

A WORLD CONVULSED:
EARTHQUAKES, AUTHORITY, AND THE MAKING OF NATIONS
IN THE WAR OF 1812 ERA

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ABSTRACT

**JONATHAN TODD HANCOCK: A World Convulsed: Earthquakes, Authority,
and the Making of Nations in the War of 1812 Era
(Under the direction of Kathleen DuVal)**

This dissertation examines responses to a series of earthquakes emanating from the Mississippi River shortly before the War of 1812. As the strongest earthquakes in the North American interior in the last 1,000 years, the tremors alarmed communities from the Great Plains to the Atlantic Coast. I consider how people across this expanse sought to explain and interpret the earthquakes in light of their own political, territorial, and cultural struggles.

By incorporating all North Americans' ideas about a common event, this dissertation seeks to broaden intellectual, religious, and environmental history to include interpretive communities well beyond the Atlantic coast. In current historiography, following the American Revolution, the continent's entangled, contingent origins quickly narrow into a conflict between U.S. expansion and collective indigenous resistance. Slower to recognize contingency and a similar multiplicity of people and interests in the early national era, historians tell the story of the post-revolutionary borderlands as an almost inevitable ideological clash between self-interested land grabbing and spiritualized resistance. I argue that the dichotomy between U.S. greed and Native American spirit misses the deep connections that all early modern people drew among the human, natural, and spiritual orders. The struggle to explain the earthquakes prompted people to engage in debates about who could claim rightful authority and what sources of knowledge they could marshal to

assert their visions for human order. The earthquakes and related geopolitical upheaval thereby summoned a range of responses that an over-simplified showdown between American expansionists and militant Indians cannot capture.

This dissertation is an intellectual history of the borderlands. Because all people took matters of spirit, territory, society, and politics into account to interpret the earthquakes, this cross-cultural approach yields insights into structures of religious and political authority, intellectual trends, and geopolitical strategies across the eastern half of North America. And amid the rush to describe expansion and change in histories of the early republic, this dissertation ultimately invites us to slow down and re-imagine early nineteenth-century North America as a site where all of its inhabitants wrestled with fundamental human questions.

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Society, the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, the Tennessee State Library and Archives, the Western Kentucky University Special Collections Library, and the State Historical Society of Missouri.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADAH	Alabama Division of Archives and History, Montgomery.
ASP:IA	<i>American State Papers, Class II: Indian Affairs</i> . 2 vols. Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1832.
CSHSW	<i>Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin</i> .
FHS	Filson Historical Society, Louisville.
IHS	Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.
KHS	Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.
LBH	<i>Letters, Journals and Writings of Benjamin Hawkins</i> . Vol. 2: 1802-1806, edited by C.L. Grant. Savannah, Ga.: The Beehive Press, 1980.
MASP	Moravian Archives – Southern Province, Winston-Salem.
MDAH	Mississippi Division of Archives and History, Jackson.
MHM	Missouri History Museum, St. Louis.
OHS	Ohio Historical Society, Columbus.
JR	<i>The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791</i> . Vols. 1-70 edited by Reuben Gold Thwaites. Cleveland: The Burrows Brothers Co., 1896-1901.
WHH	The Papers of William Henry Harrison. Edited by Douglas Clanin. Microfilm copy from IHS.
SBHLA	Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.
SHSM	State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.
SPMD	<i>The Moravian Springplace Mission to the Cherokees</i> . Vol. 1 edited by Rowena McClinton. Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska Press, 2007.
TSLA	Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

INTRODUCTION

“The Crisis is not far off when I trust in God that the Tyrant [Napoleon] will be humbled, & the Scoundrel American Democrats be obliged to go on their knees to Britain...Never did War rage as it does at present, the World seems convulsed.”¹

- British Indian Agent Robert Dickson, 1814

From December 1811 through the spring of 1812, the world actually convulsed. Emanating from the Mississippi River, the strongest earthquakes in the North American interior in the last 1,000 years alarmed communities from the Great Plains to the Atlantic Coast. Separated by months of persistent quivering, three major shocks approaching 7.0 on the Richter Scale unleashed astounding damage on the land near their epicenters under the Missouri boot heel. Frightened communities of American Indians and Euroamerican settlers fled broken, flooded land and dark clouds of vapor and dust. Curious naturalists gathered evidence, and fiery preachers and prophets warned of divine disfavor with human order in the new century. Later named for a trading post founded on the Mississippi River when the region belonged to Spain, the New Madrid earthquakes briefly reversed the flow of the mighty waterway and aroused fear and fascination across eastern North America.²

¹ John Dickson to Robert Lawe, February 4, 1814, “Dickson and Grignon Papers, 1812-1815,” Reuben G. Thwaites, ed., *CSHSW* 11 (1888), 291.

² For useful historical introductions to the New Madrid earthquakes, see Jay Feldman, *When the Mississippi Ran Backwards: Empire, Intrigue, Murder, and the New Madrid Earthquakes* (New York: Free Press, 2005); Jake Page and Charles Officer *The Big One: The Earthquake that Rocked Early America and Helped Create a Science* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004); Norma Hayes Bagnall, *On Shaky Ground: The New Madrid Earthquakes of 1811-1812* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1996); Myrl Rhine Mueller, *Lost in the Annals: History and Legends of the New Madrid Earthquake of 1811-12* (Little Rock, Ark.: J&B Quality

Firsthand accounts of the shaking captured the earthquakes' scope as well as the extent of destruction. People reported tremors from as far away as present-day Kansas and Nebraska, Detroit, New Orleans, Baltimore, and Charleston. The earth's oscillation awoke Americans with ill-timed church bells across the country. Groggy people imagined home intruders as their most likely nighttime threat. In Washington City, families moved from room to room to search for thieves, and a young girl in Indiana Territory thought that Indians were trying to break into her house. Close to the epicenter, the damage was terrifying and immense. A doctor in Louisville captured the awful totality of the experience:

All was confusion and terror. The sky became darker each moment, the stars grew dim till they were invisible; and from out the solid, almost intangible blackness of the night, issued those fearful sounds, as though the whole order of things and all the laws of nature were about being broken up, and matter returning to its original chaos.

The earthquakes rendered Mississippi River navigation manuals useless as islands disappeared and riverbanks disintegrated. In the days following the initial temblor, a

Book Bindery, 1990); James Lal Penick, Jr., *The New Madrid Earthquakes*, rev. ed. (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1981). These works also discuss how advances in geology have informed the modern scientific study of the New Madrid earthquakes. Seismologist Myron Fuller pioneered the geologic study of the earthquakes. See Myron L. Fuller, "The New Madrid Earthquake," U.S. Geological Survey *Bulletin* 494 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1912). Seismologists Susan Hough and Morgan Page have recently revised traditional magnitude estimates of 8.0 or higher for the earthquakes and argued instead that they were closer to 7.0. See Susan Hough and Morgan Page, "Toward a consistent model for strain accrual and release for the New Madrid Seismic Zone, central United States," *Journal of Geophysical Research* 116 (2011), B03311. The United States Geological Survey (USGS) maintains a webpage about the New Madrid earthquakes with scientific details and useful maps at <http://earthquake.usgs.gov/earthquakes/states/events/1811-1812.php>. Several eyewitness accounts corroborate the observation that the Mississippi River ran backwards. See Samuel L. Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes which occurred on the 16th day of December, 1811, and agitated the parts of North America that lie between the Atlantic Ocean and Louisiana," *Transactions of the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York* 1 (1815), 290-91, 300; Firmin La Roche, "A Sailor's Record of the New Madrid Earthquake," *Missouri Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1928), 269; and Vincent Nolte, *Fifty Years in Both Hemispheres or, Reminiscences of the Life of a Former Merchant* (New York: Redfield, 1854), 182. Charles LaTrobe, James Ross, and Thomas L. Stephens relate the memories of inhabitants who experienced the earthquakes and claimed the river ran backwards in Charles Joseph LaTrobe, *The Rambler in North America, 1832-1833, Vol. 1*, (London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1835), 111; James Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires & Rodgers, n.d.), 207; Meteorological Record of John E. Younglove, Western Kentucky University Special Collections Library.

boatman reported being awoken by chunks of former islands and riverbanks scraping against his boat. The shaking cracked Indiana Territory Governor William Henry Harrison's chimney in Vincennes and exposed coffins along the bank of the Mississippi River. People found their wells and smokehouses on the opposite sides of new streams.³

The earthquakes struck the continent amid major structural changes in the economy, geopolitics, and demography of eastern North America. The early American republic aggressively expanded into new territories, where religious revivalism spread among trans-Appalachian settlers, and eastern planters began establishing large-scale slave plantations in the Deep South. Some American politicians agitated for war against Great Britain to assert the republic's economic and military prowess, while others feared that warfare and expansion would upset already tenuous national bonds. Meanwhile, in an effort to maintain autonomy, Native Americans responded to U.S. westward expansion with strategies that ranged from alliance and trade with the United States to inter-tribal and tribally based resistance. More than two years after the first tremors, with the Napoleonic Wars raging in Europe and the "Scoundrel American Democrats" seeking to take Canada, British agent Robert Dickson

³ John James Audubon, *Audubon and His Journals*, Vol. 2, ed. Maria R. Audubon (1898; repr. New York: Dover Publications, 1960), 234-35; Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative," 281; "Mrs. Lydia B. Bacon's Journal, 1811-1812," ed. Mary M. Crawford, *Indiana Magazine of History* 40, no. 10 (1944), 385; P.S. Ruter, *Reminiscences of a Virginia Physician* (Louisville: Ben Casseday & Co., 1849), 20; J.H.B. LaTrobe, *The First Steamboat Voyage on the Western Waters* (Baltimore: Maryland Historical Society, 1871), 28-31; James McGready to Jane McGready, February 181, 1812, McGready-Ingram Collection, Kentucky Historical Society; James McBride to Mary Roberts, April 1, 1812, "Brief Accounts of Journeys in Western Country, 1809-1812," *Quarterly Publication of the Historical and Philosophical Society of Ohio* 5, no. 1 (1910), 29; "Historical Sketch of Pemiscot County, 1786-1936," Western Manuscripts Collection, SHSM. New York Congressman, physician, and naturalist Samuel Mitchill compiled testimony from across the century and established this rough estimate of the geographical reach of the earthquakes. He questioned the "dubious character" of reports of shocks as far north as Philadelphia and New York, but other studies extend the earthquakes' further north. For Mitchill's discussion of the "limits of their extension," see Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes," 295-6. On the account of shaking in the eastern Great Plains, see Edwin James, *James's Account of S.H. Long's Expedition, 1819-1820*, repr. *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846*, vol. 15, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1905), 57. Susan Hough has suggested that the saying that the earthquakes "rang church bells in Boston" probably stemmed from a report that church bells in "Charlestown" rang. People then mistook Charleston, South Carolina, for the Charlestown neighborhood of Boston. See Richard A. Lovett, "Quake Analysis Rewrites History Books," *Nature*, April 29, 2010.

remarked that the world still seemed “convulsed.” The earthquakes provoked a contest of ideas about the operation of the natural world with deeper political, cultural, and territorial consequences. In seeking to establish the authority to interpret the natural disorder, people throughout the societies affected by the tremors advanced broader claims about their visions for human order in North America.

By incorporating all North Americans’ ideas about a common event, I seek to broaden early nineteenth-century American intellectual, religious, and environmental history to include interpretive communities well beyond the Atlantic coast. Recent approaches to colonial North America have captured the diversity of people and perspectives populating the continent. Casting away old assumptions about Native Americans as monolithic obstacles to expansion or the American Revolution as the inevitable outcome of British colonization, colonial historiography now emphasizes the multitude of indigenous and European polities and traces their shifting alliances over time. However, in current historiography, following the establishment of the United States, the continent’s entangled, contingent origins quickly narrow into a conflict between U.S. expansion and collective indigenous resistance. Slower to recognize contingency and a similar multiplicity of people and interests in the early national era, historians tell the story of the post-revolutionary borderlands as an almost inevitable ideological clash between self-interested land grabbing and spiritualized resistance. I argue that the dichotomy between U.S. greed and Native American spirit misses the deep connections that all early modern people drew among the human, natural, and spiritual orders. The struggle to explain the earthquakes prompted people across North America to engage in debates about who could claim rightful authority and what sources of knowledge they could marshal to assert their visions for human order. The earthquakes and

related geopolitical upheaval summoned a range of responses that an over-simplified showdown between American expansionists and militant Indians cannot capture.

In the early nineteenth century, people's environmental and geopolitical fears were intertwined. A settler near Cincinnati wrote that "people are moving out of this country faster than they ever moved in to it" because of the threat of Indians and earthquakes. A Cherokee man proclaimed, "Many Indians believe that white people are responsible for this because they already possess so much Indian land and want ever more. God is angry about this and wants to scare them through earthquakes to put an end to this." Concerns ranged far from the epicenter. "I hope these things are not ominous of natural calamity," worried a congressman in Washington City. In the areas most affected by the earthquakes, Indian prophets and American evangelicals emerged from their larger communities' social margins claiming new authority from direct access to the divine forces responsible for the tremors. They pointed to the earthquakes as signs of the need for reform of the existing cultural and territorial order. The emergent American, Cherokee, and Creek states relegated these revivalistic movements to the political margins, but their legacies persisted as important social and political forces in United States history.⁴

Because all people took matters of spirit, territory, society, and politics into account to interpret the earthquakes, this cross-cultural approach yields insights into structures of religious and political authority, intellectual trends, and geopolitical strategies across eastern North America in the early nineteenth century. Responses to the upheaval of late 1811 and 1812 also call into question some of the other major interpretive categories that historians

⁴ C.A. Dillingham to Isaac Jones, April 9, 1812, C.A. Dillingham Papers, Ohio Historical Society; Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, January 1, 1812, "Letters of Abijah Bigelow, Member of Congress, To His Wife, 1810-1815," ed. Clarence Brigham, *American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings* 40 (1930), 323.

have constructed in the study of the early republic. Even in this age of evangelical revival, there was little antagonism or distinction between “religious” and “scientific” worldviews. Earthquake interpretations often blended evangelical concerns with empirical observations, and people agreed that there was at least some measure of divine control over the natural world. American Indian earthquake interpretations and related wartime strategies show a great variety of indigenous prophetic and political authorities in Indian country that defied the strict binary that Tecumseh sought to construct between spiritualized, inter-tribal militancy and accommodation to the United States. And in the early republic, eastern skepticism about western people and their dramatic, occasionally fabricated accounts of earthquake damage suggest that the major axis of regional tension at the end of the eighteenth century and in the first two decades of the nineteenth century was the Appalachian Mountains, not the divide between free and slave states.

Varying interpretations of the earthquakes also suggest important ideological differences among Native Americans. Historians have assumed that inter-tribal militancy was the dominant Indian strategy for reckoning with U.S. infiltration of Native territories and cultures in the War of 1812 era. While Native Americans east of the Mississippi River were universally concerned about U.S. encroachment, most did not subscribe to Tecumseh’s millennial vision of the conflict. By comparing the varied responses of Creeks, Cherokees, Delawares, Shawnees and other tribes to the earthquakes and geopolitical upheaval, I argue that American Indians employed a wider range of political and diplomatic strategies. Tribally specific strategies for maintaining sovereignty, including neutrality, lesser-known prophetic movements, and alliances with the United States show that this emphasis on inter-tribalism restricts a fuller understanding of early nineteenth-century Native American politics

and diplomacy. East of the Mississippi River, we tend to analyze postwar Native American strategies solely in terms of their accommodation or inter-tribal resistance to the United States. But the choice between accommodation or inter-tribal resistance was not one that early nineteenth-century American Indians themselves would have recognized. When the American nation and its expansion are the only referents around which the histories of the Trans-Appalachian West are written, American Indians unfortunately become either obstacles or enablers. And in many cases, the picture of U.S. opposition to the inter-tribal militants is that of a greedy, calculating American juggernaut, uniformly committed to territorial expansion through Indian dispossession. But this conflict was not a simple matter of Native spirit against American greed.⁵

Although historians have linked Creek and Cherokee prophets to Tecumseh's militant

⁵ American fascination with Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa's inter-tribal movement began in their lifetimes and continued in the nineteenth century with Daniel Drake's 1852 biography of the Shawnee brothers. See Drake, *Life of Tecumseh, and of his brother the prophet: with a historical sketch of the Shawanoe Indians* (Cincinnati: H.S. & J. Applegate & Co, 1852). Gregory Evans Dowd's path-breaking work has established prophetic, inter-tribal militancy as the dominant Indian strategy for reckoning with colonial British and later U.S. expansion. See Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). Pitting American Indian "nativists" against "accommodationists," Dowd's interpretive model importantly recognized the prophetic roots of inter-tribal resistance from the mid-eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. While not diminishing the importance of this brand of inter-tribal militancy, I argue that a variety of American Indian interpretations of the earthquakes and related geopolitical upheaval demonstrate a wider spectrum of Indian strategies and tribal particularities that the persistent historiographical focus on the Shawnee brothers and previous "nativist" militants has overshadowed. For studies of American Indians in the War of 1812 with a similar focus, see R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*. (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 1983); John Sugden, *Tecumseh: a life* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1998); Alfred A. Cave, "The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making," *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 1 (2002), 651-661; Adam Jortner, *The Gods of Prophetstown: The Battle of Tippecanoe and the Holy War for the American Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). The literature on the early U.S. expansion for land and empire is vast. For example, see Reginald Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy, 1783-1812* (East Lansing: Michigan State Press, 1967); Bernard W. Sheehan, *Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973); Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Meta-Physics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997); Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007); Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (W.W. Norton, 2008); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *This Violent Empire: The Birth of an American National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010). These works rarely discuss the contingency of U.S. territorial expansion in this period.

inter-tribalism, I use their divergent understandings of the earthquakes, among other evidence, to argue that these southeastern prophetic movements are better understood in their specific tribal contexts. While Creek and Cherokee earthquake interpretations and wider calls for reform were rooted in common southeastern Indian concepts of purity, I explore how differences in Creek and Cherokee social organization and history led to divergent outcomes for these movements, as civil war engulfed the Creeks. I argue that the militant Creek uprising known as the Redstick War was not an extension of the inter-tribalism further north, but an extended purge grounded in Creek cultural terms. And I point to disagreements within the emerging Creek and Cherokee nations about the earthquakes' meaning and the proper course of action in the War of 1812, which culminated in members of both groups assisting the United States in putting down the Redsticks.

Responses to the earthquakes among Euroamerican settlers also offer a new lens into intellectual trends and questions of authority and authenticity among American evangelicals. The tremors were a major catalyst in the growth of trans-Appalachian evangelicalism. At the same time, however, the earthquakes raised questions about the authenticity of both evangelical conversion experiences and seemingly improbable accounts of the disaster. People criticized "Earthquake Christians" for their short-lived piety and western settlers for their supposed unreliability.

Many settlers' earthquake accounts exhibit the influences of evangelicalism and empiricism, two important trends of thought often assumed to be at odds with one another. Settlers' earthquake interpretations and subsequent print discussions about the earthquakes' religious meanings show that it would be misguided to project later antagonism between "evangelical" and "scientific" understandings of the workings of the natural world back into

the first decades of the early republic. Debates about divine intentionality, the authenticity of religious experience, and the parameters of access to knowledge about the divine were more contentious intellectual issues than questions about the compatibility of faith and reason. Equally reliant on the experience and authority of the individual, evangelicalism and empiricism mutually framed many of the same earthquake interpretations without conflict, stoking debates about who could claim interpretive authority and what sources of experiential and written knowledge could inform interpretations.

These debates played out in early national print culture. Seeking to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as a European tendency to theorize, American naturalists, newspapers, and their readers welcomed empirical earthquake accounts from closer to the epicenter. With reports of volcanoes erupting in western North Carolina, the Mississippi River running backwards, and other similarly implausible sights, however, it was difficult to distinguish between authentic and fabricated information. Amid eastern skepticism of western claims, some of which could be true and others fictitious, an informant's social status became a filter for determining the authenticity of earthquake accounts. The earthquakes also figured into public debates about territorial expansion, elite and popular political interests, and the ensuing conflict with Great Britain.

When untangling alliances and competition among groups of Native Americans and Euroamericans, terminology can be frustrating. Indeed early U.S. citizens complained that they lacked an original name of their own. In his review of an influential French work on early U.S. lands and climates, New York politician and naturalist Samuel Mitchill was dismayed about naming: "When the people of this distinguished part of the western world shall determine to assume their proper appellation, it will be easily in their power to avoid the

nicknames which foreigners bestow upon them.” For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to refer to citizens of the United States as “Americans,” realizing that this term is problematic for a project that focuses heavily on the indigenous inhabitants of North America. One of my major arguments is that despite the push for inter-tribal militancy in the War of 1812 era, tribal affiliation remained crucial, and I identify Native Americans by tribe whenever possible. In seeking to write an indigenous intellectual history about earthquakes, however, some generalizations are necessary. I argue that Native Americans’ long-standing associations of earthquakes with illness, impurity, and the abandonment of ritual persisted into the nineteenth century, and I compare indigenous systems of knowledge about the natural world with those of Euroamerican people.⁶

At its core, what follows is an intellectual history of the borderlands. Amid the rush to describe expansion and change in histories of the early republic, this approach ultimately invites us to slow down and re-imagine early nineteenth-century North America as a site where all of its inhabitants wrestled with fundamental human questions. I use the common experience of the earthquakes to challenge us to consider what else can we know about these people.

⁶ Samuel Mitchill, “Review of Volney, *A View of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America*,” *The Medical Repository* 2 (1804), 196. Ideally the dissertation would contain a more sustained analysis of African American interpretations of the earthquakes. Although I address the evangelical conversions of enslaved people in Chapter 4 and the case of an enslaved woman with a “serious mental affliction” from the earthquakes in the Conclusion, the limitations of time and an adequate source base have prevented me from carrying this inquiry any further in the dissertation.

PART I
LINEAGES OF THOUGHT

The earthquakes summoned ancient ideas about the operation of the natural world that intersected with contemporary concerns about politics, land, and culture. European colonialism brought together ideas that had taken root in the ancient and medieval cultures of North America, Africa, and Europe. While these lineages of thought had undergone significant changes in this colonial context, particularly as intellectual trends encouraging the experience and authority of the individual arose in the eighteenth century, they always had grappled with a central question: to what extent could humans mediate the forces responsible for natural phenomena? Systems of knowledge among Europeans, Africans, and American Indians also allowed interpretive space for earthquakes to be part of natural cycles unrelated to human behavior. This flexibility meant that in understanding earthquakes, early modern people looked for human and natural causes without finding them mutually exclusive. Distinctions between “scientific” and “religious” understandings of natural phenomena were meaningless when all people drew connections among human, natural, and divine worlds.

CHAPTER 1

THE ROOTS OF NORTH AMERICAN EARTHQUAKE INQUIRY: NEGOTIATING NATURAL CAUSES AND HUMAN RESPONSIBILITIES

Interpretations of the New Madrid earthquakes reflected several long-standing features of thought that people adapted to the pressing issues of 1811 and 1812. American Indians summoned an intellectual tradition that linked tremors with illness and impurity. Euroamericans largely turned to instances of natural phenomena as divine punishment in the Bible, as well as Greco-Roman ideas about wind, water, and fire as the natural causes of earthquakes. Europeans updated the ideas of Antiquity and advanced new theories about electricity after major earthquakes in the mid-eighteenth century. Meanwhile, evangelical thinkers and Indian prophets used tremors and other natural phenomena to argue that the distance between the human and spiritual worlds had narrowed and that divine forces demanded immediate earthly reforms. Despite differences among these interpretive communities, however, looking to the sky and drawing links between human problems and environmental instability were millennia-old traditions of earthquake observation and interpretation across world cultures. The sacred and the empirical remained fused.

Native North America

When referring to “American Indian” ideas, one risks overgeneralizing about people and traditions across Native North America. Tribal specificity is important, but it can

atomize the study of American Indians and prevent useful comparisons to “Europe,” a designation that scholars use much more readily. Both terms can be problematic if employed uncritically, but if scholars study the history of European earthquake inquiry without hesitation, Native North American ideas about earthquakes seem a reasonable comparison. Though the limits of the written source base in Native North America complicate the task, literate Europeans should not be the sole subjects of early American intellectual history. Oral histories often employ metaphors that make Native understandings of the natural world seem more mythic than scientific. However, anthropologists and other specialists of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK) have shown that indigenous systems of knowledge are not remnants of a bygone era, but sophisticated and adaptable ways of understanding how the natural world operates.¹

While archaeoastronomy has established how assiduously Mesoamericans documented their ancient skies, the lack of physical evidence in North America complicates the job of exploring how Native North Americans recorded and understood changes in the earth and sky. Though knowledge may not have been hewn into massive blocks of stone, as in parts of Latin America, this material circumstance must not bolster the assumption that these communities were less concerned with documenting cyclical and sudden change in the natural world. Native North Americans recorded instances of natural phenomena through smaller rock carvings and in less durable materials like dirt, wood, and animal skins and transmitted ways to understand them through oral histories. For example, Great Plains

¹ W. Bruce Masse, Elizabeth Wayland Barber, Luigi Piccardi, and Paul T. Barber, “Exploring the nature of myth and its role in science,” *Geological Society, London, Special Publications* 273 (2007), 9-28; Nurit Bird-David, “‘Animism’ Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology,” *Current Anthropology* 40 (1999), S69-S91; Coll Thrush with Ruth S. Ludwin., “Finding Fault: Indigenous Seismology, Colonial Science, and the Rediscovery of Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Canada,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 31, no. 4 (2007), 1-24.

winter counts documented years with earthquakes and meteor showers. In California, where many sacred sites were located near areas of high seismic activity, uneven lines in petroglyph drawings likely signified earthquakes.²

In explaining earthquakes in Native North America, there was a central tension between viewing the shaking as part of a natural cycle or as something directly related to disruptions in human affairs. In many North American indigenous cosmologies, the universe is divided into three layers: a watery underworld, an island that constituted this world, and the sky. The Penobscots of present-day northern New England attributed the shaking to an underworld being “who turns over where he lives beneath the earth every few years.” Capable of living on land and in the water, massive reptiles like turtles and snakes often held up the island from the watery world beneath it. Among tribes descended from medieval Mississippian cultures, large snakes held up the earth at its four cardinal corners. Because they shouldered great weight, these reptiles periodically shifted positions and made the ground shake. The Delawares and Wyandots, many of whom relocated to the Ohio Valley in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, offered similar accounts of a great turtle who held up the continent on its back. According to the Wyandots, “Sometimes he becomes weary of remaining so long in one position. Then he shifts his weight, and moves his feet. And the Great Island trembles, and the Wyandots cry out, ‘He moves the earth! He moves the

² James H. Howard, “Yanktonai Ethnohistory and the John K. Bear Winter Count,” *Plains Anthropologist* 21, no. 73 (1976), 33; Susan E. Hough, “Writing on the walls: geological context and early American spiritual beliefs,” *Geological Society, London, Special Publications* 273 (2007), 107-115. For a survey of Mesoamerican archaeoastronomy, see Anthony F. Aveni, “Archaeoastronomy in the Ancient Americas,” *Journal of Archaeological Research* 11, no. 2 (2003), 149-191. On Native North American inquiry into the natural world, see Clara Sue Kidwell, “Ethnoastronomy as the Key to Human Intellectual Development and Social Organization,” in *Native Voices: American Indian Identity and Resistance*, eds. Richard A. Grounds, George E. Tinker, and David E. Wilkins (Lawrence, Ks.: University of Kansas Press, 2003), 5-19; Kidwell, “Native Knowledge in the Americas,” *Osiris*, 2nd series, vol. I (1985), 209-228. Kidwell, “Systems of Knowledge,” *America in 1492: The World of the Indian Peoples before the Arrival of Columbus*, ed. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), 369-404.

earth!” The Yuchis, a tribe affiliated with the Creek Confederacy, attributed earthquakes to an underground being that “sometimes shakes and jerks the earth to find out how much water there remains on it.” Earthquakes were thus regular consequences of the occasional rebalancing of the universe’s layers. In this capacity, they were unrelated to human affairs.³

These Native understandings of earthquakes as part of natural cycles existed alongside scenarios in which earthquakes were punishments or warnings for disrupting rituals and generally behaving badly. In these cases, humans had the power to mediate the divine forces responsible for the tremors. For the Iowas and Hopis, human responsibility for earthquakes dated back to their creation stories. In the beginning of the Iowa universe, an animate pit known as a “U’yê” swallowed people and animals that came near it. Like most indigenous underworlds, the bottom of the U’yê was a dark and menacing place “with all manner of dead, dying, and partially digested humans and animals.” Heroic twins cut their way out of the U’yê and killed it. A major earthquake from the U’yê’s shuddering signaled its death. The Iowa story was a rare case in which direct human action led to earthquakes. More often, misbehavior or ritual inaction led to shaking. In a Hopi emergence story, Hopi migrants settled for four years at a place where there was incessant fighting and sexual licentiousness. This misbehavior led to a major earthquake, and the earth swallowed those who did not flee.⁴

³ Frank G. Speck, “Penobscot Tales and Religious Beliefs,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 48, no. 187 (1935), 21; Jay Miller, “Why the World is on the Turtle’s Back,” *Man* 9, no. 2 (1974), 306-08; George E. Lankford, “World on a String: Some Cosmological Components of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, eds. Richard F. Townsend and Robert V. Sharp (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press for the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004), 207-18; William E. Connelley, “Notes on the Folk-Lore of the Wyandots,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 12, no. 45 (1899), 122; John Heckewelder, *An Account of the History, Manners, and Customs, of the Indians Nations, who once inhabited Pennsylvania and the Neighbouring States* (Philadelphia: Abraham Small, 1818), 307; Speck, “Ethnology of the Yuchi Indians,” *Anthropological Publications of the University Museum* 1, no. 1 (1909), 110.

⁴ Alanson Skinner, “Traditions of the Iowa Indians,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 38, no. 125 (1925), 429-

The threat of earthquakes for abandoning rituals or not behaving properly persisted for Hopis and other American Indians across North America. Water serpents live in springs and provide water for Hopis, unless they fail to make proper arrangements to honor the snakes. According to a Hopi account, “If the ceremonies are not carried out properly, the fate of the village will be sealed when it is swallowed by the earth to the accompaniment of new cataclysmic earthquakes.” Earthquakes served as warnings for California Indians interviewed in the early twentieth century. They believed that “the tilting of the earth” caused earthquakes when “deerskin and jumping dances” did not bring the earth back into balance. Two earthquakes in a year constituted a grave warning, since this worldly layer could slide off its support from below. The Delawares first created their elaborate Big House Ceremony as a ritual response to earthquakes. In the Pacific Northwest, where the Cascadia subduction zone has created some of the largest earthquakes in North American history, American Indians correlated tremors with human activity. On Vancouver Island, a Kwakwaka'wakw account held that the human mistreatment of dogs caused earthquakes.⁵

Long-held indigenous ideas about ritual loss and other errant human behaviors framed Native earthquake interpretations in the colonial period, especially as European diseases devastated their communities and cultures. Rituals for healing, renewal, and purity

30; Wilson D. Wallis, “Folk Tales from Shumopovi, Second Mesa,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 49, nos. 191-92 (1936), 17-18. Anthropologist Richard O. Clemmer has argued that Hopi prophecies of disaster as punishment for misbehavior have remained central to how Hopis relate to outsiders and seek reforms. See Richard O. Clemmer, “‘Then Will You Rise and Strike My Head from My Neck’: Hopi Prophecy and the Discourse of Empowerment,” *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 1 (1995), 31-73.

⁵ *Hopi Tales of Destruction*, trans. and ed. Ekkehart Malotki (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 2002), 4-16; A.L. Kroeber, “Earthquakes,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 19, no. 75 (1906), 322-25; Speck, *A Study of the Delaware Big House Ceremony* (Harrisburg, Pa.: The Pennsylvania Historical Commission, 1931); Miller, “Old Religion among the Delawares: The Gamwing (Big House Rite),” *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 1 (1997), 113-34; Alan D. McMillan and Ian Hutchinson, “When the Mountain Dwarfs Danced: Aboriginal Traditions of Paleoseismic Events along the Cascadia Subduction Zone of Western North America,” *Ethnohistory* 49, no. 1 (2002), 41-68; Coll Thrush with Ruth S. Ludwin, “Finding Fault: Indigenous Seismology, Colonial Science, and the Rediscovery of Earthquakes and Tsunamis in Canada,” 1-24.

always had been important responses to illnesses. As another traditional sign of impurity, not only of sick bodies but impure lands and cultures as well, an earthquake also signaled ritual imbalance. Some Native people mutually associated these alarming cosmological disruptions with the arrival of Europeans. Native North Americans therefore linked colonial-era earthquakes with outbreaks of disease and other forms of pollution. And just as some Native people blamed Europeans for diseases, they also appropriated tremors and other natural phenomena to critique colonialism.

Western Europe

The Bible and ancient Greco-Roman philosophy were the intellectual foundations of western European earthquake inquiry. Just as many indigenous traditions associated shaking with human activity but left interpretive space for earthquakes in natural cycles unrelated to humans, Europeans also negotiated the tension between natural and human causes. And as interpretations of the New Madrid earthquakes showed, debates about the human role in natural phenomena persisted into the nineteenth century.

Medieval and early modern Europeans looked to the great works of Antiquity to explain earthquakes. In his multi-volume opus *Meteorologica*, Aristotle addressed the theories of his pre-Socratic predecessors, most of whom pointed to water as the primary cause of earthquakes. Supposing a watery underworld in the same way that indigenous North American thinkers did, Democritus believed that when the underground pores were full, the earth shook to release the excess water. The onrush of water into empty caverns also created earthquakes. Accordingly, periods of extreme moisture or drought were prime occasions for earthquakes. Anaximenes, another pre-Socratic natural philosopher, supposed

that slabs of earth collapsed when the ground became excessively wet or dry, leading to tremors. Aristotle understood why Democritus and Anaximenes attributed earthquakes to dryness or too much moisture in the ground, but he questioned why earthquakes took place in areas that were neither excessively wet nor dry. Instead he believed that water was a secondary effect of underground winds that built up and shook the ground when they escaped out of it.⁶

First-century Roman natural philosopher Pliny the Elder joined Aristotle in pointing to underground wind as the primary cause of earthquakes, and he discussed possible connections between human and natural disorder, as well as the earth and the sky. He devoted a chapter of the first volume of his major work *Natural History* to explaining earthquakes, which began by discussing Greek leaders who predicted that earthquakes would destroy their cities. “And if these things be true, how nearly do these individuals approach to the Deity, even during their lifetime! But I leave every one to judge of these matters as he pleases,” he added. Pliny also considered conditions in the air and among humans that were related to the ground shaking. He noted that earthquakes were more frequent at night, as well as during lunar and solar eclipses. Another “sign in the heavens” was a cloud “stretched out in the clear sky, like a long thin line.” Furthermore, an earthquake was “a forerunner of some great calamity,” as reports of tremors were frequent during the Punic Wars.⁷

In casting their ultimate meaning as a divine punishment or moment of revelation, the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament were less equivocal about the human role in

⁶ Aristotle, *Meteorologica*, trans. H.D.P. Lee (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 1952), 48-54.

⁷ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History of Pliny*, vol. 1, trans. John Bostock and H.T. Riley (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893), 111-16. Historian of science John Gates Taylor, Jr., has asserted that European understandings of earthquakes did not change substantially between the first and seventeenth centuries. See John Gates Taylor, Jr., “Eighteenth-Century Earthquake Theories: A Case-History Investigation into the Character of the Earth in the Enlightenment,” Ph.D. diss., University of Oklahoma, 1975.

earthquakes. In dozens of references in the Hebrew Bible, prophets warned that God used earthquakes to punish humans. Shaking was therefore evidence of divine power and displeasure with human order. The Book of Isaiah typified biblical statements about divine wrath: “Therefore is the anger of the LORD kindled against his people, and he hath stretched for his hand against them, and hath smitten them: and the hills did tremble, and their carcasses were torn in the midst of the streets.” Earthquakes were both punishments and warnings about where ultimate power lay. As a psalmist urged readers, “Come, behold the works of the LORD, what desolations he hath made in the earth.” In a work where God was often a punisher, earthquakes were often the weapons.⁸

As signs of Jesus’ divinity following the Crucifixion and stages of the end times, earthquakes assumed even more consequential roles in the New Testament’s Gospels and Book of Revelation. Following Jesus’ death in the Book of Matthew, an earthquake opened graves around the Temple in Jerusalem. As the “bodies of saints” escaped their graves and arose, Roman centurions and other onlookers exclaimed, “Truly this was the Son of God.” In the next chapter, “a great earthquake” coincided with the visit of an angel who descended from heaven to tell Mary Magdalene and Mary that Jesus was no longer in his tomb. Earthquakes also were crucial elements of the New Testament’s second major concern: the end of the world. Many of the detailed stages in the Book of Revelation included earthquakes among an array of natural catastrophes. The eleventh chapter of Revelation predicted that one would kill seven thousand men, and after the Ark of the Covenant was

⁸ Isaiah 5:25; Psalms 46:8.

opened, there would be “lightnings, and voices, and thunderings, and an earthquake, and great hail.”⁹

Transatlantic colonists brought these biblical and Greco-Roman understandings of earthquakes with them. These perspectives, one emphasizing divine will and the other interested in linking tremors to natural causes, might seem irreconcilable to modern polemicists on either side of the “science versus religion” debate. But for the medieval or early modern thinker, they were compatible. The question of divine influence on earthquakes was one of proximity, not existence: how involved was God in the day-to-day operation of the natural world? And if God were directly involved, what divine messages were encoded in an earthquake? Nor were these European ideas stagnant between the Classical Age and the Enlightenment. A mid-fourteenth-century German treatise proposed that earthquakes in 1347 released deadly fumes that led to an outbreak of the bubonic plague. The text began with the baseline contention that “*It is from divine wrath that the mortality of these years proceeds.*” The German writer then proposed that just as rotting fruit or fetid water gave off unhealthy vapors, so too did the earth release poisonous gas when it cracked and shook. Ideas linking illness and earthquakes were common to medieval Europe and North America.¹⁰

Among colonists in British North America, preachers were the most prominent part-time naturalists. Cotton Mather’s case demonstrates Protestants’ long-standing fusion of sacred and empirical understandings of nature in North America. Despite his strict adherence to Calvinism, which stressed humanity’s total inability to comprehend God’s plan, the

⁹ Matthew 27:51-54, 28:1-6; Revelation 11:13,19.

¹⁰ Karl Sudhoff, “Pestschriften aus den ersten 150 Jahren nach der Epidemie des ‘schwarzen Todes’ 1348: XI,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Medizin* 11 (1918-19), 47-51, in *The Black Death*, trans. and ed. Rosemary Horrox (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1994), 177-82.

Puritan polymath deemed the natural sciences a legitimate object of study because they offered small insights into how God ordered the universe. During the Salem Witch Trials of the early 1690s, Mather sought to distinguish between accusations of witchcraft based on spectral evidence, or the alleged visitation of the devil in the form of an accused person, and “more evident and sensible things” like confessions or evidence of the actual practice of witchcraft. He also penned a series of letters to the Royal Society of London between 1712 and 1724 in hopes of being accepted into the highest circles of European learning. Entitled “Curiosa Americana,” the missives featured Mather’s thoughts on a number of topics related to nature, most notably the discovery of giant bones in New England. At once theological, scientific, and occult, these musings contained subtle appeals for European recognition of both their author’s intellect and the Americas as a legitimate arena of study.¹¹

Mather further attempted to construct what one literary scholar has deemed his “harmonious structure of knowledge” in his 1721 work *The Christian Philosopher*. His discussion of earthquakes borrowed heavily from Athanius Kircher, a seventeenth-century German Jesuit whose study of the subterranean world yielded elaborate illustrations and schema for understanding “the Divine Structure of the under-ground World, and the wondrous distribution of the Work-houses of Nature, and her Majesty and Riches therein.”

¹¹ Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World*, 1693 (repr. *The Witchcraft Delusion in New England*, ed. Samuel Drake (Roxbury, Mass.: Printed for W. Elliott Woodward, 1866), 35. For a discussion of Mather’s refusal to admit spectral evidence and the types of evidence that actually led to convictions in the Salem Witch Trials, see Wendel D. Craker, “Spectral Evidence, Non-Spectral Acts of Witchcraft, and Confession at Salem in 1692,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no.2 (June 1997), 331-358. Craker may read too far into Mather’s original claim in *The Wonders of the Invisible World* by equating Mather’s discussion of “more evident and sensible things” with a commitment to empirical evidence. But it remains significant for understanding Mather’s approach to empiricism that he distinguished between types of evidence. For a sample letter by Mather and an introductory discussion of its context, see David Levin, “Giants in the Earth: Science and the Occult in Cotton Mather’s Letters to the Royal Society,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (1998), 751-770. Paul Semonin tracks the three hundred year history of social meanings assigned to the bones, which were the prehistoric fossils of a mastodon, in Semonin, *American Monster: How the Nation’s First Prehistoric Creature Became a Symbol of National Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

In his empirical quest to explore and comprehend the processes guiding the natural world, Kircher went as far as lowering himself into Mount Vesuvius' active volcano with a rope. Mather incorporated Kircher's theories about the combustible combination of minerals within the earth's underground networks but concluded that earthquakes offered a stern warning against materialism and the foolhardy assumption that one could defend against tremors of the earth. He warned, "*Fear*, lest the *Pit* and the *Snare* be upon you! Against all other Strokes there may be some Defence or other be thought on: There is none against an *Earthquake!*" Mather added that earthquakes "will effectually instruct me to avoid the Folly of setting my Heart inordinately on any *Earthly Possessions* or *Enjoyments.*" For Mather, earthquakes functioned simultaneously as God's warning and an object of study. It was useful to seek to understand why earthquakes occurred, but their unpredictability still made people reliant on divine protection.¹²

In collecting specimens and sending reports across the Atlantic, colonists like Mather yearned for membership in Europe's highest intellectual circles. The metropole was the scholarly apex of the empire. Europeans dictated the Atlantic hierarchy of knowledge about nature by purchasing and studying specimens and disseminating theories about processes and oddities in nature. But as thinkers, specimen gatherers, and occasional specimens themselves, American Indians, African slaves, and Euroamerican colonists were nonetheless integral, although unequal, participants in this flow of knowledge. Though Americans were committed to dismantling this intellectual hierarchy and establishing the United States as its

¹² Athanasius Kircher, *Mundus Subterraneus*, cited in Louis de Vorsey, "Mapping the world below: Athanasius Kircher and his subterranean world," *Mercator's World* 8, no. 2 (2003), 28-32; Mather, *The Christian Philosopher*, ed. Winton U. Solberg (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 109. For two of the few studies on Kircher written in English, see Paula Findlen, ed., *Athanasius Kircher: The Last Man Who Knew Everything* (New York: Routledge, 2004) and Jocelyn Godwin, *Athanasius Kircher: A Renaissance Man and the Quest for Lost Knowledge* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1979).

own site of knowledge production, they largely transposed the same hierarchy on to their western borderlands. Places like Philadelphia and Boston became the new London, and Louisiana Territory the new colonial periphery.¹³

Cross-Cultural Debates in Colonial North America

Colonialism brought together these traditions of inquiry into the natural world. North American encounters demanded that Europeans and Native Americans alike adapt their systems of knowledge to incorporate and influence one another. Catholic and Protestant missionaries hoped to use earthquakes and other natural phenomena as evangelical tools for conversion. Describing the differences between Huron and Catholic understandings of eclipses, a Jesuit priest wrote, “All those who have not the knowledge of God have more darkness in their minds than the earth has through the absence of the Sun. They admire our truths when compared with their own fables.” He was wrong: American Indians compared their own “truths” with newcomers’ “fables.” Like Europeans, they distinguished their systems of knowledge from others and usually preferred their own. Situating European people and goods into their understandings of the connections between shaking and impurity, ritual neglect, and misbehavior, Native Americans used earthquakes to critique European colonialism and the diseases that accompanied it. Some also exaggerated the impact of

¹³ On colonial British natural history and the contributions and positioning of colonists, African slaves, and Native Americans in this Atlantic matrix of ideas and specimens, see Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). Parrish argues that the terms of colonial Anglo-Atlantic scientific exchange were more fluid and diffuse than the economic and political boundaries instituted between the colonies and the metropole. She maintains that only after the 1760s did the boundaries of participation and influence in Anglo-American science become more rigid and exclusive. On the postcolonial legacy of this colonial exchange of information, which fed American feelings of insecurity following the American Revolution, see Kariann Akemi Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

earthquakes on the North American interior, a deliberate strategy of misinformation intended to discourage European intrusions further from the coast. Yet despite increasing insistence on their differences, Europeans and American Indians across North America continued to find human significance in natural events, a fact of early modern thought across cultures that bound them together.¹⁴

Responding to Spanish *entradas* through the Southwest, the Apache and Hopi people adapted their understandings of earthquakes as signs of ritual neglect in order to indict Catholic rituals and Spanish mining. The Hopis claimed that baptism was a ritual meant only for the Spanish; if Hopis were to engage in this foreign ceremony, a large, horned dragon would register his displeasure from under the earth. A violent version of the story instructed the Hopis to “behead these bad people,” presumably priests, or face a series of earthquakes that would flip the earth over and force people to live in the watery underworld. In this case, this competition of indigenous and European systems of knowledge had profound consequences: baptisms threatened cosmological order. The Apaches applied their earthquake understandings to Spanish mining, as they explained that “grubbing into Mother Earth” led to earthquakes. “Mountain Spirits” caused the shaking, which was intended “to avenge the desecration of the mountains.” These Southwestern earthquake interpretations critiqued the foundations of Spanish colonialism by incorporating contemporary concerns into long-held ideas about the operation of the natural world.¹⁵

¹⁴ *JR*, vol. 12, 73. On how American Indians and Europeans used common concepts to construct notions of difference over the colonial period, see Nancy Shoemaker, *A Strange Likeness: Becoming Red and White in Eighteenth-Century North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

¹⁵ Wallis, “Folks Tales from Shumopovi, Second Mesa,” 12; Eve Ball, *Indeh: An Apache Odyssey* (Provo, Ut.: Brigham Young University Press, 1980), 15, 58; Sherry Robinson, *Apache Voices: Their Stories of Survival as told to Eve Ball* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000), 110.

