



City in Crisis: Lessons from the Great Chicago Fire Gallery Video Transcript

Approx. Lexile Range – 610 -1000L (Lexile range 644-950L recommended for grades 3-5)

We recommend this script be used in conjunction with viewing the video *City in Crisis: Lessons from the Great Chicago Fire* at <https://www.chicagohistory.org/education/field-trips/virtual-field-trips/>

Hello! My name is Heidi and I work in the education department of the Chicago History Museum. I'm standing at the entrance to our exhibition all about Chicago's history called Chicago: Crossroads of America. This exhibition explores Chicago's changing economy, challenging crises, diverse neighborhoods and groundbreaking innovations. Each video in our series will explore a different story told in the exhibition. Let's go inside and see some more!

On October 8, 1871, the Great Chicago Fire began in the O'Leary barn on the Southwest side of the city. On our tour today, we are going to explore what happened during and right after the fire. We will think about how disasters shape cities. We will also consider the lessons we can learn from the past when we face challenges today.

Time: 03:48- Write down what you know about the Great Chicago Fire and any questions you have. As you watch the video you can check off things already on your list and add new information.

Do you know this building? It is the Water Tower, one of the few buildings left standing after the fire. It became a symbol of the city's survival and rebuilding. It still stands today! By 1871 Chicago was a city growing very quickly. More than 300,000 people called Chicago home. There was a small community of African Americans, about 300 people. Most of the rest of the people were White, around 99% of the population, but almost half of them were new immigrants, mainly coming from Germany and Ireland. The other half were people whose families had moved here from states like New York, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. The old settlers were not always welcoming to the new immigrants. As we have seen in other times through our history, the old settlers didn't understand the traditions the new immigrants brought with them from their home countries. Because of prejudice the poor Irish and the African American people lived in separate neighborhoods. Whether old or new, rich or poor, most Chicagoans lived in homes made of wood.

This model shows a way of building that was popular at the time called balloon frame construction. This type of building used nails and standard size wood, which meant that people without a lot of training could build simple houses. Wood was easy to get, since it was shipped to Chicago from our neighboring states of Wisconsin and Michigan. It was cheap and a quick way to build. The city was also proud of its miles of wooden streets and sidewalks, which kept people and carriages out of the mud. But I'm sure you can think of one big problem with using so much wood to build the growing city!

Chicagoan's were used to fires. In addition to the many wooden buildings, businesses used coal, a type of rock that is found underground and can be burned for power and heating. People used kerosene, a kind of oil in lanterns for light. All this created a high risk for fire. The fire department was kept very busy! During the summer and fall of 1871 Chicago had a long period of hot, dry weather. On the evening of Saturday October 7th, a fire broke out in a lumber yard along the Chicago River. Firefighters fought the blaze for hours, but four city blocks burned before the fire was put out.

Time: 03:48-Take a close look at this drawing. It shows the popular myth of how the Great Chicago Fire began. It puts the blame on Mrs. O'Leary and her cow kicking over a lantern. Find the details in the drawing that show that story.

Mrs. O'Leary was blamed for many, many years, but that story is not true. Mrs. O'Leary was asleep when the fire broke out in her barn. Like many other Chicagoans of the time, her family had a barn and kept animals. Many people had cows, pigs, chickens, and horses, in wooden barns filled with hay. To this day, we don't know how the fire began. But we do know it started in the O'Leary barn. Unfortunately, the firefighters were accidentally sent to the site of the Saturday night fire because they thought it had started up again. When they finally made it to the O'Leary's neighborhood, the fire was already burning out of control. It moved fast through the wooden homes and barns and was helped along by a strong wind.

This painting, called Memories of the Chicago Fire was made by a woman named Julia Lemos. Julia lived through the fire with her five children and two elderly parents.

Time: 04:57-What words would you use to describe the mood of this painting? What makes you say that?

