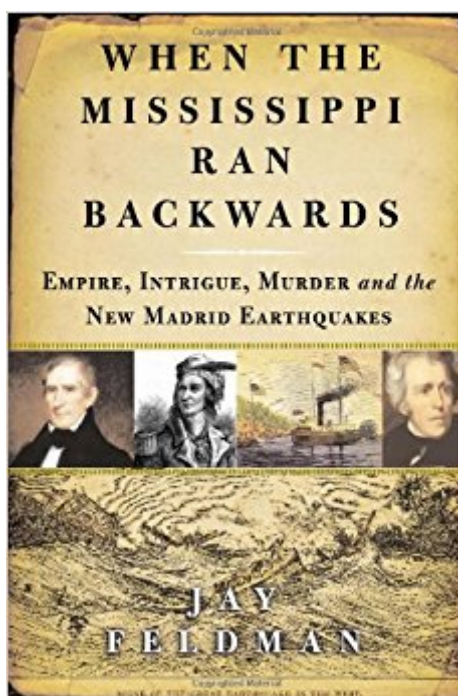


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# When The Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, And The New Madrid Earthquakes



## 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.

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## Customer Reviews

The shocks that devastated the Mississippi River town of New Madrid, Mo., and environs in the winter of 1812 were among the strongest earthquakes in America's history. But in human terms they were fairly inconsequential (about 100 people died in the lightly populated area), hence the resort to empire, intrigue and murder to flesh out this engaging if haphazard survey of the Mississippi valley frontier. Journalist and scriptwriter Feldman gives a lucid rundown of the geology and seismology of the quakes and skillfully deploys sparse firsthand memoirs of the disaster to describe the titanic upheavals of earth and water that terrified onlookers. But that leaves most of the book still to write, so he brings in other developments tenuously related to the earthquake and the region. These include the brutal Indian wars of the early 19th century, the maiden voyage of the Mississippi's first steamboat and the murder of a Kentucky slave by his degenerate owner, which came to light after one of the titular quakes demolished the chimney where the victim's remains were hidden; a set piece of the Battle of New Orleans is tacked on as a coda. The author's attempts to tie these happenings together are perfunctory at best, but it's a diverting patchwork of events, with colorful characters, that Feldman's well-paced storytelling turns into a vivid historical panorama. Agent, Alex Smithline. History Book Club Alternate Selection.(Mar.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

Through four historical figures, Feldman re-creates the frontier world of 1811-12, when the New Madrid earthquakes devastated the lower Ohio and mid-Mississippi valleys. One central character is New Madrid founder George Morgan. Others include Lilburne Lewis, a nephew of Thomas Jefferson, and Nicholas Roosevelt, whose steamboat, the first on the western rivers, was maltreated by the Mississippi when the quakes struck. Together, the schemes of these men stand for the white settlement that was opposed by the fourth main character in Feldman's drama: Tecumseh. In fateful ways, according to Feldman, the earthquakes affected their projects: the tremors destroyed Morgan's town; they collapsed Lewis' chimney, exposing the remains of a slave he murdered; and they signified, to Tecumseh's pan-Indian movement, the Great Spirit's disapproval of ceding land to whites. Synthesizing lives and times, Feldman composes a fluent, coherent narrative that culminates in the War of 1812. Feldman's fine history on the New Madrid events parallels a popular work on their geology, *The Big One*, by Charles Officer and Jake Page (2004). Gilbert