In a different North American colonial sphere, French and Huron reactions to a major 1663 earthquake in present-day southern Quebec revealed the competitive interplay between European and indigenous knowledge about natural phenomena. In contrast to the triumphal tone that European colonial writing often assumed, the scene was haunting to all parties. An Ursuline nun described an alarming array of sights and sounds, including a man “with flames pouring from his mouth,” “terrible specters,” “demons,” and the din of cannon and thunder. “Amidst all these terrors we did not know where the whole thing would end...In a word we sickened in the expectation of some universal misfortune,” she wrote. The Iroquois had been raiding Huron villages, and some people believed they heard the “doleful voices” of their captives. Others supposed they were the cries of river porpoises or “sea-cows.” Nature’s multisensory assault led a Jesuit to remark that “all the Elements seemed armed against us, and threatened us with the direst disaster.” They made no stock distinctions between confident, reasoned colonizers and frantic, illogical Indians. As one observer wrote, “From the first tremor consternation was universal.”¹⁶

Colonial French reactions to the 1663 earthquake also exhibited a common feature in early modern European thought: the interplay between seeking a strictly natural explanation of tremors and correlating them with sinful human behavior. Like many earthquake observers, Jesuits looked to the sky, where they saw fiery lights and other “disturbances.” After learning that “it rained ashes in such quantity that they lay an inch thick on the ground,” a nun attributed the earthquake to a subterranean fire that “touched off a mine” and released ashes “like burned sugar.” Their accounts also emphasized human roles in the

¹⁶ Marie de L’Incarnation, August 20, 1663, *Word from New France: The Selected Letters of Marie de L’Incarnation*, ed. and trans. Joyce Marshall (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1967), 289-90; *JR*, vol. 46, 203; *JR*, vol. 48, 27, 44.

shaking. The earthquakes occurred during Carnival, and people believed they were being punished for wayward behavior. This interpretation applied to individual and collective behavior. A soldier known for stealing cried out, “Don’t search for any other cause of what you see. This is God wishing to punish my crimes.” Multiple sources noted that the tremors muted the kinds of Carnival celebrations that later U.S. commentators would criticize in French communities as they were incorporated into the nation. Seeking baptism or engaging in confessions, fasts, and processions, people “abandoned their wicked lives” and fled to churches in hopes of dying in “more sacred places.” A priest noted, “The days of the Carnival were turned into days of piety, mourning, contrition, and tears.” But as in the case of western U.S. towns like Louisville after the earthquakes in 1811 and 1812, collective piety in New France was short-lived. A priest complained that what began was a “wonderful commotion of minds” devolved into “conversions so transitory.”¹⁷

Some French colonists and Hurons agreed that alcohol was at the root of the natural upheaval. While in prayer, a Frenchman had a vision in which he saw a “confused throng of victims devoted to hell.” Among them were “the wine-Dealers and retailers of Brandy, basely ministering to the lusts of drunkards for the sake of gain.” Europeans had introduced the product into Native North America only recently. While some American Indians hailed alcohol’s otherworldly effects and incorporated it into rituals, for those indicting European colonialism, the beverage symbolized a powerful foreign impurity. Hurons claimed that trees inhabited by demons had beaten them “because of the excesses they had committed while drinking the brandy that the wicked French had given them.” They also described the woods as “drunken.” For the Hurons, the earthquakes were signs that the Indian consumption of

¹⁷ Marie de L’ Incarnation, August 20, 1663, *Word from New France*, 297-98; *JR*, vol. 48, 193, 207-09; *JR*, vol. 47, 255-57.

alcohol had upset natural order. Only ritual purification, particularly abstinence from a foreign pollutant like alcohol, could rebalance the earth.¹⁸

As a strategy of misinformation, Hurons claimed to see extraordinary damage further inland that made “drunken” trees seem mild. A Jesuit priest recorded that “there are persons who certify that they saw very lofty hills striking together with brows opposed, like headstrong rams, then suddenly and instantaneously swallowed up on the yawning of the earth.” The sight of tall hills crashing together like rams was surely an exaggeration, but why would Indians relate such a scene? It seems likely that they used these descriptions to prevent further French incursions into Huron territory. Just as southwestern Indians pointed Spanish expeditions toward distant, nonexistent cities of silver and gold to keep them moving away from their homelands, these Huron informants intentionally fabricated accounts of far-fetched earthquake damage in their land. Exaggerating the extent of damage from natural disasters further inland thus constituted an indigenous strategy of misinformation that American Indians continued through the War of 1812. Early national newspapers in 1811 and 1812 were replete with dramatic Indian accounts of faraway volcanoes and ruined landscapes. As much as Native Americans contributed to Euroamerican natural history and geography as informants and specimen gatherers, they also misled unwelcome outsiders by exaggerating the danger of the continent’s interior. In the case of the 1663 earthquake, no French people set off to the collapsed hills to corroborate the Huron account.¹⁹

¹⁸ *JR*, vol. 48, 43, 219-2. For a survey of the history of Native Americans and alcohol in British North America, see Peter C. Mancall, *Deadly Medicine: Indians and Alcohol in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995). On alcohol among Cherokees, see Izumi Ishii, *Bad Fruits of the Civilized Tree: Alcohol and the Sovereignty of the Cherokee* (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

¹⁹ *JR*, vol. 48, 217.

The *Jesuit Relations* were, of course, promotional material intended to report back to Europe about missionary successes in French North America. While they are important ethnographic sources for the study of seventeenth-century Native Americans in the French colonial sphere, the Jesuits writing these reports were most concerned with celebrating their colleagues' sacrifices and addressing contemporary theological questions for their European audiences. In this cross-cultural flow of information and misinformation about the 1663 earthquake, Jesuits sought the interpretive upper hand by preaching to Hurons about the necessity of conversion. Missionaries claimed that French and Indian people alike quit their Carnival revelries to seek baptism during the earthquakes. In two cases, pious female Huron converts claimed to use their newfound Catholic access to God to foretell the tremors. Recently recovered from illness by "extraordinary trust in the Cross of the Son of God," a young girl predicted each tremor. Because of her new spiritual status as a Catholic, an older woman also received a "very special manifestation" to predict the earthquake. Her piety had been influential among members of her family, inspiring in her husband, "who used to be very remiss in prayer, a fervor which is quite extraordinary." Her young son followed suit and requested to attend a seminary. The *Relations* were written to emphasize these kinds of missionary successes.²⁰

Yet in this encounter with menacing and unknown natural forces, Europeans shed their triumphal tone. They considered whether the tremors were byproducts of larger natural systems that created underground combustion and unusual conditions in the sky, or divine warnings against the sinful behavior associated with Carnival. While Catholic authorities sought to use the earthquake to spur piety that often proved short-lived when the tremors

²⁰ *JR*, vol. 48, 53-57; *Ibid.*, vol. 49, 89-91.

ceased, some Hurons situated the earthquake into their indictment of French colonialism as a pollutant of Native territory and culture. In this case, alcohol symbolized the impurity of foreign influence. Earthquakes were signs of the need for ritual cleansing and renewal, a Native American refrain that persisted into the nineteenth century as they grappled with impurities in their lands and cultures.

In colonial New England, American Indians associated earthquakes with disease, another powerful foreign contaminant that wreaked havoc on Native societies. In 1638, Roger Williams noted that a Narragansett elder explained to him that when an earthquake occurred, “either plague or pox or some other epidemical disease followed.” The tribe kept a detailed accounting of earthquakes in the region. Williams’ informant told him that there had been five in the last eighty years. American Indians also used a related natural phenomenon in New England to critique colonialism. They told of a place near East Haddam, Connecticut, that they called “Machemoodus,” or “the place of the noises.” Machemoodus was famous for rumbling and mysterious “Moodus noises” that scientists today attribute to microquakes whose underground sounds are abnormally magnified. An early town history explained that Indians there believed the noises were “the voice of their god,” which had been particularly active in the seventeenth century. Local Indians, who found the site sacred, related the noises’ frequency to English incursions. As an elder explained, “The Indian’s God was very angry because the Englishman’s God came there.”²¹

²¹ Roger Williams to John Winthrop, June 1638, *The Complete Writings of Roger Williams, Volume 6: Letters of Roger Williams, 1632-1682*, ed. John Russell Bartlett (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1963), 99; David D. Field, *A History of the Towns of Haddam and East-Haddam* (Middletown, Ct.: Loomis and Richards, 1814), 4; Edward Augustus Kendall, *Travels Through the Northern Parts of the United States, Volume 1* (New-York: I. Riley, 1809), 99-103. The “Moodus noises” continue to this day. See Andi Rierden, “A Steady Observer for Trembling Moodus,” *The New York Times*, August 6, 1989.

These dimensions of colonial cross-cultural exchange about natural phenomena persisted into the early national era. Continuing to associate earthquakes with impurities in their lands and cultures, American Indians used the tremors to critique both American incursions and Native willingness to cede territory. They also related fanciful scenes of faraway destruction as a means of discouraging western settlement. Meanwhile, blaming sinful behavior for the tumult, Christian missionaries sought to appropriate the earthquakes to hasten exceedingly rare indigenous conversions to Christianity. Everyone in 1811 and 1812 continued to read human problems into natural disasters, as cross-cultural developments in eighteenth-century revivalism made divine messages encoded in natural phenomena seem even more pressing.

“The Great Narrowing” of the Eighteenth Century

The “Great Awakening” stands as an important, if still debated, term in early North American history. Historians have given great weight to the social and political effects of mid-eighteenth-century revivalism in Anglo-American religion. Emphasizing the necessity of conversion through the individual’s intense, emotional experience of connection to the divine, the Great Awakening gave individuals more control over their religious lives and, some would argue, empowered them to question established religious and political authorities. The term has become so important to the study of early North America that scholars noticing contemporaneous revivalism among Native Americans have identified an “Indian Great Awakening” and considered how the Great Awakening shaped prophetic movements in Indian country.²²

²² Jon Butler’s classic rebuttal to the notion of a mid-eighteenth century “Great Awakening” is Butler, “Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretive Fiction,” *The Journal of American*

While scholars have discussed with great nuance how Native Americans selectively adapted evangelical Protestant ideas and practices to suit Native cultures and objectives, the term “Indian Great Awakening” nonetheless situates American Indians within a Euroamerican paradigm in which Christianity was normative and foundational. The period’s emphasis on individual religious experience clearly threatened established religious authorities across cultures in the eighteenth century. And Native Americans within evangelical networks in New England were undoubtedly more receptive to Christianity than they had been previously. But there was something larger at work than a mutual “awakening” or transmission of evangelical Christianity to Native and Euroamerican colonists alike. As the terms “Great Awakening” and “Indian Great Awakening” connote, evangelical Christianity too often frames comparisons of eighteenth-century transformations in religious practice and authority across eastern North America. Whether or not the Great Awakening was “so-called,” as historians since Jon Butler have so often qualified it, the term hinders a balanced comparison of concurrent, and often structurally similar, developments among the evangelical and inter-tribal movements that challenged their communities’ social and political norms. It may be time to retire the term without diminishing the period’s significance.

For the sake of comparison, it is more useful to think about this undeniably important transformation as a “narrowing” of human and spiritual worlds, rather than an “awakening” of people to Christianity. Some American Indians and colonists, particularly those who were dislocated and socially marginalized, became convinced of the divine’s closer proximity to

History 69, no. 2 (1982), 305-25. For examples of the use of the term “Indian Great Awakening” in Native American history, see Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 23; Jane T. Merritt, “Dreaming of the Savior’s Blood: Moravians and the Indian Great Awakening in Pennsylvania,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (1997), 723-746; Linford Fisher, *The Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

human order. Among these people, the perceived distance between human and spiritual worlds narrowed in the eighteenth century. Pervasive natural phenomena like comets and earthquakes were striking evidence of these worlds' close proximity. Those who denied God's direct influence on sudden events were not necessarily less "religious" and more "scientific" than those who interpreted the same events as clear divine signals; instead disputes centered on divine distance from human affairs.

This belief in the narrowing of worlds had profound consequences for established institutions, as socially marginal people claiming direct revelations threatened hierarchies of religious and political authority. In evangelical revivals and inter-tribal gatherings alike, people sensed this closer connection to the divine. But there was one major difference: Native Americans were much more inclined to couch their messages in collective terms.

Where Indian prophets spoke collectively about Native America, or at least specific tribes, Euroamerican evangelicals articulated concern for individual souls. Because individual conversion experiences and ensuing behavioral reform, not the collective defense of territories and cultures, were the hallmarks of the evangelical agenda, the movement did not assume the immediate geopolitical ramifications of its indigenous counterpart. Nonetheless, the emerging nations of early nineteenth-century North America – namely the Cherokees, Creeks, and the United States – all had to contend with new spiritual authorities that challenged existing social orders.

In eighteenth-century Native North America, this movement arguing for the narrowing of human and divine worlds began in the ashes of the Seven Years' War. Disparate Native American communities regrouped in the Great Lakes region to confront a new geopolitical order. The British had beaten and expelled the French, who were longtime

allies and trading partners of many Native American polities in the region. Forced to contend with a single, hostile European colonial power, Indian militants embraced the visions and teachings of Neolin, a prophet from Delaware country, who urged them to unite in mutual defense of their land and culture. Native religious authorities traditionally mediated proximate but less powerful spiritual forces. Like the Calvinists' distant God, the earlier incarnation of an ultimate divine figure existed beyond direct human communication and influence. By contrast, Neolin claimed to receive messages directly from the Great Spirit. This special connection lent immediacy to his platform of social and political reform and militant resistance. His teachings launched Pontiac's War, an inter-tribal insurgency against the British that led the British to establish the Proclamation Line of 1763, but faded after infighting among the militants. In the War of 1812 era, the Shawnee brothers Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa inherited the tradition of revivalistic, inter-tribal leadership in the region that began with Neolin and Pontiac.

While maintaining some traditions, prophets decidedly broke from the past. They used traditional means of communicating with divine forces – dreams, visions, and rituals – to articulate innovative messages that threatened established Native and Euroamerican authorities alike. As much as these Indian inter-tribal movements preached unity, they created new social cleavages and questions. The principle of direct revelation simultaneously energized and divided the inter-tribal movement. As in evangelical denominational schisms, inter-tribal prophets and traditional Native spiritual leaders debated forms of organization and leadership. They grappled with a central question: when people value individual claims of direct revelation, how do they restructure their communities?

Of course, this is not to say that structures of Native religious leadership were uniform or static before the eighteenth century. The Cherokees, for example, have a story about the overthrow of an ancient priesthood. This account in oral histories likely captures the dissolution of the highly centralized and hierarchical authority of Mississippian priests – a kind of Cherokee analog to Martin Luther’s Reformation. But in the eighteenth century, the “Great Spirit,” as many prophets called it, assumed a more direct role in the daily operation and larger problems of Native societies. In rising from the social margins of eighteenth-century Indian life, typically wayward lives full of heavy drinking, these prophets often were not part of their tribes’ established religious and political leadership. Furthermore, in binding earthly and spiritual matters in their programs of reform, they violated the differentiation of religious and political leadership built into many Native societies. For all of the discussion of the struggle for inter-tribal unity in the period between Pontiac’s Rebellion and the War of 1812, it is also important to remember that prophets sought to achieve this unity and consolidate leadership through violence. Traditional spiritual figures within particular tribes threatened the insurgent prophets’ authority, and at least in the cases of Tenskwatawa and Handsome Lake, these early nineteenth-century prophets had their rivals executed on charges of witchcraft.²³

²³ Alfred A. Cave, *Prophets of the Great Spirit: Native American Revitalization Movements in Eastern North America* (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 2006), xiii-5; Raymond D. Fogelson, “Who Were the Ani-Kutani? An Excursion into Cherokee Historical Thought,” *Ethnohistory* 31, no. 1 (1984), 255-63; Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745-1815* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 23-46. Though the question of continuity versus rupture in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Native prophetic tradition is not a polarized debate, Dowd has argued for more continuity, while Cave has emphasized its revolutionary nature. On degrees of differentiation in political and religious leadership in the Native South, see Duane Champagne, *Social Order and Political Change: Constitutional Governments among the Cherokee, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Creek* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1992).

Among Christians, this diffusion of interpretive authority began with the Protestant Reformation and rising European literacy rates, and it accelerated with the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. While Protestants sought to eliminate Catholicism's hierarchy of spiritual power, biblical instances of prophecy and natural phenomena still led to a pervasive belief in the religious significance of natural disorder. Providence replaced saints and their miracles as the vehicle for delivering natural phenomena. Anglo-Americans transplanted this mode of thinking across the Atlantic, and it was not limited to the highly literate Puritans of seventeenth-century New England. For instance, in recounting Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia, an eyewitness noted "three Prodigies in that Country, which, from th' attending Disasters, were Look'd upon as Ominous Presages": a comet, a dense flock of pigeons, and "Swarms of Flyes about an Inch long."²⁴

While it is important not to oversimplify the diversity and complexity of Protestant theology in colonial North America, the theological differences between Cotton Mather and John Wesley demonstrate the narrowing of worlds, the rising importance of individual experience and authority, and resulting shifts in Protestant earthquake inquiry over the eighteenth century. As theologians and prolific writers, both leaders were interested in earthquakes. Mather commented extensively on them in his 1721 publication, *The Christian Philosopher*, and Wesley wrote about the 1755 Lisbon earthquake. In the earth's shaking, they found God's power and a poignant call for Christian fidelity. But Mather's Calvinism and Wesley's Arminianism offered two different frameworks for interpreting earthquakes that mirrored a larger shift during the evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth and early

²⁴ Alexandra Walsham, *The Reformation of the Landscape: Religion, Identity, and Memory in Early Modern Britain and Ireland* (London: Oxford University Press, 2011), 340-43; David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), 72-115; Thomas Mathew to Robert Harley, July 13, 1705, *Narratives of the Insurrections*, ed. Charles McLean Andrews (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 15-16.

nineteenth century: the Calvinist view of election by predestination versus the Arminian belief in the individual's ability to attain salvation through conversion. As his writings after the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 would show, Wesley did not argue for human agency in the sense that he believed that humans could control the forces responsible for earthquakes. People did, however, have more control over the direction of their own religious lives, as well as the location of their afterlives, by undergoing individual conversion experiences. Conversion was a hallmark of Wesleyan Arminianism. By contrast, Mather's Calvinism left little room for individuals to control their spiritual life course. Although individuals were encouraged to undergo a conversion experience, a more distant God already had predestined whether or not it would occur. For Mather, God had determined the state of individual souls long before any natural phenomena; earthquakes were instead calls for the community to fear God and reform their behavior. For Wesley, earthquakes offered people a reminder about the opportunity for individual salvation that a Calvinist God had long foreclosed.²⁵

People of lower social standing found the promise of individual spiritual salvation especially appealing because it allowed them to transcend their station in life. Evangelicalism consequently flourished on the social and geographical margins of North America, where people were not part of the religious and political establishment. It therefore should come as no surprise that this evangelical line of interpretation about earthquakes was popular among Euroamerican settlers in the early republic's western borderlands – or that

²⁵ On theological shifts in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, particularly the evangelical departure from Calvinism to Arminianism, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 170-79; E. Brooks Hollifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 128-35; Robert J. Wilson III, *The Benevolent Deity: Ebenezer Gay and the Rise of Rational Religion in New England, 1696-1787* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 61-79; Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 438-39. As Ahlstrom and others have noted, the Calvinist-Arminian dialectic was overstated, as denominational competition between Methodists and Presbyterians exaggerated their theological differences.

dislocated Native American communities living in those same borderlands shared in their feeling of close proximity to divine forces.

Whereas Mather sought recognition from Europe's highest intellectual circles, Wesley criticized elite inquiry for lacking a foundation in faith and a belief in the necessity of conversion. Although evangelical people made observations about the earthquakes of 1811 and 1812 that were similar to those of learned naturalists, their ultimate concerns differed. Wesley's example shows that the interpretive aims of the evangelical community had diverged from those of scientific elites over the course of the eighteenth century. Like contemporary Indian prophets, they found more immediate religious meaning in disruptions of day-to-day life. When worlds narrowed, the messages encoded in natural phenomena were sometimes too urgent for scientific patience.

Despite evangelical concerns about the shortcomings in science's ultimate goals, the Great Narrowing applied to both eighteenth-century evangelicalism and empiricism, because they mutually relied on the experience and authority of the individual. Just as evangelicals stressed the importance of an individual's connection with the divine, empiricists collected evidence and observed the natural world firsthand. People who were evangelical or empirical often eschewed the theoretical orientations of learned elites, whose dense theories about God and nature required intermediate authorities themselves to translate complex ideas for popular audiences. In privileging the individual as the primary interpretive authority, empiricism and evangelicalism pushed back against established hierarchies of knowledge about the natural world and God's more distant role in it.

Despite the steady diffusion of authority to individuals in the intellectual enterprises of the eighteenth century, people of higher social standing in the centers of colonial

governance continued to have more influence on their intellectual climate. In short, Cotton Mather in Boston or Isaac Newton in London circulated ideas more easily than itinerant preachers. But the eighteenth-century growth in literacy rates and popular print widened the colonial North American public sphere, giving space for new ideas. Disruptions in the natural environment, which anyone could observe and experience, became ideal topics through which to discuss the central intellectual questions of the eighteenth century: did the world operate according to universal laws? How much did God intervene, and did humans have agency, in its day-to-day operation? Were there divine messages in natural phenomena, and who could interpret them?

Eighteenth-Century Earthquakes and Intellectual Trends in Action

Mid-eighteenth century earthquakes across the North Atlantic world gave people ample opportunity to apply the principles of firsthand observation and empiricism, as well as to argue about God's role in the destruction. First were tremors in London and New England in 1750, followed by the devastating Lisbon earthquake of 1755. Not surprisingly, experts in astronomy, electricity, and other specialized disciplines attributed earthquakes to their objects of study. Months before the tremors in London, astronomers proposed an "airquake" theory, suggesting that rumbling in the air rather than underground was responsible for tremors. Most natural philosophers continued to privilege subterranean explanations, but the "airquake" theory forced them to reckon with meteorological oddities that accompanied earthquakes. Also in 1750, William Stukeley drew from Benjamin Franklin's writings to submit that if the electrically charged earth hit a cloud, the earth would "snap." If subterranean fire were the cause of earthquakes, as Kircher and others who related

combustion with earthquakes had proposed, Stukeley questioned why the fires did not always shoot up through the earth to create large tears in the ground. He also doubted that “airquakes” could be capable of inflicting mass destruction. Although Franklin’s laws of electricity were crucial for Stukeley, Franklin himself favored the idea that waves of internal fluid inside the earth were responsible for shaking. The question of an electrical cause for earthquakes became a topic of lively debate among New England intellectuals. In his 1755 pamphlet *Earthquakes the Works of God*, Boston preacher Thomas Prince explained that God had used electricity to shake New England, which drew criticism from Harvard mathematician and astronomer John Winthrop IV, who dismissed electricity as a fashionable, but ultimately unsatisfying mechanism for explaining earthquakes.²⁶

While the tremors in New England and London excited Anglo-American interest in the cause of earthquakes, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 unleashed unimagined disorder and suffering, tempering Enlightenment optimism about humanity’s capacity for infinite understanding. With estimates at 30,000 killed, the port city destroyed, and rumors of craters swallowing surrounding villages whole, the disaster in Lisbon was a sensational news item that demanded the attention of prominent European thinkers. Voltaire’s *Candide, or Optimism* famously critiqued the age’s hopefulness and preoccupation with categories of natural order. For Voltaire, the earthquake in Lisbon defied the laws of nature and reason, repudiating the related sense of natural order that the Linnaean system of classification

²⁶ John Gates Taylor, Jr., “Eighteenth-Century Earthquake Theories,” 70-90; Thomas Prince, *Earthquakes the Work of God* (Boston: D. Fowle, 1755); and John Winthrop IV, *A lecture on earthquakes* (Boston: Edes & Gill, 1755). On the debate between Prince and Winthrop, see James Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), 66-69, and Sara Beth Errington, “Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture in New England, 1720-1820,” PhD diss., Brown University, 2000. Errington argues that conflicting interpretations of “natural wonders” revealed “a gulf between learned and unlearned understandings of divine agency” in late eighteenth-century New England as “learned rationalists” and “unlearned enthusiasts” squared off over the extent to which reason could explain natural phenomena.

sought to construct. The disaster fractured nature and the categories constructed for its study.²⁷

Wesley seized upon prevailing unease about the limits of human reason to argue that faith in God was the only true means of understanding nature. In a 1756 pamphlet entitled *Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Earthquake in Lisbon* and sermons and hymns printed soon thereafter, Wesley sought to disprove the ideas that fire, water, and air were the responsible agents by questioning why each element did not leave behind more evidence of its impact. He reserved most of his disdain for the “airquake” theory, declaring “the fashionable Opinion, that the exterior Air is the grand agent in Earthquakes,” to be “so senseless, unmechanical, unphilosophical a Dream, as deserves not be named, but to be exploded.” Wesley then launched into a jeremiad against worldly means of seeking control. When “the Earth threatens to swallow you up,” he argued, no amount of money, honor, intelligence, strength, or speed offers protection. “Wealthy Fool, where is now thy Golden God?” he taunted, adding that even if one could escape, “there is another grim Enemy at the Door: and you cannot drive him away. It is death.” Terrible earthquakes delivered a message that evangelicals believed they already knew: humanity lacked control. But whereas Mather emphasized fear and judgment, Wesley closed his message by encouraging readers to embrace a God of love and salvation. He argued that God would respond favorably to people who opened themselves up to the possibility of Christian conversion. He

²⁷ On the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and its impact on the Enlightenment and the study of earthquakes, see Taylor, “Eighteenth-Century Earthquake Theories,” 154-185; Ana Cristina Araujo, “European public opinion and the Lisbon earthquake,” *European Review* 14, no. 3 (2006), 313-19; *The Lisbon Earthquake of 1755: Representations and Reactions*, eds. Theodore E.D. Braun and John B. Radner (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), especially Matthias Georgi, “The Lisbon earthquake and scientific knowledge in the British public sphere,” 81-96.

closed the pamphlet imploring readers to undergo this transformation: “May the Father of your spirit, and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, make you such a Christian!”²⁸

Despite his insistence on human helplessness to escape earthquakes, much less identify their natural cause, Wesley remained interested in studying nature. After reading Franklin’s work, he published his own treatise on electricity and purchased four “electricity machines” to treat illnesses among his London congregants. For Wesley, nature could be studied and harnessed to serve humans, but human reason was incapable of understanding natural disasters and their devastation. Arguing against a rational means of comprehending the natural order that his Enlightenment contemporaries craved, Wesley urged readers to embrace their earthly limitations by pursuing faith in divine control. This position exaggerated his differences with thinkers who were not evangelical Christians. But to consolidate his authority and stoke his religious movement, Wesley often avoided nuance.²⁹

While the Lisbon disaster evoked a profound sense of human limitation, it did not leave the European intelligentsia entirely dissatisfied with the Enlightenment impulse to explain nature, nor did it uniformly stoke clergymen’s impassioned calls for conversion. In 1757 Huguenot preacher and naturalist Jean-Élie Bertrand published *Memoires historiques et*

²⁸ John Wesley, *Serious Thoughts Occasioned by the Earthquake at Lisbon*, 6th ed. (London: n.p., 1756). See also Wesley, "Sermon CXXIX. – The Cause and Cure of Earthquakes," *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed., vols. 7 and 8 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1996), 394. On Wesley’s response to the Lisbon earthquake and his understanding of scientific inquiry, see Richard Michael Riss, “John Wesley’s Reactions to the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755,” PhD diss, Drew University, 2007; Robert Webster, “The Lisbon earthquake: John and Charles Wesley reconsidered,” in *The Lisbon earthquake of 1755: Representations and reactions*, eds. Braun and Radner, 116-126; and Robert E. Schofield, “John Wesley and Science in 18th Century England,” *Isis* 44, no. 4 (Dec., 1953), 331-40. Wesley’s major works on natural laws and medicine included *The Desideratum*, his treatise on electricity; *Primitive Physic*, his compilation of remedies for illnesses; and *A Survey of the Wisdom of God in the Creation, or a Compendium of Natural*, a 1763 compilation that Schofield describes as the “best example of Wesley’s religious interest in science.” On the theological implications of the Lisbon earthquake, see Susan Bassnett, “Faith, doubt, aid and prayer: the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 revisited,” *European Review* 14, no. 3 (2006), 321-328, and Edgar Brightman, “The Lisbon Earthquake: A Study in Religious Valuation,” *The American Journal of Theology* 23, no. 4 (1919), 500-518.

²⁹ On Wesley’s means of attracting followers, see Henry Abelove, *The Evangelist of Desire: John Wesley and the Methodists* (Stanford, Ca.: Stanford University Press, 1990).

physiques sure les tremblements de terre, a treatise that functioned both as a compilation of observations related to the recent European earthquakes and a call for a methodological reorientation in their study. A frequent correspondent with Voltaire, Bertrand sought both divine and natural explanations for earthquakes. He insisted that one must never forget that God directed these “extraordinary events.” People also needed to learn more about the interior of the earth, where “all the reasons that make earthquakes useful and necessary” would be discovered. Because of the great variety in the eruptions of dust, water, fire, and ash that accompanied “particular” tremors, Bertrand also cautioned against oversimplifying explanations for earthquakes. To “hold on to a single cause” would be a “methodological error and against the truth,” he argued. With faith in both God and an empirical method that did not obscure the variety and complexity of tremors, he hoped to advance the study of earthquakes, if not reach a definitive answer.³⁰

Insecurity and Empiricism: Studying Nature in the Early Republic

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the North Atlantic world hosted its share of shocks to the environmental and political order. Just as overseas colonies had become objects of European study, the Louisiana Purchase and the seizure of Indian territory offered the new United States homegrown opportunities to link imperial and scholarly enterprises. The scientific and diplomatic impulses underlying Lewis and Clark’s mission exemplified the connection between the study of nature and the extension of empire, but the Corps of Discovery was not the only group that Thomas Jefferson dispatched to the trans-Mississippi

³⁰ Jean-Élie Bertrand, *Memoires historiques et physiques sure les tremblemens de terre* (La Haye: Chez Pierre Gosse, Jr., 1757), 2-3, 21-23, 171-172. On Bertrand and his correspondence with Voltaire, see Francis J. Crowley, “Pastor Bertrand and Voltaire’s *Lisbonne*,” *Modern Language Notes* 74, no. 5 (1959), 430-433.

West. After sailing to the United States to collect cotton specimens around New Orleans, Scottish botanist John Bradbury travelled first to Monticello, where Jefferson encouraged him to gather plants around St. Louis instead. Bradbury obliged and even ventured up the Missouri River to a northern Mandan village before returning to St. Louis, where he finally set out for his original destination in time to meet the earthquakes at their epicenter.³¹

The circumstances that led to Bradbury's fateful position on river are telling not only for his intrepid pursuit of plants and terrible luck. Bradbury's case demonstrates that in the early nineteenth century, the study of nature in North America became increasingly transcontinental but remained transatlantic. Thirteen colonies may have broken political ties with Britain, but the post-colonial exchange that followed reflected their continued dependence on European centers of learning, which supplied the former colonies with books, scientific instruments, and professional scientists like Bradbury. For American-born elite men at the turn of the century, the study of nature was largely a leisure activity. It was also a marker of social distinction reserved for physicians, politicians, and lawyers who could afford the equipment and the time away from their regular occupations but who could not support themselves through scientific study alone. Professional naturalists still resided in Europe because patrons there could afford to pay them.³²

³¹ On Bradbury's travels before the earthquakes and interaction with Jefferson, see Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America, in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*, 1-204; Rodney H. True, "A Sketch of the Life of John Bradbury, Including His Unpublished Correspondence with Thomas Jefferson," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 68, no. 2 (1929), 133-150; and H.W. Rickett, "John Bradbury's Explorations in Missouri Territory," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 94, no. 1 (1950), 59-89.

³² On early national science and its continuing dependence on Britain, see John C. Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson* (Ames, Ia.: The Iowa State University Press, 1984), and Kariann Yokota, "'To Pursue the stream to its fountain': Race, Inequality, and the Post-Colonial Exchange across the Atlantic," *Explorations in Early American Culture* 5 (2001), 173-229. Throughout the article, Yokota develops the image of elite early national students travelling "upstream" across the Atlantic to learn from European founts of knowledge. She limits her analysis to the "upstream" flow of knowledge in the postcolonial age, but as Cotton Mather's case demonstrates, an Anglo-American intellectual inferiority complex also pervaded the colonial period. On the intellectual companionship that elite men sought through their scientific correspondence, see Konstantin Dierks,

This American cast of part-time naturalists sought a different way to do science, which had larger political implications. The study of earthquakes in the first decades of the early republic reflected American desires to construct a distinct intellectual landscape in which observation and empiricism trumped theory. Though there were only faint tremors in the early national era before 1811, seismic activity during the eighteenth century gave Americans the opportunity to carve out their own brand of inquiry by investigating previous earthquakes with fresh, republican eyes. In the spring and summer of 1788, Harvard professor Samuel Williams published “Observations and remarks on the earthquakes of New-England,” a lengthy article that spanned multiple issues of *The American Museum*, a short-lived monthly publication from Philadelphia that boasted many prominent subscribers. Williams built on the work of John Winthrop IV, his advisor at Harvard, in cautioning against theories that supposed without evidence that electricity or other unseen mechanisms were the causes of earthquakes. He was instead a committed empiricist. “In all philosophical hypotheses, a writer is in danger of making more of his subject than will bear a strict examination,” he wrote. “The cause of truth and science is of infinitely more importance, than any of our schemes and conjectures: and this is what I wish may prevail, in all countries, and in all ages.”³³

If Americans were to be uneasy about theory, which they criticized as a European preoccupation, their proven knowledge about earthquakes was sure to be scant. Williams surveyed more than a century of New England earthquake study, committed more to questioning theories and “conjectures” than seeking to prove the precise cause of

“Letter Writing, Masculinity, and American Men of Science, 1750-1800,” *Explorations in Early American Culture* 2 (1998), 167-198.

³³ Samuel Williams, “Observations and conjectures on the earthquakes of New England,” *The American Museum*, April 1788, 291.

earthquakes. He began with “ancient and modern” accounts linking tremors with disease. In considering various other theories that attributed earthquakes to weather, electricity, underground fire, and the “grand fermentation” of vapor, Williams pointed out instances where conditions were not right for these mechanisms to act, and the ground shook nevertheless. The article thus captured the uncertainty of American earthquake study in the two decades before 1811. These circumstances left Williams to deduce only basic facts: the earth was a “cavernous structure,” earthquakes were the result of “something which has moved along under the surface of the earth,” and because their causes “lie out of sight, and beyond the reach of observation, we have no way to come to the knowledge of them, but by general reasonings from the phenomena that fall under our observation.” Their pervasive uncertainty about the natural causes of earthquakes and general unwillingness to entertain theories meant that Americans could not easily dismiss alternative ways of thinking about nature.³⁴

The most important principle that Williams gleaned from his study actually was a religious matter, though in casting earthquakes as examples of divine goodwill, he differed markedly from Wesley or other evangelical thinkers. He found “the wisdom and benevolence of the Creator” in earthquakes, because they created the topographical diversity that allowed certain regions to be fertile grounds for farming. Williams agreed with Wesley that these powerful and unexpected natural phenomena bred piety, but more out of awe than fear. Disruptions in the natural world evoked a sense of people’s dependence on the divine, rather than the immediate necessity of conversion that evangelicals advocated. “Amidst such convulsions of nature,” he concluded, “strong impressions of the power and majesty of God,

³⁴ Ibid., 304-06.

will naturally take possession of the human mind. Mankind will see and feel their dependence upon the Creator – with the wisdom, benefit, and advantage of such a steady course of virtue, as leaders to an habitual trust in his providence and protection.” In Williams’ conception, God remained strong and all knowing. But God was a much more distant and less punitive being than Wesley would have allowed.³⁵

The central tension in popular understandings of earthquakes in the early republic thus concerned divine intentionality and proximity. Evangelicals readily acknowledged that unusual natural circumstances produced earthquakes, and they believed that seeking to understand those circumstances was a worthy endeavor. But they also seized on naturalists’ uncertainties to argue for the limits of human comprehension. For evangelicals, the naturalists’ preoccupation with empirical observations also obscured earthquakes’ true importance: they were both signs of God’s power and the need for Christian conversion. The real matters for debate among Americans were whether or not God intended for the earthquakes to deliver an immediate message and, if so, what that message was.

Financial instability in the early republic was one major shortcoming in the early national intellectual struggle to seek European recognition for the legitimacy of their inquiry. Americans’ push to prove that their republican experiment could foster excellence in the arts and sciences revealed both their insecurities and their problems funding research. For instance, Williams struggled with debt despite his scholarly achievements. He took out loans from other professors and was accused of forging a deceased creditor’s note of repayment. When Harvard’s Hollis Chair of Natural Philosophy, one of the most prestigious scientific positions in the early republic, fled to Vermont one night in 1788 after being indicted for

³⁵ Samuel Williams, “Observations and conjectures on the earthquakes of New England,” *The American Museum* (June 1788), 577-79.

forgery, his case did little to help the new republic's cause of legitimating American scientific inquiry.³⁶

To the chagrin of American naturalists seeking acclaim on the international stage, a Frenchman wrote the most influential survey of U.S. geology in the early nineteenth century. Constantin-François Volney's 1804 book, *View of the Climate and Soil of the United States*, was read widely across the north Atlantic world. Volney cited Williams' work in the *American Museum*, but his survey ranged beyond New England. He suggested that underground combustion created earthquakes, as a "stratum of schist" that he found at Niagara was combustible and "forms one of the floors of the county, in which is the principal focus of earthquakes." Volney also tied American earthquakes to volcanic activity, suggesting that Lake Ontario was deep because a volcanic crater created its unusual depth. The prevalence of earthquakes and volcanoes explained the "confusion of all the strata of earth and stone, which occurs throughout the Atlantic coast." In the West, Volney found "no traces" of earthquakes. He supported his claim by arguing that "the savages there have not even a name for them," and they were "equally ignorant of volcanoes." Perhaps citing the American Indian reports of catastrophic western damage in seventeenth-century Jesuit accounts, he mentioned the possibility of an interior volcano in the north of Canada, though he remained resolute about the absence of western earthquakes. The dramatic earthquakes on the Mississippi River would prove him wrong less than a decade later, though actual American Indian knowledge of seismic activity would have done so even earlier. Volney also pointed to the inadequacy of homegrown research in the United States, one of many criticisms of the early republic that earned him harsh reviews in American publications.

³⁶ On the life and career of Samuel Williams, see Robert Friend Rothschild, *Two Brides for Apollo: The Life of Samuel Williams (1743-1817)* (Bloomington, Ind.: iUniverse, 2009).

With a hint of condescension, particularly considering learned American organizations like the American Philosophical Society predated the American Revolution, he appealed to Americans to start their own societies: “It is to be wished, and we have reason to hope, that in course of time learned societies, formed in the United States, will apply to geological researches of this kind both attention and funds beyond the abilities of foreign travelers.”³⁷

The study of American nature had diplomatic implications as intellectuals in the early republic read for European condescension in foreigners’ work on the North American natural environment. In a revealing demonstration of their insecurity, American reviewers took offense at Volney’s criticisms of their people and land. Samuel Mitchill, a prominent commentator on the earthquakes of 1811 and 1812, wanted his review of Volney’s work to be part of the early republic’s “laudable and just purpose of correcting the blunders, exposing the misrepresentations, and repelling the calumnies, which certain vain and superficial scribblers in Europe delight to propagate concerning America and its inhabitants.” He wished Volney had focused only on the natural environment, rather than interjecting “angry and disrespectful remarks” about the American government, people, and climate. But why was Volney so critical? Mitchill speculated that his negativity stemmed from having to flee France and being frequently sick during his trip across the United States. A reviewer in Boston’s *The Monthly Anthology* added that Volney’s preoccupation with complaining about American bugs and roads detracted from the work.³⁸

³⁷ Constantin-François Volney, *View of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America* (London: J. Johnson, 1804), 117-121.

³⁸ Samuel Mitchill, “Review of *A View of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America*,” *The Medical Repository* 2 (1804), 173-74; “Review of *A View of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America*,” *The Monthly Anthology, and Boston Review* 5, no. 8 (1808), 441-49. Mitchill’s response to Volney mirrored Thomas Jefferson’s efforts to counter Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon’s theory of North American degeneracy in Jefferson’s eponymous *Notes on the State of Virginia*. On Jefferson’s response to Buffon and his theory of

Final American assessments of the Frenchman's *View* were mixed, reflecting the early republic's post-colonial ambivalence about being simultaneously an object of study and its own site of knowledge production. *The Monthly Anthology* found his work too reliant on his "love of theory." According to the review, "We do not think, upon the whole, that Mr. Volney's reputation will be raised by the present work. His love of system and of generalizing lead him frequently into the grossest errors." Mitchill was more compromising, offering a "favourable opinion," despite "the national reflections, personal irritations, and snarling cavils, which disgrace." On North American earthquakes, American reviewers agreed that Volney too easily dismissed the possibility of western tremors. French informants of Army officer Amos Stoddard told him that earthquakes were frequent. As for Volney's claim that western American Indians did not have the words to describe earthquakes or volcanoes, Mitchill argued that the claim "only shows the Indians to be bad observers, and their language to be very scanty." The Illinois country had been the site of an earthquake in 1795, and thanks to a recurring Indian strategy of misinformation highlighting the frequency of far western natural disasters, Mitchill explained that an illusory volcano existed "far up the Missouri." *The Monthly Anthology* felt that Volney too often used earthquakes to explain "any irregularities in his system." The New Madrid earthquakes would give American naturalists the opportunity to study major seismic activity firsthand, but as they soon discovered, a flurry of real and fabricated accounts of the tremors challenged their commitments to empiricism.³⁹

degeneracy, see Lee Alan Dugatkin, *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

³⁹ "Review of Volney," *The Monthly Anthology*, 444-49; Mitchill, *The Medical Repository*, 175, 195-96; Amos Stoddard, "Observations on the Native Salt, Bearded Indians, Earthquakes, and Boundaries of Louisiana," *The Medical Repository* 4 (1806), 49.

What Volney dismissed as amateur scientific practice in the United States, Americans hailed as a republican brand of science in which experience and observation trumped theory. Newspapers and journals regularly carried scientific discussions, and in line with Jefferson's celebration of the yeomanry, this more inclusive intellectual culture encouraged contributions from white males of all social stations. As historian Andrew J. Lewis has shown, just as in American governance, the early republic's citizens emphasized uniqueness and possibility in American nature. They were reticent to dismiss accounts of natural phenomena or remarkable species that defied the laws of nature. It was therefore common for periodicals to print practical agricultural advice alongside commentaries on rattlesnakes' ability to mesmerize their prey or birds hibernating underneath the muddy floors of ponds for the winter. Of course, widening people's access and input to arenas of natural inquiry through newspapers and journals came with risks. Just as mobs threatened the republican political order, the possibility of fabrication or wild, baseless claims about nature threatened this republican science experiment. The process of determining who could contribute to the nation and what sources of knowledge were acceptable thus took place across political, religious, and scientific forums in the early republic. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the public would lose its hands-on engagement with science as it became the exclusive province of professional specialists. But in the War of 1812 era, the earthquakes exposed this grappling for authority in interpretive communities of naturalists, evangelicals, politicians, and the wider print culture.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Lewis has described this unique intellectual climate and its decline through nineteenth-century professionalization in Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

The practice of natural science in the early republic was not an isolated intellectual sphere free of domestic and international political entanglements. Elite thinkers in the early republic were insecure in their position as inhabitants of a former colony that was more of an object of study than an intellectual center. They sought to carve out an empirical republican intellectual culture that was skeptical of European tendencies to theorize. But as popular presses widened public access to information and evangelical leaders questioned elite religious and academic institutions, intellectual authority became increasingly contested. The study of nature embodied this tension between popular and elite impulses. While classification established a sense of stability and order in a language that held currency only for educated elites, empiricism scattered authority by encouraging wider participation. Meanwhile, popular print and the renewed Protestant revivalism of the early nineteenth century blurred distinctions between rational and enthusiastic, cosmopolitan and folk, and other dichotomous understandings of knowledge and order.⁴¹

Conclusion

When the earth began shaking in December 1811, people across eastern North America summoned long-standing traditions of inquiry into the natural world. They turned to ancient stories where natural disasters acted as punishments for misbehavior or the abandonment of rituals. But tempering arguments for human fault in tremors were examples of earthquakes that were part of natural cycles and thus unrelated to human affairs. The

⁴¹ On the tensions between more democratic scientific discourse and an elite desire for order, see Christopher Looby, "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram," *Early American Literature* 22, no. 3 (1987), 252-273, and Andrew Lewis, "A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic," 663-96. On the blurred intellectual lineages of the Second Great Awakening and the Enlightenment, see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 34-40; and Gordon Wood, "Evangelical America and Early Mormonism," *New York History* 61, no. 4 (1980), 359-378.

question of human responsibility for natural phenomena animated European debates from early Christianity through the Lisbon earthquake of 1755, a devastating disaster that blunted Enlightenment commitments to humankind's unlimited capacity for comprehension and prediction. While American Indian thinkers were more apt to point to human causes for natural disruptions, particularly as signs of ritual neglect or impurity, their traditions also left interpretive space for earthquakes to be related to the regular reshuffling of the universe's layers.

North American colonialism elevated the interpretive stakes of knowledge about natural phenomena and revealed cross-cultural dynamics of earthquake interpretation that lingered into the nineteenth century. Missionaries and preachers appropriated tremors to argue for the importance of conversion and pious behavior, while Native Americans used them to critique colonialism and correlated shaking with outbreaks of disease. They reported faraway destruction to discourage European incursions into the continent's interior. Over the course of the eighteenth century, people across cultures perceived natural disasters as signs that the distance between the human and spiritual worlds had narrowed. In this framework, earthquakes were no longer judgments from a distant God, but immediate calls for reform. Though they did not dismiss the value of inquiry into the natural world, evangelical leaders insisted that the search for the natural causes of tremors obscured their central meaning as signs of the need for conversion. Meanwhile, revivalistic Indian leaders also sought conversions to a militant, inter-tribal vision of Native political organization, and the prophets whose visions guided these movements often claimed to manipulate or predict natural phenomena.

The establishment of the United States and its territorial expansion added a new geopolitical dimension to North American earthquake inquiry. Americans sought to dismantle the colonial Atlantic intellectual hierarchy in which North America was an object of study rather than a center of study. They also tried to forge a more inclusive, republican brand of scientific investigation in which the observations and experiences of individuals, regardless of their social station, were eligible to contribute. But for the study of natural phenomena, these commitments to empiricism and vernacular scientific practice had drawbacks: they produced a flood of conflicting, possibly fabricated accounts. In distrusting western earthquake accounts, East Coast intellectuals revealed a new national hierarchy based on geography. This tension between seeking European recognition and maintaining American distinctiveness characterized early national pursuits in science, the arts, and governance. The new nation's expansion also lent added urgency to the warnings of inter-tribal prophets. The earthquakes of 1811 and 1812 would expose these churning intellectual currents.

PART II

INDIAN COUNTRY

In the fall of 1811, the famed Shawnee leader Tecumseh ventured south from the Ohio Valley. He sought to recruit Southern Indians to a militant, pan-Indian defense of indigenous land and culture against United States encroachment. Most of the stops on his itinerary are unclear, but it is certain that he spoke to an audience of Creek chiefs, along with a number of Choctaw and Cherokee delegates, at the Creek town of Tuckabatchee. No firsthand accounts of his speech exist, and those gathered at Tuckabatchee were careful to guard the details and motives of his visit. Indeed Indian agent Benjamin Hawkins, the American most attuned to early nineteenth-century Creek civil affairs, first believed Tecumseh had traveled to Tuckabatchee to plead for peace, not to foment militancy. In his next letter to the United States Secretary of War, Hawkins recanted this initial impression of Tecumseh's visit, warning that the Shawnees "did not come on a visit friendly to white people...but to witness and encourage the reception of the war pipe."¹

Despite their sympathy for the cause of protecting Native land and culture, Creeks, Choctaws, and Cherokees largely rejected Tecumseh's bid for a military alliance. Though a

¹ Benjamin Hawkins to William Eustis, September 21, 1811, and Hawkins to Eustis, October 3 1811, *LBH*, 591, 593. On the secrecy of the plan, see Alexander Cornells to Benjamin Hawkins, June 22, 1813, *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 846. Tecumseh biographer John Sugden has exhaustively evaluated the sources related to Tecumseh's travels in Sugden, "Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh's Tour of the Indian Country, 1811-1812," *American Indian Quarterly* 10, no. 4 (1986), 273-304, and Sugden, "Tecumseh's Travels Revisited," *Indiana Magazine of History* 96 (2000), 150-68. Of all the stops Tecumseh might have made on his tour, his time in Tuckabatchee is the most documented, but also the most mythologized.

handful of Creeks would travel north with Tecumseh's delegation to discover that his brother had launched an ill-advised attack against the United States military at Tippecanoe in November, his reception was nonetheless tepid considering his family ties to the Creeks. Tecumseh's mother was born in Tuckabatchee, and after traveling a great distance to rally Southern Indians in common cause, he must have been disappointed when Big Warrior, the headman of his mother's hometown, refused his overtures.

By the 1830s, when people told the story of Tecumseh's visit to Tuckabatchee, they emphasized his supposed prophetic announcement there. After being spurned by Big Warrior, the Shawnee leader claimed that he would prove the potency of his cause by harnessing the forces of nature. To prove his "great supernatural power," Tecumseh promised to climb a mountain and stamp his foot three times to "make the whole earth tremble. Just weeks after Tecumseh's supposed pronouncement, the first of three major earthquakes rattled the eastern half of North America.²

The shocks were most dramatic in trans-Appalachian Indian country where, as the story commonly is told, Creek prophets were emboldened by Tecumseh's visit and began to revolt against their elite peers. Only scattered acts of violence and theft at first, the uprising became a full-fledged war in August 1813, when the prophets and their followers, known as Redsticks, killed a diverse group of more than 250 people of Creek, Euroamerican, and African descent gathered inside Fort Mims. In response, a coalition of anti-Redstick Creeks,

² "Stiggins Narrative," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2 (1958), 147. George Stiggins, a man of Creek and Euroamerican ancestry who fought against the Redsticks, wrote an account of the Redstick insurgency that is contained within the Tecumseh Papers, series YY of the Draper Manuscripts at the Wisconsin Historical Society. His account is transcribed by Theron A. Nunez, Jr. in Nunez, Jr., "Creek Nativism and the Creek War of 1813-1814," *Ethnohistory* 5, nos. 1, 2, and 3 (1958), 1-47, 131-175, and 292-301, hereafter cited as "Stiggins Narrative" with the corresponding *Ethnohistory* issue and page number.

