Chapter 1—Dangerous Republic: The United States Before ‘Disaster Politics’, 1789-1850

The greatest ‘natural’ disaster to hit the United States during its first two decades was a Yellow Fever epidemic that killed perhaps ten percent of the population of Philadelphia in 1793. Atlantic port cities were all-too-familiar with epidemic disease, and Philadelphia was not just the new Republic’s busiest port but its largest city and the national capital.¹ More than that, its elites viewed their city as “the continental seat of culture and commerce,” and prided themselves on their civic-mindedness.² In Philadelphia, a recent historian has remarked, “association was the word of the day.”³ Yellow Fever, however, largely paralysed its institutions and its political leadership. True, the city’s Federalist mayor, Matthew Clarkson, bravely stayed at his post, and so did its leading physician, Benjamin Rush. But the resources upon which they could now draw were feeble. Most obviously, no one knew that the disease was carried by tiny mosquitoes that arrived with ship cargos, multiplied in still water, and spread the disease by biting their victims. Instead, Philadelphians adhered to the ancient assumptions that the disease was caused by unclean, ‘miasmatic’ air, and to equally antiquated remedies—bleeding and purging victims to correct an imbalance in their ‘humours’, detonating gunpowder in order to clear the air, ringing church bells to propitiate the Lord.

So far, so familiar, for this was the way that communities hit by epidemic disease understood their condition on both sides of the Atlantic in the eighteenth century. Not for another century would a series of dramatic breakthroughs in medical knowledge allow cities and public health practitioners to respond scientifically either to yellow fever or to such other ghastly scourges as cholera, typhus, and malaria. At the same time, however, European cities and states had been striving to respond methodically to epidemic disease ever since the advent of plague in the

¹ On previous Philadelphia epidemics (the most recent in 1762), see John Duffy, Epidemics in Colonial America Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1953), 137-38, 165.
³ Finger, 57.
thirteenth century, and during the early modern period had developed progressively more systematic mechanisms for quarantining and hospitalising victims, cleaning streets, and dispensing charity to survivors.\(^4\) True, the last great European plague outbreak had severely tested the municipal authorities of Marseilles in 1720, and found them largely wanting. But regional and national governments had responded decisively first to the threat of contagion and (eventually) to the vast humanitarian toll of disease.\(^5\)

Given that backdrop, the historian is initially surprised on encountering the best-known contemporary chronicle of the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic, authored by the printer and publisher, Matthew Carey. Its opening pages record a story not of a city and its people purposefully combatting contagion, but rather of cataclysmic social collapse. Describing “a total dissolution of the bonds of society,” Carey found that “government of every kind was almost wholly vacated.” Aldermen, justices of the peace, the governor of the state, overseers of the poor, federal officials all fled the city. Putrefying corpses lay in the street. Neighbours and family members abandoned one another in an apocalyptic environment where personal survival was the only goal. As for those public-spirited citizens who remained, their actions sometimes only added to the chaos: Carey refers to cacophonous, panic-inducing blasts of gunpowder, and to the constant ringing of church bells—“terrify[ing] those in health, and driv[ing] the sick…to their graves”.

How could the cradle of the Republic have been reduced to such a condition? Finding an explanation as thoroughly familiar on both sides of the Atlantic as the gunpowder, the bells, the

\(^{4}\) Mark Harrison, *Contagion: How Commerce Has Spread Disease* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2012), Chapters 1 and 2, which deal with “the naturalisation of disease” first in Mediterranean, then in northern, Europe “and its placement within the affairs of state” (quote from 12). See also John Booker, *Maritime Quarantine: The British Experience, 1650-1800* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), which emphasises the difficulty of imposing quarantine in British political culture but an overall story of progress.

bleeding and the purging, Carey detected the hand of God. Philadelphians had grown increasingly complacent and self-satisfied during the months leading up to this terrible visitation, he pronounced, and given to ostentatious displays of wealth. “Luxury, the usual, and perhaps inevitable, concomitant of prosperity, was gaining ground in a manner very alarming to those who considered how far the virtue, the liberty, and the happiness of the nation depend on its temperance and sober manners.” Declining to “attempt to scan the decrees of Heaven,” Carey nevertheless felt certain that “something was wanting to humble the pride of a city, which was running on in full career, to the goal of prodigality and dissipation.”

But parallel with this story of doom, Carey also offers a counter-narrative of hero-led redemption, featuring courageous individuals such as Mayor Clarkson and Doctor Rush who called on Philadelphia and the Republic’s noblest traditions, casting self-preservation to one side in pursuit of a larger public good. Their activities reveal a somewhat more concerted public response to the yellow fever epidemic than is suggested by the author’s more lurid and nightmarish passages, and also hint at the value of construing ‘public authority’ during the early republic not narrowly in terms of governmental action, but rather in terms of partnership between governmental and nongovernmental elites. Rather than arguing over the size of the American State, Brian Balogh has recently argued, historians might find it more profitable to investigate its fundamental character. Very early in the history of the Republic, he suggests, Americans developed what would become a characteristic mode of governance that involved pursuing collective goals through non-governmental action.

Philadelphia’s response to yellow fever neatly illustrates Balogh’s point. While its Common Council lacked effective authority in addressing the formidable social problems created by rapid, uncontrolled urban growth, a recent historian uncovers a parallel civic world in which leading

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merchants, physicians and other elites nourished a strong commitment to the larger public good.\textsuperscript{8} When yellow fever struck, the weakness of formal governmental authority was initially debilitating, resulting in the panic that Carey documents so avidly, and eliminating any prospect that the geographic spread of the disease beyond the docks might rapidly be curtailed. But Mayor Clarkson was at least able to draw on the energies and public spirit of the city’s College of Physicians, resulting in a series of mostly sensible instructions about sanitation and isolation that were then disseminated by mayoral proclamation. A little later, the few aldermen and overseers of the poor who remained in post worked with leading Philadelphians such as Carey and the merchant Stephen Girard to establish a hospital for the treatment of the sick, together with arrangements for disposing of the dead.\textsuperscript{9}

Acknowledging the extent to which Philadelphians faced with yellow fever pursued collective ends through non-governmental means, the limits of governmental action—state and federal, as well as municipal—remain worthy of note. In 1793, the state government of Pennsylvania, like the federal government, was based in the city, but there is no suggestion in the existing literature that the Commonwealth played any role in combatting the spread of the disease or alleviating the suffering of its victims. Governor Thomas Mifflin’s most energetic actions appear to have been to berate the Mayor for not doing enough, to issue empty promises of state funds in support of more robust action, to instruct Clarkson to fire gunpowder throughout the city—and then to vacate the scene for his country estate.\textsuperscript{10} A recent monograph on Pennsylvania state government during the early national period makes no reference to yellow fever, or to public health more

\textsuperscript{8} Finger, \textit{Contagious City}, Chapter 4.
generally. It is common for historians of the early American state to juxtapose the limits of federal authority in domestic affairs with the compensatory strength of the states. In that context, one might expect the long-established and economically developed commonwealth of Pennsylvania to have at least attempted to provide the kind of political leadership that regional governments in Provence had displayed when confronted with the 1720 plague epidemic in Marseilles. Yet such leadership appears to have been entirely absent, and not even seriously suggested.

What of the General Government? Again, it seems to have felt that it had no role to play in combating an epidemic on its very doorstep. Why might that be? Writing about a severe food shortage that had hit parts of the northeast four years earlier, Alan Taylor observes that the federal government was too “new and feeble” for federal relief even to be an option. Still more was that the case in relation to the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. Lacking either a standing army, or any social welfare or public health infrastructure, the General Government had no practical ability to alleviate either the humanitarian or the public health crisis. And while the Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson, had initially wondered whether he might at least demonstrate symbolic leadership by staying at his post during the emergency, in the event discretion had proved the better part of valour—instead, he returned to Monticello.

13 Brockliss
15 The first stage in developing such capacity came in 1798, with the formation of the Marine Hospital Service. For the emergence of a military role in alleviating disaster, see Gaines Foster, *The Demands of Humanity: Army Medical Disaster Relief* (Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1983), and Leland Johnson, *Situation Desperate: U.S. Army Engineer Disaster Relief Operations, Origins to 1950* (Alexandria, Va.: US Army Corps of Engineers, 2012). Not until the late 19th century would the federal government play any role in quarantining disease.
16 [insert TJ correspondence here]
More than that, though, in the early national period there was no seeming constitutional sanction for federal disaster management. The historian Max Edling reminds us that the United States had been created not to police the internal affairs of individual states, but rather to solve grave challenges of security and national survival. Its fundamental purpose, far from being to create an expansive national government, was to strengthen the states, in contexts (military, economic, diplomatic) where that end—rather than some grand national vision—impelled confederation. Much later, the U.S. Constitution’s ‘general welfare’ clause would be invoked to justify a federal social welfare role. When the clause was first adumbrated, however, Benjamin Franklin had explained that it “referred only to the management of international commerce, the currency, and the military.” No domestic disaster during the early national period—not even the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic—came close to imperilling the Union. Insofar as dealing with disaster was a political matter, therefore, the responsibility unquestionably lay with the states, under their opaque but expansive “internal police” power. Reading the correspondence of President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson for the months when yellow fever was raging, their overwhelming priority remained the war in France.17

The historian Cynthia Kierner highlights the distinctiveness of this arrangement, drawing an instructive contrast between the way that the young United States and the British Empire approached the previously mentioned 1789 food shortage, which affected settlers and Indians on both sides of the U.S-Canadian border. During the late eighteenth century, she notes, the British government had displayed a growing interest in projecting a paternalistic concern for its colonial subjects in the Caribbean and North America, not primarily out of altruism, but rather because -- in a revolutionary political environment, and with European empires and advocates of self-rule vying for pre-eminence -- displaying benevolence to one’s subjects might help to shore up the crown’s embattled authority. In that context, disaster could present not just a humanitarian challenge, but a

useful opportunity. While the federal government in New York City took no action in response to
hunger on the northern border, London intervened energetically, hoping to shore up the allegiance
to the crown of their new French Canadian subjects by projecting benevolence. Quite apart from
the fact that the U.S. lacked that political incentive to action, she observes that American political
culture was fundamentally not “paternalist” in character. It was not only that the federal
government that declined to alleviate hunger in upstate New York; neither did the state
government. In the young United States, she explains, responsibility for alleviating social distress,
including that caused by a natural disaster, was not just a non-federal but overwhelmingly a non-
governmental matter.

