

An eyewitness account of the Great Chicago Fire, 1871

Introduction

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 killed nearly 300 people, left 100,000 homeless, destroyed over \$190 million worth of property, and leveled the entire central business district of the city. The fire broke out just after 9 p.m. on October 8 in the barn of Patrick and Catherine O’Leary on DeKoven Street. By the time firefighters arrived, the fire was already raging out of control.

John R. Chapin, an illustrator for *Harper’s Weekly*, wrote this first-hand account and drafted two sketches for his employer shortly after the fire. Chapin reported that he was asleep in his room at the Sheridan House when he was woken by a commotion in the hotel’s hallway:

Listening for a few moments, and thinking it must be near morning, I composed myself to sleep again, but was restless, and my mind became gradually filled with a dread for which I could not account. At length, to assure myself, I rose and went to the window, threw open the blinds, and gazed upon a sheet of flame towering one hundred feet above the top of the hotel, and upon a shower of sparks as copious as drops in a thunder-storm.

In his account, printed in *Harper’s Weekly* on October 28, 1871, Chapin described his harrowing escape from the fire. From his vantage point across the river, he watched desperate citizens attempt to save their belongings as the flames claimed Chicago’s distinguished buildings. After raging for two days, the fire was extinguished by rain on October 10.

Excerpts

I confess that I felt myself a second NERO as I sat down to make the sketch which I send herewith of the burning of Chicago. In the presence of such a fearful calamity, surrounded by such scenes of misery and woe, having within a brief hour barely escaped with my life from the burning hotel, knowing that under my eye human life was being destroyed, wealth swept away, and misery entailed upon untold thousands of my fellow-men, nothing but the importance of preserving a record of the scene induced me to force my nervous system into a state sufficiently calm to jot down the scenes passing before me. . . . Niagara sinks into insignificance before that towering wall of whirling, seething, roaring flame, which swept on, on—devouring the most stately and massive stone buildings as though they had been the cardboard playthings of a child. . . . Vehicles of every kind and character were crossing and recrossing the bridge, bringing away goods of all kinds, and sometimes of the most ludicrous description. Fabulous prices were asked and paid for any thing on wheels. . . . One party had a platform store truck with thee wheels, on which they had piled desks, chairs, cushions, and office furniture to a height of six or eight feet. In trying to get off the track the whole load slid off, and an immense express wagon, dashing along, went over the pile and crushed it into splinters. Here comes a steamer! Back rushes the crowd, and four splendid horses, followed by an engine, whose driver was either wild with excitement or crazy drunk, dashed across the bridge, and, wheeling to the right, took up a

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position on the edge of the dock. . . . And who shall attempt to depict the scenes of misery, the agony of suffering, among that mass of people which was surging back and forth, to and fro, in every direction, on the west side? In every door-way were groups and families, on the curbs, in the gutters, every where . . . they could be seen huddled around their little all that the flames had spared, with misery depicted on their countenances and with despair in their hearts.

Questions for Discussion

Read the introduction and the excerpt, examine the images, and study John R. Chapin's account of the event. Then apply your knowledge of American history to answer the following questions:

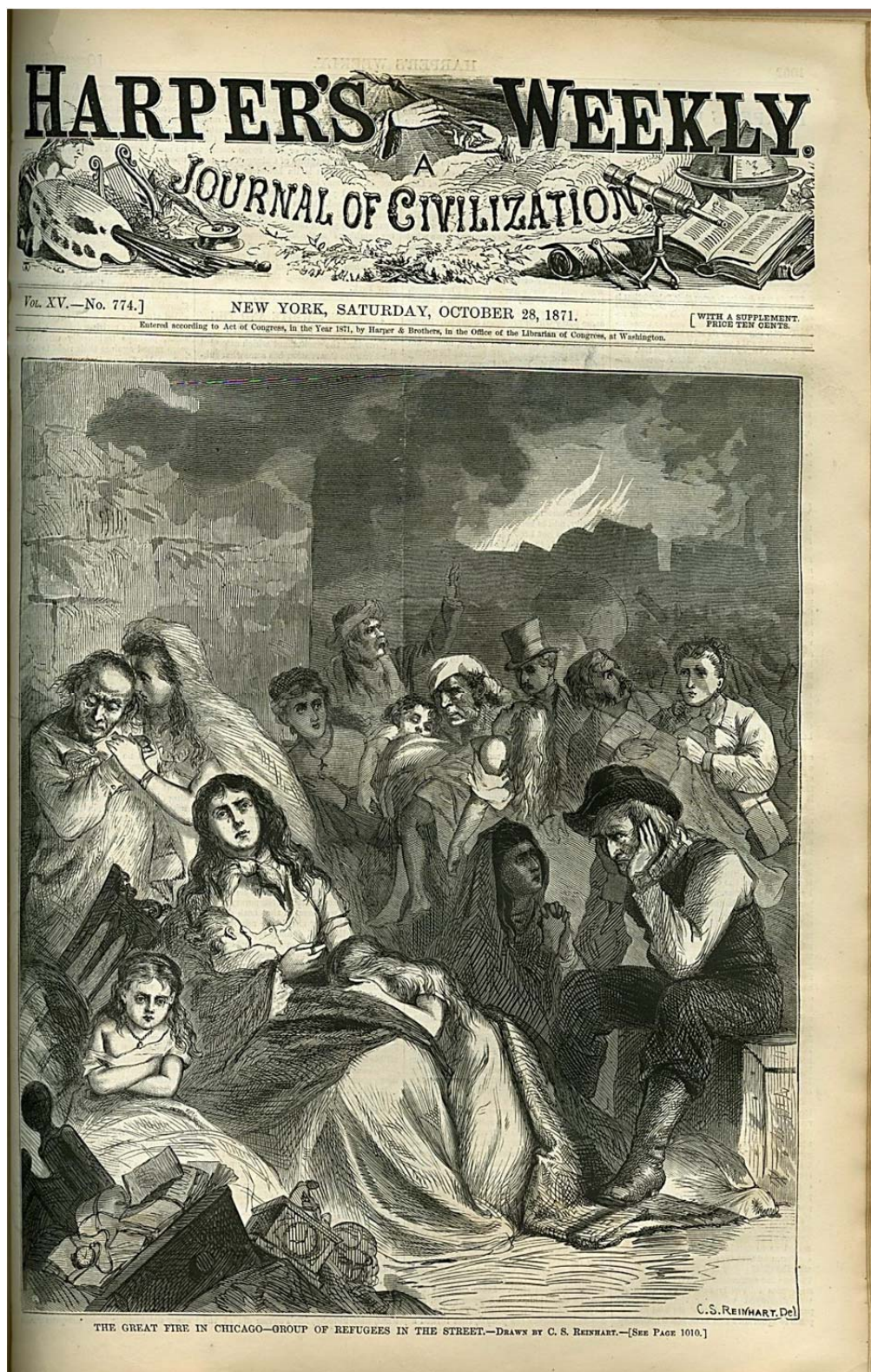
1. What did John R. Chapin mean when, in describing the Chicago fire, he wrote that "Niagara sinks into insignificance before that towering wall of whirling, seething, roaring flame"?
2. According to Chapin, in what ways did Chicagoans attempt to escape the great fire?
3. Compare the illustrations that appeared in *Harper's Weekly* with Chapin's account. Which of the illustrations most closely depicts the conditions Chapin described? Choose a specific illustration and cite the corresponding passage in the text.

Research Questions:

1. Locate issues of various American newspapers published in the immediate aftermath of the Chicago fire. How did cities such as New York, Philadelphia, and Boston report on the disaster?
2. To what extent did the Chicago fire result in both local and national attempts to prevent similar catastrophes?

