

# FURTHER REVIEW

# CHICAGO IN FLAMES

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

Why is Chicago often referred to as “the Second City”? Is it because Chicago spent many decades as the nation’s second-largest city, behind New York?

Nope. It’s because modern-day Chicago is the second Chicago that existed. The first was destroyed by an enormous fire that burned 3.3 square miles, destroyed 17,500 structures and left a third of the city’s population homeless.

That fire was ignited Oct. 10, 1871 — 155 years ago.

## THE CAUSE OF THE FIRE WAS *NOT* A MILK COW

Let’s get this out of the way right now: Neither Mrs. Catherine O’Leary, an Irish immigrant who resided at 137 DeKoven Street, nor her one cow who lived in her barn out back were at fault for starting the fire.

The fire most likely started in or near her barn, but Catherine O’Leary was already in bed with a sore foot when the fire started.

And the cow wasn’t even in the barn — it was tied up outside, grazing that evening. The O’Leary’s neighbors were hosting a party to welcome a newly arrived Irish relative. Catherine was falling asleep listening to the fiddle playing when her husband burst into the bedroom yelling that their barn was on fire.

Catherine rushed



The O’Leary house on the Southwest side of Chicago survived the fire. The barn did not.

outside to rescue her cow and her new wagon, but someone had already set the cow free. And it was too late for the wagon.

Winds drove flames into nearby houses. Residents rushed to douse them with buckets of water, but the fire was spreading too quickly.

The next day, the Chicago Evening Journal

blamed the start of the blaze on the O’Leary’s cow kicking over a lantern while it was being milked. Years later, the reporter of that story admitted he had made up the story to blame immigrants.

Catherine O’Leary died in 1895 at age 68. One hundred and two years later, the City of Chicago formally exonerated O’Leary and her cow.

## THE FIRE SPREAD RAPIDLY IN THE WIND

The city of Chicago, built quickly over very few years, featured a large number of wooden buildings and sidewalks and streets paved with tar-swathed wooden blocks. It also had inadequate fire codes and outdated firefighting equipment.

The entire Midwest was suffering through a drought that summer, turning the city into kindling. High winds whipped the flames into “fire devils,” whirling pockets of gas and air that rolled through the city.

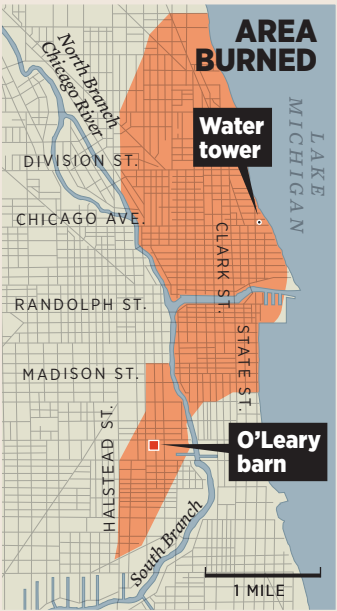
The fire jumped the river from the lumberyards and grain elevators into the central business district. Winds threw sparks into St. Paul’s Church and the Cook County Courthouse, where the bell kept

clanging, even as fire destroyed the cupola where it was mounted. City landmarks such as Marshall Field’s Marble Palace, Potter Palmer’s hotel and the Chicago Tribune

building succumbed to the flames. Terrified residents fled the firestorm and headed to the city’s North side, only to find the fire had jumped the river again and was following them.



The corner of State and Madison streets, in the heart of Chicago’s business district. This corner later became the origin point of the city’s street numbering grid system.



In the North Side, where houses were further apart, the fire spread more slowly. One structure that did survive there was the city’s water tower along Michigan Avenue, which had been built two years earlier to keep the city’s hydrants supplied. The fire reached the limestone structure and spared it, but the pumping station was destroyed in the early hours of Oct. 9.

Finally, mercifully, in the early hours of Oct. 10, rain began to fall, which extinguished the fire.

Much of Chicago was in ruins. Spared were the stockyards and freight yards on the southwest side of town, meaning that food could still arrive and be processed there.

185      300      100,000      17,500      3.3      \$222m      50

Number of firefighters the city employed at the time of the fire      Estimated death toll of the fire. Only 120 bodies were actually recovered.      Number of residents estimated to be left homeless. This was about a third of the city’s population      Number of structures estimated destroyed by the fire      Square miles of the city that burned — roughly 2,124 acres      Total loss in 1871 dollars. Adjusted to today’s money, that would be about \$5 billion      Years before the reporter who blamed the fire on Mrs. O’Leary’s cow admitted he had lied.

## RECOVERING FROM THE FIRE

In its first postfire edition, the Chicago Tribune proclaimed: “Cheer Up! ... Looking upon the ashes of thirty years’ accumulations, the people of this once beautiful city have resolved that Chicago shall rise again.”

Food and supplies arrived from Cincinnati, Milwaukee and other cities. Plans were made up to ration food and

coal and to build temporary housing. Within a week, 6,000 temporary structures were built. That November Tribune editor Joseph Medill ran for mayor as the “fireproof” candidate, pledging to ban wooden buildings in the business district and to rebuild the city with grander, more elaborate and taller buildings.



Women’s groups organized clothing drives to distribute clothing to those who lost their homes.

New laws were passed requiring new buildings to be constructed with brick, stone, marble and limestone and held together with mortar.

Buildings were constructed with steel frameworks, which allowed for non load-bearing walls of brick and terra cotta and for larger windows and taller structures. Completed in 1884, the

Home Insurance Building was considered to be the world’s first skyscraper.

By 1880, Chicago had become the nation’s fourth largest city. In 1890, its population surpassed 1 million.

In 1956, the Chicago Fire Academy was built on the site where the O’Learys’ barn once stood. Firefighters are trained there to this day.