



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871

Chicago's population had exploded from about 4,000 people when it gained its first city charter in 1837, to 30,000 in 1850, then to an astounding 330,000 by 1871. It had just passed St. Louis as the fourth-largest city in America and sat poised to become a major player on the international scene.

This rapid growth, however, occurred with little planning. Some brick-and-mortar office buildings existed, but thousands of structures were literally "thrown up" to accommodate the vast influx of European immigrants. [Shantytowns \(most famously, Streeterville\)](#) sprang up alongside ornate mansions. Streets and sidewalks were constructed of wood.

One water station served the entire city. Only two-and-a-half inches of rain had fallen on the city between July 3 and October 9. Chicago had averaged about two fires a day over the past year and 20 the previous week; the fire department was woefully understaffed. That set the stage for the unseasonably warm evening of October 8.

The Facts About the Fire



There is little dispute that on the Sunday evening of October 8, 1871, something ignited a fire in Patrick and Catherine O'Leary's barn at 137 De Koven St. on Chicago's west side.[1]

When the flames subsided on Tuesday morning, the Great Fire had consumed more than three square miles (some 2,000 acres) of the city, taken 300 lives, left 100,000



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

without shelter (about a third of the population), and destroyed property valued at nearly \$200 million. Ironically, the O'Leary house was upwind of the fire and survived.

The Cause

Most school-aged children are taught to believe that a cow kicked over a lit kerosene lantern, which started a fire in O'Leary's barn and eventually spread out to destroy the city of Chicago. But is this "fairy tale" a reality?

After interviewing 51 people who were near the fire when it broke out or experts to help on the technical end, an investigative panel came to the conclusion that it was unable to identify the cause.

Other Theories Were Bandied About

There seems to have been some inconsistencies in the testimonies of Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan and Dennis Regan.

Sullivan's house was located across the street and to the east of the O'Learys'. He testified that, after visiting the O'Learys, he walked across the street, proceeded past his own house, then sat in front of William White's house, one house farther east.

Sullivan said he could see the fire break out later and ran to the O'Learys to help save the animals. One problem: The line of from the white house to the O'Leary barn was blocked by the James Dalton house.

Regan testified that he heard music as he passed the McLaughlin house, where a party had been going on, on his way to help with the fire. Problem Two: Mrs. McLaughlin testified that the fire had started after the music stopped.

Some conjecture has it that the two men were in the barn, where they had been "hundreds of times." That may not have been unusual for them. They may have wrestled a bit, accidentally knocked the glowing wad of tobacco from Sullivan's pipe, and then gone their separate ways.

Another theory: Could it have been a fragment of a rogue comet that touched off this fire, as well as in upstate Wisconsin and Michigan, on the same night, and on the same path!

The foregoing postulation has been bounced around since 1883 — and most often rejected. There is a scientific basis for the theory, however. Scientists speculate



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

fragments from Biela's Comet could have ignited the Great Fire in Chicago as well as killing 2,000 people and devastating four million acres of farm and prairie land.

Pre-fire Chicago

The larger picture shows Chicago at a place where the manufacturing East meets the agricultural West, and at a time when the nation was flexing its financial muscles in the international arena.

The microcosm would reveal a spunky town with a diverse ethnicity. There was an ever-increasing influx of people, money, goods, and information. There was the lakefront (Lake Michigan) and the branches of the Chicago River, which split the city into north, south, and west; each sector hummed with commercial activity. Ten railroads converged on Chicago. The city was linked by rail coast to coast. Seventeen grain elevators had a total capacity of about 12 million bushels, or about 550,000 cubic yards.

Factories, of which there were more than 1,100, included the McCormick Reaper Works. The Board of Trade was among several commercial exchanges. Wholesalers included grocer Z.M. Hall, located in the five-story Lind Block building. A bustling retail trade on State Street included the Field and Leiter department store and Bookseller's Row.

