

# The Windy City Burns

The Rise and Fall of Old Chicago

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Chicago, The Windy City, is known for a lot of great advancements and failures. One of the biggest disasters it's known for is The Great Chicago Fire of 1871. What started as a drought ended as a massive tragedy. At the time of the fire, Chicago was a wooden wonder. The streets and sidewalks were wooden. The businesses were lumber and paper mills all made of wood. The city was the kindling-- all it needed was a match. Then suddenly a fire started that set the city ablaze in an instant, and all it left was rubble in its wake. After three days the rain came and stopped it from getting farther. Three elements against human strength, and all it took to stop it was the other element--Water. The impact of the fire was the way the city's structures were built and the new fire codes for the city..

### **Background**

In 1871, Chicago was having a drought and most of the city was made of wood. When the fire happened it was no big surprise. Back then Chicago had the best fire equipment in the states, which meant that they could put out fires better than anyone else. However, because of the mostly wooden city and the drought, Chicago had fire teams all over the city just in case something started. In addition, Chicago had at the time what were thought to be fireproof houses, which weren't actually fireproof; they just had tar roofs and stone walls, but even those were bound to fall (Pascal 66).

### **Before the Fire**

Before the fire Chicago had one of the best fire crews in the states as well as the best trucks, but the city didn't always have that. When Chicago was just starting in 1833, they had designated people who took turns on the fire crew in the neighborhoods throughout the city. The further they got in developing the town, the better their fire equipment became. Soon after they

had the best fire equipment, they had a state of the art waterworks facility that imported water from the lake into town. They had many problems with mud throughout the years, so they had to raise the buildings several feet with a type of big screw. At one point they lifted a hotel that had guests in it at the time, and they didn't feel a thing (Pascal 24-26). This greatly improved the state of the city and the state of the people. But that made the fire inevitable; with more buildings made from wood the fire had more fuel.

### **The Fire**

When the fire started, it was at Patrick and Catherine O'Leary's barn in Chicago's South District on Oct. 8, 1871. A lantern fell over in the barn near a stack of hay and then the fire began. Their neighbor Peg Leg Sullivan ( Appendix A) woke up the O'Learys and saved one of their calves from the flames. One of the biggest misconceptions was that the O'Leary's cow started the fire by kicking over the lantern, but that theory was proven false, and Mrs.O'Leary and the cow were cleared. When the fire was still small, the watchtower guard on duty didn't notice it at first, but when it got worse he miscalculated where it was and pulled a lever that was for a fire station that was very far away from the fire. When the fire crew got there, the fire was much bigger and it was hard to put out but they didn't put it out in time. The wind increased and blew the fire to other houses and spread it rapidly.

Soon the watchman called more fire stations to the scene, but it kept getting worse and worse. The firefighters couldn't contain the fire, so it kept spreading. A lot of people had to flee their homes with what they could carry and tried to save themselves, but a lot of people failed. The more the fire burned the worse it got, and the fire spread over to the "fireproof" houses,

made of stone walls and tar roofs. Those still burned down when the tar got too hot and set the wood under it on fire. The fire burned for three days (Pascal 48).

### **Tales From The Inside**

In the fire there was a little girl who was ten at the time. Her name was Fannie Belle Becker. She was abruptly awakened and told to dress, for everything around them was going to be no more. She was carrying a lot of things that were important to the family. One of the things was her China doll named Jennie. Someone helped them with their trunk, along with a mattress and his friend's trunk. "Ma told me to go down on Jackson St." She ran away from the man who was carrying their stuff because he looked shady. She met up with her mom, and they kept moving from house to house until they got to the water's edge. Her uncle poured water on their stuff and all of it was safe from the fire. With all of the dirt and cinder, it made it hard to see and her mother had to guide her through it. They went to Fruitport to stay until they could go back to Chicago. Fannie said she would never forget her friends in Fruitport (Kohler).

### **Note for Phillip**

A young man named Justin [Butterfield] sent a letter to his chum Phillip Prescott and this is some of what it said. They woke up to a knocking on the door and were getting dressed quickly. He and his brother tried putting out the fire but they had to leave. Their trunks on a wheel barrow they're ran as fast as they could to the old skating park. They were getting along well until the Peshtigo lumber yard caught fire. Their mother caught on fire, but they put her out. They saved one of two trunks and ran (Kohler).

