

The Great Chicago Fire

By Michael A. Signal

In 1871, the city of Chicago caught fire and burned for nearly two days, destroying much of the city and killing hundreds of people. What happened?

On the morning of Tuesday, October 10, 1871, smoke hung low over the city of Chicago. A light rain spat from the sky, holding back the blaze that had raged since Sunday night. Rain helped save Chicago, but almost four square miles of wooden buildings, streets, and sidewalks lay reduced to ashes. The flames from the fire had ravaged almost 20,000 buildings and left one-third of the people in Chicago homeless.

How did a disaster like this strike a great American **metropolis** like Chicago?

The Fire Rages

Sometime around nine o'clock on the evening of October 8, 1871, a fire was spotted in a wooden barn on the south side of Chicago. The city's firefighters were tired from battling blazes all week, but they quickly gathered their equipment and rushed to where they thought the fire had started. The firemen were given faulty directions and didn't arrive at the correct **site** for an hour. During that hour, the small fire had grown



John R. Chapin, an artist who worked for the magazine *Harper's Weekly*, drew this picture showing the Chicago Fire Department as it desperately tried to save buildings from the hungry flames. *Public domain image, courtesy of Wikimedia.*

quickly out of control and **devoured** the barn. As the wind picked up, it carried the fire with it, spreading it from building to building. The firefighters' attempts at controlling the flames had no effect.

Every object in the fire's path became more fuel for it. It burned dry houses, barns, warehouses, and wood-lined streets. Flames even raced right across the Chicago River, feeding on **flammable** waste in the water.

Chicago is known as “The Windy City” for the strong gusts that frequently tear through its streets. During the fire, these winds pushed the flames north. Panicked residents that were able to escape their homes fled northward also, hoping to outrun the inferno.

Battling the blaze soon became impossible. The heat and the danger were too great. But even if the firefighters had wanted to continue, the city’s water pumps were already destroyed. Without any water, the people of Chicago were helpless. The fire had been raging for seven hours. It would keep pushing north, engulfing more of the dry city, for at least twenty hours.

As Chicago burned, people continued to rush north as quickly as possible. They were fenced in by a river to the west, Lake Michigan to the east, and fast moving flames coming right behind them from the south. Red-hot embers blew across the Windy City. People were beginning to lose hope.

Then, late on Monday evening, the rain began. Nature would put an end to a disaster that no number of firefighters

could stop. The survivors of the Chicago fire were lucky, though they probably didn’t feel that way. Three hundred people had died in the fire. Many more citizens lost their homes and all their possessions. However, the west side of the city had been spared.

Bad Building Materials

City inspectors began to look for the cause of the fire as soon as Chicago’s **ruins** had cooled, which took days. One **culprit** was natural. Chicago had been in the middle of a drought when the fire started. Everything in the city was very dry from weeks without rain. But the building practices in Chicago were the main reason the fire grew uncontrollable and destructive.

Chicago had expanded rapidly in the late 19th century. Homes and other

structures were being made quickly and cheaply. Stone or brick buildings would have withstood the flames well, but all of the buildings in Chicago were made of wood. Builders paid little attention to the danger of fires as they rushed to construct buildings to accommodate the growing population. As a result, most of the city was built from lumber, which made it easy for the fire to spread across the city.

Did a cow start the fire?

Legends say that a cow belonging to Catherine O’Leary kicked over a lantern and started the Great Fire of 1871. The fire did start in Mrs. O’Leary’s barn. But eventually, a reporter admitted to making up the story about Mrs. O’Leary’s cow. There are several theories of how the fire really started, but in 1997, even though she had died one hundred years earlier, Mrs. O’Leary was officially cleared of any wrongdoing by the city council of Chicago.



As this picture shows, the fire caused massive destruction across the city and left whole buildings completely destroyed. *Public domain image, courtesy of Wikimedia.*

A New Chicago

The Great Fire of 1871 actually helped Chicago to become a bigger, busier city than ever before. The rebuilding effort was massive. Donations of money and materials immediately began to flow into the city from around the country. As the people of Chicago rebuilt their city, they paid more attention to fire safety and made sure new structures were held to higher quality standards. Just nine years after the Great Fire, Chicago had gained 200,000 new inhabitants, nearly doubling in size. Hard work and help from around the country turned a tragedy into an opportunity, and Chicago rebuilt itself into a bigger, better, and more fire resistant city.

Glossary

Metropolis (*n*)

a major city

Site (*n*)

a location or place

Devoured (*v*)

to eat up quickly until something is gone

Flammable (*adj.*)

something that easily catches fire and burns quickly

ruins (*n*)

what remains after something has been destroyed

Culprit (*n*)

person or thing responsible for something