



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.

World's Columbian Exposition

Cold Storage Building Fire, July 10, 1893.

On the afternoon of Monday, July 10, 1893, four Chicago firemen, eight firemen hired by the Columbian Exposition and three civilians lost their lives in a fiery inferno that was the cold storage building. It was the greatest loss of life in the Chicago Fire Department until the Chicago Stockyards fire of December 22, 1910 which claimed the lives of Chief Fire Marshal James Horan and 21 firefighters.



As can best be determined the fire started in the cupola that surrounded and was flush with the top of the smoke stack. The fire started small enough but there was a stiff breeze coming out of the northeast and gradually the flames circled around until the



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.

pillars of the cupola caught fire. By the time the top pillars were on fire, firemen had already reached the main roof of the building.

The first attempt to get a hose to the first platform was by the use of an extension ladder from the southeast corner of the building but was unsuccessful. Under orders of Acting Chief Murphy, men climbed the seventy feet up the tower from the outside by using cleats nailed to the side of the tower. The men took lengths of rope with them but no ladders. When they finished their ascent to the first platform they lowered their ropes and the process of pulling up hoses to the first platform had begun. While the firemen were valiantly attempting to put out the blaze, a crowd of about 30,000 fair goers was forming around the building. A cheer broke out from the crowd when the first spurts of water burst from the hoses onto the fire above.





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.

It seemed to this awe-struck audience that the brave men of the Chicago Fire Department and Columbian Fire Department had the upper hand but their cheers very suddenly turned to gasps of horror. The whole while that the men were planning their attack on the fire, it seemed, in retrospect, that the fire was already planning its revenge in the form of an almost perfect death trap. In fact it later became apparent that the firefighters' fates were sealed before the opening of the fair when the cold storage building's smoke stack was just an ugly piece of bare metal that extended 191 feet in the air. It was said that Daniel Burnham, Chief of Construction, did not like the stark contrast of the bare metal with that beauty of the "White City" and ordered that it be made to blend in with the surrounding buildings. The facade of wood and white painted staff that was erected around the stack did indeed blend well with the surrounding great buildings but it also created a hollow gap between the façade and the pipe that extended below the main roof of the building. What the firefighters and the crowd didn't see were the burning embers falling through this gap and slowly igniting the material 70 feet below the firefighters.

A small puff of smoke near their feet was the first indication to the brave souls above that something was terribly wrong. The firefighters on the roof could feel increased heat but it wasn't coming only from above them anymore! As the firefighters on the roof sounded their warning, the crowd uttered a common cry of horror as flames erupted directly below the feet of the firefighters in the tower. It seemed to be only a split second between the initial burst of flame and when flames seemed to be pouring from between every pillar and even from the walls of the tower itself. The flames curled upwards surrounding the firefighters from both above and below them. Some in the crowd screamed, some women fainted and one man went to his knees and lifted his arms upwards towards the sky and appeared to be praying as well as concentrating on looking upward and at the same time trying to avoid watching what was unfolding in front of him. The crowd was so dense at this point that no one could simply walk away and was almost forced to witness what was quickly unfolding.

A silence fell over the crowd when a lone figure jumped from the 70 foot ledge and frantically reached for the hose that extended down to the roof. He managed to only grab it with one hand but managed to hold on. He slid down the hose into what seemed like a hopeless wall of fire that extended all the way down to the roof. He miraculously



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.

emerged from the flame with his clothes on fire but still holding the hose. He managed to make it to the roof and to the north side of the building where he was lowered to the ground. He was John Davis of the fire company stationed on the Midway Plaisance. A split second can mean the difference between life and death in any fire but almost a certainty in a fire of this magnitude. Unfortunately, firefighter Davis's comrades hesitated and the hose that could have been a life line for a select few was consumed by the flames and burned in half. Spectators could see the figure of Captain James Fitzpatrick who was assigned to Engine Co. 2 and also Assistant Chief of Battalion 14 of the CFD. He seemed to be issuing order to the men and one- by-one they started shimmying along the ledge of the tower to the north side which seemed to offer a few more precious seconds from the fire's reach.

There was a short lived cheer as they all made the perilous journey to the north side of the tower. The celebration was short lived as the flames quickly looked to finish their morbid task. The men huddled closer and closer attempting to avoid the heat of the oncoming flames. What happened next brought tears and cries from the even the strongest men in the crowd. There was an eerie calm that seemed to come across the men on the tower and one man threw his arms around the neck of another in what could be a final embrace. That started a chain reaction of farewell words and hugs between the doomed men. A rope was thrown out and fell almost to the roof but even before anyone could grab it was burnt in two. The firefighters on the roof were frantically calling for ladders to be sent up from the ground but none came.

Without warning a figure took the 7 story jump to the roof below but the flame ravaged wooden roof was no match for the weight of the man and he fell through into a fiery inferno. Now it seemed the only choice was to jump or burn and a second person took the fiery plunge and turned over and over until not landing on his feet but his head and was killed instantly. Seeing the fate of the first of their comrades, the rest of the group hesitated briefly but the intensity of the flames spurred them in their decision making.

Fireman W.P. Mahoney saw a comrade of his named Bielenberg pass out due to the heat of the flames. He picked up his friend and jumped for the rope. He managed to grab it and slow both of their descent to the point that they both survived the initial impact on the roof but Mahoney had broken both legs. He still managed to drag his



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.

friend to the north side of the building where they were both lowered by ladder to the ground.

There now remained only two firefighters left on the tower, one was Captain Fitzpatrick. He was trying to convince his comrade to go first but to no avail. The Captain jumped to the only remaining rope which had only about 20 feet left and as he reached the burning end of the rope, swung himself hard to the north avoiding the hottest of the flames. The last of those remaining attempted to duplicate the Captain's technique but right at that moment the tower could no longer support its own weight and crashed into the burning inferno taking the last unfortunate soul with it.

Chief Murphy had been on the burning roof for as long as he could trying to do whatever he could but was driven back by the intense heat. He had just reached the ground when Captain Fitzpatrick had fallen and called for Captain Kennedy of Company 5 and Hans Rehfeldt of the Hook and Ladder Company and the three shot up a ladder to the roof where Captain Fitzpatrick was lying. They raised him to his feet and tied a rope line securely under his arms and slowly lowered him to the ground.

By the end of the fire, 15 souls had been lost. The blaze claimed 12 firefighters and 3 civilians.

- Captain James Fitzpatrick, Chicago Fire Department
- Ralph Drummond, Superintendent Harter Electric Company
- William H. Denning, World's Fair Fire Department
- Lt. John H. Freeman, World's Fair Fire Department
- John C. McBride, World's Fair Fire Department
- Louis J. Frank, World's Fair Fire Department
- Lt. Charles W. Purvis, Chicago Fire Department
- Paul W. Shroeder, World's Fair Fire Department
- John A. Smith, World's Fair Fire Department
- Captain James A. Garvey, Chicago Fire Department
- Norman M. Hartman, Electric Lineman
- John Cahill, World's Fair Fire Department
- Phillip J. Breen, World's Fair Fire Department
- Bernard Murphy, Boilermaker
- Captain Burton E. Page, Chicago Fire Department



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 strange thing is that when I traced all of the victims of the fire to their respective gravesites I discovered that there was one extra body!

At Oakwoods Cemetery in Chicago there is a monument to those lost in the fire and underneath that monument, according to Oakwoods records, are 7 bodies when there should only be 6!

Just who this unidentified 16th victim is anyone's guess. There was only one small mention of an unidentified victim in a newspaper at the time but no other mention. There were a couple of possibilities but none seemed to pan out. The mystery continues!

By Ray Johnson.