

Vintage Chicago

A Cliff Dweller's History of Chicago

A Narrative History of Chicago in Six Eras

William J. Bowe

Dedication

This companion book to the interactive [Vintage Chicago Map](#) is dedicated to the many past, present, and future members of The Cliff Dwellers who have made and will continue to make significant contributions to Chicago's cultural life.

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About

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Origins of the Vintage Chicago History Project. I retired in 2014 with a hard drive containing more than 70,000 photographs and no plan for what to do with them. Most photos were the ordinary residue of a family and working life — vacations, business trips for United Press International and later Encyclopaedia Britannica, family visits here and in France — basically the accumulated clutter that comes from always having a camera at hand.

After retirement, with even more time on my hands, I turned my attention to collecting from online public sources old Chicago photographs, postcards, lithographs, maps, and artwork, and then adding them to my photo archive after geotagging and captioning them. By 2025, I had a substantial, well-organized collection of vintage Chicago pictures and absolutely no way for anyone else to see them.

The arrival in 2025 of artificial intelligence platforms and one of its computer code-writing progeny, Anthropic's Claude, helped me to create the interactive [Vintage Chicago Map](#). By writing some 50,000 lines of code gobbledygook that I couldn't, the machine named Claude enabled me to give all those vintage photos a utilitarian home by making them widely available on the interactive map platform of Vintage Chicago, A Cliff Dweller's History.

Vintage Chicago, A Cliff Dweller's History of Chicago's Six Eras. A critical corollary complementing the interactive map's visual focus on Chicago's past is its textual narrative, *A Cliff Dweller's History of Chicago's Six Eras*, also accessed from the map's legend. This short history of Chicago has six chapters divided into its chronological eras of the development:

- **1688–1812 Colonial Era.** Chicago's Native and colonial beginnings;
- **1813–1870 Early Settlement Era.** Its early settlement and the arrival of the railroads;
- **1871–1900 Post-Fire Era.** The Great Chicago Fire and the later rebuilding and industrial boom;
- **1901–1950 Jazz Age Era.** The Great Migration and the Chicago Renaissance;
- **1950–2000 Digital Era.** The second half of the twentieth century; and
- **2001–Present Contemporary Era.** The city as it stands today.

Each chapter is illustrated with historic photographs from the map and concludes with a hot linked bibliography to encourage further reading. To help you find what you're interested in, there is an [Index](#) at the end to consult.

The Vintage Chicago Map Legend. The map's legend is the Jane Byrne Interchange of the visual side of Vintage Chicago. You can get everywhere and to everything from it. Its numerous filters and era choices now access more than 3,000 photographs that cover Chicago's visual record from 1688, when the Italian Franciscan friar Vincenzo Coronelli drew the first printed map to carry the name "Chekagou," down to today. Layered onto the map are galleries for 100 Famous Buildings and 50 Famous Architects, Famous Writer Locations, a filter for exploring each of Chicago's 78 neighborhoods, aerial photos, historic maps and artwork.

The map legend has been designed to offer a variety of ways to view Chicago's history. You can zoom down to a neighborhood street corner, take a closer at one of the city's famous buildings or read about how the city evolved from a muddy trading post into the global metropolis of today. You can also begin to understand how it was that Chicago arrived in its current role as the architectural design capital for distant megatall structures all over the world.

The Cliff Dwellers. There is also a filter devoted to notable architects, writers, artists, and photographers of The Cliff Dwellers, the small downtown arts club that I've belonged to for decades and once served as president. This connection is why I refer to the Vintage Chicago map as "A Cliff Dweller's History." It's a personal label as much as a descriptive one, and the map permits me to

celebrate the role of some of the club members who have left their mark on Chicago's cultural plane following the club's founding in 1907.

Interest in Chicago History. My original interest in Chicago history goes back to a single spring school vacation when I was a teenager. My mother, eager to keep me both educated and out from underfoot, suggested I spend some days at the Newberry Library.

