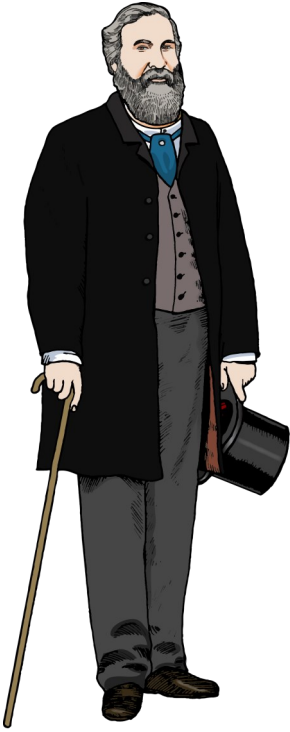


## Meet Joel Bigelow



Joel Bigelow and his twin brother were born in Tecumseh, Ontario, Canada, on November 9, 1828. Their parents, Mary and Hiram, moved the family to Lindsay, Ontario, when the boys were 13 years old. In 1850, Joel and his brother opened their own business, a **general store**.

In 1856, Joel married Mary Ann Dryden. Joel and Mary Ann had their first child, a son named Hiram, in 1860. The family moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1864 and later moved again to Chicago. In Chicago, Joel opened a **mercantile store**, and their family grew. Their daughter Sarah Eliza was born in 1868.

Sadly, the Great Chicago Fire destroyed Joel's store. But Joel felt hopeful about the future. His family was safe. He also had **insurance**. He knew that meant he would have the money he needed to rebuild. On October 10, 1871, Joel wrote his brothers, who lived in Ontario, a letter. With the letter he also included a hand-drawn map. The map showed the area of the city that burned during the fire.

Joel started his letter by writing: "My dear Brothers, it is my painful duty to write to you of the sad **misfortune** that has **befallen** Chicago." Joel shared that he was thankful that after the fire, he had a house to sleep in. He wrote that thousands of Chicagoans lost their homes.

Joel described the kinds of buildings that burned in the fire and noted their locations on his map. He listed the loss of the Court House, the Post Office, hotels, theaters, museums, banks, and

newspaper buildings. His letter gives us an idea of the challenges the city faced in meeting the needs of people. He explained that bridges across the Chicago River burned, making it hard to get around. The fire also destroyed utilities. This meant that there was no gas for lights or water to drink. Joel wrote that the buildings “. . . are all in ruins. My store among the rest.”

Joel’s letter captures the sadness and uncertainty after a disaster. He wrote: “there must be many lives lost. . . . I am informed 30 are missing on the North Side. There are so many reports one doesn’t know what to believe.”

But his letter also shares good news. He shared that St. Louis and Milwaukee sent replacement fire engines to Chicago. Also, railroad companies gave out free train tickets to people who wanted to leave the city. People around the country sent food and supplies, and a system of giving them to people in need was set up.

Joel was hopeful. He ended his letter by writing, “we are all as well as could be expected after the excitement we have gone through.” He even encouraged his brothers to **invest** a little money in Chicago. He was sure the city would come back stronger than ever.

Joel Bigelow was a **resilient** person. In 1874 there was another large fire in Chicago. His store burned for a second time! But that did not stop him. He had started to buy land, and he was able to stay in Chicago and support his family even after the second fire. Joel passed away when he was 68 years old in 1896. His letter and map are important pieces of Chicago’s history. They help us understand how the Great Chicago Fire affected people. They also show us how the city started to rebuild and recover.

### Vocabulary:

**General Store:** a store, often in a small town, that sells a wide variety of goods

**Mercantile Store:** a larger store, often organized into departments, such as clothing, jewelry, housewares, and toys

**Insurance:** when a person pays a company to protect them in case of loss or damage to their property; if something goes wrong, the insurance company will pay the person

**Misfortune:** an unfortunate condition or event; bad luck

**Befallen:** to happen to, especially by chance

**Invest:** when a person uses their money to try to make more money—there are many ways people invest money, such as buying property, businesses, or stocks in companies

**Resilient:** when a person is able to get through and recover from a difficult situation