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Images



Harper's Weekly, October 28, 1871. (Gilder Lehrman Institute, GLC01733.13)

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ACCOUNT BY AN EYE-WITNESS.

We have received the following intensely interesting and graphic account of the great fire from our special artist, Mr. JOHN R. CHAPIN, whose sketches are given on pages 1004 and 1013:

To the Editor of Harper's Weekly:

I confess that I felt myself a second NERO as I sat down to make the sketch which I send herewith of the burning of Chicago. In the presence of such a fearful calamity, surrounded by such scenes of misery and woe, having within a brief hour barely escaped with my life from the burning hotel, knowing that under my eye human life was being destroyed, wealth swept away, and misery entailed upon untold thousands of my fellow-men, nothing but the importance of preserving a record of the scene induced me to force my nervous system into a state sufficiently calm to jot down the scenes passing before me.

No man can describe a battle so well as he who was far away from it. I shall not, therefore, pretend to give a description of any thing more than that which I witnessed; and I trust that I shall be forgiven the use of the personal pronoun in view of the necessity of narrating my own experience in order to convey my impressions to others.

I arrived in Chicago for the first time on Saturday, the 7th inst., and stopped at the Sherman House. During the afternoon of that day a friend drove me around through the business portion of the city to show me the magnificent buildings which covered the area now a heap of ashes. Stopping here and there to admire the stately Court-house, the magnificent proportions of the Michigan Southern Railroad Dépôt, or the Grand Pacific Hotel, we passed into Wabash, Calumet, and other avenues skirting the lake, to view the long rows of beautiful residences which wealth, culture, and refinement had erected on the

edge of the lake, all of which are now embraced in an immense heap of brick, stone, and ashes. At the *Tribune* buildings we were shown through that immense structure—constructed in a manner precisely similar to your own building—that we might see how completely *fire-proof* it was. We visited the Board of Commerce, Western Union Telegraph, and numerous other magnificent buildings, until, tired at last, we returned to the hotel to sup and talk of the wealth, extent, rapid growth, and enterprise of Chicago—that great city of the West, that fabulous city of yesterday.

An alarm of fire during the evening caused no anxiety, for it was a thing of frequent occurrence. Yet the morning brought us intelligence that twenty acres in the southwestern part of the city had been swept as with the besom of destruction. We, together with thousands of others, went out in the afternoon to see the ruins. In the evening, returning from church with a young and dear friend, we parted at the hotel door with a promise to meet on the morrow. In a few hours we were houseless wanderers, and did not meet again. Retiring to my room, I read until half past ten, and at that hour went to bed and to sleep. I had heard the alarm of fire at ten o'clock; but, notwithstanding a high wind—a gale, indeed—was blowing, I felt no uneasiness, but dropped off to slumber with a mind filled with engagements for the morning, which were never to be fulfilled. I had slept about two or three hours when I was awakened by a rattling of a key in my door, as though some one was trying to enter. Calling out "Who's there? what do you want?" and receiving no answer, I again fell asleep, but was again awakened by the sound of the tramping of feet and confusion in the hall, and by a dull roar, which I supposed was the sound of wheels on the Nicholson pavement. Listening for a few moments, and thinking it must be near morning, I composed myself to sleep again, but was restless, and my mind became gradually filled with a dread for which I could not account. At length, to assure myself, I rose and went to the window, threw open the blinds, and gazed upon a sheet of flame towering one hundred feet above the top of the hotel, and upon a shower of sparks as copious as drops in a thunder-storm. Fortunately I did not lose my presence of mind, but packed my valise and dressed myself—hurriedly it is true—but saved even my watch under my pillow, and, leaving my room, rushed into a scene of dire confusion and dismay. The guests were hurrying through the halls, and dragging trunks and other baggage down the stairways, rushing frantically about, partially dressed and wild with excitement, every one intent upon himself, and all filled with that indescribable horror which can only be felt in gazing into the jaws of that terrible fire-fiend whose power is so grandly irresistible, and before whom individuality sinks to nothingness. Reaching the office, I went to the coat-room to obtain my overcoat; but finding it closed, and