Before long I was poking through A. T. Andreas's three-volume *History of Chicago*. This grand story of the city's early history begins with LaSalle's 1679 expedition, and carries through to the 1812 Fort Dearborn massacre, the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the railroads, the Great Fire of 1871, and Chicago's immediate and astounding recovery right up to the year 1884, when Andreas published his first volume. I didn't appreciate it fully at the time, but that week at a Newberry reading table set something afoot that took another 70 years or so to fully develop.

Interest in Chicago Architecture. The Vintage Chicago map's special focus on Chicago's architectural history reflects a lifelong interest in architecture engendered by my uncle, my father's brother Judge Augustine J. Bowe. Mayor Richard J. Daley had appointed him in 1957 as the first chairman of Chicago's new Commission on Chicago Architectural Landmarks.

As the Commission's inaugural chairman, Gus led it during its formative years, including the significant 1960 initiative that designated the first 38 buildings as official landmarks. These buildings included the Glessner House, and the Rookery. He was also centrally involved in the high-profile, and ultimately unsuccessful, battle to save Louis Sullivan's Garrick Theater. (See [The Demolition of Louis Sullivan's Garrick Theater](#)).

Acknowledgements. A work like the Vintage Chicago map would not exist without the institutions and people who do the difficult, patient work of keeping Chicago's past alive for later generations. To name a few: the Ryerson and Burnham Library at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Newberry Library, the Chicago History Museum, the University of Chicago Library, the Chicago Architecture Center, those who built the Chicagology resource, Erik Nordstrom, with his architectural scholarship and his Building 51 museum and gallery.

Not to be forgotten are the generous members of half a dozen Facebook Chicago history groups who kept turning up photographs I'd never have found on my own. I owe all of them a debt I can only repay in general terms, as the Vintage Chicago map arrived well after most individual photo credits that once existed had been lost. I didn't see the AI-assisted future coming far enough in advance to capture earlier available provenance.

Errors and Assigning Blame. This map and its history I'm sure have their quotient of gaps, misstatements, and errors. This may be particularly true where I was trying to assign an accurate geotag location to a map or the place from which an aerial photo was taken. If you stumble across other embarrassments, such as coding bugs or generative text that's garbled, leave Claude out of it and blame me. I'll deal with Claude myself if necessary.

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August 2026
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Colonial Chicago, 1688–1812

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The first printed map to include “Chekagou” as a place name, by the Italian cartographer Vincenzo Maria Coronelli, 1688.

A Meeting Place Long Before It Was a City

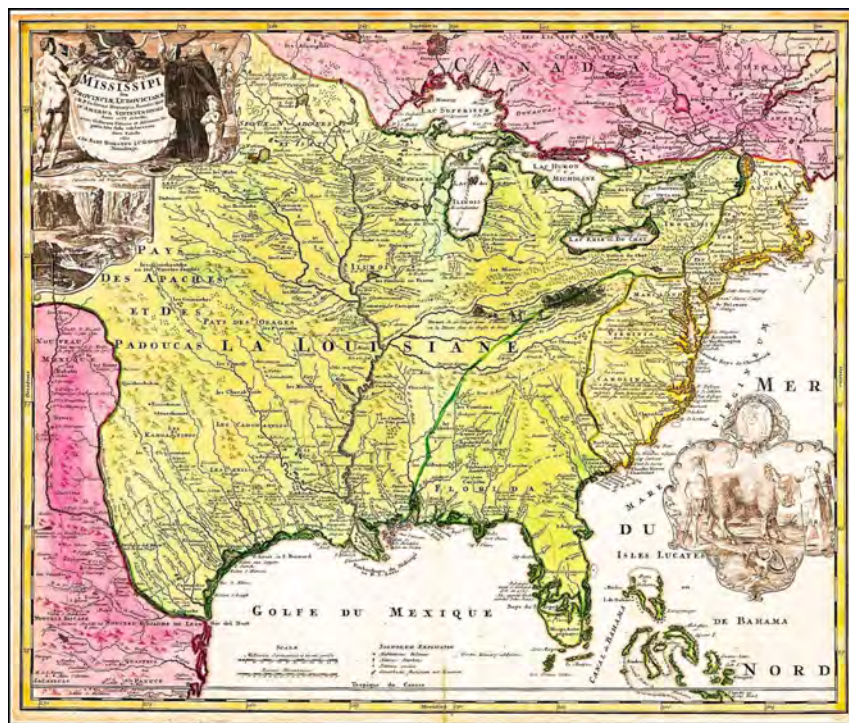


Albert F. Scharf's 1901 map of Native American trails and villages in Chicago, Cook, DuPage, and Will Counties.

