

BY JLC STAFF

California's Forgotten 'Big One'

On the morning of January 9, 1857, the Fort Tejon earthquake, one of the strongest ever recorded in the U.S., struck Southern California. Its strength was such that it was reported to have caused rivers to flow backward and lake waters to be thrown upon their shores, stranding fish miles from original lake beds.

A lonely military outpost, Fort Tejon—built a few years earlier in sparsely populated, 1850s Southern California—took the brunt of the quake. “We have accounts from one of the commanding officers, Captain John W.T. Gardiner, who was there the morning it hit,” says Michael Deagon, an interpreter at Fort Tejon State Historic Park, a 75-mile drive high into mountains northwest of Los Angeles. “In letters, Captain Gardiner describes being thrown from his bed across the floor and not able to get on his feet because of the intensity of the earthquake.” Throughout southern and central California, the strong shaking caused by the 1857 shock was reported to have lasted for at least one minute, possibly upwards of three. The earthquake acquired its name because Fort Tejon was the largest population center near the fault, but the quake’s epicenter was actually 100 miles to the northwest of the fort, near Parkfield, Calif.—the self-proclaimed “earthquake capitol of the world” (1).

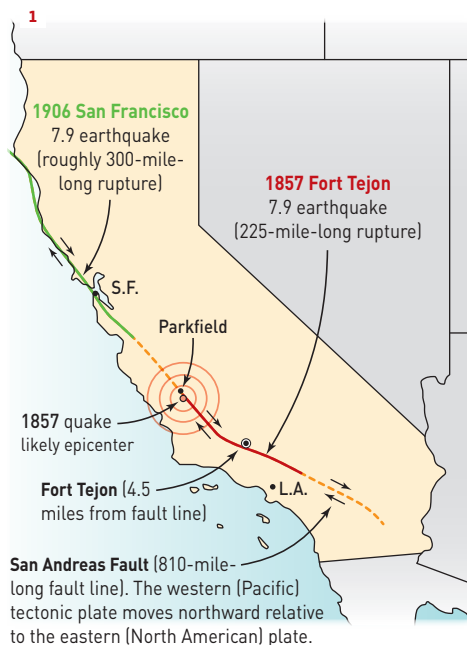
Damage, abandonment, and restoration. Restoration archi-

tect Clarence Cullimore gave a sense of the damage in *Old Adobes of Forgotten Fort Tejon* (1949). As reported by the Los Angeles *Star* on January 24, 1857, “Quarters occupied by Lt. Col. Beall has received more damage than any other finished building on the Post. Its chimnies [sic] have been thrown down, its plastering broken off in many places, and one of its ends so badly shaken and cracked as to be too insecure to be occupied.”

The fort was rebuilt, but was later abandoned in September 1864. Once deserted, its many structures fell into decay, with rain and mountain snows taking their toll on the unprotected adobe wall surfaces (2).

According to Deagon, “It was the late '40s, early '50s when they started rebuilding some of the structures. The park plan still calls for 15 other old historic structures to be rebuilt.” A third of the original structures have been restored (3) with one in a state of “arrested decay”—adobe buttresses were placed around an exterior wall in the 1950s to stabilize it until it could be fully preserved (4).

The next “big one.” Deagon notes, “It was the last major earthquake of that size to hit this area. Seismologists tell us this part of the San Andreas tends to be on a 150-year cycle and the earthquake was over 160 years ago. So we’re kind of overdue.”



1, Tim Healey; 2, Library of Congress; 3, 4, courtesy California State Parks