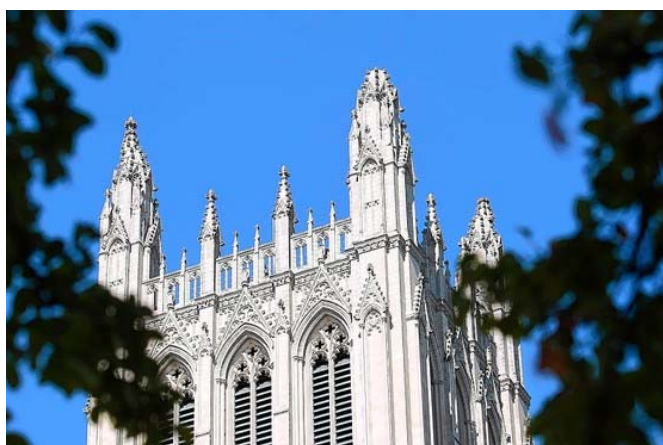


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AUGUST 24, 2011

Rare Earthquake Stuns East Coast



Associated Press

One of the spires of Washington National Cathedral is damaged by an earthquake that also forced evacuations on the National Mall.

A rare East Coast earthquake—one of the strongest to hit the region in modern history—struck Tuesday in Virginia southwest of the nation's capital in the middle of the afternoon, rattling buildings and nerves from Florida to Maine.

Overall, the earthquake appeared to have caused little in the way of serious injuries or damage though it apparently opened a crack on the top of the Washington Monument.

Structural engineers were set to take a closer look

Wednesday, said park service spokesman Bill Line, who added the monument will be closed indefinitely. The crack was spotted about 6 p.m. when officials surveyed the monument by helicopter, and hours after it was closed following the quake.

The quake disrupted flights and cut grid power to one nuclear plant. It also sent office workers into the streets of New York and Washington, clogged cellphone networks and triggered an outpouring of Twitter updates.

Most of all, the quake reminded East Coasters that they, too, live in a possible earthquake zone. Karen Schaefer was stopped at a traffic light in Raleigh, N.C., when her 1995 Honda Accord began shaking.

"It felt like when you are sitting on a suspension bridge and you feel it swaying," she said. "But I knew I wasn't on a suspension bridge. I was like, 'Is this an earthquake?' And I said, 'No, this is Raleigh, North Carolina.' "

The Atlantic seaboard's worries about Mother Nature were focused this week on the threat from Hurricane Irene. Yet while earthquakes are much less frequent in the Eastern U.S. compared with the West, seismologic experts say they can be just as powerful and the impact far more widespread.

Quakes happen when stress in the earth's crust





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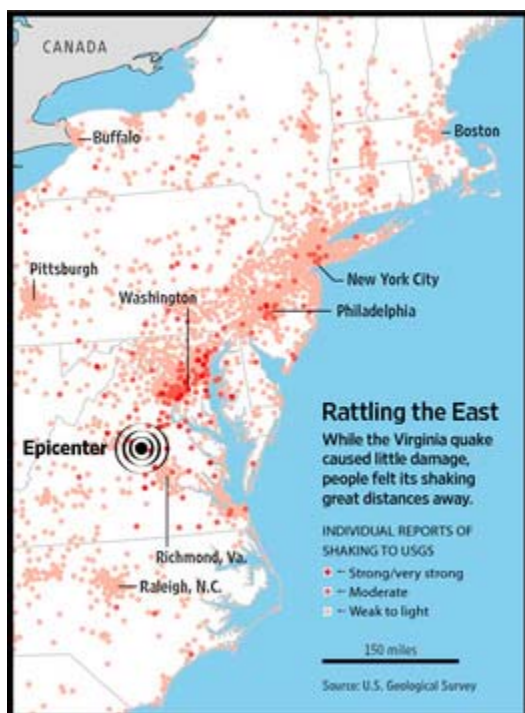
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builds up until a point when the energy is released all at once. They are more frequent on the West Coast where two large, rigid plates of the earth's crust meet.

On the East Coast, the earth's crust is now all one plate formed from a collision of plates hundreds of millions of years ago. Even without actively moving plates, forces can build up within small weaknesses in the earth's crust and break through from time to time.

Tuesday's 5.8-magnitude quake occurred on a fault that was "active about 200 million years ago," said Art Lerner-Lam, interim director of Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory at Columbia University in New York.



The region's geology means shocks disseminate much farther. The active movement of the plates in the West leaves the rocks warmer and able to absorb more energy than the colder, harder and older rocks that form the earth's crust under the East Coast, according to Andrew Filiatrault, director of the Multidisciplinary Center for Earthquake Engineering Research at the University of Buffalo in New York.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the quake struck at 1:51 p.m. at Mineral, Va., 87 miles southwest of Washington and at a depth of 3.7 miles. The quake was the state's strongest in 114 years.

The White House said Tuesday that there were no initial reports of major infrastructure damage or requests for federal assistance. Minor structural damage was reported around Virginia, however.

In Mineral, the quake shattered the windows of several buildings in the one-stoplight town, including the U.S. Post Office branch.

In Washington, the central tower of the National Cathedral, the city's highest point, was damaged. The cathedral was evacuated while officials assessed its stability.

The earthquake generated a jump in cellphone calls and messages that congested networks in the first half hour, though they quickly recovered.

In downtown New York City, Manhattan District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr. had just begun a news conference regarding the dismissal of charges against former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn when the room started shaking. Mr. Vance told his staff that everything was OK, but he and the journalists in the room were evacuated from the building.

All the courthouses and several buildings in lower Manhattan were cleared, leaving hundreds of people standing around.

Amy Noller and Steve Mutton were among those standing in a park—she in her white wedding dress and he in his suit. They had been third in line at the New York City Marriage Bureau when they were told they had to leave.

"We were just getting ready to go into the chapel when we were told that we had to evacuate the building," Ms. Noller said. "We've got to call the caterer and tell them we're going to be late."

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