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CHICAGO IN THE EARLY 1800s, AN AREA IN TRANSITION

Chicago early history, consecutive movements of population, the encroachment of commerce and industry as the city crossed the north branch of the river and sprawled northward, have all left their impress and have contributed to the establishment of social distances within this "community" in the inner city.

Indians camped along the river where now great factories smoke and thousands of vehicles clamor at the bridges. Indeed, it is only a little over two hundred years ago, as tradition has it, since a black man from San Domingo, bearing the ornate name of Jean Baptiste Point de Sable, built the first log cabin in 1790 of what was to be early Chicago, on the north bank of the river. This cabin was later acquired by John Kinzie, the first American and the first real settler, who brought his family on in 1804. Kinzie's cabin became the center of a little settlement near the stockade of the long-vanished Fort Dearborn. After the War of 1812 a village grew up between the northern and southern branches of the river and the lake.





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With the dredging of the harbor, in 1833, the village became a town. Wharves were built along both banks of the river. Chicago's first packing house was built at this time. Immigrants from the East came crowding in, and by 1837, the year in which Chicago was incorporated as a city, it had become a community of several thousand, and had pushed northward to North Avenue and Lincoln Park. It was expected that Kinzie Street would be the business street of the new city, and Chicago's first railroad, the Galena & Chicago Union Railroad, was brought down the center of Kinzie Street in 1847. The lumber business was then locating along the river, and things were in a state of boom. But Chicago was still a frontier town. In 1845 there were but 5,000 persons between Chicago and the Pacific.

On the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Lake Street was a very large, vacant field, which was usually filled with camping parties; whole communities migrating from the East to the West. It was a common sight to see a long line of prairie-schooners drive into this field, with cows tied behind the wagons. There they would unload for the night. There was always mystery and charm about their evening campfires....

The greatest excitement was the arrival of the weekly boat from Buffalo.... These boats brought many supplies, and our only news from the outside world. In those days the great West Side, as we know it now, did not exist; and even the North Side seemed like a separate town because there were only one or two bridges connecting the two sides of the town....

THE EIGHTEEN SIXTIES

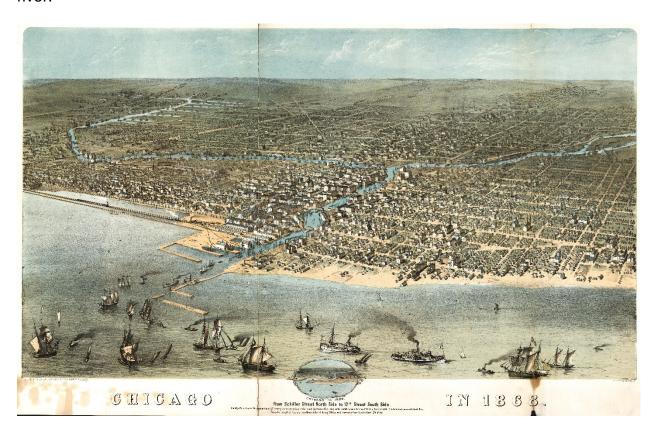
In the decade and a half previous to the Civil War the city grew rapidly, and by 1860 there were 29,922 persons living north of the river. During the years between 1850 and 1860 nearly half of Chicago's increase in population was by foreign immigration; as it was, also, between 1860 and 1870. And while previous to 1860 the population of the North Side was mainly Native American, the first statistics available on the national composition of Chicago's population by wards, those for 1866, show that there were then a considerable number of Irish and Germans living in the North Division. The Irish, the first of five waves of immigration that were to sweep over the Near North Side, began coming in soon after the Irish.

The commercial importance of the North Branch continued to grow. The tanning and meat-packing industries were locating along it; the lumber business was rapidly increasing; warehouses were building; and in 1857 Chicago's first iron industry, the North



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Chicago Rolling Mills, located on its banks. Later, as railroads came into the city, a number of machine shops were built on Clark, Wells, State, Erie, Kinzie and Division streets, and on Chicago and North avenues, thus binding the North Side more closely to the activities of the city as a whole" And between 1859 and 1864 horse-drawn trams began to run out Clark, Wells, and Larrabee streets, and across Chicago Avenue and Division Street. Meanwhile some little retail business was springing up on the streets near the river.