New Madrid Earthquakes, 1811-1812

Along with the Philadelphia yellow fever epidemic of 1793, the natural disaster from the
early national period that has attracted the greatest historical attention is a series of powerful
earthquakes that struck the Mississippi River valley in the winter of 1811-12, with its epicentre near
the small Missouri Territory town of New Madrid. This interest is unsurprising, given the
incongruity of a series of very powerful tremors striking a part of the United States that is so very

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19 In making this contrast, Kierner draws on Alan Taylor, ”The Hungry Year,” in Alessa Johns, ed., Dreadful Visitations: Confronting Natural Catastrophe in the Age of Enlightenment (New York: Routledge, 1999)
20 Kierner, Inventing Disaster, 141-42.
21 The epidemic generated at least $34,000 in cash donations, mostly from neighbouring states, but including a substantial sum from Boston. Kierner, Inventing Disaster, 137.
far removed from the San Andreas fault. Much of this work has focussed on trying to piece together the details, drama and social effects of a disaster whose isolated rural setting presents a significant challenge to the historian. Most significant for present purposes, though, is the legal historian Michele Landis Dauber’s claim that Congress’s 1815 decision to donate portions of public land to victims of the quakes constituted an early instance of federal disaster relief. On closer examination, this claim becomes problematic, and obscures a more historically important counter-story, namely the absence of any far-reaching humanitarian response – either governmental or philanthropic – to what was undoubtedly one of the more harrowing natural disasters to have struck the young American republic.

Piecing together precisely what happened in and around New Madrid remains difficult, but surviving letters, diaries and newspaper coverage amply confirm the traumatic effects of its three principal tremors (the first came in December of 1811, the second the following month, the third and strongest in early February). The principal effects were felt in south east Missouri Territory, in adjacent portions of Arkansas Territory, and in western parts of Kentucky and Tennessee, while the quakes also caused a mixture of wonderment and panic as far afield as South Carolina, the District of Columbia and New York. A number of first-hand accounts come from boatmen who were journeying down the Mississippi either during this protracted series of tremors, or in their immediate aftermath. One such observer chronicled a scene of “confusion, terror in New Madrid itself, with townspeople fleeing for open country, and camping out in fields and woods, while “those in the country fled with like purpose towards the town.”23 Another, going ashore just after the second big shock, came across a log house containing more than twenty people, “almost distracted with fear,” gathered together and praying earnestly for deliverance.24 A third, owner of a fleet of flat-boats, lost one of his boats in the same quake, together with all its occupants. Writing from Natchez a month

23 Account by William Leigh Pierce, a merchant, reproduced in Mueller, Lost in the Annals, 38.
24 This chronicler was John Bradbury, a Scottish naturalist who was visiting Missouri at the suggestion of Thomas Jefferson. Ibid., 35.
or so later, he recalled having seen dead bodies floating in the river, houses on fire, and survivors “crowded out upon the hillside and...in great fear.” A fourth, going ashore at the ruined river town of Little Prairie, south of New Madrid, came across a seventeen year old girl whose leg was “crushed and pinned by a falling beam,” and whose family had abandoned her.  

On especially poignant first-hand account comes from George Heinrich Crist, a Kentucky farmer whose Nelson County home was some 250 miles from New Madrid, but whose diary conveys the protracted terror of those who were trapped in the earthquake zone throughout the winter of 1811-12. During the first quake he experienced not just extreme shaking but a “loud roaring sound” that he thought “would never stop,” punctuated by “screams from people and animals.” Since it struck at 2 a.m., the terror was accentuated by complete darkness. All of his family had survived, he noted, but destruction of property was widespread and “blood was everywhere.” Crist was determined to move to Indiana territory, in the hope that the earthquake had not extended that far, but was still in Nelson County a month later, when the second big quake struck. Here is how he recorded that experience:

What are we gonna do? You cannot fight it cause you do not know how. It is not something that you can see....The earthquake or whatever it is come again today. It was as bad or worse than the one in December. We lost our Amandy Jane in this one—a log fell on her. We will bury her upon the hill under a clump of trees where Besys Ma and Pa is buried. A lot of people thinks that the devil has come here. Some thinks that this is the beginning of the world coming to a end.

Two weeks later came what historians agree to have been the strongest quake (at its epicentre, it is estimated to have reached between 7 and 8 on the Richter scale). Still trapped in Nelson County, Crist told his diary that “If we do not get away from here the ground is going to eat us alive.” “We had another one of them earthquakes yesterday,” he continued, adding that “we are all about to go

25 Valencius, *Lost History*, 39
crazy—from pain and fright.” But he could not get away from this scene of terror, for he had been unable to find any animals to pull his wagons.26

These glimpses of trauma come variously from private diaries and correspondence, or from subsequent reminiscences. How, though, did these same events reach Americans who had not directly experienced the earthquakes, or had at least been spared its worst ravages? Put simply, they mostly failed to do so at all, and this fact alone obviated the sort of national relief campaign—be it philanthropic or governmental—that had by this point started to materialise in response to better-recorded disasters in North America and the Greater Caribbean.27 In the rural environments where most Americans lived, news travelled slowly.28 In the winter of 1811-12, those difficulties were compounded by bad weather and by earthquake damage: many rivers in the Mississippi and Ohio valleys were blocked by ice, while land-subsidence and cracks in the ground disrupted road transportation.29 When a territorial judge in Missouri strove to tender his resignation in 1813, getting his letter through to Washington along quake-damaged roads was still a major challenge.30

In this environment, initial coverage of the earthquakes in newspapers focussed on how they were experienced in (often urban) areas that were far removed from the epicentre.31 Nothing in these early articles suggested the need for a major programme of relief. A search of the extensive Gale-Cengage collection of nineteenth century U.S. newspapers discloses no references to conditions in Missouri Territory until January 25, more than five weeks after the first strong quake.32

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27 See Mulcahy, Hurricanes and Society, Kierner, Inventing Disaster, Schwarz, Sea of Storms.
28 Desperate for political news from Washington in 1807, a federal agent in Arkansas was reduced to reading scraps of newspaper that had been used as packaging material. Valencius, Lost History, 50.
29 For the former problem, see Mueller, Lost in the Annals, 44.
30 Valencius, Lost History, 50.
31 See, for example, The Supporter [Chillicothe, Oh.], Dec. 21, 1811, National Intelligencer [Washington, D.C.], Dec. 24, 1811, Maryland Gazette [Annapolis], Jan. 9, 1812. (The first two simply report the modest local effects of the first quake, while the third reproduces one letter from a correspondent in Charleston, SC, and another that had originally been published in the Georgia Journal [Milledgeville, Ga.]. None makes any reference to conditions in the worst hit states and territories.
32 The Supporter [Chillicothe, Oh.], Jan. 25, 1812.
From that point, references to conditions there and in other hard-hit locations became more frequent, especially with the publication in mid February of a detailed letter by William Leigh Pierce, a merchant who had been travelling past New Madrid in a flat boat when that first quake struck. Much of the human detail contained in early eye-witness reports, though, concerned the experience of boatmen who, while undoubtedly traumatised by what they had endured, nevertheless had survived the quake and been able to carry on with their journeys. Besides that, these accounts focussed very largely on the geo-physical properties of the earthquakes, and on their effects on the landscape adjacent to the river, and the river itself, rather than on their effects on particular communities or families.33 Readers in the East who read such stories would have been moved, maybe even appalled, by them. But the human detail was so sketchy, the reports of damage so anecdotal and scattergun in character, that they did not really provide the empirical basis for a focussed relief campaign or even—again—suggest that there was much need for such an effort.34 Finally, some of the more vivid stories were unreliable: a dramatic account by one John Clarke Edwards of earthquake terror in Buncombe County NC was undermined by subsequent claims that he did not exist.35 In retrospect, this was the start of a process of mystification over quite what had happened that has been well analysed by the historian Conevery Valencius, and following which the New Madrid earthquakes (inherently improbable as they were) started to belong more to the Davy Crockett genre of western tall tales than to the world of historical fact.36

