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Mt. Pelée Erupts I

Lead: On the morning of May 8, 1902, a massive cloud of volcanic matter rolled out of the conical summit of Mt. Pelée and plunged toward the coastal city of St. Pierre on the Caribbean island of Martinique. Within minutes the 30,000 citizens of St. Pierre had been incinerated.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Visited by Columbus on his fourth voyage in 1502, Martinique was first settled by Europeans when the French established a colony there in 1635. Except for a few years during

wartime, they retained control and French Martinique remains in the twenty-first century. The island was formed by volcanoes, the principal of which was Mt. Pelée, a stratovolcano towering 4500 feet above the northern end of the Island. Until 1902 the chief commercial center of Martinique was the port of St. Pierre three miles distant from Mt. Pelée.

For half a century the mountain lay dormant, quietly baking in the warm tropical climate of the eastern Caribbean. Then, in the early spring, 1902, it woke up. Belching steam and ash, at first the volcano's activity seemed harmless enough. No molten lava flowed down its slopes threatening the farmers there and the French

colonial governor took no unusual precautions. In April the eruptions of Mt. Pelée became more frequent and furious and minor earthquakes grew in number. Refugees poured into St. Pierre, with its red-tiled and stone houses covered now with gray ash so thick on the streets that it muffled the sound of carriage wheels.

The morning of May 8th found Mt. Pelée rumbling, erupting in its normal manner, with ash and steam climbing skyward. About mid-day an unusual cloud blew out of the cone and instead of going up, it went down, rolling toward St. Pierre at about a hundred miles an hour. A survivor standing on a hill overlooking the town described the cloud as glowing, filled with rolling

red boulders and lightning, making a throbbing, staccato roar. It moved through the town and when it lifted, St. Pierre was dead. Next time: Nuée ardente, the glowing cloud.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

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