



The Great Chicago Fire: Chicago Is Burning!



INSTRUCTOR NOTE

Ask students to locate the second star on the Chicago flag. This star stands for the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. Set the mood for students by explaining that they are going to hear about a terrible time in Chicago's history. Begin by telling them that in 1871 Chicago was the fastest growing city in the United States. Buildings went up every day—most made out of wood. The summer of 1871 had been very dry with little rain. Along the boulevards and streets of the city, the grass and trees were brown and brittle. Review the following vocabulary words with students before reading the “newspaper story.”

Vocabulary

declare—said with authority

ordinary—not unusual

ruined—destroyed

magnificent—wonderful

possessions—things people own

shelter—a safe place

property—land, buildings, and things people own

beloved—something that is loved



Narrative

**Extra! Extra!
Read All About It!**

CHICAGO BURNS!

Around 8:00 on the night of October 8, 1871, Patrick and Catherine O’Leary of 13 De Koven Street went to bed early to be well rested for the next day, when they were going to have much work to do. Mrs. O’Leary had to milk the cows, and Mr. O’Leary had to go to work. That evening, a neighbor, Daniel Sullivan came by to visit and saw that the O’Learys were in bed. He started to walk home, but from the corner of his eye, he saw a yellow flame dancing out of the O’Learys’ barn.

1 If you were Daniel Sullivan, what would you have done? “Fire! Fire!” he shouted. Sullivan ran into the barn to try and save the O’Learys’ cows. He was able to save one calf. Neighbors flew out of their homes with buckets of water. The fire had already jumped from the O’Learys’ barn to their houses. **2** Because the neighbors’ homes were also built out of wood, what do you think happened? Soon the entire neighborhood was in flames.

Meanwhile, a fireman named Mathias Schaffer was stationed at the city courthouse. From the courthouse tower he could see much of the city. When he saw smoke in the distance, Schaffer quickly told his assistant to signal the fire engines. The engines started off, but Schaffer realized he had mistakenly

sent them to the wrong location.

By 10:30 that night, the fire was declared out of control. **3** How did the buildings in Chicago help the fire spread? The wooden buildings burned quickly, which helped the fire speed toward the center of the city.

Fires were not unusual in Chicago, and people who could see the smoke went to bed thinking it was just another fire. But they were wrong. By 11:30 that night the fire had destroyed the West Side where the O’Learys lived. Then it jumped over the river and headed to the center of the city. Soon the fire ruined the *Chicago Tribune* building and destroyed the great hotels, businesses, and magnificent stores on State Street. Even the courthouse, where fireman Schaffer was on fire-spotting duty at the beginning of the blaze, burned.



People running from the fire over the Randolph Street bridge

4 What do you think people were doing by this time?



The Palmer House before the fire

Firefighters tried to stop the fire but were unsuccessful. By Monday night the fire once again jumped over the river and headed to the North Side. People rushed out of their homes carrying only a few possessions, looking for safety as they ran through the streets. People found shelter along Lake Michigan and in the large cemetery that was being converted to a green space called Lincoln Park. They also found shelter in the prairie that surrounded the city. On the third day of the fire, there were a few raindrops. The very tired Chicagoans looked up to the sky thinking this rain might possibly save them.

Finally, the flames died down. After three long days, Chicago was safe. As a result of



The ruins of the Palmer House after the fire

the fire, three hundred people had died, two hundred million dollars in property had been destroyed, and one hundred thousand people were left without homes. **5** **What do you think the people of Chicago did after the fire stopped?** On October 11, the day after the fire ended, William Kerfoot set up an office to continue his real estate business, the first building to appear in the business district after the fire. He hung this sign in front of a little shack: “All gone but wife children and energy.” Only four days after the fire started in the O’Leary barn, the people of Chicago showed their spirit and began to rebuild their beloved city.



Fire Facts

- The O’Learys’ barn, where the fire started, did burn down, but their nearby house did not.
- Although some buildings had brick facades, their shells were made out of wood and thus susceptible to the fire.
- The boundaries of the fire were Taylor Street to the south, Fullerton Avenue to the north, Halsted Street to the west, and the lake to the east.
- England donated more than seven thousand books to establish Chicago’s first free public library. The library opened in 1812 in a temporary location: a steel water tank.
- The *Chicago Tribune* building was totally destroyed. The editor for the *Cincinnati Commercial*, unprompted, sent the *Tribune* everything it would need to begin publishing the newspaper again.
- Much of the city’s infrastructure remained unharmed—including its water supply, sewage, and transportation systems—which enabled Chicago to rebuild quickly.

Sources

Lowe, David. *The Great Chicago Fire*. New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1979.

Murphy, Jim. *The Great Fire*. New York: Scholastic Inc., 1995.







ACTIVITY
3

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE



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Artifact Detective

Draw a melted artifact from the fire here.

Tell us about your artifact.

Some things you can write about:

- What was it made out of? (Describe its color and shape.)
- Who do you think used it?
- Where might it have been found?

Bind your scrapbook here.