33 See Valencius, Lost History, 27, 41, and chapter 2, passim. See also Niles’ Weekly Register [Baltimore], Mar. 21, 1812.
34 For an article that conveys well the over-riding sense of confusion about quite what had happened, see Maryland Gazette [Annapolis], Jan. 9, 1812, including speculations about the possible epicentre of the first quake. A few days later, the same paper speculated that New Orleans might have been destroyed. See Gazette, Feb. 13, 1812. Three months later, a Philadelphia periodical remained uncertain regarding the geographic spread and intensity of the quakes: see Portfolio, May 1812, p.421. See also Penick, New Madrid Earthquakes, 31-32, 45-46.
35 For letters by ‘Edwards’, see Maryland Gazette, Feb. 6, 1812 and Raleigh [NC] Register, Feb. 7, 1812. For the suggestion that he did not exist, see The Supporter [Chillicothe, Oh.], Mar. 7, 1812 (reproducing an item from the Raleigh [NC] Star). One Boston religious periodical suggested that made-up stories about fires, earthquakes and other disasters were commonplace, and that compilations of disaster myths were frequently “hawked” around on the streets by pedlars. See Polyanthus, Feb. 1 1812, p.15.
36 Valencius, Lost History, 1, 6-8.
Despite all of this confused and diffuse newspaper coverages, the subject of earthquakes did finally come into political focus in the early months of 1812. What brought it into focus, however, was not the dissemination in east coast newspapers of William Leigh Pierce’s judicious account of events in Missouri Territory; rather, the precipitating event was a series of reports of the far more deadly and destructive quake that had just hit Venezuela, levelling large parts of Caracas. Whereas knowledge of recent events in the Mississippi Valley remained hazy and unreliable, American merchants who had experienced this foreign disaster sent back full and persuasively precise accounts of urban destruction and distress. Congress (which had been in session throughout the period of the New Madrid quakes) responded with despatch, authorising President Madison to purchase $50,000 worth of supplies to relieve earthquake sufferers in Latin America.

Michele Landis Dauber again presents this decision as evidence of the federal government’s early openness to granting disaster relief, even when the victims were foreigners rather than U.S. citizens. Other scholars, however, concur that this aid was granted less as a matter of humanitarian concern than for foreign policy reasons, at a time when the Madison Administration wished to signal sympathy for fellow republicans in Latin America, without provoking a diplomatic tiff with imperial Spain. It is perhaps also revealing that extensive coverage of the Venezuelan quake failed to result in politicians in Washington focussing anew on the suffering of their own citizens in the Mississippi Valley. To the contrary, the Annals of Congress for 1812 include not be a single reference to the New Madrid earthquakes. There was none, in fact, until the closing days of 1813—and then the context was not relief, but rather the need to appoint an additional judge for Arkansas Territory,

37 See National Intelligencer [Washington, D.C.], Apr. 23, Apr. 25, Apr. 30, 1812
38 The new U.S. consul to Caracas was instructed by Secretary of State James Monroe to emphasize that “this interposition for the relief of the distressed people of Venezuela is a strong proof of the friendship and interest which the United States takes in their welfare.” See Charles C. Griffin, The United States and the Disruption of the Spanish Empire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 66. See also Leland R. Johnson, Situation Desperate: U.S. Army Engineer Disaster Relief Operations Origins to 1950 (Alexandria, Va.: Office of History, Army Corps of Engineers, 2011), 7. It is perhaps revealing that, even as it granted aid to Venezuela, Congress should have chosen to deny relief to starvation-threatened Canary Islanders.
given the difficulty that a New Madrid-based circuit judge was having in reaching the territory across earthquake-damaged roads.\footnote{Annals of Congress, Dec. 29, 1813, pp.813-814.}

Why did the 12th Congress’s focus on earthquake-sufferers abroad -- or, for that matter, its being confronted with the evidently dramatic impact of the New Madrid quakes on roads in southeast Missouri-- not cause it to turn its attention to the plight of earthquake-sufferers at home? Doubtless, a continuing difficulty in knowing quite what had happened was part of the explanation. Also, however, there remained very little sense in the United States during the early nineteenth century that relieving distress was a job for Washington. Cynthia Kierner’s point about the limited governmental response to yellow fever in 1793, and Max Edling’s observation about the federal role more generally, remain pertinent here—American political culture was not paternalistic, and the idea that the federal government had any significant role to play in the domestic affairs of the states as yet had few advocates.\footnote{In addition to Kierner and Edling, see Walter Trattner, From Poor Law to Welfare State: A History of Social Welfare in America 5\textsuperscript{th} ed. (New York: Free Press, 1994), 43-46.  Trattner observes that states too assumed little responsibility for helping the needy—overwhelmingly, this was a matter for individual communities, and for charity.}

At the same time, this picture should not be overdrawn, for Michele Dauber rightly observes that there were a number of occasions during the early national period when Congress did assume some responsibility for victims of disaster, or at least contemplated action. It debated relief to French refugees fleeing the Haitian revolution in 1794. It helped merchants whose goods had been destroyed by fire in Portland, Maine, in 1803, and in Norfolk, Virginia, the following year. It granted broader humanitarian relief to families who lost their homes when the city of Alexandria burned in 1827.\footnote{For these examples, see Dauber, Sympathetic State.} And on occasion Congress also acted to assist Indian tribes threatened with starvation or disease.\footnote{The Washington administration distributed corn to starving Creek Indians in 1792, and Congress approved aid to hungry Seminole Indians in 1826. For the first instance, see Letter, James Seagrove to Governor of East Florida, June 13, 1792, and letter, Seagrove to Henry Knox [Secretary of War], Oct. 17, 1792, in U.S. Congress, American State Papers: Indian Affairs (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1832), vol.IV, 303-04, and 311-12.} Still, in all of these cases there was some very particular Constitutional
authority for what Congress had done. It had an especial responsibility for Indian nations, and for
the people of Alexandria (which in 1827 was part of the District of Columbia). As for the other cases,
in Portland and Norfolk it did no more than forgive customs payments on goods that had been
destroyed by fire, while aid to French refugees (like aid to Venezuelans) was an act of diplomacy.
(Had it been presented to him as a relief measure, President Madison would most likely have vetoed
the idea.)

We should be careful in extrapolating any broader conclusion about a federal
commitment to disaster relief from examples such as these.

So too with the bill donating public lands to earthquake sufferers from New Madrid County
that Congress eventually approved in 1815—three-and-a-half years on from the disaster. In
Constitutional terms, no one doubted Congress’s authority to dispose of public lands, and the New
Madrid measure is best understood not as a welfare measure but rather as one among innumerable
federal actions to satisfy the vast numbers of Americans who were moving west in the aftermath of
the War of 1812. In approving it, Congress was likely motivated by “the combination of innocence
and venality” that Malcolm Rohrbough finds to have been characteristic of the distribution of public
lands more generally. Certainly, it cannot be said that the measure offered much relief to disaster
victims for, as one historian notes, “the act was so drawn that fraud was all but openly invited.”

For the second, see House debate of April 12, 1826, and Senate debate of May 20, 1826, in Register of
Debates, 2195, 783. On disease, see Clyde Dollar, “The High Plains Smallpox Epidemic of 1837-38,” Western
Historical Quarterly, 8, 1 (January 1977), 15-38; J. Diane Pearson, “Lewis Cass and the Politics of Vaccination:
The Indian Vaccination Act of 1832,” Wicazosa Review, 18, 2 (Fall, 2003), 9-35; Michael Trimble, “The 1832
Inoculation Program on the Missouri River,” in John W. Verano and Douglas H. Ubelaker, eds., Disease and

On the benefits that “land sharks” extracted from Congress in relation to the distribution of public land, see
also Malcolm Comeaux, Geoscience and Man: Atchafalaya Swamp Life—Settlement and Folk Occupations

Specifically, the General Land Office was authorised to distribute available public lands not simply to earthquake sufferers, but to any owner of land in New Madrid County. In the event, land speculators learned of the new law well before residents of New Madrid County, purchased damaged land from quake victims at bargain basement prices, and then presented their certificates to federal land agents, exchanging them for far more valuable land in other parts of the territory. The speculators included the famed explorer William Clark, of Lewis and Clark fame. Now governor of Missouri Territory, Clark was also the man who had overseen the original plea for ‘relief’. 47

Even if one takes at face value the idea that the New Madrid act was intended as a relief measure, one might inquire why its scope should have been restricted to Missouri Territory, when so many Americans in Virginia, Kentucky and Tennessee had also been severely affected by the earthquakes. The explanation most likely lies in the fact that Missouri was still a territory in 1815, while the others were states. That meant that Congress played a larger role in its life than it did in the internal affairs of its neighbours. It does not appear that the legislatures of the three states even sought similar relief, or that their representatives in Congress (who in the case of badly hit Kentucky included Cong. Samuel McKee, powerful chair of the House Committee on Public Lands) ever thought to make such a claim on their behalf. 48

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Community Mutualism in the Early Republic


48 For the Missouri assembly’s appeal, see ‘Resolution for the Relief of the Citizens of New Madrid County’, Jan. 12, 1814, in Clarence Edwin Carter, ed., *The Territorial Papers of the United States: The Territory of Louisiana-Missouri, 1806-1814* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1949), Vol. XIV, 729-31. The House Committee on Public Lands approved the proposal the following month but Congress did not give its final assent until February 17, 1815, a full three years after the final New Madrid tremor. On Cong. McKee, see Rohrbough, *Land Office Business*, 79. (Rohrbough notes that his Kentucky colleague, Thomas Montgomery, was also a notably aggressive promoter of the rapid distribution of public lands.)
The circulation of information expanded rapidly during the early decades of the 19th century. Comparing reporting of floods in 1810 and equivalent inundations in 1832 and 1840, one is struck by the more extensive coverage that the later disasters attracted, especially when they struck urban locations. In 1832, stories from newspapers in Pittsburgh, Wheeling, Cincinnati and other western towns were widely reproduced in papers as far afield as Vermont, thanks to the 1790 federal law that allowed for the free exchange of newspapers via the postal system. What is more, they sometimes featured detailed tabulations of damage to property and loss of life, together with vivid accounts of timber-frame houses floating en masse down the Ohio River, and excited claims regarding the unique scale of the disaster.