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thinking time too valuable to be wasted at such a moment, I left the building and hurried into the street. Hesitating but an instant to gaze into the face of the awful but sublime monster that was pursuing me, I turned and fled through the fiery shower—whither I knew not—but away from the fire. Coming to the river, I recognized to the left of me the entrance to the tunnel on Washington Street, and hastened toward it. It was filled already with a crowd of fugitives, all flying, with their backs and arms loaded with what they had gathered in the despair of the moment, seeking a place of safety. The scenes witnessed among this crowd were painful, and in many instances humorous and ludicrous in the extreme—or would have been under other circumstances. Helping now a poor mother who was struggling along with an infant and half a dozen older children, anon assisting an old woman staggering under her burden of household stuff, we at length reached the other side, and emerged into a place of safety.

Here for the first time I realized the magnitude of the danger and the awful nature of the calamity. As far as the eye could see toward the south the flames extended in one unbroken sheet, while they were advancing, a wall of fire from one to two hundred feet in height, with terrible rapidity. One glance was sufficient to convince the most hopeful that the city was doomed. A gale of wind was blowing from the southwest, and urging the fire onward over the wealthiest and handsomest portion of the place. No human power could stay its progress, and no effort was made. The slightest change of wind to the southward would have driven the sparks across to the west side, and, falling among the frame buildings of which that portion is mainly composed, would have cut off the escape of tens of thousands toward the prairie. Dripping with perspiration from my exertions, yet feeling the chill of the blast, I dared not stand for a moment, but wandered from street to street, until I met a gentleman, his wife, and three children, who, like myself, had been driven out shelterless, who kindly directed me to the Mallory House, where I was permitted to change my clothing; and now, more warmly clad, I started out to help, if I could, all that I could. I soon found myself on the Randolph Street Bridge, the point whence my sketch was taken. No language which I can command will serve to convey any idea of the grandeur, the awful sublimity, of the scene. For nearly two miles to the right of me the flames and smoke were rising from the ruins and ashes of dwellings, warehouses, lumber-yards, the immense gas-works; and the view in that direction was bounded by an elevator towering one hundred and fifty feet in the air, which had withstood the fire of the night before, but which was now a living coal, sending upward a sheet of flame and smoke a thousand feet high.

Following the line of fire northward, the next prominent object was the Nevada House, a large

brick hotel of six or seven stories in height by about 100 feet square. For a long time this stood surrounded by the fire, and it seemed likely to resist the attack of the flames; but soon a slight column of smoke climbed up the farther corner, a light tongue of flame followed, and in three minutes thereafter the whole structure was toppling to the ground. Before us we looked upon a sight which it is impossible to describe. Every one knows how inadequate is human language to express the grandeur of Niagara—we can only *feel* it. And yet Niagara sinks into insignificance before that towering wall of whirling, seething, roaring flame, which swept on, on—devouring the most stately and massive stone buildings as though they had been the cardboard playthings of a child. Looking under the flame, we could see the buildings on either side of Randolph Street, whose beauty and magnificence and whose wealth of contents we had admired the day before, in the centre of the furnace. A moment, and a flickering flame crept out of a window, another and another followed, a sheet of fire joined the whirling mass above, and they were gone. One after another they dissolved like snow on the mountain, until the fire had reached the corner just before us. Loud detonations to the right and left of us, where buildings were being blown up, added to the falling of the walls and the roaring of the flames—the moaning of the wind, the shouting of the crowd, the shrill whistling of the tugs as they endeavored to remove the shipping out of the reach of danger—made up a frightful discord of sounds which will live in memory while life shall last. Vehicles of every kind and character were crossing and recrossing the bridge, bringing away goods of all kinds, and sometimes of the most ludicrous description. Fabulous prices were asked and paid for any thing on wheels. Wagons and carts without horses, but drawn by men, wheelbarrows, hand-carts, trucks, and every available means of transit, were called into requisition. One party had a platform store truck with three wheels, on which they had piled desks, chairs, cushions, and office furniture to a height of six or eight feet. In trying to get off the track the whole load slid off, and an immense express wagon, dashing along, went over the pile and crushed it into splinters. Here comes a steamer! Back rushes the crowd, and four splendid horses, followed by an engine, whose driver was either wild with excitement or crazy drunk, dashed across the bridge, and, wheeling to the right, took up a position on the edge of the dock. Here they commenced dipping the water up in pails, which were sure to strike bottom side down, and when they did get a pail full, in pulling it up it was sure to spill two-thirds; and thus they were trying to fill a wash-tub, out of which they took suction to get a stream on about two thousand tons of coal. After working in this way with the energy of despair about an hour, some one called across the river, “Why in h—ll don’t you put your suction into the river?” They had apparently never thought of that. They dropped the hose and got a stream.

