Earthquakes in the central United States, 1699–2010

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Three Centuries of Earthquakes

About this map

This map is an update to Miscellaneous Investigations Map I–2812 (Wheeler and others, 2003). The updated map shows 39 additional earthquakes, including the April 18, 2008 Mount Carmel earthquake. The data shown are current through June, 2010.

The large map shows the distribution of earthquakes in the most seismically active region of the central United States. It was prepared for a general audience and should not be used to assess earthquake hazards for small areas or at individual locations. The large map shows earthquakes that were large enough to be felt, and a few of them were large enough to cause damage. Earthquakes too small to be felt are far more numerous, occur nearly everywhere, but are not shown on the map.

The well-known New Madrid seismic zone (NMSZ) is shown by the dense, northeast-elongated cluster of earthquakes in northeastern Arkansas, southeastern Missouri, and adjacent Tennessee and Kentucky. The seismic zone is the most seismically active part of North America east of the Rocky Mountains (see the section "Notable Earthquakes" to the right). The ends of the NMSZ are roughly at the two large earthquakes that occurred in 1843 and 1895. North of the NMSZ, extending as far as St. Louis and Indianapolis, is an area of scattered earthquakes. The eastern part of this area straddles the Wabash River and is called the Wabash Valley seismic zone (WVSZ).

A tight cluster of small earthquakes north of Little Rock, Ark., is called the Enola earthquake swarm. During the 1980's, tens of thousands of small, mostly unfelt earthquakes occurred in the cluster, and the map shows the largest of them.
The oldest earthquake shown on the map occurred in 1795 northeast of St. Louis; however, almost a century earlier in 1699, missionaries traveling down the Mississippi River felt an earthquake. From their single written report that earthquake's location cannot be determined. They reported being camped, probably next to the river and

probably between what are now Memphis, Tenn., and Helena, Ark. Seismologists interpreted the description of the earthquake shaking as consistent with a small earthquake, possibly within a few tens of kilometers of the camp. The map shows the approximate location of the camp (solid red diamond) along the river between present-day Memphis and Helena.

Earthquakes occur on geologic faults. However, east of the Rocky Mountains, with few exceptions, it cannot be determined which fault slipped to cause an individual earthquake. Geologic maps show faults that are exposed at the Earth's surface, and maps like this one show the locations of earthquakes, but there is no reliable map of all "earthquake faults" for the central United States.

The most common measure of the size of an earthquake is its magnitude. There are many different ways to measure magnitude. The frequently cited "Richter scale" was the first of these ways, although the name is too often applied indiscriminately. Use of different magnitude types can give slightly different values for the magnitude of the same earthquake. Differences of several tenths of a magnitude unit are common.

The location of an earthquake's focus within the Earth is uncertain, typically by several kilometers or more. Uncertainties are larger where seismographs (instruments that record earthquake waves) are far apart, and for earthquakes that occurred before the development of seismographs. Some earthquakes with uncertain locations appear to line up along east-west or north-south lines (for example, in and near St. Louis, Chicago, and Memphis) because their locations can only be estimated to the nearest degree or tenth of a degree. Despite the uncertain locations of some earthquakes, the map shows that people in most parts of the map area have felt earthquakes since European settlers arrived there.

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Earthquakes in the central United States

Technical Note for Seismologists: Details of catalog assembly are in Wheeler, 2003, USGS Open-File Report 03–232, 15 p. (available for free downloading at URL http://pubs.usgs.gov/of /2003/ofr-03-232). On the small map of earthquakes in all the central United States, the area between the red and black outlines shows earthquakes whose records C.S. Mueller compiled through 2001 from several standard catalogs (written commun., 2002), plus records through 2002 that were added from the U.S. Geological Survey Preliminary Determinations of Epicenters. Since 2002, 39 earthquakes of M3.0 or larger have occurred in the area of the large map through June 30, 2010. These events have been added to this version of the poster. Except for the Mount Carmel earthquake of April 18, 2008 (M5.4), none of the added events exceeded M 5.0. In the lower right corner of this report, a description of the Mount Carmel earthquake replaced a description of the June 18, 2002 M4.6 southwestern Indiana earthquake.

Contributors: The idea of making the poster originated with N.C. Hester and J. Wilkinson. The earthquake catalog and earthquake descriptions were improved by data, discussions, suggestions, and corrections from R.R. Anderson, M.B.E. Bograd, M.D. Bricker, M.C. Chapman, M.W. Hamburger, J.R. Hill, M.G. Hopper, A.C. Johnston, J.D. McFarland, A.G. Metzger, N.K. Moran, C.S. Mueller, D.E. Raymond, and M.M. Withers. The large map benefited from suggestions by A.J. Crone, P.S. Detra, J.T. Felkerson, T.H. Larson, E.S. Schweig, and A.C. Tarr. The poster as a whole was improved by reviews from J.S. Gomberg, J.C. Lahr, P.A. Lentz, P.J. Modreski, E.S. Schweig, and Lisa Wald (USGS). The poster resulted from collaboration between earthquake specialists in the USGS Geologic Hazards Science Center in Golden, Colo., and digital elevation specialists in the USGS Mid-Continent Geographic Science Center in Rolla, Mo.