Later in the nineteenth century, equivalent events and coverage would yield extensive federal and Red Cross relief. Before the Civil War, though, the idea of a national obligation to relieve the plight of flood sufferers was not even proposed. This is not to say, however, that victims of flooding in 1832 or 1840 were necessarily on their own. To the contrary, there is much evidence of mutualism in the way that individual communities dealt with disaster. In towns, it characteristically took the hybrid form of governmental and voluntarist action that we have already encountered in relation to the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793. In Pittsburgh in 1832, it was the Mayor took the initiative, proposing that his city contribute $500 for the relief of those who could not support themselves or had nowhere to live, and summoning the city council to organise a ward-level fund drive. At no point does one encounter any debate about the propriety of governmental as opposed to voluntarist action. Rather, a strong sense of mutual obligation evidently existed, and the respective roles of the municipality and its citizenry were shaped by questions of capacity rather than ideology. As was the case in relation to poor relief, it was government that possessed the

49 See Richard John, Spreading the News.
50 Pittsburgh Gazette, Feb. 17, 1832, Feb. 21, 1832For similar action in Cincinnati, see New York Spectator, March 13, 1832, reproduced from Cincinnati Daily Advertiser, Feb. 27, 1832.
authority and capacity to shape a civic response to urgent human need, but the Common Council lacked the resources to fund or administer relief.\textsuperscript{51}

What of rural flooding? As with the New Madrid quakes, mostly town-centred newspapers could provide only spotty and impressionistic coverage of their plight, confined largely to the debris and riverbank damage that flatboat and steamboat travellers could observe while navigating the swollen Ohio or Mississippi.\textsuperscript{52} Moreover, such anecdotal testimony was not always regarded as being reliable. Passing on information about supposed flood damage in New Orleans in 1840, one newspaper cautioned that the news had been “brought by steamboat passengers, and is doubtless highly exaggerated.”\textsuperscript{53} On some occasions too, elites in small towns were reluctant to acknowledge serious flooding, anxious that such publicity might deter settlement and investment.\textsuperscript{54} Still, difficulties in securing information about rural floods did not prevent sensation-hungry newspaper from attempting to convey their drama. Reporting the 1840 Mississippi flood of 1840, the \textit{New York Spectator} resorted to eye-catching punctuation:

\begin{quote}
The Mississippi is rising! Rising!! Rising!!!—and the lowlands will this summer know nothing but ruin! Ruin!! Ruin!!!\textsuperscript{55}
\end{quote}

It is hard, given this spotty coverage, for the historian to reconstruct how \textit{rural} communities responded to disaster. It would be surprising, however, if the same habits of mutual support that characterised urban responses to flooding did not also appear in rural communities. Daniel Boone and Frederick Jackson Turner stereotypes notwithstanding, historians have long dismissed the idea that frontier life in the early decades of the nineteenth century was characterised solely by

\textsuperscript{51} See Trattner, \textit{From Poor Law to Welfare State}
\textsuperscript{52} See \textit{Washington Globe}, Feb. 21, 1832 reported that a recent traveller had seen “200 houses floating down with the current” [reproduced from \textit{Baltimore Sun}].
\textsuperscript{53} See \textit{Indiana Journal}, May 23, 1840.
\textsuperscript{54} A correspondent in flood-prone Cairo, Illinois, pooh-poohed dismal reports of flooding from a St. Louis newspaper, attributing it to inter-city rivalry. See \textit{North American Advocate}, May 30, 1840. And when the Ohio town of Steubenville was flooded in 1832, its newspaper assured readers that “no situation upon the Ohio River can be found furnishing a more eligible site for a large town and city.” The article was distributed to its exchange newspapers, along with the request that they reproduce it. See \textit{National Intelligencer} [Washington, D.C.], April 13, 1832, reproducing article from \textit{Steubenville Herald}.
\textsuperscript{55} \textit{New York Spectator}, May 25, 1840 (reprinted from \textit{Natchez Courier}, May 18, 1840)
individualism. Rather, Daniel Boorstin argues, *homo Americanus* was defined by “strenuous cooperation.” For Stanley Elkins and Eric McKitrick (building on Tocqueville), the absence of a “traditional, ready-made structure of leadership” in frontier society resulted not in disorder or a sundering of the bonds of civil society, but rather in mass participation in public life. This participation, they suggest, was shaped less by democratic idealism than by “brutal necessity,” with cooperation the key to survival amid the manifold challenges and perils of daily life, including disease, crop failure, Indian conflict—and natural disaster.

For all that patterns of community responsibility characterised both rural and urban life on the frontier, there is little in the historical record to suggest that, when disaster struck, these patterns extended beyond the realm of short-term relief for the indigent. By the end of the nineteenth century, the American Red Cross was committed not simply to that kind of support, but to restoring disaster victims to their previous condition. One finds no equivalent to that sort of commitment in newspaper coverage of earlier American disasters. Reports of lives and businesses destroyed by flooding, however poignant and detailed, were rarely if ever accompanied by the suggestion that restoring the *status quo ante* was a collective task. Conversely, the record is replete with instances of Americans whose lives were entirely upended by disaster, and whose evident

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inability to secure the kind of external support that would allow them to recover on site forced them to abandon their homes and communities. George Heinrich Crist, whose account of the New Madrid quakes we encountered above, appears to have succeeded in his quest to abandon Kentucky for a new life in Indiana. 58 An account of the drastic effects of the extremely cold summer of 1816 observes that many New Englanders “despaired of rebuilding their lives” when struck additionally by a devastating storm, and relocated to Ohio. 59 And travellers in Arkansas territory during the same period wrote of encountering “abandoned cabins and cleared but untended fields” in the “rich bottomland” of the Mississippi Valley, a “silent testimony” to the disastrous consequences of recent inundation. 60

Did the absence of substantial recovery aid result in Americans making more prudent decisions about how and where to live than we might associate with more recent times? Here, the evidence is mixed. On the one hand, Richard Wade’s classic account of urban life on the western frontier chronicles the concentration of river town development in the bottomlands adjacent to the river—whatever awareness might exist of the flood-risk was outweighed by the manifold and immediate advantages in terms of commerce and transportation. And, along similar lines, he finds frontier town-dwellers to have been notably cavalier in the face of the danger of fire, lacking robust municipal mechanisms for mitigating the risk, and taking periodic conflagrations in their stride as an inevitable cost of urban life. 61

58 A George Heinrich Crist who had been resident in Kentucky in 1811-12 is recorded as having died in Tippecanoe County, Indiana in 1845. See https://www.wikitree.com/wiki/Crist-172, downloaded on Oct. 14, 2019.
59 John Dippel, Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death: The Impact of America’s First Climate Crisis (New York: Algora, 2015), 53, 61. (Conversely, Federalists worried by westward expansion presented the west’s susceptibility to disaster as one reason for not relocating. See Dippel, 49.) Three years after the disaster, the Connecticut Gazetter observed that “the current of emigration from this state has swelled to a torrent,” with Ohio and western New York the main destinations. See Howard Russell, A Long, Deep Furrow: Three Centuries of Farming in New England (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1976), 275.
61 Richard Wade, Urban Frontier. For intensive development in hazardous riverfront locations, see 22-4 (Cincinnati), and 29 (Lexington). For attitudes to fire-risk, see 91-95.
More recent sociological literature suggests that residents of hazardous locations characteristically understate the degree of their vulnerability, and struggle to incorporate the risk of disaster in decisions about where and how to live. If that is so even in an era when federal agencies such as FEMA and NOAA provide copious information about disaster-risk, still less is it likely that residents of flood-prone cities such as Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Louisville would have possessed much collective sense for the degree of their vulnerability in the first half of the nineteenth century, even in the immediate aftermath of disaster, and certainly not if they had not personally experienced such an event.\(^\text{62}\) As for more rural locations, one 1816 traveller to the Louisiana sugar country found planters “strangely indifferent to protecting themselves against such misfortune” as flooding. “From the natural carelessness of the human species,” he remarked, “no sooner does the flood subside, than the danger, and all serious reflections on the means to prevent its recurrence, subsides also.”\(^\text{63}\)

On the other hand, there is scattered counter-evidence of settlers avoiding alluvial locations where the risk of inundation or epidemic disease was judged to be especially great. Writing of early settlers in Tennessee and Kentucky, one historian argues that they were not generally motivated simply by a get-rich-quick mentality; they often preferred “land of a second rate in the healthier and higher areas of settlement” to the superficially greater attractions of an alluvial riverside location.\(^\text{64}\) As for those who made a different calculation, a historian of the Atchafalaya country in Louisiana remarks that they too took nature into account, and “accepted a style of life that emphasised the temporary over the permanent.” Instead of constructing “sturdy houses out of brick and mortar,

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\(^\text{62}\) The relevant academic literature suggests that disaster victims find frequently imagine that the occurrence of a ‘100 year flood’ leaves them less vulnerable than before to a repeat inundation, on the grounds that lightning rarely strikes twice in the same place. It also suggests that individuals who have not personally experienced disaster find it hard to think of the threat of disaster as being concrete, rather than abstract. See Ian Burton and Robert Kates, “The Perception of Natural Hazards in Resource Management,” *Natural Resources Journal* 3 (Jan. 1964), 413-41, and esp. Ian Burton, “Cultural and Personality Variables in the Perception of Natural Hazards,” in Joachim Wohlwill and Daniel Carson, eds., *Environment and the Social Sciences: Perspectives and Applications* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 1976 [?]), 184-95.