Cherokees, Choctaws, and the United States military, led by Andrew Jackson, put down the rebellion during the following year.³

Some newspaper accounts in 1812 described Indians who believed Tecumseh's brother Tenskwatawa had caused the shaking, but it is unlikely that Tecumseh's pledge actually predated the earthquakes. Had he foretold the tremors, one suspects that more than a handful of Creeks would have ventured north to the Ohio Valley to join his campaign against the United States. Furthermore, this famous, foot-stomping speech only first surfaced in the 1830s. The story speaks more to Tecumseh's prominent place in American mythology after his death than his seismological acumen.⁴

Tecumseh's foot-stomping story, like his movement, also has overshadowed a more complete picture of Native Americans in the War of 1812 era. In their varied interpretations of the earthquakes, approaches to the war, and allegiances to different spiritual and political authorities, we see a spectrum of Indian ideas and strategies that did not conform to the strict categories that Tecumseh sought to construct. He described his movement as an all-or-nothing proposition: purge white people and their goods and join in a pan-Indian defense of Native land. Anything less than total Indian unity was accommodation. For a warrior seeking to build a coalition of disparate people, some of whom had been ancient enemies, his bold rhetoric was politically useful but difficult to actualize.

³ Since the nineteenth century, histories of the Redstick War have linked Tecumseh's visit with the Redstick insurgency. While Tecumseh undoubtedly influenced the Redsticks, and the Creeks who returned north with Tecumseh did commit some of the early violence and theft in the conflict, this connection obscures the cultural and ideological elements of the rebellion that were distinctly Creek, rather than pan-Indian or Shawnee. Furthermore, more than one year passed between his speech at Tuckabatchee and the beginning widespread conflict, suggesting Tecumseh's impact was not as immediate as it is commonly portrayed. Following this line of reasoning, Karl Davis examines the "core Creek values" behind the attack on Ft. Mims in Davis, "'Remember Fort Mims: Reinterpreting the Origins of the Creek War,'" *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 4 (2002), 611-636.

⁴ For newspapers reporting that Indians believed the Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh's brother, caused the earthquakes, see *Georgia Journal*, March 25, 1812, 2; *New-York Herald*, February 12, 1812, 2.

Historians often view the years following the earthquakes as a missed opportunity for Indians across the Mississippi River Valley to rally around these remarkable and outspoken Shawnee brothers. If inter-tribal militancy is the dominant paradigm for interpreting early nineteenth-century revitalization movements and evaluating their success, Tecumseh's 1813 defeat at the Battle of the Thames and General Andrew Jackson's 1814 rout of the Redsticks at Horseshoe Bend certainly signaled a resounding failure. Further, if inter-tribal unity frames the narrative, the Cherokees, Choctaws, and anti-Redstick Creeks who assisted Jackson in crushing the Redsticks, as well as those Indians who did not ally with Tecumseh in the Old Northwest, appear as traitorous people who sacrificed Indian solidarity for short-term favor with the United States.

But the expectation of pan-Indian unity imposes an unrealistic standard of success on disparate groups who drew from a variety of strategies to preserve their territory and culture. Most Indians did not heed Tecumseh's call for united militancy, but they remained willing to fight for local interests. Though they were concerned about the influence of Anglo-American goods, people, and ideas in their territory, they rejected the absolutist claims of the Shawnee brothers and the Redsticks. The fact that the Shawnee brothers' message of militant unity ranged so widely was more of a testament to the cosmopolitanism of Native North America than the willingness of Indians to join them.

The diversity of American Indian responses to the earthquakes mirrors approaches to the War of 1812 and the larger issue of U.S. encroachment. Natural signs and forces were important and needed to be addressed, but they did not lead all Native Americans on the same path to inter-tribal war against the United States. This fact should reframe our understanding of Indian participation in the conflict. Focusing on the failure of inter-tribal

militancy is less important than situating it within a range of Indian strategies, all of which took related matters of land, spirit, and culture into account.

CHAPTER 2

“CONVULSIVE MOVEMENTS” IN THE NATIVE SOUTH

Although Tecumseh’s message of militant unity circulated widely across the Native South, Creek and Cherokee interpretations of the earthquakes show that it would be misguided to view southeastern Indian prophets merely as an outgrowth of inter-tribal militancy in the Ohio Valley. They were much more concerned with local tribal problems than the effort to rally more multi-ethnic Indian communities against Americans in the Ohio Valley. Tecumseh did not need to stomp the ground to alarm southern Indians, because in Creek and Cherokee understandings of natural order, the earthquakes already signaled social trouble and the need for renewal through ritual purification. In particular, the idea that massive underground snakes were responsible for the earthquakes demonstrates that Mississippian cosmological knowledge and social conventions governing purity informed Creek and Cherokee earthquake interpretations. The fact that ancient customs framed their analyses of the tremors does not mean that their interpretations were inattentive to current events; rather contemporary concerns about territorial and cultural autonomy fortified their long-held understandings of the maintenance of order and the causes of disorder in the natural world.

Despite their common intellectual foundation for understanding the tremors, Creek and Cherokee responses to the earthquakes – and their solutions for the wider problems that the shaking signaled – varied widely. The Redsticks claimed the ability to manipulate a range of

natural forces, including earthquakes, and they led an extended purge of Creek territory and culture that an allied force of Cherokees, Choctaws, Americans, and other Creeks eventually eliminated at Horseshoe Bend. The Creek and Cherokee prophets' uses of the earthquakes to advocate for reforms led to vastly different outcomes. The Cherokees, whose religious and political leadership was more differentiated than the Creeks, did not become embroiled in civil war. In the process of nationalizing, however, both groups relegated these revivalistic and – in the Creeks' case – violent elements of their population to the political margins.

The Problems of Outside Influences and Internal Divisions in the Redstick War

The Redsticks have been closely associated with Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa since their opponents and early historians of the conflict blamed the prophetic activity on outside agitation. These claims ignored the reality that the ideological impulses for the Redstick insurgency originated from within Creek society and were grounded in Creek cultural terms. After living among the Creeks for more than a decade, Benjamin Hawkins was incredulous that some of them had rebelled so violently and enthusiastically against his social and economic reforms. The Alabamas, a loosely-affiliated member of the multi-ethnic Creek confederacy that produced a number of Redstick prophets, particularly disappointed him. “The Alabamas were the most industrious and best behaved of all our Indians,” he wrote. “Their fields were the granary of the upper towns and furnished considerable supplies by water to Mobile. But this Fanaticism has rendered them quite the reverse.” To Hawkins, outsiders had deceived the Alabamas. Unwilling to admit that his actions could have bred

such violent resistance, he refused to consider the possibility that skilled farmers also could be homegrown prophets.¹

In order to lessen tension between the United States and the majority of the Creeks who did not rebel, anti-Redstick Creeks pointed to devious outsiders who manipulated impulsive young Creeks. Alexander Cornells, a Creek interpreter for Hawkins, reported that the Redstick “plan, whatever it is, must have come from the Lake Indians,” meaning Tecumseh, Tenskwatawa, and American Indians in the Great Lakes region. Despite the related timing of Tecumseh’s visit and the outbreak of violence the following year, several prominent Upper Creek chiefs cautioned Hawkins and the United States not to “think that we lean to the Shawanee tribes, because you saw Tecumseh and his party dance in our square, around our fire, and some of our foolish people believed their foolish talks.” To describe their rebellious countrymen, anti-Redstick Creeks ventured beyond talk of foolishness to the language of madness. Big Warrior viewed Redstick radicalism as “a sort of madness and amusement for idle people” that had “burst forth in acts of murder.” George Stiggins, a man of Creek and Anglo-American descent who lived in the wealthy plantation district most ravaged by the Redsticks, echoed Cornells. Claiming the Redsticks were “ripe in fanatical frenzy to imbibe Tecumseh’s mad notions” and “infatuated by studied tales fabricated to suit their understanding and manners,” he called Big Warrior “a light of returning reason” for rejecting Tecumseh’s offer.²

When assigning blame for the uprising, some Americans looked even further afield to the British. In a letter to the Governor of Georgia, the commander of the Mississippi militia

¹ Hawkins to John Armstrong, June 28, 1813, *LBH*, 643.

² Cornells to Hawkins, June 22, 1813, *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 846; Big Warrior, Alexander Cornells, and William McIntosh to Benjamin Hawkins, April 26, 1813, *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 841; “Stiggins Narrative,” *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 147.

claimed “there can be no doubt that the War between the Creeks had originated with the British in Canada.” The Redsticks had carried a letter from the British authorizing them to acquire arms and ammunition from the Spanish in Florida, but the causes for the Redstick revolt were decidedly more local. Rather than recognizing that their policies and settlers had stoked conflict, Americans commonly blamed their problems with Indians on British interference.³

Tecumseh’s trip has presented historians with an interpretive quandary. Highlighting the connections among Native people, goods, and ideas across broad swaths of territory, ethnohistorians have rightfully exploded the notion that Indians lived in insular, static societies. But in zooming out from smaller social units of study, they have risked overlooking important cultural distinctions among indigenous groups and making anachronistic connections across time and place. Though their agendas obviously differ from Hawkins, Cornells, and Stiggins, later interpretations of the Redstick War have followed the earliest observers in arguing that outside Indian influences radicalized the Creeks.⁴

Tecumseh’s message did travel widely, and there is evidence of a small degree of collaboration between the Redsticks and the Shawnee brothers. Before Tecumseh’s trip, Creeks had visited his headquarters at Prophetstown. In late 1812 or early 1813, a group of Redsticks ventured north to consult with the Shawnee brothers and to learn the “Dance of the Lakes,” which they used as a recruitment tool. The Governor of Illinois believed that after their visit, Redsticks had carried wampum belts across the Mississippi River to rally

³ Ferdinand L. Claiborne to David B. Mitchell, August 14, 1813, in “A Prelude to the Creek War of 1813-1814: In a Letter of John Innerarity to James Innerarity,” ed. Elizabeth Howard West, *The Florida Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (1940), 264.

⁴ On early accounts of the Creek War that strongly link Tecumseh to the Redsticks, see “Stiggins Narrative,” *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 145-47; Albert James Pickett, *History of Alabama, and Incidentally of Georgia and Mississippi, from the Earliest Period*, vol. 2, 3rd ed. (Charleston, S.C.: Walker and James, 1851), 249; and H.S. Halbert and T.H. Ball, *The Creek War of 1813 and 1814* (Chicago: Donohue & Henneberry, 1895), 37.

Kickapoos, Potawatomis, and others in Illinois Country. On their way back from the Ohio Valley and perhaps points west, the Redstick delegation killed seven settler families at the mouth of the Ohio River. The Creek national council dispatched their own police force to execute the Redstick delegation for the killings, a move designed to show the Americans that this emerging indigenous nation did not stand for the Redsticks and their anti-American violence.⁵

Despite the executions, the Redstick movement continued to gain momentum, suggesting the locus of their authority lay in Creek country and not with the Shawnee brothers. Prophetic messages circulated widely across cosmopolitan Indian societies, but Indian ideas and strategies for reckoning with territorial and cultural encroachment did not necessarily have common origins in Prophetstown. Despite his remarkable leadership in the Ohio Valley and ardor for the inter-tribal cause, Tecumseh's rhetoric was not the only ideological foundation for the militant defense of Indian land and culture in the early nineteenth century.

One reason that the Redstick War has been associated with the inter-tribal militancy further north is that it has been difficult for historians to understand why some Creeks joined the Redsticks while others did not. Attributing the impetus for revolt to an outside force, as Hawkins and American officials first did, has been more interpretively satisfying than acknowledging that many of the conflict's internal dimensions have remained unknown. Though it has been cast as a conflict between "accommodationists" and "nativists" or the propertied, acculturated elite and the poor, marginalized traditionalists, no single factor

⁵ Thomas Simpson Woodward, *Woodward's Reminiscences of the Creek, or Muscogee Indians* (Montgomery, AL: Barrett & Wimbush, 1859), 94; "Stiggins Narrative," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 145; Ninian Edwards to William Eustis, August 4, 1812, *History of Illinois, from 1778 to 1833; and Life and Times of Ninian Edwards*, ed. Ninian Wirt Edwards (Springplace, IL: Illinois State Journal Company, 1870), 334.

determined the battle lines of the Redstick War. It is impossible to explain the war's divisions based on ethnicity, geography, wealth, or age. Among the Redstick leaders were a wealthy, red-headed warrior, as well as a prophet named Paddy Welch. The war divided families, and once the fighting began, the battle lines remained fluid. Captain Isaacs, one of the primary spiritual leaders of the Redsticks, left the movement and was condemned as a witch after he led a police force to execute the murderers of Ohio Valley families. Angry about the actions of the Creek national authority, two prominent leaders then joined the Redsticks.⁶

Recent historians have more readily acknowledged that a complicated matrix of considerations drove the Redsticks. Two works have recast the assault on Ft. Mims not as a wanton, bloodthirsty massacre, but a calculated, symbolic punishment for deviations from what one scholar has deemed "core Creek values." Another argues that a federal road cut across Creek territory in 1811 was crucial in inciting the Redsticks. These recent studies of the multivalent cleavages and motivations shaping the conflict have provoked the need for a reassessment of the ideology that united Redsticks and ultimately drove them to try to purge their homelands of Euroamerican people and goods with violence.⁷

⁶ For interpretations that largely cast the Redstick War in "accommodationist" versus "nativist" terms, see Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 148, 169-73; Joel W. Martin, *Sacred Revolt: The Muskogees' Struggle for a New World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 114-32; Claudio Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 249-72. On Captain Isaacs' defection, see Gregory A. Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813-1814* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 2006), 89. For a detailed investigation of town divisions, see Ross Hassig, "Internal Conflict in the Creek War of 1813-1814," *Ethnohistory* 21, no. 3 (1974), 251-71.

⁷ On reinterpretations of the Fort Mims attack as a symbolic gesture of punishment, see Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813-1814*; Karl Davis, "Remember Fort Mims:" Reinterpreting the Origins of the Creek War," 611-636. On the role of federal roads in stoking Redstick anger, Angela Pulley Hudson, *Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves and the Making of the American South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 7.

Great Serpents and the Redstick Purge

The earthquakes were not a causal factor in the Redstick War, but they were powerful and pervasive signs of illness and impurity that Creeks related to social and diplomatic problems. Creek interpretations of the tremors were rooted in Southeastern Indian oral tradition and ceremony, not Tecumseh's unlikely foot-stomping claim. Before he defected from the Redsticks, Captain Isaacs told of diving to the bottom of a river and "for many days and nights receiving instruction and information from an enormous and friendly serpent that dwells [sic] there and was acquainted with future events and all other things necessary for a man to know in this life." In the earliest months of the Redstick movement, Captain Isaacs enhanced his credibility as a powerful mediator between the human realm and the dangerous but powerful underworld. After his break with the Redsticks, however, his opponents used the story to argue that he was an evil witch whose spiritual power could not be trusted. Although the prophet did not explicitly link the "enormous and friendly serpent" with the tremors, a variety of evidence points both to the snake's role in the earthquakes and the tremors as signs of impurity and illness in the Native South. While this snake in Creek country was "enormous and friendly," the Shawnee brothers argued that snakes were the evil creators of the American enemy.⁸

Some Cherokees ascribed the earthquakes to "a great snake who must have crawled under their house." This statement was not idle speculation, but a statement replete with cosmological significance. In the Southeastern Indian universe, snakes were ubiquitous and fundamental to order. Archaeological studies of southeastern towns and mounds from the twelfth through the fourteenth centuries have suggested that Southeastern Indians conceived

⁸ "Stiggins Account," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2 (1958), 149.

of a universe with three layers: a bottom layer of water, the earth, and the sun and sky above. Humans lived on the middle layer, but beings and forces surrounded them, including four water serpents that held the earth up from the watery layer beneath it. Flat necklace beads found in these sites mapped the cosmos and depicted the snakes' cosmological responsibility.⁹

In Creek oral history, large serpents known as “tie-snakes” were created when humans violated food taboos. Various versions of the story exist, but each begins with two hungry hunters. One man told his companion that he could become a snake by mixing and then eating the brains of a black snake, a black squirrel, and a wild turkey. After devouring

⁹ *SPMD*, December 17, 1811, 461; Lankford, “World on a String: Some Cosmological Components of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, eds. Richard F. Townsend and Robert V. Sharp (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press for the Art Institute of Chicago, 2004), 208. The question of whether early modern Southeastern Indian cosmology can be reconstructed is a sensitive and contested one. A chapter in a report in the John Howard Payne Papers enumerates “departures from the religious system considered as the orthodox one among the Cherokee,” particularly changes in the Green Corn Festival, and cites the difficulty of deciphering “a sort of talking in hieroglyphics; which presupposes an intimate knowledge of their customs of their customs, their religious mysteries, their modes of thinking, and the latent significance of their antique phrases.” As Lee Irwin has noted, the Payne Papers remain a valuable resource, but they must be read with an understanding that they are an incomplete representation of Cherokee cosmology, and like James Adair’s account, they try to force connections between the Cherokees and the ancient Israelites. At the turn of the twentieth century, anthropologist James Mooney explained that “disjointed fragments of an original complete genesis and migration legend, which are now lost,” composed his understanding of Cherokee cosmology. Recent studies of the cosmological meaning embedded in artwork excavated from ancient southeastern archaeological sites guide my understanding of the broad cosmological elements most important for gauging Cherokee responses to the New Madrid earthquakes. Even if Cherokee cosmology shifted in the centuries between the pre-contact period and the New Madrid earthquakes, Cherokee statements recorded by James Adair, Moravian missionaries, and Daniel Butrick suggest strong cosmological continuities. See James Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, ed. Kathryn E. Holland Braund (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 146-8, 254-7; John Howard Payne Papers, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library. Microfilm, Volume 1, 26, 94; James Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee* (1900; repr. *James Mooney’s History, Myths, and Sacred Formulas of the Cherokees*, Asheville, N.C.: Bright Mountain Books, 1992), 229. Citations are to the reprinted edition; Charles Hudson, *The Southeastern Indians* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee Press, 1976), 120-83; Lee Irwin, “Different Voices Together: Preservation and Acculturation in Early 19th Century Cherokee Religion,” *Journal of Cherokee Studies* 18 (1997), 3-26; Lankford, “World on a String: Some Cosmological Components of the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex,” *Hero, Hawk, and Open Hand: American Indian Art of the Ancient Midwest and South*, 207-18. Recently some archaeologists have begun reappraising the applicability of some of the most basic terms used to describe social and political organization in the Native South before contact with Europeans. For critiques of the term “Mississippian chiefdoms” and the general approach to archaeology in the Southeast, see Timothy R. Pauketat, *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions* (Lanham, Md.: AltaMira Press, 2007), and a review forum devoted to *Chiefdoms and Other Archaeological Delusions in Native South 2* (2009), 69-132.

the concoction, he indeed transformed into a snake and retired into a deep pool. The fellow hunter returned home alone, and townspeople accused him of murder. He led his hunting partner's parents to the pool, where the snake "laid its head against its mother's jaw. It shed tears, but could not speak." In other iterations of the story, the hunter-turned-tie-snake ate "a queer fish" or a bad egg, but the message remained clear: eating impure foods had dangerous consequences. Although the tie-snake was a potential menace that pulled people into ponds, his tears and inability to speak in this story also made him a sympathetic figure. One historian has argued that Redsticks eventually tried to assassinate Captain Isaacs, because in visiting the tie-snake, he had communed with the embodiment of "pure malevolence." Creek oral histories, however, offer a more nuanced portrait of the serpent as a powerful warning against impure bodies.¹⁰

Redsticks addressed these impurities with ritual purges. Over time, these rituals escalated into large-scale violence and property destruction, but they retained their essential character as purges. Redsticks initially fostered solidarity by gathering to imbibe the "black drink." In accepting this traditional tea, which could induce vomiting and thereby purified the body, Creeks publicly pledged their allegiance to the Redstick cause. When William Weatherford and Samuel Moniac encountered Redsticks gathered to take the black drink, they were instructed to "join or be put to death." Weatherford, the aforementioned redhead and a Creek warrior from a prominent family, reluctantly accepted the drink and his place in the revolt. He also warned "that it would be their ruin; but they were his people – he was raised with them, and he would share their fate." The Creek brother-in-law of a prominent prophet, Moniac refused to participate, barely escaped the gathering with his life, and later

¹⁰ John Reed Swanton, *Myths and Tales of the Southeastern Indians* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995), 30-36; Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 170.

gave one of the few firsthand accounts of the Redsticks after they had burned his house and property.¹¹

A newly constructed federal road cut through Creek country was a visible manifestation of territorial impurity. The United States had negotiated with the Creeks to open the road as a southern link between the newly acquired Louisiana Territory and the United States. The road became a flashpoint between Creeks and the United States years before the birth of the Redstick movement. Although Creeks agreed to the construction of the road in an 1805 treaty, many feared it would compromise their territorial rights and introduce unsavory people and goods into Creek country. Big Warrior and Cornells had already complained to Hawkins about the unauthorized sale of liquor from boats in 1809. Although the road was a strategic necessity for U.S. communication and trade between their territory along the Atlantic seaboard and in the Deep South, it also encouraged illicit trade. Indeed after the road was constructed, Hawkins admitted that “loose worthless characters” frequented his agency on their way west. In a direct appeal to President Madison before the Redstick revolt, one leader explained that he could not control the “young people” who were illegally charging tolls, harassing travelers, and killing livestock that strayed from their parties. “What land we have left is but large enough to live and walk on,” he added.¹²

Redsticks registered their displeasure with foreign goods passing through Creek country by publicly demonstrating their spiritual power. When the prophets shook hands

¹¹ Woodward, *Woodward's Reminiscences*, 96. On the ceremonial uses of the “black drink,” see *Black Drink: A Native American Tea*, ed. Charles M. Hudson (1979; repr. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 2004). On Moniac and his familial ties to the Redsticks, see “Samuel Manac deposition,” ADAH; Hawkins to John Armstrong, June 28, 1813, *LBH*, 643.

¹² Big Warrior to Hawkins and Cornells to Hawkins, April 11, 1809, National Archives and Records Administration: Letters Received by the Office of the Secretary of War relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1823; Hawkins to Eustis, June 9, 1812, *LBH*, 609; Hoboheithlee Mico to James Madison, 15 May 181, National Archives and Records Administration: Letters Received by the Office of the Secretary of War relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1823.

with those who opposed them, they claimed to sense the salt in their diets. To cleanse themselves of this substance, which Euroamericans used to flavor and preserve meat, they jerked their bodies uncontrollably. A British trader described a prophet “who trembled, grinned horribly, & made the most convulsive movements so as to endeavour to inspire terror.” He also noted that Redsticks did not “taste a single a drop of liquor, or any thing else but water.” When the earth shook and unusually heavy rains washed out the federal road and even destroyed Hawkins’ mill during the winter of 1812, Redsticks likely believed nature was working in tandem with them to rid their bodies and lands of impurities.¹³

In a hostile display designed to purge the land of foreign influence, Redsticks escalated Creek opposition to the federal road, and the goods that circulated through it, when they shot at a post rider and stole his mail during a chance encounter in the early summer of 1813. Some Redsticks were traveling to Pensacola to seek arms from the Spanish when they ran into the postman. They shot off his hat and killed his horse before stealing his mail and allowing him to escape on foot. While seemingly minor, this symbolic gesture pointed to Redsticks’ desire to gather intelligence and rid their territory of a major cultural difference between Creeks and Americans: written communication. During the summer of 1813, Redsticks also began attacking owners and their property. “The destruction of every American is the song of the day,” an anti-Redstick Creek chief reported to Hawkins. They began slaughtering livestock and leaving carcasses to rot without eating them. Dispelling

¹³ “Stiggins Narrative,” *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 155; John Innerarity to James Innerarity, July 27, 1813, “A Prelude to the Creek War of 1813-1814,” 250-51; Pickett, *History of Alabama*, 252. Waselkov has likened the prophet’s convulsive state to the behaviors of traditional Creek *kithlas*, who were responsible for diagnosing disease and, among other special functions, sought to control the weather in Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit*, 83-84. On the flooding, see Hawkins to Eustis, February 3, February 26, and June 9, 1812, *LBH*, 601-02, 609; *Partners in the Lord’s Work: The Diary of Two Moravian Missionaries in the Creek Indian Country, 1807-1813*, ed. and trans. Carl Mauelshagen and Gerald H. Davis, School of Arts and Sciences Research Paper 21 (Atlanta: Georgia State College, 1969), 67.

any notions that they were British pawns, the chief also noted with surprise that Redsticks had destroyed all of a Scottish loyalist's hogs and taken his cattle, horses, and slaves in their rampage across present-day southern Alabama. Like the killing of the Ohio Valley families, these reports foreshadowed the Redsticks' plan to purge the land with blood.¹⁴

As the violence intensified, the earthquakes emboldened Redstick prophets to claim that they could manipulate natural forces in their favor. In July 1813, the prophets asserted that they could create "quamires" around white people's dwellings by drawing circles in the ground. They also "had power to destroy them by an earthquake, or rendering the ground soft and miry, and thunder." To eliminate rivals from accessing the spirit world, they identified and burned witches for practicing "diabolical art" such as flying or poisoning people with "contagious air." Stiggins noted that the executed witches were often "the most inlightened and well disposed to peace and good order." Challengers to the Redsticks faced accusations of witchcraft in much the same way that contemporary prophets Tenskwatawa and Handsome Lake executed their political enemies for sorcery. Before their attack on Fort Mims, prophet Paddy Welch argued that the Redsticks did not need their firearms, because he would run around the fort three times, rendering their counterparts "in a state of torpitude and paralised" with bullets that "would be dead or fly upwards." These prophets did not

¹⁴ Toulmin to Claiborne, July 23 1813 (typescript), ADAH; Holmes to Armstrong, August 3, 1813, *The Territorial Papers of the United States, Volume 6: The Territory of Mississippi, 1809-1817, continued* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1937), 390; Hawkins to John Armstrong, July 28, 1813, *LBH*, 651; Joseph Carson to Claiborne, July 30, 1813, ADAH; Hoithleponiyau to Hawkins, August 17, 1813, *LBH*, 656. On the witch hunts of Tenskwatawa and Handsome Lake, see R. David Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet* (Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), 42-47; Anthony F.C. Wallace, *The Death and Rebirth of the Seneca* (New York: Knopf, 1970), 254-62; Matthew Dennis, *Seneca Possessed: Indians, Witchcraft, and Power in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 94-108.

need the Shawnee brothers to stomp their feet and witch-hunt for them; they drew from their own spiritual power.¹⁵

The Redsticks' ritual drive to eradicate Euroamerican people and their lifeways from Creek country reached its violent climax in their assault on Fort Mims and its aftermath in late August 1813. Though variously cast as a "punishment" or "massacre" of people huddled inside a new, hastily constructed fort, it was certainly a purge, the extreme culmination of an extended rite that began with the public sharing of the black drink. The carnage was unprecedented; casualty estimates were imprecise, but more than 250 men, women, and children died at the hands of a force of about 700 Redsticks. Though they had not been impervious to enemy bullets, the Redsticks' victory was decisive, not only in terms of lives lost but damage inflicted. Redsticks burned and mutilated human remains and property and left more livestock carcasses to waste, even though they would later go hungry. Their commitment to purging the land was absolute. After a captured slave showed the Redsticks where Fort Mims residents had buried furniture, they took the time to dig up the furniture and incinerate it. They even charred dollars and melted silver money, streaking it across the ground.¹⁶

While they were willing to burn money and slaughter livestock without consuming it, these purges still had limits, especially when it came to the use of firearms and the ambiguous role of African American slaves in the movement. Paddy Welch had directed the Redsticks to dispense with firearms in their attack on Fort Mims, and a settler noted that they were skillful with bows and arrows and "render them more dangerous than bullets."

¹⁵ Pickett, *History of Alabama*, 244; Cornells to Hawkins, June 22, 1813, *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 846; Hawkins to Mitchell, July 22, 1813, *LBH*, 648; "Stiggins Narrative," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 149 and 167.

¹⁶ "Stiggins Narrative," *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 154-55, 169; Hawkins to Armstrong, September 21, 1813, *LBH*, 665. On casualty estimates at Fort Mims, see Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit*, 190-93.

Nevertheless, they demanded firearms and ammunition from British traders. They sought to obtain these Euroamerican weapons with another Euroamerican cultural form: the written word. The prophet Josiah Francis claimed to meet daily with the “master of breath” to learn how to speak and write in foreign languages. To prove his newfound linguistic skills, he wrote a letter in Spanish to the Governor of Pensacola requesting more arms and ammunition, though Stiggins reported the letter “looked more like a paper full of crooked marks than writing.” To outsiders in the region, the illegible letter was further evidence that the prophets had deluded their followers. But these kinds of fantastic skills became ways for Redstick prophets to exhibit their spiritual prowess and to consolidate authority.¹⁷

The role of African Americans in the Redstick movement points to some flexibility in Redstick ideas about purging outside influences. At least some Redsticks were slave owners, yet in certain cases, runaway slaves joined the movement. The Redsticks’ handling of African Americans at Fort Mims exemplified this ambiguity. In his meticulous recent study of the Redsticks, Gregory A. Waselkov has found that of the 65 documented African Americans at Fort Mims, 30 were killed, 30 were captured, and five escaped. Hawkins reported that 20 black people had been killed and scalped. But a surviving slave recounted that a Redstick explained, “The Master of Breath has ordered us not to kill any but white people and half breeds.” In other cases, Redsticks captured the slaves of their enemies rather than condemning them to the fate of the livestock. Although United States officials and settlers in the Deep South were wary of Redsticks uniting with slaves and European soldiers to capture American territory, this coalition was never feasible. The Redsticks were determined to carry out the purge on their own terms, and the 30 African Americans slain at

¹⁷ Toulmin to Claiborne, July 23, 1813; John Innerarity to James Innerarity, July 27, 1813, *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, 256; “Stiggins Narrative,” *Ethnohistory* 5, no. 2, 151.

Fort Mims were a testament to their refusal to unite with slaves or any other military force in the region.¹⁸

After the destruction at Fort Mims, the Redsticks' renown grew, and outsiders even speculated about their ability to manipulate nature. The earthquakes did not initiate the Redstick uprising; their grievances were deeper and their strategies more sophisticated. The tremors did, however, powerfully signify impurity in Creek country and bolster Redstick claims to spiritual power. Only after almost eighteen months of gathering momentum did the movement seek to restore natural balance with the ultimate rite of purification at Fort Mims. Writing to Creek chiefs from Choctaw territory in November 1813, a Scottish trader had heard "that some of your people is a going to make the ground shake." Long after the earthquakes, Redsticks still professed the ability to make the earth shake. While the Redsticks' success at Fort Mims led the United States to gather a multinational force to put them down, it had clearly emboldened their claims to sacred power.¹⁹

In the winter of 1814, the prophets redoubled their efforts to protect their people through sacred means. They consecrated a new town and named it "Holy Ground." Redsticks could retreat to Holy Ground, which showcased "a great number of white scalps of every description from the infant to the grey head" in the town center, because it was supposedly impermeable to white people. When enemies approached, the ground around the

¹⁸ Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit*, 192; Hawkins to John B. Floyd, September 26, 1813, and Hawkins to Armstrong, September 21, 1813, *LBH*, 665-67. Waselkov has argued that by 1813, most Creeks believed in the inherent inferiority of African-descended people in Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit*, 92. This view, which complicates the Redstick movement even further, contrasts with the final scene in Claudio Saunt's *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733-1816*, 273-90, where Redsticks, Seminoles, and fugitive slaves gathered at the "Negro Fort" in the Florida panhandle to mount "a final challenge to the new order spreading across the Deep South" (273). The Redsticks' willingness to defend the multiethnic inhabitants inside the fort was likely motivated more by desperation than a desire to incorporate runaway slaves into their movement. The opportunity to incorporate them into a successful alliance would have been much greater at the height of their power in 1813 than in 1815 or 1816.

¹⁹ Adam James to "the head Chiefs in the Creek nation," November 29, 1813, ADAH.

town would sink, protecting its inhabitants and the food and plunder they buried within its walls.²⁰

Despite terrifying American settlers and their Creek counterparts alike with their successes in 1813, the Redsticks eventually met their match early in 1814. Commanded by Andrew Jackson, a joint force of American, Cherokee, Choctaw, and Creek soldiers routed the Redsticks at Horseshoe Bend on March 27, 1814. Survivors fled south and regrouped in Florida, but their purges through the Deep South were effectively over. Referring to some of the same natural elements that the Redsticks claimed to control, Hawkins had warned the “Fanatical Chiefs”:

You may frighten one another with the power of your prophets to make thunder, earthquakes, and to sink the earth. These things cannot frighten the American soldiers...The thunder of their cannon, their rifles and their swords will be more terrible than the works of your prophets.

Hawkins worried about the uprising’s consequences on Creek territory and sovereignty. When Andrew Jackson drew up a treaty that punished all Creeks with major land cessions, Hawkins resigned in protest from his position as agent.²¹

Redstick leaders bolstered their authority by claiming to manipulate natural forces, including the earthquakes, and they used this authority to direct a violent, extended, and tribally focused purge of foreign people and lifeways from Creek culture and territory. The Creek leaders who assisted the United States in putting down the Redsticks offered their own vision of Creek nationhood. The Redsticks obviously did not belong in this vision, not because Creeks were unsympathetic to concerns about the maintenance of their tribal territory and culture, but because they did not agree with the Redsticks’ militant solutions for

²⁰ Neal Smith to James Smiley, January 8, 1814, ADAH.

²¹ Hawkins to Armstrong, July 13, 1813, *LBH*, 647.

their shared problems. The Creek national council viewed the Redsticks as a threat to Creek national sovereignty and decided that it was in their best interest to put down the rebellion. Because the Americans ultimately betrayed their Creek allies by demanding land cessions from the entire nation, historians have too easily dismissed this decision as a failed policy of accommodation. It was also part of the making of the Creek nation.

Prophecy on Cherokee Terms

In Cherokee country, the earthquakes intensified their own prophets' pre-existing calls for purity and renewal. As in the Redstick movement, this prophetic agitation sowed internal conflict, but the Cherokee prophets' demands and strategies were ultimately much less violent than their Redstick counterparts. In some of their visions, Cherokee prophets allowed for the selective adoption of Euroamerican people and culture as a means to enhance their society in the eyes of the aggressive early republic.

Reeling from the rapid loss of hunting ground, the decline of the deerskin trade, and violent reprisals from American settlers for fighting against them in the American Revolution, Cherokee leaders sought to nationalize in the early nineteenth century. This nationalizing project included demanding a new order of collectivity in diplomacy with the United States, allowing missionaries and Indian agents to promote literacy and American industry, and later adopting a tribal constitution. This transition was neither easy nor peaceful. In 1807 a band of prominent Cherokees killed Doublehead, a chief who had accepted individual payments from the United States and ceded territory without the entire national council's consent. Cherokee leaders ultimately sent troops to put down the Redstick Creeks in order to project their legitimacy as a nation and ally of the United States. Because

the United States represented a greater threat to their sovereignty than the Redsticks, the Cherokees' decision was a diplomatic choice, not a betrayal of Tecumseh's call for intertribal unity. Like the Creeks, the Cherokee effort to cultivate a nation bred generational, cultural, and socioeconomic rifts over questions of assimilation and resistance to white encroachment, but these tensions did not boil over into civil war.²²

As Cherokee leaders consolidated diplomatic authority in the early nineteenth century, fractious council meetings reflected some Cherokees' abiding concern with cultural devolution and the need for reviving traditional life ways and ceremonies. A man named Charles rose to relate a message from the "Great Spirit" before an audience of women "wearing terrapin shells filled with pebbles" and men chanting "a song of ancient times" gathered at one such council. "The Great Spirit was angry, and had withdrawn his protection" of the Cherokee people for their adoption of white modes of dress, communication, labor, and housing. "They must kill their cats, cut short their frocks...discard all the fashions of whites, abandon the use of any communication with each other except by word of mouth, and give up their mills, their houses, and all the arts learned by the white people," Charles explained. After purging these trappings of Euroamerican culture, game would return, white people would vanish, and "the Great Spirit would whisper in their dreams." Those who did not obey risked being "cut off from the living." Major Ridge, one of Doublehead's executioners, sought to temper the enthusiastic response to Charles' declaration by questioning the authenticity of the message and asserting that such radicalism would lead to war with the United States. The frenzied crowd attacked Ridge,

²² William G. McLoughlin has outlined this Cherokee transformation in McLoughlin, *Cherokee Renascence in the Early Republic* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992).

exemplifying the charged nature of cultural questions among early nineteenth-century
Cherokees.²³

In the winter of 1811, ten months before the earth began to tremble, three travelers shared a vision that assumed a more moderate stance on the question of Euroamerican influence in Cherokee country. The travelers saw a band of horsemen descend on the mountain from the sky and approach the travelers to urge the Cherokees' selective acceptance of white men who could teach them how to write. Like many prophets, the messengers' leader announced that "God" was unhappy about white encroachment and the "white people's corn" that Cherokees had planted and milled in defiance of their "ancestors' ways." "We are made from red earth, but they are made from white sand," the leader added, conveying elemental difference between Indians and Euroamericans. Unlike Charles's insistence that the nation purge itself of every habit, material good, and person of European descent, however, these messengers allowed useful white influences. Four white houses appeared in the sky, and the leader instructed the Cherokees to use the houses to reconstruct their "beloved towns" on territory that had been ceded to the United States. One of the houses was reserved for Captain James Blair, an American official and confidant of Cherokee elites who was "much loved by many," and the other three were intended "for other white men who could be useful to the nation with writing and so on." Although the adoption of Euroamerican conventions was a politically charged issue, the details of this vision show that Cherokee rifts were not rooted in absolutist attitudes about white people and their life ways. The issue was not a simple matter of accommodation or resistance. Literacy

²³ Thomas Loraine McKenney and James Hall, *History of the Indian tribes of North America, With Biographical Sketches and Anecdotes of the Principal Chiefs*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: D. Rice and J.G. Clark, 1849), 94. Cherokee leader Major Ridge related the council speech to Thomas McKenney, a United States government official who included the prophecy in his biography of Major Ridge. The date of the council is unclear, but it occurred between 1807 and 1811.

education, for example, could be a powerful force both for fostering wider communication and legitimating Cherokee “civility” and land claims.²⁴

Once the earthquakes began, prophets urged Cherokees to consider the tremors’ spiritual significance in light of their compromised cultural and territorial integrity. One prophetic vision circulating through Cherokee country depicted cultural devolution as an illness that could be cured through ritual purification. After the first shocks, an Indian man sat pensively with his sick children in a cabin when a man clothed in tree leaves walked in with two children and “said that the little child in his arms was God.” By claiming that they neglected to thank God and “perform the dances in His honour that are traditional to the Nation,” he criticized Cherokees’ failure to perform the Green Corn Ceremony. Through four days of successive feasting, fasting, and purging in early autumn, the community cleansed itself of impurities and ill will, climaxing in the extinguishing of the previous year’s holy fire and the lighting of a new flame.²⁵

The prophet then used the man’s sick children to make a symbolic argument for the efficacy of Cherokee customs. “You are sad because you believe your children are ill; they are really not ill, but have just gotten a little dust inside them,” the “messenger” explained to the father before instructing him to boil pieces of bark and serve the elixir to his children. His gesture made it clear that Cherokee remedies found in nature and through ritual, not Euroamerican medicine, would cure the children by purifying them. After enumerating “other means of curing illnesses,” the prophet departed. With his distinct dress in tree leaves, which were symbols of healing, and his claim that he cradled God as a child, the prophet was

²⁴ *SPMD*, February 10, 1811.

²⁵ *SPMD*, February 17, 1812, 474. This summary of the Green Corn Ceremony is based on James Adair’s eighteenth-century account in Adair, *The History of the American Indians*, 140-57.

an anomalous figure whose defiance of social conventions and gender roles denoted his power. For the prophet, the earthquakes functioned as warning for Cherokees to return to a healthy cultural order.²⁶

This vision's emphasis on tribal traditions distinguished it from the Shawnee brothers' platform of eliminating tribal conventions and spiritual figures that threatened their authority. Unlike the "Dance of the Lakes," a new ritual that the Shawnee brothers designed to replace previous customs and to unite Indians in the Ohio Valley, the Green Corn Ceremony was fundamental to Cherokee tradition and tribal identity. The inter-tribal militants banned medicine bags; the Cherokee messenger encouraged the use of traditional plants and healing methods. And the children's illness was not a sign of poisoning from witchcraft and the accompanying need to purge evil from the community, which was how Tenskwatawa often interpreted disease and agitated for witch hunts. Like his people as a whole, the Cherokee prophet was neither willing to abandon ancient customs in favor of inter-tribal militancy, nor accommodate to American ways.

Closer to the epicenter, the leader of a band of Cherokee migrants in Arkansas had a vision in which he was purified and told to flee the "fire of war" burning in the region. His divinely inspired relocation strategy constituted yet another Indian approach to the earthquakes and the impending war. Between early tremors, Skaquaw, also known as the "the Swan," was peering out at the Great Comet when lightning from the four cardinal

²⁶ *SPMD*, February 17, 1812, 474. On the Cherokee belief in the healing properties of plants, see Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 324-28. Nancy Shoemaker's article "An Alliance between Men: Gender Metaphors in Eighteenth-Century American Indian Diplomacy East of the Mississippi" deals only with gender metaphors in diplomacy, but her discussion of the way that Native Americans employed gendered language to celebrate fictive kin ties and recognize power is informative. The prophet in this case is never described as a woman, but he assumes a female responsibility, and power as a social anomaly, by cradling the child. His outfit of tree leaves furthers his powerful liminality. See Shoemaker, "An Alliance between Men: Gender Metaphors in Eighteenth-Century American Indian Diplomacy East of the Mississippi," *Ethnohistory* 46, no. 2 (1999), 239-63.

directions converged at his feet. Two children emerged from the lightning and used perfume to send Skaquaw into a trance. He awoke in one of the children's hands and was told that he had been "purified in this celestial fire," which was presumably the comet, so that he could properly hear the words of the "Ever-Great Spirit." The children told him that the Ever-Great Spirit "has determined to put an end to mankind, their mortal enemy, and save his children alone." They proclaimed that "the fire of war is burning already in all four corners of the earth," and this Cherokee band needed to leave their location on the St. Francis River. As a sign to escape, the earth would shake "like a horse who shakes the dust from his back." Skaquaw's band was then to travel west until it found peaceful hunting ground and await the "end to mankind." When the earth shook, their St. Francis village turned into a swamp, and this Cherokee group fled west to find dry land and to avoid being caught up in the war.²⁷

Elements of this vision point both to its cosmological importance and contemporary concerns about the pollution of Cherokee land and bodies. The children who came from the sky to greet Skaquaw were likely the famous Thunder Boys from Cherokee creation stories. Although they were initially responsible for the scarcity of crops and game, the brothers learned the proper rituals for ensuring that corn would grow each year. They later retreated to the sky, and Cherokees occasionally called them back to attract game. The presence of these foundational figures in Skaquaw's vision conveyed the gravity of the message. Like the early nineteenth-century Cherokees who ceded territory, adopted Euroamerican lifeways,

²⁷ "Speech of the Cherokee Skaquaw, (the Swan), on the 3d day of June of June, 1812, at Crowtown, on St. Francis River," Louis Bringier, "Notices of the Geology, Minerology, Topography, Productions, and Aboriginal inhabitants of the regions around the Mississippi and its confluent waters – in a letter from L. Bringier, Esq. of Louisiana, to Rev. Elias Cornelius – communicated for this journal," *American Journal of Science and Arts* 3, no. 1 (1821), 39. Interestingly, Skaquaw's speech was reprinted in a scientific journal along with a collection of earthquake observations. On the "Arkansas Cherokees" settled on the St. Francis River, see Robert A. Myers, "Cherokee Pioneers in Arkansas: The St. Francis Years, 1785-1813," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* 56, no. 2 (1997), 127-157.

and failed to conduct rituals, the Thunder Boys had once behaved improperly, but they had reformed their ways to become fixtures in the Cherokee understanding of the operation of the natural world. Furthermore, the references to comet and earthquakes as purifying agents demonstrate the centrality of the concept of purification in Cherokee understandings of the earthquakes and the coinciding comet. Like the dust inside the children, the dust on the horse's back signified greater problems in Cherokee affairs.²⁸

This prophetic emphasis on illness and impurity was especially significant considering the central role of health in the Cherokee language. Two fundamental Cherokee concepts are *tōhi* and *osi*. As Cherokee linguists recently have discussed in work about the relationship among Cherokee worldview, language, and health, *tōhi* is the idea that “nature is flowing at its appropriate pace and everything is as it should be” and can be used in discussions about health. *Osi* refers to balance. The two terms are used as greetings in the same way that an English speaker might ask, “How are you doing?” Unhealthiness, on a communal or individual level, ensues when flow and balance are interrupted. The linguists have argued that Cherokee speakers view history as “a series of events that relate to the attainment, maintenance, or loss of the states of *tōhi* and *osi*.” Consequently, many present-day Cherokees believe that eighteenth-century smallpox epidemics resulted from a loss of natural balance from overhunting for the deerskin trade. Given Native Americans' long association of earthquakes with illness and the importance of the concepts of *tōhi* and *osi* in the Cherokee language, it follows that Cherokees would have associated the tremors with the community's declining health.²⁹

²⁸ On the Thunder Boys, see Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 242-48.

²⁹ Heidi M. Altman and Thomas N. Belt, “Reading History: Cherokee History through a Cherokee Lens,” *Native South* 1 (2008), 90-98. See also, Altman and Belt, “*Tōhi*: The Cherokee Concept of Well-Being,” in

To address the unhealthiness signaled by the earthquakes, Cherokees gathered around mountain streams and fires to purify themselves. United States military representative and Indian agent Return Meigs remarked in March 1812 that some Cherokees were “in a remarkable manner endeavouring to appease the Anger of the great spirit, which they conceive is manifested by the late shocks of the earth” by reviving “religious dances of ancient origin” and riverside rituals. Waterways always had been symbols of purity and locations for both daily ablution and special ceremonies to “wash away” sad memories, and the earthquakes lent added significance to the practice. Meigs also noted that some of the participants in the washing ceremonies were “fanatics” who claimed “the great spirit is angry with them [the Cherokees] for adopting the manners, customs, and habits of the white people, who they think are very wicked.”³⁰

Material goods were a tangible reminder of white infiltration and cultural pollution, and charismatic figures encouraged Cherokees to cast off their Euroamerican clothing and other products. In March 1812, a Cherokee visitor reported to the missionaries that an Indian had foretold a “great darkness” during which time “all the white people and those Indians who had clothing or household items in the style of white people would also be carried away.” To ensure “that God would not mistake them in the darkness,” the prophet directed Cherokees to “put aside everything which was similar to the white people and what they had learned from them.” If Cherokees refused to discard their “white” goods, they and their livestock would immediately die. One man had allegedly perished already for not heeding

Under the Rattlesnake: Cherokee Health and Resiliency, ed. Lisa J. Lefler (Tuscaloosa, Al.: The University of Alabama Press, 2009), 9-22; Charles Hudson, “The Cherokee Concept of Natural Balance,” *The Indian Historian* 3, no. 4 (1970), 51-54.

³⁰ Return Jonathan Meigs, “Some Reflections on Cherokee concerns, manners, state,” March 19, 1812, Records of the Cherokee Agency of East Tennessee (microfilm), reel 6. For Cherokee understandings of the river, see Mooney, “The Cherokee River Cult,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 13, no. 49 (1900), 1-10.

the warning, but the threat did not frighten the visitor who related the prophecy to the Moravians. Instead she offered to buy her neighbors' "household items and clothing" to show them "that she didn't pay any attention to the lies." In another case, a man "burned his hat as a sacrifice" and encouraged a "young chief" to do the same, to which the chief replied, "It is no matter what clothes I wear while my heart is straight." Like all North American communities relating the natural disorder to social problems, Cherokees argued over how to address the shaking.³¹

Some prophetic teachings may have originated from beyond Cherokee boundaries, but they did not gain as much support as the messages grounded in Cherokee cultural terms. "Even the lies of the Shawanee [sic] prophets are being circulated this far," a missionary wrote, offering a brief, but notable reference to the Shawnee brothers. In the fall of 1811, some Cherokees had gathered at Tuckhabatchee to hear Tecumseh's bid to recruit southern Indian allies. Late nineteenth-century tradition held that Tecumseh had also visited the Cherokee homeland. In his meticulous retracing of Tecumseh's southern tour, historian John Sugden could not determine if Tecumseh traveled to Cherokee country. But the Shawnee leader certainly visited Creeks, Choctaws, Osages, and other groups. Cherokees and missionaries alike discussed Shawnee prophecies as messages about militant inter-tribal unity circulated widely across the early nineteenth-century Native South.³²

Cherokee oral tradition holds that they were cautious about accepting those who claimed to derive special powers from beyond Cherokee country. In the colonial era, a warrior travelled to a faraway European settlement, where he first saw a peacock. He

³¹ *SPMD*, March 8, 1812, 478; Meigs, "Reflections on Cherokee concerns, manners, state," reel 6.