The tendency to the segregation of population on the basis of race, nationality, and economic status, which is an inevitable accompaniment of the growth of the city, was becoming evident at this early date. The more well-to-do and fashionable native element, and the Irish and German immigrant elements as well as the laboring population and a small element of riff-raff and transients, were beginning to live in groups to themselves and to characterize certain streets and sections of the North Side. The Near North Side has always been a more or less fashionable residence district, though it was not until 1900 that the Lake Shore Drive became the place to live. In the sixties the fashionable and aristocratic residence section of Chicago on the North Side was in the district from Chicago Avenue south to Michigan Street, and from Clark Street



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east to Cass Street. Residences on Ohio, Ontario, Erie, Superior, Rush, Cass, Pine, Dearborn, and North State streets appear frequently in the "society column" of the sixties. It was on these streets that the leading families of the early settlers and the early aristocracy lived. And they, with South Michigan Avenue, were the "modish" streets of the day. One of this early aristocracy writes:

The North Side was "home," and a lovely, homelike place it was. The large grounds and beautiful shade-trees about so many residences gave a sense of space, rest, flowers, sunshine and shadows, that hardly belongs nowadays to the idea of a city. There was great friendliness, and much simple, charming living.

Over between Clark, Illinois, Dearborn, and Indiana streets stood the old North Side Market, where the men of the families often took their market-baskets in the morning, while the "virtuous woman" stayed at home "and looked well to the ways of her household."

Another institution of our day was the custom of sitting on the front steps though even then there were those who rather scorned that democratic meeting place. But for those of us who did not rejoice in porches and large grounds, they had their joys.... In fact, it was even possible for unconventional people like ourselves to carry out chairs and sit on the board platforms built across the ditches that ran along each side of the street, and on which carriages drove up to the sidewalks.

Of course there were "high teas," when our mothers and fathers were regaled with "pound to a pound" preserves, chicken salad, escalloped oysters, pound-cake, fruit-cake, and all other cakes known to womankind; and where they played old-fashioned whist and chess.

.... Parties usually began about half-past seven or eight o'clock, and "the ball broke" generally about eleven or twelve o'clock; where there was no dancing it ended at ten or eleven o'clock.

Of course there was no "organized charity," as we know it nowadays, but there was much of that now despised "basket charity," when friendships were formed between rich and poor.

Between Clark Street and Wells Street, south of Chicago Avenue, was a neighborhood of storekeepers and merchants; while west of Wells lived the laboring people. In this area there were a number of laborers' boarding-houses and cheap saloons. At this time there was nothing but a sandy waste between Cass Street and the lake.' And there was an unsavory population on the sand flats at the mouth of the river and immediately along its banks, known as "Shanty Town," and ruled over by the "Queen of the Sands."



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A memorable event of the decade was the raid on the "Sands" led by "Long John" Wentworth, then mayor, when the police razed its brothels amid the mingled cheers and hisses of the populace.

The Irish had settled along the river, to the south and west. The settlement extended as far east as State immediately along the river, but the most of the Irish lived between Kinzie and Erie, in the vicinity of old Market Street.

In 1853, William B. Ogden, a Chicago real estate developer, built a channel to provide a more straightforward alternative to Chicago River's winding North Branch. The result was an island, the only island in Chicago. This river settlement along the North Branch was known as "Kilgubbin," or more often, as "the Patch". It quickly became a haven for Irish immigrants who were so poor they couldn't afford proper housing. The island was dubbed Kilgubbin, after the area most of them were originally from. Taking a cue from the life they left behind in Europe, they built flimsy wooden homes with gardens and farms where they raised vegetables and livestock. As the city grew around them, the island got a few factories, but other than that, it barely changed. Chicagoans came to see the residents as backwards, treating them with a mixture of pity and mockery so they called Kilgubbin "Goose Island."

The Irish were then mostly laborers, not having been in America long enough to have exploited their flare for politics. They were already displaying their love of a fight, however, and a solidly Irish regiment was recruited from Kilgubbin during the Civil War. Kilgubbin was in reality a squatters' village, and contained within it a lawless element. In an article printed in the Chicago Times, in August, 1865, some account is given of Kilgubbin and its population:

At the head of the list of the squatter villages of Chicago stands "Kilgubbin," the largest settlement within its limits. It has a varied history, having been the terror of constables, sheriffs and policemen. It numbered several years ago many thousand inhabitants of all ages and habits, besides large droves of geese, goslings, pigs, and rats. It was a safe retreat for criminals, policemen not venturing to invade its precincts, or even cross the border, without having a strong reserve force.

The Germans, on the other hand, were truck gardeners rather than laborers. Very few went into business, though there were three breweries owned by Germans where the pumping station now stands. But the majority of the Germans lived north of Chicago Avenue and east of Clark Street, in cottages on small farms or gardens, and did truck farming. There were German families scattered along Clark, La Salle, and Wells streets, however. And the German element for a time found the center of its social activities in the vicinity of the German Theater, at the corner of Wells and Indiana streets. This



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theater, supported by a German musical society, offered "the first purely musical entertainment ever presented in Chicago," and for years continued to present dramatic sketches in the German language.

The city limits extended at this time, 1860-70, to North Avenue. But until after the fire the area north of Division Street, and even north of Chicago Avenue to the west, was practically "country."