



Earth could move again Northeast quake peril

By JOEL SIEGEL
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The East Coast earthquake may have startled millions Friday night, but it didn't faze the experts. These things have happened before, seismologists said yesterday, and they undoubtedly will happen again.

And next time, they warned, the damage could be far, far worse.

Friday's quake, centered 90 miles north of Quebec City, Canada, measured 6.0 on the Richter scale, making it the most powerful Eastern earthquake in decades.

It rocked the United States from Maine to Wisconsin to Washington, D.C. New Yorkers were among those shaken.

"It's important that the public and government ... appreciate the fact of reasonable-size earthquakes in the Northeast and the potential of damage," David Simpson, of Columbia University's Lamont-Doherty Geological Observatory, said yesterday.

The most severe quake centered in metropolitan New York occurred in 1884, toppling bricks and cracking plaster from Hartford, Conn., to Pennsylvania. It measured 5.0 on the Richter scale.

Dr. Charles Merguerian, a Hofstra University professor who has studied geologic faults beneath New York City, thinks serious damage could result if a quake like Friday's was centered here.

"The tunnels (under the East and Hudson Rivers) would probably snap ... and water towers would be leaping off buildings," he said.

The Northeast U.S. experiences an average of 100 quakes annually, Simpson said. Most are so small, only delicate instruments notice them. By comparison, thousands of seismic events strike California each year.

But Eastern quakes can still be dangerous. At least 60 people died in 1886 when a quake measuring 7.5 rumbled through Charleston, S.C.

No quake design

About 95% of all earthquakes occur in areas where massive "plates" of the Earth's crust rub against each other, Simpson said.

But the eastern U.S. and Canada are smack in the middle of the North American plate. So how do quakes in this region occur?

One theory is that stress and strain from the plate's edges are transmitted through the Earth's crust, causing shifts in the crust thousands of miles away. But nothing is proven.

One thing is sure: "The New York area is not seismically still," Merguerian said.

"Not to be an alarmist, but it scares me a little bit that here in the Northeast we build buildings with no concept of earthquake design," he added.