³² John Gambold to Simon Peter, March 21, 1812, trans. Elizabeth Marx, *MASP*; Sugden, "Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh's Tour of the Indian Country," 273-304.

purchased peacock feathers and secretly fashioned a headdress. At the next dance, he donned the exotic headdress, claimed that the peacock feathers were “star feathers” received on a journey to the sky, and delivered a message from the “star spirits.” The self-styled prophet then retreated to a beaver lodge to live in seclusion, returning only to dances to relate the details of his latest sky journeys. His renown grew with each dance until a Cherokee man saw another peacock at a European settlement and suspected fraudulence. After the next dance, people followed the supposed prophet back to his beaver lodge, discovering that he had been in hiding rather than travelling to the sky. Although the disciples of Tenskwatawa and Handsome Lake embraced their claims to dream travel and altered states of consciousness, this long-held story of prophetic deception may have given Cherokees reason for skepticism about outside prophetic movements.³³

Despite widespread agreement that the human and natural environments were unbalanced, some Cherokees distanced themselves from calls for radical cultural renewal. In their dealings with missionaries and military officials, certain leaders expressed disdain for “rainmakers” and other charismatic figures, accusing them of remaining content to drink whiskey and steal horses even as they spoke of purity and renewal. At a council speech in late April 1812 delivered to Cherokee leaders as well as Agent Meigs and John Gambold, Chief Sower Mush decried “his own people’s misbehavior” with sagely sarcasm:

Recently the earth has sometimes moved a little. This brought you great fear and you were afraid you would sink into it, but when you go among white people to break into their stalls and steal horses you are not afraid and there is much greater danger because if they catch you in such a deed they would certainly shoot you down, then indeed you would have to be lowered into the earth.³⁴

³³ Mooney, *Myths of the Cherokee*, 399-400.

³⁴ *SPMD*, April 30, 1812, 487. See *SPMD*, July 26, 1812, 495, for The Ridge’s distaste for “rainmakers.” In “Some Reflection on Cherokee concerns, manners, state,” Meigs cited a Cherokee woman who told him that the

Cherokees' public denouncements of "rainmakers" before audiences of missionaries and United States military agents did not necessarily signal the actual cultural devolution that prophets so feared. In accordance with their early nineteenth-century drive to secure territorial integrity and political autonomy by adapting their legal, political, and economic institutions to suit the early republic's standards of "civility" and legitimate nationhood, Cherokee leaders strove to project a corporate image that did not accord with prophetic exuberance and horse thievery. Just as James Madison might have winced at a backwoods revivalist or squatter greeting a Cherokee diplomatic delegation, so too did Sower Mush feel compelled to address "his own people's misbehavior" publicly at the April 1812 council before United States emissaries.

This variety in Cherokee reactions also shows that they were far from a monolithic entity with unified goals and strategies for reckoning with either earthquakes or white encroachment. Galvanized by prophets seeking to purge the nation of white infiltration, enthusiastic citizens gathered to burn their clothing and reinvigorate traditional ceremonies, while leaders like Chief Sower Mush advocated a more cautious, conciliatory approach. Both positions were part of a lively debate about Cherokee culture and territory in the early nineteenth century.

Cherokee Opposition to the Redsticks

If Cherokees and Creeks faced common challenges and had similar debates in the early nineteenth century, and the earthquakes stoked the messages of Cherokee and Redstick

Cherokees concerned with burning Euroamerican clothing and purifying themselves "ought to become good people and leave off stealing horses and drinking whiskey instead of destroying their cloathing [sic]."

prophets alike, how do we account for the extreme variation in their responses to the earthquakes and the larger issue of U.S. encroachment? Cherokees and Creeks shared cosmologically grounded concerns about territory, culture, and spirit, but why did some Creeks lead a bloody revolt that some Cherokees ultimately helped to defeat? While there are no easy explanations, three differences shaped their divergent paths in the War of 1812 era: contemporary conflict between them, kinship and governance structures, and the backgrounds and rhetoric of their prophets.

While conflict between Creeks and Cherokees had not escalated into large-scale violence since the middle of the eighteenth century, it bears mentioning that old rivalries posed a major obstacle to inter-tribal unity in the Native South and beyond. By the early nineteenth century, land sales and speculation fueled conflict and mistrust. In 1809, Creeks complained that Cherokees led speculators onto Creek land. “Now I must blame you more than the Whites, that you led them in,” protested a chief from Tuckaubatchee in 1809, adding that Cherokees should have been “a sham’d” of their conduct. There was also tension between Creeks and their Choctaw neighbors to the west, who had also fought in the eighteenth century. In 1811, Creeks wrote to James Madison about their right to land that Choctaws had sold to the United States. It certainly took more than boundary disputes and speculation concerns to drive the Cherokees and Choctaws to ally with the United States in the Redstick War, but relations among Southeastern Indians leading up to the conflict were not necessarily amicable.³⁵

³⁵ Tustunnugge Thlucco to Pathmaker, May 1, 1809, and Hoboheilthlee Micco to James Madison, May 15, 1811, National Archives and Records Administration: Letters Received by the Office of the Secretary of War relating to Indian Affairs, 1800-1823.

Structural differences in kinship and governance provide the most compelling explanation for the tribal battle lines in the Redstick War. In an important sociological study comparing the nineteenth-century development of constitutional governments among Southeastern tribes, Duane Champagne has argued that the religious and political roles of leaders in Cherokee and Choctaw society were more differentiated than their Creek counterparts. According to Champagne, this differentiation of social and political order, combined with a nationalized system of kinship and ceremonial organization, gave the Cherokees a structural advantage in the development of a national constitutional government. In Creek society, on the other hand, kinship and governance were more diffuse and less differentiated. Kinship varied by region, and political leaders often had major ceremonial or religious roles.³⁶

Champagne's analysis is instructive for examining the escalation of Creek civil conflict and the Cherokee and Choctaw alliance with the United States in the Redstick War. The institutional gaps in the more diffuse structure of Creek governance and kinship made the Redstick ascension possible. While the Cherokees may have been able to summon people from across the country to bring their relatives into line, no Creeks could claim such broad, kin-based authority. Furthermore, as religious and political leadership was less differentiated in Creek society, civil authorities could not neutralize radical religious leaders, because this distinction did not exist. Redstick prophets therefore took advantage of the structure of their society. Meanwhile, the differentiated Cherokee civil authorities opted to ally with the United States as a means of projecting their national authority and right to sovereignty. As much as it was a collective enterprise, nation building relied on exclusion.

³⁶ Duane Champagne, *Social Order and Political Change*.

In this case, Cherokee, Choctaws, and moderate Creeks deemed the Redsticks a threat to their national political authority and diplomatic efforts. Their alliance with the United States was not a betrayal of some ideal of pan-Indian unity but a choice that they felt was in their emerging nations' best interest.

The Redstick prophets' prominent backgrounds and incendiary rhetoric were final factors in their incitement of more violence than their Cherokee counterparts. The Cherokee prophets seem to have been more socially marginal people who were less invested in political power. They did not garner a following with dramatic public displays like convulsing on the ground after a handshake or claiming to control earthquakes. They called for radical cultural renewal, but they stopped well short of advocating violence or political upheaval, perhaps because they did not have the political or economic clout to effect such changes. Conversely, the Redstick prophets were often wealthy, well-connected men who drew from kin ties to British traders and Shawnees. At least one prophet owned slaves, and another boasted of a common great-grandmother with Tecumseh.³⁷

Conclusion

By examining the distinct cultural underpinnings of Cherokee and Creek responses to the New Madrid earthquakes, particularly concerns about purity, we see that the intellectual groundwork for revitalization and resistance in the Native South was not dependent upon Ohio Valley inter-tribal movement nor Tecumseh's heavy steps. Although Creeks and Cherokees drew from common traditions and held similar grievances against the United States, their responses to the earthquakes, as well as the larger issue of white encroachment,

³⁷ On the backgrounds of Redstick prophets, see Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit*, 32-55; Halbert and Ball, *The Creek War of 1813-1814*, 40.

were radically different. They mutually recognized the earthquakes as signs of impurity, but they adopted a variety of strategies to address related problems of territory, culture, and spirit. Whereas Redsticks sought to purge their land and culture through violence, Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws viewed the Redsticks as a threat to their sovereignty and allied with the United States as diplomatic partners. This variety points both to major ideological obstacles to Indian unity and complexities that defied the nativist-accommodationist binary in the Native South.

CHAPTER 3

“A GREAT DISTURBANCE OF MIND”: NATIVE AUTHORITY IN THE OHIO VALLEY AND BEYOND

American Indians across the eastern half of North America recognized the earthquakes as signs of impurity and imbalance in the cultural and territorial orders of the day. But among the sacred stories and rituals of the tribes populating this expanse, the earthquakes held special significance for the Delawares. According to oral tradition, the first Delaware Big House Ceremony began after a major earthquake in Delaware country. While ethnohistorians disagree about whether the ceremony was an ancient tradition or a more recent innovation, the original earthquake predated those in 1811 and 1812. After the large earthquake, a menacing black fluid and smoke emanated from huge gaps in the earth. The scene produced a “great disturbance of mind,” as animals prayed and humans believed the smoke to be the “breath of the Evil Spirit.” All creatures convened a council to consider how to proceed. They decided that the earthquake was a sign that “the Great Spirit was very seriously angry with them,” and many humans reported a common dream in which they were told to construct a building and conduct an annual ritual of purification and thanksgiving. The result became known as the Big House Ceremony, an elaborate, 12-day process that was the highlight of the Delaware ritual calendar. Despite their constant dislocations west from their homelands in the mid-Atlantic, the ceremony gave the Delawares a steady sense of place inside the Big House. It also oriented their largely neutral stance in the War of 1812.

Rather than participating in a conflict with an uncertain and likely short-term outcome, they handled the cosmological disruptions internally.¹

Like their neutrality in the War of 1812, the Delawares' ritual response to the earthquakes does not fit well into discussions of American Indian prophecy, revitalization, and resistance in the early nineteenth century. They could have, after all, drawn from a long tradition of militant, inter-tribal resistance to Euroamerican settlement in the Ohio Valley. In the eighteenth century, the Delaware prophet Neolin had been one of the first leaders to advocate pan-Indian unity, and his teachings inspired Pontiac's War following the Seven Years' War. But in the Big House, there were no outspoken prophets fomenting inter-tribal militancy, banning traditional medicine bundles, or urging a strict separation between Euroamerican and indigenous people and their lifeways. And yet the Delaware experience of these tumultuous years of earthquakes and warfare in the Ohio Valley was more typical than the persistent historical focus on Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa might otherwise imply. While they certainly shared the Shawnee brothers' concerns, many Native Americans opted for neutrality as their best strategy for retaining land and sovereignty. For those Indians sympathetic to the Shawnee brothers but wary of committing people and resources to their inter-tribal movement, neutrality was one choice among a range of possible approaches to the geopolitical upheaval of the War of 1812.

Just as the Redsticks had done, the Shawnee brothers used the tremors to bolster their spiritual authority by claiming direct access to the forces responsible for the shaking.

Tenskwatawa claimed to have foretold or even caused the earthquakes in contemporary

¹ On recorded versions of the Big House Ceremony and its origins, see Speck, *A Study of the Delaware Indian Big House Ceremony*; *Voices from the Delaware Big House Ceremony*, ed. Robert S. Grumet (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001). On Delaware mobility and the Delawares' adaptable sense of homeland in the Ohio Valley, see Dawn Marsh, "Creating Delaware Homelands in the Ohio Country," *Ohio History* 116 (2009), 26-40.

newspaper reports on the earthquakes. The brothers then translated their spiritual authority into militant resistance, as the pervasive and alarming shaking underscored the urgency of their cause. As the Delaware case demonstrates, however, there were other tribal leaders in the region with divergent understandings of both the earthquakes and the path to rightful human order in the Ohio Valley and beyond. The Shawnee brothers had consolidated their authority violently in the past and sought to maintain rigid control over the ritual lives of their followers, alienating some potential allies. When Tecumseh claimed to speak for all Indians, his rhetoric did not match the reality of his authority over Ohio Valley.

This interpretive and strategic diversity among Indians in the War of 1812 era does not imply that the Shawnee brothers were weak or insignificant figures. They found sympathetic audiences across the Mississippi River Valley and advanced a vision of inter-tribal unity that has remained an important historical force. As far away as the Northern Plains, Native people fondly remembered the scope of their influence one century later. “The excitement spread from tribe to tribe until all the Indians from Hudson’s Bay and even to the Rocky mountains were affected by it,” related a Sioux man in 1910. But like many Indian communities closer to the conflict, the Sioux identified with their cause without joining them in battle. While young Sioux warriors sought to prove themselves by offering to attack American soldiers and Native enemies, the Sioux refrained from full-scale participation in the conflict. Their leaders marshaled their own spiritual and material arguments for staying out of the war.²

As in the Native South, American Indians in the northwestern theater of war therefore developed a range of strategies and took advantage of opportunities that did not always

² Doane Robinson, “A Sioux Indian View of the Last War with England,” *South Dakota Historical Collections* 5 (1910), 398.

accord with the inter-tribal objectives of the Shawnee brothers. Like the Cherokees, Creeks, and Choctaws who assisted the American army in putting down the Redsticks, some Shawnees, Ottawas, and others even found alliance with the United States preferable to joining Tecumseh. When joint Indian and British forces made gains in late 1812, Ohio Valley Indians became more receptive to alliance, but their enthusiasm waned with the losses of 1813. In fact, the main sites of Indian resistance in the western theater of the War of 1812 may not have even been among followers of the Shawnee brothers. American Indians on the Illinois plains such as the Potawatomis were a sprawling and complex force located northwest from the main region of contention. They had a prophet of their own who opposed the United States but refused to comply with Prophetstown's strict social codes and centralized political organization. Another major Potawatomi leader spied for the Americans. While Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa occupied the newspaper headlines, and indeed the attention of later historians, United States officials in the Old Northwest were most concerned with the threat posed by groups from Illinois Country like the Potawatomis, some of whom could attack the Americans and retreat northwest even as others spied on their behalf. And contrary to the notion that Indian military resistance died with Tecumseh, British, Spanish, and American officials tried to cultivate military alliances with Native Americans well after the leader's death in the fall of 1813, while Indians remained committed to influencing the conflict on their own terms.

The Shawnee Brothers and the Earthquakes

While Ohio Valley Indians shared concerns with Southeastern Indians about territorial and cultural infiltration, the geopolitical context and ideological foundations

framing their responses to United States encroachment were markedly different. They lived in multi-ethnic villages comprised of groups indigenous to the region, such as Potawatomis and Kickapoos, and relative newcomers driven west by the Iroquois and Anglo-Americans, such as the Wyandots, Delawares, and Shawnees. The region was fertile ground for inter-tribal confederacies, and their new articulations of social and political organization, because tribes were long accustomed to living with or near others. These communities also had long been in contact with Christian missionaries, and while few renounced their traditional spiritual customs for Christianity, their inter-tribal prophets often incorporated Christian concepts such as sin and hell into their messages of unity and renewal. By contrast, the Native South contained much larger and more discrete communities that held territory, language, governance, and ritual life in common, and their prophets' ideas reflected less Christian influence. The Creek and Cherokee nations that emerged in the early nineteenth century had their own obstacles to tribal unity, but inter-tribal confederacies made more strategic sense further north, where daily life itself was inter-tribal.

The United States was well aware of the threat that Ohio Indian collectives posed. Following the Revolutionary War, a confederacy registered its opposition to American settlement and speculation in the Northwest Territory with continued attacks on settlers. The conflict culminated in a series of high-profile skirmishes in the 1790s. After being humiliated in 1790 and 1791, U.S. soldiers decisively defeated the confederacy at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, resulting in a major cession of Indian lands in the following year's Treaty of Greenville. Opposition to the Treaty of Greenville galvanized a new generation of Indian resistance to American settlement in most of present-day Ohio. The treaty also bred tension between younger leaders like Tecumseh and the older Black Hoof, a

Shawnee veteran of the Northwest Confederacy who urged a more conciliatory approach to American advancement into the Ohio Country.³

Concerns about land and culture loss, alcohol abuse, and witchcraft gave rise to Tenskwatawa's movement at the turn of the nineteenth century. Formerly a doctor and a "very wicked man" prone to bouts of drunkenness, he fell into a trance in which he had a vision depicting the paths of righteous and sinful people. Renaming himself Tenskwatawa, or "the Open Door," the Prophet became a spiritual medium who could "dream to God." Like other pan-Indian leaders dating back at least to the mid eighteenth-century Delaware prophet Neolin, the Christian concept of sin figured prominently in Tenskwatawa's vision and teaching, a fact that initially endeared him to the Shaker missionaries who interviewed him in 1807. He sought Indian renewal through lifestyle changes. Among the worst sins that Indians could commit were "witchcraft, poisoning people, fighting, murdering, drinking whiskey, and beating their wives." The punishment for drunkenness was particularly tortuous, as upon drinking whiskey, a man's "bowels were seized with an exquisite burning." The Prophet also urged people to abandon all white folkways, as well as the "wicked ways" of certain Indian chiefs.⁴

As much as the movement urged a return to tradition, it also sought to reform indigenous rituals and political organization. Eliminating these "wicked ways" included banning the use of traditional medicine bags and songs that had been passed down through generations and separating followers from their families and original communities. He

³ Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 90-115. On generational tensions between Indians in the Old Northwest, see Jason Hartwig, "'We Will Put Our Old Men and Chiefs behind Us': Generational Conflict and Native American Confederation in the Ohio Country, 1770-95," *Northwest Ohio History* 76 (no. 1, 2008), 1-20.

⁴ "Shaker Mission to the Shawnee Indians," *Ohio Archaeological and Historical Society Publications* 11 (June 1903), 216-229; Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 28-41; Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance*, 123-147.

established a new settlement at Prophetstown, a site at the confluence of the Wabash and Tippecanoe Rivers, where he and his brother demanded absolute loyalty from followers of different backgrounds. As a U.S. official described, Tenskwatawa was “always reserving Supreme authority to himself, viz, that he might be considered the head of the whole of the different Nations of Indians, as he only, could see and converse with the Great Spirit.” He hoped to amass enough followers to force non-committal Indians to live there also. By consolidating power and insisting that followers inhabit a single settlement, Tenskwatawa sought to mute tribal differences. But he also risked alienating those who refused to subscribe to his strict lifestyle codes or remain settled at Prophetstown. In the case of the Potawatomis, whose own prophet later fell out with Tenskwatawa, the movement’s austerity eventually compromised its military might.⁵

The roots of the limits of the Shawnee brothers’ authority in the Old Northwest also lay in their violent consolidation of power during the movement’s early stages. While he urged a united front, Tenskwatawa built a history of inter-Indian conflict into his understanding of Shawnee history and his platform for Native American renewal. In his telling of their origins, the Shawnees acquired powerful medicine that the Creeks dismissed. The Shawnees proved their medicine’s efficacy by destroying the Creeks and later bringing them back to life with it. There were few Indian groups that they had not fought in their long history as a people, and some Shawnees even had enlisted the help of their enemies in taking down rival families within the tribe. The Prophet built from this history to encourage separatism. In the region, he found “some of the chiefs who were very wicked, would not

⁵ Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, December 23, 1812, Tesson Family Papers (typescript), MHM. Published as “Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, St. Louis, December 23, 1812,” ed. Dorothy Libby, *Ethnohistory* 8, no. 2 (1961), 191, 195.

believe, and tried to keep the people from believing, and encouraged them on in their former wicked ways.” The Great Spirit instructed him to remove his followers from “these wicked chiefs and their people,” which he did by founding the new settlement.⁶

Tenskwatawa used this divine mandate to bolster authority through violence. He claimed the special ability to interpret and manipulate nature as well as to identify and execute witches. When assigning blame for Indian troubles in the early nineteenth century, witches were ideal targets. They could poison victims, hinder hunting success, and disrupt the general wellbeing of the community. In the Prophet’s case, witches and their medicine bundles also undermined his spiritual authority. Their bundles contained snake parts traditionally believed to be spiritually potent, but neither inherently good nor evil. Probably appropriating the biblical story of the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Tenskwatawa argued that snakes were fundamentally evil and that witches and white people coordinated with the “Great Serpent.” His campaign against Delaware political rivals and converts to the Moravian Church in 1806 eliminated the spiritual and political threat posed by Moravian converts, alleged witches, and their powerful bundles in the flames of public executions. Tenskwatawa also reinforced his spiritual insight into unseen forces in nature by foretelling an eclipse during the same year. For Shawnees, eclipses were “certain precursors of war.” The comet that followed in 1811 only enhanced suspicion of future conflict.⁷

⁶ *Shawnese Traditions: C.C. Trowbridge’s Account*, eds. Vernon Kinietz and Erminie W. Voegelin, (Ann Arbor, Mi.: University of Michigan Press, 1939), 6-9; “Shaker Mission to the Indians,” 224.

⁷ Joseph Badger, *A Memoir of Rev. Joseph Badger: Containing an Autobiography, and Selections from his Private Journal and Correspondence* (Hudson, Oh.: Sawyer, Ingersoll and Company, 1851), 114, 125, 145; *Shawnese Traditions*, 37; Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 42-49. On the Shawnee brothers’ understanding of snakes, see *Shawnese Traditions: C.C. Trowbridge’s Account*, eds. Vernon Kinietz and Erminie W. Voegelin, (Ann Arbor, Mi.: University of Michigan Press, 1939), 45; Simon Pokagon, “The Massacre at Fort Dearborn at Chicago,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 97, no. 586 (1899), 650; Alfred Cave, *Prophets of the Great Spirit*, 76; Adam Jortner, *The Gods of Prophetstown: The Battle of Tippecanoe and the Holy War for the American Frontier* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 106.

These executions marked a turning point in the Shawnee brothers' movement. Missionaries and U.S. officials previously regarded them as peaceful reformers. The burnings poignantly signaled that the path to revitalization would be violent. In response, terrified missionaries evacuated the region, and U.S. officials grew wary of Indian hostility. The witch hunts also may be another reason why the Delawares were largely neutral in the War of 1812. By targeting their leaders soon before the conflict, Tenskwatawa violated the Delawares' special status in the region. As the Prophet later told an interviewer, Shawnees regarded the Delawares as "grandfathers" and had never fought them. Though Tenskwatawa and Tecumseh heralded a return to Indian customs, they decidedly broke from tradition by ordering the Delaware executions. They bolstered their claims to spiritual power with a violent insistence on absolute authority over their program of inter-tribal unity. And their victims – often traditional spiritual leaders – did not fit easily into the binary that Tecumseh and later historians constructed between nativists and accommodationists.⁸

At the Battle of Tippecanoe in November 1811, the Prophet initiated the conflict that the eclipse and comet had foretold. The circumstances of the battle are well known: while Tecumseh was on his southern recruiting trip, the Prophet ordered his followers to attack Harrison nearby encampment in the early hours of November 7. In another display of spiritual power, he claimed that he would send hail and rain that would render American weapons useless. Tenskwatawa insisted that inclement weather and early morning attack would make the Americans confused and dispirited, Harrison would be targeted and killed, and the inter-tribal force at Prophetstown would prove its power, all while their great military leader was away. Harrison's army took major casualties, and he was later criticized for

⁸ *Shawnese Traditions*, 9.

falling prey to the surprise attack, but he destroyed Prophetstown and dispersed its inhabitants. Having instructed his forces not to fight the Americans while he was traveling, Tecumseh claimed to Harrison that the battle would not have occurred if he were in town, and he was “much exasperated against his brother for his precipitancy.”⁹

The consequences of the Battle of Tippecanoe on Tenskwatawa’s ability to recruit and organize followers were less decisive than the smoldering fate of Prophetstown. According to his biographer R. David Edmunds, the beginning of 1812 “marked the nadir of his influence.” A recent study has blamed the self-promoting Harrison and sympathetic nineteenth-century historians for suggesting that the Prophet’s followers turned on him after Tippecanoe. At least in the early days of 1812, the prevailing opinion among other American observers and their Indian informants was that the Prophet was lucky to be alive. One American official in Ohio wrote that he was “in a disconsolate situation.” Days after the battle, Winnebagos at Prophetstown questioned the Prophet’s spiritual power. They called him a “liar” and “bound him with cords” for claiming the night before the battle that he could kill half Harrison’s army and render the other half “bewildered” with the “power of his art.” Harrison’s informant believed he soon would be sacrificed. Tenskwatawa was contrite, though he deflected criticism by blaming his wife’s menstruation. He alleged that she had not informed him of her “monthly visitation,” which had compromised the power of his “incantations before the battle.” Estimates of the brothers’ remaining followers ranged from a handful to hundreds, though they almost certainly underestimated those who were loyal but

⁹ “Speeches of Indians at Massassinway, May 15, 1812,” *Governors Messages and Letters*, vol. 2, ed. Logan Esarey (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Commission, 1922); Harrison to Eustis, March 4, 1812, WHH, reel 5; Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 110-116.

scattered across the region. Miami chief Little Turtle reported that their group had been reduced to as few as eight.¹⁰

By the spring of 1812, the movement had gathered momentum again, and United States officials were concerned anew. The *Louisiana Gazette* of St. Louis reported that “a general combination is ripening fast,” as red wampum had circulated as far north as Sioux country. Responding to Potawatomi claims that they had incited their youth to violence, the brothers publicly professed peace. “We defy a living creature to say we ever advised any one, directly or indirectly, to make war on our white brothers,” Tecumseh retorted. Nonetheless, Harrison believed they had adopted a savvy new strategy: scatter killings across the Ohio Country “to distract and divide our attention to prevent the Militia from embodying” in a single location. Their gatherings also grew; the Prophet was spotted with about 500 followers near the old site of Prophetstown in May. They rebuilt the settlement that summer, and Potawatomis hung a fresh scalp on a pole near Tecumseh’s camp. What began as isolated killings soon escalated into full-scale warfare. In July, Tecumseh declared war on the United States, and by October, he had assembled 2000 warriors for an attack on Fort Wayne.¹¹

This dramatic turnaround provokes a number of questions about Indian concerns and motivations in 1812: if the Prophet’s followers called him a liar and nearly sacrificed him after Tippecanoe, how did he regain his spiritual authority? Edmunds has asserted that he

¹⁰ Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 117; Alfred A. Cave, “The Shawnee Prophet, Tecumseh, and Tippecanoe: A Case Study of Historical Myth-Making,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 22, no. 1 (2002), 651-661; Return Jonathan Meigs, Jr. to Sophia Meigs, December 18, 1811, Meigs Mss., Eli Lilly Library; Josiah Snelling to Harrison, November 20, 1811, WHH, reel 5; James Miller to Ruth Miller, December 15, 1811, James Miller Papers (photostat), OHS; Little Turtle to Harrison, January 25, 1812, WHH, reel 5.

¹¹ *Louisiana Gazette*, March 21, 1812; “Speeches of Indians at Massassinway, May 15 1812,” *Governors Messages and Letters*, vol. 2; Harrison to Eustis, April 29, 1812, and William Wells to Harrison, July 22, 1812, WHH, reel 5; Harrison to Eustis, October 13, 1812, WHH, reel 6.

never regained it, instead retreating from power and leaving Tecumseh to lead the movement. Even if Tenskwatawa assumed a more marginal role, how did the brothers amass a force of thousands when the Battle of Tippecanoe had left them with a handful of homeless followers less than a year before?¹²

Although the earthquakes were not *causes* of violent resistance, they served as timely *signs* of impurity and ritual disorder that enhanced the urgency of prophetic causes. Among Shawnees, the shaking occasioned a protracted ceremony of purification and supplication before the Great Spirit. The *Louisiana Gazette* of St. Louis described Shawnees gathered to “excite the pity of the GREAT SPIRIT” by fasting and sacrificing deer. They passed three nights lying on the fresh skins, “turning their thoughts exclusively upon the happy prospect of immediate protection; that they may conceive dreams to that effect, the only vehicle of intercourse between them and the GREAT SPIRIT.” Men and women separated and spent their days “in absolute fasting” hoping that the Great Spirit would protect them and provide plentiful game. When the three days had passed, they related their dreams and feasted on the deer.¹³

While the popular press often caricatured Indians – the most exaggerated account was an Indian “completely bewildered” by the earthquakes who pointed to the sky and said, “Great Spirit — whisky too much” – the *Louisiana Gazette*’s description of the Shawnee ceremony seems to be authentic. Dream interpretation, fasting, animal sacrifice, and calls for the return of game were all common elements of Indian ceremonialism, particularly for followers of inter-tribal leaders in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

¹² Edmunds, *The Shawnee Prophet*, 115-16.

¹³ *Louisiana Gazette*, March 21, 1812.

Tenskwatawa received his visions in a dreamlike state, and the loss of game was a common issue that drove people to rally around pan-Indian leaders calling for a new spiritual order. The three-day fast was further evidence that Indian interpreted the earthquakes as signs of impurity that needed to be addressed through ritual cleansing. Regardless of the Prophet's directives, there was ancient precedent for both alarm and the ritual means to restore balance after the earthquakes.¹⁴

While Tecumseh's foot-stomping story did not take hold in American mythology until decades after his death, Tenskwatawa loomed large as the cause or foreteller of the earthquakes in print discussions immediately following the tremors. Newspapers across the East Coast reprinted the story of seven Indians who were swallowed up in a chasm. In various iterations of the story, the single survivor claimed that the Prophet had either predicted or created the earthquakes. The survivor in the *Virginia Argus* said that "the Shawanoe Prophet has caused the Earthquake, to destroy the whites," while in New York City's *The Columbian*, he explained that "this calamity was foretold by the Shawnanoe Prophet for the destruction of the whites!" In either case, the Prophet's power and intentions were clear: he held a special relationship with the forces of nature, and he had used those forces against American intruders.¹⁵

The earthquakes therefore helped to reinvigorate the Shawnee brothers' movement in the spring of 1812. Tenskwatawa previously had bolstered his authority by claiming the

¹⁴ The Shawnees often sacrificed game in anticipation of monumental events. In the 1820s, an American Indian agent reported that the Shawnees carried out sacrificial deer hunts "before attending treaties, great councils or an other important national business." They had also sacrificed deer before meeting with the President of the United States "in order to obtain the good will of the Great Spirit." On Indian caricatures, see John C. Van Tramp, *Prairie and Rocky Mountain Adventures or Life in the West* (St. Louis: H. Miller, 1860), 99. On Shawnee ritual, see John Johnston, "Account of the Present State of the Indian Tribes Inhabiting Ohio," *Transactions and Collections of the American Antiquarian Society* 1 (1820), 274.

¹⁵ *Virginia Argus*, December 24, 1811; *The Columbian*, February 14, 1812.

spiritual power to predict and manipulate forces beyond human control. Since he had garnered followers and eliminated rivals by foretelling an eclipse and identifying evil witches in 1806, there is no reason to doubt that he would have situated the earthquakes among these previous feats of divination and control of natural forces. As pervasive and troubling signs of impurity, the earthquakes offered Tenskwatawa the opportunity to reclaim spiritual authority compromised by the human disaster at Tippecanoe. Just as evangelical preachers appropriated the tremors to argue for the urgency of Christian conversion among American settlers, the Prophet used the shaking as a dramatic recruitment tool.

An unnamed Indian community near a Moravian mission at Goshen, Ohio, also situated the earthquakes into their spiritualized opposition to American settlement. Nearly thirty Indians left the mission congregation at the end of 1811, “overpowered in principle by the presence here of many confused, discontented or evil-minded Indians,” as one missionary described them. After the second major earthquake a few weeks later, a visiting chief offered insight into what might have motivated their departure: “the late earthquakes took place because the Great Spirit was not pleased that the white people had taken possession of so much of the Indian country, and had lately killed so many Indians on the Wabash.” Rather than viewing the military loss as sign of spiritual weakness, as the mass abandonment of the Prophet in late 1811 suggested, this leader interpreted the earthquakes as a display of divine displeasure with the outcome at Tippecanoe and the general dispossession of Indians. Like most North Americans, his reading of the earthquakes intertwined matters of politics, land, and spirit.¹⁶

¹⁶ Goshen Diary, January 23, 1812, Moravian Archives – Bethlehem.

Ohio Governor Return Jonathan Meigs also recognized the spiritual significance encoded in the combination of the Battle of Tippecanoe and the earthquakes. In a June 1812 council, he obviously used the tumult to convey a different message. He began his talk by denigrating the spiritual authority of the “pretended prophet,” who “does not communicate with the Great Spirit; his counsels are foolish, and have stained the land with blood.” The Great Spirit had “frowned upon the prophet at Tippecanoe, and his deluded followers were destroyed.” Using the tremors to substantiate his message, Meigs described the will of the “Great Spirit who shakes the earth” as he instructed his Indian audience to refrain from allying with the British. Whether they were employed to foment resistance or urge peace, the earthquakes held special significance across battle lines.¹⁷

Divergent Indian Strategies and the Limits of Tecumseh’s Authority

While Tenskwatawa capitalized on the tremors to reassert his spiritual power after Tippecanoe, certain purely material factors drove Indians in the Old Northwest to fight alongside the British in 1812. Chief among these were American trade policy, Indian opportunism after British military gains, and Harrison’s raids against neutral Indian villages. These examples are useful reminders that the spiritual impulse for inter-tribal resistance should be situated among a constellation of factors that Indians weighed as they considered the most effective strategy for maintaining their lands, cultures, and communities. And those who decided to join Tecumseh at the onset of the War of 1812 did not necessarily subscribe

¹⁷ “Proceedings of a council begun and held near Urbana, Champaign county, Ohio, on Saturday the 6th of June, 1812,” *War on Detroit: The Chronicles of Thomas Verchères de Boucherville and the Capitulation by an Ohio Volunteer*, ed. Milo Milton Quaife (Chicago: The Lakeside Press, 1940), 199-201.

to his vision of social and political unity and absolute separation between indigenous and Euroamerican people and lifeways.

Wartime interruptions in trade galvanized some Indians who were unconvinced about the spiritual imperative for conflict. Americans were unable to replace the British as a reliable source of goods for Indians. In June 1812, an American man from Cahokia wrote to Illinois Governor Ninian Edwards about an impending trade crisis there. He explained that if the United States refused to allow the British to supply Indians, “then all those tribes, amounting to some thousands, will consider themselves as abandoned and as it were, dead, and through despair immediately they will assemble all the nations around them, determined to conquer or die, and destroy us, our wives and children, before necessary assistance can be obtained.” He urged the United States to “send factors and traders among those Indians to supply them with merchandise and powder, etc., to support them and their families...then and not till then will they be peaceful.” This was not a plea for charity; Indians would have gladly exchanged furs for the goods. When Americans prevented them from supporting their families through trade, however, they went to war alongside the British.¹⁸

Long after the War of 1812, the famed Sauk leader Black Hawk remembered a similar desperation for trade goods. Americans originally told his village leaders that, like the British, they would supply goods on credit. Assured that trade would not be interrupted by conflict, Black Hawk recounted, “Every thing went on cheerfully in our village. We resumed our pastimes of playing ball, horse racing, and dancing, which had been laid aside when this great war was first talked about.” The Americans later recanted on their promise,

¹⁸ “Jarrott from Cahokia” to Ninian Edwards, June 29, 1812, in *History of Illinois*, 330.

and British boats “loaded with goods” soon arrived at Black Hawk’s village. “Here ended all hopes of our remaining at peace – having been *forced into WAR by being DECEIVED!*” he wrote. In their bluster about the British “inciting” the Indians to war, Americans misinterpreted an Indian act of survival as a British act of incitement. The British certainly traded with Indians for strategic reasons, but a military alliance was not foreordained. According to Edwards’ American correspondent and Black Hawk, people on both sides of the war, Americans could have secured at least Indian neutrality through trade. From Black Hawk’s perspective, Indian participation in the conflict was an economic calculation – not Tenskwatawa’s divinely ordained directive nor a manipulative British conspiracy. The fact of “Having been *forced into WAR*” for trade access complicates the idea that even those American Indians who fought alongside the British and Tecumseh’s followers did so because they subscribed to the Shawnee brothers vision of a future without Anglo-American goods and trading partners. In Black Hawk’s calculus, the ability to provide for his community through trade dwarfed arguments about the spiritual necessity for war. And his militancy certainly outlasted the Treaty of Ghent.¹⁹

Despite the Shawnee Brothers’ anti-American stance, many Indians in the region did not ally with the British until the fall of 1812, when the British and their early Indian allies made major incursions into the United States. These easy and early gains surprised the British. “That a consequences so deeply injurious to the United States, as their expulsion from such an immense tract of the Indian Country, should have resulted almost instantaneously as it were...must not only have exceeded the expectation, it can hardly have been within the contemplation of our most sanguine friends,” reported a British traveler in

¹⁹ Black Hawk, *Life of Black Hawk* (1833; repr. New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 24-25.

November 1812. By December, Secretary of War William Eustis resigned in embarrassment after the seizures of Forts Detroit and Wayne.²⁰

The year 1813 brought more American losses: a joint force destroyed an Army attachment of nearly 2,000 soldiers, taking 600 prisoners in an engagement remembered by Americans as the “River Raisin Massacre.” American agent John Johnston feared that the sweeping British-Indian victory would inspire more Indians to fight. As he explained to Harrison, “above all things I dread the effects it will produce on the Indians Such a victory will transport them beyond measure. the news will fly thro’ their Country like lightening and will gather them in Swarms to Detroit in the Spring, expecting to reap a Similar harvest of plunder and glory.” Rather than an act of desperation, as Tecumseh’s movement is commonly portrayed, mass Indian participation in the conflict’s northwest theater was a measured, strategic decision.²¹

By raiding previously neutral villages, it was William Henry Harrison who actually incited some Indians to war. The Miami case illustrates how Harrison’s blunders, coupled with tensions over leadership following the death of Little Turtle, transformed neutrals into combatants. At a gathering in September 1811, a speaker for one branch of the Miami contrasted his people’s caution with the impulsiveness of the Prophet’s followers. “We the Miamies, are not a people that are passionate...Our hearts are as heavy as the earth! Our minds are not easily irritated,” he explained, adding that they would defend their land under invasion and “be angry but once.” Citing the Treaty of Greenville, Little Turtle, the famed 1790s Northwest resistance leader turned peacemaker, asked Harrison “not to bloody our

²⁰ T. Tackle to Lord Henry Bathurst, November 24, 1812, “The Fur-Trade in Wisconsin, 1812-1825,” *CSHSW*, vol. 20, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Madison: Wisconsin Historical Society, 1911), 3.

²¹ John Johnston to Harrison, February 4, 1813, WHH, reel 7.

ground, if you can avoid it.” He granted that although the Prophet may have lived and traveled in Miami lands, he did so without their permission. By January 1812, Little Turtle anticipated military conflict, but he pledged solidarity with the United States. “The clouds appear to be rising in a different quarter, which threatens to turn out light into darkness. To prevent this, it may require the united efforts of us all. – We hope; that none of us, will be found to shrink from the storm,” he explained.²²

Relations between the Miamis and the United States remained steady into the spring of 1812, although a report of Miami thefts against settlers and a coalescing alliance between the British and some Indian bands made the diplomatic situation volatile. At an inter-tribal council in May, Miamis warned potentially hostile Potawatomis, Shawnees, Kickapoos, and Winnebagos to “keep their warriors in good order.” Once the British formally declared war against the United States in June, the battle lines hardened rapidly. With Indian violence intensifying and the British appealing for military assistance, Miami chief Picon aptly characterized his people’s dilemma as being caught “between two fires.” The fires pointed toward war, but Picon wished simply wished to protect his community. He turned to his “red brethren, but could see no safety there.” Sensing danger in joining with other Indians, and decrying deception from both the Americans and the British, Picon and the Miamis felt the mounting pressure of neutrality.²³

The space between competing British and American fires narrowed after Little Turtle’s death on July 14, 1812. The loss of this elder statesman and staunch advocate of

²² “Speeches of Miami, et al. Chiefs,” September 4, 1811, WHH, reel 4; Little Turtle to Harrison, January 25, 1812, WHH, reel 5; Josiah Snelling to Harrison, April 14, 1812, WHH, reel 5; “Meeting with Miami, et al. Chiefs, April 17-18, 1812,” WHH, reel 5; “Journal of the proceedings of the commissioners plenipotentiary, appointed on behalf of the United States of America, to treat with the Northwestern tribes of Indians,” July 12, 1814, *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 831.

²³ Wells to Harrison, May 24, 1812, *Governors Messages and Letters*, vol. 2, 53;

neutrality almost certainly tilted the delicate Miami balance toward war against the United States. Nevertheless, after the British and Indian siege of Fort Wayne, Harrison made the Miamis' decision for them by ordering attacks on Miami towns on the Wabash River. He wrote to Eustis that he had "no evidence" of Miami participation at Fort Wayne and granted that many Miami leaders were "no doubt desirous of preserving their friendly relations with us, but as they are unable to control the licentious part of their tribe it is impossible to discriminate & we have no alternative but operating upon their fears by severe chastisement." Furthermore, Harrison reasoned that since the Miami villages were near Fort Wayne, the corn crops that were cut down and left to rot would prevent Indians from gathering near the fort again. One of the villages destroyed had been Little Turtle's. Harrison knowingly sacrificed Miami neutrality out of indiscriminate revenge.²⁴

On Miami hostility one month later, Harrison wrote that "the revolution in their affairs and in their disposition towards us was very Sudden." But he was too savvy to be genuinely surprised. On the battlefield and in Harrison's letters, the Miamis became increasing menaces. Americans and Miamis traded attacks, and beginning in early 1813, Americans plotted assaults against Miami winter camps. By September 1813, the Miami transformation from neutral to enemy was complete. Somehow betrayed, even though he had ordered attacks without evidence that they had participated in the siege of Fort Wayne, Harrison singled the Miamis and Potawatomis out for particular punishment. "The Miamis and Potawatimies deserve no mercy – they were the tribes most favored by us. they have been, (the latter particularly) our most cruel and inveterate enemies," he wrote. Neither the

²⁴ Stickney to Harrison, July 21, 1812, WHH, reel 5; Harrison to Shelby, September 18, 1812, and Harrison to Eustis, September 21, 1812, WHH, reel 6.

British nor Tecumseh had “incited” the Miamis; they sought to defend themselves from the fires engulfing the region.²⁵

Harrison’s grouping of the Potawatomis with the Miamis is curious, because along with the Kickapoos, the Potawatomis led a force of Indians from the Illinois plains who were avowedly both hostile to the United States and their ancient Native enemies. American concerns about these Illinois Indians suggest that the main locus of Indian resistance in the Old Northwest during the War of 1812 may have been not with the Shawnee brothers and their followers, but further west in Illinois country. Thanks to sparse American settlement and less American monitoring of Indian affairs here, Indians could more freely gather forces to attack east of the Illinois River and retreat back across to the western side of the river.

Illinois Territorial Governor Ninian Edwards constantly sought to remind Harrison and other American officials farther east that Indians in his territory, most of whom “were not in the battle of Tippecanoe,” constituted a threat to Americans in the Ohio Valley and beyond. In May 1812, he warned Secretary of War Eustis that their “force is superior to the Prophet’s.” Following scattered murders early that year, which Edwards believed were part of strategy to avoid engaging the American army in a pitched battle, his reports became increasingly alarmist. “If the Illinois Indians become hostile, they will over-run this Territory,” he wrote to Eustis in June 1812.²⁶

By July, Edwards’ concerns boiled into panic. He wrote to Harrison that the focus on the Indian threat in the Ohio Valley ignored other regions of gathering resistance and “hitherto the most imminent danger has not been well understood.” He believed that the

²⁵ Harrison to Eustis, 13 October 1812, WHH, reel 6; John B. Campbell to Harrison, 25 December 1812, WHH, reel 7; Harrison to Armstrong, WHH, reel 9.

²⁶ Edwards to Eustis, May 12, 1812 and June 2, 1812, *History of Illinois*, 319, 325; Harrison to Eustis, June 3, 1812, WHH, reel 5.

British were seeking to make peace between the warring Sioux and Ojibwa in order to amass a northern force that could travel to eastern side of the Illinois River in ten days. Indeed the Prophet had previously visited the Ojibwa and promised them that if they followed his rules of obedience to the Great Spirit, they would be protected from the Sioux. In reality, the Sioux attacked the Ojibwa in the summer of 1812, ensuring that neither would engage in the Anglo-American dimensions of the conflict, though British and American authorities remained wary of the potential for their full-scale participation in the conflict into 1815. The Potawatomis nearby Edwards remained his most immediate concern. Although he was more prone to distress in his letters than his contemporaries, other reports corroborated his accounts of more distant Indian threats that were less well known than the Shawnee brothers and not altogether loyal to them.²⁷

Despite the Americans' perception that all Indians allied against them were under Tecumseh's leadership, longstanding regional conflicts between Indians hampered inter-tribal efforts. The origins of these divides long pre-dated the establishment of the United States. There was a rivalry between Tenskwatawa and Main Poc, a Potawatomi shaman and war chief who spread the Prophet's message through Illinois country in 1808. Though he remained hostile to the United States, Main Poc broke his alliance with Tenskwatawa.²⁸

There were two likely factors behind this rift: one was long-standing and diplomatic, the other a more immediate problem with the way of life among the Prophet's followers. In March 1812, the *Louisiana Gazette* reported that Main Poc was preparing for war against the

²⁷ Edwards to Harrison and Charles Scott, July 23, 1812, WHH, reel 5; John Tanner, *A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner* (1830; repr. *The Falcon: A Narrative of the Captivity and Adventures of John Tanner*, New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 145-47; Thomas G. Anderson, "Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson," *CSHSW* 9 (1882), 183-90.

²⁸ On Main Poc and his historiographical overshadowing, see R. David Edmunds, "Main Poc: Potawatomi Wabeno," *American Indian Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1985), 259-272.