Note: This poster is an updated 2010 version of the original Earthquakes in the Central United States—1699–2002 poster (Wheeler and others, 2003). Changes to the original poster are minimal: post 2002 earthquake locations were added to the map and the 2008 magnitude 5.4 Mt. Carmel earthquake, in east-central Illinois, replaced the southwestern Indiana 2002 magnitude 4.6 Posey County earthquake, in the Notable Earthquakes section. Work on this report was done by Richard L. Dart and Christina M. Volpi of the U.S. Geological Survey Earthquake Hazards Program under the supervision of Jill McCarthy.

scale 1:1,250,000
1 kilometer equals approximately 0.6 mile, and 1 mile equals approximately 1.6 kilometers.

Earthquake magnitude
7.0 or greater
6.0–6.9
5.0–5.9
4.0–4.9
3.0–3.9

Explanation
County boundary
State boundary
Interstate highway
Urban area
State capital
Probable site at which 1699 earthquake was felt. See “About This Map”

Shaded-relief base produced by the U.S. Geological Survey from elevation data from The National Map (http://nationalmap.gov): base created with 8X vertical exaggeration from U.S. Geological Survey National Elevation dataset (http://ned.usgs.gov) at 30-m resolution, resampled at 90 m. Albers equal-area projection, standard parallels 35°5'N. and 39°55'N., and central meridian 89°30'W. Latitude of projection origin is 0°.

Notable Earthquakes

Numerous earthquakes have caused damage in the map area. All earthquakes of magnitude (M) 5.0 or larger are identified on the map by their dates, as is the smaller earthquake that occurred near St. Louis in 1795. The nine most notable of these earthquakes are summarized below. Times shown are Central Standard Times.

M7.0 or greater
December 16, 1811, 2:15 a.m.
January 23, 1812, 9:00 a.m.
February 7, 1812, 3:45 a.m.
1811–1812
Locations: New Madrid seismic zone (NMSZ) of southeastern Missouri, northeastern Arkansas, and adjacent parts of Tennessee and Kentucky.
Effects: These three earthquakes were among the largest to strike North America since European settlement. They spanned two months and were followed by many hundreds of aftershocks that lasted for decades. Many of the aftershocks were major earthquakes themselves. The area that was strongly shaken by the three main shocks was 2–3 times as large as the strongly shaken area of the 1964 M9.2 Alaskan earthquake, and 10 times as large as that of the 1906 M7.8 San Francisco earthquake.
The New Madrid earthquakes happened along the western frontier of the young U.S. They were felt in all settled parts of the central and eastern U.S. except Maine, as well as in Toronto, Canada. They caused general alarm from Detroit, Mich., to New Orleans, La. Chimneys were knocked down as far off as Cincinnati, Ohio, 560 km (350 mi) away. Closer to the earthquakes (Memphis was not yet established), many homes in St. Louis were damaged. The thriving frontier trading town of New Madrid, Mo., was severely damaged and temporarily evacuated and, about 45 km (30 mi) south of New Madrid, the town of Little Prairie, Mo., was destroyed. The ground rose, fell, and cracked; trees snapped and were uprooted; large landslides were abundant on steep ground from the future site of Memphis, Tenn., to southernmost Illinois. Large areas rose permanently, and some of them dammed rivers to create or enlarge lakes that remain today. Other large areas sank and were flooded by streams and by enormous volumes of water and sand that erupted from thousands of fissures over a region about 240 km (150 mi) long and 80 km (50 mi) wide. Great waves on the Mississippi River and collapsing banks and sand bars destroyed some boats and washed others ashore. A sudden uplift beneath the river caused it to overflow its banks, briefly flow upstream, and form two large rapids.
Eyewitness and other accounts make gripping reading at URL http://www.ceri.memphis.edu/compendium/. The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) and the Center for Earthquake Research and Information of the University of Memphis estimate that similar NMSZ earthquakes have a 7–10 percent chance of reoccurring within the next 50 years (USGS Fact Sheet FS–131–02; see "Sources of Information").

Artists' concepts of public reaction to the powerful New Madrid earthquakes 1811–1812. 19th Century illustrations used by permission of State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia.

American Eagle
Memphis, Friday, Jan. 6, 1843
ALARMING EARTHQUAKE.

At about half past 8 o'clock yesterday evening our City was visited by one of those awful throes of Nature, so convulsive and terrible, as to spread almost universal alarm over the city. The firmest buildings trembled and cracked, and the earth reeled and rocked under a most terrific excitement. *** the agitation seized the brick walls surrounding us, shaking and reeling them, to such an extent, as to knock down particles of brick and plaster, jarring the roof and whole building so as to impress us with the fear of the building's falling. *** we hastily fled into the street for safety. *** In the street, there was still a violent rocking of the earth, and a rattling and rumbling noise. People fled into the streets, and cries, and lamentations of many horror-stricken men and women were heard to fill the air.

