

The Great Chicago Fire
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Directions: The following questions are based on the accompanying documents (A-E). All of the primary sources you will be analyzing were taken from The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory website created by the Chicago Historical Society and the Trustees of Northwestern University. You can look this information up online at www.chicagohs.org. Some of these documents have been edited for the purposes of this exercise. These questions are designed to test your ability to work with historical documents. As you analyze the documents, take into account both the sources of the document and the author's points of view.

Questions: The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 leveled the city of Chicago. As you evaluate the following documents answer the following questions: Where did the Chicago fire start? Why did the fire grow so quickly and why was it so strong? How did the event affect the citizens of Chicago?

Background information: The Great Chicago Fire occurred on Sunday, October 8, 1871 near Chicago's downtown area. This fire has proved to be the most disastrous fire in the history of Chicago; it burned four square miles to the ground before it was extinguished. Flames were discovered in a small stable in the rear of a house on the corner of De Koven and Jefferson streets. The wind was blowing from the south-southwest direction. With terrible effect the flames spread across the city of Chicago very quickly and burnt up everything in its way. Shed after shed went down, and dwelling houses followed in rapid sequence. Block after block gave way and many families were driven from their homes. The fire department was powerless to prevent the spreading of this terrible disaster because for fifteen weeks prior to the fire there had been no heavy rain in the region and the wooden walls of many of the buildings were extremely dry. The area burned over by the fire is about two thousand one hundred and fifty acres, distributed through the three divisions of the city: About one hundred and sixty acres in the West Division, nearly five hundred acres in the South Division, and about fourteen hundred acres in the North Division. The number of buildings burned is between seventeen thousand and eighteen thousand. The total loss of property burned is estimated at about \$200,000,000. The blaze burned homes and shops and left 300 people dead and 500,000 people homeless. As the fire spread, people ran out of their homes, taking with them whatever they could grab.

Historic Background: Document A: Many citizens wondered who to blame for this tragic event. For many years citizens have blamed Mrs. Catherine O'Leary. Legend has it that after she left the barn from milking her cow, it accidentally kicked the lantern over starting the fire. Because of the rumors, Catherine O'Leary was naturally a star witness, though she claimed she knew very little about the fire and was mainly concerned with her own serious losses. The following excerpt is the testimony of Mrs. Catherine O'Leary taken by the Board of Police and Fire Commissioners of Chicago.

Q. What do you know about this fire?

A. I was in bed myself and my husband and five children when this fire commenced. I was the owner of them five cows that was burnt, and the horse wagon and harness. I had two tons of coal and two tons of hay. I had everything that I wanted in for the winter. I could not save five cents worth of anything out of the barn...

Q. Do you know how the fire caught?

A. I could not tell anything of the fire only that two men came by the door. I guess it was my husband got outside the door and he ran back to the bedroom and said "Kate the barn is afire." I ran out and the whole barn was on fire. Well I went out to the barn and upon my word I could not tell anyone about the fire...

Q. Is that your house?

A. Yes sir. They kept water on it until the fire went out. We had plenty of water until the fire was done.

Q. Was there any other family living in your house?

A. Yes sir. There was Mrs. Laughlin.

Q. How many rooms did they occupy?

A. Two rooms.

Q. Front rooms?

A. Yes sir.

Q. Do you know whether they were in bed?

A. I know they were not in bed.

Q. How do you know that?

A. Because I could hear from my own bedroom. Could hear them going on. There was a little music there...

Q. They had a little party there?

A. Yes sir. Her husband was a fiddler.

Q. They had dancing there?

A. They had.

Q. Some company?

A. Some company. I could not tell how many were there.

Q. That was going on at the time the fire broke out, that dance, was it?

A. I could not tell you sir.

Q. Did you hear any of these people from the front part of the house passing to the back end of the dwelling, pass back and forth in the alley between the two houses?

A. I didn't indeed.

1. According to the report, who saw the flames coming from the barn, and what time did he say he noticed the fire?
2. According to the report, who started the fire?

Historical Document C Background Information: Fannie Belle Becker (later Fanny Dement), ten at the time of the fire, wrote "My Experience of the Chicago Fire" almost exactly two years later.

Document C taken from: <http://www.chicagohs.org>

Saturday evening Oct the 8th 1871 there was a large Fire in Chicago it was probably the largest Fire ever in that city...

I was awakened and told to Dress for the Fire was all around us and we would soon be burnt out. My ma put all her valubals into her sewing machine and locked it up and threw some things in to her trunk...