\(^\text{64}\) McNeilly, *Old South Frontier*, 16.
which invited catastrophic damages during a flood,” he observes that Acadian settlers in Louisiana “learned to construct cruder structures out of palmetto and cypress.” These pioneers, he goes on, “learned to accept the natural cycle of the Atchafalaya Basin. Spring’s high water and fall’s low water dictated what they did and when.”65 Similarly, the first white Arkansans to settle the low ground adjacent to the Mississippi did not put down deep roots there, or contemplate elaborate flood-protection schemes. Instead of planting crops and investing in real estate, they led a mobile and subsistence lifestyle centred around hunting, fishing and harvesting timber, or made a living by selling provisions to passing steamboats.66

It was when plantation agriculture came to Chicot County, in the Southeast of the state, that the first demands for state-funded levees were advanced, but they initially received an unenthusiastic reception from state legislators who mostly represented upland counties, and for whom aid to improvident planters was “politically intolerable.” A close student of this debate captures their preponderant view that “people who wanted to escape flooding should move out of the flood plain.” To the extent that they chose instead to develop low-lying swampland, they were inviting disaster. “Majority opinion,” Jeffrey Owen remarks, “concluded that since the cause of hardship sprang from the swamplers’ own actions, so should the remedy.”67

*Urban Fires and the Growth of Philanthropy*

We have seen that awareness of rural floods and the New Madrid earthquakes was limited by slow communications—information about what had happened leaked out only slowly, if at all, to

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centres of population, influence and news in the East. By contrast, urban fires were widely noticed: as early as 1811, a theatre fire in Richmond attracted substantial coverage. Quite apart from the fact that news of urban disasters spread more rapidly, they presented a more dramatic spectacle than a rural flood. Compared to other ante-bellum disasters, great fires such as those that swept New York in 1835, Pittsburgh a decade later, and St. Louis in 1849 stood out for the extensive and dramatic newspaper coverage that they attracted. The heroics of volunteer fire companies attracted particular admiration and excitement—for some, they symbolised the rich associational life and democratic spirit of the United States, and their activities presented rich copy for an expanding newspaper industry, as well as for poets and portraitists. At the same time, they were not very good at putting fires out, hindered as they were by rudimentary training and equipment, and by limited access to water. But these shortcomings, no less than their heroism and self-conscious manliness, only added to the drama associated with their activities, contributing as they did to the tendency of initially small blazes to spread extremely rapidly, sometimes consuming great swathes of cities that lacked robust fire-prevention regulations...and therefore creating still richer journalistic copy. The historian Richard Wade suggests that western town-dwellers sometimes seemed to regard fire as a thoroughly enjoyable spectacle—one commentator suggested that his city might purchase a group of houses, and burn one down each month, as a kind of community celebration.

New York, 1835

During the evening of December 16 1835, a city watchman smelt smoke at the corner of Exchange and Pearl streets, in the heart of New York’s warehouse: a broken gas line had ignited. Within 15 minutes, the entire neighbourhood was ablaze, as arctic winds spread the flames through narrow streets and tightly packed buildings. The fire alarm on the new City Hall building was rung.

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68 See For the fullest account, see Baker. See also Kierner, Davies.
69 Amy Bridges. See also Wilentz.
70 For the standard account, see Amy Greenberg, Call the Alarm.
71 Tebeau, Hoffer.
72 Richard Wade, Urban Frontier, 95 [check page].
as were church bells, and New York’s various fire companies were swiftly on the scene, but they struggled to contain the conflagration. For one thing, they were exhausted, having spent the previous night fighting a number of other big blazes. For another, they struggled to find running water for their hoses—with temperatures as low as minus 17 degrees Fahrenheit, hydrants and the East River were frozen solid. Another problem, it appears, was their resistance to modern techniques of fire-fighting: they had resisted the idea that they should convey their heavy hand-operated machines by horse, rather than hand, or that they should acquire the steam engines that had been in use in London and other cities for a number of years.73

To the diarist (and former New York mayor) Philip Hone, it appeared that this fire—which destroyed 50 blocks of the business and warehouse district, causing some $30 million of damage—must be “the most awful calamity which has ever visited these United States.” It had, he suggested, destroyed perhaps the densest concentration of valuable real estate in the world, including Wall Street’s grand new Merchants Exchange. Business people such as himself who held stock in insurance companies and other city businesses lost substantial sums. So too had his son, who owned a dry good warehouse. In the first instance, Philip had participated in a successful bid to remove all of its stock and store it well away from the fire; within hours, though, “our labours were rendered unavailing, for the fire reached and destroyed them.” Observing the ruins, and the “unmanageable” flames, the watching crowd, and fire-fighters too, were reduced to an “apathy of despair.”74 A correspondent for the New York Herald compared the scene to “the ruins of Rome after it was burned by the Gauls.”75 A colleague for the Commercial Advertiser also reached back to the Classical world, invoking the ruins of Pompeii and Carthage.76

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73 This paragraph is drawn from the splendid account in Gotham, 596.
74 Hone, Diary of Philip Hone, vol. 1, 185–89. Watching urban fires was a common spectator sport: see also the diary of Hone’s young compatriot, George Templeton Strong: rushing to the fire, he found that it “presented a splendid spectacle.” See Strong, Diary, vol. 1, p.8.
75 New York Herald, Dec. 19, 1819
By the time that the fire came partially under control—partly through the efforts of marines who brought gunpowder across the frozen river from a New Jersey armoury and blew up buildings along Wall Street to create a firewall—the flames were so great that they could be seen from New Haven and Philadelphia. The total cost of damage, when they were finally extinguished, twenty four hours later, were computed to have exceeded the cost of building the recently completed Erie Canal by three times.\(^77\) What is more, this disaster had a greater national impact than a comparable blaze in any other American city would have done, given New York’s recent emergence as the largest port and financial centre in the United States. Most fires, however dramatic, were local affairs; this one, though, was debated extensively in Congress, with attention focussing both on the plight of its ruined merchants and on the implications of the fire for national commerce and prosperity.

The historian Michele Landis Dauber again uses these deliberations to illustrate her larger claim that the federal government frequently stepped in to help victims of disaster during the early national period, and that these efforts might be seen as amounting to a proto-welfare state. She is right that Congress debated and passed what it termed “a bill for relief for sufferers by fire in the city of New York.”\(^78\) However, as with her other examples, it would be a stretch to argue that the approved measures disclosed any federal commitment to social welfare. True, the shock of the fire and its national implications had initially led the Common Council of Philadelphia to propose an outright federal appropriation for relief, showing that the idea was at least imaginable. But the suggestion was not seriously countenanced in Washington, and indeed no appropriation was approved for any purpose. Instead, the only forms of “relief” approved by Congress were decidedly limited in nature: Congress agreed that merchants should not have to pay duties on imported goods destroyed in the fire, and it extended additional credit to merchants who had borrowed money in order to purchase now-destroyed stocks of goods. Some legislators doubted the wisdom of these

\(^77\) *Gotham*, 598.

measures on a variety of grounds, but even flinty conservatives accepted that they posed no constitutional difficulty—they were securely grounded in the federal tax power, and past supporters of similar measures had included Thomas Jefferson and John Randolph.\textsuperscript{79}

When Philadelphia proposed the idea of an outright appropriation of federal funds, New York naturally had no objection, but its merchants, political leaders and newspapers certainly made no clamour for federal aid in restoring their city, or for charitable contributions. This is largely because the fire was confined to the business district, and did not create a major humanitarian emergency. For that reason, it generated only modest philanthropic donations.\textsuperscript{80} Few New Yorkers were homeless, and there was no shortage of work available for those whose normal work had been disrupted by the blaze—to the contrary, the enormous task of restoring lower Manhattan created abundant new employment opportunities for all. As for who should direct that project, this was almost exclusively a matter for the city and its business community. Making that case, the New York Herald argued that the city could not afford to wait for state or federal legislatures to alleviate its “Great Calamity,” with their “long, interminable” debates.\textsuperscript{81} By contrast, the city and its merchants could move swiftly and decisively: New York’s mayor declared that “it cannot be doubted that the enterprise and activity of our citizens will be found adequate to repair the evil.”\textsuperscript{82} Concurring with that assessment, the Herald exulted that “there is a spirit rising up in the city which will in less than

\textsuperscript{79} Sen. John C. Calhoun of South Carolina and John Tyler of Virginia were among those who acknowledged that there was no constitutional issue (though Calhoun objected on other grounds). For Calhoun, see \textit{Annals of Congress}, Jan. 13, 1836, pp.115-16; for Tyler (including the invocation of Jefferson and Randolph), see \textit{Annals}, March 8, 1836, pp.2711, 2716. Some legislators objected to relief because New York was home to the fiercely anti-slavery businessman and evangelical Christian, Arthur Tappan.