Centuries before Chicago existed as a town, the marshy ground where the Chicago River met Lake Michigan was already important, just not to Europeans. The Potawatomi were the dominant people of the region by the time written records begin, part of a wider network that included the Illinois Confederacy, the Miami, and others who hunted, traveled, and traded across the area. A Jesuit missionary, Father Claude Allouez, recorded meeting a village of some eighty Illinois Indians near the Illinois River as early as 1677, a reminder that “Chicago” was Native ground for thousands of years before it was anyone’s colonial outpost. The very name of the place is itself Native in origin, an Algonquian word usually translated as referring to the wild garlic or onion that grew along the riverbanks.

When European traders and soldiers eventually arrived, they were entering a landscape that already had its own trade routes, alliances, and rivalries. The story of early Chicago is, from the start, a story of contact and negotiation between these worlds, one that would end, in 1812, in violence.

The French Arrive: Marquette, Jolliet, and the Portage



French map of Louisiana and the Great Lakes region, before the Illinois Country passed to Britain in 1763.

Chicago’s first appearance in the historical record comes from that contact. In the spring of 1673, Louis Jolliet, commissioned by the French colonial administration to search for a great western river, set out from the Straits of Mackinac with the Jesuit missionary Father Jacques Marquette and five companions. They paddled down the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers to the Mississippi, then followed it south nearly to the Arkansas River before turning back, wary of Spanish territory ahead. On their return journey, guided by local Native travelers, they came back north by way of the Illinois River and, most likely, the short overland portage that separated it from the Chicago River. By tradition, they became the first Europeans to cross the ground that would become downtown Chicago.

Marquette returned to the site in December 1674, fell seriously ill, and ended up spending the winter camped near the portage — the first extended stay by a European in the area, though he almost certainly sheltered in a Native-style wigwam rather than any log structure, whatever later, more romantic accounts suggested. He was not entirely alone even then: he found two French traders already living a short distance downstream, evidence that the portage was already becoming known to fur traders even before it had a name that would stick. A few years later, the more famous and more ruthless René-Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, also crossed the portage on his own expeditions to

claim the Mississippi valley for France — a contrast historians have long drawn between the “gentle, saintly” Marquette and the “masterful,” empire-building La Salle. Between them, the two Frenchmen set the terms by which Europe would first understand this stretch of prairie: not as a place to settle, but as a route to somewhere else.

Why Here? The Geography That Made a Metropolis



An early French map of the Great Lakes and Midwest river systems — the same watershed geography that made the Chicago portage valuable.

That last point is the key to everything that follows. Chicago’s location was, for more than a century, valuable almost entirely because of what lay on either side of it. The Chicago Portage was one of only a handful of places where a canoe, and later a wagon, could cross from the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence watershed into the Mississippi and Gulf of Mexico watershed without a long overland haul. Through the Chicago and Des Plaines Rivers, a traveler could more easily access the interior of the continent. Contemporary accounts from the early 1700s describe the portage as a matter of a few miles in dry weather, sometimes stretching to nine miles when the marshes dried out. However, in wet seasons a paddler could sometimes make their way through flooded sedge grass from the Lake Michigan nearly all the way to the Des Plaines River without ever setting foot on land.

One historian later called it one of “the keys of the continent.” It’s not an exaggeration to say that this marshy, often-flooded gap explains why a city arose here rather than at any of a dozen equally flat, equally lakeside spots along Lake Michigan’s shore. When Jolliet returned from his 1673 expedition, he proposed cutting a short canal to make the connection permanent. This idea came to fruition a century and a half later when the Illinois and Michigan Canal was built. After that the same logic brought Chicago’s railroads, but the portage came first. Everything else about Chicago’s later growth as a transportation hub follows from it.



French, Spanish, and British possessions in North America at the close of the French and Indian War, 1763.

