ In my reconstruction of the disaster, I connect these accounts to the geographic locations of the city's diverse neighborhoods in order to tease out the social expectations and experiences of residents before and after the disaster. I also move beyond these written words to consider disaster artifacts and find the personal and communal stories embedded in the treasured objects that some victims managed to rescue from the fires. In addition, I turn to the Sanborn Maps and U.S. Census data (1900, 1910, and 1920) to make sense of post-disaster demographic changes. These data, when broken down by neighborhood, class, race, and family status, illuminate how the disaster intensified social differences among the city's vibrant neighborhoods. Together, these materials tell the story of how diverse responses to disaster helped define San Francisco after 1906.

Disaster history has a history of its own, beginning in the early twentieth century with the study of a 1917 munitions ship explosion in Halifax, Canada.²⁰ One scholar used the disaster to test “normal” social processes in Halifax because the ship explosion that destroyed the city originated “outside” the built environment. This seminal work established the view that natural disasters (fire, earthquake, flood, hurricane, and so on) occur outside the bounds of society. Since then, many scholars have turned to this natural disaster/society binary to understand the social consequences of calamity. But Mike Davis is among others who argue for an alternative point of view in the investigation of the social construction of “natural” disasters,²¹ the view that disasters are both physical and social events.²² Following this alternative approach, this book challenges the natural disaster/society binary by envisioning the disaster as simultaneously seismic and social: First, earthquake damage exposed social differences preserved by the built environment. Second, responses to the disaster—fire suppression, relief, and rebuilding—remained firmly attached to contemporary notions of social order.

When the 1906 earthquake struck, it interrupted a critical moment in the Progressive Era. Numerous scholars have written about the many social and political reforms that occurred between 1890 and 1920, but they have been unable to agree on precise definitions of the terms “Progressive Era” and “Progressivism.”²³ One reason is that there was no single identifiable “Progressive movement.” At most, there was a shared popular sentiment that *some* type of reform was needed in modern America, but there was no broad agreement as to what form it should take. Indeed, the Progressive Era included both democratic and undemocratic initiatives advocated by reformers who were either egalitarian or elitist.

Despite their differing approaches and goals, Progressives did share one attribute: a commitment to fixing the myriad problems that stemmed from industrialization. Progressives tackled the deplorable working and living conditions generated by unregulated factories and overcrowded tenements (to name just two pressing issues of the time) by means of new social science theories and bureaucratic structures. San Francisco’s 1906 calamity created a moment of unity for local and national Progressive reformers, who sprang into action after April 18. The disaster zone opened up new space for Progressives in San Francisco and, at the same time, invited a wider audience to debate the efficacy of their proposed reforms.

This book also shows the 1906 disaster as a test case for the emerging field of professional social work, particularly for the approach known as “positive environmentalism.” The disaster drew Edward T. Devine, one of the nation’s leading social work experts, to San Francisco to put his theories into practice. As Devine developed new relief protocols, he worked closely with local Associated Charities leader Katharine Felton. Devine and Felton were Progressives who shared the perspective of positive environmentalists. As historian Paul Boyer explains, positive environmentalists believed that poverty was linked to an environment shaped by economic conditions rather than

by hereditary factors.²⁴ This approach moved away from moral evaluations and toward professional expertise and training in the quest to improve the lives of the poor. Proponents of scientific social work relied on bureaucratic organization to implement what they considered to be objective criteria for the evaluation of need.

A close examination of 1906 disaster relief contributes to our historical understanding of Progressive Era reform by revealing the uneven transition from nineteenth-century approaches to charity to twentieth-century social work methodologies. In the translation from policy to practice, the objective, bureaucratic standards of twentieth-century scientific social work blended with nineteenth-century notions of charity that included moral assessment and personal involvement. In other words, despite Devine's and Felton's avowal of positive environmentalism, moral evaluations of those in need—based on nineteenth-century definitions of the “deserving” poor—crept back into twentieth-century disaster relief. Historian Linda Gordon notes that the long-standing fear that aid fostered pauperism was difficult for many reformers to overcome and that this belief, in turn, influenced the notion that “welfare called for supervision of a personal nature.”²⁵ For all of the scientific progress made by new relief policy, it also reinforced a subjective, value-laden approach toward poverty.