\textsuperscript{80} Cynthia Kierner notes that philanthropy following urban fires was a common pattern during the early national period, and that on some occasions (as following a well-publicised blaze in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1802), the aid came from quite far afield. See Kierner, \textit{Inventing Disaster}, 144-51. In 1835, there were some moves in this direction: see \textit{Fayetteville Observer}, Dec. 24, 1835, and Jan. 1, 1836; \textit{New York Spectator}, Dec. 31, 1835 [relating to a fund-drive in the upstate towns of Norwich and Utica]

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{New York Herald}, Dec. 21, 1835.

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid.
two years regain every inch of ground lost.” “Let us avoid any application to Congress,” it declared. “We of New York alone are capable of meeting the emergency.”

This sort of reaction should not surprise us, given the city’s explosive growth and commercial vigour during the early decades of the nineteenth century, and most especially since the opening of the Erie Canal in 1825. In the context of the local energy and self-confidence associated with these patterns, he Jackson era federal government could bring little to the table. Its main energies in the winter of 1835 were directed to undermining such symbols of earlier federal energy as the internal improvements programme and the Bank of the United States.

More interesting is the way that the fire was covered in the dynamic and innovative world of New York journalism, for this was the first major disaster since the advent of the ‘Penny Press.’ Until 1833, the main New York papers had retailed for 6 cents a copy, and their coverage had been aimed squarely at the city’s commercial and political elite. In that year, though, the New York Sun was launched, seeking to reach a much larger and more popular audience and retailing for just one cent. Two years later, and six months before the fire, James Gordon Bennett had launched the similarly priced New York Herald, with a recognisably modern emphasis on sensation. As a business-orientated paper in St. Louis sniffily put it, the Herald “always contains something either marvellous or horrible.” For such a paper the fire of December 1835 was manna from heaven, generating lurid description, purple prose, and the Herald’s first ever illustration, an early engraving of the ruined Merchants Exchange by the celebrated lithographer, Nathaniel Currier. Not content simply to report whatever fragments of information reached it, the Herald determined to head out into the field and make news, its correspondent (probably Bennett himself) writing in the first person about the damage that he had seen, and feverishly imagining the ruined lives and dashed hopes that lay behind the burnt remains.

83 Ibid.
84 [supplement this para—Howe, Feller]
85 St. Louis Commercial Bulletin, Feb. 5, 1835.
86 A history of the paper notes that Bennett “fed his readers a steady diet of violence, crime, murder, suicide, seduction, and rape.” See Crouthamel, 25. For the role that disaster prints played in the career of the celebrated lithographers, Currier and Ives, see Kierner, Inventing Disaster, 180-81.
behind the smouldering ruins.\textsuperscript{87} As the Sun’s owner put it, “we newspaper people thrive best on the calamities of others.”\textsuperscript{88} For both the Sun and the Herald, the 1835 fire generated extra editions and longer print runs—early instances of a pattern that would become commonplace whenever disaster struck in the later nineteenth century. Of one 50,000 copy edition, Bennett implored readers to preserve it “in the archives of their family.”\textsuperscript{89}

The fire was also widely reported outside of New York—it may, indeed, have been the most extensively covered natural disaster in United States history up to this point. If so, that perhaps owes less to the severity of the fire than to the point just made in relation to the penny press. We have seen that the Sun and the Herald were increasingly interested in broadening their coverage beyond foreign, political, and business news, and which found in disasters—along with crimes and scandals—an effective mechanism for doing so. Two developments greatly enhanced their ability to do so. First, changes in print technology allowed newspapers to be produced more quickly, more cheaply, and in greater volume. And, second, the nation’s network of post roads and canals continued to expand, while the nation’s major cities were beginning to be connected by railroads.\textsuperscript{90}

All of this accelerated the circulation of information, and lent new significance to longstanding federal legislation that allowed for the free circulation of newspapers across the United States between editorial offices. Within days of the 1835 fire, papers in Philadelphia, Washington, and Boston were reproducing detailed accounts from New York papers, and within two weeks, similar reports were appearing in papers as far afield as Tallahassee, Raleigh, and Indianapolis.

\textsuperscript{87} New York Herald, Dec. 21, 1835. Cynthia Kierner reproduces the Herald’s front page, featuring both this image and a map: see Inventing Disaster, 183.

\textsuperscript{88} Crouthamel, Bennett’s New York Herald and the Rise of the Popular Press, 25.

\textsuperscript{89} Gotham.

\textsuperscript{90} Historians often note that new internal improvements projects were starting to tail off by the mid-1830s (symbolised most famous by Andrew Jackson’s Maysville Road veto), and use this to illustrate the diminished aspirations of the federal state. For a useful graph, see Daniel Walker Howe, What Hath God Wrought (New York: Oxford University Press, 200?), 362, detailing an 80% slump after the Panic of 1837. In the case of transportation, however, the practical effects of this development were limited, for internal improvements were overwhelmingly financed by the states and localities, rather than by Washington. Before the Civil War, the states spent $300 million, local governments $125 million, and the federal government less than $59 million. See Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 365.
Pittsburgh, 1845

By 1845, the population of Pittsburgh stood at 25,000 or so, but that figure does not capture its importance, given the volume of goods and people that passed through there en route to the West and Southwest, or given the scale and range of its industrial output. As early as 1821 (when its population was little more than 5,000), a visitor had presented this busy river town as “the emporium of the western world.” Especially renowned for its glassworks and iron foundries, it also featured cotton factories, tanneries, distilleries, glass foundries, flour mills and print shops. With dynamism, however, came a rather insouciant attitude to hazard: perhaps even more than other towns on the western frontier, its leading figures evinced little interest in planning urban growth—in investing in infrastructure, limiting development in flood-prone locations, ensuring a good supply of water, mitigating fire risk through building regulations. When a disastrous fire struck Pittsburgh in the spring of 1845, the search for the culprit focused narrowly on an unnamed Irish washerwoman, but the fire historian James Hoffer observes that “the real cause of the fire was the city itself,” thanks both to this heedless inattention to risk and to its peculiarly “fire-breathing, fire-driven” industrial character.

In New York in 1835, frozen hydrants had prevented fire fighters from tackling the blaze during its early stages. In Pittsburgh, a decade later, preceding weather was also a strong contributory factor—it had not rained for six weeks, reservoirs were depleted, and when a residential neighbourhood of the city’s First Ward caught fire, the water pressure was too low to extinguish the flames. It did not help, Hoffer adds, that the hoses that Pittsburgh’s dozen fire companies used had recently “been condemned” as decrepit. And neither did it help—especially given Pittsburgh’s hilly topography— that, as in New York, these companies still insisted on pulling

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91 The material in the next two paragraphs is drawn from Hoffer, Seven Fires, 72-80, Hensler, Crucible of Fire, 48-51, Worley, Pittsburgh’s Vintage Firemen, and Cook, “Great Fire of Pittsburgh,” 177-79.  
92 On the general pattern, see Wade, Urban Frontier.  
93 Hoffer, 68.  
94 New York Herald, April 14, 1845 (reproduced from Pittsburgh Post)  
95 For a negative assessment of Pittsburgh’s fire companies, see New York Herald, April 15, 1845.
their heavy engines by hand to the scene of the fire. Within twenty-four hours, half of the city had been destroyed. Whereas an estimated 700 buildings had been destroyed in New York in 1835, in Pittsburgh the figure was perhaps twice that much.96 And whereas the destruction in the earlier case had centred on warehouses and shops, in Pittsburgh the fire additionally wrecked a densely packed residential neighbourhood, leaving thousands homeless, and presenting the city not just with a vast long-term task of reconstruction but with an immediate challenge of relief.97

Reading newspaper coverage of this disaster in relation to reporting of the earlier New York fire, what strikes one first is the greater speed with which news of what had happened reached Americans living in other parts of the country. In 1835, it was a week before the Boston Courier (a daily paper) contained any news of the fire, while readers in farther-flung Indianapolis and Tallahassee did not learn about it for a full two weeks.98 A decade later, papers in New York and Cleveland were reproducing full stories from the Pittsburgh papers within four days, Philadelphia within five, and the more distant cities of Boston and Washington, D.C. just two or three days after that.99 This acceleration in the spread of information presumably owed something to the fact that leading American cities in the east were connected by railroad by the mid-1840s, and something too to the competitive zeal with which an expanding and circulation- and sensation-driven penny press pursued calamity in all its forms.100