I found this book very easy reading and generally accurate, but somewhat superficial since a lot of detail could have been included about the fascinating career of the Prophet, future president Harrison, with only passing reference to one of my personal favorite character Indian Agent William Wells. It's a fairly short and simple recounting of the days of the New Madrid earthquakes of 1811-12. George Morgan founds New Madrid when his land speculation plans fall through by negotiating a settlement with the Spanish ambassador. James Wilkinson had poisoned New Orleans governor Miro with false statements as he tries to carve out his own lucrative trade deal while hinting that he might bring grumbling Kentucky settlers over to the Spanish cause. But Morgan prevails and chooses a congenial looking bluff on the north bank of a great Mississippi bend. But the site fails to prosper because the bluff is eroding and the poorly drained lands farther inland are just not hospitable. It doesn't matter for him since he inherits some more profitable lands in Pennsylvania. So it becomes a modestly prosperous river port town but little more. Meanwhile Tecumseh is forming his coalition and legend has it that he predicted the great earthquakes. There's the non-battle at Tippecanoe when the prophet Tensketawa was forced to defend the village. Meanwhile, Nicholas (steam boat engineer and paddle wheel inventor) and Lydia Roosevelt sail his technology pushing New Orleans down the Ohio to be just above the quake region on the fateful night of the first event. The boat performs flawlessly throughout and sets the stage for regular steam ship traffic on the river. A brief but generally accurate description of the fault system and the quakes, except that the magnitude is perhaps overstated at 8.0. Lots of graphic descriptions of the quakes themselves, even with lots of contradictory statements from understandably terrified observers. The tragic story of the Lewis brothers and their murder of the slave George are just a sidebar. Another sidebar is the story of Richard Johnson who supposedly was the trooper who shot down Tecumseh and uses that claim to fame to launch a political career through Congress and the Vice Presidency with Harrison. Far more interesting is the result of the first Congressional disaster relief. The idea is to provide local landowners with a land exchange voucher. But Saint Louis residents learn first and buy up plots for a song. Then, when locals find out, they resort to selling the same plot many times over. Then Saint Louis banks fail and the currency used for payments loses all value. A general fiasco all around.

I teach geology, and I've long wondered about the New Madrid faultline and the big earthquake that occurred there in the early 1800's. I know way more about the San Francisco 1906 earthquake

because I was raised in the Bay Area, and I'm familiar with the San Andreas fault. That's actually why I became interested in geology. Everyone always worries about the West Coast having earthquakes, not realizing the middle of the country has an faultline just as dangerous to worry about...This book is a mix of genres. It is a lot of history, some biography, and some geography in order to tell the whole story of not just the quake but the impact that the 1811/1812 quake and shocks had on a variety of characters in a historical context. The author brings alive how interconnected everything is...one domino falls and it impacts so many other things. In this case the quake altered the Mississippi River, caused a murder to be discovered, it led to some changes in where towns were placed along the river, and impacted the 1812 War between the British/Native Americans and the U.S. The writing was excellent, with a lot of very good research that made the book very readable and brought a long forgotten time back to life. What I really appreciate is having a lot more knowledge about the New Madrid Fault (there were some good maps in the book) and about the future potential and probability for another quake to happen. The next one will be much more devastating as this area is a lot more populated...

To go back in time when the cost of Freedom and opportunity of land was worth the risk of Indian attacks and the unknown variables that Mother Nature can destroy. Political influences, broken promises are deciphered clearly by the writer to create a total consumption of what life was like to travel west into the wilderness. And if these were not enough hardships, experience what it is like being near the center of one the largest earthquakes in North American History. A well written book that combines intelligently the events that led to the U. S. expansion west and the cost to achieve the American dream. A mature adventure that compares to Mark Twain's stories.

My girl friend loved it!

I never really understood the war of 1812 and all the build up behind it.....this book brings all the pieces together. I also think the largest earthquake in recorded U.S. History, is known of so little. I felt like I was there reliving it.....very well written and factually documented.

Well researched and written.

Once I got into it, I wish there could have been a little bit better of a plot instead of straight historical facts. Our history as Americans sometimes is a very bitter sad story to take. Along with all that is

happening today, and the way people are repeating the racism for many nationalities, it seems sad to think that we still haven't learned to get along with each other. There is always a strife for greed. Many of the earth's natural weather conditions, seem to be building for another plate shift maybe in our life time. I am 63 now. Only God knows that for sure.

Excellent quality and service

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