

## The Great Chicago Fire 1871

The fire remains one of Chicago's most well known disasters. Burning for three days, it left 300 dead, 100,000 homeless, 73 miles of street destroyed and over \$200 million worth of property destroyed. The fire spread dramatically due to a dry summer heat wave, high winds, the many wood buildings and sidewalks, ships lining the river, and the commercial lumber and coal yards along the river. Cities all over the world sent supplies, money and books. Rebuilding began almost immediately and spurred Chicago's development into one of the most populous and economically important American cities. Trash and debris from the fire were used as landfill to make a bugger lakeshore.

**September 1871** – after summer drought, *Tribune* describes the city as “miles of fire-traps, pleasing to the eye, looking substantial, but all sham and shingles.”

**October 8, 1871** – fire begins around 9:00 pm on the West Side, in an alley behind DeKoven Street & Jefferson.

**9:40 pm** – fire department receives first alarm

**Midnight** – high winds spur fire on, fire crosses south branch of Chicago River

**October 9, 1871** – Substantial buildings on South Side destroyed – the Courthouse (shortly before its destruction about 100 prisoners are freed from their cells in the building), the Tremont, Grand Pacific Hotel and the supposedly fireproof building of the Chicago Tribune around 2:30 am. Mayor Roswell Mason wires various cities for help. (Fire engines later arrived from Cincinnati, Dayton, Detroit, Louisville, Milwaukee, Pittsburg and Springfield.)

**3:00 am** – Fire reaches city waterworks. Only water remaining for firemen – other than lake and river – was limited amounts in the mains.

**4:30 am** – Mains dry.

West and South sides of city burning out of control.

Everything is tried to slow fire's advance including blowing up and tearing down buildings to isolate it.

Fire rages through central business district, spreads northward, crosses river's north branch and continues into city's north side.

**11:00 pm** - fire finally burns out aided by diminishing winds and a light rain.

Coal fires smoldered throughout city for days.

**October 10** – Western Union back in business in a brick warehouse at State & 16<sup>th</sup> Streets.

**October 13 ??** – *Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers resume publication.

**October 18** – *Chicago Times* has edition out.

**October 27** – City waterworks resume operations and the city's health improves.

**November 1871** – Joseph Medill (editor at *Chicago Tribune*) elected mayor, running on the Fireproof Ticket.

**January 1872** – 300,000 buildings built.

### Structures that survived

Chicago Water Tower

St. Ignatius School

St. Michael's Church

### Post Fire

\* Marshal law declared, crime rates up

\* Within 48 hours, 12 banks re-established themselves in temporary quarters

- Cincinnati raised \$160,000 before sunset Monday, October 9; also opened and ran a soup kitchen that fed 3,500 daily and was still serving food two months after the fire.

- St. Louis (a bitter rival) sent a relief train immediately on Tuesday, October 10

6,000 temporary structures erected by the end of the first week after the fire

- President Grant sent \$1,000 of his own money.

- Boston - \$400,000, New York - \$600,000

- So many books were donated it gave Chicago the largest public library of its time.

- The first load of lumber for rebuilding arrived the day the last burning building was extinguished.

- Relief trains came packed with goods to restock Chicago stores and warehouses.

- Numerous offers on almost unlimited credit.

- Total money sent = \$4,820,148

\$973,897 from foreign countries

\* Improved building codes and safety laws (wooden structures forbidden in business section).

\* 1<sup>st</sup> skyscraper constructed in 1885 using steel-skeleton construction.

### Notable sources

*People & Events: The Great Fire of 1871*. PBS website

*History of the Great Fires of Chicago and the West.* Rev.

Edgar J. Goodspeed.

*The Great Chicago Fire*. Robert Cromie (2006)

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)

### Personal Essays/REMEMBER

\* Have you ever put the “common

good" over your own safety? Why?

\* Describe a time you lost something/had something destroyed or damaged that meant a great deal to you.

\* For years the O'Leary Myth perpetuated as the cause of the Great Chicago Fire. Why do people like believing in things like this as opposed to the more rational truth? Which do you prefer?

\* What 'natural' disaster (fire, earthquake, hurricane, tornado, tidal wave etc) do you most fear?

\* Many say being a hero (or brave) means recognizing danger, being afraid, YET still acting altruistically. America has had many tragedies (9/11, Katrina) which seem to exemplify this. Why do you think this is true or not?

### **REPORTS/DISCOVER**

\* Post fire, Chicago's industry skyrocketed along with its new building. This led to more and more immigrant workers crowding into the city, most times working and living conditions were terrible. This led to a wave of labor strikes, which erupted in the Haymarket Riott of 1886. Jane Addams also founded Hull House (1889) to help these workers. How did the fire influence these events?

\* Compare the Chicago Fire with the Haymarket Riot (1886) in terms of cost, cause and society's reaction.

\* Three other significant fires' (Peshtigo, WI, Holland, MI, and Manistee, MI) began on the same day, all on the shores of Lake Michigan, the same day as the Great Chicago Fire. An alternative theory is that a meteor shower was the actual cause of the fire. What do you think?

\* How many other cities in America had the potential to experience a tragedy such as the Chicago Fire? I.e. ideal fire conditions.

### **Opinions/DECIDE**

\* What do you believe was the cause of the Chicago fire?

\* What could or should the city have done to prevent this tragedy?

### **Historical Fiction/IMAGINE**

\* It is often said that tragedy proves who people really are. If you were a firefighter during the Great Chicago Fire, and after battling the fire for hours with little progress made, do you continue to help (and how) or do you think, "survival of the fittest" and go your own way?

\* You have the choice of saving a stable of trapped horses or your store's new inventory shipment. What do you do? Why?

\* You are a bellhop at the new Palmer House Hotel (built only ?? days pre-fire). After the fire (which totally has destroyed the hotel) you are told Potter Palmer plans to rebuild immediately. Do you think he's crazy or do you join in helping?

\* You have lost your business, home et al in the fire. You are offered the opportunity to go West and start over. Do you go? Why, why not?