

**I**N 1871, LESS THAN 40 YEARS AFTER ITS INCORPORATION, CHICAGO had mushroomed from a pioneer outpost to a thriving and ever-expanding urban hub. Its modern incarnation was already obvious: a central business district, distinct industrial areas, and neighborhoods segregated by ethnicity and class. The city's preeminence as a transport center and processing site for resource extraction industries was established. Lured by the diverse economy, thousands arrived every year to see what opportunities Chicago might hold.

All this was interrupted the night of October 8. Fueled by a strong wind from the southwest, a fire that began in Catherine O'Leary's barn near DeKoven Street spread out of control. Ravaging the wooden cottages of the O'Learys'

neighborhood, then feeding on the lumberyards on the South Branch of the river, the giant blaze moved steadily to the north. By the time the fire reached the central business district, it no longer needed wind or fresh fuel; the mile-wide holocaust had become a firestorm, propelling burning debris into the sky that began new blazes when it fell to earth. Commercial buildings touted as fireproof offered little more resistance than the wooden rookeries of the Irish ghetto. Bricks survived, but mortar dissolved, collapsing masonry walls. Through the city center, marble crumbled and iron melted. The main waterworks failed around 3:30 a.m.; the blaze leapt the main branch of the Chicago River soon after. For almost 20 hours more, the fire marched north, incinerat-

# 1871

January: German empire proclaimed

March: Indian Department Appropriations Act (IDAA) ratified; Paris Commune proclaimed, collapses in May

**a** *The City of Chicago as It Was before the Great Conflagration of October 8th, 9th, & 10th, 1871*, by William Flint. Chicago's population at the time of this bird's-eye view looking southwest from Lake Michigan was approximately 334,000.

**b** This Currier & Ives lithograph shows people fleeing across the Randolph Street Bridge. Thousands of people literally ran for their lives before the flames, unleashing remarkable scenes of terror and dislocation. "The whole earth, or all we saw of it, was a lurid yellowish red," wrote one survivor. "Everywhere dust, smoke, flames, heat, thunder of falling walls, crackle of fire, hissing of water, panting of engines, shouts, braying of trumpets, roar of wind, confusion, and uproar."

**c** Corner of State and Madison after the fire, 1871. Within a year, most visible traces of the destruction were gone, and Chicago expanded and improved as it was resurrected. This image shows how daunting the task was and how quickly the city set about re-building.

**d** The home of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary, their two children, and an Irish tenant family on DeKoven Street. Although the fire that started in the O'Leary barn left the house intact, it destroyed Mrs. O'Leary's reputation. Although the civic board empowered to investigate the cause of the Great Fire exonerated her, the popular imagination vilified her as a hag—a lurid example of all the laziness, drunkenness, and stupidity then commonly ascribed to the Irish.

**e** "Homeless Citizens Taking Refuge from the Flames among the Ruins," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*. Municipal authorities sought to nip in the bud any possible dependence, and mounted a program of rigorous screening for relief to weed out the "unworthy." Immigrant Chicagoans complained bitterly that administrators were limiting access to the relief fund through their failure to offer services in languages other than English, or to venture to the devastated North Side.



ing the homes of tens of thousands of German and Scandinavian immigrants. At the northern limits of the city, four and a half miles from the O'Leary barn, the Great Fire finally died.

The Great Fire has traditionally been understood as the turning point in Chicago's early history, the moment when the city proved its greatness. The fire led to critical shifts in land use, new forms of investment and finance, and innovations in technology and architecture. Chicagoans did rebuild their city, at a pace that can only be described as heroic.

Yet, the postfire months of 1871 were times of great hardship and social conflict. The poorest victims turned to public relief, gaining some sustenance

from the gifts that flowed into the city from around the world and confronting a civic elite that believed that "zealous and promiscuous giving" would "corrupt the poor." A plan for a "fireproof" city drew fierce opposition from those who could not afford to rebuild in brick or stone. Housing shortages raised rents; a labor market glutted by new residents depressed wages. The Great Fire thus forced Chicagoans to confront the meaning of their city's social and economic fissures.

The Great Fire transformed the lives of Chicagoans and gave the city a lasting and special image as a place of renewal, progress, and great possibilities.

Karen Sawislak

*April:* Congress passes Ku Klux Klan Act, allows U.S. president to suspend the writ of habeas corpus in cases of secret conspiracy

*November:* New York Herald reporter Henry M. Stanley finds British explorer David Livingstone in Ujiji (Tanzania) in central Africa



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