Sovereignty over that gap changed hands twice more before Chicago was truly a town. France ceded its claim to the territory east of the Mississippi to Great Britain in 1763 at the close of the French and Indian War. Then two decades later the map was redrawn again when the 1783 Treaty of Paris transferred the region to the newly independent United States as part of the old Northwest Territory. The portage itself never moved, however much the flags claiming it did.



John Mitchell's Map of the British and French Dominions in North America, the primary reference used to define U.S. boundaries in the 1783 Treaty of Paris.

Traders and a Fort: Du Sable, Kinzie, and Fort Dearborn



The west bank of the Chicago River's north branch, near Wolf Point — site of Jean Baptiste Point du Sable's log cabin, where he farmed and traded.



The Kinzie Mansion at the mouth of the Chicago River — originally du Sable's second house, later home to the Kinzie family.

For most of the eighteenth century, the portage's few visitors were fur traders passing through rather than settlers staying put. That changed when Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a trader of French and African descent born around 1745 in present-day Haiti, by the 1780s had built a substantial and prosperous trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River. A visiting trader's journal from 1790 describes finding it well stocked with goods. Du Sable married a Potawatomi woman named Kitihawa, and is today recognized as Chicago's first permanent non-Native resident and its founder. He sold his post and left the area around 1800. The property eventually came into the possession of John Kinzie, a trader who moved his family to Chicago in 1803 and became for the next decade the settlement's most prominent civilian resident.



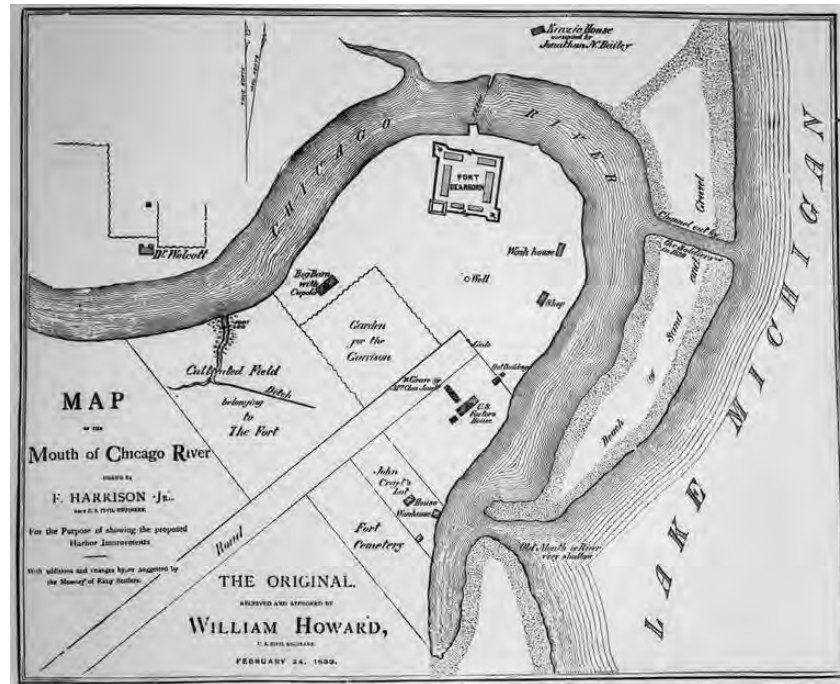
An artist's conception of Fort Dearborn around the time it was built, 1803.



A model of the first Fort Dearborn (1803–1812), sculpted by A. L. Van Den Berghen in 1898 from a drawing by Captain John Whistler.

Kinzie's arrival came the same year the United States Army built the first Fort Dearborn. It was a modest log stockade on the river's south bank, built to secure American claims in the region following the Louisiana Purchase and to manage relations with the surrounding tribes. The first fort was smaller than the one later rebuilt to replace it in 1816. It had two blockhouses and a covered underground passage down to the Chicago River. This gave the garrison access to water even when the fort was under siege, a detail that suggests the Army understood exactly how exposed this small post really was. Kinzie's own house stood just across the river from the fort. Nearby was an outlying farm known as "Lee's Place." By 1812 it was a small community with a fort garrison, a trading family, a handful of other settlers. Around them for miles in every direction were the far larger and more numerous Potawatomi and allied villages on whose goodwill the whole outpost quietly depended.

