

Earthquake of 1886

It was one of the largest historic earthquakes in eastern North America, and by far the largest earthquake in the southeastern United States. A major shock, it occurred August 31, 1886 at approximately 9:50 p.m. and lasted less than one minute, but resulted in about sixty deaths and extensive damage to the city of Charleston. The epicenter of the earthquake was Summerville. Because the event took place before seismological instrumentation, estimates of its location and size must come from observations of the damage and effects caused by the earthquake. Most of what we know of the event and the resulting damage comes from a comprehensive report by C.E. Dutton of the U.S. Geological Survey published in 1889. The meizoseismal area (area of maximum damage) of the 1886 earthquake is an elliptical area roughly 20 by 30 miles trending northeast between Charleston and Jedburg and including Summerville and roughly centered at Middleton Place. Although there was no Richter scale at the time (it would not be created until 1935), experts today believe that the earthquake in Summerville, referred to as the Charleston earthquake, would fall between 6.6 and 7.3.

The 1886 earthquake was followed by a series of aftershocks. Of 435 or more earthquakes reported to have taken place in South Carolina between 1754 and 1975, more than 300 were aftershocks that occurred in the first 35 years following 1886. The 1886 earthquake and its aftershocks dominate the seismic record of the southeast.

The large clock on the wall is from the Charleston Hotel. The Charleston Hotel, was built c. 1838 under the design of Prussian architect Charles Reichardt, and was considered one of the most iconic hotels in the country. It was demolished in 1960 to make way for a motor lodge (*a.k.a. a hotel designed for people with cars*). The clock is set at 9:50, the time the earthquake occurred.