In the late summer of 2011, the state of Virginia experienced an earthquake, hurricane, flooding, and a few tornadoes. These events were hardly catastrophic, and although some people did experience damage to their homes and property, these events will not be remembered as being as devastating as Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

When examining a topic such as “disasters and tragic events,” we need to keep some definitions in mind. What is a disaster? What is a tragic event? To be certain, such occurrences strike people every day, such as house fires, vehicle crashes, the passing of a loved one, or something that doesn’t involve actual physical trauma, such as losing one’s home to foreclosure and being put out in the street.

Yet all these events are life altering. They might not make the evening news or even a blurb in the local newspaper, but to those who live through them they may often identify with others who also suffer some form of misery. Some, in their grief, might say, “It’s not as bad as what I went through.” While such words may seem callous (and sometimes often are if the speaker has no compassion), true offense is not always intended. Tragic events may fade from memory while others can never be forgotten. People are also fond of comparing their miseries to those of others.

Disasters and Tragic Events: An Encyclopedia of Catastrophes in American History examines 206 disasters and tragic events throughout U.S. history. Written by writers and scholars from many professions and disciplines, the entries, which usually run from one thousand to two thousand words in length, all include extensive cross-references to similar or related entries as well as a list of relevant, current print and electronic sources of additional information on the entry topic. Written for high school and undergraduate students, as well as for interested general readers, these two volumes also offer a chronology of each disaster included, a general bibliography of print and electronic resources on related and relevant topics, and nineteen primary documents relating to some of the events covered.

While some of the events discussed in these volumes are better known than others, these stories had significant impact in one form or another. By no means is this a comprehensive list. Several of the events—such as the Salem Witch Trials of
1692 or the Boston Massacre of 1770—occurred before the United States was an independent country. Still, they linger in our memory and have become part of our folklore, even if the details are often distorted.

It is not to be implied that if a particular event is omitted it is therefore considered to be insignificant. Such is not the case. As with the creation of any list, decisions had to be made with certain criteria. For instance, the amount of information available may not be sufficient to cover an event. When such instances occur, some of these “lesser known” (for want of a better phrase) events may appear as a reference or a sidebar in a longer entry.

These two volumes also avoid focusing on one type of disaster/tragic event. At no point should the reader believe this work is belittling or diminishing any tragedies not mentioned or put in a sidebar. There are some volumes that concentrate solely on events such as tornadoes and hurricanes. The attempt here is to examine a wide variety of events and understand why we still remember them. We can also see how life is perfect one minute and in a sudden instant all is wiped away. The Florida hurricane of 1926 is a perfect example of this. Florida seemed like the place to make an investment in land and then turn a quick profit, but in 1926 Mother Nature intervened and brought the nation back to reality.

There are many events that this work does not cover. For instance, war is a terrible occurrence, but, for our purposes, no wars are covered because they comprise a broad series of events over time, not a single tragic event occurring over a single or a few days. As with any other events not being discussed, this exclusion does not diminish the impact any wars have had throughout American history. Disasters and Tragic Events does cover some particular battles because of the impact they had on the nation; these include the Civil War Battle of Antietam and the Battle of Khe Sanh during the Vietnam War. To paraphrase a quote, if anyone prays for peace it is the one in the military. Therefore, the exclusion of any war or any other battle is also not to be construed as disrespect.

It must also be kept in mind that certain tragic events, such as a lynching or race riot, should never be forgotten. Where possible, these will be mentioned alongside similar events. Again, the point is to maintain a balance, and the exclusion of any particular event is not to be understood as unimportant.

When producing a work such as this, an important question is how to arrange the entries. Should the entries be arranged according to topics, i.e., natural disasters, man-made disasters, racial strife, human cruelty, industrial accidents, or outbreaks of disease? Such an arrangement may make sense for the researcher who is looking for a specific event but does not know when it occurred. But this approach is somewhat limiting. As advantageous as it may seem in terms of finding a specific event, it belies the true nature of human history. Some see history as cyclical, with identical themes repeating time and again. Others, like the great German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Frederich Hegel, see history as linear, moving toward a
Slavery

Dating back thousands of years, slavery was a system whereby people legally bought, sold, and owned other humans and forced them to labor without pay for life. Although relegated to property and subjected to violence, enslaved people always found creative ways to express their agency. Maintained and spread with racist ideologies, slavery in the United States originated in its deepest colonial roots and extended to 1865 when the nation fought a bloody Civil War over the resulting economic, political, and social issues. Due to the countless ways in which people practiced slavery and due to its dynamic nature, generalizations about enslavers, enslaved, and their society are particularly difficult and risky to make. The lack of sources in some cases and the completely unquestioned power held by enslavers and total lack of governmental oversight further compound this situation.

Slavery as developed by European colonizers beginning in the 1400s was racialized. Virtually all of those enslaved were Africans and the children of Africans. An enslaved Africans’ forced migration to the Americas began when they where abducted and forced to march to the coast. Throughout this excursion, extending six or seven months, the enslaved were barefoot, chained together, and constantly under threat of death. Once a European buyer inspected, branded, and bought two hundred to three hundred humans, they began their journey through the Middle Passage. These ships were unsanitary and crowded. From abuse, inadequate food, and shock, by the time Africans arrived in the Americas and were placed on the auction block along with livestock, there was approximately a 60 to 70 percent mortality rate. Of the survivors, 25 percent died after being in the New World for one year, mostly from shock and overwork, but also from disease. To hide any signs of disease or illness, they were bathed and covered in oils. The strongest men sold first at the highest price. In the 1850s, the average price for a field hand was $2,000 (equivalent to $50,000 in 2012).