War Comes to the Portage: The Fort Dearborn Massacre



"Chicago in 1812," a retrospective map by Alfred Theodore Andreas, published in his 1875–1885 History of Chicago.

In the summer of 1812, the United States declared war on Britain and the isolated garrisons of the old Northwest were far from possible reinforcement and surrounded by tribes that British agents had spent years courting. They were suddenly vulnerable.

On August 8, Fort Dearborn's commander, Captain Nathan Heald, received an order from General William Hull, carried to him by a Potawatomi chief named Winnemeg. It instructed him to abandon the fort and march to Fort Wayne in what is now Indiana and distribute the fort's goods to the surrounding tribes as he left. On August 12, Captain William Wells arrived from Fort Wayne with a company of Miami warriors as an escort. With roughly five hundred Potawatomi gathered near the fort and its caches of muskets, artillery, gunpowder, and provisions, Wells thought the situation had become dangerous. At his and Kinzie's urging, Heald reversed his earlier plan. On the night of August 13, he had the fort's weapons, liquor, and ammunition destroyed rather than handed over to the Potawatomi, a decision that angered the assembled Potawatomi the following morning.

That night, a Potawatomi leader named Black Partridge came privately to Heald and returned the peace medal the Americans had given him. In words later recorded by an officer who survived the battle, he said he could no longer restrain his younger warriors and would not wear a token of peace while forced to act as an enemy. Heald did not share this warning with his own officers.

On the morning of August 15, 1812, the garrison evacuated anyway, with fifty-two soldiers, four officers and a surgeon, a handful of other settlers, nine women, and eighteen children, marching south along the lakeshore prairie with their Miami escort. About a mile and a half from the fort, Wells, riding ahead, signaled that they were surrounded, and the attack began almost immediately. Within minutes, all but a handful of the soldiers were killed or wounded. The fighting was brutal and, by every surviving account, a massacre carried out at close range between people who had lived near one another for years. Roughly two dozen soldiers died in the initial fighting, along with a number of the civilians traveling with them; the wounded who could not be moved were killed where the column had stopped.

Lieutenant Linai Helm, Kinzie's son-in-law, was wounded and captured, but his wife survived, hidden and protected by the Potawatomi leader Black Partridge. Heald and his wife were eventually released

and made their way east by a long, route through St. Joseph and Mackinac. The fort itself was burned to the ground, though it was later rebuilt on a larger scale in 1816.

A Small, Violent Beginning



Fort Dearborn's location mapped against the old and new Lake Michigan shorelines.

In August 1812, “Chicago” was a fort, a trading house, a scattering of families, and a few miles of prairie. The non-Native population numbered in the dozens, and the event that would come to define this period in local memory took less than an hour. And yet nearly everything that followed depended on what happened here in this early period. The portage that made the site worth fighting over in the first place was discovered. The traders who first came this way saw its commercial promise. And the early accommodation among the settlers and the Potawatomi failed with the Fort Dearborn massacre. Chicago’s later explosive growth as a railroad and shipping hub, was predestined given a geographic fact the Potawatomi, the French, and the Army had all separately recognized more than a century earlier. Whoever controlled this narrow, marshy gap in the landscape controlled central passage between two halves of the North American continent.



The Battle of Fort Dearborn Site memorial plaque, Fort Dearborn Park, 1801 South Calumet Avenue — the massacre site as it looks today.

Sources: Milo M. Quaife, [Chicago and the Old Northwest, 1673–1835](#) (1913); Juliette Kinzie, [Wau-Bun: The “Early Day” in the North-West](#) (1856); Lieutenant Linai T. Helm’s [narrative of the Fort Dearborn massacre](#); general reference sources on Jean Baptiste Point du Sable.

