

Excerpt from *The Great Fire* by Jim Murphy

The Great Fire of Chicago is considered the largest disaster of the 1800s. It is rumored to have started in the barn of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary.

It was Sunday and an unusually warm evening for October eighth, so Daniel "Peg Leg" Sullivan left his stifling little house in the west side of Chicago and went to visit neighbors. One of his stops was at the shingled cottage of Patrick and Catherine O'Leary. The one-legged Sullivan remembered getting to the O'Learys' house at around eight o'clock, but left after only a few minutes because the O'Leary family was already in bed. Both Patrick and Catherine had to be up very early in the morning: he to set off for his job as a laborer; she to milk their five cows and then deliver the milk to the neighbors.

Sullivan ambled down the stretch of land between the O'Learys' and their neighbor, crossed the street, and sat down on the wooden sidewalk in front of Thomas White's house. After adjusting his wooden leg to make himself comfortable, he leaned back against White's fence to enjoy the night.

The wind coming off the prairie had been strong all day, sometimes gusting wildly, and leaves scuttled along the streets; the sound of laughter and fiddle music drifted through the night. A party was going on at the McLaughlins' to celebrate the arrival of a relative from Ireland. Another neighbor, Dennis Rogan, dropped by the O'Learys' at eight-thirty, but he, too, left when he heard the family was in bed.

Fifteen minutes later, Sullivan decided to go home. As the driver of a wagon, he would need every ounce of strength come morning. It was while pushing himself up that Sullivan first saw the fire—a single tongue of flame shooting out the side of the O'Leary's barn.

Sullivan didn't hesitate a second. "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!" he shouted as loud as he could. Running clumsily across the dirt street, Sullivan made his way directly to the barn. There was no time to stop for help. The building was already burning fiercely and he knew that in addition to five cows, the O'Learys had a calf and a horse in there.

The barn's loft held over three tons of timothy hay, delivered earlier that day. Flames from the burning hay pushed against the roof and beams, almost as if they were struggling to break free. A shower of burning embers greeted Sullivan as he entered the building.

He untied the ropes of the cows, but the frightened animals did not move. On the other side of the barn, another cow and the horse were tied to the wall, straining get loose. Sullivan took a step toward them, then realized that the fire had gotten around behind him and might cut off any chance of escape in a matter of seconds. The heat was fiercely intense and blinding, and in his rush to flee, Sullivan slipped on the uneven floorboards and fell with a thud.

He struggled to get up and, as he did, Sullivan discovered that his wooden leg had gotten stuck between two boards and came off. Instead of panicking, he began hopping toward where he thought the door was. Luck was with him. He had gone a few feet when the O'Learys' calf bumped into him, and Sullivan

was able to throw his arms around its neck. Together, man and calf managed to find the door and safety, both frightened, both badly singed.

A shed attached to the barn was already engulfed by flames. It contained two tons of coal for the winter and a large supply of kindling wood. Fire ran along the dry grass and leaves, and took hold of a neighbor's fence. The heat from the burning barn, shed, and fence was so hot that the O'Learys' house, forty feet away, began to smolder. Neighbors rushed from their homes, many carrying buckets or pots of water. The sound of music and merrymaking stopped abruptly, replaced by the shout of "FIRE!". It would be a warning cry heard thousands of times during the next thirty-one hours.

Chicago in 1871 was a city ready to burn. The city boasted having 59,500 buildings, many of them— such as the Courthouse and the Tribune Building—large and ornately decorated. The trouble was that about two-thirds of all these structures were made entirely of wood. Many of the remaining buildings (even the ones proclaimed to be "fireproof") looked solid, but were actually jerrybuilt affairs; the stone or brick exteriors hid wooden frames and floors, all topped with highly flammable tar or shingle roofs. It was also a common practice to disguise wood as another kind of building material. The fancy exterior decorations on just about every building were carved from wood, then painted to look like stone or marble. Most churches had steeples that appeared to be solid from the street, but a closer inspection would reveal a wooden framework covered with cleverly painted copper or tin.

The situation was worst in the middle-class and poorer districts. Lot sizes were small, and owners usually filled them up with cottages, barns, sheds, and outhouses—all made of fast-burning wood, naturally. Because both Patrick and Catherine O'Leary worked, they were able to put a large addition on their cottage despite a lot size of just 25 by 100 feet. Interspersed in these residential areas were a variety of businesses— paint factories, lumberyards, distilleries, gasworks, mills, furniture manufacturers, warehouses, and coal distributors.

