

Great Fire of Chicago 1871

It occurred on October 8–10, 1871 and killed approximately 300 people, destroyed roughly 9 km² of the city, and left more than 100,000 residents homeless (in 1871 Chicago had about 324,000 inhabitants).

The fire destroyed much of central Chicago, and then even leapt the main branch of the Chicago River, destroying the near north side.

Reasons

1. Summer was hot and dry for a long period of time, drought conditions.
2. Strong windy conditions.
3. Large parts of the city houses were built out of wood as a cheap building material, buildings being topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs, city's sidewalks and many roads were also made of wood.
4. In 1871, the Chicago Fire Department had 185 firefighters. Due to an error by the watchman, the firefighters were sent to the wrong place, allowing the fire to grow unchecked. And the firefighters were tired from having fought numerous small fires and one large fire in the week before.
5. Rapid destruction of the water pumping system.

Start

The fire erupted in the evening of October 8th 1871 in or around a small barn of the O'Leary family in the southwest of the city center.

The exact cause of the blaze could not be determined: different speculations exist, though:

1. a cow knocked a lantern
2. gamblers sitting in the barn knocked a lantern
3. fire related to other fires that already occurred at that time

Process

Strong wind came from the southwest and fire spread to neighbouring houses progressing fast toward the central business district.

Due to the wind, flaming debris was blown across the river, so the fire leapt the south branch and the main branch of the Chicago River.

Because of the growing fire, tremendous heat existed, so that because of the heat itself wooden structures caught fire.

City's waterworks were destroyed by the fire, so within minutes Chicago's water mains went dry.

Firefighters lost control over the fire, the fire burned unchecked from building to building, block to block.

Finally, late into the evening of October 9, it started to rain, but the fire had already started to burn itself out.

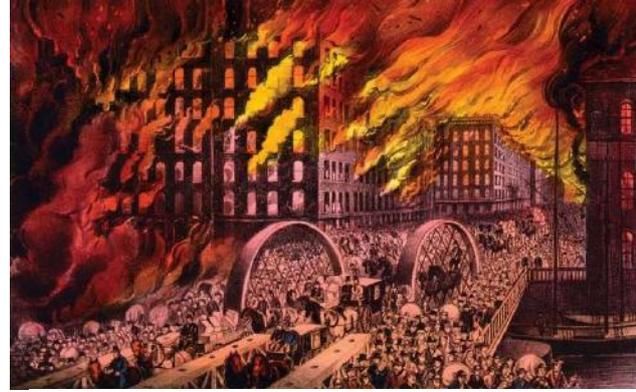


Fig. 1 Chicago in Flames, lithograph by Currier & Ives

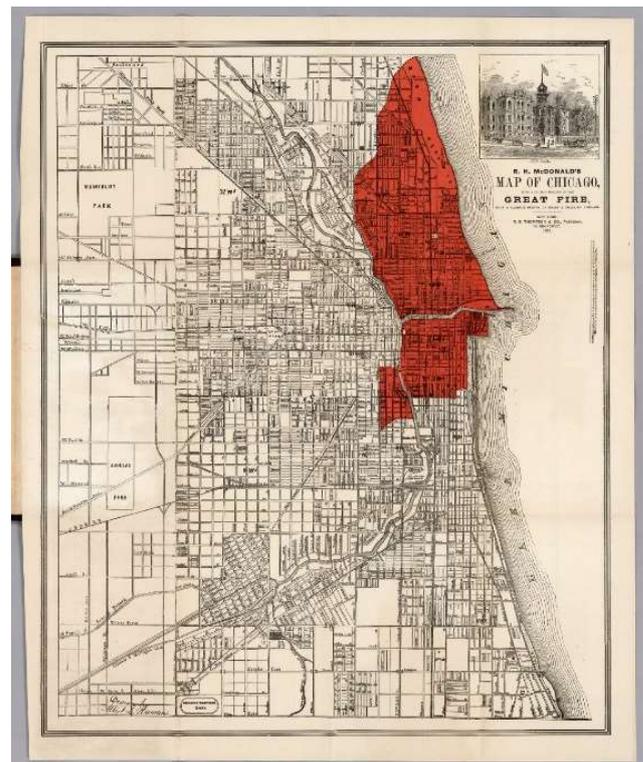


Fig. 2 Map showing the extent of the Great Fire