Racialized enslavement came to British North America in 1619 when citizens in Jamestown, Virginia, bought twenty Africans from a Dutch slave ship, The White Lion. Prior to the 1650s and 1660s when colonial courts codified slavery and the 1670s when colonial class and ethnic tensions came to a forefront in Bacon’s Rebellion (1676), slavery remained limited. Throughout the age of Revolutionary America, people generally believed slavery would end on its own. With the adoption of Eli Whitney’s cotton gin in the 1790s, an enslaved African could
pick and process fifty pounds of cotton daily instead of ten. As a result, slavery became an absolutely significant and vital part of the nation, and the number of enslaved people increased from approximately seven hundred thousand in 1790 to two million in 1830 and four million in 1860. These four million people were valued at $3 billion, which was forty-eight times larger than the national budget in 1860. As Congress forbade the international slave trade after 1808, the majority of these enslaved people were born in the United States and bought through the traumatic domestic slave trade.

Slavery was based on coerced labor and violence. Although a miniscule number of blacks owned other blacks as human property, the vast majority of enslavers were white. In general, enslaved people were required to work eighty or more hours a week, for life, without ever being paid. Most labored on plantations or farms growing cotton, rice, sugar, tobacco, and countless other crops, although a small number toiled in cities or in the “Big House.” They were given one outfit a year. Their houses were usually 20’ x 20’ with dirt floors and no windows. In general, enslaved people were forbidden to learn to read or write, travel, assemble in groups, buy their freedom, or testify in court. They were malnourished and sick. Every enslaved person regularly faced the threat of being sold and torn away from loved ones. The status of “slave” was automatically passed on to children.

In addition to inhumane living and working conditions, enslaved people were regularly subjected to violence. Females were always susceptible to rape by whites. Enslavers punished individuals who worked too slow, were caught breaking rules, or just to make an example. Punishments regularly included whipping the bare back fifty to seventy-five times. In other cases, an arm, ear, or leg might be cut off. Sometimes, the enslaved would be murdered.

While enslaved Africans and African Americans faced extreme violence and inhumane conditions, they were by no means docile about their status. Enslaved people regularly engaged in small- and large-scale rebellions: Active resistance and challenges by enslaved people were an everyday occurrence. Small rebellions
consisted of forming fictive kin networks, working slow, faking illness, breaking tools, petty theft, or poisoning their enslavers.

From 1526–1864, there were 313 documented insurrections whereby enslaved people fought for their freedom. For example, on September 9, 1739, the Stono Rebellion began near Charleston, South Carolina, when an enslaved person named Jemmy killed and beheaded two whites at a local warehouse and stole firearms. Twenty others joined Jemmy. This group planned to march to St. Augustine, Florida, for their freedom. They beat drums, made flags, and yelled “Liberty!” as they destroyed everything and killed everyone. Throughout this commotion, eighty more blacks joined them. A few hours later, however, most were caught, killed, and beheaded. Following the Stono Rebellion, the Negro Act of 1740 furthered the codification of slavery.

In addition, Nat Turner’s Rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, was the bloodiest and largest revolt in North America. Turner taught himself to read and write (even his enslaver could not read) and enjoyed rare freedoms, such as being able to travel without permission and preach to other blacks. Turner reported that on February 12, 1831, God told him to lead a revolt. After six months of planning, the revolt began the evening of August 22, 1831. Turner and a group of others began killing every white person. By the morning, their numbers grew to seventy, and they had killed almost sixty white men, women, and children. As in the Stono Rebellion, whites quickly stopped these rebels and killed them. Turner successfully hid for two months before being hanged.

After Nat Turner’s Rebellion, calls to either end or stop the spread of slavery became more vocal among Northerners, and among Southerners, justifications for the perpetual continuation and spread of slavery rose to new intensity. Nat Turner’s Rebellion brought slavery to the national spotlight, especially for a new generation of northerners who had little or no direct experience with slavery. In addition, whites supposed that if a man with Nat Turner’s “freedom” hated whites, then the other enslaved people without such “freedom” probably hated whites and slavery even more.

In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison’s American Antislavery Society called for an immediate end to slavery. The most radical abolitionist for a time, he spoke against slavery and distributed literature and images detailing the horrors of slavery. When he sent pamphlets to the South, they were burned and never delivered. In 1837, when Elijah Lovejoy, a white abolitionist, publisher, and preacher, became the first white martyr for the cause of abolition, white Northerners who previously found calls to end slavery immediately too radical came to support Garrison because they saw how the violence of slavery directly affected whites as well. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin, a powerful work that attacked slavery as evil and immoral, was published in 1852 and quickly became the most widely read attack on slavery in history.

In response, Southerners developed proslavery arguments. These arguments used faulty logic and pseudoscience to justify the enslavement of blacks. In the