The Union Stock Yards processed more than three million head of livestock in 1871.

The Tinderbox

Chicago had averaged about two fires a day during the previous year, including 20 in the previous week. The largest of those had occurred on Saturday night, on the eve of the "Big One."



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.



The fire at the O'Leary's headed straight for the center of town, prodded by gusting winds of 20 mph from the southwest. It unexpectedly hopped the South Branch of the Chicago River around midnight. Splitting in two yet again, the fire consumed Conley's Patch, a shantytown of Irish immigrants, comprising flimsy, tightly packed wooden structures not fit to be called "housing." By 1:30 it reached the Courthouse tower where law-breakers were housed. City officials released the prisoners moments before the great bell came crashing through the ceiling of the basement.

Thousands of people, with flames licking at their heels, scrambled to escape to the North Division. By 3:30 a.m., the roof collapsed on the pumping station, rendering firefighting efforts moot. Back in the South Division, the offices of the Chicago Tribune, whose editors throughout the summer and fall had railed prophetically against lax fire safety standards, were destroyed.

As the fire spread, hordes rushed to positions from which they could watch it advance. Before long, however, they realized that this probably wasn't the best decision they had ever made. A panicked retreat began with families becoming separated, and chaos set in.



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

Even the ground itself was on fire. The streets, sidewalks, and bridges were made of wood, providing ample fuel for the fire, and it seemed the river was vulnerable, as well, as several vessels on the water and grease that had been dumped unthinkingly along the banks of the river, caught fire.

The conflagration engulfed the city's gasworks. The result was predictable. The enormous explosion added tons of volatile fuel to the firestorm.

The fire now was showing signs of what firefighters call a "convection effect," the ability produce a concentrated updraft, as if creating a perpetual, self-generating entity that could move forward on its own accord without help from any wind. Air from every direction got sucked into the center of the flames, generating a whirlwind effect carrying flaming debris high into the night air.

The fiery shards latched onto the city waterworks and made a shambles of the structure, effectively shutting down firefighting efforts.

As the fire marched inexorably north, such other phenomena as spontaneous combustion, sent buildings thundering into flame without being touched by the main body of the fire.

In the North Division of the city, tens of thousands of ethnic Scandinavians and Germans had more time to escape than those in Conley's Patch, yet nearly all suffered the same fate — the loss of whatever dwelling in which they had resided. Miraculously, only the mansion of real estate millionaire Mahlon D. Ogden was spared from the flames — that by a shift in the wind.

Eventually the fire reached the edge of the city with only prairie grass and dry sod to feed the flames, and expired on its own.

The burned-out, bedraggled, and newly homeless flocked together in disoriented groups on open stretches of prairie west and northwest of town; in the South Division, refugees huddled along Lake Michigan, in the North Division, they hunkered down at the south end of Lincoln Park and along "the Sands," a scrap of lakeshore just north of the river.

Here Chicagoans who previously had little reason to speak to each other were shepherded together in one polyglot group. As one historian put it, "One could find Mr. McCormick, the millionaire of the reaper trade, and other north-side nabobs, herding promiscuously with the humblest laborer, the lowest vagabond, and the meanest harlot."



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

The aptly called "Burnt District," a map of which appeared in virtually every printed account of the fire, comprised an area four miles long and an average of three-quarters of a mile wide — more than two thousand acres — including more than 28 miles of streets, 120 miles of sidewalks, and at least 2,000 lampposts.

Gone, too, were countless trees, shrubs, and flowering plants in "the Garden City of the West." Some 18,000 buildings and about a third of the valuation of the entire city went up in smoke. Even though half of that amount was insured, several company failures cut the actual payments in half.

Those structures and businesses left standing were located on the west or south sides of the Burnt District. They included most of the heavy industries, including the stockyards. The downtown railroad depots were totaled, but not the far more critical rail lines themselves. What the fire could not touch was one of Chicago's most important assets, its location. It made the city more accessible to resources and markets throughout the nation and the world at a time when the United States was assuming a role in world leadership in industrial enterprise.