## **Hell On Earth**

Soon the firefighters had to be all over the city. Some of the fire hoses caught on fire and spread to the trucks, which were partly made of wood. The proximity they had to be to the fire didn't help either. The hoses they were using were made of a type of fabric that could catch fire. Then suddenly the water in the hoses stopped; the waterworks facility had been burned to the ground. At that point there was no way to stop the fire! What the people did was go toward the lake and go down into it. The problem with that was they couldn't bring their belongings in the lake, and the fire was inching ever closer. Soon the fire reached the water but it didn't stop there. The pollution on the edge of the lake caught fire, and people had to move closer to the middle of the lake, with water up to their necks. Most people's possessions burned, but there were a lucky few whose belongings survived. In another instance, many people fled to the park but were worried that the grass would catch fire. The fire never got to the park, and everyone there was safe from the fire, including their personal possessions (History.com).

## **The Peshtigo Fire**

There were other fires at the time of the great Chicago fire that were just as bad, including the Peshtigo fire in Wisconsin that destroyed hundreds of acres of forest and killed 1200 people. But this fire was put over it. The Peshtigo Fire was a very bad fire as well, but Chicago bragged about their fire so much that the Peshtigo Fire didn't get as much attention during that time.

## **After the Fire**

When the rain finally came it was 11:00 at night on Oct. 10. Within a few hours, the fire was almost out. Nature managed to do what Chicago's firefighters could not accomplish

themselves (Pascal 79). When they looked out at the damage it was terrible. Only 150 bodies were found, but up to 300 people were presumed dead. Over 90,000 people were left homeless. Everything that came in touch with the fire was destroyed. When other towns heard the news, people hurried to get there and help with the rebuilding of the city. There were very few remaining houses in the burnt district, mostly just the scaffolding but there were some full buildings left. (Appendix B and C) Ironically, the O'Leary's house was not burnt because of the direction of the wind (Cooper 53). Many cities around the world helped Chicago in rebuilding the great city, by sending money and supplies. St. Louis, for example, gave \$300,000, and the Common Council of London donated 1,000 guineas, as well as £7,000 from private donations.

In the next city elections, it was hard to tell if someone voted twice because all the documents were destroyed in the fire (History.com). A month after the fire Joseph Medill was elected mayor and made new fire and safety codes for the city. The damage included 73 miles of road, 120 miles of sidewalk, 2,000 lampposts, and 17,500 buildings. The overall cost of the damage was estimated to be two hundred twenty two million dollars! (History.com). The new Chicago Fire Academy was built on the site of the O'Leary's barn.

### **Long Term Impact**

The city was now rebuilt of bricks and metal because they had learned from their mistakes. The rest of the time after that they continued building the city to its former state. There were some people that were true heroes like Peg Leg Sullivan and some unnamed locals that helped others that were in trouble. The new fire codes helped them rebuild and make sure there weren't any more fires of this size. The city built the first skyscraper The Home Insurance

building, which was only 10 stories tall. Chicago became the biggest and most developed city in the states for a while.

### **Conclusion**

The Great Chicago Fire of Oct. 8-10, 1871, was the most famous fire in American history. It impacted everyone who lived there. The O'Leary household survived, and the new Chicago City Fire Academy was built on 137 Dekoven Street right where the O'Leary's lived. When the cow and Catherine O'Leary were cleared of any blame for the fire, the city built a statue of them to commemorate the fire that happened that day. From a wooden wonder to a stone and metal marvel, Chicago has been through a lot, but one of the worst tragedies it experienced was the fire in 1871.

