As for the biggest quakes in recorded history, size estimates vary. Over the past century, the ways that earthquake magnitude and intensity are recorded have changed with improving seismic measurements. The well-known Richter scale was devised in the 1930s to describe the relative sizes of earthquakes in southern California. Here are the biggest earthquakes in California's recorded history, according to magnitude estimates from the U.S Geological Survey. 1. Fort Tejon; January 9, 1857 Magnitude 7.9. Often compared to the devastating 1906 San Francisco earthquake, the Fort Tejon quake actually caused larger average ground movements than the more famous 1906 quake. Horizontal displacement along the fault was as much as 29.5 feet (9 meters).