Wealthier districts were by no means free of fire hazards. Stately stone and brick homes had wood interiors, and stood side by side with smaller wood-frame houses. Wooden stables and other storage buildings were common, and trees lined the streets and filled the yards.

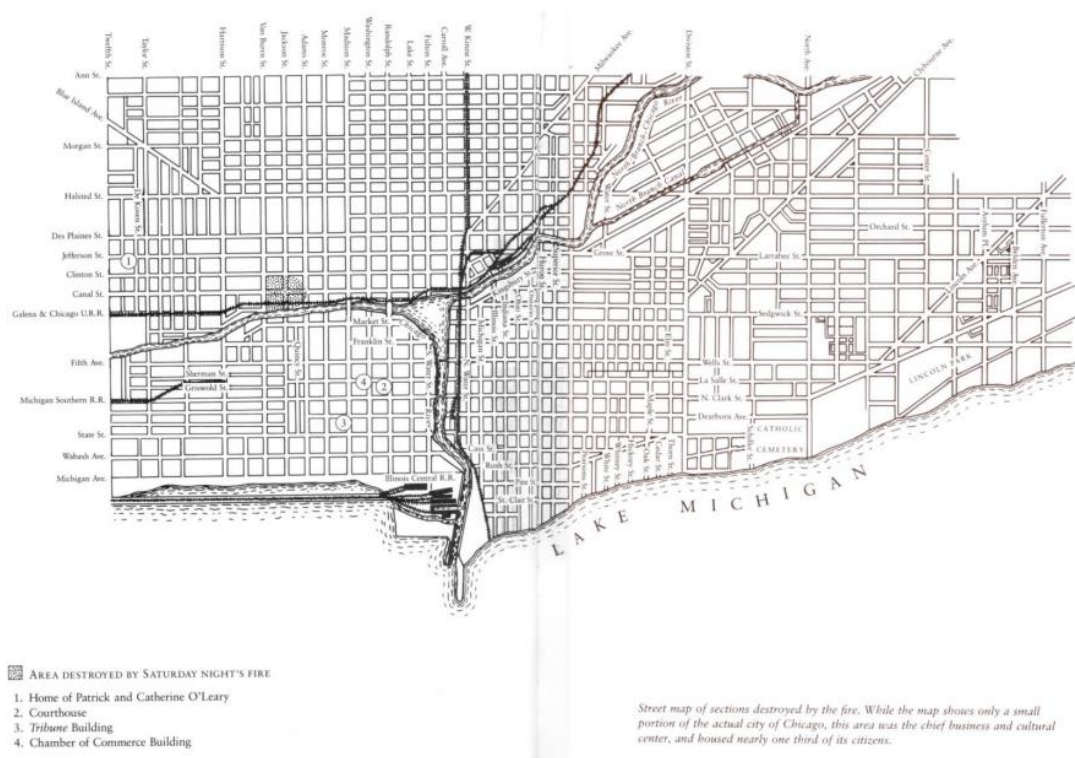
The links between richer and poorer sections went beyond the materials used for construction or the way buildings were crammed together. Chicago had been built largely on soggy marshland that flooded every time it rained. As the years passed and the town developed, a quick solution to the water and mud problem was needed. The answer was to make the roads and sidewalks out of wood and elevate them above the waterline, in some places by several feet. On the day the fire started, over 55 miles of pine-block streets and 600 miles of wooden sidewalks bound the 23,000 acres of the city in a highly combustible knot.

Fires were common in all cities back then, and Chicago was no exception. In 1863 there had been 186 reported fires in Chicago; the number had risen to 515 by 1868. Records for 1870 indicate that fire-fighting companies responded to nearly 600 alarms. The next year saw even more fires spring up, mainly because the summer had been unusually dry. Between July and October only a few scattered showers had taken place and these did not produce much water at all. Trees drooped in the unrelenting summer

sun; grass and leaves dried out. By October, as many as six fires were breaking out every day. On Saturday the seventh, the night before the Great Fire, a blaze destroyed four blocks and took over sixteen hours to control. What made Sunday the eighth different and particularly dangerous was the steady wind blowing in from the southwest.

It was this gusting, swirling wind that drove the flames from the O'Learys' barn into neighboring yards. To the east, a fence and shed of Jim Dalton's went up in flames; to the west, a barn smoldered for a few minutes, then flared up into a thousand yellow-orange fingers. Dennis Rogan had heard Sullivan's initial shouts about a fire and returned. He forced open the door to the O'Learys' house and called for them to wake up.

Street Map of the Sections of Chicago Destroyed by the Fire



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