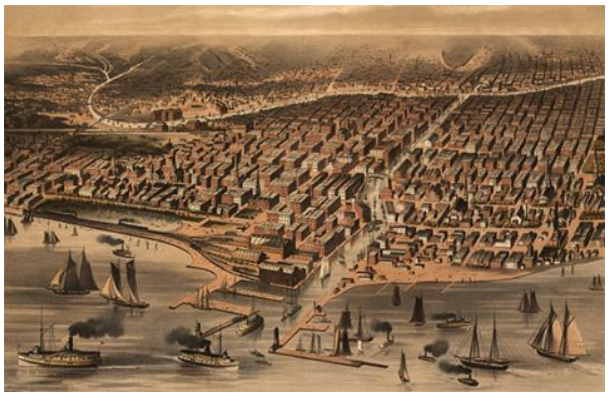
AWESOME stories

CHICAGO IN 1871



0. CHICAGO IN 1871 - Story Preface

1. FIRE!

2. 19TH CENTURY FIREFIGHTING

3. WAS IT REALLY THE COW?

4. FIRE IN PESHTIGO: A COINCIDENCE?

5. DEATH IN PESHTIGO

6. PESHTIGO SURVIVORS

7. CHICAGO IN 1871

8. CAUSE AND ORIGIN

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10. A DEVASTATED CITY

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12. CIVIL RESTRICTIONS

13. HOLLAND BURNS

How did Chicago appear in 1871, before the Great Fire burned several miles of America's "Second City?" This illustration, by William Flint, depicts "The City of Chicago as it was before the great conflagration of October 8th, 9th, & 10th," circa 1871. Image online via the Geography and Map Division at the Library of Congress. Call Number G4104.C6A3

The summer of 1871 was dry. About one inch of rain had fallen in 4 months.

On October 8th, a large city on the shore of Lake Michigan was about to endure one of the worst urban fires in American history. Maximizing tinder-dry conditions, a gale-force wind turned a small fire into a huge disaster. Almost three square miles of the city were destroyed. Nearly 300 people died. The entire business section was wiped out.

Chicago had come a long way since Jean-Baptiste Pointe DuSable first settled near Lake Michigan (in the late 18th century) and John Kinzie built his home there (in 1815). From a small settlement (not far from Fort Dearborn) to a major transportation center (40 years later), Chicago prospered.

As the Civil War neared its end, Chicago was "the metropolis of the northwest." By 1868, little was stopping the city's growth.

The three branches of the Chicago River formed a kind of boundary for the town (as demonstrated by an 1871 Harper's Weekly drawing). The south branch (left side of the picture) divided the rural part of south Chicago (where the O'Leary family lived) from the urban part.

In 1871, Chicago had over 330,000 inhabitants. Its fire department and equipment were "modern" for the time, but the city employed only 185 fire-fighting personnel.

On the night of October 7th, a mill plant fire broke out at what is now 209 South Canal Street. Some of the city's equipment was damaged while firemen were battling that blaze.

Worse, the fire at Lull & Holmes Planing Mill overtaxed an already overworked, understaffed fire-fighting crew.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/CHICAGO-IN-1871-Great-Fire-of-1871

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:
http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/CHICAGO-IN-1871-Great-Fire-of-1871

Questions 2 Ponder

Do Consecutive Disasters Sap Our Strength and Morale?

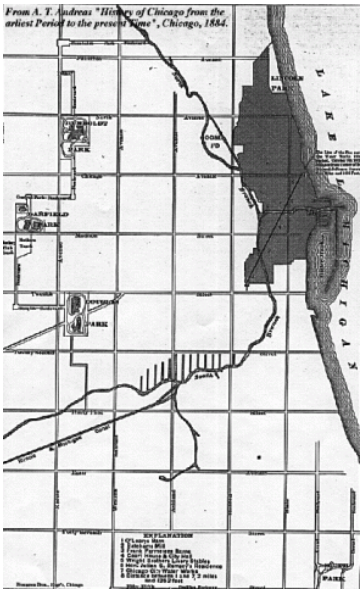
The day before the Great Fire of 1871 consumed a significant part of Chicago's business district, the city's

firefighters fought a devastating mill fire on October 7, 1871. It occurred at Lull and Holmes, on Canal Street, where Union Station sits today.

What impact may that mill fire have had on firefighters' ability to battle the catastrophe which followed 24 hours later?

Do consecutive disasters, like both of those fires, have a tendency to sap our strength and morale? Why, or why not?

Media Stream



Map Depicting the Burnt Area of the Chicago Fire
Map online, courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.
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Chicago's First House
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Chicago in 1831
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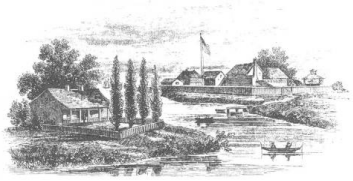

Fort Dearborn - Early Days of Chicago
Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.
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Chicago - Appearance in 1868
Lithograph by A. Ruger of Chicago Lithographing Co., Clark Street, Chicago. Online, courtesy Library of Congress (catalog number 73693350).
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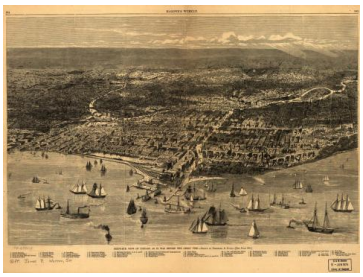

Chicago in 1871 - Before the Great Fire

Illustration from *Harper's Weekly* - October 21, 1871, pages 984-5 - online, courtesy Library of Congress (catalog number 74693213).

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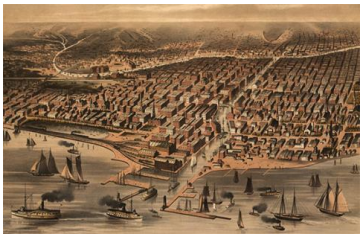

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