The fire spread very quickly, jumping the south branch of the Chicago River. It moved through the downtown area burning hotels, stores, banks and even the Court House. It jumped the main branch of the river and burned the waterworks building which housed the machines that pumped the water. The tower which held water, now with no way to pump it out to firefighters was left standing. When the waterworks burned, firefighters no longer had water in their hoses. The fire kept going, destroying Northside neighborhoods. As the fire burned, thousands of Chicagoans were running out of its path. Some crowded onto bridges over the river. Others tried to find safety by the shores of Lake Michigan, some even wading into the water. The fire burned all day and through the night of Monday, October 9th. It finally died out early the next morning on the 10th. It had reached a part of the city with little left to burn and it began to rain. The fire burned a path over four miles long and a mile wide. Sadly, over 300 people died and over 100,000 people were left homeless. More than 18,000 buildings were destroyed.

A young boy named Justin wrote this letter to a friend along with a picture he drew showing his family's escape from the fire.



Time: 06:28-Take a look at the picture he drew of his family. What do you think people needed when the fire was over?

The mayor of Chicago, Roswell Mason, along with other city officials got to work right away. They made rules to keep people safe. One of the rules told people to stop using kerosene lanterns. They also set the price of bread, so that people would not be overcharged. The mayor formed a temporary Relief Committee. The committee organized people to walk through unburnt areas of the city to make sure no new fires broke out. They ordered churches and schools that were still standing to provide food and shelter for the homeless. The committee also gave out food, clothing, blankets, and other supplies. Cities from around the country and even other countries, sent money and supplies to help Chicago.

Just a few days after the fire, a private organization called the Relief and Aid Society took over the work of the Mayor's temporary relief committee. This organization had more experience in helping people. They quickly made groups to work on different recovery needs such as health care and housing. Sometimes decisions were made that weren't fair. For example, skilled workers who could help rebuild the city, were given single-family homes to live in. But less skilled workers were given shelter in barrack buildings that housed a lot of people. Unfortunately, instead of treating all people equally, this system helped some people more than others. It separated people by how much money they made.

Time: 08:15-What can we learn from the recovery efforts after the Great Chicago Fire to help us when we have disasters today? How can we ensure everyone gets the help they need?

The fire affected different people in different ways. Some like Julia Lemos and Justin shared their experiences in writings and drawings for us to learn from. Many people left Chicago and never came back. Others moved somewhere else temporarily. One way or another, people who survived the fire had to start all over again. They needed to find work and a place to live. Mrs. O'Leary was cleared of blame for the fire by an investigation. Sadly, many people still blamed her anyway. As an Irish immigrant woman, they found it easy to point the finger at her. Even though there were many reasons the fire burned so quickly and strongly, including human mistakes, the myth of Mrs. O'Leary and her cow is still told today.

Time: 09:30- Chicago today is a very diverse city, home to people of different races and classes. Unfortunately, today like in 1871, there are tensions between groups of people. How can we respect and celebrate our differences, so that Chicago is a welcoming place for all people?

The fire changed the city physically. New laws were passed to make buildings safer. One rule was that all buildings downtown had to be made of brick or stone. The rubble from the fire was carried away by wagons and brought to the lakefront. This changed our shoreline and created new spaces called landfill to build on. Today, Grant Park sits on some of this land. Architects came to Chicago and began to experiment with new materials such as steel and new ways of building. Soon Chicago became famous for its skyscrapers.

Time: 10:30-How do you think the fire changed Chicago? What kinds of choices should we make in the future if we find ourselves in a similar situation?

The needs Chicagoan's had right after the fire are not very different from the needs of people today who live through disasters. The decisions made by government, charities, and even individuals, affect people. These choices also shape communities for many years to come. The water tower has become a symbol in Chicago of the city's ability to get through hard times. Learning about history from objects big, like the water tower, or small like a photograph, helps us plan better for the future and reminds us that we can do great things, even in difficult times.

Time: 11:10-What symbol would you choose to show your own strength?

This script was researched and written by Heidi Moisan, Chicago History Museum school programs manager. Thank you to the following Museum staff members for their thoughtful review: Julius L. Jones, assistant curator; Nancy Villafranca-Guzmán, vice president for Education and Engagement; and the Chicago History Museum's Teacher Advisory Board.

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