Mary Todd Lincoln in the midst of the Great Chicago Fire

Mary Todd Lincoln was staying with son Robert at his house at 653 Wabash Avenue. Both survived Great Chicago Fire... [read more.](#)

Phoenix from the Ashes

Because of Chicago's pre-fire economic momentum and commercial ties and the unique geographic situation, the city couldn't have failed to rebuild itself if it had tried. It was "meant to be."

One thing the Great Fire hadn't taken from the people of Chicago was their grit and determination to rebound from the calamity — it would become bigger, better — and wiser.

The worst of times had rallied the best of men. Joseph Medill, publisher of the Chicago Tribune, put out a special edition trumpeting, "Chicago will rise from the ashes!" Potter Palmer, whose new hotel and 32 other holdings were destroyed in the fire, set out immediately to raise capital for reconstruction. Jonathan Scammon broke ground on a new, fully pre-rented office building only four days after the fire. The confidence and enthusiasm of those men and others rang up and down the social ladder, calling Chicagoans to the challenge.



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

City officials, in makeshift offices in the First Congressional Church on the city's west side, set the price on bread, forbade wagon drivers from charging more than what was normal, and limited saloon hours, in order to keep looting and price-gouging to a minimum. They also banned smoking.

Even before the fire burnt itself out, plans were being made to remake the city. Within days, even as the rubble was being removed, enterprising small businesses erected sheds and stands. Business traffic began to move again. Within six weeks, more than 200 stone and brick buildings had been started in the South Division alone.

Chicago's Shelter Cottages

After the Fire of 1871, the city was in ruins. Nearly 100,000 people lost their homes. Tens of thousands of people left the city; others were taken in by friends. The fire had struck in early October, and winter was coming.

The Chicago Relief and Aid Society stepped in to provide kits – plans and materials – so people could build their own “[Shelter Cottages](#)” (aka: fire relief shelter or fire relief cottages), as they were called. They came in two sizes; both were tiny, small (\$100) and smaller (\$75). The kits contained pre-cut lumber, windows, a door, a chimney and a flexible room partition offering a modicum of privacy. The 12-by-16-foot model was for those with families of three or fewer; the 16-by-20-foot version was for everyone else.

By 1872, \$50 million had been pumped into construction. In 1873, amid a national recession, Chicago proudly hosted the [Interstate Industrial Exposition](#) in the newly built Interstate Industrial Exposition building (completed in 1872), which promoted the city and the Northwest (of that era). Interstate Industrial Exposition building was razed in 1892 to make way for the Art Institute. By 1885, America had its first skyscraper, the nine-story high Home Insurance Building.

[Read about the Chicago Fire of 1884.](#)

By the time the [1893 World's Columbian Exposition](#) opened in May, the city was well on its way to recovery.

NOTES:

[1] Addresses are pre-[1909 Chicago Street Renaming](#), [1909 Chicago Street Renumbering](#) and [1911 Chicago Downtown Renumbering](#) documents.



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

CHICAGO ON FIRE!

10,000 BUILDINGS BURNED,

FIRE STILL RAGING,

MASS MEETING

WILL BE HELD AT THE

CENTRAL RINK

At 3 O'clock To-Day,

TO TAKE ACTION TO AID

Chicago's Suffering People

HELP, HELP, HELP

CITIZENS, TURN OUT!

F. W. PELTON, Mayor.

Monday, October 9th, 1871.



Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





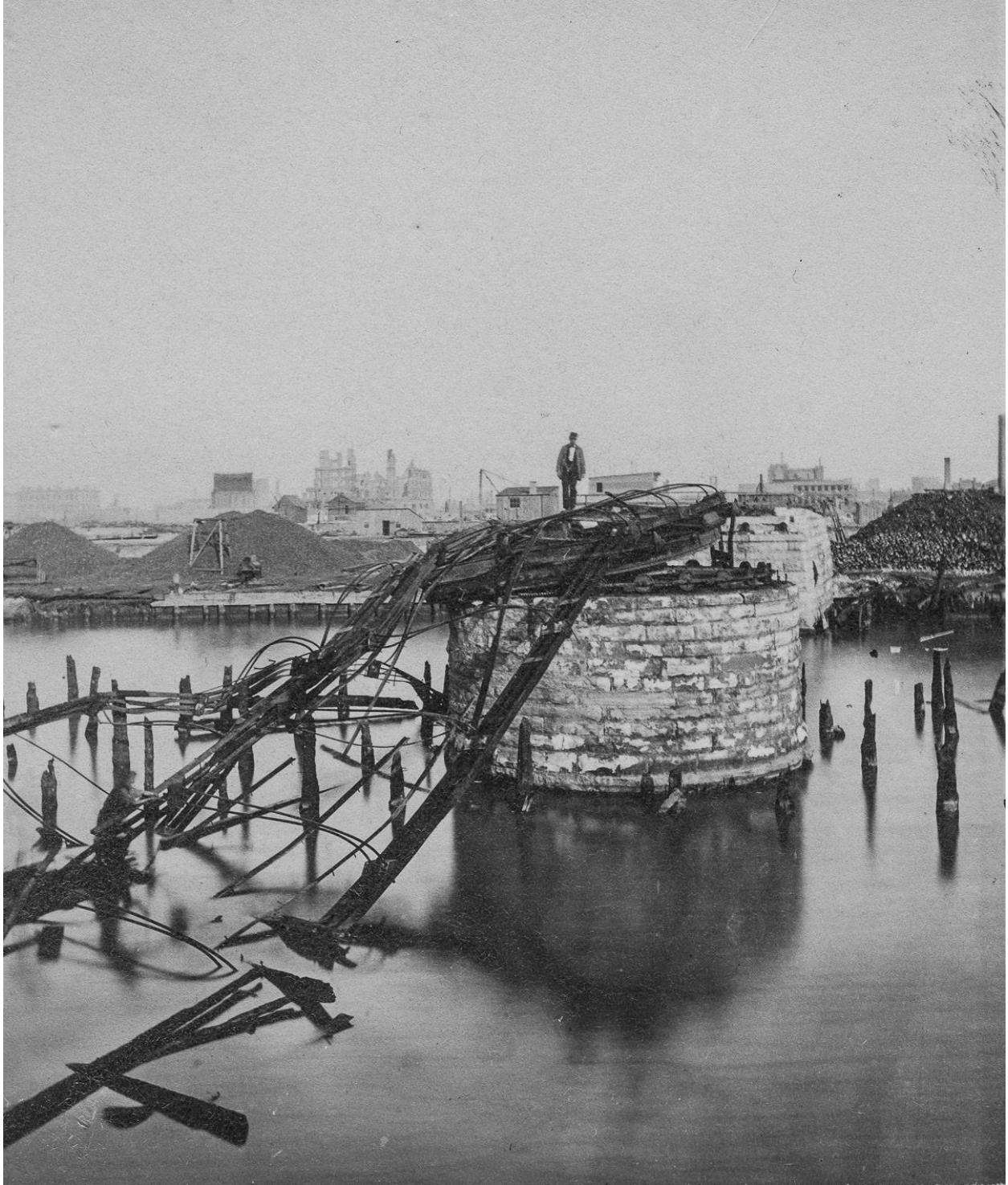
Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.





Living History of Illinois and Chicago®

[Living History of Illinois and Chicago®](#) – Facebook Group.

[Digital Research Library of Illinois History®](#)

[Living History of Illinois Gazette](#) - The Free Daily Illinois Newspaper.

[Illinois History Store®](#) – Vintage Illinois and Chicago logo products.