Osages. In his grand tour of Indian country in the fall of 1811, Tecumseh had visited the Osages and sought their support. Seventeenth-century Osage expansion had created many Indian enemies in this period, and news that Tecumseh sought an alliance with the Osages likely hurt the Shawnee brothers' standing among other potential western allies like Main Poc's band. Furthermore, an American official suggested that the Potawatomis "in the course of one season got tired of this strict way of living, and declared off and joined the Main Poque." The Prophet's ban on traditional cultural forms like medicine bags and songs, as well as Euroamerican objects and conventions, fueled Indian dissent, because it violated specific tribal conventions and made daily life more difficult. By leaving the Shawnee brothers for a prophet from among their own people, Potawatomis remained concerned about American expansion without making the major sacrifices that Tenskwatawa demanded.²⁹

The outbreak of war in the region and their break with the Prophet allowed the Potawatomis to settle old scores with Indian enemies, although Americans remained convinced that all Indians had rallied against them. At the end of 1812, an American agent reported that Potawatomis, Ottawas, and Ojibwas were fighting Miamis, Weas, Piankashaws, and Peorias. Precisely what Tecumseh sought to avoid by uniting tribes and consolidating power, this inter-Indian conflict was nonetheless a persistent feature of the War of 1812. But American newspaper headlines and letters remained fixated on the *perception* that a unified Indian menace – manipulated by the British – threatened the nation's existence. "I am

²⁹ Edmunds, *The Potawatomis: Keepers of the Fire* (Norman, Ok.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 166-69; *Louisiana Gazette*, March 21, 1812; Forsyth to Clark, May 27, 1812, Tesson Family Papers, MHM; Harrison to Armstrong, September 20, 1813, WHH, reel 9; Forsyth to Clark, December 23, 1812 (typescript), Tesson Family Papers, MHM. On Tecumseh's alleged visit to the Osages, see Sugden, "Early Pan-Indianism: Tecumseh's Tour of the Indian Country," *American Indian Quarterly*, 292, and Sugden, "Tecumseh's Travels Revisited," *Indiana Magazine of History*, 164-65. On Osage conflicts with other regional Indians in the period, see Kathleen DuVal, *The Native Ground: Indians and Colonists in the Heart of the Continent* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 196-215.

informed that every Nation has Declared war against the United States even the Chickesaws + Chocktaws that has so long been friendly. The British had made Tecumshe the Prophets brother a Brigadier General,” wrote a man in northern Kentucky. Governor Edwards worried about a wider conspiracy. “The union of Indians, negroes, disaffected French people, other choice spirits and a British force from the West-Indians will give our government enough on our southern frontier,” he wrote to another Illinois official. At the western edges of American settlement, rumors led people to imagine all manner of threatening alliances.³⁰

Potawatomis, Kickapoos, and others undoubtedly communicated with the Shawnee brothers and shared some of their objectives, but like opportunistic Ohio Indians, they were late to join the War of 1812. Many abandoned the inter-tribal cause well before Tecumseh’s death, but they remained a concern for the American and British militaries alike into 1814 and 1815. When Americans accused them of treachery, they frequently demurred, blaming their young men’s involvement on youthful impetuosity and the seductive lies of the Prophet. Before the Battle of Tippecanoe, a Potawatomi chief acknowledged that some young men were “foolish enough to believe what he said.” He argued, however, “that their faults shall not be charged to our nation.” After reports that Potawatomis had killed American settlers in the spring of 1812, their anti-Tenskwatawa rhetoric intensified. In a council they explained that the “pretended prophet” had encouraged the attacks and sought to “detach” the youth from their traditional leaders. “We have no control over these few vagabonds, and consider them not belonging to our nation; and will be thankful to any people that will put them to death, wherever they are found,” they added. By denying official

³⁰ “Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, St. Louis, December 23, 1812,” 188; Joseph Bunker to his uncle, September 18, 1812, Hite-Bowman Papers, IHS; Edwards to Nathaniel Pope, August 1813, “Letter of Ninian Edwards to Nathaniel Pope,” *Illinois State Historical Society Journal* 10, no. 2 (1917), 277.

involvement in the conflict, groups like the Potawatomis and Kickapoos sought to hedge their bets on the outcome of the War of 1812. They were hardly the absolute enemies of the United States that the Shawnee brothers claimed to be. But as in the case of Harrison's revenge on the Miamis, Americans became increasingly unwilling to distinguish between outwardly neutral or friendly villages and the young combatants who lived there.³¹

The Indians' refrain that their young men were uncontrollable was common, suggesting that the War of 1812 era spurred generational conflict among Indians and scrambled Indian battle lines even further. For example, the threats *and* opportunities that the war posed to Wyandot sovereignty starkly divided them. Americans noted their presence at Tippecanoe, but the Wyandots quickly disavowed their allegiance to the Shawnee brothers. Like the Cherokee program to appear friendly to missionaries and agriculture, the Wyandots appealed to the Americans' Christian and material sensibilities, arguing that because they allowed missionaries, built "valuable houses," and improved their land, they should remain on it. As other Ohio Indians agitated for war in the spring of 1812, Wyandots used their status as an "elder" tribe to urge restraint, instructing their "younger brothers" to "put an entire stop to the effusion of blood." Nevertheless, certain Wyandots broke from the tribe's professions of peace. In August 1813, Wyandot chief Round Head led one of three major detachments to assault Fort Meigs, and Americans exchanged Wyandot captives for Kentucky militiamen taken in the stalemate. Other Wyandots, however, assumed a much more active role in supporting the Americans than tribes that claimed to be friendly or at least neutral. During the same year, a Wyandot chief seized Ottawa spies for the British and alerted Harrison about a hostile force gathering to attack a post at Sandusky. Like other

³¹ "Speeches of Miami, et al. Chiefs," September 4, 1811, WHH, reel 4; "Speeches of Indians at Massassinway," May 15, 1812, *Governors Messages and Letters*, vol. 2, 51.

Indians in the region, Wyandots collectively resisted expectations about their absolute commitment to one side or another during the War of 1812.³²

Indian neutrality or alliance with the United States in the War of 1812 constituted another strategy for preserving sovereignty in this geopolitically tumultuous time and place. As a group, the Ottawas were the most committed Native opponents of the Shawnee brothers. An American official described them as “inveterate enemies to the Shawanoe Prophet,” and claimed that “had the United States, shewn the least inclination, the Ottawas alone would have routed the Prophet and his party from the Wabash.” To the British, the Ottawa chiefs that joined Harrison at Detroit were “avowed Yankees.”³³

The emphasis on Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa also has overshadowed the fact that of the Shawnees that actively participated in the War of 1812, most fought or spied for the Americans. Shawnee chief Logan died on the Americans’ side during the December 1812 attacks on Miami villages ordered by Harrison, who called him “a Victim to his Zeal for our cause.” In the winter of 1813, Shawnee chiefs offered intelligence about Tecumseh gathering a force for a spring offensive. While the chiefs were reluctant to offer warriors, an American official “informed them the service already rendered had been acceptable.” One month later, Harrison ordered an agent to hire 24 Shawnee spies. On their spying, Harrison reported that the Shawnees had “given a Strikeing proof of their fidelity.” Along with the Kentucky militiamen captured in the attack on Fort Meigs, four Shawnees were returned to

³² Johnston to Eustis, nd., WHH, reel 5; “Wyandot Chiefs to the President of the United States, the Senate, and House of Representatives,” *ASP:IA*, vol. 1, 795; Wells to Harrison, May 24, 1812, *Governors Messages and Letters*, vol. 2, 50; Harrison to Armstrong, August 4, 1813, WHH, reel 8; Stickney to Harrison, April 7 and April 17, 1813, WHH, reel 8.

³³ “Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, St. Louis, December 23, 1812,” *Ethnohistory*, 189; John Askin to Louis Grignon, January 28, 1812, “Lawe and Grignon Papers, 1794-1821,” ed. Lyman Copeland Draper, *CSHSW* 10 (1909), 101.

the United States. These captives recounted being saved by Tecumseh when Wyandots wanted to execute them.³⁴

Shawnees who fought for the United States constantly apologized for the actions of their hostile tribesmen. When chiefs discovered a young man had killed an American soldier in July 1813, they explained to Harrison that they were “all very much hurt at our hearts” and promised to deliver him in accordance with the Treaty of Greenville. While they acknowledged that his fate was the Americans’ prerogative, they also sought American mercy for a number of reasons. They explained that the young man had killed the soldier to avenge his friend’s death, “the devil had taken possession of his mind at that moment,” he was “in deep sorrow for what he has done,” and if pardoned, he promised to fight for the Americans. This Shawnee plea and Tecumseh’s protection of the Shawnee captives at Fort Meigs were significant, because they revealed that tribal bonds withstood the internal divisions created by the conflict. It would have been much more diplomatically expedient for the chiefs to distance themselves from an individual who threatened relations with a large nation already mobilized for war.³⁵

While the War of 1812 splintered allegiances in most tribes across the Ohio Valley, the Delawares remained the most avowedly neutral. At a council in May 1812, they described the Prophet’s teachings as destructive for Indians and Americans alike. Increasing murders in the Ohio Valley were evidence that “both the red and white people had felt the

³⁴ Harrison to Eustis, December 14, 1812, WHH, reel 6; John Payne to Harrison, February 7, 1813, and “Order to Johnston,” March 14, 1813, WHH, reel 7; John Wingate to Harrison, June 15, 1813, WHH, reel 8. On Shawnee allies to the United States during the War of 1812, see Edmunds, “Forgotten Allies: The Loyal Shawnees and the War of 1812,” *The Sixty Years’ War for the Great Lakes, 1754-1814*, eds. David Curtis Skaggs and Larry L. Nelson (East Lansing, Mi.: Michigan State University Press, 2001), 337-51.

³⁵ Harrison to Armstrong, May 26, 1813, Shawnee Chiefs to Harrison, July 17, 1813, and Harrison to Armstrong, July 23, 1813, WHH, reel 8.

bad effect his counsels.” They wished instead to “proclaim peace through the land of the red people.” When war was officially declared, and the British advanced into United States territory, they remained unwilling to join the burgeoning cause. Because of “the bravery of their Warriors” and “intimate acquaintance” with American settlements, Harrison recognized the importance of preserving Delaware neutrality. Although rumors implicated them in murders, he praised their “Uncommon faithfulness” and, unlike his approach to the Miamis, urged “every proper forbearance” in American dealings with them. Through the end of the war, Americans remained concerned about wavering Delaware neutrality, but their fears never materialized.³⁶

While the Shawnee brothers’ rhetoric conveyed a sense of absolute Indian commitment to their cause, most Indian participation in the War of 1812 proved to be much more situational. After early British victories, they sensed an opportunity to check the growth of the expansionist early republic, but they were careful not to stake their futures in the region on British success. Indeed Harrison noted that Indians had committed “less mischief” against settlers during the war than prior to it. As an American official later noted, “The fall of Detroit and defeat of Gen. Winchester’s army at River Raisin, raised the spirits of the Indians to such a pitch that they really thought that nothing could conquer them.”³⁷

Indian involvement in the conflict seems to have peaked in late 1812 and early 1813, when joint British and Indian forces attacked a series of American forts and committed what Americans regarded as “massacres” against American armies. By October 1812, however,

³⁶ Harrison to Eustis, April 15, 1812, “Message to the Delawares,” April 17, 1812, and Harrison to Eustis, April 29 1812, WHH, reel 5; Wells to Harrison, 24 May 1812, *Governors Messages and Letters, Volume 2*, 52; Stickney to Harrison, October 11 1812, WHH, reel 6; Stickney to Harrison, March 16, 1813, and Johnston to Harrison, March 31, 1813, WHH, reel 7.

³⁷ Harrison to Eustis, October 13, 1812, WHH, reel 6; Thomas Forsyth to Rufus Easton, September 18, 1814, “Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth,” ed. Thwaites, *CSHSW* 11 (1888), 331.

Winnebagos had reportedly deserted the Prophet's forces and "returned home disgusted" after a failed attempt to seize Fort Harrison. The pro-British Indian front splintered further during the next spring, when another failed siege prompted the Shawnee brothers to lead their group north to British territory. Between 1600 and 2000 Indians immediately withdrew from the British and the Shawnee brothers. The Weas stole horses from the Prophet, and bands of Miamis, Kickapoos, and others appealed to the United States for peace and goods.³⁸

Coping with dwindling Indian support, Tecumseh felt similarly aggrieved by the British in September 1813. He likened their conduct to a "fat Animal" that ran away with its tail between its legs when threatened. His death at the Battle of the Thames on October 5, 1813, launched later nineteenth-century celebrations and political careers. In recounting the battle, a British official described Tecumseh's multi-ethnic force: "Tecumseh, with his party – some Ottawas, Chippewas, Delawares, Sauks, Folles Avoines [Menominees], and some Hurons followed." While British and American authorities understandably struggled to identify Indian people in a region this diverse, Potawatomis were noticeably absent from the list. Among a host of other actors, including the Sioux and the Sauks, the Potawatomis showed that Indian influence in this theater of the War of 1812 did not end with Tecumseh.³⁹

Widening the Scope: The Sauks, Sioux, Potawatomis, and Otos after Tecumseh

Nearly a year after Tecumseh's death, U.S. Indian agent Thomas Forsyth in St. Louis estimated that the British "can at any time raise three or four thousand Indians without

³⁸ Harrison to Eustis, October 22, 1812, and Johnston to Harrison, October 23, 1812, WHH, reel 6; Johnston to Harrison, March 31, 1813, WHH, reel 7; Harrison to Armstrong, May 13, 1813 and June 8, 1813, WHH, reel 8; Richard Mentor Johnson to Harrison, September 20, 1813, Harrison to Armstrong, September 30, 1813 and October 10, 1813, WHH, reel 9.

³⁹ "Speech of Tecumseh to Henry Proctor," September 18, 1813, WHH, reel 9; John Askin to Louis Grignon, December 1813, "Lowe and Grignon Papers, 1794-1821," 99.

including the Sioux, or the Mississippi, or any of the Missouri Indians.” On the same September day, an American military leader stationed further north noted in his journal that the Sioux were circulating a pipe and wampum across the Upper Midwest in a bid “to request all Indians, of what nation soever, to join hands, and not allow an American to come this far.” Divergent Indian strategies and certain inter-Indian conflicts, particularly between the Potawatomi and Sioux, ensured that Indians would not form the powerful, post-Tecumseh confederacy that Americans feared. Nonetheless, as trading partners, combatants, and threats, Indians remained essential actors in the war well after Tecumseh’s death. The continued resistance of the Sauks, as well as recurrent American and British concerns about Potawatomi and Sioux participation in the conflict, show that a narrow emphasis on the Shawnee brothers’ inter-tribal militancy does not fully capture the multivalent nature of Indian authority in the region.

For most Indians living in the region during the war, Tecumseh’s death was not the great turning point that historians later emphasized. Much to the frustration of American and British officials, who complained that Indian statements and actions were duplicitous, Indians continued to use wartime instability to negotiate optimal trade and diplomatic relationships among American, British, and Native powers. What Euroamericans on both sides of the conflict regarded as treachery was in fact flexible policy-making based on the changing nature of the war and relations among a complicated network of Native groups. A wider geographical angle of vision on American Indians in the conflict also reveals that this network extended much further north and west than the war’s hotspots in the Ohio Valley.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Thomas Forsyth to Rufus Easton, September 18, 1814, “Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth,” 334; Anderson, “Anderson’s Journal at Fort McKay, 1814,” 235.

While they did not launch any large-scale attacks after 1813, the Potawatomis remained a constant concern for the British and the Americans, preventing both sides in the region from diverting their attention and resources elsewhere. At the beginning of the war, U.S. Indian agent Thomas Forsyth foreshadowed later authorities' frustrations with the Potawatomis when he described them as numerous, geographically diffuse, and "a deceitful, treacherous people." They had been the primary assailants at the American Fort Dearborn in 1812, a siege seared into nineteenth-century American memory as an icon of supposedly inherent Indian savagery. After seizing the fort, the Potawatomis disagreed about the fate of their American captives. Later nineteenth-century Potawatomi activist and writer Simon Pokagon reminded American readers of this fact when he questioned why Indian attacks were always considered "massacres" when Horseshoe Bend had been a "battle." Pokagon's recounting of Potawatomi differences at Fort Dearborn revealed the decentralized nature of Potawatomi leadership and authority in the War of 1812 era. With bands spread across the Old Northwest, Potawatomis looked to a range of leaders with markedly different strategies, from the militant spiritual leader Main Poc to Gomo, a chief who supplied the United States with wartime intelligence.⁴¹

The Potawatomis' diffuse leadership, wartime strategies, and geographical distribution did not prevent them from exerting great geopolitical influence on the Illinois plains. In 1814, British and American authorities worried that although some bands had made peace with the Americans, they were playing both sides, and their 1,200 warriors could not be easily ignored. Explaining that they "have always been villains to both parties & will continue so until the end of the Chapter," British trader and Indian agent Robert Dickson

⁴¹ "Thomas Forsyth to William Clark, St. Louis, December 23, 1812," *Ethnohistory*, 188; Pokagon, "The Massacre of Fort Dearborn at Chicago," *Harpers New Monthly Magazine*, 649-56.

expected them to attack in the winter of 1814. When a few Potawatomi emissaries arrived at his camp in February to ask for goods, Dickson “asked them what they were; and told them in a stern matter if they were Pottawatomies, they should walk off immediately.” That Dickson had to inquire “what they were” demonstrates Euroamericans’ difficulty in identifying specific Indian groups in a diverse region. In this case, their reputation preceded them, and Dickson rejected their request for goods. He went on to draft a detailed list of 34 reasons why the British could not trust the Potawatomis. Among the reasons, they had promised to fight for the British in the fall of 1813, “and putting it off under different pretexts from time to time,” they negotiated peace with the Americans. Furthermore, despite Main Poc’s avowed opposition to the United States, Dickson found him unreliable and untrustworthy. While they never attacked them in the conflict’s later stages, the Potawatomis nonetheless kept the British guessing about their intentions, a useful strategy while the war’s outcome was still in doubt.⁴²

Although they had negotiated an armistice, Americans were no less suspicious of the Potawatomis. Ninian Edwards, who had so vociferously warned Americans about them at the onset of war, instructed Forsyth to order a Potawatomi attack on the British to prove their loyalty. In May 1814 he wrote that “experience has fully convinced us that there can be no neutrality with savages” and “we have found them faithless in all their promises.” Like their previous agreement with the Americans to attack the Winnebagos, the Potawatomis did not comply with U.S. wishes. By the fall of 1814, Forsyth wondered if they were not turning to the British for gunpowder and ammunition. Needing to hunt before winter, the Potawatomis

⁴² Robert Dickson to John Lawe, February 4, 1814, “Remarks on the Bad Intentions of the Potawatomi, March 2, 1814,” “Lawe and Grignon Papers, 1794-1821,” 102-03, 108; Dickson to Lawe, February 4, 1814, “Dickson and Grignon Papers – 1812-1815,” 291. On Europeans struggling to identify Indians and misunderstanding the nature of their social and political organization in this region, see Michael Witgen, *An Infinity of Nations: How the Native New World Shaped Early America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

were surrounded by Indian allies of the British who had helped the British seize an American fort in July 1814. If they did receive hunting supplies from the British, the Potawatomis nonetheless refrained from attacking the Americans. In exchange for honoring the armistice, they appealed for the United States to lower the prices of goods at trading posts. Instead they got American surveyors, who arrived in Potawatomi territory in 1815 to survey bounty land for War of 1812 veterans. As for Main Poc, Forsyth reported a year later that the leader was sickly and had lost his hearing. As his health waivered, so too had his influence.⁴³

The British and the Americans were not the only major foreign powers with which the Potawatomis had to contend. While the Sioux did not directly participate in the conflict, the threat of their involvement and their hostility with the Potawatomis and Ojibwas further complicated efforts at inter-tribal unity. The British and the inter-tribal militants both recruited the Sioux, who were sympathetic to the anti-American cause. Though they remained a military presence with which the Americans, British, and other Indians had to reckon during the war, a number of factors influenced their decision not to fight. First, disease and famine were prominent on the Northern Plains in the early 1810s. Winter counts listed a smallpox outbreak in the winter of 1810-1811, followed by famine in 1812 and whooping cough in 1813. Just as access to British trade goods motivated Black Hawk, these material circumstances surely tempered Sioux enthusiasm for the alliance. Early nineteenth-century U.S. expansion obviously had not affected Sioux trade and territory as much as it had for Indian communities further south and east, and the Sioux had less to gain from repelling

⁴³ Edwards to Forsyth, May 16, 1814; Forsyth to Edwards, September 3, 1814; Forsyth to Rufus Easton, September 18, 1814; Forsyth to James Monroe, April 13, 1815; Forsyth to Edwards, March 31, 1816, "Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth," 316-17, 333; James D. Walker, *War of 1812 Bounty Lands in Illinois* (Thomson, Ill.: Heritage House, 1977), xi.

this distant eastern power. Rumor also had it that the United States dispatched a Spanish trader from St. Louis to outfit the Teton Sioux at the Big Bend of the Missouri River. Furthermore, as enemies of the Potawatomi and Ojibwa, the Sioux also had to protect their communities from indigenous foes whose threats were much more long-standing and proximate than the United States. Early twentieth-century Sioux people remembered the potential conflict with the Potawatomis as the major reason why the Sioux avoided the War of 1812. Finally, a Sioux chief related a vision of his own that stood in marked contrast with those of Tenskwatawa. He explained that although “all the blood in my heart is English,” he saw the war as a struggle between a British lion and an American eagle. The lion and the eagle “will scold at each other for a while; but they will finally make up and be friends, and smoke the pipe of peace. The lion will then go home, and leave us Indians with our foes.” Like the Delawares, the chief’s reading of the divine led him to a sympathetic but ultimately neutral stance on the war. The inter-tribal militants were not the only people claiming special spiritual access to orient their wartime strategies. Those strategies, which took spiritual, material, and social circumstances in account, often did not lead Indians to war.⁴⁴

While the Sioux refrained from full-scale participation in the war, they nonetheless shaped British, American, and other Indian approaches to the conflict. They constituted a peripheral influence on the northwestern theater in the same way that anti-war Federalists in New England were an important northeastern faction on the American side, even if both groups did not actively participate in the fighting. In the summer of 1812, the Sioux attacked the Ojibwas, which undoubtedly contributed to the Ojibwa decision also to refrain from the

⁴⁴ Linea Sundstrom, “Smallpox Used Them Up: References to Epidemic Disease in Northern Plains Winter Counts, 1714-1920,” *Ethnohistory* 44, no. 2 (1997), 315-17; Robinson, “A Sioux Indian View of the Last War with England,” 398-400; Anderson, “Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson,” 197-98.

military engagements further south. Two years later, younger Sioux leaders became more active in the conflict as they supplied intelligence to the British and offered to attack American forces. Motivated by their desire for British gunpowder and the need to prove themselves as young men, some Sioux traded intelligence for British supplies and offered to hunt Americans and American-allied Indians. Little Crow, the grandfather of the 1862 Dakota War leader by the same name, arrived at a British fort with 100 “young men” and their families in September 1814. “He regarded every Indian and white soldier, no matter of what color, as long as they were British subject as his brother – the rest his inveterate enemies, and would act with greatest vigor towards both accordingly,” a British officer recorded in his journal. Fearing that raids would destabilize their alliances with Indians who were hostile to the Sioux, the British prevented Little Crow from carrying out his sweep through the south, though he and his band remained well supplied by their foreign allies. With the British and Tecumseh’s forces courting the Sioux, who in turn influenced the wartime strategies of their Ojibwa and Potawatomi enemies, the international dimensions of a conflict so closely associated with American vulnerabilities on the East Coast extended well beyond Prophetstown in the West.⁴⁵

Compared to other incidents in the latter stages of the war, like the Battle of New Orleans and the burning of Washington City, these diplomatic machinations and concerns about the Potawatomis and Sioux may seem isolated and insignificant. But these examples show how American Indians ensured that the war’s northwest theater retained its international importance after Tecumseh’s death. It was from his vantage point in Michigan in early 1814 that Dickson remarked that the world still seemed “convulsed.” Dickson

⁴⁵ Anderson, “Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson,” 183-90, 238; Dickson to Lawe, February 4, 1814, “Dickson and Grignon Papers, 1812-1815,” 290; “Anderson’s Journal at Fort McKay, 1814,” 219-49.

believed that Spanish and British military maneuvers in the Deep South, combined with the Redstick uprising, would bring the Americans “on their knees to Britain.” The Redsticks also would force American troops away from St. Louis, rendering the city vulnerable to takeover. This scenario was what led Forsyth to estimate that three to four thousand Indians could attack St. Louis in 1814, which he feared would result in “an indiscriminate massacre.” In his calculation, Forsyth did not include the nearly five thousand more Indians to his south and west, which he believed the Spanish could mobilize. While this attack never occurred, American and British discussions about its possibility shows that Indians remained a major, inter-tribal threat to the Americans’ western outposts into 1814.⁴⁶

Of the Indian groups that remained prominent geopolitical players in the war after Tecumseh’s death, the Sauks remained most avowedly hostile to the United States. Although some bands had the British guessing about them “playing a double game,” the Sauks continued to attack Americans into 1815. In accordance with their initial motivation for war, they leveraged their opposition to the Americans for a favorable trade and military relationship with the British. With 1,200 warriors in 1814, the Sauks matched the Potawatomis’ forces in size, and their alliance with the British was more consequential than the armistice that the Potawatomis and others had signed with the Americans. Perhaps because the Potawatomis agreed to stop fighting, the Sauks stole their horses. As the largest anti-American force of Indians in the region, they sought to translate their loyalty into more trade goods and weapons. When the Sauks appealed for more traders in late 1814, a British commander regretted that he could not coordinate independent traders, but he assured them that if they could not take up the matter with his superior, the commander “would even go so

⁴⁶ Robert Dickson to John Lawe, February 4, 1814, “Dickson and Grignon Papers – 1812-1815,” 291-92; Thomas Forsyth to Rufus Easton, September 18, 1814, “Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth,” 335.

far as to take powder from the big guns, to assist them.” He continued to reward their loyalty with ammunition until he learned that the Treaty of Ghent ceased hostilities between the Americans and the British. “I gave them some ammunition, provisions, with a hearty shake of the hand, and we parted sorrowfully,” he remembered about his farewell with Black Hawk. This exchange was a stark departure from Tecumseh’s claim that the British ran away like a “fat animal” less than two years earlier.⁴⁷

Sauk appeals to the British and attacks on the Americans nonetheless continued. In an April 1815 speech, Black Hawk requested a British cannon for protection. He received guns and ammunition instead, a gift that infuriated the Americans in light of the treaty. Though the region’s “color” was about to change from red (war) to white (peace), Black Hawk also vowed to continue fighting, as the United States had not concluded peace with the Sauks: “I now see the time is drawing near when we shall all change color; but, my Father, our lands have not yet changed color – they are red – the water is red with our blood, and the sky is cloudy. I have fought the Big Knives, and will continue to fight them until they retire from our lands.” One month later, his assault on American troops just northwest of St. Louis, known as the Battle of the Sink Hole, signaled his unwillingness to relent.⁴⁸

Years after the earthquakes, Tecumseh’s death, and the Battle of the Sink Hole, the Otos encountered an American expedition travelling up the Missouri River. Though the earthquakes were nearly a decade earlier, the Otos’ interpretation of the tremors was

⁴⁷ Dickson to Lawe, January 23, 1814, March 31, 1814, “Dickson and Grignon Papers – 1812-1815,” 287, 302; Forsyth to Edwards, July 6, 1814, “Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth,” 320; Anderson, “Narrative of Capt. Thomas G. Anderson,” 201.

⁴⁸ “Speech of L’Epervier, or Sparrow Hawk, better known as Black Hawk, principal war-chief of the Sauks, delivered before peace was known, at Prairie du Chien, April 18th, 1815, and taken down by Capt. T.G. Anderson,” “Prairie du Chien Documents, 1814-1815,” *CSHSW* 9 (1882), 278; Forsyth to Monroe, April 13, 1815, “Letter-Book of Thomas Forsyth,” 337.

significant enough that an American trader in the Oto village explained it to their visitors. In 1811, a “son of the Master of Life” rode a white horse through a nearby forest. Some Americans “of a sanguinary disposition” shot and killed the mystical figure on horseback. Otos explained that earthquakes were “the effect of supernatural agency, connected, like thunder, with the immediate operations of the Master of Life.” For killing a divine messenger, the American assailants enraged the Master of Life, and “it was certainly owing to this act that the earth as now trembling before the anger of the Great Wahconda [Master of Life].”⁴⁹

Whether the “son of the Master of Life” was an emissary from Prophetstown or a local spiritual leader, the Otos clearly blamed American violence for the earthquakes. But when the Shawnee Prophet sent wampum to invite them to join the inter-tribal alliance, however, the Otos refused. They explained “they could make more by trapping beaver than making war against the Americans.”⁵⁰

The Otos’ case epitomized the matrix of considerations that all American Indians had to take into account when deliberating about whether or not to join the Shawnee brothers. On one hand, even Native groups as far west as the Otos already had witnessed the violent consequences of American expansion. From the Great Plains to the Ohio River and from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, Tecumseh and Tenskwatawa’s bid for alliance found sympathetic audiences across the continent’s interior. But while Indians agreed that the new nation threatened their lands and people, the United States was not their sole concern in the

⁴⁹ Edwin James, *James’s Account of S.H. Long’s Expedition, 1819-1820*, repr. *Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, Vol. 15*, ed. Reuben Gold Thwaites (Cleveland: The Arthur H. Clark Company, 1905), 57. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

⁵⁰ “Interesting Narrative of the Expedition of Mr. Hunt,” appendix in John Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America in the Years 1809, 1810, and 1811*, 2nd ed. (1819; Lincoln, Ne.: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 227. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

daily rhythms of early nineteenth-century Native trade and diplomacy. For those Ohio Valley Indians who were the foundation of inter-tribal militancy, the situation indeed seemed more desperate. Coupled with rumors of war between the Americans and the British, the earthquakes deepened many people's sense of alarm and urgency. But even among those living closest to American settlements in Ohio and Indiana Territory, the decision to relocate to Prophetstown and cede all spiritual and political authority to the Shawnee brothers was not an easy one. Like most Native Americans in the War of 1812 era, the Otos worried about signs of imbalance in the natural, human, and spiritual orders without committing to inter-tribal militancy.

Conclusion

On his plans to attack Fort Wayne in the fall of 1812, Tecumseh told Miamis “to step on one side, for his feet were very [sic] large, and required much room. If they did not he might step upon them.” For the study of Native Americans in the War of 1812 era, Tecumseh's footprint is equally large. But Tecumseh's forces comprised a small fraction of Indians living in the western theater of the War of 1812 and the Creek War. The disproportionate focus on the Shawnee brothers has obscured a more complex and dynamic picture of how Indians grappled with the steadily encroaching early republic and how they saw the world and their place in it. As much as Tecumseh and his nemesis Harrison tried to define a clear battle line between Indians and Americans, Indians in the South and the Old Northwest defied this simplistic classification. In the most extreme example of violent resistance, Redsticks killed fellow Creeks. Cherokees, Choctaws, and moderate Creeks allied with the United States to put down the Redsticks as part of a diplomatic strategy to

prove their national sovereignty to the Americans. Farther north, many Indians chose neutrality or even alliance with the United States in the War of 1812 as the most viable strategy for preserving their sovereignty. Most Indians who did fight against the United States did so because they sensed an opportunity to check U.S. expansion, not because they were absolutely loyal to the Shawnee brothers or “incited” by the British. When British armies faltered, they quickly abandoned that strategy and adopted new ones for retaining their lands and cultures. In an era that historians have so closely associated with Indian millenarianism, pragmatism most often reigned.⁵¹

The persistence of Tecumseh’s foot-stomping story in American mythology has obscured a range of Indian responses to the earthquakes, which also reflected divergent approaches to the War of 1812. Indians understood the earthquakes as potent signs of impurity across their territories and cultures, but did they not reach the same conclusions about how to purify their land and people. Tenskwatawa used the earthquakes to reassert his spiritual authority after his defeat at Tippeceanoe. The Redsticks shared the Shawnee brothers’ millenarian outlook, though their extended, bloody purge was grounded in Creek cultural terms rather than inter-tribal prophecy. Cherokee prophets diagnosed the shaking as the symptom of a deeper cultural illness that could be cured through less violent means. While they attributed the earthquakes to American violence, Otos were unwilling to interrupt their brisk beaver trade by fighting. And Delawares largely retreated to the Big House to address the tremors with a tribally specific ritual. These responses highlight a vibrant and diverse world of Indian thought that survived centuries of colonialism.

⁵¹ Stickney to Harrison, September 29, 1812, WHH, reel 6.

Furthermore, the interpretive binary between “accommodationist” and “nativist,” first drawn by Tecumseh himself, restricts a fuller examination of the range of strategies that Indians employed to respond to U.S. encroachment. When the American nation and its expansion are the only referents around which histories of the postrevolutionary borderlands are written, the Shawnee brothers stand in for a multiplicity of Indian perspectives and objectives in the War of 1812 era. By closely examining Indians across the middle of the continent, we see that the spectrum for Native Americans negotiating U.S. expansion was wider and more varied than the false choice between joining Tecumseh or accommodating to the United States. The concerns of tribal revitalization and resistance movements in the early nineteenth century may have resembled those of militant pan-Indian leaders, but they did not necessarily have the same cultural or ideological origins. In other words, when we step back from Tecumseh’s large footprint, we see a broader spectrum of Indian strategies for protecting land and sovereignty in the War of 1812 era.

PART III

THE EARLY REPUBLIC

Concerns about sovereignty and territorial integrity were not limited to Native American societies. The confident, aggressive American republic that emerged out of the War of 1812 masked tremendous uncertainty before and during the war. In people's readings of the earthquakes, environmental and geopolitical fears were intertwined. The Governor of Illinois Territory feared an alliance among Indians, runaway slaves, French settlers, and British troops, and he begged the Secretary of War to recognize the threat posed by western Indian groups not allied with Tecumseh. An American naval officer in New Orleans complained that he was powerless to curtail smuggling and piracy there. Americans in Mississippi Territory tried to build wooden cannons to defend themselves from the Redsticks. These anxious accounts provide personal windows into the contingency of the early republic's western expansion.¹

While American evangelicals would look back with fondness at the revivalism during the earthquakes, this also was a period of religious volatility and disharmony. Evangelical conversion rates and church attendance during the earthquakes tailed off as quickly as they had spiked. Denominations splintered as they debated theological questions and bemoaned the fickleness of the crowds who abandoned the pews as soon as the shaking stopped. Riding the wave of popular print, writers emerged from obscurity to make special and alarming

¹ "Letter of Ninian Edwards to Nathaniel Pope," 277; John Shaw Papers, Library of Congress; John Evans, "Reminiscences of Olden Times," ADAH.

claims of divine revelation that stoked debates about religious authority and individual access to the divine. For others, religious questions were deeply personal: people lay awake at night pondering whether their conversion experiences during the earthquakes were authentic or a case of disingenuous “earthquake religion.”

Newspapers and journals along the East Coast also grappled with issues of authenticity as they considered seemingly implausible reports of earthquake damage from the continent’s interior. The earthquakes tested the new nation’s commitment to a republican intellectual culture in which all citizens, not just elite experts, were invited to contribute. Accounts of the Mississippi River running backwards and people disappearing into crevices were as truthful as they were remarkable. But reports of western volcanoes, some deliberately fabricated by western settlers and others resulting from a long-standing American Indian campaign of misinformation, led to doubts about the efficacy of popular empirical inquiry. In an era of mistrust about the inhabitants of the newly incorporated Louisiana Territory, people’s social and geographical locations became filters for determining the authenticity of their earthquake reports. In the first decades of the early republic, the Appalachian Mountains, not the divide between free and slave states, created the primary axis of regional tension.

CHAPTER 4

“EARTHQUAKE CHRISTIANS”

Over the first half of the nineteenth century, physician Ira Ellis Cornelius transcribed hymns, drafted biblical commentaries, and practiced his signature in a diary that contained more church doctrine than personal detail. A newcomer to Mississippi Territory from South Carolina, Cornelius was near present-day Huntsville, Alabama, when the earthquakes began. In a book usually reserved for grappling with matters of eternity, Cornelius almost never recorded daily observations. But the shaking prompted him to scrawl a flurry of notes that stand out from his generally tidy spelling and penmanship. Tallying the total number of tremors at 105, he also wrote:

A grate nois + an Awfull Grumbling [.] it Shook the Fowls of[f] their Rust [roost] [.] Every Thing appear'd to be Sensable of Aproching Danger [.] the Cry of A bird was not to be heard the whole Day...as I reclect it continued for Twenty Three Day + Some Say Longer [.] People was much Alarmed – many Different Ideas about it.

Cornelius' earthquake commentary also ranged well beyond earthly details. Following his tremor tally, he hurriedly scribbled, “not In your hous [.] Trample it undre you feet stick [it] o[u]t of the Door & Send it to hell Where it come From,” referring to sinful behavior that Cornelius was struggling to control. “We are Sollemnly Warned against Apostacy,” he added.¹

¹ Ira Ellis Cornelius Diary, Smith (Floy) Collection, MDAH.

In the spring of 1815, when the conclusions of the War of 1812 and the Redstick War had calmed matters considerably for American settlers in the Old Southwest, Cornelius offered more insight into what he wished to cast “to hell Where it come From.” With more distance from the turbulence of the earthquakes and the war, he made three resolutions: “never to use ardent spirits; only when I believe it to be Necessary to preserve My health,” “to avoid unholy + unbecomeing Discourse,” and “to Resist Fleshly Lust.” He revisited the sobriety pledge in January 1816.²

Cornelius’ writings offer a personal view into broader intellectual trends in the early republic and capture the earthquakes’ importance in the religious lives of American settlers. As unexpected and alarming displays of natural force, especially amid early nineteenth-century revivalism and the looming threat of war with Britain, the tremors led many of those who experienced them to ponder the deeper divine messages encoded in the shaking. And as Cornelius noted, there were “many Different Ideas about it” in his community. This assessment also held for the early republic at large. Among Baptist and Methodist congregations closest to the tremors, conversions spiked in early 1812, and observers attributed the revivalism to the earthquakes. People soon derided those “Earthquake Christians” who abandoned commitments to church attendance and other proper Christian behavior when the shaking stopped in the spring of 1812.

Cornelius’ scribbling exhibits the strong influences of evangelicalism and empiricism, two important and overlapping trends of thought that are not often considered together in studies of early national religious and intellectual culture. As an empiricist, Cornelius tallied tremors and recorded detailed observations about the sights and sounds related to the tumult

² Ibid.

alongside his evangelical meditations on sin and wayward personal behavior. Equally reliant on the experience and authority of the individual, evangelicalism and empiricism mutually framed settler earthquake interpretations and stoked debates about who could claim interpretive authority and what sources of experiential and written knowledge could inform interpretations.³

Like Cornelius' diary, settlers' earthquake interpretations and subsequent print discussions about the earthquakes' religious meanings show that it would be misguided to project later antagonism between "evangelical" and "scientific" understandings of the workings of the natural world back into the first decades of the early republic. In early nineteenth-century American Christianity, debates about divine intentionality, the authenticity of religious experience, and the parameters of access to knowledge about the divine were more contentious intellectual issues than questions about the compatibility of faith and reason. Evangelicals readily acknowledged that unusual natural circumstances produced earthquakes, and they believed that seeking to understand those circumstances was a worthy endeavor. Indeed people's otherworldly concerns did not preclude them from making detailed observations about the natural world that corroborated the observations and hypotheses of learned naturalists. But they also seized on naturalists' uncertainties about the earthquakes' exact causes to argue for the limits of human comprehension. For evangelicals, the naturalists' preoccupation with empirical observations obscured the earthquakes' true importance: they were both signs of God's power and the need for Christian conversion. The real matter for debate was whether or not God intended for the earthquakes to deliver an

³ In *Doomsayers: Anglo-American Prophecy in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), historian Susan Juster suggests "that we stop seeing the enlightenment and religious enthusiasm as distinct and antagonistic forces" (viii).

immediate message. Those who located divine intention in the shaking most often pointed to lax morality and godlessness in the trans-Appalachian West, a stance that contributed to broader regional tensions in the fitful War of 1812 era.⁴

The Earthquakes and Mass Conversions

Conversion rates oversimplify religious lives. But in areas where the shaking was strongest, the earthquakes' statistical impact on the size and structure of the Baptist and Methodist Churches was undeniable. With few exceptions, the tremors' role in the growth of evangelicalism in the trans-Appalachian West, as well as the ways in which evangelical earthquake interpretations revealed insights and tensions within the movement, have been understated in the histories of United States evangelicalism. The American Methodist Church's 10% rate of growth in 1812 nearly doubled that of the previous year. Of the 18,947 people who joined the Church in 1812, 15,242 of them were from the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences, which included the states of Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, and the territories of Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, Mississippi, and Louisiana. Put another way, an area containing approximately 15% of the population of the United States and its territories accounted for 80% of the growth in American Methodism in 1812. During the following year, with the War of 1812 in full force, national Methodist membership declined by nearly

⁴ For the purposes of definition, "evangelical" traditionally refers to the Baptists and Methodists, as well as unaffiliated Protestant itinerants and independent congregations that emphasized the importance of conversion experiences and an individual's relationship with God. Most of the earthquake interpreters considered here fall within this definition, though denominational affiliations and definitional questions are not crucial for considering American Protestant perspectives on the earthquakes and related intellectual concerns in the War of 1812 era. As Donald Mathews has argued, the Second Great Awakening was more important for its social function than as a theological or denominational contest. The movement created a "common world of experience" for post-revolutionary American Protestants. See Donald Mathews, "The Second Great Awakening as an Organizing Process, 1780-1830: An Hypothesis," *American Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1969), 23-43.

3,000 congregants. Only in 1815 did the American Methodist population return to 1812 levels (see Table 1).⁵

Table 1: Methodist Church Membership by Conference, 1810-1815⁶

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815
Western *	27,148	30,741	-	-	-	-
Ohio	-	-	23,284	22,385	22,593	24,739
Tennessee	-	-	22,699	21,706	21,915	21,758
South-Carolina **	28,533	40,926	42,736	38,054	37,767	39,494
Virginia **	25,577	25,432	26,151	26,251	25,161	24,361
Baltimore	27,240	29,186	28,362	28,393	28,276	26,574
Philadelphia	32,881	34,249	34,757	32,667	32,307	30,402
Total ***	184,567	195,357	214,307	211,129	211,165	214,235

* After 1811 the Western Conference was divided into the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences.

** Regions of North Carolina were included in the South-Carolina and Virginia Conferences.

***The total includes figures from three additional conferences not listed here: New-York, New-England, and Genese.

⁵ This statistical survey builds on previous work about evangelical responses to the New Madrid earthquakes by historians Walter Brownlow Posey and Tom Kanon. It considers regional variations and African Americans in western Methodist church membership and adds Baptist data at the church and associational level from church books at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives (SBHLA) and Kentucky Historical Society (KHS). On previous studies about the importance of the earthquakes in the western growth of Methodism, see Walter Brownlow Posey, "The Earthquake of 1811 and its Influence on Evangelistic Methods in the Churches of the Old South," *Tennessee Historical Magazine* 1, no. 2 (1931), 107-114; Tom Kanon, "'Scared from their Sins for a Season: The Religious Ramifications of the New Madrid Earthquakes, 1811-12,'" *Ohio Valley History* 5, no. 2 (2005), 21-38. See also, Stephen Aron, *How the West Was Lost: The Transformation of Kentucky from Daniel Boone to Henry Clay* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 185-86.

⁶ All Methodist membership statistics drawn from: *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1811* (New-York: John C. Totten, 1811), 22-29; *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1812* (New-York: Daniel Hitt and Thomas Ware, 1812), 19-26; *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1813* (New-York: John C. Totten, 1813), 28-35; *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1814* (New-York: John C. Totten, 1814), 23-31; *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1815* (New-York: John C. Totten, 1815), 21-29, *Minutes taken at the several annual conferences of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States of America, for the year 1816* (New-York: John C. Totten, 1816), 27-35.

This single year of massive western growth transformed the geography and organizational structure of American Methodism. Previously, seven conferences managed denser populations along the eastern seaboard, leaving the Western Conference to oversee trans-Appalachian Methodists in the thousands of square miles from Vincennes to Natchez. In 1812, the national church body divided the Western Conference and its eight subordinate districts into the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences. Responsible for Methodists in Ohio and Kentucky, the Ohio Conference assumed leadership over five districts. The Tennessee Conference managed six additional districts in the states and territories to the west and south of the Ohio Conference. Split evenly between nearly 46,000 western Methodists, one-third of whom joined the Church in 1812, both of the new conferences were larger than each of the three Methodist conferences in the northeastern United States.

Methodism's western growth in 1812 was dramatic but not uniform. The reshuffling of districts within the new Ohio and Tennessee Conferences that year makes it difficult to determine precise rates of growth across the region. Congregational growth in the Miami District of southwest Ohio (48%), the Mississippi District along the eastern banks of the Mississippi River (67%), and the new Nashville District in central Tennessee (118%) nonetheless stand out as sites of tremendous Methodist expansion. On the other hand, Methodist populations in the cities of Lexington and Cincinnati did not rise as sharply as the rest of the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences. In 1812 the number of new Methodists in New Madrid – up 113 people from 27 in 1811 – exceeded those new Methodists in the larger cities of Lexington (67) and Cincinnati (112) (See Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2: Western Methodist Church Membership by District, 1810-15

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815
Holston	3705	4359	6335	6014	5513	5397
Cumberland	5376	6645	4692**	4321	3725	3784
Kentucky	3133	3618	4564	4170	4136	3643
Green River	4355	4354	**	-	-	2884
Mississippi	509	789	1307	1316	2095	2054
Indiana	1009	918	**	-	-	-
Miami	6117	6247	9218	5007***	4554	5173
Muskingum	3249	3857	2950**	2972	3168	3292
Ohio*	-	-	2857	3457	3284	4723
Salt River*	-	-	3695	3016	3342	3482
Wabash*	-	-	3193	2887	****	-
Illinoise*	-	-	1440	1264	1828****	1874
Nashville*	-	-	5732**	5891	4962	4598
Scioto***	-	-	-	3867***	4109	4325
Total	27,148	30,741	45,983	44,091	44,508	46,497

*These districts were created in 1812.

**Significant portions of those Methodist populations formerly residing in the Cumberland, Green River, Muskingum and Indiana Districts were transferred to the new districts of Ohio, Salt River, Wabash, and Nashville. This realignment reflects a major shift in western Methodism's institutional structure in 1812.

***The Scioto District was founded in 1813 and accounts for the steep decline in Miami District membership in 1813. Nonetheless, the combination of Scioto and Miami congregants in 1813 (8846) does not match the population of the Miami District in 1812 (9168).

****The Wabash and Illinoise Districts were combined in 1814.

Table 3: Western Methodist Church Membership by Locale, 1810-1815

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815
Illinoise	341	411	547	436	408	462
Cape Garrideau	100	76	148	112	133	144
New Madrid	30	27	165	119	136	138
Natchez	180	186	262	262***	551****	510
Amit (MS)	-	170	306	306***	391	411
Nashville	1417	550*	5732*	5891	4962	4598
Lexington	600	803	889	780	815	744
Cincinnati	950	817	928	226**	264	310

*The Cumberland District in Tennessee added 4 sub-regions in 1811. These new sub-regions likely absorbed some Nashville's 1229 Methodist congregants in 1810. This reorganization probably accounts for what initially appears to be a steep decline in Nashville's 1811 membership. In 1812, the Methodist population in and around Nashville more than doubled, and the area became its own sub-region.

**700 of Cincinnati's Methodists were reassigned to a new sub-region in 1813, which accounts for that year's steep decline.

***The Creek War restricted communication networks in the Deep South and likely explains why the Methodists used the same figures for Natchez and "Amit" in 1812 and 1813.

****1814 Figures for Natchez and Claiborne, two sub-groups in the Mississippi District, were combined. These places added 25 African-American and 17 Euroamerican congregants in 1814.

African American Methodist populations also grew significantly in 1812, though most of growth came from the South-Carolina Conference, which also included areas of North Carolina. Of the 42,859 African American Methodists whom the church tallied in 1812, nearly one-third lived in the South-Carolina Conference. Still, the 2,627 African American Methodists living in the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences in 1812 represented a nearly 60% increase from the previous year. Most of these church members lived as slaves in Kentucky and Tennessee, since the cotton boom and postwar land grab that fueled forced slave migrations to the Deep South did not take full effect in Mississippi and Alabama until after the War of 1812. Though miniscule when compared to black Methodist hubs in Charleston, Baltimore, and Philadelphia, conversions in 1812 significantly expanded, or in some cases created, black Methodist communities in the West. In the Red River region spanning south-central Kentucky and north-central Tennessee, the African American Methodist population nearly doubled to 172. Whereas no African Americans in New Madrid were members of the Methodist Church before the earthquakes, 25 people joined in 1812 (See Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4: African-American Methodism by Conference, 1810-1815

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815
Western*	1467	1648	-	-	-	-
Ohio	-	-	561	421	600	644
Tennessee	-	-	2066	1930	2040	2059
South-Carolina**	9129	11,063	13,771	14,348	14,527	16,429
Virginia**	6232	6275	6334	6371	5856	5629
Baltimore	7438	7886	7990	7993	8353	7205
Philadelphia	10,354	10,538	10,884	9936	10,386	8835
Total***	35,732	38,505	42,859****	42,437	43,187	42,304

* After 1811 the Western Conference was divided into the Ohio and Tennessee Conferences.

** Regions of North Carolina were included in the South-Carolina and Virginia Conferences.

***The total includes figures from three additional conferences not listed here: New-York, New-England, and Genese.

****This figure was mistakenly listed as 43,859 in the report for 1812.

Table 5: Southern and Western African-American Methodism by Locale, 1810-1815

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815
New Madrid (MO)	0	0	25	17	16	14
Red River (KY/TN)	58	99	172	137	144	128
Shelby (KY)	88	103	38	46	0*	36
Danville (KY)	97	80	80	63	0*	73
Nashville (TN)	183	50	127	94	113	192
Natchez/Claiborne (MS)	111	97	107	125	149	219
Charleston (SC)	2223	3128	3604	3418	3793	5313
Baltimore City (MD)	800	868	973	1101	1552	1430

*These appear to be reporting errors.

Evidence of Baptist congregational growth in 1812 is more fragmentary but equally compelling. Baptist congregations functioned more independently than their Methodist counterparts. Compared to the Methodists' national, printed, and centralized reporting, Baptist churches and regional associations left only handwritten, often monthly tallies in books kept by church members. These scattered records nonetheless suggest that 1812 was a monumental year for church growth. "A great and tremendous earthquake commenced which broke many places of the earth at New Madrid County. It continued shaking very hard all winter," noted a Baptist church book in Cape Girardeau that was typically reserved only

for documenting disciplinary matters and counting members. In the two years before the earthquakes, the church secured one convert; in 1812, there were 49 new members, 13 of whom joined in February and March. For the next three years, the church's membership declined.⁷

Further from the epicenter in Tennessee and Kentucky, increases in Baptist church membership in 1812 remained notable. In the Concord Baptist Association of central Tennessee, 45% of the baptisms from 1812 to 1820 took place in 1812. Among the South Kentucky Association of Separate Baptists, a Baptist offshoot that refused to subscribe to confessions or creeds not made explicit in the Bible, 44% of new members in the seven years between 1811 and 1817 joined in 1812. In Kentucky Baptist associations near Lexington and Louisville, the growth was notable but less dramatic, as baptism rates in 1810, 1817, and 1818 exceeded those in 1812 (See Table 6).