The shock lasted about two minutes, and reached its most agitating period, at the end of the first half minute, when it gradually died away in a dismal rumbling sound ***.

The tops of several chimneys were shaken down ***. A great many brick walls are seriously cracked and sunk, windows broken, and a cotton shed, naturally crazy, fell down shortly after the shock. ***

M6.3
January 4, 1843, 8:45 p.m.
1843
Location: Southern end of NMSZ, near Marked Tree, Poinsett County, northeastern Arkansas.
Effects: The strongest earthquake in the southern half of the seismic zone since 1811–1812 damaged Memphis, Tenn., 60–70 km (about 40 mi) from the epicenter—chimney tops fell, walls cracked, and windows broke. Chimneys fell at Helena, Ark., 110 km (70 mi) away, and at Hickman, Ky., 160 km (100 mi) away. The earthquake was felt on the Atlantic Coast of Georgia and the Carolinas, in Providence, R.I., and beyond the westernmost frontier forts.

Newspaper headline, October 31, 1985. (Reprinted with permission of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, copyright 1895.)
An Earthquake Shakes the City
Violent seismic disturbance lasting nearly a minute
Felt throughout the city
Houses Rocked, Windows rattles and Brick Chimneys Tumbled to the Ground.

M6.6
October 31, 5:08 p.m.
1895
Location: Northern part of NMSZ, at Charleston, Mississippi County, southeastern Missouri.
Effects: Strong shaking caused eruptions of slurries of sand and water at several places within an area spanning roughly 30 km (20 mi). Damage occurred in six States, most severely at Charleston. Walls cracked, windows shattered, plaster broke, and chimneys

fell, extensively in Charleston and less so in Cairo, Ill. Shaking was felt in 23 States from Washington, D.C. to Kansas and from southernmost Canada to New Orleans, La.

St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Quake damage minor; felt over wide area in midwest and east
Centered about 120 miles east
Newspaper headline, November 10, 1968. (Reprinted with permission of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, copyright 1968).

M5.4
November 9, 1968, 11:02 a.m.
1968
Location: Wabash Valley seismic zone (WVSZ), near Dale, Hamilton County, southeastern Illinois.
Effects: This was the largest earthquake in the map area since 1895. Chimneys and parapets fell, foundations cracked, and tombstones overturned. In a larger surrounding region, including St. Louis, Mo., 180 km (115 mi) away, bricks fell from chimneys, windows broke, television antennae fell, and plaster fell or cracked. Shaking was felt in 23 States from Minnesota to Georgia and from Pennsylvania to Kansas, and in multi-story buildings in Boston, Mass., and southernmost Ontario, Canada.

M5.0
June 10, 1987, 5:49 p.m.
1987
Location: WVSZ, near Olney, Richland County, southeastern Illinois.
Effects: Chimneys and chimney bricks fell, underground pipes were damaged, and sidewalks and streets cracked in at least four cities in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky. Several towns in Illinois and Indiana reported cracked chimneys, plaster, drywall, and foundations. Shaking was felt in 17 States and Canada, from Pennsylvania to Kansas and from Alabama to Minnesota and southernmost Ontario, Canada.

M5.4
April 18, 2008, 4:37 a.m.
2008
Location: WVSZ, in Wabash County, southwestern Illinois.
Effects: A few buildings sustained minor structural damage at East Alton, Mount Carmel and West Salem, Ill., and a cornice fell from one building at Louisville, Ky. Shaking was reported in several states and in southern Ontario, Canada. This earthquake was located with the Illinois basin-Ozark dome region, which covers parts of Indiana, Kentucky, Illinois, Missouri, and Arkansas and stretches from Indianapolis and St. Louis to Memphis. Moderately damaging earthquakes have historically occurred at irregular intervals in this region, with a significant earthquake typically occurring every decade or two. Typically, smaller-magnitude earthquakes are felt in the area about once or twice a year. Geological field studies in the past 20 years have identified prehistoric liquefaction features along the banks of rivers and creeks that indicate at least eight strong earthquakes have occurred in the lower Wabash Valley region in the past 20,000 years, each having an estimated magnitude between about 6.5 to 7.5. The largest of these

paleoearthquakes is thought to have occurred about 6,100 years ago and was probably centered about 25 km (15 mi) west of Vincennes, Ind.

Did You Feel It?
Map of April 18, 2008 earthquake
USGS Community Internet Intensity Map
ILLINOIS
Apr 18 2008 04:36:58 CDT 38.4808N 87.8258W M5.2 Depth: 11 km ID:us2008qza6

This map was created from the public responses at URL http://earthquake.usgs.gov ("Did You Feel It?") following the earthquake. Questionnaire answers for each ZIP Code were turned into ground-motion intensities, creating a map of the shaking distribution. The original map is at URL
http://pasadena.wr.usgs.gov/shake/ca/STORE/Xfnbk/ciim_display.html

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