



Chicago River



INSTRUCTOR NOTE

Ask students to locate the blue stripes on their Chicago flag. The stripes represent Lake Michigan and the north and south branches of the Chicago River. The Chicago River is not only a gateway to the Great Lakes, but it is also a route to the Mississippi River and from there, the Atlantic Ocean. This narrative is told in the voice of the river itself. Review the following vocabulary list with students prior to reading the narrative.

Vocabulary

glaciers—large bodies of ice

carved—cut

to take advantage—to use for one's own purpose

goods—things that are bought and sold

docked—parked, usually referring to a ship

tragedy—a bad thing to have happen

leapt—jumped

sewage—human waste

mast—the long piece of wood or metal that supports a sail or sails on a boat



Narrative

Thousands of years ago the glaciers that covered Illinois carved me out. At my deepest point I am twenty-six feet deep. Fifty-two thousand boats of different sizes carry people and goods on me every year. I may not be as big as Lake Michigan, but I am just as important. **1 What do you think I am?**

Let me tell you a little more about myself. The Indians were the first people to take advantage of me. From Lake Michigan they paddled their canoes onto me and then onto the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers. From there, they could enter one of the longest rivers in the world: the Mississippi.

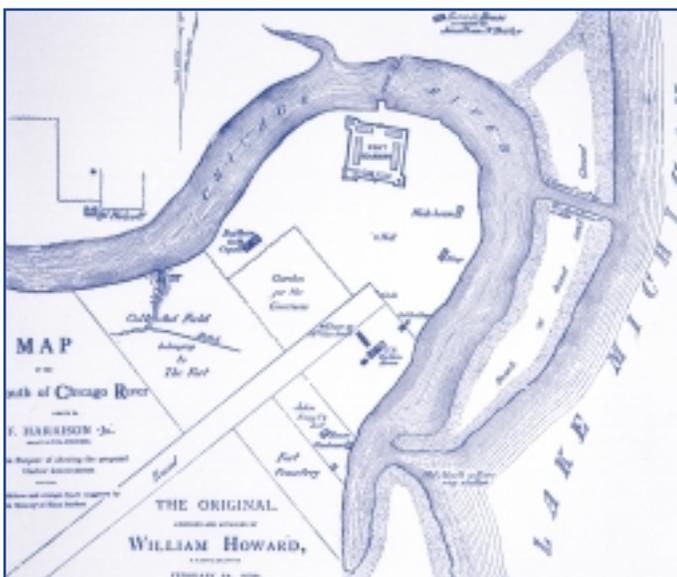
As I said, Indians were the first people to use me. However, the United States also began to see how valuable I was for transporting goods. In 1804, the U.S. government wanted to make sure they had control of me,

so they built a fort on my banks. **2 What was the name of this fort?** **3 Do you think a lot of people lived here along my banks?** In the early 1800s, my banks looked like this:



South Water Street

It was good to be located so close to a major waterway. As more and more people and boats began to use me, Chicago got bigger. I helped Chicago grow into a large industrial city. Businesses could move their goods on a boat and, once the boat docked in Chicago, the goods could be transferred to a train. Once on the train the goods traveled to places in the United States that are far away from Chicago. By 1871 more ships docked on me than at the ports of New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, San Francisco, Charleston, and Mobile combined. Also in that



Early map of the Chicago River

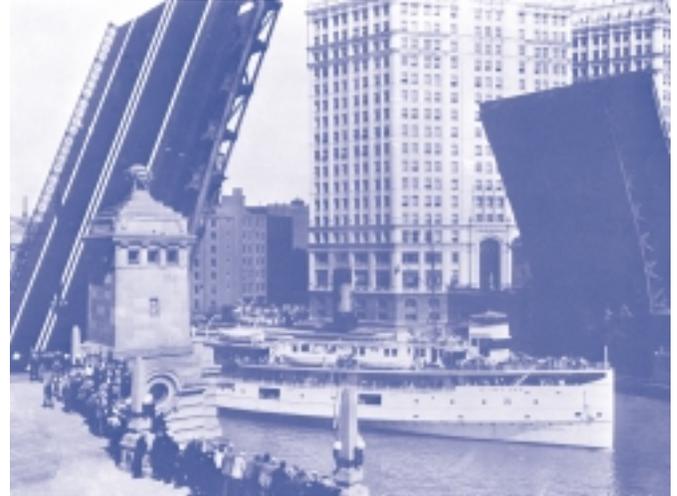


Narrative

same year, a very awful thing happened to Chicago. **4 What tragedy happened to the city in 1871?** The Great Chicago Fire started on the south side. People rushed to my bank on the north side for safety during the fire. They hoped I could stop it, but the fire was so strong its flames leapt over me to the other side. Even though I wasn't able to stop the fire, I was able to help Chicago rebuild. Boats carried supplies on me to help rebuild a bigger and better Chicago.