Table 6: Baptisms by Baptist Association, 1810-20⁸

	1810	1811	1812	1813	1814	1815	1816	1817	1818	1819	1820
Concord, Tennessee	-	-	866	122	64	29	84	87	91	191	392
S. District, Kentucky	-	-	134	56	29	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sep. Baptists, Kentucky *	-	61	495	100	0	200	31	237	-	-	-
Long Run, Kentucky***	956	132	199	74	51	63	175	521	340	162	89
Salem, Kentucky	327	111	184	118	37	14	-	153	157	35	81
Licking, KY	-	33	96	9	9	10	20	24	126	54	27

⁷ Bethel Baptist Church Minutes (typescript), Western Manuscripts Collection, SHSM.

⁸ Baptist statistics are drawn from: Minutes of the Concord Association of Baptists, SBHLA; Minutes of the South District Association of Baptists, SBHLA; Minutes of the South Kentucky Association of Separate Baptists, SBHLA; Minutes of the Long Run Association of Baptists, SBHLA; Minutes of the Salem Baptist Association of Baptists, SBHLA; Minutes of the Licking Association of Baptists, KHS; Frank M. Masters, *A History of Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville, Ky.: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, 1953), 55, 167-84.

* The South Kentucky Association of Separate Baptists was one of two Separate Baptist associations in the state that traced its denomination's history back to a splinter group of Baptists that promoted enthusiastic worship during the so-called First Great Awakening. While several Kentucky Baptist associations formed a union in 1801, the South Kentucky Association of Separate Baptists broke from the union two years later. On early nineteenth-century Kentucky Baptist church politics, see Keith Harper, "'And All the Baptists in Kentucky Took the Name *United Baptists*': The Union of the Separate and Regular Baptists in Kentucky," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 110, no. 1 (2012), 3-32.

**6 new churches joined the Licking Association between 1810 and 1814.

***In 1812, six churches in Indiana left the Long Run Association to join a Baptist association in their own state. This realignment likely lowered the Long Run Association's baptism totals for 1812.

Among many Baptist churches that reported the number of people "received by experience" on a monthly basis, a disproportionately high number of baptisms occurred during the peak of seismic activity. In southeastern Kentucky, 13 people joined a church between February and April 1812; nine more people joined between May 1812 and 1820. Outside Lexington, there were 15 baptisms between Christmas Day 1811 and April 1812, and another 12 through 1814. Despite these figures, congregations did not always grow during the earthquakes. More people joined central Kentucky's Shawnee Run Baptist Church in 1811 than 1812. At Zion Hill Baptist Church in southwest Mississippi, 1812 conversions did not spike until July, perhaps related to unrest following June's declaration of war.⁹

Firsthand observations from across the western states and territories linked the backcountry revivalism of 1812 to the earthquakes. In Indiana Territory, a woman described an evocative scene of "the darkness that pervades this frontier," as people prayed for the imminent end of the world to relieve their fears. "A number of them I heard shouting and praising god for shaking the earth and wishing he would do it again for the sooner that nature would undergo her last convulsive shock the sooner thier [sic] souls would be at rest," she wrote to her brother in Cincinnati. Further east from their epicenter, the tremors still

⁹ Smithfield Baptist Church and Boone's Creek Baptist Church Records, SBHLA; Shawnee Run Baptist Church Records, KHS; Zion Hill Baptist Church Minutes, 1811-1853, MDAH.

managed to induce revivalism. A settler in Ohio noted in May 1812 that although earthquake damage in his neighborhood was minimal, “about the height of them we had a revival of religion and several got religion.”¹⁰

Memories of the earthquakes’ importance in stoking 1812 revivalism persisted in church histories, obituaries, and memoirs published later in the nineteenth century. An historian of Methodism in Kentucky in 1869 wrote that “it was during this Conference-year [1812] that the giant tread of the earthquake was felt throughout the country.” Borrowing a quotation from an 1860 edition of a Memphis religious periodical, he noted that “the elements were combining to alarm the fears of the guilty and to excite Christians to earnest prayer and holy lives.” In certain retellings, fear and desperation muted denominational differences. A visitor to New Madrid remembered an ecumenical gathering of 2,000 refugees who “all simultaneously, Catholics and Protestants, knelt and offered solemn prayer to their Creator,” a scene that “had had the effect to constrain the most wicked and profane, earnestly to plead to God in prayer for mercy.” Future preacher Jacob Bower, who converted during the earthquakes in 1812, noted that his community united in otherworldly concerns:

The people relinquished all kinds of labour for a time, except feeding stock, and eat only enough to support nature a few days. Visiting from house to house, going to meeting Singing – praying, ex[h]o[r]ting, and once in a while ketch a sermon from a travelling Minister. Men, Women and children, everywhere were heard enquiring what they must do to be saved...Deiists & Universalist[s] in those days were scarce.

Just north of Nashville, preacher Reuben Ross marveled at his congregation’s unity, as “all seemed serious and thoughtful, and very much disposed to huddle together” and “many knees bent in prayer that had, perhaps, never bent in that way before.” Communal piety often

¹⁰ Polly Wilson McGee to Joshua Lacy Wilson, February 24, 1812, Joshua Lacy Wilson Papers, University of Chicago Special Collections Research Center; Peter A. Pelham to Sarah Dromgoole, May 3, 1812, in *The Methodists, 1783-1840*, ed. William Warren Sweet (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 201.

dissipated, but an individual's spiritual crisis could linger. An 1830 obituary for a New Madrid man mentioned that the earthquakes occasioned "the necessity of a change of heart, which he never lost until he tasted the pardoning love of God about four years later."¹¹

These published memories served their own evangelical purposes of celebrating revivalism's past and promoting its future. Their authors might easily be accused of exaggerating the tremors' impact, if not for the combination of Methodist and Baptist statistics, firsthand observations, and unpublished memoirs that support their claims. Though she was only nine years old at the time, in her handwritten retelling of her life, nonagenarian Mary Morriss Smith of Tennessee still remembered the earthquakes among the most important handful of events: "They knew not the cause of those heavy shakes. The houses, the trees, the whole earth shook. Some thought the end of the world was come and time would be no more...They had meeting[,] sang and prayed and tried to prepare for the last day."¹²

Empirical Knowledge and the Divine

The tremors were an important catalyst for trans-Appalachian evangelicalism. But the numbers and descriptions of people "getting religion" during the revivalism of 1812 that support this claim are less useful for analyzing this burgeoning movement's intellectual concerns and internal tensions. The growth of a community of people who claimed spiritual

¹¹ "New Madrid Earthquake Account of Col. John Shaw," *Missouri Historical Review* 6, no. 2 (1912), 91-92; Jacob Bower, "The Autobiography of Jacob Bower: A Frontier Baptist Preacher and Missionary," in *The Baptists, 1783-1830: A Collection of Source Material*, ed. William Warren Sweet (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1964), 191; James Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires & Rodgers, 1882), 203; "Biographical Department," *Christian Advocate and Zion's Herald*, July 16, 1830, 184.

¹² "Mary Morriss Smith Memoirs, 1886-1895," TSLA. On Smith, see "I, Mary Morriss Smith, do recollect..." ed. Virginia Lawlor, *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 29, no. 1 (1970), 79-87.

salvation through personal conversion experiences created challenges in defining the boundaries of the rightful Christian community and evangelical authority. In an era of revivalism, denominational rivalry, and expanded access to print, determining who could lead and what special sources of knowledge from which those leaders could draw were, of course, contested processes. Examining how people sifted through these various sources of knowledge during and immediately following the earthquakes shows that trans-Appalachian settler communities were not revivalistic release valves opposing the rationalism and empiricism that early national elites embraced. Personal recollections and print discussions of the earthquakes also reveal evangelical concerns about the authenticity of conversion experiences, denominational tensions, the pitfalls of “backsliding,” and whether the earthquakes betokened some greater calamity. Settlers employed empirical methods and reasoned discussion to investigate the earthquakes’ relationship to the divine.

During the tremors, evangelical Americans did not simply close their eyes and pray to be taken away to Heaven. While the earthquakes provoked questions about divine agency, prayer, and the apocalypse, settlers’ otherworldly preoccupations did not prevent them from investigating the natural world. Though far removed from cosmopolitan nodes of the Enlightenment, they drew from a variety of sources of knowledge at hand – personal observations of the environment during earthquakes, memories of other natural phenomena, the Bible, and theories about airborne or underground causes – to construct earthquake interpretations that muddy any distinction one might be tempted to draw between “religious” and “scientific” understandings of nature in the early republic.

A number of individual cases illustrate how backcountry evangelicals drew from porous systems of knowledge and reached various conclusions about earthquakes’ immediate

natural causes and larger significance. From his boat on the Mississippi River near the epicenter, Scottish botanist John Bradbury described the scene of the first earthquake in vivid detail. He recounted:

The trees fell on both sides of the river were most violently agitated, and the banks in several places fell in, within our view carrying with them innumerable trees, the crash of which falling into the river, mixed with the terrible sound attending the shock, and the screaming of geese and other wild fowl, produced an idea that all nature was in a state of dissolution.

After tremors halted his progress down the river, Bradbury docked his boat and visited a small community near the Lower Chickasaw Bluffs. Observing a “bible lying open on the table” in a log cabin packed with anxious people, Bradbury spoke with a man who explained that the earthquakes were the result of the earth trying to dislodge itself from its position between “two horns” of a comet that had appeared in recent months. If the earth were successful in its endeavor to free itself from the horns of the comet, “all would be well, if otherwise, inevitable destruction to the world would follow.” “Finding the man confident in his hypothesis” and “unable to refute it,” Bradbury continued down the Mississippi.¹³

Given the antagonism that exists between religious and scientific understandings of nature today, it would be convenient to project this dichotomy back in time to suppose that Bradbury’s encounter with the apocalyptically-minded settler demonstrates an irreconcilable divide between science and religion that spans United States history. On the surface, Bradbury’s meticulous observations contrast with his counterpart’s astrological musings in the same way that Enlightenment rationalism allegedly opposed Christian enthusiasm. However, the settler acted empirically by observing and theorizing about the array of natural phenomena that surrounded him in the last days of 1811. The “horned comet” that this

¹³ Bradbury, *Travels in the Interior of America*, 204-9.

settler linked to the earthquake was the Great Comet of 1811, which was most prominent in American skies throughout the preceding autumn and captivated observers across the world with its brilliant pronged tail. His vivid memory of the Great Comet, a bible, and a major earthquake created the perfect recipe for his eschatological concern.¹⁴

Not all evangelical settlers assumed that the apocalypse was imminent. They may have considered the earthquakes divinely sanctioned, but the tremors remained natural events that were observed and studied without diminishing their otherworldly significance.

Kentucky schoolmaster John Allan ultimately became a Baptist during the tremors. He identified the shaking that first awoke him as an earthquake, not a portent of end times.

Allan rose out of bed to see if his sister “had either got up in her sleep and was dancing or had fallen into a fit.” He then realized the “real cause of the commotion,” informed his wife that they would “probably have another shock in a few minutes,” and, having “satisfied” himself as to the cause of the disturbance, “slept soundly till daylight.” Perhaps wondering if he had only dreamed about the earthquake, Allan awoke the next morning “expressing a strong desire to witness another shock.” The earth granted his wish, and he “was then quite satisfied and had no desire to see any more shocks.” Allan would later convert, although he emphasized that he had “been more or less serious for several years” about becoming a Baptist and found “the reproach of having merely an earthquake religion” terrifying.

Between sleeping soundly after the first tremor and hoping for another earthquake to confirm the cause of the previous night’s shaking, Allan’s understanding of the earthquake was never

¹⁴ On the Great Comet of 1811, see Gary W. Kronk, *Cometography: A Catalog of Comets*, vol. 2 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 19-28, and Roberta J.M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff, *Fire in the Sky: Comets and Meteors, the Decisive Centuries, in British Art and Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 100, 120-131. Astronomer William Herschel and landscape artist John Linnell sketched the Great Comet’s long two-pronged tail from England.

apocalyptic. And once church attendance and disciplined behavior ceased with the tremors, he insisted that his was not an inauthentic “earthquake religion” of convenience.¹⁵

As his Tennessee community struggled to interpret a range of foreboding natural phenomena, Baptist preacher Reuben Ross walked a fine line between stoking revivalism and assuaging fear. The community’s unease predated the shaking. When a stranger in town died, Ross took to organizing a burial that had not ended by dusk. As the final shovels of dirt filled the grave, people noticed the Great Comet:

I need not say it caused a deep sensation in a crowd, all of whom had been taught to look upon comets as harbingers of impending calamity. To add to our misfortunes still further, the northern lights were particularly showy and beautiful this season. And when they would change rapidly from one part of the heavens to another, and sometimes assume a dark red hue, many thought that the movements of armies and bloodshed were portended, and lost heart altogether.

Like the horned comet theorist that Bradbury encountered on the Mississippi, Ross’ community clearly reached beyond the Bible for sources of knowledge to interpret the evening’s eerie combination of the comet of 1811, the northern lights, and a stranger’s burial. Coupled with local intrigue and rumors of impending hostility with the British, these astronomical oddities stretched settlers’ interpretations beyond the boundaries of what the Bible could explain. As a preacher, Ross had the responsibility to judge ideas as either productive for strengthening his religious community or likely to threaten his interpretive authority and his community’s ability to function.¹⁶

A few months later, the earthquakes amplified the community’s anxiety about the broader consequences of instability in the natural world. Concerned that the shaking would

¹⁵Allan, “Extracts from the Autobiography of John Allan,” 826.

¹⁶Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross*, 201.

collapse their houses, people huddled around nighttime fires to hear Ross' explanation of this more pervasive sign of danger. He capitalized on the opportunity to preach about God's capacity to punish humans for sinful behavior, as well the human ability to avert disaster, by relating the Old Testament story of Nineveh, a major city in the ancient Assyrian empire. He told them that God spared this ancient civilization from destruction because all Ninevites "repented of their sins." Ross encouraged his audience to do the same, suggesting that they had the ability to mediate the divine through prayer and repentance. Accordingly, "knees bent in prayer that had, perhaps, never bent in that way before." Ross' selection of the Ninevite story was curious, because two books later in the Hebrew Bible, the prophet Nahum foretold Ninevah's destruction. In a vivid description of divine wrath visited upon the city for the Assyrian empire's oppression of neighboring polities, Nahum referenced earthquakes and wartime bloodshed, two realities that Ross' congregation also faced in the winter of 1812. And the Assyrian city indeed fell in the seventh century BCE. Ross' selective narration of the Ninevites' plight epitomized the way in which all early nineteenth-century earthquake authorities sifted through a variety of sources of information at hand to construct interpretations that advanced particular objectives. In this case, Ross appropriated the earthquakes for evangelism and grounded his interpretation in a biblical story about the importance of piety, but he privileged one Ninevite story over another in order to promote community stability.¹⁷

Ross also calmed people's otherworldly fears with sources of knowledge beyond the Bible. He explained that earthquakes resulted from "great fires raging in the bowels of the

¹⁷ Ibid., 203-04. On Ninevah in the Book of Jonah and the Book of Nahum, see Theodore Hiebert's introductions to the books in *The Access Bible: New Revised Standard Version*, eds. Gail R. O'Day and David Peterson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1192, 1207.

earth,” a natural cause worthy of study. When “many became very despondent and were little disposed to make preparation for a crop,” he encouraged them to continue farming, as “there were many instances on record, where after the earth had been violently agitated for a time, no great calamity had been suffered by the people where it had occurred.” For Ross, the long-term threat of starvation outweighed the need for immediate congregational piety. Like many thinkers in this age of empiricism and widened access to information, Ross drew from disparate sources of written and experiential knowledge to try to restore a sense of order and understanding to his frightened and confused congregation. From biblical references, theories about the natural causes of earthquakes, and his own observations regarding the impact of earthquakes and the importance of agriculture, this literate but hardly classically educated preacher constructed a useful empirical response to the disaster.¹⁸

While Ross believed that “great fires raging in the bowels of the earth” were the natural mechanisms responsible for the shaking, other settlers looked to the sky to develop earthquake interpretations that merged empirical observation with evangelical concerns about sin and conversion. Perhaps because they were located further from the epicenter, their readings were less alarmist than the horned comet theory. In Kentucky, teenager Abraham Snethen, who later became an independent itinerant preacher, believed the comet had induced the earthquakes by striking the earth. As others gathered around his community’s only literate person to listen to her read the Bible, Snethen focused on the sky. With characteristic disregard for orthographic convention, he remembered “there was an earthquak in the year Eliven and a commet just before and as it had just went out of sight when the earthquake occurd it was thought it had hit earth and mad it shake.” According to

¹⁸ Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross*, 202-05.

Presbyterian minister John Carrigan, North Carolina's skies were alight with other oddities before the earthquakes. On a November afternoon before the earthquakes, he witnessed a meteor "attended with a fulminating noise." A curious "whitish substance, resembling a duck in size and shape" accompanied the meteor before tailing off in a cloud of smoke. "Whether these things are ominous or not, one thing is certain, this is a time of extraordinaries," he wrote. His observations and reasoning demonstrated the possibility for experiential and confessional understandings of nature. Being a Presbyterian minister required a more formal education than what was available to a backcountry Methodist or Baptist preacher, and as an informant for New York naturalist and politician Samuel Mitchill's published report on the earthquakes, Carrigan provided empirical data to the nation's elite scientific societies. But communities across North America entertained the idea that abnormal sights in the sky were related to the tremors.¹⁹

Empirical observations about the sky and the atmosphere figured into other readings of the earthquakes' religious significance. Whereas Snethen and Carrigan linked the shaking to discrete airborne objects like comets and meteors, other American observers connected the earthquakes to both Christian messages and more general conditions in the nighttime air. Amid their detailed observations, these accounts also associated the feeling of higher air density and darkness with central evangelical concerns: guilt about sin, the need for belief and behavioral reform, and divine judgment through destruction. Lydia Bacon, who accompanied her husband on military campaigns through the Old Northwest in 1811 and 1812, sent a number of letters detailing her earthquake experiences back to her family in New

¹⁹ "The Autobiography of Abraham Snethen, Frontier Preacher," ed. Paul Woehrmann, *The Filson Club Historical Quarterly* 51 (1977), 319-20; John Carrigan to Israel Pickens, February 28, 1812, in Samuel L. Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes," 299.

England. Like many Americans in the backcountry, she first believed the tremors were American Indians breaking into her house in Vincennes. After describing the damage, Bacon identified the quaking as one of many divine judgments that “shew us the fallibility, of earthly enjoyments, & the necessity of religion, to make us happy, & enable us to view these judgments, as we ought, how mild are they compared with what our sins deserve.” She then addressed her younger sister directly, urging “youth is time for preparation, Piety in youth is delightful.” In the letter that followed, Bacon explained that she tried to use the weather to predict the next tremors: “I often rise in the night & go to the door to examine the Weather, for the most severe ones have been felt in calm lowering weather,” she wrote. Describing the array of strange lights in the nighttime sky that accompanied the earthquakes, Moravian missionaries in Cherokee country “had a very strange feeling...that perhaps the Day of the Lord had come.” As he contemplated Baptist conversion, Jacob Bower merged evangelical concerns and detailed meteorological observations that mirrored those of Bacon and the missionaries:

The Lord have mercy upon us, we shall all be sunk & lost, and I am not prepared. O God have mercy upon us all. I expected immediate destruction, had no hope of seeing the dawn of another day. Eternity, oh Eternity was just at hand, and all of us unprepared; just about the time the sun arose, as I supposed, for it was a thick, dark and foggy morning there was another verry hard shock – lasted several minutes terrible indeed. To see everything touching the earth, shakeing – quivering trembling; and mens hearts quaking for fear of the approaching judgment...All nature appeared to be dressed in mourning, and the god of nature frowning, oh what a time of melancholy.²⁰

These brief observations pointed to a fundamental question that elite academic circles had debated since the inception of the “airquake” theory in the 1750s: were the earthquakes

²⁰ Lydia Bacon, “Lydia B. Bacon's Journal, 1811-1812,” ed. Mary M. Crawford, *Indiana Magazine of History* 40, no. 10 (1944), 385; John and Anna Rosina Gambold to Samuel Stoltz, February 15, 1812, Springplace Correspondence, trans. Elizabeth Marx, MASP; Bower, “The Autobiography of Jacob Bower: A Frontier Baptist Preacher and Missionary,” 191-92.

related to conditions or movement in the air? And yet amid their observations about extent of the damage and the tremors' potential links to darkness and low pressure, these people also grappled with otherworldly issues. The earthquakes made these issues more pressing, as they gave tangible form to preachers' exhortations about sin and judgment. Empiricism and evangelicalism – two influential intellectual trends reliant on individual experience and observation – were not mutually exclusive frameworks for understanding how the natural world worked in the backcountry of the early republic.

Just as newspapers and eastern experts in natural history distinguished between true and fabricated observations before publishing earthquake reports, preachers questioned the sincerity of evangelical commitments, particularly when church attendance dropped after the tremors ended. In this case, monitoring behavior after the earthquakes became the way to gauge authentic conversion and genuine belief. The term “Earthquake Christians” became a popular way to describe people who filled the pews and refrained from ungodly behavior like drinking and dancing during the tremors, yet abandoned these commitments when the shaking stopped. On “Earthquake Christians,” Ross explained that “as the earth became more and more steady, their faith became more and more unsteady,” and they soon stopped their “pious walk and godly conversation.” After previously celebrating the ecumenical gathering of 2,000 Catholics and Protestants bowed in prayer, the visitor to New Madrid noted on another visit that the same people there “became so accustomed to the recurring vibrations, that they paid little or no regard to them, not even interrupting or checking their dances, frolics, and vices.” Church membership rolls lent statistical credence to these laments. After growing by more than 15,000 people in 1812, the two western Methodist

conferences lost nearly 2000 members in 1813. Baptisms among Baptist associations also declined substantially in 1813 (see Tables 1 and 6).²¹

Preachers were not alone in questioning the authenticity of evangelical conversions in their congregations. Doubts about the legitimacy of people's conversion experiences and the durability of their commitments lingered in the minds of believers and skeptics alike. John Allan found it "mortifying...that I might subject myself to the reproach of having merely an earthquake religion." He noted that a majority of people "threw off their concerns as soon as the earth ceased to shake" and wondered whether his experience was any different. Allan came to trust the legitimacy of his conversion. Like many commentators who complained about backsliding, he tried to validate the widespread but short-lived revivalism by pointing to people who maintained sturdier evangelical commitments. Bower responded to doubts about long-term impact of earthquake revivalism in similar terms. Arguing that some backsliding was inevitable, he claimed to have met a number of ministers who converted during the earthquakes. Even some people who did not participate in the revivals recognized their social function amidst danger and uncertainty. Polly Wilson McGee in Indiana Territory appreciated the solace that those engaged in a nearby revival found in the experience: "all that I could say was this if it was a delusion it was a glorious one for I soon saw they were much happier than I while I was affraid at every convulsive pang of nature that the earth would open her MOUTH and Swallow me up alive."²²

²¹ Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross*, 204; Shaw, "New Madrid Earthquake Account of Col. John Shaw," 92.

²² Allan, "Extracts from the Autobiography of J. Allan," 826; Polly Wilson McGee to Joshua Lacy Wilson, March 25, 1812, University of Chicago Special Collections. Allan's meditations on sleepless nights of self-doubt also capture a perspective missing in the celebratory tone of many nineteenth-century narrations of evangelicalism's western growth: evangelical conversion could be an exhausting, unpleasant experience.

From John Allan struggling with the authenticity of his conversion experience to Lydia Bacon linking the earthquakes to “lowering weather” to Polly Wilson McGee remarking that the “delusion” of revival remained “glorious” even if it were imagined, evangelicalism framed, but did not bind, many settlers’ perspectives on the earthquakes. These varied perspectives also point to a form of experimentation within the available ideas at hand that did not conform to evangelical authorities’ preoccupations with the strict divisions between faith and apostasy, and between salvation and damnation. In sermons and print discussions about proper behavior and the pitfalls of backsliding, preachers certainly drew a hard line, but when Ira Ellis Cornelius sat to write in his diary and Reuben Ross spoke to his congregation about the Ninevites, “great fires raging in the bowels of the earth,” and the need to plant, they drew from an amalgamation of knowledge grounded in personal observations and experiences.

Near the exit of this arena of experimentation with evangelical and observational ideas about the earthquakes was outright skepticism. Despite believers’ efforts to justify the earthquakes’ punctuated effect on the behavior of newly converted people as a predictable outcome of mass conversions, skeptics seized on earthquake revivalism to argue that evangelical warnings and behavior were alarmist and excessive. They particularly criticized people whose bodies shook like the earth. “It was frequently said by the enemies of religion, the Baptists are all *shakers*, that when the earth is don[e] shaking, they will all turn back, and be as they were before,” wrote Bower. The “jerks” were prominent in Mary Morriss Smith’s memories of the earthquakes. Although the practice had “measurably subsided” since the great revivals at the turn of nineteenth century, Smith remembered a vigorous debate in her community about the causes and remedies for the jerks during the earthquakes, as well a

cautionary tale about doubting people's capacity to jerk involuntarily. She wrote, "There were skepticks in those days who thought this a voluntary exercise. They could keep from jerking if they wished. If anyone spoke reproachfully of it they were sure to have the jerks and their whole bodies jerk till they would fall prostrate to the earth." One young skeptic "took the jerks and fell prostrate with his nice clothes" into a hog wallow.²³

While the jerks were difficult to explain, young law student Joseph Underwood believed he understood the source of people's unnecessary fright in Lexington, Kentucky. Watchmen told their neighbors that while on patrol, they heard "aerial songs, which portent an awful desolation." The song was a verse from an early eighteenth-century hymn urging repentance: "While the lamp holds out to burn / The vilest sinner may return." In a letter to his uncle, Underwood was deeply skeptical about the "aerial songs," which sprung from "the imaginations of the watchmen influenced by fear in the hour of midnight." Either their imaginations had deceived them, or they had conspired to frighten people, who because of the earthquakes, were "now ready to believe in and wonder at miracles." In Underwood's estimation, the earthquakes did not betoken "very serious consequences." If other strange events were to occur, however, it was prudent "to await the calamity with courage and not anticipate horrors which may never result."²⁴

As a law student in Lexington, Underwood and his skepticism were representative of Kentucky's class and geographical divides. Lexington's Methodist population grew in 1812, but not at nearly the rates in less urbanizing areas of Kentucky (see Table 3). Underwood's dismissal of people "now ready to believe in and wonder at miracles" extended a pattern that

²³ Bower, "The Autobiography of Jacob Bower," 200; Mary Morriss Smith Memoirs, 14-20.

²⁴ Joseph R. Underwood to Edmund Rogers, February 13, 1812, Underwood Collection, Western Kentucky University Special Collections Library.

began in mid eighteenth-century New England, where formally educated people increasingly dismissed less-educated evangelical peoples' claims about the pressing religious significance of natural phenomena. The nature of the earthquakes, whereby magnitude depended on proximity to the epicenters, make it more difficult to assess whether this social divide held in other areas of the United States and its territories. People along the East Coast gathering accounts dismissed some reports from further inland as exaggerated and fantastic. But had they witnessed people disappear in cracks and the Mississippi River appear as though it were running backwards, they might have reserved judgment.²⁵

Evangelical Debates in Print

While evangelical settlers' personal memories and community discussions about the earthquakes left questions open to interpretation, evangelical claims in the early republic's burgeoning print culture were often much less equivocal. Armed with the Hebrew Bible, they depicted God as a punisher who used the earthquakes, among a sequence of other foreboding signs, to deliver a direct, urgent message about the need to convert for protection from further destruction. But this uncompromising stance did not go unopposed. Just as people questioned the authenticity and durability of "earthquake religion," so too did writers criticize the definitive and often menacing conclusions that Lorenzo Dow and other figures sought to draw from the tremors and other upheaval in late 1811 and early 1812, which included the comet, the publication of a pamphlet foretelling widespread destruction, the Richmond theater fire, and the threat of war. This growing, and possibly related, sequence of

²⁵ On tensions between lawyers and evangelicals in Lexington and the disregard that Lexington newspapers showed for the "Great Revival" in the first years of the nineteenth century, see Aron, *How the West Was Lost*, 187-88. On social divisions over interpreting natural phenomena in late colonial and early national New England, see Sara Beth Errington, "Wonders and the Creation of Evangelical Culture in New England, 1720-1820."

strange events amplified the stakes of the debate about divine intentionality. In print discussions about the religious significance of these phenomena, people debated broader questions that the Enlightenment and evangelical awakenings had mutually provoked. In an era of emphasis on individual experience – through evangelical conversion, empirical inquiry, or some combination thereof – on what grounds could people claim interpretive authority and from which sources of knowledge could they draw? While theological questions about divine intentionality and punishment bred open-ended answers, writers also appropriated the era’s instability to advance more specific claims about the need for missions and moral reform in the West.

The fall comet set the tone for discussions about the religious significance of natural phenomena and their connections to human order. A contributor to Baltimore’s *Weekly Register* newspaper enumerated a number of calculations related to the comet and ended a largely mathematical discussion with an esoteric rumination on the mysteriousness of God’s “Infinite Mind” and humanity’s “dependence” on the divine. His dual commitments to studying the comet and emphasizing the limits of human comprehension and the necessity of religious devotion captured one prevailing perspective in print discussions of the earthquakes’ religious significance: as long as humans recognized their limits and God’s omnipotence, natural phenomena were worthy objects of study. In *The Comet Explained and Improved*, a New England pamphlet fashioned as a dialogue between a minister and a parishioner, the minister explained that the comet was “2000 times hotter than red-hot iron,” and “it flies at the amazing swiftness of 880,000 miles in one hour!” It was also a demonstration of divine power and order: “Consider then, how dreadful is the power of that Almighty arm, which so launches these Comets, that they pass beyond the limits of our

world; with such measured and exact force” that they pass by the Earth and inspire awe in its inhabitants without hitting them. The pamphlet concluded its gentle, expository tone with a starker warning that “if we have not been *born again*, we cannot be admitted to the kingdom of heaven.” The amalgamation of mathematical and theological points in *The Comet Explained and Improved* typified the early republic’s eclectic intellectual culture.²⁶

Nimrod Hughes tested the limits of this eclectic intellectual culture. Written in 1810, Hughes’ *A Solemn Warning to all the Dwellers Upon the Earth* merged his visions of widespread catastrophe with creative biblical calculations to foretell the “Certain DESTRUCTION of ONE THIRD OF MANKIND” on June 4, 1812. The visions came to him while incarcerated – wrongly, he claimed – in Abingdon, Virginia. He described an evocative scene of a tempest with wind that leveled entire forests and hail “like the roaring of thousands of guns continually firing and bursting without intermission.” People “were destroyed, torn to pieces and mangled amongst the ruins of the earth.” Human suffering did not end with the storm. As he contemplated his first vision, Hughes felt carried away from his prison cell and placed at the precipice of a “deep and dismal dark pit” into which people of “every rank and station” tumbled. The fact that one-third of humanity was to die on that June day in 1812 was inescapable. Denominational divisions fed “unbelief,” and the earth was “full of iniquity and violence, fraud and blasphemy, with every species of pollution and uncleanness.” He claimed that although people read the scriptures, they “were totally blind to their most important meanings.” To devise his doomsday date, he employed a

²⁶ *Weekly Register*, “Astronomical. History of the Comet,” March 7, 1812; *The Comet Explained and Improved, in a Conversation between a Minister and One of his Parishioners* (Boston: Lincoln and Edmands, 1812), 2-4. On the popularization of enlightenment principles and their intersections with evangelicalism in the Early Republic, see Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 35-36; Wood, “Evangelical America and Early Mormonism,” 359-86.

complicated series of calculations related to the Book of Daniel and discussions about numerology and Kabbalism.²⁷

The growing popular print culture in the United States, coupled with evangelicalism's emphasis on sin and individual revelation, the Enlightenment's commitment to deciphering the universe's mysteries, and the nation's unsteady geopolitical footing, opened space for Americans to consider Nimrod Hughes' claims to special access and authority without immediately dismissing them. This expansive intellectual climate also created a forum to repudiate him, and Hughes anticipated skeptics. "Let no man say that this vision was the effect of a crazed or disturbed imagination," he wrote. Hoping to protect his supernatural experience and calculations from skeptics' "vain contradictions and useless criticisms," Hughes also argued that the publication was not "a mere scheme" to make money. The cost to the consumer paled in comparison to the time and expense required in preparing such a detailed study, and ideally he would have had the means to distribute it "gratis over the whole earth." He conceded that doubts would persist, but on the appointed day, he would "hear the exclaim amidst their frightful shrieks and bitter roaring: 'O! now I know that Hughes was right. He declared the truth, but we would not believe it.'"²⁸

A Solemn Warning provoked conversations across the United States, and like his ideas, Hughes' reception ranged widely. In a November 1811 letter to his cousin in Ohio, a man noted that the work had been "a matter of Great alarm and astonishment" in western Pennsylvania, where newspapers claimed that some predictions had already come true. He

²⁷ Nimrod Hughes, *A Solemn Warning to all the Dwellers Upon the Earth*, 2nd ed. (New-Jersey: Printed for the Book-Sellers, n.d.), 1-24. In her study of a series of Anglo-American prophets in the revolutionary and early national periods, Susan Juster has situated Hughes among a "rogues' gallery" of self-styled prophets who exploited the increasing commercialism of early nineteenth-century print culture. See Juster, *Doomsayers*, 178-215.

²⁸ Hughes, *A Solemn Warning*, 10, 16-22.

had not read the prophecy, but he did not dismiss it entirely. “Time alone can solve whether he is inspired to foretell future events, or is influenced, by the power of enthusiasm,” he concluded, distinguishing between the inspiration of biblical prophecy and the delusions of enthusiasm. During the same month in New Orleans, an African-American man aggregated an array of knowledge forms – ancient, astronomical, and prophetic – to decree “that two thirds of the inhabitants of the earth will be destroyed by the Comet; on the 18th March next, in honour of the birth day of the young King of Rome.” Among other sources, this New Orleans prophet clearly drew from Hughes to foretell the proportional destruction of humanity. Seeking to capitalize on the alarming sequence of events taking shape after the second major earthquake in January 1812, distributors of the pamphlet announced in the *New-Jersey Journal* that it had been received and was available for purchase.²⁹

The new year also brought a backlash against Hughes, as commentators questioned his character, criticized those who believed him, and sought to silence speculation for good when June 4, 1812, finally arrived. In southwestern Ohio, Moravian missionaries complained that “the prognostications of a so called prophet among the whites in Virginia,” among other factors, led people to believe that the world would soon end. Hughes claimed to have been imprisoned falsely; in a letter reprinted in several newspapers, an Abingdon, Virginia, resident forcefully indicated otherwise:

He is one of the greatest villains I ever knew...he was in jail here 6 or 9 months, for stealing bacon and burning a barn; and notwithstanding he was acquitted, it is generally believed he is guilty. There is no man who is acquainted with him would believe a word he says; much less have confidence in his

²⁹ John Widney to Samuel Williams, November 13, 1811, Samuel Williams Manuscripts, Eli Lilly Library; *Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, November 27, 1811, 2; *New-Jersey Journal*, January 21, 1812, 4. Roman emperor Caligula was born on March 18.

prophecy, and I was never more astonished than to hear that his pamphlet excited a single enquiry. But people of superstitious minds are always ready to catch at shadows.

Other writers advanced this simultaneous critique of Hughes' character and the climate of superstition that permitted people to believe him. According to a widely reprinted editorial, Hughes' writing contained "the visions of a bigot, just let loose from prison" that was "at war with the lessons of philosophy." On June 3, 1812, the day before the supposed destruction of one-third of humanity, the *Georgia Journal* excoriated Hughes and any Georgians who believed him. The newspaper argued that the United States had advanced beyond the "superstitious folly of New England brethren" and their "implicit faith in the existence of witchcraft and sorcery." Believing in Hughes' prophecy threatened to return Georgia to the "mists of superstition." "Away then with this nonsense, and let us hear no more of Hughes or his prophecy," the editorial concluded, urging readers not to be "the dupes of his villainy."³⁰

While the early republic's intellectual culture was more open and diffuse than its European counterparts, the sources of knowledge that Hughes used to support his claims and interpretive authority fell outside its wide, republican boundaries. In particular, critics attacked his character, a move also employed by naturalists skeptical of fantastic claims about the earthquakes' improbable impact on the Mississippi River. How could God, and by extension humans, trust a bacon thief and barnburner with such special and urgent knowledge? American religious, scientific, and political authorities all had to balance the inherent tension between encouraging the wide input of the republic's citizens and retreating back into the "mists of superstition."

³⁰ Goshen (Ohio) Mission Diary, February 7, 1812, Moravian Archives-Northern Province; *The Columbian*, January 23, 1812, 3; *New-York Herald*, February 8, 1812, 1; *Georgia Journal* June 3, 1812.

On June 4, the day of destruction that Hughes had calculated so meticulously, a Maryland preacher delivered a sermon denouncing the supposed prophet once and for all. He then converted the address into a pamphlet that called for readers to focus more on God's capacity to order the universe than to punish it. "Were God to suspend the laws of nature, on occasion of a very great crime that was committed on earth, and to govern the world by frequent interpositions of a miraculous kind, the whole order of human affairs would be unhinged," he wrote. While the lack of destruction on the appointed day easily discredited Hughes, the preacher remained compelled to address the "extraordinary changes and commotions" during the first half of 1812. These remained undeniably "eventful days," with "great sufferings, nationally and individually; wars and rumours of wars; pestilence, famine, and earthquakes; nation rising up against nation, and kingdom against kingdom." He explained that natural phenomena such as earthquakes were "indispensably necessary" and stemmed from "physical causes" that were "consistent with the unsearchable plans of infinite wisdom." While the natural mechanisms responsible for earthquakes were worth understanding, God's broader plans lay beyond the full comprehension of any human, much less one man of ill repute. He nevertheless recognized the startling signs of instability and urged followers to cope with "such extraordinary changes and commotions" with calm, sustained piety, not the short-lived, hysterical outbursts that Hughes provoked but could not sustain.³¹

The scope and substance of the backlash against Hughes show that his opponents did not take his alarmism lightly. Beyond the foreboding nature of his message, Hughes

³¹ *An Address, Delivered in Havre-de-Grace, June 4, 1812: In Consequence of a Pamphlet set forth by a certain Nimrod Hughes, Denouncing that day as the awful period of visitation to the inhabitants of this earth, by the Almighty.* (Baltimore: B.W. Sower, & Co., 1812), 1-15.

constituted a threat not because he was an easily dismissed, aberrant quack, but because he channeled popular, legitimate trends in early nineteenth-century Anglo-American thought to update a timeless Christian concern. And as accounts from Louisiana, Maryland, Ohio, and Pennsylvania demonstrate, people living well beyond his home state took his pamphlet seriously. Hughes knew well that in the intellectual climate of the early republic, people did not dismiss possibilities easily. By defaming him and urging calm, critics sought to regulate boundaries of divine knowledge and access that the evangelical movement had rendered less hierarchical and more permeable. They questioned his interpretive authority by pointing to the “superstition” and excessive “enthusiasm” embedded in his claims, not his emphasis on direct revelation or sin.

Surprisingly, Hughes never updated editions of *A Solemn Warning* to include the disturbing series of events that gripped the nation in late 1811 and into 1812. Beyond the earthquakes, there was ample evidence to promote Hughes’ depiction of God as Old Testament punisher. On the evening after Christmas 1811, flames engulfed the Richmond Theater, killing the Governor of Virginia and 71 other people. Virginians felt the earthquake ten days prior to the fire, but this local tragedy gripped the public more than the faint shaking. Many evangelicals seized on the fire’s location to argue for moral reform. Like drinking and dancing, they viewed theater going as a frivolous, godless activity that God had punished with the fire.³²

Calamity at Richmond, a pamphlet decrying theater going as immoral, prompted a contentious debate about divine intentionality between two anonymous writers in the pages of Washington City’s *National Intelligencer*. While they never addressed the earthquakes

³² On the Richmond Theater Fire of 1811, see Meredith Henne Baker, *The Richmond Theater Fire: Early America’s First Great Disaster* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2012).

directly, their disagreement framed how Americans variously interpreted God's role, or lack thereof, in the unexpected disasters of 1811 and 1812. Mirroring Hughes' critics, "Philo-Dramaticus" opened the exchange by arguing that the pamphlet's main points were "grounded in superstition" and "inconsistent with experience." Religious leaders like the pamphlet's author sought "to destroy every relish for rational amusement, and depress the energies of genius," but science allowed humans to see "the true nature of things," which was "the endless succession of cause and effect," not God's direct hand in every event. In this case, the fire was a natural accident, not divine judgment. Philo in no way denied God's existence; he believed in a "benevolent and merciful being." Indeed if fires were divine judgment, why did more churches burn down than theaters?³³

Philo's main critic, "Vindex," responded with three treatises that argued for divine intervention while defending the intellectual curiosity of Christians. He particularly seized on Philo's notion of "the endless succession of cause and effect" as a dangerous philosophy that "leaves every thing to the wild and ungovernable caprice of chance." Isaac Newton "knew a *little* about the laws of nature" and yet he was a Christian. Vindex found it inconceivable to deny "the hand of a Prime Mover, a Great Master-Operator in the scene," particularly "in this day of monstrous degeneracy, of sad and criminal indifference to every thing sacred." He also questioned how a philosophical person like Philo could remain so fatalistic and nonchalant amid so many "awful operations in the works of nature." Where Philo found an accidental disruption to divine order, Vindex found alarming synchronicity.

³³ *National Intelligencer*, February 1, 1812, 3.

“If we hear not the voice of God in these instances, what will we hear?” he asked in his third response to Philo’s initial salvo.³⁴

Intentionally ignoring their common belief in a Christian God, Philo and Vindex exaggerated the implications of their counterpart’s positions. The debate was as notable for its sharp tone as its ideas about divine intervention. Philo’s provocative initial rhetoric – priests’ minds were “cramped by stupidity” and their efforts were “sanctified bigotry” in his estimation – violated the newspaper’s boundaries of polite conversation about religion. A letter to the editor regretted that so much of the newspaper had been devoted to refuting Philo, whose piece “was really unworthy of notice, and seemed to demand no answer, except a caution to the public that the writer was probably an infidel.” The editors of the *National Intelligencer* noted that they “unequivocally disapprove of the style of the letter,” which was the “opposite extreme” of the pamphlet’s equally distasteful tone. When characterizing each other’s views, Philo and Vindex never heeded this call for moderation, and their escalating language demonstrated the charged nature of the issue. To Vindex, his faith was “an impenetrable shield to all the attacks of those destroyers of our peace” like Philo, whom he sarcastically noted, “claiming upon the broad privilege of those modern days, arrogate themselves the high and honorable distinction – of philosophers.” If he were to assume such a title, Vindex believed he would “be a perpetual war with myself, and all within the gloomy, perturbed sphere of my *capricious, anxious, undecisive, distracted* mind!” While Vindex never mentioned Thomas Paine by name, Philo took offense at being compared to the radical. He then claimed that Vindex’s support for the idea of divine intervention in the theater fire “conveys its absolute savageness and imbecility.” He closed his final letter by instructing

³⁴ Ibid., February 8, 1812, 1; February 13, 1812, 1; February 15, 1812, 3.

Vindex to “retire to the monkish cell of desperate bigotry; and bellow thy frigid doctrines to the cold and cheerless walls.”³⁵

The theater fire, along with earthquake reports and the threat of war with Indians and the British, stoked concerns about what the North Carolina minister called “a time of extraordinaries.” In Washington City, a congressman reported that a preacher “spoke of the Richmond fire and intimated that the comet, the indian battle, the shock of Earthquakes were warnings to the nation.” The congressman believed “this was going too far, as they may be considered only the ordinary operations of nature,” but he found this alarming sequence of events nonetheless “worthy of notice” and hoped that it was “not ominous of national calamity.” The degree to which God was responsible for what seemed to be mutually unbalanced human and natural affairs was a contentious intellectual issue for all kinds of communities within and beyond the United States at the beginning of 1812.³⁶

When the earthquakes began, religious commentators in American print followed Vindex in attaching otherworldly significance to worldly upheaval. They also connected the alarming sequence of events, urging Christian faith and repentance for God’s mercy as means to cope with these displays of divine power. “We have had an uncommon year: and the moral as well as political world, appear to be undergoing some extraordinary change!” noted a letter writer in a February 1812 edition of a Savannah, Georgia, newspaper. “Let us unite in adoring HIM, ‘who causeth the earth to tremble, and the waves of the sea to be still.’” In newspapers and religious periodicals across the country, other writers echoed this mutual

³⁵ Ibid., February 8, 1812, 1; February 22, 1812, 3; February 29, 1812, 3; March 12, 1812, 1.

³⁶ Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, January 1, 1812 and January 5, 1812, “Letters of Abijah Bigelow, Member of Congress, To His Wife, 1810-1815,” ed. Clarence Brigham, *American Antiquarian Society, Proceedings* 40 (1930), 323.

emphasis on divine power and the foreboding and related nature of natural phenomena.

“What power short of OMNIPOTENCE, could raise and shake such a vast portion of the globe?” asked one person in Hartford’s *Connecticut Mirror*, later quoting a verse from the Book of Matthew about discerning “the signs of the times.” A man in Charleston, South Carolina, found it “vain and presumptuous” that one would attribute disasters to chance, as Philo had done with the theater fire, and he was glad that God spared his city “through his Divine Mercy.” *The Massachusetts Baptists Missionary Magazine* used poetry to cast the earthquakes as a poignant display of divine power: “How dread the Earthquake’s awful roll, / That shakes the earth from pole to pole! / What power can thus convulse the whole? Can it be less than Deity?”³⁷

While religious commentators agreed that the earthquakes were important signs of divine power, they drew different conclusions about the extent to which human reason could inform understandings of the earthquakes. In the first issue of *The Halcyon Luminary, and Theological Repository*, the editors of the New York publication explained that “*Natural and Scientific truths, so far from being incompatible with genuine theology, are absolutely necessary to constitute a well-informed mind.*” Accordingly, the journal contained an article about how God used volcanoes and earthquakes to relieve the heat and pressure built up from subterranean fires. The writer argued that small volcanoes were not always bad for humans, as volcano-prone areas had fertile soil. Furthermore, earthquakes would be more devastating if volcanoes did not exist to relieve underground heat and pressure. In the writer’s estimation, these phenomena were divinely ordained, though God’s intention was to prevent

³⁷ *Savannah Evening Ledger*, February 8, 1812, 2; *Connecticut Mirror*, February 2, 1812, 3-4; *New-York Herald*, February 22, 1812, 1; “The Earthquake,” *The Massachusetts Baptists Missionary Magazine* 3, no. 5 (1812), 160.

more major cataclysms, rather than to punish humans. Subsequent topics in the first issue – “Wonderful Construction of the Eye,” “Repentance and Conversion,” and “Solomon’s Temple” – blended Enlightenment reasoning with religious devotion.³⁸

But not all religious publications sought such epistemological harmony between the scientific study of the earthquakes and the belief that they were divinely ordained. They argued that the drive to uncover the earthquakes’ natural mechanisms obscured their primary importance as displays of divine will and power. Lexington, Kentucky’s *The Evangelical Record, and Western Review*, also first published in January 1812, classified three types of earthquake interpretation, only one of which was acceptable. Some people were “only brutes in human shape,” as they were too panic-stricken to consider the earthquakes’ meaning during the shaking and soon forgot about them. Others “carry their inquiries no farther than the natural causes which are supposed to have produced them.” *The Evangelical Record* judged these observers harshly for not reading religious meaning into the tremors; they were “devils, in employing their intellectual faculty wholly in contriving how the world was made and is governed without a God.” Finally, there were those who employed a “useful philosophy” to recognize divine intention in the earthquakes and link them to “the moral government of the world.”³⁹

With this last perspective, *The Evangelical Record* emphasized the limits of human reason alone in explaining the earthquakes. This argument was popular among other writers who cast strict empiricists as aimless, conceited, and ultimately powerless before divine authority. To demonstrate the point, *The Evangelical Record* compared mining operations

³⁸ “Thoughts on Subterraneous Fires,” *The Halcyon Luminary, and Theological Repository* 1, no. 1. (1812), 17-19.

