

**Watchwords by Officer Tom Hanshaw**  
**October 26, 2012**

I usually write the first draft of my Watchwords column a week or so before it's printed; so in this case, it's Tuesday October 16<sup>th</sup>. My typical routine is to finish dinner, walk the dog, plug in the lap top and get a cup of tea ready, while listening to the radio. On this date, however, I encountered a slight disruption to the routine, as most residents did that evening. Shortly after 7:10 PM, the house shook, there was a loud bang and the cat went crazy as Amesbury was rattled by a 4.6 magnitude earthquake, centered in southern Maine; note it was later downgraded to a 4.0. Fortunately there were no injuries or damage locally but there certainly was quite a bit of excitement.

I thought I'd log onto facebook for a few moments to check the comments and postings, which were plentiful to say the least. One of my favorite subjects, years ago, in school was Psychology and the study of people's responses to particular events. "People watching" can be quite entertaining and the social media has truly taken that science to a new level. Within ten seconds of the quake my younger sister was calling and asking if "something weird" had just happened at my house. Soon after, the comments started showing up, from friends all over New England. It's actually amazing how quickly news can travel thanks to the technology of today. Remember when you had to wait for the 11 o'clock nightly for information about events like that?

After some time passed, I thought I'd touch bases with the dispatcher at the police station to see if she had received any calls. Needless to say, Sherrie had spoken with quite a few residents after the quake. In fact, over 100 calls flooded the 911 and business lines at the police station, including transfers from neighboring communities. Callers asked if there had been an accident or explosion, while others wondered about the Seabrook Nuclear Plant. Many asked if there had been an earthquake, which is understandable, but the truth is, they could only assume. Thanks to Dispatcher Worthen for providing the information for this week's column.

So how fast does news travel? Well thanks to today's technology, very fast. In fact, I checked the times to see how quickly the facts were public. According to my phone, the quake happened about 7:14, the time of my sister's call. I then sent a text to a friend and about two minutes learned the incident was a 4.6 quake, centered in southwestern Maine. At the same time, the facebook posts began popping up, once again from people all over New England, clearly saying we had an earthquake. Within about five minutes, the official posts of the US Geological Survey (USGS) were on the board, showing the exact location, depth and magnitude of the quake. Local media outlets also showed the breaking news on their web sites, television and radio about then. In less than a half-hour, there were even posts depicting "damage" caused by the quake, such as tipped over chairs and recycle bins. Luckily this was not a serious quake and no one got hurt, so poking fun at the incident became popular. So popular, that a facebook site called something like, "I survived the 10-16-2012 quake" emerged and attracted over 50,000 "likes" in about an hour.

Now, I realize that in an emergency, time is crucial. Certainly if there had been an explosion or accident, we would want residents to call for help immediately. However,

sometimes you need to take a breath; there was no need for over 100 people to call the police station to ask what was happening, especially when an earthquake was suspected. In incidents like this one, we don't have the information immediately. If there had been an explosion or serious accident, dispatchers would be needed to direct emergency responders to the scene. They do not have time and are never allowed to release sensitive information. If a real emergency happened during the moments after the earthquake, it's possible a call may not have made it through to dispatch. Imagine if your family member is having a heart attack and you dial 911, only to receive a busy signal. In situations like the earthquake, it's natural for people to wonder what's going on and more tempting to discuss the matter. The biggest issue that the staff at the police station encountered was the fact people wanted to talk about the quake. Although we'd like to, with dozens of calls coming in at the same time, we can't.

We encourage residents to report incidents and emergencies but would ask that some discrepancy be used when something like an earthquake, sixty miles away, happens. The same holds true for power outages, snowplowing, school closings and community events. Sometimes you will be able to access more information more quickly than police. We live in an age where technology is always getting more advanced, so we are fortunate to see news as it happens. Whether it's the Internet, a social site, a cell phone, radio or television, there are several resources today that weren't around in the past. Although the volume of activity may reduce the use of devices like a cell phone, you can always check the television or radio.

Just a reminder, TRICK or TREAT is Wednesday October 31<sup>st</sup>, from 5:30 to 7:30 PM in Amesbury.