



GREAT CHICAGO FIRES

HISTORIC BLAZES THAT SHAPED A CITY

by David Cowan

“The hand of God and the lack of fire escapes.”

—Carl Sandburg, “Anna Imroth”

The Story of Chicago’s Other “Great” Fires

Perhaps no other city in America identifies itself with fire quite like Chicago does; certainly no other city cites a great conflagration as the cornerstone of its will and identity. No history of Chicago can be complete without discussing the effects fire has had on the city—effects that have been both revolutionary and disastrous.

Infernos of International Influence

The Great Chicago Fires was not the only infamous blaze the city has seen. As Chicago changed from agrarian outpost to industrial giant, time and again it would be visited by some of the worst infernos in American history—fires that sparked not only banner headlines but, more importantly, critical upgrades in fire safety laws across the globe.

From Fort Dearborn to Present Day

Cowan follows the colorful evolution of Chicago’s firefighting forces from early 19th-century citizen bucket brigades to the armada of the modern day fire department, lacing his narrative with the dangers of his profession, including a vivid account of one of the worst days in American fire service history when 21 firefighters died battling a fire at Chicago’s Union Stockyards.

The Details Behind the Disasters

In transporting readers beyond the fireline and into the ruins, Cowan brings readers up close to the heroism, awe, and devastation generated by the fires that shaped Chicago.

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