

ChicagoHistoryMuseum

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HOLD CHICAGO HISTORY AND YOUR IPHONE IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND

A new mobile app and online exhibition offer amazing new ways to explore Chicago's past

CHICAGO (OCTOBER 3, 2011) – It seems there's an app for everything. Now, just in time for the 140th anniversary of the Great Chicago Fire on October 8, a new mobile app will make it possible to walk Chicago streets and travel through time, holding Chicago history and an iPhone in the palm of your hand.

The iPhone app – available for 99 cents at the Apple Online Store -- is part of a complete revision and major expansion of "The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory," launching also as a website at www.greatchicagofire.org on October 8.

A collaboration of the Chicago History Museum (CHM) and Northwestern University, the original online exhibition was launched in 1996 to rave reviews on the 125th anniversary of the fire that captured the American imagination and forever changed Chicago.

"The app and updated online exhibition take full advantage of 2011 technologies to achieve an historic immediacy previously unimaginable," says Carl Smith, Northwestern's Franklyn Bliss Snyder Professor of English and American Studies and the award-winning cultural historian who curated "The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory."

Fifteen years ago, the online exhibition broke through the space limitations of museum walls, and gave anyone anywhere access to what arguably was and remains the most extensive online treatment of a single historical event. Now the iPhone app will physically guide you through some of the places where Chicago history was made and, through texts and images, show how the city developed. "The Chicago History Museum is committed to making our collection and the compelling stories from the city's history more accessible through new technology", says Gary Johnson, CHM president, "and no story illuminates Chicago's past more powerfully than the Fire. We are thrilled to partner with Northwestern University to develop this amazing app." An app customized for the iPad will be offered at a later date.

Few, if any, mobile cultural heritage tour apps or online history exhibitions can match the intellectual depth that Smith's extraordinary scholarship and the richness that access to CHM's unparalleled collections make possible. The content is equivalent to a 400-page book with more than 350 illustrations.

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The mobile app provides tours of 10 distinct Chicago areas and 54 fire-related landmarks, from the famed Water Tower (that miraculously survived the fire) to City Hall (that did not). Other landmarks include Holy Name Cathedral, Field & Leiter (the department store that later became Marshall Field and Co.), the Michigan Avenue lakefront, and the former city cemetery in Lincoln Park where Chicagoans escaping the fire took refuge.

Stand at the site where Mrs. O'Leary's cow was said to have started the Fire and you can read a page from the handwritten transcript of O'Leary's testimony in which she insists she knew little about the fire's origins. Visit the Water Tower and view images of it before the fire, immediately after, and, in the years that followed when its claim as one of the city's tallest buildings fell short among the city's burgeoning skyscrapers.

With funding from the Guild of the Chicago History Museum, the hundreds of images and artifacts were scanned in ultra-high resolution, allowing users to zoom in and view them in extraordinary detail. "In 1996, there simply wasn't the capacity, network speed, or data to see things at the granular level that we offer today," says Harlan Wallach, media architect at Northwestern University Information Technology (NUIT), the department that designed the website and mobile app.

Seen in full, a photograph of an enormous map from 1857 based on a drawing by I.T. Palmatary, provides a remarkably detailed view of pre-fire Chicago. "Zoom in and you can see every individual building, house, tree, person, and animal in this magnificent lithograph--it's an extraordinary educational tool that will allow students, teachers, and anyone curious about Chicago to discover overlooked aspects of its history," says Russell Lewis, CHM's executive vice president and chief historian. "It's magic to read the notes on a Chicago street map handwritten by a man who carefully surveyed the ruined city immediately after the fire in an effort to document the damage, or to zoom in on the post-fire remains of City Hall and read a broadside instructing displaced residents where to go for aid," Smith says. "You would never notice that broadside, let alone be able to read it looking at the original photo. The high-resolution images and zooming capability bring the past visually back to life in ways that are always arresting and often deeply moving."

Other features will include comparative photograph panoramic views of Chicago taken from the top of City Hall in 1858 and 2011, recordings of popular fire songs by soprano Patrice Michaels, a timeline profile of cultural life in 1871 culled from newspapers of the time, stereographic photographs viewable in 3-D, and more than 20 personal memoirs by people who experienced the fire firsthand.

The personal memoirs are part of the "Web of Memory" portion of the site and app, which is devoted to the different ways in which the legendary fire has entered cultural memory. "The Great Chicago Fire" portion offers a history of the disaster and the city's response and recovery.

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The development of the Great Fire app is part of a part of a long and fruitful partnership between NUIT Academic and Research Technologies, Northwestern University scholars, and the Chicago History Museum, which has resulted in a number of critically acclaimed online presentations over the past fifteen years. NUIT Academic and Research Technologies' ongoing efforts to take advantage of desktop and laptop computers, tablets, and smart phones to bring scholarship to a broader audience in a way that is at once accessible, appealing, and deep match up with CHM's mission to support history education and fulfill its role as a premier research institution. "Northwestern University has been an ideal partner," says Johnson, "and we are very proud of all we have accomplished together to place Chicago's history in the hands of the public."

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The Chicago History Museum, a major museum and research center for Chicago and American history, is located at 1601 N. Clark Street. The Museum can be reached by CTA buses 11, 22, 36, 72, 73, 151, and 156. Parking is conveniently located one block north of the Museum at Clark and LaSalle Streets (enter on Stockton Drive). Admission to the Museum is \$14 adults with audio tour, \$12 seniors/students with audio tour, free for children 12 years and younger. Please call 312.642.4600 or visit us at www.chicagohistory.org. The Chicago History Museum is affiliated with the Chicago Historical Society and acknowledges the Chicago Park District's generous support of all the Museum's activities.