In 1881, a terrible disease spread through Chicago. It turns out that sewage and industrial waste dumped into me flowed right into Lake Michigan—which is where Chicagoans then and even now get their drinking water. Thousands of people died from diseases called typhoid and cholera that travel in water. The city decided to reverse my flow by building the Sanitary and Ship Canal and installing a system of locks, so that I wouldn't flow into Lake Michigan, I would flow away from it! They actually did it! Fewer people died from typhoid in 1910 than in the 1890s. Now the drinking water is still safe, and I am the only river in the world that flows backwards.

Today my banks are lined with buildings: some that people live in, and some where people do business. I have fifty-two movable bridges. What do I mean by a movable bridge? Well, if a boat has a mast that is very tall, my bridges can split in half and rise up so the boat can pass through. Of course, this annoys many people who try to cross the



Bridge raising over the Chicago River

bridges because it takes about fifteen minutes for the bridge to go up, the boat to pass through, and then close again.

Quite a lot has happened to me since the days before Fort Dearborn. Today I look more like this:



Chicago River today



Activity

Explain to students that they are going to examine primary sources to find out more about the Chicago River: just the way real historians do. Explain that primary sources are a documentation of something by someone who was there. A primary source can be something written, like a letter, or it can be a photograph.

1 Review with students some of the facts from the narrative about the importance of rivers and the Chicago River in particular. Have students refer to a map to emphasize the Chicago River's importance among major waterways.

- **Where can boats travel to once they are on the Chicago River?**
- **Who were the first people to use the Chicago River? On what kinds of boats did they travel?**
- **Why did the city of Chicago reverse the flow of the Chicago River?**
- **How did the Chicago River help the city rebuild after the fire?**

2 Explain to students that they are going to look at photographs, a kind of primary source. Discuss with students that the Chicago Historical Society (as well as other museums) collects and takes care of primary sources. Museum collections help tell the story of the past and help us learn about our history as a city.

3 Ask students to turn to the *Chicago River Photo Analysis* in their scrapbooks. Allow students time to study the photographs and answer the questions. Ask students to share their responses with the group.

MATERIALS

- *Chicago River Photograph Analysis* student activity sheet (one set for each student)
- pencils
- map of Chicago or Illinois



Activity cont.

- 4 Now that students know all about the Chicago River, they can play the word game “Rowing Down the Chicago River.” If students enjoy singing, you can begin by singing the song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat,” but substitute “the Chicago River” in place of “the stream.” This game involves recall and forms a chain of vocabulary words about sights and sounds along the Chicago River. Tell students that while playing this game they will need to remember the narrative, think about the photographs of the river, and use their imagination to help identify the words they want to use. Begin with the phrase:

“Rowing down the Chicago River, I:
See...
Hear...
Smell...
Touch...”

Any of the above words can be used in a phrase. For example, you supply the first phrase:

“Rowing down the Chicago River, I see houses.”

Then a student supplies the next, repeating yours and adding their own:

“Rowing down the Chicago River, I see houses, and I hear birds.”

The next student repeats the first two phrases and adds a third:

“Rowing down the Chicago River I see houses, hear birds, and smell fish.”

Keep going until a student is unable to repeat the entire list from memory, or cannot think of a new word to add to the chain. Invite other students to assist the “stuck” student and keep going. End the game when you have created a thorough list of the sights, sounds, and smells of the Chicago River. During the game you may need to prompt students if they are having difficulty thinking of a word. To keep the pace moving, you may want to generate a list of words in advance or allow students to do the same. You can also play this game with students participating in small teams instead of individually.



Chicago River Photograph Analysis



Bind your scrapbook here.

Look at the photograph and answer the following questions.

- 1** Do you think this is an old or new photograph? How can you tell?
- 2** Describe the buildings along the river.
- 3** How many bridges do you see?
- 4** Besides boats, what other types of transportation do you see in the photograph?
- 5** Why do you think businesses would want to be located on a river a long time ago? Today?



Chicago River Photograph Analysis



Bind your scrapbook here.

Look at the photograph and answer the following questions.

- 1** How are the buildings in this photograph different from the buildings in the other photograph?
- 2** People live in some of these buildings. Why do you think people would want to live along a river?
- 3** How many bridges do you see?
- 4** Was this photograph taken earlier or later than the previous photograph?
How do you know?