## Appendix A



**Peg Leg Sullivan (Bly)**

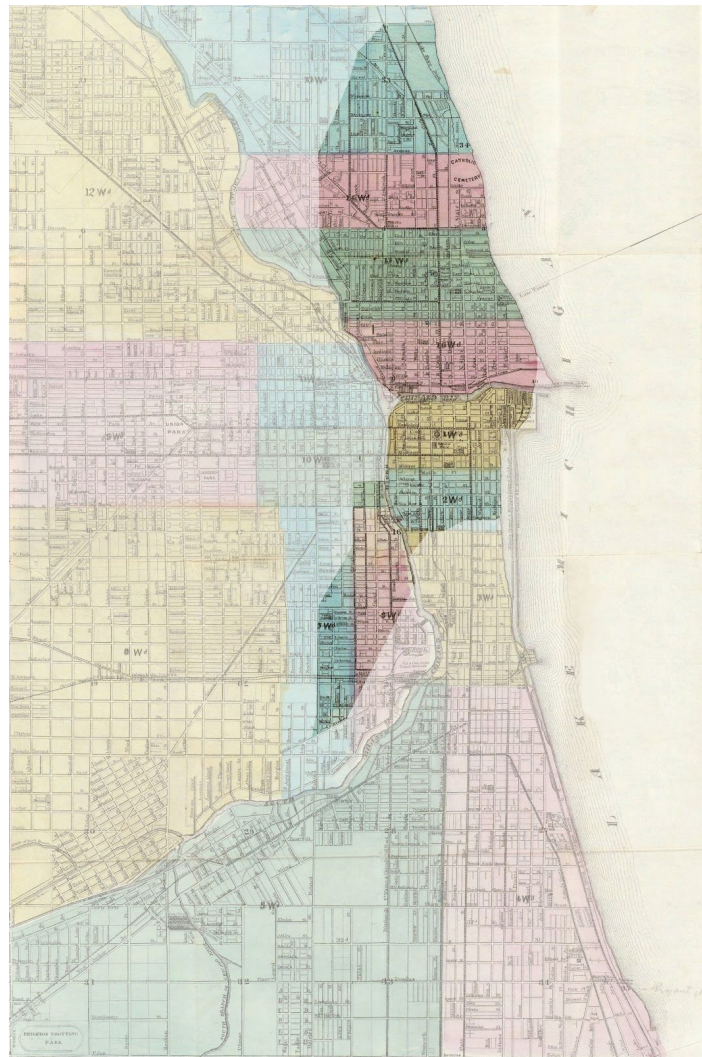


## Appendix B



**A panorama of Chicago Burnt District by George N. Barnard**

## Appendix C



**A map of the burnt district of Chicago (Rumsey)**

# Annotated Bibliography

## Primary Sources

Kohler, Gerry. "The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History." *Historical Context: The Global Effect of World War I | Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History*, [www.gilderlehrman.org/content/great-chicago-fire-1871-story-human-tragedy-and-triumph](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/content/great-chicago-fire-1871-story-human-tragedy-and-triumph).

This website includes first-hand accounts, letters, memoirs, and family records from and about the The Great Chicago Fire survivors. I used this site to get some stories so I could have some first-hand accounts to use as a primary source. It helped me get some inspiration for different sections of the paper.

Rumsey, David. "David Rumsey Map Collection." *Thailand, Lan-Na / Seated Buddha Subduing Mara / 14th-15th Century*, [www.davidrumsey.com/](http://www.davidrumsey.com/).

This website contains a map of the burnt district of Chicago and other maps. I used it for a picture in the appendix.

## Secondary Sources

Editors, History.com. "Chicago Fire of 1871." *History.com*, a&E Television Networks, 4 Mar. 2010, [www.history.com/topics/19th-century/great-chicago-fire](http://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/great-chicago-fire).

This site helped me with the very first parts of the paper with how Chicago got built. Also, it helped me understand more of what it is.

"Great Chicago Fire." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 Feb. 2019, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great\\_Chicago\\_Fire](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Great_Chicago_Fire).

This site held the biggest info of all the sites. It helped with the numbers and other information.

“Peg Leg Sullivan.” *Biography of Nellie Bly -- Pioneer of Investigative Reporting*,  
agilewriter.com/History/PegLegSullivan.htm.

This site is about how Peg Leg Sullivan might be a suspect in starting the great Chicago fire. But I only used it for the picture.

### **Books**

Cooper, Michael L. *Fighting Fire!: Ten of the Deadliest Fires in American History and How We Fought Them*. Square Fish, an Imprint of Macmillan, 2016.

This book is about how we put out the fire. It helped with the near end of the paper.

Guiberson, Brenda A. *Disasters: Natural and Man-Made Catastrophes through the Centuries*. Christy Ottaviano Books, 2010.

This book has most of the same info but helped expand the story a little bit. The story went well with the sources.

Pascal, Janet B., and Kevin McVeigh. *What Was the Great Chicago Fire?* Grosset & Dunlap, an Imprint of Penguin Random House, 2016.

This held the most info in any of the books. I used it to discover the main story behind the fire.