

Webdoc: Inquest on St. Francis Dam

Responsibility for the St. Francis Dam disaster is placed on the Bureau of Water Works and Supply and the Chief Engineer thereof, and those to whom the Chief Engineer is subservient, including the Department of Water and Power Commissioners, the legislative bodies of city and State and the public at large. The destruction of this dam was caused by the failure of the rock formations upon which it was built, and not by any error in the design of the dam itself or defect in the materials on which the dam is constructed. The gravity section according with standard practice, and would have produced a safe structure if it had been built upon hard, impervious rock, as was supposed to be the case by those who built it.

On account of the great destruction wrought by the disaster and the absence of living eyewitnesses, much important evidence bearing on the cause of the failure was obliterated, making it impossible to determine, with anything approaching complete accuracy, the exact cause of the initial break and the sequence of events thereafter.

It was apparent that the entire personnel of the water department had an unusual degree of confidence in Chief Engineer William Mulholland and relied entirely upon his ability, experience, and infallibility in matters of engineering judgment. However, Chief William Mulholland and his principal assistants have had little experience in the building of large masonry or concrete dams previous to the construction of the St. Francis, and apparently did not appreciate the necessity of doing the many things that must be done in order to be certain that the foundations will remain hard, impervious and unyielding.

As a result, various errors were made by an entirely responsible organization confident they were maintaining high standards of accomplishment. . .

The construction of a municipal dam should never be left to the sole judgment of one man, no matter how eminent.

The jury recommends there be no criminal prosecution by the District Attorney based on its findings of no evidence of criminal act or intent on the part of the Board of Water Works or any engineer or employee in the construction or operation of the dam. Errors of judgment, absent criminality, caused the tragedy. . .

Owing to previous attacks on the water system by the use of explosives, consideration has been given to the possibility that this disaster was precipitated by an overt act. While it is undoubtedly possible that the destruction

of the dam could have been caused by an explosion, no conclusive evidence that such was the case has been brought before us. Even if the failure had been precipitated by this cause, it would not change the situation as far as concerns the existence of the defects that have been described and which were the more probable cause of the disaster.