Yet new relief policy did not grant officials unmitigated social control over disaster victims. Following the work of Michael Katz, Thomas Krainz, and Linda Gordon, I shift the focus away from the rhetoric of leaders to spotlight the everyday experiences of those on the receiving end of reform.²⁶ An investigation of records left by a young camp commander, for example, shows how refugee women adapted new relief policy regulations to serve their own needs, openly defying policy class and gender biases. Refugees in San Francisco used the agencies of social control to their own ends.

This examination of 1906 relief also highlights the contribution of women reformers to the professionalization of social work. Katharine Felton's approach to disaster victims in San Francisco adds to the rich body of literature on women social work leaders. After the disaster, Felton softened relief policy's new scientific and bureaucratic methods with her ambivalence about an entirely professional system that overlooked the idiosyncrasies of the poor. Felton taught Associated Charities caseworkers that “efficiency in charity work” depended on their “knowing the languages spoken by the poor of the city and thoroughly understanding how to deal with people in trouble.”²⁷ Importantly, Felton did not stand alone in such views. Robyn Muncy's work on women reformers shows how some brought their old-fashioned, charity-based reform impulses to their new positions of authority in social work professions.²⁸ These women Progressives, among others, walked a tightrope between tradition and modernity, where the fervor for twentieth-century scientific experimentation and documentation was balanced with an attachment to nineteenth-century charity ideals.²⁹

Disasters make messy subjects. To make sense of San Francisco in 1906, I use a model conceived by sociologists Robert W. Kates and David Pijawka

to divide the city's post-disaster experience into four periods: emergency, restoration, replacement reconstruction, and commemorative reconstruction.³⁰ Although these phases can overlap and vary in duration and intensity, they provide a useful framework for understanding such a chaotic time and place.³¹

The emergency period started with the initial responses to the disaster, lasting from April to July 1906. Search and rescue, emergency food and housing, and debris removal all fell under this umbrella. The emergency phase ended once the San Francisco Relief and Red Cross Funds took charge of long-term relief policies. The subsequent restoration phase reestablished basic utility, housing, and commercial structures. During this time, thousands of refugees lived in relief camps, and their experiences reveal a more complex social dynamic at play. Rebuilding policies laid the groundwork for the third period, replacement reconstruction. Marking the return of San Francisco's social and economic activities to pre-disaster levels, replacement reconstruction was supported by local politicians, business leaders, and laborers alike. They moved quickly, and San Francisco's population returned to pre-disaster levels within three years of the first seismic tremors. The final period, commemorative reconstruction, symbolized the city's exultant recovery from disaster. City leaders sponsored two commemorative events. The first public celebration, the 1909 Portolá Festival, marked the end of replacement reconstruction. And a few years later, the more important 1915 Panama Pacific International Exposition showcased the rebuilt city to an international audience. Although most exposition structures were not built to endure, they provided tangible proof of San Francisco's disaster narrative that described a phoenix-like rise of the modern city from the ashes of a major fire.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Chapter 1 begins with the geography of San Francisco, outlining how the urban landscape carved out social meaning for local residents. It then takes a closer look at emergency responses to the fires as they raged through the city's five densely populated residential neighborhoods. From this viewpoint, the earthquake and fires stripped away urban edifices but not social identity. Emergency responders and relief leaders turned to popular conceptions of gender, race, class, and ethnicity to salvage the turn-of-the-century city. Moreover, San Francisco politics raged alongside the inferno as the mayor took command of firefighting strategy and used the emergency to bolster his political power.³² Equally important was the residents' response to the trauma. For purposes of survival, they clung to family bonds and community ties, keeping these social networks alive as their homes were destroyed.

Chapter 2 explores the historical origins and political implications of disaster relief. Seizing the opportunity for reform, Progressives rushed to the disaster zone in the hope of influencing San Francisco's recovery. Progressive relief experts evaluated both the disaster zone and the refugees, writing new relief policy aimed at reestablishing social order. The calamity gave

Progressives the opportunity (urban disarray and human need) and the means (\$9.5 million in relief donations) to press for civic reform.