Also notable in news coverage of the 1845 fire was the dramatic, eye-witness reporting that it sometimes generated. The Cleveland Herald’s initial coverage included an on-the-scene description of how the 3rd Presbyterian church in Pittsburgh, and adjacent blocks, were saved by the

96 [Tebeau?]
97 Cleveland Herald, April 14, 1845 (reproduced from Pittsburgh Gazette)
99 See New York Herald, April 14, 1845, Cleveland Herald, April 14, 1845, North American Advertiser [Philadelphia], April 15, 1845, Boston Daily Atlas, April 17, 1845, National Intelligencer [Washington, D.C.], April 17, 1845.
100 On the dramatic acceleration in railroad-building after 1842, see Howe, What Hath God Wrought, 564. As in 1835, and in early instances of what was to become a ubiquitous pattern following later nineteenth century disasters, some newspapers responded to the fire by producing special editions: see, Cleveland Herald, which went to press an hour earlier than usual on April 14, 1845.
actions of the church’s members, who cloaked its roof with damp cloth, and cut away its overhanging ends. It also describes the valour and skill of the fire-fighters who managed to save the newspaper office from which the Herald’s correspondent wrote.\textsuperscript{101} The New York Herald’s coverage, meanwhile, combined news of the fire with the ordeal of passengers aboard the Swallow, a steamboat that had just exploded on the Hudson River. (Presumably, the editor judged that both dramatic incidents would appeal to the same sensation-seeking readers.)\textsuperscript{102}

All of these elements, together with the fact that so many Pittsburggers were left homeless by the fire, help to explain the final aspect of this disaster that commands attention, namely the very substantial programme of philanthropic giving that it triggered from towns and cities across the United States. Whereas New York’s elites had felt generally confident about their capacity to meet their city’s needs in full in 1835, the Common Council of the smaller city of Pittsburgh had no such feeling a decade later, in view of their more limited resources and the far greater humanitarian challenge that its fire had created. Meeting in emergency session, it dispatched Cornelius Darragh—a Pittsburgh lawyer and Whig congressman—to Harrisburg to seek aid from Pennsylvania’s state legislature.\textsuperscript{103} Darragh was successful in that endeavour: legislators appropriated $50,000.\textsuperscript{104}

That was a substantial sum, hinting at the comparative affluence of this state and the activist instincts of its legislature, but also at the general revival of economic prosperity in the mid-1840s, following the difficult years that had followed the Panic of 1837.\textsuperscript{105} Having for a decade been secretary to the state’s Canal Commission, from which position he had directed an extensive programme of public works, it is perhaps not surprising that the Pennsylvania governor, Francis Shunk, should have responded with energy to the plight of Pittsburgh. It may also be relevant that

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{101} Cleveland Herald, April 14, 1845. This article may have been reproduced without attribution from the Pittsburgh Gazette. (The Herald’s other coverage came from this source.)

\textsuperscript{102} For excited newspaper coverage of steamboat accidents, see Kierner, Inventing Disaster, 170-79, 185

\textsuperscript{103} Cleveland Herald, April 14, 1845.

\textsuperscript{104} New York Herald, April 16, 1845.

\textsuperscript{105} A Philadelphia resolution in favour of generous relief declared that “returning prosperity enables us to divide with the bereaved and suffering of our sister city, a part of our own stores.” North American Advertiser, April 16, 1845. On Penna activism, see Hartz.}
the fire took place against a national backdrop of sharp sectional tension, centred on the application of the independent state of Texas to join the Union as a slave state. Imploring a generous response to the fire, Governor Shunk presented it as “one of those public calamities that speak to the whole people and their representatives, in terms that are felt and understood by all.”106 Most firmly of all, however, this German Lutheran farmer rooted his mutualist injunction in the New Testament:

This visitation of Providence strikes from beneath us all self-dependence, and enforces the instruction from the Book of Life, that “other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ,” and the necessity of that faith “that looks for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.”107

If the response of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania to appeals such as this was substantial, then the primary responsibility for alleviating the plight of fire sufferers fell to what we would call “private” philanthropy. In newspaper coverage of mid-nineteenth century responses to disaster, however, one finds little if any interest in debating the appropriate boundary between governmental or non-governmental action, let alone in labelling one as “public” and the other as “private.” Rather, the business of organising what we would call “private” giving was an intensely “public” act, one that involved not just private individuals but the community as a whole. When “an immense concourse” of Philadelphians met at the city’s Merchants Exchange to organise relief, the fact that the meeting was overseen by former mayor George M. Dallas, who was now serving as President James K. Polk’s Vice President, symbolised this unselfconscious fusing of governmental and non-governmental activism in pursuit of a pressing common cause. So too did the presence at this same meeting of Whig congressman Joseph J. Ingersoll, who detected and celebrated “a determination to bestow of our abundance upon those whom sudden calamity had left destitute.”108

106 Meeting at the city’s Merchants Exchange, members of Boston’s relief committee justified aid on the grounds that Pittsburghers were “our brethren,” and “our fellow countrymen.”
108 North American Advertiser, April 16, 1845.
Much of the estimated $130,000 that had been raised in cash donations by late May was organised by the committees of notables that cities such as New York, Boston, Washington, and Baltimore, as well as Philadelphia, established, as they learned of the scale of the devastation and humanitarian need. 109 Doubtless, this tide of philanthropy was actuated by humanitarian and religious instincts that Americans experienced at a deeply personal and private level. At the same time, philanthropic donors and organisers were also keen that their Christian benevolence should be publicly recognised. When Philadelphia organised ward-by-ward collections, newspapers named all of the 150 or so individuals who had been given the honour of leading the campaign.110

Cities qua cities were also keen to demonstrate conspicuous generosity: In retrospect, their organised philanthropy in response to the Pittsburgh fire can be seen as presenting an early instance of a kind of competitive spirit of emulation that would become far more marked in the later nineteenth century. Approving of the New York Mayor’s proclamation on behalf of Pittsburgh’s fire victims, for example, the Herald observed that the obligation of this “great city” to help out its smaller “sister city” was too obvious to require extended discussion.111 Hearing of the generous and publicised exploits of rival conurbations, and even of smaller towns such as Wheeling, Virginia, a newspaper in Cleveland inquired rather plaintively when its citizens would step up to the plate.112

Much of this fund-raising had an elite cast, with leading merchants and ministers to the fore. At the same time, newspapers were sometimes keen to stress the role that mass-giving was playing. The final accounts of the Philadelphia committee, for example, include an itemised list (down to the last penny) of donations that had been received from the city’s school-children. And other

109 For an estimate of $131,477.68, see National Intelligencer, May 27, 1845. Smaller cities also organised relief campaigns. For the resolution of the people of Chillicothe, Ohio, see Scioto Gazette, April 17, 1845.
110 North American Advertiser, April 18, 1845.
111 New York Weekly Herald, April 19, 1845. Major James Harper declared that Pittsburgh was “our sister city,” in terms suggesting that all urban Americans shared some important kind of bond.
112 Cleveland Herald, April 18, 1845. It noted the way that Pittsburgh papers were acknowledging the generous support that they were receiving from other cities, including Cleveland’s Ohio rival, Cincinnati. See also Cleveland Herald, April 22, 1845. (By this time, the Herald could add Steubenville, Ohio, and Washington, Pennsylvania, to the list of other towns that had made generous donations.)
references to mass-giving may hint at the gradual emergence during and after the Jacksonian period of more of a broader public culture than had existed during the early republic. In particular, there are at least four references to benefit concerts on behalf of fire sufferers. Two weeks after the fire, the Cleveland Herald reported that the noted blackface group, “Christy’s Minstrels”, were to give a concert “for the benefit of the Pittsburgh sufferers.” On the same day, the New York Herald noted that donations to Baltimore’s fund had included the proceeds of a concert by the “Ethiopian Serenaders,” most likely another minstrel group. And the following month, the Nashville Union reported a third benefit concert, by yet another minstrel group, the “Sable Harmonists.”

Finally, the Boston Courier announced in early May that a Mr. Colton had agreed to exhibit the humorous properties of Nitrous Oxide Gast at a forthcoming benefit event at the Tremont Temple, the leading Baptist church in Boston. “[T]hose who would enjoy a hearty laugh, and at the same time aid a worthy cause,” were “respectfully invite[d] to attend,” safe in the assurance that the event would contain nothing “to offend the most delicate.” (Incongruously to the sensibilities of a later age, this assurance was followed in short order by the promise that those on stage and experiencing the delights of lighting gas would include “two Deaf Mutes!”)

St. Louis Fire, 1849

If reporting of the Pittsburgh fire had been shaped in part by the spread of the railroad, then by the time that the booming western city of St. Louis was wrecked by fire some four years later, the next revolution in communications was well underway. Now, major news centres in the United States were connected not just by rails but by the electric telegraph. In September 1846, two years after Samuel Morse’s first demonstration of the promise of telegraphy, there were just 1,000 miles

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113 Nashville Union, May 7, 1845. For the rise of blackface minstrelsy during this period, including references to the specific ensembles mentioned here, see William John Mahar, Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy, and John Springhall, Genesis of Mass Culture: Show Business Live in America, 1840-1940.