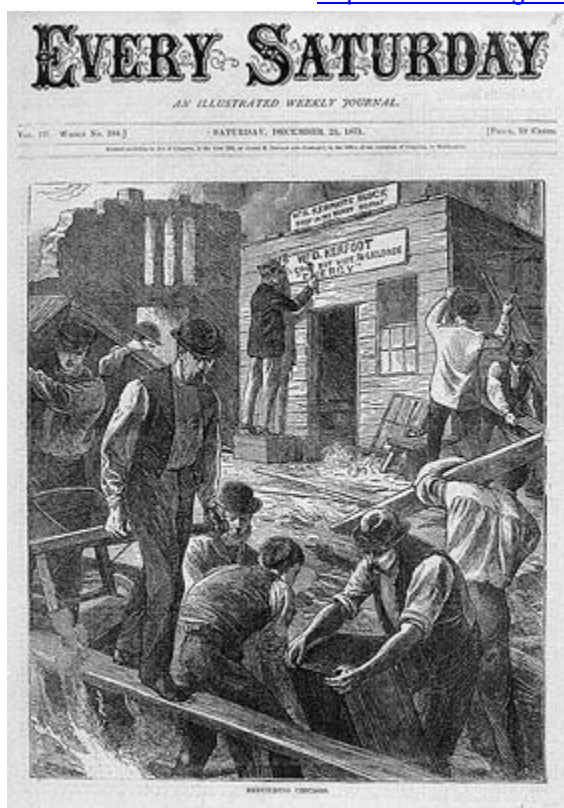
We had a gentleman friend who helped us; we all went down right away but ma stayed, she said that she would stay as long as she could. So we went around the corner to Monroe Street and waited and when she came she brought a large hair Matrass. The air was so full of cinders and was so hot that it almost stifled her. We could not get an express man to carry the things for there were none to be had. So our friend drew our trunk and a trunk that belonged to a friend of his who was out of the city. He lashed the two together and lashed the Matrass on top of the trunks, and then drew them along. The trunks both had castors on. When we got to the corners of Dearborn Street ma told me to go Down on Jackson St. a few blocks away to the house of a friend and see if they thought the fire would come there and if not we would go there and stay...

When I got to the house they had all their things packed and out on the side walk and, in a little while ma came and then we went back to Monroe St. and then as the Fire came on we went on toward Lake Michigan as we went on we came to our friends brothers house we stayed here until the fire drove us out then the heat was so intense that it drove us down to the waters Edge and then my uncle who was with us took his hat and poured water on the things to keep them from burning but thousands and thousands of dollar's worth of goods were burned right there on the waters Edge.

1. What did Ma bring with her when she finally caught up with the children?
2. Why do you think Ma did not go with the children, at first?
3. What happened when Bessie got to her friends house?
4. How much monetary value of damage had the fire done?

Document D Historic Background: Several weeks following the devastating fire the weekly newspapers devoted space to featuring stories and were the first major source of visual images of the fire. Below are two of the newspapers front covers.

Document D taken from: <http://www.chicagohs.org>



1. Who do you think the people in the pictures are?
2. What are the people in the pictures doing?
3. What do you see in the background of these two pictures?

Document E Historical Background: People immediately started to rebuild. Architects, people and even firemen were working nonstop for 3 months. Cities all over the world sent supplies, money, and enough books to give Chicago the largest public library of its time. Old businesses were rebuilt and Chicago had enough industry to need a lot more workers than before. To make more room for buildings, Chicagoans used the trash from the fire to make a much bigger lakeshore by adding the trash to the existing lakeshore. After 3 months 300,000 buildings were built.

Charles Randolph's article appeared in a special issue of the *Lakeside Monthly*, the leading literary magazine published in Chicago and the Northwest in January of 1872. This issue was devoted to an account of the fire and its significance. Randolph was secretary of the Board of Trade.

Document E taken from: <http://www.chicagohs.org>

... It is because Chicago has possessed remarkable advantages for the development of trade and commerce, that the remarkable results, now matters of history, have been attained...

...While it cannot be denied that the city has drawn largely upon the best blood and most vigorous mental capacities, not only of our own country but also from foreign immigration, and to an extent that has made it a city representing by its people natives of almost every town and hamlet in this country and of Europe, thus consolidating into one homogeneous citizenship, the thought and enterprise of many and widely diversified intellects and educations, still all these advantages could not alone produce the results that have been manifest, and that have challenged the attention of the civilized world. In fact, this flood of emigration would not have set hitherward but for advantages of a permanent character that were apparent to the observing and inquiring mind...

The introduction of railroads, at a later but not distant day, was but the further development of transportation facilities, the necessity and advantages of which were made strikingly apparent by the acknowledged benefit resulting from the completion of the canal line.... Chicago lines of railway have, in view of the wonderful past and prospective growth of their traffic, been so eminently profitable that capital from abroad has been ever ready to embark in their construction, sometimes even when her own citizens could not readily comprehend the necessity or prospective profit of the investment. The fact that no drain of this kind has been necessary, has left the citizens free to invest in mercantile or other enterprises of a local character, and has enabled them to meet municipal taxation for the extraordinary improvements necessary in a city requiring so much expenditure to make it convenient and enjoyable, without being oppressively burdened...

...Such, briefly, has been the outlines of Chicago's history in Trade and Commerce, and such was her situation as regards business, present and prospective, when, in view of the past,--feeling cheerful, strong, and confident in contemplating the future, beaming with brilliant prospects and high hopes,--she is suddenly overtaken by the most dire financial calamity the world has ever witnessed; in a day withering those hopes, laying in ashes her lofty and magnificent temples, both of worship and of trade, and utterly annihilating her treasures of beauty and of art; dividing the fortunes of her citizens by two, by four, by ten, or by an hundred, and some, alas! Thrusting from wealth and luxury to actual penury and suffering. What wonder that for a moment her people stand appalled as they contemplate the awful wreck? But it will be only a moment[t]. [While] some may find their burden greater than they can ever stagger under, others will gather together the fragments that remain, and with the aid of the outstretched helping hands from the four quarters of the globe, will repair the waste places, rebuild the leveled landmarks, and raise from the ashes of Chicago past, a city more grand, more, substantial, and in every way more adapted to the needs of what the world has come to recognize as the necessities of Chicago future...

1. What does Randolph say is an advantage for the city of Chicago?
2. What did Randolph point out about the citizens living in Chicago?
3. List some of the transportation technology that Randolph believes to be an advantage for the city of Chicago?