Chapter 3 describes “unofficial” relief work, using new evidence to show how the disaster intensified solidarity among San Francisco’s peripheral social groups. Sheer need meant new opportunities for several groups and prominent individuals who created various forms of relief before Progressive policy assumed control. Disaster relief served a wide range of interests—from those of Catholic nuns and middle-class women to those of Chinatown leaders, working-class refugees, and philanthropic millionaires. Some of these unofficial relief efforts presented viable alternatives (and one a direct challenge) to Progressive relief policy. Refugee protesters, for example, publicly debated the efficacy of a policy that was administered by experts rather than by disaster victims themselves. All of these efforts stood in stark contrast to Progressive relief and, as a result, revealed how the policies that were intended to aid disaster victims further marginalized non-elite survivors.

Chapter 4 takes San Francisco’s disaster relief camps as a case study to explore how relief policies politicized the language of race and domesticity. The official camps’ “public home” facilitated social order by temporarily organizing refugees according to race, gender, and class criteria. On their most basic level, the camps redrew social boundaries by allocating space outside the disaster zone to contain poor and working-class refugees. By reaching beyond emergency food, shelter, and clothing, relief policy thus influenced private life, painting a new social landscape of order and progress. But relief camp documents show that even as Progressive policy scripted social order, many white women and Chinatown refugees openly defied the class, gender, and racial biases of policy.

Chapter 5 outlines the heated political and social battles during the reconstruction period. Reconstruction shared, and ultimately realized, many disaster relief goals. Both relief and rebuilding accelerated the development of several pre-catastrophe trends. Progressive reformers, for example, continued to take advantage of San Francisco’s predicament as they thrust themselves into the rebuilding debate to put forth their ambitious plans for urban redesign. Although they did not rebuild the city in accordance with their standards, they successfully battled municipal government corruption and succeeded in replacing the mayor and his political allies shortly after the catastrophe. In another important Progressive victory, women—specifically white, middle-class women who were active in disaster relief—made significant advancements in the political realm.

Rebuilding solidified the boundaries among San Francisco’s socially segregated neighborhoods. As William Issel and Robert Cherny establish, “patterns of residence, work, ethnicity, and family not only continued but also in some instances intensified” in post-disaster San Francisco.³³ I examine U.S. Census data to clarify the class, gender, and racial divisions in both old and new San Francisco neighborhoods and show how the disaster spurred urban decentralization and suburbanization. Ignoring these significant demographic changes,

most civic leaders focused instead on San Francisco's public image by planning the Panama Pacific International Exposition in 1915 to launch the new San Francisco. While the visually stunning international affair symbolized the city's glorious recovery from disaster, the event also highlighted social differences that had reportedly been destroyed by the catastrophe.

The Epilogue takes on yet another disaster question: What do catastrophes mean to those who survive them? It is difficult, of course, to measure the personal meanings attached to life-altering events, especially when the primary disaster narrative, or the public story that defines a catastrophe's core meaning, masks alternative points of view. This book gives voice to those marginalized by the dominant narrative by finding their stories in disaster artifacts. For those hit hardest by the catastrophe, the bits and pieces of property they salvaged reasserted their identities and rewove family bonds. Moreover, these objects point to a symbiotic relationship between geography and identity. As Robert Self argues, "We cannot separate historical actors from their spatial relationships. Class and race are lived through the fabric of urban life and space," and I would add that so, too, is gender.³⁴ The stories of these artifacts illustrate the multiple meanings that a single catastrophe generated for survivors and that continued to resonate long after urban recovery.

The earthquake and fires created a messy moment of opportunity because such unprecedented need required a new kind of participation in the civic body. Who had what place in the devastated city was a critical question. At first, earthquake damage and emergency responses exacerbated preexisting social differences among San Francisco's neighborhoods. Reconstruction continued on the course set in motion by the first seismic tremors as new commercial buildings and homes spurred decentralization and solidified the pre-disaster tendency toward socially stratified neighborhoods. Thus, the 1906 disaster acted as a social accelerant that propelled some preexisting social groups and political agendas forward. Relief policy bridged the gap between material loss and rebuilding by reinforcing contemporary class, gender, and racial social hierarchies. Not surprisingly, relief became the nexus for political power and empowered those charged with its distribution to determine who belonged in the rebuilt city. But urban devastation and the widespread need of hundreds of thousands of San Franciscans also created many opportunities, enabling some marginalized groups and individuals to find a voice in the public realm. In the end, however, the 1906 disaster exposed preexisting social fissures that, in turn, guided relief and reconstruction in ways that would ultimately cement social differences in San Francisco.