

LIBBY HILL



↪ **Award-winning author,**
The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History

↪ **Chicago River expert**

↪ **Debunker,**
Urban legend of Chicago's 1885 cholera epidemic

“There is a woman named Libby Hill who is in love with rivers.”

—Rick Kogan, *Chicago Tribune Magazine*, “*Dream Rivers*,” November 12, 2000

“Countless histories of Chicago mention devastating 1885 epidemics triggered by a flood that washed unspeakable filth into the city’s water supply. According to numerous sources available from the last fifty years, as many as ninety thousand Chicagoans—12 percent of the city’s population—succumbed to the life-draining waterborne diseases of cholera, typhoid, and dysentery. It is a shocking tale of a vibrant metropolis laid low by ungovernable nature and disease. And it never happened. . . . **[I]t is the historian’s duty to set records straight. The truth matters and can be just as intriguing as fiction.**”

—Libby Hill, *Journal of Illinois History*, “The Chicago Epidemic of 1885: An Urban Legend?,” Autumn 2006

“. . . **For the facts we turn to *The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History*** by Libby Hill (2000). Hill informs us that sanitary facilities in Chicago were wholly inadequate in 1885: sewers emptied into the Chicago River; after heavy rains, runoff caused sewage to flow far out into the lake, the city’s source of fresh water. A torrential storm on August 2 of that year dropped five and a half inches of rain on the city in 19 hours, which under other circumstances might have meant disaster. To the relief of all, however, nothing happened, possibly because winds were out of the northeast, which may have kept effluent from reaching the water intake two miles offshore. No cholera deaths were reported (the disease was unknown in Chicago after the 1860s), and the typhoid rate for the year was only slightly above average. Typhoid deaths during the 1880s never exceeded 1,000, peaking in 1891 at 1,700. (Alarmed by the 1885 close call, the city undertook the massive canal project that permanently reversed the flow of the river and ended the typhoid threat.) You can’t blame the *Tribune* for repeating a local legend—Hill tells me she’s still trying to figure out where the story originated. What’s surprising is that even though her impressively researched book was cited in the letter to the editor you saw and is available from the public library, the *Trib* refused to face the facts. . . .”

—Cecil Adams, *Chicago Reader*, “The Straight Dope,” November 12, 2004

“**The expert seems to agree.** Libby Hill told me that she researched the cholera epidemic by studying copies of the *Tribune* and *Daily News* from August 1885. She read every newspaper from August 1 to August 19, expecting to find stories of coffins rolling through the streets. ‘It just wasn’t there,’ she said.”

—Ted Kleine, *Chicago Reader*, Letters, “A Mistake of Epidemic Proportions,” June 14, 2002

“In a Sept. 6 Tempo section story on the Chicago River, mention was made of a cholera epidemic in 1885. Similar mentions were made in a *Tribune Magazine* article on March 25, 2004, and in a Metro section story in 1997. An 1885 epidemic also is cited on a Friends of the River Web site and on a UIC site. All seem to be the result of what Libby Hill, author of *The Chicago River*, calls an ‘urban legend.’ *Tribune* archives and public health records do not note such an occurrence, and the number of purported deaths—80,000 to 90,000—would have been far too many not to have been noted. Hill is now researching the origin of this epidemic that wasn’t.”

—*Chicago Tribune*, “Corrections and Clarifications,” September 29, 2005

“The Aug. 13 news story “In Chicago, a ‘Living River’ Brings a Lively Debate” repeats the urban legend that an estimated 80,000 Chicagoans died in a typhoid epidemic in the 1880s.

The typical version of the story has epidemics of cholera, typhoid and other waterborne diseases killing 12 percent of the population.

My research shows that the epidemics, usually attributed to a severe flood on Aug. 2, 1885, never occurred. The highest number of deaths from typhoid in any year in the 1880s was fewer than 1,000, in 1881.

In 1891, the all-time peak year, 1,700 people died of that disease.”

—Libby Hill, letter to the editor, *Washington Post*

“. . . the demolition of the Sun-Times Building and its replacement with a significant structure is a culminating event in the history of the riverscape.”

—Libby Hill quoted in Gary Wisby’s “Sun-Times move means end of era for river,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, January 23, 2005

More towns need to appreciate the Chicago River

“. . . Northbrook is a superb example of a community that is highlighting the importance of the northern reaches of the Chicago River. Many people, not only visitors to Chicago, think of the Chicago River as that portion flowing through the downtown Chicago canyon of architectural gems. That reach of the river system, however, is only a small, though dramatic, part of the story. It flows approximately 1.5 miles.

“The North Branch with its three forks flows approximately 79 miles. In Lake County, where its upper waters gather around Park City, the river flows through Waukegan, North Chicago, Lake Bluff, Lake Forest, Green Oaks, a small corner of Mettawa, Riverwoods, Lincolnshire, Bannockburn, Deerfield and Highland Park. In Cook County, it flows through Glencoe, Northfield, Northbrook, Winnetka, Golf, Morton Grove and Niles. Wilmette, Skokie, Evanston and Lincolnwood lie along the North Shore Channel. After the North Branch reaches Chicago’s northern boundary at Devon, it flows through 37 Chicago neighborhoods.

“. . . If more citizens, especially students, in many of these communities were familiar with and connected to the river, more communities might emulate Northbrook in appreciating the waterway as an amenity for themselves and for communities upstream and downstream. Familiarity with the river could lead citizens all along the watershed to support the river’s rehabilitation.”

—Libby Hill, letter to the editor, *Chicago Tribune*, Voice of the People, December 3, 2001

“Historian Libby Hill established in her 2000 book *The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History* that the story was fiction — while there was a big rainstorm in 1885, favorable winds kept sewage out of the tap water — but didn’t know where it originated. Now she does.”

—Cecil Adams, *Chicago Reader*, “The Straight Dope,” April 27, 2007