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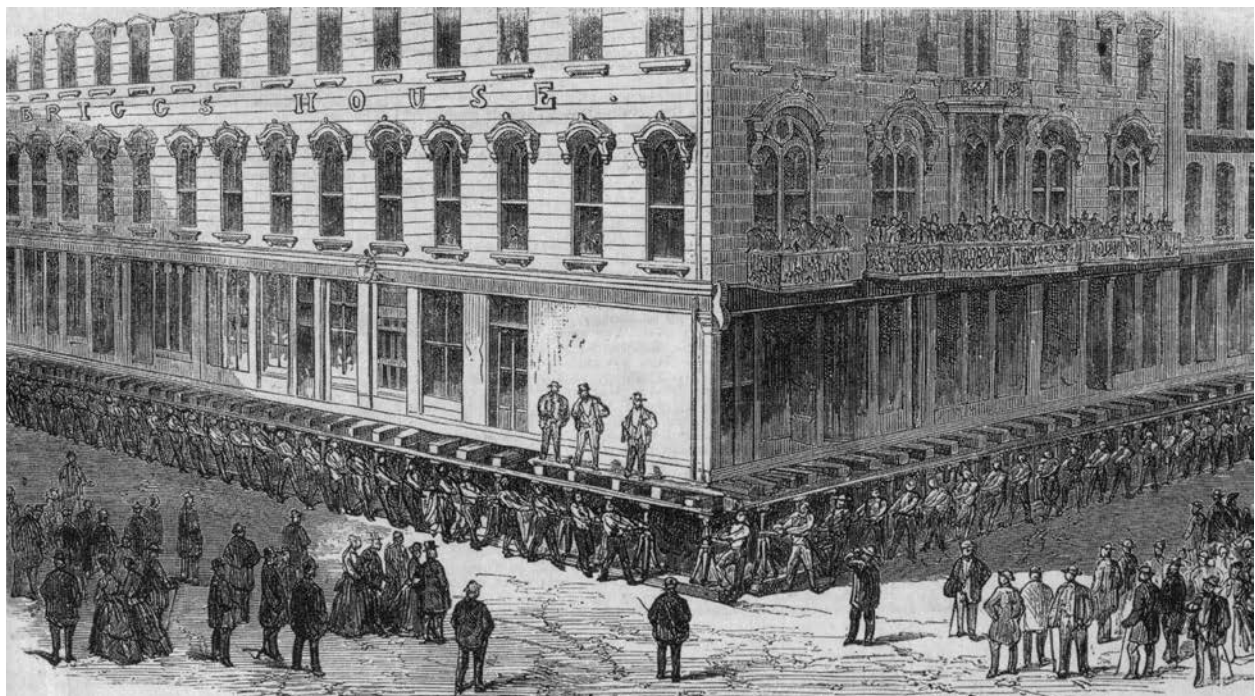
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Raising Chicago Streets Out of the Mud in 1858

During the 19th century, the elevation of the Chicago area was not much higher than the shorelines of Lake Michigan, so for many years there was little or no naturally occurring drainage from the city surface. The lack of drainage caused unpleasant living conditions, and standing water harbored pathogens that caused numerous epidemics. Epidemics including typhoid fever and dysentery blighted Chicago six years in a row culminating in the 1854 outbreak of cholera that killed six percent of the city's population.

The crisis forced the city's engineers and aldermen to take the drainage problem seriously and after many heated discussions — and following at least one false start — a solution eventually materialized. In 1856, engineer Ellis S. Chesbrough drafted a plan for the installation of a city-wide sewerage system and submitted it to the Common Council, which adopted the plan. Workers then laid drains, covered and refinished roads and sidewalks with several feet of soil, and raised most buildings to the new grade with hydraulic jacks.





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In January 1858, the first masonry building in Chicago was raised — a four story, 70-foot long, 750-ton brick structure situated at the north-east corner of Randolph and Dearborn Streets — was lifted on two hundred jackscrews to its new grade, which was 6 feet 2 inches higher than the old one, “without the slightest injury to the building.” It was the first of more than fifty comparably large masonry buildings to be raised that year.

By 1860, confidence was sufficiently high that a consortium of no fewer than six engineers — including James Brown, James Hollingsworth and George Pullman — took on one of the most impressive locations in the city and hoisted it up complete and in one go. They lifted half a city block on Lake Street, between Clark Street and LaSalle Street; a solid masonry row of shops, offices, printer shops, etc., 320 feet long, comprising brick and stone buildings, some four stories high, some five, having a footprint taking up almost one acre of space, and an estimated all in weight including hanging sidewalks of thirty five thousand tons.





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Businesses operating out of these premises were not closed down for the lifting; as the buildings were being raised, people came, went, shopped and worked in them as if nothing out of the ordinary were happening. In five days the entire assembly was elevated 4 feet 8 inches clear in the air by a team consisting of six hundred men using six thousand jackscrews, ready for new foundation walls to be built underneath. The spectacle drew crowds of thousands, who were on the final day permitted to walk at the old ground level, among the jack.

The following year a team led by Ely, Smith and Pullman raised the Tremont House hotel on the south-east corner of Lake Street and Dearborn Street. This building was luxuriously appointed, was of brick construction, was six stories high, and had a footprint taking up over 1-acre of space. Once again business as usual was maintained as this vast hotel parted from the ground it was standing on, and indeed some of the guests staying there at the time — among whose number were several VIPs and a US Senator — were completely oblivious to the feat as the five hundred men operating their five thousand jackscrews worked under covered trenches.





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One patron was puzzled to note that the front steps leading from the street into the hotel were becoming steeper every day and that when he checked out, the windows were several feet above his head, whereas before they had been at eye level. This huge hotel, which until just the previous year had been the tallest building in Chicago, was in fact raised fully 6 feet without a hitch.

Another notable feat was the raising of the Robbins Building, an iron building 150 feet long, 80 feet wide and five stories high, located at the corner of South Water Street and Wells Street. This was a very heavy building; its ornate iron frame, its twelve inch thick masonry wall filling, and its “floors filled with heavy goods” made for a weight estimated at 27,000 tons, a large load to raise over a relatively small area. Hollingsworth and Coughlin took the contract and in November 1865 lifted not only the building but also the 230 feet of stone sidewalk outside it. The complete mass of iron and masonry was raised 27.5 inches, “without the slightest crack or damage.”





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There is evidence in primary document sources that at least one building in Chicago, the Franklin House on Franklin Street, was raised hydraulically by the engineer John C. Lane, of the Lane and Stratton partnership. These gentlemen had apparently been using this method of lifting buildings in San Francisco since 1853.

Many of central Chicago's hurriedly erected wooden frame buildings were now considered wholly inappropriate to the burgeoning and increasingly wealthy city. Rather than raise them several feet, proprietors often preferred to relocate these old frame buildings, replacing them with new masonry blocks built to the latest grade. Consequently, the practice of putting the old multi-story, intact and furnished wooden buildings—sometimes entire rows of them all at the same time — on rollers and moving them to the outskirts of town or to the suburbs was so common as to be considered nothing more than routine traffic.





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The raising of Chicago became the talk of the nation, but for the people of Chicago, the enormous undertaking not only solved a problem, it testified to the young city's character. "Nothing," noted an early historian, "better illustrates the energy and determination with which the makers of Chicago set about a task when once they had made up their minds, than the speed and thoroughness with which they solved the problem of the city's drainage and sewage."