Photo Sources: Coronelli’s 1688 map of the Great Lakes — Newberry Library, Chicago; Library of Congress; Mitchell’s Map of the British and French Dominions in North America — Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division; Scharf’s 1901 map of Native American trails — Chicago History Museum; The Kinzie Mansion — Wisconsin Historical Society; also held via Calisphere; Fort Dearborn, 1803 (artist’s conception) — Chicago History Museum; Model of the first Fort Dearborn — Chicago History Museum, Crossroads of America exhibit; “Chicago in 1812” (Andreas map) — A. T. Andreas, *History of Chicago* (1884); Newberry Library / Chicago Public Library. Internet sources of other photos are not identified.

Early Settlement Chicago, 1813–1870

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A Fort Rebuilt, A Frontier Reclaimed



The rebuilt Fort Dearborn at the mouth of the Chicago River, 1816.

When American soldiers returned to the mouth of the Chicago River in the summer of 1816, they found little but ashes and memories of survivors. The original Fort Dearborn had been burned to the ground after the August 1812 massacre, and the handful of traders and Native families who had called the place home were mostly scattered or dead. The new Fort Dearborn, built that year under Captain Hezekiah Bradley, was a modest wooden stockade. Its purpose was to reassert American control over a crossroads the United States had no intention of abandoning.

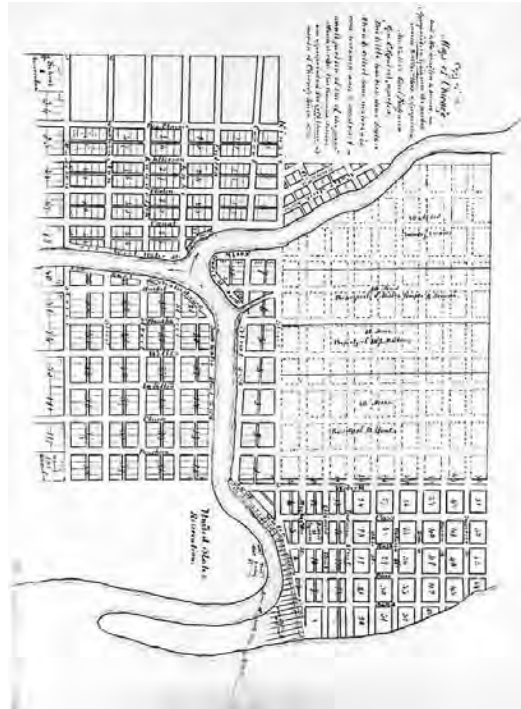
The garrison brought with it a slow trickle of civilians, traders, interpreters, and a few enterprising families willing to gamble on a swampy outpost most of the country had never heard of. For nearly two decades afterward, Chicago remained what it had always been, a portage and trading post, its population rarely exceeding a few dozen white residents alongside the Potawatomi, Odawa, and Ojibwe who still dominated the surrounding country. Nothing about its physical setting, flat, wet, mosquito-ridden, and prone to flooding, suggested it was destined to become anything more.

Black Hawk's War and the Departure of the Potawatomi

The event that did more than any other to clear the way for American settlement was not a Chicago event at all. It happened in 1832 along the Rock River, when the Sauk leader Black Hawk led several hundred followers back across the Mississippi into Illinois hoping to reclaim ancestral cornfields and in defiance of an earlier land cession.

The conflict that followed, brief and one-sided, barely touched Chicago directly, but it terrified the scattered settlers of the region badly enough that many fled to the rebuilt fort for protection. The event hardened American resolve to finish removing Native nations from northern Illinois altogether. The following year, 1833, U.S. commissioners gathered in Chicago thousands of Potawatomi, along with Odawa and Ojibwe delegates. The goal was the Treaty of Chicago, in which the tribes ceded the last of their remaining land in the region in exchange for cash and reservations west of the Mississippi. The actual departures took place over several years, but by 1835 the last large Potawatomi encampments had left the Chicago area for good. They were marched west under a government escort. It was a wrenching, coerced ending to thousands of years of Native presence at the confluence of the Chicago River and lake, and it opened the ground on which the American city would be built.

From Trading Post to Town to City



John Kinzie's original 1833 plat map of Chicago — the same downtown street grid as today's Loop.