³⁹ *The Evangelical Record, and Western Review* 1, no. 1 (1812), 15-16.

and the “few sparks of electricity” that humans could generate with “the power which shakes the continent” and lightning that flashed across the sky. In letters to newspapers, one writer explained that “the wandering mazes of scientific reason” would not lead people to the “true source” of the tremors, and another person added that they “present a awful lesson of man’s dependence on his maker.” The *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer* caricatured the French naturalist Volney, who was “celebrated or rather notorious for his atheistical principles.” Supposedly caught in a storm on a boat in the Great Lakes, Volney exclaimed, “Oh! my God, my God, what shall I do? What shall I do?” to which his traveling companion responded, “Well; Mr. Volney, what; you have a God now.” While outright atheism was rare among early nineteenth-century naturalists, this story sought to capture the inadequacy of pure rationalism in the face of God’s power.⁴⁰

Despite differences in emphasis among these publications, Euroamerican earthquake interpretation was not a competition between eastern rationalism and western enthusiasm. For thinkers like those in *The Evangelical Record*, narrow scientific investigations into the earthquakes’ natural causes obscured their ultimate importance as a sign of God’s power and dissatisfaction with human behavior. This interpretation entailed a deity who was more directly involved and vengeful than the one who used volcanoes and earthquakes to relieve underground pressure and to improve soil quality in *The Halcyon Luminary*. The difference in the publishing locations of the two periodicals – New York City and Lexington – might suggest regional variety in American Christians’ receptiveness to natural history, but the detailed observations of evangelical settlers like Bacon and Bower demonstrate otherwise.

The Evangelical Record did not dispute the “laws of matter” immediately governing

⁴⁰ Ibid., 17; *Carolina Gazette*, December 28, 1811, 3; *Georgia Journal*, February 12, 1812, 2; “Anecdote of the Celebrated Volney,” *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer* 1, no. 51 (1813), 806-07.

earthquakes. It did, however, caution readers against considering these laws as the primary cause of the tremors; rather the laws were the effects of a greater divine cause. Furthermore, the magnitude of the shaking in Kentucky probably made God appear more punitive and engaged in day-to-day human affairs than it did in New York. For Americans on the East Coast, the faint earthquakes were little more than a philosophical matter; closer to the epicenter, the interpretive stakes were higher.

Deciphering God's Message

If God had delivered a direct message through the earthquakes, what exactly was that message, and how should humans respond to it? Many prominent evangelical commentators feared the worst. With proclamations that were less detailed but equally as foreboding as Hughes' warning, they tied the tremors to other signs of the End Times in human affairs and the natural world alike. In a handbill, prominent itinerant preacher Lorenzo Dow was unequivocal: “*WARS – PESTILENCE – EARTHQUAKES and FAMINE are the sword and scourge of GOD – the spirit of Missionary is prevalent – the times are eventful – and the *signs* are ominous; but it shall be *well* with those whose GOD is the LORD!!” Published in 1812 in Virginia, Dow's sprawling theological treatise identified ten such signs, including papal power, the “clash of Nations,” worldwide famines and plagues, and finally, “the remarkable and extensive shocks of the Earthquakes.” Even his fellow itinerant preachers identified Dow as an extreme, roguish figure, but he was not alone in highlighting the gravity of the era. In the first issue of the *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer*, published in June 1812, the editors announced that they created the paper because not since the days of Jesus had an age been “more evidently marked with the stately steppings of an Almighty

God.” They explained that it seemed “as if the great Drama of the world was drawing to a close,” and “all nations have, in a greater or less degree, tasted of the cup of trembling.”

These concerns lingered well after the natural phenomena and the declaration of war. In a May 1813 issue, their interpretation was less speculative and more focused on the United States than a general global warning: “unless political reformation prevents, national sins will produce national ruins and judgments...The day of vengeance is near. Five swords of the Almighty are visible: destructive insects, pestilence, earthquakes, wars, and famines.”⁴¹

Just as Philo-Dramaticus sought to temper alarm in Richmond by arguing for a “benevolent and merciful being,” so too did commentators push back against these warnings about further divine vengeance. In “A Few Hasty on Earthquakes, &c.,” an article published in Richmond’s *Virginia Argus*, a Georgetown man bemoaned the “surmises of bigots, who would convert a God of infinite mercy and goodness into a God of terror and vengeance.” While many preachers promoted the Gospel by stoking fear, the writer preferred to win believers by showing the “beauty, unity, order, harmony, and consequently, boundless wisdom and benevolence” that God maintained in “the structure of the universe.” It was nonetheless difficult to argue for a God of benevolence and harmony as the earthquakes continued and the threat of war loomed through the early months of 1812. Writers instead promoted a God of wisdom, mercy, and protection to combat the emphasis on judgment and vengeance. “The Being who can lift up a whole city, by the might of his power, and can set it down again, without overturning its edifices – must know how to govern the world,” wrote a South Carolina man. The pamphlet denouncing Nimrod Hughes on his ordained day of

⁴¹ “Lorenzo Dow Handbill,” November 2, 1815 (Cincinnati: Looker & Wallace Print), FHS; Lorenzo Dow, *A Journey from Babylon to Jerusalem, or the Road to Peace and True Happiness* (Lynchburg, Va.: Haas and Lamb, 1812), 79-80; “Editorial Address,” *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer* 1, no. 1 (1812), 1; *Ibid.*, 1, no. 45, 711-12.

destruction explained that God did not need to incite Hughes' vision of worldwide calamity to punish sinners for their misdeeds. "From the *spirit* of the word it appears, that the ALMIGHTY has no occasion to disturb the fair order of his creation to punish sinners, by calling down thunder from the heavens, occasioning a war of elements, or a world in ruins," wrote the author. He added that the world could not function as it did if God needed "to suspend the laws of nature, on occasion of every great crime that was committed on earth." When commentators across cultures appropriated the earthquakes and other phenomena to stoke their revivalistic messages with fear and urgency, critics tempered their alarmist claims with assurances of God's moderation and restraint.⁴²

Because gauging the authenticity of post-earthquake piety was an inherently nebulous exercise, evangelical commentators gave concrete shape to general calls for conversion and fidelity by prescribing specific moral and institutional reforms. It was, of course, easier for religious authorities to monitor behavior than belief. While moral reformers agreed that certain behaviors were universally problematic, some displays of piety were more controversial. Fasting, for example, created charged cultural questions across the United States during the War of 1812 era. The terms of the debate varied by region. In New England, where Federalist opposition to the war was vociferous, anti-war churchgoers bristled at President Madison's request that Americans use August 20, 1812, to fast and focus their prayers on the military effort. In the West, Americans' concerns about fasting predated Madison's decree. Many sought to distinguish themselves from French inhabitants of the borderlands, whose Catholic piety they considered disingenuous and morals loose. Surprised by the anxiety that the earthquakes had provoked, Joseph Underwood described the wife of a

⁴² "A Few Hasty hints on Earthquakes, &c.," *Virginia Argus*, February 13, 1812; *New-York Herald*, February 22, 1812, 1; *An Address, Delivered in Havre-de-Grace, June 4, 1812*, 4-5.

“respectable gentleman” who had not eaten in days. She “was willing (like a catholic) to attempt to appease the wrath of Heaven by fasting and praying,” he wrote sarcastically. In the southwestern corner of Mississippi Territory, a small Baptist congregation resolved to hold a day of fasting and prayer on the first Friday of March 1812, likely as a response to the earthquakes. This rare declaration, months before Madison’s request, marked the only time in the 1810s that the church decided to do so.⁴³

In other cases, people found public displays of prayer hollow, particularly when those praying did not do so regularly. Likely variations on a common folk tale, anecdotes from settlers who lived near New Madrid during the earthquakes pointed to the problem of restricting religiosity to moments of crisis. Settlers told of French trappers who beseeched them to stop praying, because God did not listen to Christians of convenience. While writers often caricatured French Louisianans as overly revelrous, these Frenchmen were principled and philosophical. In one story, the trapper even threatened to kill the praying man for his inconsistencies. In another, he offered a sobering commentary: “if de God kill all de rest, and leave us, me no want to stay – and if de God kill us, and leave all de rest, he not de God me take him for.” Published as cautionary tales in later nineteenth-century memoirs about the need for regular piety, these stories also reflected evangelical concerns about the authenticity of religious experience during the earthquakes. They critiqued those who turned to prayer only for protection in times of danger, rather than making the practice part of their

⁴³ Joseph R. Underwood to Edmund Rogers, February 13, 1812, Underwood Collection, Western Kentucky University Special Collections Library; Ebenezer Baptist Church Records, 1806-1865, MDAH. On fasting in New England, see Edward Gribbin, *The Churches Militant: The War of 1812 and American Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 19-24.

daily lives. Just as preachers bemoaned the short-lived piety of “Earthquake Christians,” commentators questioned the efficacy of prayers said only in times of dire need.⁴⁴

Despite disagreements about the proper Christian response, for evangelicals the earthquakes remained clear signs of divine dissatisfaction with American morality. God wanted Americans to change their ways. Evangelicals were concerned about both personal behavior and a general moral laxity that western cities supposedly tolerated. More than two years after the first shocks, a woman near Louisville wrote to family in Philadelphia about a “verry grate change” in her sister, who had not been to “a Ball a play or any such amusement” since December 1811. The earthquakes led her to feel “how awful it was to mett death unprepared,” and she hoped to improve her spiritual status by refraining from leisure activities. In other accounts, people believed that working on the Sabbath or burying copper plates used for counterfeiting created a chemical reaction that caused the earthquakes. For worldviews premised on ideas about inherent human sinfulness and God’s capacity for judgment, these notions of direct causality were eminently logical. When God delivered this biblical form of warning through an earthquake, evangelical people looked to their or their neighbors’ most recent transgression to understand its cause and cure.⁴⁵

Expanding western cities were particular targets of moral criticism from within and without. In January 1812, Moravian missionaries in Cherokee country reported that the “terrified” residents of Nashville “had omitted completely the usual Christmas frolics and had passed the holidays quite soberly and quietly.” Newspapers editors in New Orleans did

⁴⁴ James Ross, *Life and Times of Elder Reuben Ross* (Philadelphia: Grant, Faires, and Rodgers, n.d.), 207; Charles Ross, *The Earthquakes of 1811* (Cincinnati: E. Shepard, 1847), 5-6.

⁴⁵ Sarah McConnell to Ann Bartlett, January 9, 1814, KHS; Posey, “The Earthquake of 1811 and its Influence on Evangelistic Methods in the Churches of the Old South,” 109; Horace Jewell, *History of Methodism in Arkansas* (Little Rock, Ark.: Press Printing Company, 1892), 26.

not feel the first tremor there. But in an ironic reversal of persistent associations of New Orleans with sinfulness, reports from Natchez led the editors to speculate that “the shake which the Natchezians have felt may be a mysterious visitation from the Author of all nature, on them for their sins – wickedness and the want of good faith have long prevailed in that territory.” Just as there were survivors at Sodom and Gomorrah, they hoped that “Natchez has been saved on the same principle.” In Louisville, moral lessons about the earthquakes lingered but were less extreme. In the mid-nineteenth century, an early historian of the city published several accounts that chided its inhabitants for their devotion to worldly entertainment. In one case, men playing cards abandoned their table when an onlooker warned, “Gentlemen, how can you be engaged in this way when the world is so near its end?” In another, the earthquakes made Louisvillians “very devout in one night,” and they resolved to give money to construct a church. Donations poured in after each major shock. When the tremors ended, however, they “concluded the devil would not send for them for a few years more, and in the mean time determined to be merry” by using the money to build a theater. The historian of Louisville relating the account noted that the theater actually predated the earthquakes, though the story remains instructive for the way it depicted the western city as a godless center of amusement. And as the next chapter shows, moral criticisms of people and cities in the country’s western periphery were not limited to religiously based arguments about their proclivity for sinful behavior. Elite naturalists and politicians in New England and the mid-Atlantic doubted many westerners’ ability to report accurately on the earthquakes. By extension, if westerners’ contributions to a national science project could not be trusted, were they worthy of incorporation into the American body politic? The regional tensions revealed in earthquake reports and commentaries carried

an underlying political significance that extended well beyond the study of natural phenomena.⁴⁶

The Mississippi Valley's distinct lack of Christian institutions and officials stoked these early nineteenth-century concerns about its godlessness. After the Louisiana Purchase, American Catholics were responsible for providing their own clergy, and until the 1820s, the Bishop of Baltimore presided over the vast territory. The results were predictable. The region was understaffed and its churches often vacant, as the few priests residing in the territory circulated through distant communities to deliver the sacraments sporadically. Accordingly, St. Louis, which had nearly 6,000 people in an 1811 territorial census, did not have a regular priest between 1808 and 1818, and itinerant priests also periodically served Catholic populations in Natchitoches and Ayovelles. One of these travelling clergymen was on a boat near New Madrid during the first earthquake. As was customary in life-threatening situations, he delivered absolution to a frightened riverside crowd. One of the only other western Catholic officials to document the earthquakes was Bishop Joseph Flaget of Bardstown, Kentucky. Flaget took note of the tremors in his diary and held Confession after February's major earthquake. These accounts, albeit sparse, suggest that even as eastern Americans decried the lack of religious institutions and supposed immorality in newly acquired lands, Catholic settlers closer to the epicenter were equally concerned about their sins and the states of their souls during the tumult.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ John and Anna Rosina Gambold to John Herbst, January 18, 1812, MASP; *The Louisiana Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, December 21, 1811; Benjamin Casseday, *The History of Louisville from its Earliest Settlement Till the Year 1852* (Louisville: Hull and Brother, 1852), 122-26.

⁴⁷ Census, January 10, 1811, Frederick Bates Papers, MHM; Firmin La Roche, "A Sailor's Record of the New Madrid Earthquake," *Missouri Historical Review* 22, no. 2 (1928), 268-70; "Bishop Flaget's Diary," *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society* 29 (1918), 47. On early nineteenth-century Catholicism in Louisiana Territory, see John Rothensteiner, *History of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, Volume I* (St. Louis: Blackwell Wielandy Co., 1928); Roger Baudier, *The Catholic Church in North Louisiana: A Historical Sketch of Pioneer*

Protestantism's institutional presence along the Mississippi River was equally thin. New Orleans' Episcopal congregation only met twice between 1811 and 1813 to discuss holding a lottery to finance the construction of a church building. Although the Methodist population of New Madrid grew by a factor of six in 1812, two decades later a missionary newspaper report explained that although the city had recovered, few people attended the church there anymore. A Presbyterian man in St. Louis estimated that there were 15 or 20 Presbyterian families there, some of whom gravitated to Methodist itinerants who were "men of very little education and small talents." In 1816, a New England missionary abandoned his efforts in St. Louis, lamenting that "the wickedness of the place threw a continual gloom over my mind. It should seem, as though in this place even the sentiment of a God was universally erased." The West's lack of religious buildings, and the clergy to staff them, fueled outsiders' opinions about the region's godlessness. For congregations closer to the East Coast, it was no coincidence that the earthquakes were strongest where Christianity's influence was weakest. Writing about his experiences, the missionary later remarked that "it is a common proverb of the people, that when we cross the Mississippi, 'we travel beyond the Sabbath.'"⁴⁸

Monitoring individual behavior became the primary means to gauge the sincerity of earthquake conversion experiences. While western evangelical congregations grew

Days and of the Diocese of Natchitoches and its Successor the Diocese of Alexandria (Diocese of Alexandria, 1953), 14-15; Elizabeth Shown Mills, *Natchitoches 1800-1826: Translated Abstract of Parish Register Number Five of the Catholic Church Parish of St. Francois de Natchitoches in Louisiana* (New Orleans: Polyanthos, 1980).

⁴⁸ Robert Campbell Witcher, "The Establishment of the Episcopal Church in Louisiana, 1803-1838," M.A. Thesis, Louisiana State University, 1960, 38; Hodding Carter and Betty Werlein Carter, *So Great a Good: A History of the Episcopal Church in Louisiana and of Christ Church Cathedral, 1805-1955* (Sewanee, Tn.: The University Press, 1955), 14; *Western Christian Advocate*, 18 September 1835, 82; Stephen Hempstead Letterbook and Diary, 57, MHM; Timothy Flint to Abel Flint, October 10, 1816, Timothy Flint Letters, MHM; Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi* (1826; repr. *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1968), 178.

significantly during the earthquakes, many western people did not adhere to the behavioral expectations that would legitimate their conversions. Rather than tempering the growth of evangelicalism, however, backsliding fit well into the overall evangelical message. The earthquakes proved God's ability to judge and to punish humanity at any moment, and backsliding proved humanity's inherent sinfulness. Critics of this evangelical emphasis on human depravity and God's capacity for vengeance argued for order, harmony, and divine benevolence, but mounting signs of disorder in human and environmental affairs made it increasingly difficult to deny that this was indeed a "time of extraordinaries."

Piety and Patriotism

Some evangelical commentators tried to build on these calls for individual behavioral reform to advocate for much wider social and political changes. They saw enemies greater than the sinfulness within individuals and western communities. In connecting the tumult of 1812 to the nation's various sins, including impiety, a lack of missions, and a failure to repudiate atheism and skepticism, these figures sought to bind evangelical people with the state through shared concerns. Though these arguments did not begin with the earthquakes, the tumult of the War of 1812 era gave them greater purchase. Indeed they would echo through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

For Kentucky Presbyterian minister John P. Campbell, the earthquakes were just one element in a litany of God's punishments for spiritual and material problems in the West. Instead of alarming audiences with terse, apocalyptic rhetoric, as Dow and others had done, Campbell offered more analysis and specificity in a published lecture commemorating the opening of the Presbyterian synod of Kentucky in 1812. He nonetheless granted that readers

might find his assessment “too dark and forbidding” as he launched into a critique of nearly every aspect of western life. He bemoaned the fact that “cupidity, avarice, fraud, extortion and usury, seem in a great degree to have lost their turpitude in public opinion” to the extent that activities previously considered crimes were dubiously reclassified under “the conciliating names of *speculation*, *providing for ones family*, and the like.” To financial crimes Campbell added all manners of “vulgar and senseless vice,” including profanity, “lewdness and drunkenness,” gambling, and lying. The consequences of this “degeneracy” were obvious: “Is it strange that we have seen the signals of God’s wrath hung out in the heavens, that the earth has trembled with strong convulsion under our feet that tempests, tornadoes, and inundations have heaped desolation on our coasts, and that *War*, that ‘*Rod of God’s anger* for a people of his wrath, and *stuff of his indignation*,’ has lighted down upon us to scourge us?” These pervasive signs of divine displeasure across earth and sky lent a “dark and lowering” aspect to Christianity’s prospects in 1812. This phrasing was remarkably similar to the ways in which Lydia Bacon and Jacob Bower described the nighttime atmosphere before the earthquakes. In this early nineteenth-century world of environmental inquiry, the experience of low air pressure often incited religious concerns.⁴⁹

Campbell ranged beyond local circumstances to address the nation’s problems with skepticism and atheism. He distinguished between religiously apathetic people and the dangerous majority that was “*positively infidel*” and sought to remake society “in the matrix of sceptical philosophy.” For Campbell, threats to religion also constituted state threats, as post-revolutionary France demonstrated “the dangerous outcomes of atheism for the state.” With dual threats to the church and state looming in the summer of 1812, people in the

⁴⁹ John P. Campbell, *A Portrait of the Times; or, the Church’s Duty* (Lexington, Ky.: Thomas T. Skillman, 1812), 3-20.

United States faced the prospect of violence and chaos. Campbell did not address the war directly, though he did call for resistance against the “Free thinker,” a “VERY TERRIBLE ANIMAL” that would abandon talk of natural rights and freedom once in power. The fates of the church and state overlapped: “Shall we, in an hour of ill-omened security, fold up our hands and affect to despise or overlook their attempts to destroy religion?”⁵⁰

Other commentators appropriated the wartime instability to advocate for western missions and institutional reforms. In *The Evangelical Record and Western Review*, a writer complained that the West was a “*vast moral waste*” and that Protestant missionaries had yet to cross the Mississippi River. These criticisms were a valuable reminder that the Christian missionary enterprise was not a constant, driving force in colonial and early national religious history. American Protestants did not universally seek to convert other people, particularly African Americans and Native Americans, at all times. It was not until later in the 1810s and the 1820s that institutionalized “foreign” evangelism, whether to the West or overseas, became central to Protestantism in the United States. Mission work sought to extend the boundaries of a rightful Christian community worthy of salvation, and with few exceptions among the Quakers, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Moravians, Native Americans were beyond the pale in the War of 1812 era. Though unaware how far west the Moravians had established missions, the writer in *The Evangelical Record* praised them for their “exemplary and evangelical diligence” and encouraged other denominations to follow their lead. As the Methodist statistics and other studies have demonstrated, African American Protestantism grew substantially in this period, but the writer encouraged further mission work in Africa and among enslaved people in the South. Diverting alcohol expenses

⁵⁰ Ibid., 7-9.

“into a channel of Christian benevolence” and funding from New England mission boards would cover the cost of these efforts.⁵¹

Denominational schisms and attendant funding problems contributed to the lack of missionary activity. While Campbell reserved his harshest criticism for skeptics and rationalists, he also found fault in Christian disunity. “In these dreadful times almost every Protestant church among us has been shivered and ramified,” he wrote. As “melancholy proof,” the six denominations first established in the West had grown to twenty. These bifurcations bred hostility among Christians and undercut ministerial authority. In this climate of fracture, congregants who did not agree with preachers felt empowered to break off from their churches and start smaller new ones. Campbell accordingly called for Christian denominations to “form one grand confederacy in opposition to infidel operations, and use every rational and christian method to rescue our amiable but misguided youth from the fangs of that blood-stained monster, sceptical philosophy.”⁵²

Like Vindex and Philo’s dispute or Dow’s alarmism, Campbell’s rhetoric demonstrated the elevated stakes of theological disagreement and institutional strife in this age of revivalism and the accompanying and pervasive signs of natural and human disorder. Even the editors of *The Halcyon Luminary*, the publication that hailed the merger of “scientific” truths and “genuine theology,” invested great expectations in the significance of

⁵¹ *The Evangelical Record and Western Review* 1 (1812), 173-77. The scholarship on Protestant missions to American Indians is vast. On missions in the early national period, see Robert F. Berkhofer, *Salvation and the Savage: An Analysis of Protestant Missions and American Indian Responses* (Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 1965); Henry Warner Bowden, *American Indians and Christian Missions: Studies in Cultural Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 164-97; William Gerald McLoughlin, *Cherokees and Missionaries, 1789-1839* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984); Dennis, *Seneca Possessed*, 117-78. On the growth of African American Protestantism, see Sylvia R. Frey and Betty Wood, *Come Shouting to Zion: African American Protestantism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 119-208.

⁵² Campbell, *A Portrait of the Times*, 4, 21, 29-30.

“these events, which must be precursors of some momentous and happy changes in the state of the Church. Concussions, paroxysms, inversions, and distractions! Old doctrines and false persuasions, which have reposed for ages...are shaken from their places, and disappear.”⁵³

All levels of sin – of the immoral individual, the conniving skeptics, the fractured church, and the godless West – were implicated in Christian readings of the earthquakes and the accompanying phenomena of late 1811 and 1812. Commentators also pointed to the sins of the new nation, and in the tumult they saw an opportunity to repudiate the separation between church and state. Having outlined the evils of French atheism, Campbell wrote, “To sever men from religious principle, is to cut loose the vessel of state from her moorings, and send her adrift in a tempest.” Sermons and other religious writings defending U.S. participation in the conflict recognized the war and the earthquakes as mutual signs of divine anger with national sins; chief among them was a lack of piety. In the *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer*, “the portentous and variegated visitations of heaven’s justice” constituted “national judgments” that, quoting the Book of Matthew, “may be *‘the beginning of sorrows.’*” A New Hampshire fast day sermon explained that “in a variety of ways, sudden and unavoidable destruction has come on mankind by the anger of God. How often has the earth suddenly quaked, opened and swallowed up men and beasts by thousands or by myriads!” A Presbyterian minister in New York likened war to a “concussion of nations” in which religious people risked having their faiths “buried in the earthquake.” Campbell praised citizens for their devotion to the nation’s cause and urged that “our *Christian Israel go forward.*” Adapting Horatio Nelson’s famous signal from the Battle of Trafalgar, he

⁵³ *The Halycon Luminary* 1, no. 4 (1812), 161.

exhorted, “America expects every man to do his duty.” These declarations in religious publications point to a relationship between revivalism and patriotism, two persistent ideological forces in United States history that often have not been interrogated together in the study of the War of 1812 era. While this was not a holy war, the passions of American patriotism and American piety were clearly intertwined.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The earthquakes had a demonstrable impact on American evangelicalism, both in terms of their statistical impact on western congregations and the ways in which the tremors figured into hallmarks of the evangelical social agenda. Commentators used the earthquakes to advance larger claims about the necessity of individual conversion, the regulation of personal and communal morality, and Christianity’s relationship with the emergent state. Despite the dogmatism of these print arguments, which might fuel the temptation to dichotomize “religious” and “scientific” earthquake interpretations, evangelical settlers’ accounts reveal backcountry empiricism – intellectual curiosity and experimentation with eclectic ideas and observations about the natural world.

As much as expanded western church rolls of 1812 were points of pride for preachers committed to evangelical expansion, the tremors provoked more questions than they answered: what constituted an authentic conversion experience, who could claim access to sacred knowledge and the authority to interpret natural phenomena, and what religious

⁵⁴ Campbell, *A Portrait of the Times*, 13, 20, 34; *Christian Monitor and Religious Intelligencer* 1, no. 1 (1812), 14; Noah Worcester, *The Substance of Two Sermons, Occasioned by the Late Declaration of War* (Concord, N.H.: George Hough, 1812), 10; Alexander McLeod, *A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes, and Ends of the Present War* (New York: Eastburn, Kirk, and Co., 1815), 198.

message, if any, was encoded in the earthquakes? From Cornelius' personal struggles to Campbell's broad claims, Americans struggled with these issues of authenticity, access, and authority across the many forums of individual reflection, community discussion, and print. And their questions did not end with the tremors.

Evangelical circles were not the only North American communities struggling to define the parameters of authority, access, and knowledge during these unusual natural phenomena. Naturalists weighed piles of extraordinary, often conflicting, and occasionally fabricated observations about the earthquakes. In their published reports about the earthquakes, they sought to define what constituted legitimate knowledge in academic circles, and what kinds of people could be trusted to supply it. Leaders in both American evangelicalism and American Indian prophetic movements encouraged followers to experience a profound and close connection to the divine. Those individuals who felt that empowering, otherworldly connection were then expected to adhere to strict behavioral standards, reform their greater societies by purifying them of vices, and expand their movements by encouraging others to undergo similar transformations. For these communities, the earthquakes served as powerful reminders of the narrowness of worlds and the immediacy of their causes. For naturalists, on the other hand, the natural mechanisms behind the shaking remained hidden and more remote, buried under mountains of useful and fabricated evidence alike.

CHAPTER 5

“AUTHENTIC INFORMATION FROM SOME PLACES”: THE POLITICS OF EARTHQUAKE REPORTING IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC

A volcano erupted in North Carolina on the same early morning as the first earthquake. So wrote eyewitness John Edwards, who reported the alarming news in a detailed letter published in major East Coast newspapers. He wrote that the volcano outside Asheville “still continues to burn with great violence, and throws up lava, scoria, ashes, calcined stones and vitrified matter, in great quantities, and with the most noise.” According to Edwards, “the quantity of lava discharged at the beginning of the eruption was immense; it ran down the mountain in a stream of liquid fire for more than three quarters of a mile and has formed a dam across the French Broad River.” Edwards also told of a mountain community led by an itinerant preacher who found that the lava coursing through the mountains transformed into “spirit, devils, &c.” at night.¹

Newspaper readers were skeptical but not immediately dismissive of Edwards’ account. In a letter to Richmond’s *Virginia Argus*, a writer explained that “a volcanic eruption in Virginia, or in some neighbouring State, would be no surprising event.” He added that “be this report true or false, I have found at a much smaller distance from Richmond, indubitable indications of formerly existing volcanoes.” The *Charleston Courier*

¹ First published in the January 10, 1812, edition of *The Star* of Raleigh, North Carolina, newspapers in at least Connecticut, Georgia, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Virginia cited Edwards’ account in the month after it appeared in *The Star*. See *The Star*, January 10, 1812, 7; *New-York Herald*, January 25, 1812, 1; *Connecticut Mirror*, February 2, 1812, 3-4; *Georgia Journal*, February 5, 1812, 3; *Virginia Argus*, February 6, 1812; *New-Jersey Journal*, February 4, 1812, 2; *Charleston Courier*, February 15, 1812, 2-3; Cope, *Philadelphia Merchant*, 268.

warned readers that Edwards' story should "be received with great caution, notwithstanding the circumstantial evidence which he gives of the phenomenon." As a Philadelphia merchant noted in his diary, "if the report be groundless or otherwise, it cannot be doubted, from the flames which have in various places during the recent earthquakes issued from rents made in the earth, that a great internal fire must exist in the bowels of this continent." Then the Raleigh postmaster reported that a "John Edwards" did not exist in Asheville. The *Virginia Argus* pronounced the "terrible account" a "HOAX." "It is to be regretted, that this personage, whoever he may be, has no better employment," lamented Washington City's *National Intelligencer*. Months later, an Asheville resident announced the recent death of Edwards, "that Great Earthquake Manufacturer," to *The Star* in Raleigh.²

False reporting on nature, especially amid geopolitical upheaval, could have dangerous consequences for the early republic. Former President John Adams recognized the danger in a letter to physician and fellow revolutionary Benjamin Rush. "Ought not your Philosophical Society to institute an Inquiry into the Truth of the terrible accounts of Earthquakes at the Southward and Westward," Adams asked, referring to the American Philosophical Society, the new nation's preeminent organization for scientific investigation. "I suspect something very wicked at the bottom of most of those stories that *falsis terroribus implent* [falsely alarm] our good Ladies and innocent Children." Like other elite observers on the East Coast, Adams did not trust earthquake reports from the continent's interior. And as a Federalist, he was dubious of both territorial expansion and incorporating western people into the body politic, because growth threatened stability and the northeastern states' political

²*Virginia Argus*, February 13, 1812, 2; *Charleston Courier*, February 15, 1812, 2-3; Cope, *Philadelphia Merchant*, 268; *New-York Evening Post*, February 25, 1812, 2; *Virginia Argus*, February 13, 1812, 3; *National Intelligencer*, February 15, 1812, 2; *The Star*, July 10, 1812, 111.

and economic prominence. After the summertime declaration of war against Great Britain, Rush wrote back to Adams about how combustible the tensions seemed between the nation's northern, southern, and western regions, which were "divided by different interests, habits, manners, and principles." Rush also feared Canada would become "the slaughterhouse of generations of our citizens." Early setbacks in the war and the fabrications of citizens like John Edwards – whether or not he was real – did little to calm these aging founders' fears.³

Volcanoes still remained a popular topic of speculation about the causes of the tremors. Just a few years earlier, Volney hypothesized that volcanoes were responsible for the topography around Lake Ontario and denied that earthquakes and volcanoes existed any further west. But in the earthquakes' immediate aftermath, reports other than that of Edwards' indicated otherwise. In speculating about faraway volcanoes in newspapers and scientific journals, Americans demonstrated continued fascination with the western territory secured by the Louisiana Purchase, as well as a broader willingness to entertain the possibility of more western settlement. This sustained public attention to the West was a significant step in making U.S. expansion seem possible.⁴

³ John Adams to Benjamin Rush, March 19, 1812, *Old Family Letters: Copied from the Originals for Alexander Biddle, Series A* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1892), 374; Benjamin Rush to John Adams, November 17, 1812, *Letters of Benjamin Rush, Volume II: 1793-1813*, ed. L.H. Butterfield (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press for The American Philosophical Society, 1951), 1167.

⁴ Volney, *View of the Climate and Soil of the United States*, 119- 21. On the "geographical imagination" of Americans, see Martin Brückner, *The Geographic Revolution in Early America: Maps, Literacy, and National Identity* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006). The extent to which Europeans in the colonial era understood very little about western territory in North America is a major subject in Paul Mapp, *The Elusive West and the Contest for Empire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011). On the ways in which western exploration and study propelled territorial expansion, see James D. Drake, *The Nation's Nature: How Continental Presumptions Gave Rise to the United States of America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011); Peter J. Kastor, *William Clark's World: Describing America in an Age of Unknowns* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011).

Of course, mechanisms more powerful than imagination later wrested most of that territory from Native Americans. In the War of 1812 era, however, trans-Mississippi land belonged to American Indians, and the outer bands of American settlement were very vulnerable to attack. Government officials in the western territories worried about the Sioux, Anishinaabe, and other indigenous forces much larger than those allied with Tecumseh, as well as the prospect that they might ally with the British and formerly enslaved people in the Deep South to repel Americans back across the Appalachian Mountains. American Indians also engaged in a more subtle form of resistance against the expanding United States by telling Americans about volcanoes at the heads of the Arkansas and Missouri Rivers.

These uses of volcanoes in print discussions about the earthquakes – as inventions for press coverage, mechanisms in scientific theories, and warnings from Indians – illustrate several key elements in the early nineteenth-century study of nature and its broader significance. First, the level of newspaper coverage and debate about the earthquakes' causes and significance showed the American public's deep engagement in seeking to understand how the natural world operated. These sophisticated discussions were not restricted by social status and expertise, and as accounts described in the previous chapter demonstrate, neither were they limited to eastern newspaper subscribers or even literate people. Also, just as Indian earthquake interpretations reflected contemporary territorial and cultural concerns, American inquiries were not divorced from national politics and wider geopolitical tensions. In entertaining a wide array of accounts from observers of all social stations, newspaper editors and elite naturalists made a political statement. Premised on the experimentation, observation, and ultimate authority of the individual, empiricism was a republican virtue. Like Nimrod Hughes, John Edwards tested the limits of this republican

intellectual landscape. The tension between embracing the input of all citizens and guarding against the crowd's wild speculation and outright fabrications mirrored the wider struggle between elite and popular political interests in the early republic. Earthquake accounts and commentaries also conveyed deep concern for the nation's western vulnerabilities. Finally, American Indians had roles in early national print culture as conveyers of information and, in many cases, misinformation regarding the earthquakes' trans-Mississippi impact. As Native Americans considered and ultimately divided on the proper course of action in the War of 1812, they stoked volcano theories and wider concerns about the danger of western land and the people living there.⁵

Studying the earthquakes thus became a national science project that revealed more about the politics of knowledge in the early republic than the actual cause of the earthquakes. The drive to find "authentic information from some places," as one commentator put it,

⁵ While earlier generations of historians of science characterized early national science as amateurism, more recent studies have probed the role of natural history in state formation, politics, and popular culture in the Early Republic. On the period as a fruitful venue for exploring the historical role of science in American popular culture and the central role of newspapers in diffusing popular scientific knowledge, see Katherine Pandora, "Popular Science in National and Transnational Perspective: Suggestions from the American Context," *Isis* 100, no. 2 (2009), 346-58. For an overview of early national science, see Greene, *American Science in the Age of Jefferson*. On the colonial roots of American commitments to empiricism and popular inquiry in the natural world, see Susan Scott Parrish, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World*. Sara Stidstone Gronim, *Everyday Nature: Knowledge of the Natural World in Colonial New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007). On the social, political, and religious implications of the study of electricity, see Delbourgo, *A Most Amazing Scene of Wonders: Electricity and Enlightenment in Early America*. On scientific inquiry as an arena for establishing a unique American national identity and American naturalists' continuing dependence on Britain, see Yokota, "'To Pursue the stream to its fountain': Race, Inequality, and the Post-Colonial Exchange across the Atlantic," 173-229; Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation*. On the intellectual companionship that elite men sought through their correspondence, see Dierks, "Letter Writing, Masculinity, and American Men of Science, 1750-1800," 167-198. On social and political implications of early national taxonomy, see Looby, "The Constitution of Nature: Taxonomy as Politics in Jefferson, Peale, and Bartram," 252-73. On the early national commitment to empiricism and its bearing on society and politics, see Lewis, "A Democracy of Facts, An Empire of Reason: Swallow Submersion and Natural History in the Early American Republic," 663-96; Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic*; Sarah Knott, "The Patient's Case: Sentimental Empiricism and Knowledge in the Early American Republic," *William and Mary Quarterly* 67, no. 4 (2010), 645-76.

reflected the entangled nature of authority and geography in the early national study of the natural world. Seeking to distinguish themselves from what they perceived as a European tendency to theorize, naturalists, newspapers, and their readers welcomed empirical earthquake accounts from closer to the epicenter. With reports of volcanoes erupting, the Mississippi River running backwards, and other similarly implausible sights, it was more difficult to distinguish between authentic and fabricated information. Amid eastern skepticism of western claims, some of them true and others fictitious, an informant's social status became a filter for determining the authenticity of earthquake accounts. And as Rush noted, the West was a key player in American regional tensions in the War of 1812 era, not simply a topic of debate between the North and South. Like other nationalizing enterprises in the early United States, scientific inquiry sought unity and order to stabilize the republic. But a series of major earthquakes, at a time of territorial expansion, revivalism, a burgeoning popular press, and impending war, offered neither.

Observing the Land and the Sky

Near their epicenter, the earthquakes elicited a level of fear and disorientation that called all knowledge about nature into question. As Americans began to piece together their recollections of the phenomena, no one held a definitive answer for the cause of the tumult. Just as the Lisbon earthquakes had raised questions about the limits of human reason in enlightenment Europe, this “state of dissolution” utterly fractured the stable, ordered sense of nature that naturalists sought to construct in the nation's first decades. In this era of widening literate discourse, commitment to observation and empiricism, and deep confusion about the cause or causes of earthquakes, the shocks emanating from the heart of the

continent revealed a more popular and diffuse intellectual landscape that accommodated an array of reactions, observations, and opinions in the decade that followed. In this period of fact gathering and hypothesizing, elite commentators privileged the observations of the educated over the unlearned, but their inquiry could not contain the pervasive uncertainty that came with attempts to predict and understand the causes of earthquakes. Americans attempted to re-exert a sense of control by observing nature and gathering facts about the earthquakes that would lead to understanding their cause. Instead they got an array of observations that supported conflicting European theories about atmospheric conditions, airquakes, and electricity.

In this empirical age, it was more prudent to observe the sky than speculate about unseen mechanisms underground. Regardless of their education, observers looked up for explanations. As Samuel L. Mitchill wrote in report for the Literary and Philosophical Society of New York, “The atmosphere seemed to forbode some unusual occurrence.” Reports in newspapers and those sponsored by American scientific and philosophical institutions listed countless observations and measurements of atmospheric conditions. Observations about the air during the earthquakes largely fell into two primary conditions: a “serene” atmosphere and thick haze. No fewer than four separate accounts described the atmosphere as “serene,” and others followed suit in noting the stillness or calmness of the nighttime air. Many others noticed hazy or foggy conditions, which contributed to the same sense of foreboding that led evangelical observers to interject commentary on sin and judgment into their observations. “The day preceding was extremely dark and gloomy there, and warmth and smokiness distinguished the weather for some time after,” wrote one of

Mitchill's correspondents from Jeffersonville in Indiana Territory. Another contributor in Louisiana found it difficult to see more than a few feet in front of him.⁶

Many accounts combined these observations of the air with complex readings of lights, temperatures, and air densities that contradicted one another. After comparing the thermometer and barometer readings, wind direction, and the extent of cloud cover on the days of two major earthquakes, former Mississippi Territory Governor Winthrop Sargent wrote that before the tremor on February 7, "the stars shone uncommonly bright, and the atmosphere was remarkably serene at this time, and continued so during the night – moon rose clear, but was succeeded by a dense vapour rising to the tops of the trees which was dissipated half an hour after sun rising." Inconsistencies and regional variations confounded a definitive link between atmosphere and the earthquakes. Whereas Sargent emphasized the brightness of the stars from Mississippi, an observer in Washington, D.C. remembered that the sky was clear, but found the stars were "lurid and dim, and afforded little light." A man in Louisville made extensive notes about cloud cover, precipitation, wind, and temperature for each tremor, but the weather conditions ranged widely. When he remarked "that the heaviest shocks usually occur in the coldest turns of weather," Mitchill's correspondent in Kaskaskia suspected that the link was coincidental. "I cannot imagine what connection there

⁶ Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes," 283, 288, 291. For accounts that described the atmosphere as "serene," "calm," or "still," see *ibid.*, 285, 290; William C.C. Claiborne "To a Lady," February 9, 1812, *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816, Vol. 6*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Jackson, Ms.: State Department of Archives and History, 1917), 52; William Leigh Pierce, *The Year: A Poem in Three Cantos* (New-York: David Longworth, 1813), 16; *Carolina Gazette*, January 18, 1812; *Savannah Evening Ledger*, February 8, 1812, 2; *National Intelligencer*, February 6, 1812, 2, and February 11, 1812, 3. For other accounts that noted the thickness or haziness of the air, see Mitchill, "A Detailed Narrative," 284; Samuel Williams to the *Scioto Gazette*, December 1811, 1811, Ross County Historical Society (Ohio); Pierce, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes, in the Western States, Particularly on the Mississippi River; December 16-23* (Newburyport, Ma., 1812), 3, 5; *Louisiana Gazette*, December 21, 1811; *National Intelligencer*, December 31, 1811, 3; *Western Spy*, January 4, 1812, January 18, 1812, 3, and January 25, 1812.

can be between cold and the cause of this phenomenon,” he wrote. “Indeed the circumstance may be merely accidental.”⁷

Reports of flashing lights and soggy conditions led some Americans to revisit Englishman William Stukeley’s 1750 assertion that electricity caused earthquakes. Numerous newspaper accounts described flashes of distant lightning. In a letter published in *The American Journal of Arts and Sciences*, Louisiana land surveyor Louis Bringier supposed that the ground had been primed for electrical and seismic shocks after unprecedented rainfall in Louisiana. An earthquake, perhaps resulting from contact between the soggy ground and the aforementioned flashes of light or a more conventional lightning strike, “produced emotions and sensations much resembling those of a strong galvanic battery.” Contributors to Mitchill’s report offered separate testimonies and theories that echoed Bringier’s contention. A correspondent from Tennessee linked shocks that “seemed to produce effects resembling those of electricity” to unusually wet seasons and an atmosphere “impregnated with sulfurous particles.” A South Carolina doctor’s observations in the report also addressed “the agency of electric fluid.” In St. Louis, “About six minutes before the shock, the whole heavens appeared to be illuminated, and darkness immediately afterwards ensued.” By Mitchill’s reasoning, the infrequency of autumn thunderstorms, a “red appearance of the clouds, which had much darkened the water for twenty-four hours

⁷ Sargent, “Account of Several Shocks,” 353-4; Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative,” 283, 290, 289, 283-5, 288, 308; Henry McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville and its Environs* (Louisville, Ky.: S. Penn, 1819), 233; Griswold to Mitchill, December 22, 1812, *The Medical Repository*, 308. Earthquake accounts from the McMurtrie volume are found in its appendix, which is labeled “an accurate Account of the Earthquakes experienced here from the 16th December 1811, to the 7th February 1812, extracted principally from the Papers of the late J. Brooks, esq.” Mitchill corroborated Sargent’s account by citing a judge in Detroit who reported that the “atmosphere was serene, but cold” and observers in St. Louis and Columbia, South Carolina, the latter of whom remarked that the “air felt as if impregnated with a vapour.” In Indiana and Kentucky, however, people reported rain showers and “dark and gloomy” skies before an earthquake. Another commentator noticed that there had been twenty-two fewer days of thunder in 1811 than in average years.

immediately before the shock,” and the “loudness of the thunder” supported an electrical understanding of the earthquakes. Observers near the Mississippi River also noted lightning preceding and following the tremors. At the end of November 1811, a man reported “two vast electrical columns shot up from the eastern horizon, until their heads reached the zenith,” which a resident on the Ohio River corroborated. Like Mitchill, he observed a “dull and fiery redness” in the atmosphere. Popular topics of scientific inquiry in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, lightning and electricity were everywhere in published accounts of the earthquakes.⁸

Less educated spectators also noted this supposed connection among lightning, moisture, and the earthquakes. An evangelical woman in Missouri remarked that the air “was saturated with sulphurous vapor.” Missionary, naturalist, and prolific author Timothy Flint traveled to the Mississippi Valley three years after the New Madrid earthquakes and included eyewitness accounts and his own impressions of the damage in a number of publications. Flint wrote that people witnessed “a continued glare of vivid flashes of lightning” accompanied by “repeated peals of subterranean thunder.” In claiming that there was a familiar scene during the concurrent but deadlier earthquakes in Caracas, Venezuela, in March of 1812, Flint also implied that there was an electrical process linking shocks on land and in the sky.⁹

⁸ *Western Sky*, January 11, 1812; *The Columbian*, February 1, 1812; *New-York Evening Post*, March 5, 1812; Bringier, “Notices of the Geology, Minerology, Topography, Productions, and Aboriginal inhabitants,” 20; Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes,” 286-87, 297-98, 304; Pierce, *The Year*, 17; Nolte, *Fifty Years in Both Hemispheres*, 182.

⁹ Eliza Bryan to Lorenzo Dow, March 22, 1816, in Robert Sidney Douglass, *History of Southeast Missouri* (Chicago, Goodspeed Publishing Co., 1888), 305; Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative,” 299; Timothy Flint, “Earthquakes on the Mississippi; extracted from the travels of Mr. Flint,” *The American Journal of Science and Arts*, 15 (January 1, 1829), 367; Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 226. Flint also discussed the human and geological impacts of the earthquakes in Flint, *The History and Geography of the Mississippi Valley*, 2 vols. (Cincinnati: E.H. Flint, 1833), 311-12. For a useful introduction to the missionary and naturalist and his many other publications, see James K. Folsom, *Timothy Flint* (New Haven, Conn.: Twayne Publishers, 1965).

This flood of often-conflicting observations reflected early nineteenth-century American naturalists' commitment to empiricism. Like any scientific enterprise, earthquake inquiry was not divorced from the wider political context in which it occurred. John Adams' suspicion that there was "something very wicked at the bottom of most those stories" reflected clear political concerns about alarmism and misinformation, but the political dimensions of most earthquake studies were often more subtle. They hoped that this method, which relied on the authority and truthfulness of individuals, would distinguish the new nation's scientific practice from what they perceived as a European tendency to theorize without evidence. One contributor to a St. Louis newspaper wrote after the first major earthquake that, "in noticing extraordinary events, perhaps no attendant circumstances should be deemed unimportant: This is one of that character, and a faithful record of appearances in such cases as these, may form data for science." With numerous displays of popular intellectual curiosity, Americans followed suit. For instance, a person in Annapolis hung an ostrich egg from the ceiling to measure the earth's oscillation. As in republican government, the new nation sought the input of all of its citizens in science, and its citizens insisted on the value of their input, as well as their responsibility to submit it.¹⁰

As "data for science" swamped newspapers, offering all manner of sights, sounds, smells, and motion accompanying the earthquakes, the volume and potential for fabrications posed problems for this republican science project. Some American empiricists remained resolute. In "Reflections concerning Earthquakes," a multipart article in March 1812 issues of the *Georgia Journal*, the author argued that "opinions not grounded on experiment, are not worthy of belief." But it was difficult to substantiate opinions on distant volcanoes or

¹⁰ *Louisiana Gazette*, December 21, 1811; *The Columbian*, January 30, 1812, 3.

invisible mechanisms like electricity in experiments, and theories about mechanisms behind the shaking crept into newspaper discussions and published reports. The *Savannah Evening Ledger* described “numerous and discordant opinions” from ancient philosophy through the early nineteenth century, including the expansion of “abyss waters,” electricity, volcanism, combustion, and fermentation. The writer believed volcanoes in the Andes were the most likely culprits. In a famous account that he reprinted as a pamphlet, William Leigh Pierce claimed that the burnt wood and coal discharged by the Mississippi River was evidence that ancient earthquakes and volcanoes had created the river. Others remained fixated on the sky for theories. Newspapers printed a letter from Lexington, where owing to well-documented haziness in the atmosphere, there was a popular theory that “convulsions are produced by this *world* and the *moon* coming into contact, and the frequent repetition of the shocks is owing to their rebounding.” The person reporting the earth-moon contact theory closed the account in jest: “The appearance of the moon yesterday evening has knocked his system as low as the quake has leveled my chimnies.” The volume of data demanded experts to determine its pertinence and reliability as well as theories to give it explanatory value. As U.S. citizens continue to question the authority of experts in the climate change debates of the twenty-first century, this tension between the rights of everyday citizens and established experts to input and interpret data about the natural world had its roots in the early republic.¹¹

The Social and Geographical Limits of Empirical Inquiry

In seeking to explain the earthquakes, the possibility of fabricated accounts presented a problem that was also at the root of the American experiment in republican government:

¹¹ *Georgia Journal*, March 11, 1812, 3; *Savannah Evening Ledger*, December 24, 1811, 1; Pierce, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes*, 6; *Virginia Argus*, February 2, 1812, 2; *Western Spy*, February 15, 1812, 2.

who could be trusted members of the body politic? Even if they did not intentionally fabricate information, untrained observers could accidentally misinterpret it. Disreputable individuals like John Edwards were isolated problems, but western people incorporated by U.S. territorial expansion posed a bigger challenge. Initial assessments of the amalgamation of people in the formerly French Louisiana were uncharitable. Americans referred to muskrat huts as “French settlements” and decried French culture as lazy and excessive. Mississippi River boatmen were known for counterfeiting, stealing, and eye-gouging. How could these people be trusted either as republican citizens or earthquake informants?¹²

In theory, empiricism was a republican virtue because it enabled all citizens to contribute. In practice, the study of the earthquakes reflected the entangled nature of geography, authority, and social status in the early republic. Scientific authorities on the East Coast privileged the accounts of western observers labeled as “respectable,” “intelligent,” and “gentleman,” all of which were glosses for western men of high social standing. On the western side of the exchange, men like Sargent submitted reports in hopes of gaining favor with elite scientific circles in Philadelphia, New York, and Boston. Despite their peripheral geographical locations, they sought to bolster their social and intellectual standing in the East by collecting reliable measurements and firsthand accounts of the earthquakes.

