

0. CAUSE AND ORIGIN - Story Preface

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**8. CAUSE AND ORIGIN**

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This map illustrates the area of Chicago which was devastated by the October 1871 "Great Fire." Click on the image to see both a much-larger view and the place where the fire originated (marked by a red dot). The map, originally released circa 1869, has been modified to show the burned-out areas of the city (and the place where fire officials believe the blaze began in the O'Leary barn).

It's generally acknowledged the fire started in the O'Leary barn (reflected by the burn pattern, starting on DeKoven Street, in the path-of-destruction map). But no one is really sure *how* it started.

There is Mrs. O'Leary, of course, and her cow. But she was exonerated in the official report.

Daniel ("Peg Leg") Sullivan first saw the flames coming, he said, from the O'Leary barn. Yet, when one considers Sullivan's line of sight to the barn, it's doubtful he could even see the O'Leary property. Maybe he really wasn't where he said he was.

Along those lines, a recent study blames Sullivan himself. Did he go to the O'Leary barn to feed his mother's cow that night? If so, did he smoke there and inadvertently start the fire?

Historians have always considered the drought and an out-of-control brush fire as the likely cause. That was at least part of the official findings after the investigation was concluded.

Recently the idea of a disintegrating comet, with falling meteorite debris, has resurfaced as a possible cause. (The link takes you to a picture of a 26.5 kilogram meteorite allegedly found on the shore of Lake Huron.) Perhaps, scientists wonder, sparks from a meteor shower ignited hay in the O'Leary barn?

At the time of the fire, people said they saw burning material falling from the heavens. No one took them seriously, of course. They were just hysterical people, weren't they? Yet the line of actual fires, drawn from the meteorite's Lake Huron location to Peshtigo and Chicago, makes one wonder about the evidence. Was it all just a coincidence?

Whatever the cause, a combination of failures worked against Chicago that night. An elaborate fire alarm system - dependent on human input - failed. The alarm closest to the O'Leary farm (Box 295) was never rung.

Firefighters in the vicinity of DeKoven Street learned about the fire when they saw it. All available men and equipment were fighting a losing battle on the south side.

No one dreamed the fire would jump the river. When it did, neither man nor machine was there to combat the growing wall of flames.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/CAUSE-AND-ORIGIN-Great-Fire-of-1871)

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See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/CAUSE-AND-ORIGIN-Great-Fire-of-1871)

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## Questions 2 Ponder

### What Makes Eyewitness Observations Suspect?

At the time of the Great Fire, people said they saw burning material falling from the sky. Today investigators think it might be possible that people were seeing bits of a falling meteor. If that were true, it might explain how simultaneous fires broke-out in geographically distant places.

Do you think such reports were believed in 1871? If not, why would those same reports be considered credible, or potentially credible, today?

Does the map, depicting the line of fires, support the claim that the fires (in three separate states) could have been started by a meteor shower? Why, or why not?

Why does the exact cause of the Great Fires still matter?

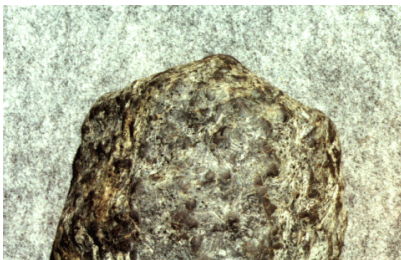
## Media Stream



### The O'Leary Barn

Photo online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

View this asset at: <http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/The-O-Leary-Barn>



### Meteorite - Linked to the Great Fire?

Photograph of meteorite, allegedly found along the shore of Lake Huron, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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