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Crossing the bridge, we viewed the fire as it swept on, devouring warehouse after warehouse on Lake Street. One after another succumbed in rapid succession but the last one—the corner of which is seen to the left of the large building in the centre of the picture—and every body hoped and prayed it might be saved. But after the others on that front had all fallen, it was seen to smoke near the cornice, and in a few moments—less time than it takes to write it—it was blazing from every window; and after extending its fiery arms to and embracing the frame building of STERNS & Co., opposite, it, too, fell to earth, a shapeless mass of brick and stone. The large building in the centre is the only one saved in the space from the river to the lake, and from two miles to the right of us to four miles to the left.

Across Lake Street the surging fire extends, and laps the cornices of the tall warehouses filled with wealth. The signs smoke, then blaze, and catch the window-frames, and in another moment the interior is a mass of fire, which rushes upward to join the mad whirl of the storm above. Now it has reached the river; and if the bridge can be saved, it can be confined to its present limits. Anxious eyes watch the bridge yonder. The crowd surge back and forth—and “Ah! there’s a stream! It will be saved!” A few moments of suspense, and some one says, “The elevator is on fire.” “No; that’s the reflection of the fire.” Every eye is turned that way with the utmost anxiety. The smoke is so dense that we can hardly see. It blows aside, and what was the reflection of the fire is now a lurid glare of flame. It is doomed. Two, three minutes more, and it is a monstrous pyramid of flame and thick, black smoke, solid as stone. “My God! look there! there are men on the top.” “No!” “Wait a moment until the smoke clears away.” “Yes, there are—three, five. They’re lost! See! they are suffocating. They have crept to the corner. O God! is there no help for them? What are they doing? They are drawing something up; ’tis a rope.” They fasten it; and just as the flames burst out around them the first one slides over the parapet and down, followed by one after another until the whole are saved, thank God! A universal cry of relief goes up from the crowd, and we turn to other points. “On the north side the flames, now having more digestible food than brick and stone, go leaping, dancing, and surging away over miles of territory, “growing by what they feed upon,” until, as far as the eye can see to the right and left, all is flame and smoke.

Let those of your readers who are familiar with New York imagine Broadway to be the river, and the East River to be the lake; then imagine the *whole* of the city from the Battery to Grand Street in flames—one-half of that space covered with such buildings as the *Herald* build-

ing, *Times* building, City Hall, and such blocks as STEWART’S, the Metropolitan and St. Nicholas hotels, all burning with such a blaze as swept upward from Barnum’s Museum; add to this a gale of wind as severe as any you ever experience in the city—and they can form some faint conception of the scene which I have been attempting to describe, but to which no human language can do justice.