In this hierarchical and skeptical exchange of earthquake information between the East and the West, as well as in Christian depictions of western immorality and godlessness discussed in the previous chapter, eastern Americans reflected their sense of the nation’s “moral geography.” In western places they viewed as rude and less civilized, only men of

¹² Charles Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of America, Volume II* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1850), 179; “Judge Goah Watson’s autobiography including accounts of the settlement of New Madrid, Missouri, the growth of New Orleans, and Indian trade between Detroit and New Orleans,” SHSM, 7-11.

high standing could be trusted to deliver authentic information. This metric contradicted many people's republican commitments in science and governance, but at the same time, the flood of information and well-founded suspicions of fraud demanded more hierarchical expertise. And a lingering mistrust between people in the original United States and the newly incorporated western territories fed a different regional tension that dominated the years between the slavery debates related to constitutional ratification and the Missouri Crisis. Historians commonly refer to American sectionalism between North and South, but for the early study of the earthquakes, as well as the War of 1812 era in general, the primary axis of regional tension was the Appalachian Mountains.¹³

This moral geography bolstered eastern suspicions about westerners' inability to relate useful observations about the tremors. Easterners supposed western honesty and education were in short supply. While Americans correlated western sinfulness with the lack of churches there, religion was not the sole determinant of the early republic's moral geography. Civic concerns about education, law, and public duty also widened the gulf of mistrust spanning the Appalachians. After the Louisiana Purchase, two American officials published harsh surveys of the territory and the people in it. Territorial Judge Henry Marie Brackenridge found that French settlers were "devoid of public spirit, of enterprise or ingenuity, and are indolent and uninformed." He believed that the rudeness of life there stemmed from constant Osage attacks, from which previous Spanish and French authorities offered no military protection. But he was confident that settlers could assimilate to American ways over time. While Brackenridge did not agree with popular tropes describing

¹³ On American perceptions of a similar intellectual hierarchy between the early United States and Europe, see Yokota, "'To Pursue the stream to its fountain,'" 173-229. Yokota addresses this idea of a "moral geography" in the early republic in Yokota, *Unbecoming British*, 58.

French Catholics as frivolous and superstitious, he criticized their lack of education: “In such a state of things, to what end is learning or science?” American military officer Amos Stoddard was less sympathetic. “The Creole French are at least a century behind other civilized nations in the arts and sciences, if not the amenities,” he wrote in his *Sketches, Historical and Descriptive, of Louisiana*. Stoddard attributed their lack of progress to three factors: illiteracy, insularity, and a lack of government support for education. He also found excessive behaviors like gambling, dancing, and laziness dominated the territory.¹⁴

For Americans on the East Coast, it was neither coincidental that the earthquakes were most dramatic in this lawless area, nor surprising that western settlers exaggerated their accounts. Many writers found the rough-and-tumble ways of life along the Mississippi distasteful, regardless of the ethnic background of those engaged in it. A Scottish émigré to Missouri remembered that robbers and counterfeiters “ruled and controlled the country at that period.” Certain sites were especially threatening. An island on the river known as the “Rogue’s Nest” housed outlaws who exacted tribute from passing boats. A decade later, a passerby noted, “The island as if to express God’s abhorrence of the crimes committed on it, was sunk by the earthquake.” A nineteenth-century historian of Missouri described New Madrid as having “all the worst elements of a frontier town,” with boatmen who spent their Sundays drinking, gambling, and fighting. This was decidedly not the romantic, character-building view of the frontier that took hold in the 1830s and 1840s.¹⁵

¹⁴ Henry Marie Brackenridge, *Views of Louisiana: Together with a Journal of a Voyage up the Missouri River, in 1811* (1814; repr. *Views of Louisiana*, Chicago: Quadrangle Books, Inc., 1962), 141. Citations are to the reprinted edition; Amos, *Sketches, historical and descriptive, of Louisiana* (Philadelphia: Mathew Carey, 1812), 307-22.

¹⁵ “Judge Goah Watson’s autobiography”; Daniel Chapman Banks Diary, May 19, 1822, FHS; John Roy Musick, *Stories of Missouri* (New York: American Book Company, 1897), 143.

The trauma of the experience limited some people's ability to relate what they witnessed. One sailor on the Mississippi River explained that the prolonged terror of the first major earthquake, along with a broken arm from a fallen tree, had restricted his observational capacity. Three months after his experience, when an unknown source asked him to estimate how long the initial shaking lasted, Firmin La Roche responded, "I do not know how long this went on, for we were all in great terror, expecting death." When the interview ended, he added, "I hope this is what you require, and I am sorry I can tell you so little. When a man expects nothing but instant death it is hard for him to think or notice anything but his danger." A priest accompanying La Roche echoed his uncertain memory, maintaining that because it was dark and the earthquake awoke the crew, "nobody could agree in his recollection of that awful night."¹⁶

Accompanied by a major comet and other irregular patterns in the sky, the shocks induced a level of natural fury that most minds would have considered unbelievable if the scenes of destruction had not been corroborated by multiple eyewitnesses and left an indelible impact on the land. Because they were so shocking, reports coming from the epicenter logically bred suspicion. For two young eastern travelers passing by the epicenter in the months following the earthquakes, however, the human and environmental toll was all too real. Twenty-three year old James McBride was piloting goods down the Mississippi to sell in New Orleans when he passed through New Madrid in early April 1812. He explained in a letter to his aunt in central Pennsylvania that he had been skeptical about reports of damage. But after seeing coffins from a riverside graveyard "exposed along the bank," complete with a large cross grave marker "made of strong Cyprus wood...broken and

¹⁶ Firmin La Roche, "A Sailor's Record of the New Madrid Earthquake," 269-70.

prostrated to the earth,” and experiencing “considerable shocks every few hours,” he no longer questioned stories of what had transpired there, including the notion that the river had run backwards. In an undated diary entry, the scene left young Stephen F. Austin of later Texas renown equally bewildered. “As I viewed the present situation of this place and reflected on the cause which desolated it I could not refrain from regarding with fearful astonishment the Force of a Power sufficient thus to agitate the Earth,” he noted.¹⁷

Other outsiders confirmed both the extent of the damage and the abilities of backcountry observers to relate their earthquake accounts with accuracy and detail despite the trauma. While New England missionary Timothy Flint was rarely impressed with westerners’ religiosity, he respected “a class of people, who have been grossly misinterpreted, and misunderstood, - the western backwoodsmen.” Though “gamblers, and gougiers, and outlaws” existed, the majority of backwoodsmen were generally “amiable and virtuous.” To support his claim, Flint cited the way “they reasoned from apprehension sharpened by fear” during the earthquakes. Though they were “the class least addicted to reasoning,” they were reliable observers. They noticed that the chasms swallowing people and houses alike all split the ground in the same direction. Then they cut down trees, placed the trunks across the cracks, crawled on to trunks to avoid falling into new chasms. These were people interested in useful observations for survival, not tall tales to deceive the reading public. Flint used their insights to publish a two-volume geological survey of the Mississippi River Valley in 1833.¹⁸

¹⁷ James McBride, “Brief Accounts of Journeys in Western Country, 1809-1812,” 28-30; Stephen F. Austin, Undated Diary Entry, “Austin Papers, Volume II,” *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1919* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 206-07.

¹⁸ Timothy Flint to Abel Flint, October 10, 1816, MHM; Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years*, 116, 174, 178, 226.

Although these writers later vouched for the reasoning and reliability of backcountry observers, Edwards' fabrication nonetheless exposed a major shortcoming in this republican intellectual landscape. In the spectrum of previously unimaginable possibilities that the earthquakes had unleashed, gauging the veracity of accounts proved difficult. In an era of expanded popular print, readers gravitated to sensational reports of the phenomena. But the astounding impact of the earthquakes blurred the lines of truth in nature and reporting. Newspaper editors recognized this problem, and while they continued to print all the stories that they received, they began flagging accounts that seemed outlandish. After printing a report that the town of Natchez had been sunk, killing 4,000 people, the *New York-Herald* added, "We trust this report will proved to be unfounded." Also in New York City, *The Columbian* suspected "much exaggeration" in an account from Kentucky about 1,000 settlers who fled their homes and were camping together. But this story was similar to other accounts of hundreds of settlers huddled together on high ground, and six days later, *The Columbian* recanted its suspicion and explained that the report was plausible. This flood of alarming accounts left newspapers in a difficult position. For all of the honest and able backcountry observers and outsiders who corroborated the extent of the damage and its human toll, there were characters like John Edwards, who fed readers' imaginations with his own.¹⁹

Some naturalists' preoccupation with tagging observers as "intelligent" or "respectable" demonstrates that in the process of gauging the authenticity of accounts, earthquake commentators staked their findings on the reputations of their correspondents. This scholarly concern with the status of western informants reveals the social limits of

¹⁹ *New-York Herald*, February 1, 1812, 3; *The Columbian*, March 11, 1812, 2.

inquiry into the natural world in the early republic. In his letter to the American Academy of Arts and Scientists, Sargent identified one man as “a gentleman of respectability” and another as “an intelligent traveler.” When informants did not meet these social criteria, he sought to legitimate their observational ability. Some information came from “settlements of enlightened French people.” To support the testimony of an “old servant” in whom he had “some confidence,” Sargent explained that he was “very wakeful.”

Samuel Mitchill’s report echoed elite concerns about the reliability of informants. He found that “much exaggeration was interwoven with some of the narratives. Some, indeed, were tinctured with fable and burlesque. Among the various recitals it became exceedingly difficult to find out the true, or even the most probable, account.” Mostly Mitchill relied on information from judges and other politicians. He referred to observations made by “one of [his] most correct and respectable friends” in conversation and in writing, implying that the friend’s information was more reliable because he communicated his findings through two mediums. In another instance, Mitchill identified an “ingenious writer” from Charleston, but this correspondent’s findings were not especially insightful. He mentioned that the comet preceded the earthquakes and the shocks induced nausea, points that anyone who experienced the tremors could have offered.²⁰

The supply-side of this exchange of information reveals an intellectual hierarchy similar to the relationship between colony and metropole in previous centuries. Just as Cotton Mather sent scientific reports across the Atlantic in hopes of membership in England’s elite scientific societies, so too did Winthrop Sargent seek recognition from

²⁰Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative,” 283, 285, 292.

Boston's American Academy of Arts and Sciences with the earthquake accounts and measurements that he gathered from Natchez.

While these elite networks privileged observations from men of high social standing, it was ultimately a woman, Sargent's sister Judith Sargent Murray, who spearheaded the publication of his findings. Other prominent institutions also were interested in Sargent's findings. In early March 1812, Benjamin Smith Barton wrote to Sargent on behalf of Philadelphia's American Philosophical Society: "I beg you to let us have them, always distinguishing what is quite certain from that which is more on hearsay." "Your observations shall be published with me," Barton promised, clearly seeking a more definitive account of the earthquakes than newspapers had offered.²¹

The desire for a hierarchy of scientific authority similar to that in Europe pushed back against attempts to level the early republic's intellectual landscape. Judith Sargent Murray sought to share her brother's findings with the most prestigious audience possible. In this case, that audience was John Adams. At the end of March 1812, she wrote to her brother about his proposed study of "those fearful phenomenons of nature," explaining that it would "assuredly be a valuable acquisition" to the Academy of Arts and Sciences or the Massachusetts Historical Society. Suspecting Adams was president of one or both societies, Murray believed "there will be much propriety in addressing your detail to that venerable gentleman." As his letter to Benjamin Rush indicated, Adams was indeed interested in a reputable report on the earthquakes to counter "something very wicked" in fabricated accounts. That fall he thanked Murray for coordinating with her brother, whose observations "were made with great perspicuity and accuracy of an able Philosopher." Adams passed the

²¹ Benjamin Smith Barton to Winthrop Sargent, March 9, 1812, Winthrop Sargent Papers (microfilm), reel 7, Massachusetts Historical Society.

report on to experts at Harvard “that it may be known at the seat of science as soon as possible.” In this hierarchical, post-revolutionary exchange of knowledge, Boston replaced London as the “seat of science,” and western territories were the new periphery. In this case, an elite woman was an essential link between the territorial periphery and the new “seat of science.” And Murray continued to promote her brother’s report. A Boston minister wrote to Sargent that she had shown him the letter from Adams “in which he speaks in the highest terms of commendation of the communication you made.” Three years later, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences published Sargent’s observations.²²

This emphasis on the reputability of sources, which Sargent, Mitchill, and other elite observers shared, indicated that as the practice of science institutionalized later in the nineteenth century, naturalists conflated observational accuracy and insight with social status. This development was at the heart of the divergence of religious and scientific epistemologies in the nineteenth-century United States, where debates often assumed a dimension of class conflict. In this era of commitment to observation, when scientific practice was premised upon trust, elite concerns about an observer’s elevated social standing restricted the supposed republican nature of empiricism. Rather than welcoming all accounts in this national science project, the authors of these compiled reports filtered observations. In doing so, they entangled authority, geography, and social status in a manner reminiscent of the hierarchical study of nature in Europe. Like the threat of mobs in the American political process, the possibility of fabrication and exaggeration in American science was real. But in restricting some of its citizens from participating in what was supposedly a novel American

²² Judith Sargent Murray to Winthrop Sargent, March 26, 1812, 2 John Adams to Murray, September 11, 1812, 1-2, Judith Sargent Murray Papers (microfilm), Letterbook 17, MDAH; Isaac Story to Sargent, October 9, 1812, Winthrop Sargent Papers (microfilm), reel 7.

brand of scientific inquiry, the early republic ultimately replicated European hierarchies. As scientific institutions grew hierarchical, the experiments and observations that sustained them followed suit, and the general American public lost its deeper engagement in science.²³

The irony of the naturalists' concern with authenticity was that regardless of the source, no observation brought them closer to a definitive understanding of the cause of the earthquakes. Eighteenth-century European theories linking the tremors to volcanoes, comets, and electricity attempted to solve the puzzle, but an understanding of continental drift would elude scientists until the next century. Samuel Mitchill acknowledged that he could not formulate even "something like a tolerable theory of earthquakes" from his extensive study. In the final pages of his report, he resigned himself to compiling a list of principles that he had deduced from the accounts and addressing the strengths and weaknesses of several hypotheses. Mitchill concluded with ten facts that addressed the earthquakes' scope and the fiery gasses and other substances released from the ground, but none of these statements were particularly insightful or authoritative. The last of his ten points was the most revealing: "it is not very evident what kindles the flame beneath; by what means it is supported by air, and kept from extinction by water; how deep it lies; how it convulses the superincumbent strata, and communicates its tremors instantaneously, for several hundred miles." In other words, after three major earthquakes and countless aftershocks that affected hundreds of thousands of square miles of populated land and yielded droves of lasting evidence, Mitchill, and indeed the broader American scientific community, had not come close to understanding how earthquakes functioned. He nonetheless retained faith in the progress of enlightened scientific inquiry, as he hoped his report would "assist some more

²³ Lewis has summarized this nineteenth-century transformation in *A Democracy of Facts*, 154-56.

happy inquirer into nature, to deduce a full and adequate theory of earthquakes.” Mitchill further showed how the “*mechanical* reasoner,” the “*chemical* expositor,” the “*electrical* philosopher,” and believers in the “*alkaline* system of earthquakes” had evidence to support their claims. “And yet, these various expositions, plausible, in some respects, as each of them is, are deficient in that general character and universal application which ought to pervade scientific researches,” he wrote. Not unlike the responses of less-educated Euroamericans to the tumult that surrounded them, Mitchill’s recognition of the human limits of comprehending the cause of earthquakes was perhaps his most enlightened bit of reasoning. Evangelical commentators seized upon these kinds of inconclusive statements to argue that although the earthquakes were worthy topics of scientific investigation, their true meaning lay in decoding their message from God.²⁴

Later in the 1810s, other naturalists’ printed works yielded more data than definitive findings. To conclude their respective volumes about the earthquakes’ impact in Ohio and Kentucky, Henry McMurtrie and Daniel Drake echoed the Enlightenment’s compulsion for classification by categorizing tremors by the degree to which they shook people and buildings. From observations in Louisville, McMurtrie constructed six “rates of violence,” ranging from the quaking that caused “a strange sort of sensation” and “giddiness” to the agitation that was “most tremendous, so as to threaten the destruction of the town.” Drake established four classes of tremors based on “their efficiency in altering the structure of the more superficial parts of the earth, and in agitating, subverting or destroying the bodies which they support.” Recognizing that “the theory of these phenomena” had not been “settled” by his work’s 1815 publication date, Drake ended by mentioning “electrical and

²⁴ Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative,” 298-306.

other physical phenomena” from 1811 through 1813 “for the gratification of the speculative reader.” In a nod to his entangled investments in empiricism and print culture, Drake recognized that his list of major floods, thunderstorms, “luminous spots” in the sky, and uneven evidence for impact of electricity was unsatisfying but nonetheless worthy of print. He doubted that the list of natural phenomena “can interest the general reader, or aid the speculative philosopher, in the same degree as those made where the last visitation was more signal,” but hoped “they may, perhaps, be found of sufficient moment to justify their publication.”²⁵

Premised upon republican rule, the new nation sought to distinguish its commitment to observation and empiricism from a European proclivity for theory. But as in governance, the early republic’s social and cultural boundaries continued to differentiate the elite from the folk in the study of nature. The published reports thus imposed another layer on the transatlantic and increasingly transcontinental intellectual hierarchy of the early nineteenth century. Learned elites sought order through understanding, but major earthquakes on the nation’s territorial periphery exposed the limits of American commitments to empiricism and only elicited more confusion. The earthquakes afforded elite commentators an opportunity to carve out a uniquely American intellectual identity; instead they transposed colonial Atlantic hierarchies of knowledge on to the continent’s backcountry and replicated long-disputed European theories about airquakes, electricity, and volcanism as the possible causes for earthquakes.

²⁵McMurtrie, *Sketches of Louisville and its Environs*, 255; Daniel Drake, *Natural and Statistical View, or Picture of Cincinnati and the Miami Country* (Cincinnati: Looker and Wallace, 1815), 225-43.

Earthquakes and Geopolitical Instability

As Americans sought to legitimize the scientific study of nature in the new nation, they were also concerned about the lowly state of American arts and letters. In all intellectual pursuits, eastern Americans worried that they remained on the periphery of the Anglophone world. William Leigh Pierce, the young man who was on the Mississippi River during the earthquakes and published his eyewitness account in the *New-York Evening Post* and later in a pamphlet, wrote a long poem dedicated to the tumultuous year of 1812. In the preface to *The Year: A Poem in Three Cantoes*, Pierce lamented that “the republic of Columbia has done comparatively nothing to liquidate the debt to letters...and she lays [sic] at this moment under the stigma of having thrown but a partial and evanescent light on the paths of science.” He offered the poem to “contribute in the slightest degree to chasten and reform the taste of my countrymen.” In raising the nation’s literary status, Pierce’s results were – to put it mildly – mixed. But the poem captured mounting American apprehension about what environmental and geopolitical instability signaled for the new nation: “O’er *eighteen hundred twelve* what tears shall flow, / What crowds of orphans wail that year of wo! / Nature convulsed! – with terrors shook the earth, / And omens usher in the monstrous birth! - / Along the blue expanse with flaming locks / The comet blazes while creation rocks.” Another stanza about the earthquakes, Richmond fire, and war identified the link between natural and human affairs that all early modern people drew: “Lo! in the south what fearful terrors spread / Lo! in the south he builds a dismal pyre / Lo! in the south he rolls the tide of war / Alas! what next? what greater evils wait? / What heavier griefs? what darker doom of fate?”²⁶

²⁶ Pierce, *The Year: A Poem in Three Cantoes*, 3-12, 22-23, 32.

Those formally educated sectors of the early nineteenth-century North American population most associated with the Enlightenment also drew connections between human, environmental, and spiritual orders. In their interpretations of the earthquakes, they did not situate the divine and human worlds as closely as many evangelical settlers and Native Americans did. But in linking natural phenomena and disruptions in human affairs, particularly the impending war with Great Britain, they acknowledged that unseen forces were responsible for sending foreboding signals. The human, environmental, and spiritual worlds were related and unbalanced. Despite commitments to reason and empiricism, the mounting signs of disorder were not something that formally educated rationalists could explain away. In seeking to understand the earthquakes, no one could divorce the alarming sequence of current events from scientific inquiry.

In their correspondence about human and environmental affairs during this tumultuous era, founders John Adams and Benjamin Rush revealed the pervasive sense of foreboding among the early republic's most elite circles. While there was no empirical evidence linking natural phenomena, divine disfavor, and national troubles in the spring of 1812, Rush was particularly concerned about the combined signs of instability. Adams sought to calm the famed physician with the assurance that philosophy was a refuge against "Storms, Earthquakes, Famines, Pestilences, Georges, [and] Napoleons." But Rush remained fearful, unleashing a flurry of critiques about the new nation's approach to banking and alcohol that echoed the jeremiads of colonial New England. He called the United States "a debanked, a bewhiskied, and dedollared nation" that should advertise itself in European newspapers:

For Sale
to the highest bidder.
The United States of America

Rush's concerns extended well beyond earthly affairs. "Among the national sins of our country that have provoked the wrath of Heaven to afflict us with a war," he emphasized the "idolatrous worship" of George Washington, whom many Americans described in terms reserved for God and Jesus. When Adams replied that an "infinitely blacker cloud" hung over the nation in the revolutionary era, Rush continued his refrain. He feared that the country's northern, southern, and western regions would separate unless they recognized their mutual interests and that a war would divide the nation further. He invoked the sacred again in February 1813, referring to the prophet Jeremiah's warning about "nations being drunk." Rush listed the major goals of Great Britain, France, and the United States. Compared to Britain's grand plan to rule the seas worldwide and Napoleon's desire to build a continental European empire, the U.S. objective to control the Great Lakes seemed ludicrous and inconsequential, prompting Rush to ask, "Which of the above three nations exhibits the strongest signs of intoxication?" Troubling signs of disorder in the human and natural realms led this elite man of science to fear for the new nation.²⁷

Fears linking the earthquakes with geopolitical instability were common among early national elites. While ultimately concerned about the nation, these fears also assumed regional dimensions. In the seat of national government, a Massachusetts congressman hoped that the tremors were "not ominous of national calamity." He wrote to his wife about "an excellent sermon" in town in which the preacher "spoke of the Richmond fire and

²⁷ Adams to Rush, May 26, 1812, *Old Family Letters*, 387; Rush to Adams, June 27, 1812, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 1145; Rush to Adam, July 8, 1812, *ibid.*, 1146; Rush to Adams, July 18, 1812, *ibid.*, 1154; Adams to Rush, August 17, 1812, *Old Family Letters*, 420-21; Rush to Adams, November 17, 1812, *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, 1167; Rush to Adams, February 15, 1813, *ibid.*, 1183.

intimated that the comet, the indian battle, the shock of earthquakes were warnings to the nation.” Bigelow was skeptical, “as they may be considered only the ordinary operations of nature,” but they remained “worthy of notice.” In Philadelphia, a merchant worried about the combination of the “sanguinary war in Europe,” “the paralyzed state of the commerce of our own country & of the world generally,” the “strange comet,” and “the frequency & great extent of the late earthquakes.” The purported volcano in Asheville compounded these fears, which for the East Coast merchant were grounded in Atlantic trade problems.²⁸

From the nation’s western periphery, elite politicians, planters, and travelers joined their earthquake accounts with concerns about trade, lawlessness, and Indian attacks. Winthrop Sargent interspersed his earthquake measurements with laments about the Deep South cotton market, which had plummeted in recent years. From New Orleans, Territorial Governor William Claiborne remarked that the December earthquake “interrupted the Gaity of the Season.” While he did not link the tremors to the frivolous behaviors that eastern observers so often associated with the West, Claiborne did correlate his fear with the “heart-rending Scenes” during the Richmond theater fire. He also noted that he was in a New Orleans theater during a major tremor in early February. Claiborne’s presence at a holiday ball in December and a theater in February led him to consider, if only briefly, the correlation between his amusements and the earthquakes. Other commentators argued for a much more causal relationship.²⁹

²⁸ Abijah Bigelow to Hannah Bigelow, January 1, 1812, and January 5, 1812, “Letters of Abijah Bigelow,” 323; Cope, *Philadelphia Merchant*, 268.

²⁹ Winthrop Sargent Papers, reel 7; William C.C. Claiborne to “a Lady,” February 9, 1812, *Official Letter Books of W.C.C. Claiborne, 1801-1816*, 52. On the declining cotton market, see G.W. Daniels, “American Cotton Trade with Liverpool Under the Embrago and Non-Intercourse Acts,” *American Historical Review* 21, no. 2 (1916), 276-87; Brian Schoen, *The Fragile Fabric of Union: Cotton, Federal Politics, and the Global Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 87-92.

Further north, elite writers focused on the frightful combination of earthquakes and Indian attacks. From St. Louis, territorial official Frederick Bates complained that a woman did not visit him there because “she is frightened by Indians, Earthquakes & Epidemics like all the rest of the world.” He feared that “Missouri will be nothing but a place of exile for Robbers & Outlaws in a few years.” Like many observers, James McBride reported that earthquakes and Indians were a dual threat to western settlement. And true to form, Ninian Edwards was terrified. In a February 1812 letter to a Cincinnati man republished in a Washington City newspaper, Edwards wrote, “It is impossible for me to give you a just conception of the terror that pervades this country.” In 1812, Americans had not assumed the inevitability of expansion.³⁰

For at least one American commentator, the earthquakes were positive barriers to U.S. expansion. In a letter to fellow Federalist Samuel Mitchill, Kentuckian Joseph Ficklin bemoaned the “spirit of wandering” that had enticed an entire generation of Americans to move west. Explaining that “the United States will suffer in the sales of their public lands west of the Mississippi for an age,” perhaps because it depressed the price of eastern lands, Ficklin wanted to establish a firm western boundary for U.S. settlement. He believed that damage from the earthquakes might have created such a border. “I am pleased in viewing the benefits which my country will derive from this great shock,” he wrote.³¹

As faint as voices of opposition like Ficklin’s may be in the historical record, they provide a useful reminder of the contingency of U.S. expansion in this era. Historians have pointed to American failures to wrest northern territory from Canada, but less has been made

³⁰ Frederick Bates to William C. Carr, July 31, 1812, *The Life and Times of Frederick Bates*, vol. 2, ed. Thomas Maitland Marshall (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society, 1926), 232; McBride, “Brief Accounts of Western Journeys,” 27-28; *The Columbian*, March 26, 1812, 3.

³¹ Mitchill, “A Detailed Narrative of the Earthquakes,” 294.

of the nation's western vulnerabilities, which officials like Edwards captured vividly. Early setbacks in the War of 1812 threatened to stem the American "spirit of wandering."

Furthermore, western expansion was a political issue on its own terms, not simply because it threatened to upset regional balance in Congress or spurred later debates about the western extension of slavery. The British and American Indians tested American power from all directions, the triumphalism of "Manifest Destiny" was decades away, the Spanish were still in Florida, and like Ficklin, not all Americans thought expansion was a good idea.

From Indian councils and backcountry revivals to Congress, people found the era's combination of geopolitical and natural instability alarming and portentous. Concerns about the mounting phenomena of 1811 and 1812, particularly what those signs meant for the republic, were not topics of conversation reserved for the dirt floors of revivals. One passionate debate about the significance of these portents gripped the floor of Congress. In response to calls for a declaration of war against Britain, Representative John Randolph of Virginia rose to speak:

I know that we are on the brink of some dreadful scourge – some great desolation – some awful visitation from that Power, whom, I am afraid, we have as yet, in our national capacity, taken no means to conciliate. If other civilized people, if the other nations of Christendom have not escaped, what reason have we to suppose that we shall be preserved from the calamities which Providence has thought fit to inflict on those nations which have ventured to intermingle in this conflict now going on in Europe?

For Randolph, the "signs of the times" were located in human and environmental disorder. In his understanding, the United States had entered into a compact with God that it would break by declaring war and ignoring these signs of the need for caution. Divine punishment was sure to follow. Congressional records did not offer great detail about these signs and

punishments, though Randolph did mention the major earthquake in Venezuela days before Easter 1812 and the Napoleonic Wars in Europe.³²

Rush's letters to Adams and Randolph's speech show that thinkers like Nimrod Hughes and American Indian prophets were not the only figures to suggest that the human and spiritual realms were connected and unbalanced – and that major troubles awaited the early republic. The prognostications of these early national elites were less exact and less bloody than those of Hughes, Paddy Welch, or Tenskwatawa, but they were no less foreboding. And regardless of background and social location, they all insisted on connections among the natural, human, and spiritual worlds.

Of course, not everyone in Congress agreed with Randolph's prescription. John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, one of the major "War Hawks," blasted his colleague for invoking the "signs of the times." Calhoun retorted, "I did hope, that the age of superstition was past, and that no attempt would be made to influence the measures of government, which ought to be founded in wisdom and policy, by the vague, I may say, superstitious feelings of any man." Distinguishing between reason and superstition in the manner that we might have expected from all people of his social standing in the early nineteenth century, Calhoun ridiculed those who read too deeply into comets and eclipses. Indeed a country "so sunk in avarice," "so corrupted by faction," and "lost to its independence" was "a sight more portentous than comets, earthquakes, eclipses, or the whole catalogue of omens."³³

As a vociferous proponent of war, Calhoun likely exaggerated his philosophical opposition to Randolph for rhetorical effect, because in private correspondence, the

³² *Annals of Congress, Debates and Proceedings in the Congress of the United States, 1789-1825*, vol. 24, 1384-86.

³³ John C. Calhoun, "Speech on the Albany Petition for the Repeal of the Embargo," May 6, 1812, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun: Volume I, 1801-1817* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1959), 91.

earthquakes interested him greatly. He wrote to a friend, “How unusual our earthquakes... No doubt you keep your attention directed on this unusual Phenomenon[.] If you have made any observations do communicate them.” The exchange between Randolph and Calhoun shows that divergent understandings of the earthquakes and other natural phenomena figured into larger political debates in societies across eastern North America. While Cherokee Chief Sower Mush cautioned young warriors against capitalizing on the fear generated by the earthquakes to justify horse theft, lest they be “lowered into the ground,” Calhoun found the earthquakes and related phenomena were a poor excuse for refraining from war against Great Britain. In Native American and U.S. political assemblies alike, interpretive disagreements about the earthquakes were emblematic of larger debates about the proper course of action in this tumultuous era.³⁴

Other American writers used the earthquakes to critique individual politicians in a similarly acerbic fashion. Frankfurt’s newspaper *The American Republic* claimed a duty to report on “all the extraordinary phenomina, in both the physical, and moral, world,” including “*Comets, Earthquakes, and political weather-cocks*” like Calhoun’s fellow War Hawk Henry Clay, whose policies threatened the republic. The day after the first earthquake in December 1811, a constituent of Kentucky state legislator John Crittendon wrote a fiery letter in which he wondered why Crittendon “shabbily avoided our town.” The writer criticized Crittendon and his “associates in legislation,” who were not responsive to their constituents “unless the hand of God, or the Earthquake has recently induced them with qualities, to which they from the time of Adam had been strangers.” He continued to attack their callousness, claiming “no cord of sympathy connects your hearts.” In addition to

³⁴ Calhoun to James MacBride, February 16, 1812, *The Papers of John C. Calhoun*, 107; *SPMD*, April 20, 1812, 487.

signifying larger political differences, the earthquakes were a topic for pettier political insults.³⁵

Regardless of social location and educational background, many Americans read wider national concerns into their interpretations of the earthquakes. These fears varied by region. In Washington City, where politicians jostled about the prudence of declaring war, they also considered whether mounting signs of human and natural disorder were related and betokened some greater national calamity. In the western borderlands, the earthquakes summoned preexisting concerns about Indian attacks and lawlessness. For at least one observer in Kentucky, the tremors were a positive check to western expansion, as he hoped that damage to land would halt the “spirit of wandering” that gripped so many Americans in the early nineteenth century. In each of these cases, the earthquakes were powerful reminders that nature itself factored into the choices facing Americans in the unsteady early months of 1812.

Volcanoes and the American Indian Campaign of Misinformation

Both as potential militants and purveyors of misinformation about environmental dangers further west, American Indians exacerbated these related concerns in the United States. While the former is well established, the latter was a subtler form of resistance that deserves more attention in studies of relations between Native Americans and Euroamerican colonizers. Maps depicting the circular, wandering routes of early Spanish entradas in the North American Southeast and Southwest demonstrate the impact that Indian misinformation and European unfamiliarity had on early European ventures in the continent’s interior.

³⁵ *The American Republic*, February 28, 1812, 2; Richard Clough Anderson to John Crittendon, December 17, 1811, Huntington Library.

Despite the widening differentials in population and firepower in the early nineteenth century, American Indians still dictated what early national officials knew about this vast expanse. As maps at the turn of the nineteenth century and discussions about the earthquakes in the West show, eastern knowledge about the geography and demography of the West remained scant.³⁶

In relating stories about distant western volcanoes, which surfaced in newspapers and published reports across the early republic, Native Americans launched a campaign of misinformation that made Americans wary about traveling west to investigate the eruptions and extent of the damage themselves. While the earthquakes of 1811 and 1812 were rare and unexpected, various Indian interpretations show that the tremors were not unprecedented, and Indians were quite capable of recognizing and understanding them. At least for the middle of the continent, volcanoes were another matter. In the second half of the eighteenth century, word of major volcanic activity in the Pacific Northwest likely travelled across Great Plains trading networks, but the alleged volcanoes that Indian informants described to western settlers were located much further inland. Like the Hurons who told seventeenth-century Jesuits about collapsing mountains in the Great Lakes region, the Indians who invented these volcanoes had strategic reasons for doing so.³⁷

Newspapers printed Indian reports of major volcanoes and accompanying destruction shortly after the first earthquake in December 1811. On December 21, the editor of the *Louisiana Gazette* first mentioned a volcano near the “great Osage village,” which previously

³⁶ For an example of Indian misinformation, see Joshua Piker, “Lying Together: The Imperial Implications of Cross-Cultural Untruths,” *American Historical Review* 116, no. 4 (2011), 964-86. For an example of a late eighteenth-century map, see Antoine Souldard, “Idée topographique des hauts du Mississipi et du Missouri : pour servir à la connaissance d'une partie des nations sauvages qui y habitent,” 1795, Edward E. Ayer Collection, Newberry Library.

³⁷ Volney, *View of the Climate and Soil of the United States of America*, 121.

had been dormant for three years. In an early January letter to the *New-York Post*, William Leigh Pierce wrote from New Orleans that “the Burning Mountain, up the Washita River, had been rent to its base.” Pierce heard the report from a settler “through the medium of some Indians.” Dispelling any concerns about the report’s veracity, he explained that the settler’s appearance “was such as to attach credit to his information.” Indian stories about burning and disintegrating western mountains soon appeared in newspapers in Tennessee, Georgia, Indiana, Ohio, and New York, and many more newspapers cited volcanoes without mentioning Indians as sources for the information. “No doubt volcanoes in the mountains of the west, which have been extinguished for ages, are now opened,” explained the *Louisiana Gazette*. Articles from Tennessee’s *Carthage Gazette* and New York’s *The Columbian* were especially graphic. In the *Carthage Gazette*, Indians described mountains that “appeared to be tumbling to pieces...rocks as large as houses were thrown into the vallies from the tops of mountains; and in many places the earth appeared to be much heated, and in every direction there were seen to be evident signs of volcanic eruptions.” According to a letter from Kentucky in *The Columbian*, “some Indians who were in search of some other Indians that were lost, had returned, and stated that they had discovered a volcano at the head of the Arkansas, by the light of which they travelled three days and nights!”³⁸

These reports of western volcanoes led American letter writers to speculate about distant volcanoes as the primary cause of the shaking. Although Winthrop Sargent chose “not to pretend beyond a Conjecture as to the Source of those mighty Concussions,” he was

³⁸ On newspaper stories that cited Indian reports of volcanoes, see *Louisiana Gazette*, 21, 1811; *Carthage Gazette*, February 8, 1812, 1; *Western Sun*, February 22, 1812; *Western Spy*, March 14, 1812; *Georgia Journal*, March 25, 1812, 2; *The Columbian*, April 1, 1812, 2; Pierce, *An Account of the Great Earthquakes*, 13-14. On newspaper stories that connected the earthquakes to volcanoes, see *Western Spy*, December 28, 1811; January 4, 1812, 3; *Savannah Evening Journal*, February 8, 1812, 2; *Georgia Journal*, February 12, 1812; *Louisiana Gazette*, February 29, 1812.

“perfectly satisfied by the Existence of Volcanoes in the West & North.” In June 1812, a settler in Indiana Territory informed his brother that the earth continued to shake faintly, which was “caused by the burning mountains on the western ocean.” And one of Mitchill’s correspondents in Illinois Territory pointed to lava floating on the Mississippi River as evidence of volcanic activity upstream. In the history of science in the early republic, American Indians were more than topics of speculation and fear among gentlemen; they influenced ideas about how the natural world operated.³⁹

Read alongside truthful descriptions of major earthquake damage, these volcano discussions, driven by Indian misinformation, make it easier to understand why readers did not immediately dismiss John Edwards’ Asheville volcano hoax. But whereas Edwards’ letter seemed to be simply a ploy for notoriety, Indians intended to discourage western exploration and settlement with their references to volcanoes and widespread destruction. The early republic’s commitment to empiricism and observation demanded that Americans corroborate the reports, but the threat of volcanic damage and Indian attack prevented them from investigating the volcanoes firsthand. The reports, in turn, fueled more speculation and fear. Perhaps John Adams had been justified in suspecting “something very wicked at the bottom of most of those stories.”

In their discussions with western settlers, American Indians also emphasized Tenskwatawa’s role in either causing or foretelling the earthquakes. Whether or not Indians believed this claim, it spread through eastern newspapers like the volcano reports and deepened American fears about the powerful and related human, natural, and spiritual forces

³⁹ Winthrop Sargent to Benjamin Smith Barton, April 2, 1812, Winthrop Sargent Papers, OHS; Hosea Smith to Brother, June 22, 1812 (transcription), FHS; Stanley Griswold to Samuel L. Mitchill, September 20, 1812, *The Medical Repository*, 304-06.

to the West. In the trans-Appalachian exchange of information, Indians related this point as part of a broader strategy to make the West seem hostile and threatening. In the Indians' telling, the people and natural phenomena located there acted as dual barriers to U.S. exploration and settlement.

In the beginning of various versions of the story that circulated through American newspapers, the earth swallowed seven Indians. Only one man escaped to describe the Shawnee Prophet's role in the disaster. In one telling, the "Shawanoë Prophet has caused the earthquake, to destroy the whites." In another, "this calamity was foretold by the Shawnanoe Prophet for the destruction of the whites!" Both iterations emphasized Tenskwatawa's special relationship with the divine and natural forces responsible for the shaking and the fact that white Americans were special targets. A letter in the *Georgia Journal* delved more deeply into the matter of the Prophet's divinations. Claiming to relate the information from many prominent anti-Redstick Creeks, the writer recounted that the Shawnee Prophet visited a Creek council. He "pronounced in the public square, that shortly a lamp would appear in the west to aid him in his hostile attack upon the whites, and if they would not be influenced by his persuasion, the earth would, ere long, tremble to its centre." The writer mentioned that the Prophet foretold the earlier comet based on calculations that he received from a trip to Quebec.⁴⁰

There were several problems with the account in the *Georgia Journal*. First, the comet of 1811 pre-dated the Shawnee delegation's fall trip to Creek country. The writer also confused the Prophet's comet calculation with his foretelling of an 1806 eclipse, when it was

⁴⁰ *Virginia Argus*, February 2, 1812; *The Columbian*, February 14, 1812, 2; *New-York Herald*, February 26, 1812, 1-2; *Georgia Journal*, March 25, 1812, 2. *The Halcyon Luminary* reprinted the *Georgia Journal* article. See *Halcyon Luminary, and Theological Repository* 1, nos. 6 (1812), 275-76.

widely believed that he received celestial calculations from Quebec. Furthermore, in response to the letter, another writer noted that as an interpreter and inhabitant of Creek country, he felt obligated “to put my fellow citizens on their guard against a person who seems to have come from Scotland to enlighten us on Earthquakes, Comets, the Indian Prophet, and the management of Indian Affairs.” He explained that Tenskwatawa was not part of the Shawnee delegation that visited Tuckabatchee, though he did not dispute the claim that some one at the council foretold the earthquakes. This discussion in the *Georgia Journal* was most likely the earliest reference to the earthquake prognostication that became so popular in retellings of the earthquakes and Tecumseh’s southern tour. Despite the strong unlikelihood Tecumseh or anyone else made the predication at Tuckabatchee, the fact that newspapers linked Tenskwatawa to the earthquakes was not merely tabloid fancy. It was a testament both to the broad recognition among Indians and the American newspapers that the Prophet had a special relationship with natural forces – and that Americans were concerned about Shawnee power in this world and beyond.⁴¹

Conclusion

In these unstable times – both environmentally and geopolitically – the public good depended on truthful reporting. A spat between two Cincinnati newspapers illustrated the stakes of reporting accurate information about the environment in the early republic. In February 1812, the editors of the *Western Spy* addressed a charge from their counterparts at the *Liberty Hall* that they had exaggerated the number of shocks felt in Cincinnati. They appealed to the city’s citizens, “respectable for their number and intelligence, their diligence

⁴¹ *Georgia Journal*, May 27, 1812, 3.

and accuracy of observations,” to confirm that the number of shocks was three times what had been reported previously. They then warned *Western Spy*’s readership about the dangers of underestimating the scope of disasters by citing a previous yellow fever outbreak in the mid-Atlantic. Officials in New York and Philadelphia denied the disease’s pervasiveness in order to protect the reputations of their cities. In covering up the extent of the epidemic, city leaders “wantonly sacrificed hundreds of lives, which might have been saved by a timely flight from the seat of pestilence – and thus narrow prejudice, fortified by avarice and self-interest, warred against humanity.” While the inhabitants of Cincinnati might not be in “imminent danger,” underestimating the number of tremors could have deadly consequences. The editors of the *Western Spy* also accused the *Liberty Hall* of its own exaggerations. In an account that East Coast newspapers reprinted, a late January issue of the *Liberty Hall* contained a letter describing how “millions of trees that were embedded in the mud” resurfaced on the Mississippi River. The *Western Spy* editors “perused that same letter, and can positively affirm the word millions is not to be found throughout the whole of it.”⁴²

Exaggeration was a major obstacle in the nation’s drive to find “authentic information from some places” about the earthquakes. Established naturalists and newspapers on the East Coast did not trust implausible accounts from newly incorporated people and territory in the continent’s interior. This mistrust reflected an emerging moral geography in the early republic in which the West was not a romantic construct, but a lawless and immoral place. And in some cases, people like John Edwards and American Indians gave easterners good reason to be skeptical.

⁴² *Western Spy*, February 8, 1812, 3.

As eastern authorities sifted through piles of observations about the sights, sounds, smells, and motion associated with the earthquakes, they filtered accounts by social status. While in many cases the insights of the unlearned mirrored those who were more formally educated, this filter represented a social barrier to a truly republican intellectual landscape that privileged the empirical input of all of its citizens over the theories of the elite. The ultimately hierarchical nature of fact gathering in this national science experiment also epitomized broader tensions between elite and popular political interests in the early republic.

Even in the empirical intellectual culture of the early republic, Americans connected human, environmental, and divine orders. The frightful sequence of a major comet, conflict with Indians, earthquakes, a theater fire, and an impending war against Great Britain led commentators – from the camp meetings to Congress – to question whether the United States was a target for divine judgment. Environmental and geopolitical fears were intertwined. American Indians, who used their own traditions and contemporary concerns to interpret the earthquakes, capitalized on these fears by relating stories about volcanoes and the power of the Shawnee Prophet to predict or control the shaking. The possibility of links between the world's various convulsions captivated everyone.

CONCLUSION

The earthquakes' significance outlasted the shaking. Nearly a decade later, Otos blamed the tremors on divine anger for an American killing their tribesman. Like most Native Americans, they did not translate their cultural, political, and territorial concerns about U.S. encroachment into troops for Tecumseh in the War of 1812. In 1824, a Kentucky slave owner sought to nullify the purchase of a woman named Isabel because she "laboured under a serious mental affliction" and "was so far deranged that for several months she did no work." Isabel's seller remembered that "about the time of the earthquakes," she had a "religious foolishness" that was "occasioned by them & a religious Feeling." Claiming the trait was not hereditary, the seller nonetheless offered to nullify the deal. Isabel therefore used the earthquakes to rescind her sale and to return to her original owner – and perhaps her family. Corroborating the statistical evidence, local church histories hailed the time of the tremors as an evangelical golden age. In memoirs written at the close of the nineteenth century, a number of elderly Tennesseans remembered the earthquakes among a handful of the most important events of their lives.¹

The land remained damaged. Although trappers found the new landscape was prime habitat for furbearing animals, many settlers opted to relocate. In 1824, the Missouri legislature appealed to the U.S. Congress to award land titles to allow residents to move

¹ James, *Early Western Travels*, 57; William Bullitt to JL Allison, October 16, 1824, and Allison to Bullitt, October 27, 1824, Bullitt-Oxmoor Collection, FHS; Mary Morriss Smith, Jane Thomas, and Nathan Vaught Memoirs, TSLA.

elsewhere. Congress granted their request, although the market for damaged land and new titles became an arena for rampant fraud and speculation. In an 1828 deposition, children orphaned by the earthquakes appealed for land. The heads of households received land certificates, but they “were mostly ignorant backwoodsmen, and shrewd and unscrupulous speculators cheated them out of their claims, so that they never received any substantial benefit from the law,” explained a nineteenth-century historian of Missouri.²

As part of the professionalization process, later nineteenth-century science sought to disentangle the natural world from the human and spiritual orders that all early modern people once connected. But other ways of thinking about nature persisted. In the 1850s, the Gros-Ventres of present-day Montana told a Jesuit missionary that recent earthquakes were signs that smallpox had returned. They blamed the missionary for the earthquakes and the epidemic, continuing the long-standing indigenous traditions of correlating tremors with illness and impurity, as well as using natural phenomena to indict colonialism. The major earthquake along the San Andreas Fault in 1906 figured prominently in Los Angeles’ Asuza Street Revival, which began the modern American Pentecostal movement. North Americans continued to read human and spiritual significance into natural phenomena, particularly when it seemed like the whole world was convulsed.³

Revivalism among evangelical settlers and inter-tribal militants also has had important and persistent political legacies. The emerging American, Cherokee, and Creek

² Lyell, *A Second Visit to the United States of America*, 179; Deposition taken October 7, 1828, Alvord Collection, SHSM; William Foley, *A History of Missouri, Volume I: 1673 to 1820* (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1971), 171; Musick, *Stories of Missouri*, 149.

³ Pierre Jean De Smet to the Editor of *Precis Historiques*, October 28, 1855, *Western Missions and Missionaries: A Series of Letters* (New York: James B. Kirker, 1863), 257-58. On the 1906 earthquake and the Pentecostal movement, see Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 22, 83, 255.

nations relegated these movements to their political margins in the early nineteenth century. But modern evangelical and inter-tribal activists still hearken back to Methodist circuit riders and Indian warriors like Tecumseh for their visions of social and political reform.

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