114 See Boston Courier, May 2, 1845.
of telegraph line; by the beginning of 1848, the figure stood at 6,700, and whereas trains had allowed readers in New York to read about a fire in Pittsburgh within four days, the telegraph gave eastern editors news of the St. Louis blaze as it was still raging.

This was a transformative moment in the development of the United States, but coverage of the 1849 fire suggests that its immediate impact on news coverage was not straightforward. To be sure, the new technology was manna from heaven for newspaper editors so hungry for scoops that they would send fast boats 150 miles out in to the Atlantic to intercept incoming ships, just so that they could get a jump on their rivals in relation to European news. During the 1840s, moreover, that imperative—to beat one’s rivals, and get the news out first—was stronger than ever: the number of daily newspapers had increased by 84% during the 1840s, and advances in print technology made it much easier for them to produce special issues and longer print runs in response to a dramatic news event. At the same time, however, early telegraph wires were unreliable and could carry only one message at a time, meaning that they worked better for short, crisp messages than for the long, atmospheric stories that had made the Pittsburgh fire so gripping. And the electric telegraph was also initially expensive: like many newspapers before the advent of the Penny Press, it was at first used primarily for the transmission of business intelligence, rather than as a mass means of communication.

How did all this affect news coverage of the St. Louis fire? On the one hand, it meant that quite distant newspapers were able to tell their readers that a great fire had taken place within

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117 Blondheim, *News*, 18, Crouthamel, *Bennett’s New York Herald*, 43. On technology, Crouthamel emphasises the installation of the steam-powered press (starting in the mid-1830s) and the introduction (a decade later) of the Hoe ‘lightning press’. A Virginia congressman, upset by the spread of antislavery, fingered the application of steam to printing as a primary culprit, describing steam-power and the press as “these two great revolutionaries of the world.” Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 105. The lightning press, introduced by the *New York Herald* in 1848, quadrupled printing speed.
twenty-four hours. On the other hand, it also meant that they were unable to tell them very much—for full accounts, they still had to wait for the St. Louis papers to arrive in the mail, which was problematic, given that all but one of the English language newspaper offices had been destroyed in the fire. This difficulty, when combined with the journalistic imperative to prioritise late-breaking news, explains why initial fire coverage in 1849 bore more than a passing resemblance to the way that earlier newspapers such as Niles Weekly Register had transmitted whatever random news had just arrived with the latest ship to dock at Baltimore. In both cases, editors gathered disparate gobbets of information from sundry sources and juxtaposed them on the page in a way that to modern eyes looks incongruous, but which to contemporary readers might primarily have caused wonderment at the speed with which this miscellany of intelligence was reaching them. And in each instance, they had greater access to business news than to granular human detail.

The first fire story in the Boston Daily Atlas illustrated these patterns. Appearing under the bold heading “By Magnetic Telegraph,” it combined this story with snippets about cholera in New York, another steamboat disaster on the Hudson, commodity prices in Buffalo and Albany, the latest in Italian politics, and the suicide of the murder, Dr. V.P. Coolidge.”

The North American Gazette featured a similar pot pourri, but added news of the Presbyterian General Assembly and the suicide of “Mr. Creighton of Allegheny.” And the Milwaukee Sentinel combined fire coverage with a series of bulletins from the far Southwest, including a weather report from Santa Fe.

Newspapers, glorying in their ability to spread news quickly, sometimes expressed frustration at their inability to do so more reliably or fully, at the early stage when reader interest was most intense. In previous years, newspapers endeavouring to provide rapid news of disaster had sometimes grumbled about the vagaries of the private operators upon whom the postal service

119 St. Louis was connected by 1848. See Richard Schwarzlose, The Nation’s Newsbrokers (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989), vol. 1, 111.
120 Boston Daily Atlas, May 19, 1849.
121 North American Gazette, May 19, 1849.
122 Milwaukee Sentinel, May 19, 1849.
depended for delivering the mail. Now, it was the inefficiencies of telegraph operators, or of the messengers who dispatched their bulletins to newspaper officers, that attracted similar adverse publicity. The Cleveland Herald, clearly perturbed that its initial coverage of the St. Louis fire had been less extensive than that of its local competitors, complained that a “brief report” of the fire had been sent via the O’Reilly line from Pittsburgh to all of the Cleveland papers, but that no copy had been delivered to its office.123 Two days later, the New York Herald was harrumphing that “we are again without any despatches from St. Louis.”124 This was only three days after the fire, and had this been 1845 rather than 1849, the writer would not yet even have known that the disaster had taken place. Since the Pittsburgh blaze, however, the telegraph had transformed journalistic (and presumably reader) expectations.

What effect did all this have on relief? The patchy way in which the first news of the fire reached potential donors, and an almost exclusive focus on business losses, may explain why the St. Louis fire generated less by way of national philanthropic relief than the Pittsburgh disaster, four years earlier. At this time, there was no expectation that either government or charity would provide extensive help to business victims of fire partly because of the growth of fire insurance during the first half of the nineteenth century.125

Confidence that St. Louis’ business community, and the city more generally, would easily recover from the fire also owed something to the spirit of “boundlessness” that the historian John Higham long ago identified as having been characteristic of American life more generally during the 1840s.126 A feature article about St. Louis published just a few days after fire had destroyed four-fifths of the city’s commercial wealth focussed scarcely at all on the recent calamity. Indeed, one

122 Cleveland Herald, May 19, 1849.
123 New York Herald, May 21, 1849.
would scarcely know that the disaster had happened at all, for this correspondent’s focus was on its status as “perhaps the most important and interesting point in the great West,” the “grand depot” for a region that was very largely “dependent on St. Louis for supplies.” “It is now universally acknowledged,” the *New York Herald* concluded, “that the ‘Mound City’ must eventually become the ‘New York of the West’.” Another article in the same paper, focussing more squarely on the blaze, nevertheless maintained that same spirit of optimism, contending that “the community itself does not seem to be retarded in its career of prosperity.” In an American city struck by fire, it went on, “new public buildings, and warehouses, and streets, appear on the site of those destroyed, with a degree of rapidity which is quite marvellous to those unacquainted with the moral and physical resources of our people.” That had been the experience of New York after 1835, and the *Herald* was confident that it would now be repeated out west.

Another newspaper account of the St. Louis fire began by noting the unusual combination of “fire, flood and pestilence” that had afflicted the Union in recent weeks. But this seemingly gloomy observation was followed not by the kind of breast-beating and gnashing of teeth that had accompanied coverage of such early national conflagrations as the Richmond fire but by something much more upbeat. This reporter trumpets:

> The extraordinary elasticity with which individuals and communities throughout the United States rebound...from calamity, exhibiting a wonderful power of endurance, a most determined purpose, and an extraordinary success in working good out of evil. There is no wringing of hands, no sitting down to mourn amongst the smouldering ashes of a burnt district. Every man puts his shoulder to the wheel. Cities aid sister cities in distress. There is no sensation of despair. Past misfortunes are forgotten in the excitement of new enterprise.”

It was in this sort of environment that American responses to disaster first started to transcend the limitations that had tended to make even very substantial calamities such as the New

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127 *New York Herald*, May 21, 1849.
Madrid earthquakes largely local events during the early national period. By mid-century, such disasters had started to acquire a more national cast, at least in cases where communications networks allowed news of what had happened to reach major centres of population and influence, and where the disaster possessed the dramatic potential to appeal to readers of the penny press.

As disasters acquired this more national character, big urban fires in particular started to generate philanthropic giving from across the United States. This giving was motivated in the first instance by some combination of human sympathy and religious benevolence. It is possible that it sometimes had a political dimension too, providing a welcome opportunity to illustrate that the United States was still a single community after all, despite the mounting sectional stress associated with westward expansion, the growth of the Cotton Empire, and the explosive growth of the antislavery impulse. For the most part, however, journalistic and philanthropic responses to disaster did not feature overt references along these lines. And when mayors and Whig congressmen took the lead in initiating charitable giving after the Pittsburgh fire, they did not make explicit references either to the idea of national community, or to the northern nationalism that historians have seen developing in the aftermath of James K. Polk’s election to the presidency.¹³⁰

In one respect, however, the nation’s response to disaster was acquiring a political dimension, and that is in relation to the question of disaster mitigation or prevention. The development of fire insurance represented an early instance of this pattern, while the federal government’s involvement in clearing obstructions from western rivers, building lighthouses and establishing a Marine Hospital Service might be seen as early national instances of a somewhat parallel sensibility. But it was during the 1840s—just as social reformers were starting to see the political arena as the natural environment for advancing antislavery, temperance and educational progress—that fires started to generate increasing commentary on the need for robust municipal

¹³⁰ [source? Robert Cook on Fessenden?] [Natchez exception]
action to lessen the susceptibility of the nation’s expanding urban populations to conflagration.\(^{131}\) And it was during this same period that floods and steamboat disasters also started to stimulate governmental action—not at the municipal level, here, but rather in state capitols and on Capitol Hill. The next chapter picks up this story, in the context of a broader pattern: the initial development of a national politics of disaster.

\(^{131}\) For such commentary in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh fire, see *New York Herald*, April 15, 1845, *Vermont Patriot*, April 26, 1845, and *Scioto Gazette*, April 17, 1845. For an earlier instance, following the New York fire, see *New York Spectator*, Dec. 24, 1835.