

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE: OCTOBER 8-10, 1871

In October 1871, Chicago was the fourth largest city in the United States with over 334,000 residents. Over 60,000 buildings (90% made of wood) were squeezed into the city limits, along with hundreds of miles of wooden streets and sidewalks. The city was also the country's woodworking center, home to dozens of furniture manufacturers and lumberyards. In addition, the previous two months had been unseasonably dry, as the city had seen only one inch of rain since July. In short, Chicago in 1871 was a tinderbox and the city employed only 185 firefighters.

Shortly before 9pm on Sunday, October 8, 1871, a fire started in a barn owned by Patrick and Catherine O'Leary. Although firemen responded within minutes, the fire had already spread to nearby barns and houses, engulfing thirty buildings in as many minutes. By that point the scarcity of fire personnel combined with the strong winds sweeping through the dry, wooden environment effectively doomed the city. Fire Marshal Robert A. Williams later described the blaze as "a hurricane of fire and cinders." Over the course of the next thirty hours, the fire consumed nearly 18,000 buildings, killing over 300 residents and leaving another 100,000 homeless. A rainstorm on the morning of Tuesday, October 10, finally extinguished the flames, but parts of the city were so hot that it took another two days before inspectors and rescue personnel could reach all of the areas that had been destroyed.

The response to the fire, and the subsequent investigations and policy changes, represent some of the earliest examples of modern emergency response practices. For example, by the afternoon of Monday, October 9, fire engines and firefighters began arriving in Chicago from elsewhere in Illinois and from cities as far away as Milwaukee and Cincinnati, illustrating the growing sense of community among the fire profession during times of overwhelming emergency. Also, the importance of a well-funded, properly trained fire department was now recognized as a fundamental necessity in large cities. Prior to the fire, the underfunded Chicago Fire Department had requested that the city hire more men, build more fire hydrants, and create a fire inspection department, but the city declined, afraid that higher taxes would inhibit the growth of business. After Chicago was destroyed, city governments elsewhere in the country found it difficult to ignore the importance of well-funded fire and emergency departments.

The later investigations into the cause of the fire and the city's response were also contemporary in nature, not only due to their thoroughness but also because of the widespread coverage by journalists from across the United States. The Chicago Board of Police and Fire Commissioners conducted an official investigation into the cause of the fire, focusing on the O'Leary family and their barn, but the commissioners never determined a definite cause. One popular myth had the fire starting when one of the O'Leary cows knocked over a kerosene lantern while being milked by Mrs. O'Leary, but the false story was later attributed to an anti-Irish journalist trying to lay the blame for the fire entirely on the immigrant family. Historians have since exonerated Mrs. O'Leary and her cow, but the exact cause of the fire remains unknown to this day.