And who shall attempt to depict the scenes of misery, the agony of suffering, among that mass of people which was surging back and forth, to and fro, in every direction, on the west side? In every door-way were groups and families, on the curbs, in the gutters, every where—in the dépôts, in the stores, wherever there was shelter, and where there was none—they could be seen huddled around their little all that the flames had spared, with misery depicted on their countenances and with despair in their hearts. I leave these scenes to more powerful pens than mine, for I too had my load of painful anxiety to bear. Where was the young friend with whom I had parted the night before? He had been burned out, and was homeless. ’Twas in vain to seek him among those thousands: I might pass and repass him a hundred times in the crowds in the streets; and late in the afternoon I was reluctantly compelled, for the sake of my family, who knew I had been stopping at the Sherman, to leave for some place whence I could telegraph of my safety. Seeking out the Indianapolis Dépôt, I purchased my ticket and awaited the opportunity to depart. Hour after hour passed in the presence of scenes of misery, the fire all the time spreading northward, until, at 7.25 P.M., we started away from the doomed city out on to the prairie. As we got away and looked back we could realize the extent of the territory, and I send you a sketch of the scene as it appeared from the windows of the train. Forty miles away we still saw the brilliant flames looming above the doomed city. JOHN R. CHAPIN.

OUR ILLUSTRATIONS.

OUR illustrations this week, referred to in general terms in the preceding article, deserve special attention. That on page 1004 represents the terrible rush for life over Randolph-street Bridge, so graphically described in our correspondent’s letter. On the left of the picture will be noticed the incident of five men escaping from a burning roof by means of a rope. The double-page illustration will enable our readers to form some conception of the sombre desolation that hung over the city as the night of Monday drew on. Three of the illustrations on page 1013 show the general character of the buildings which have been swept away by the fire. They are drawn from photographs furnished through the courtesy of Messrs. ANTHONY, of this city. Probably no city in the Union possessed a greater number of elegant public and private buildings than Chicago; and of these only one, the residence of Mr. WILLIAM B. OGDEN, remains in the burned district. It owed its safety to its isolation in spacious open grounds. The pathetic sketch by Mr. REINHART, printed on our front page, conveys a more graphic idea than can be expressed in words of the privations and sufferings endured by the multitudes who sought refuge in the parks and fields from the devastating flames.

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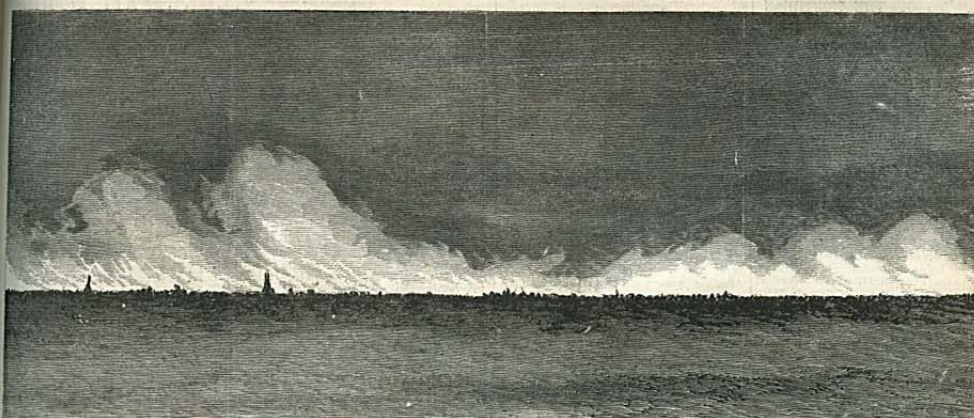
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OCTOBER 28, 1871.]

HARPER'S WEEKLY.

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THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION, AS SEEN FROM THE PRAIRIE.—[SKETCHED BY JOHN R. CHAPIN.]



THE "TRIBUNE" BUILDING.



THE PALMER HOUSE.



THE SHEPARD BLOCK, DEARBORN STREET.



BURNING OF THE CENTRAL GRAIN-ELEVATORS AT THE MOUTH OF THE CHICAGO RIVER.—[FROM A SKETCH BY H. SMITH.]

THE BURNING OF CHICAGO.—[SEE PAGE 1010.]

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