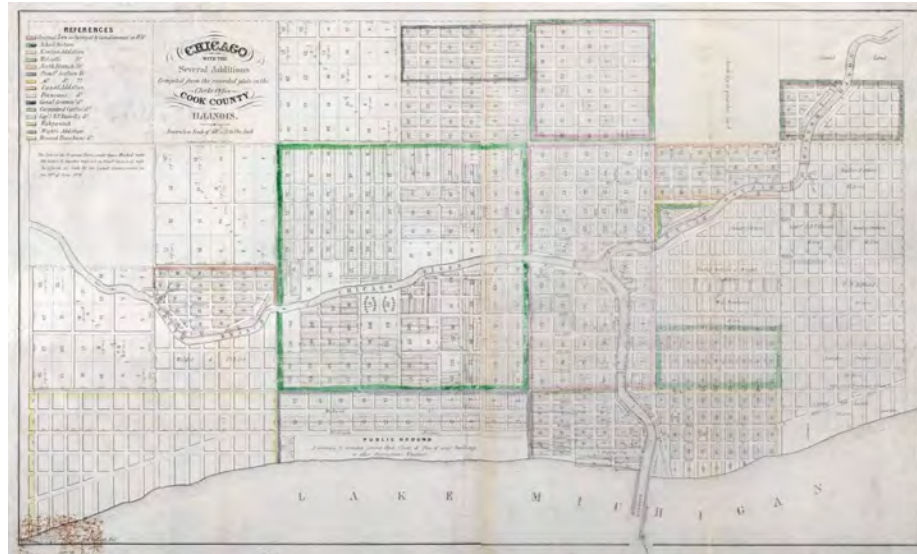


Wolf Point, 1832, by George Davis — Wentworth's tavern at left, the Miller House at right.

The transformation that followed was startling even to contemporaries. In 1833, the same year as the Treaty of Chicago, the tiny settlement, a few hundred residents clustered around the fort and the river mouth, organized itself as the Town of Chicago. It elected a board of trustees and adopted a charter fit for a place that could still be walked end to end in a few minutes.

Land speculation was already becoming the town's first real industry. Plots that had sold for a few dollars in the early 1830s were changing hands for hundreds within a few years. Word was spreading that this swampy junction sat on the likely route of a canal connecting the Great Lakes to the Mississippi watershed. Growth outpaced the town charter almost immediately. By 1837, with a population estimated around four thousand, Chicago incorporated as a full city, electing as its first mayor, William B. Ogden, a transplanted New Yorker and canal-land promoter. The timing was inopportune as the Panic of 1837 hit the same year. The speculative land bubble that had inflated Chicago's early growth collapsed along with banks across the country. For several ensuing years the young city's finances and its half-built canal project both nearly foundered.

The Canal That Made the City



Chicago as recorded by the Illinois and Michigan Canal Commission, 1836.



The British traveler James S. Buckingham's 1841 account of the Irish laborers' camp along the canal works.

Long before the panic, Illinois legislators and Chicago boosters understood that the settlement's future depended on solving one stubborn geographic problem: the portage between the Chicago River and the Des Plaines River, though short, was not navigable. This meant goods and boats had to be hauled overland between the Great Lakes system and the Mississippi system. The Illinois and Michigan Canal, authorized by the state legislature in 1836, was meant to fix that permanently by cutting a channel roughly a hundred miles long connecting Chicago to the Illinois River at LaSalle. Construction began that same year with enormous fanfare and even more enormous debt. The debt had been financed substantially by land grants and bond sales tied to the very real estate speculation that would soon crash.

Work slowed to a crawl during the depression years of the late 1830s and early 1840s, and the state came close to abandoning the project. It was finally finished in 1848, twelve years after it began, but the cost had nearly bankrupted Illinois. However, once it opened, the effect was immediate and transformative. Grain, lumber, and all manner of goods could now move by water all the way from the Mississippi basin to the Great Lakes. From there they could be moved on to the Atlantic seaboard via the Erie Canal/ Chicago sat at the hinge point of this entire system. The canal did what its promoters had always promised. It turned a village on Lake Michigan into a genuine commercial gateway.

Locks, Lumber, and a River Put to Work

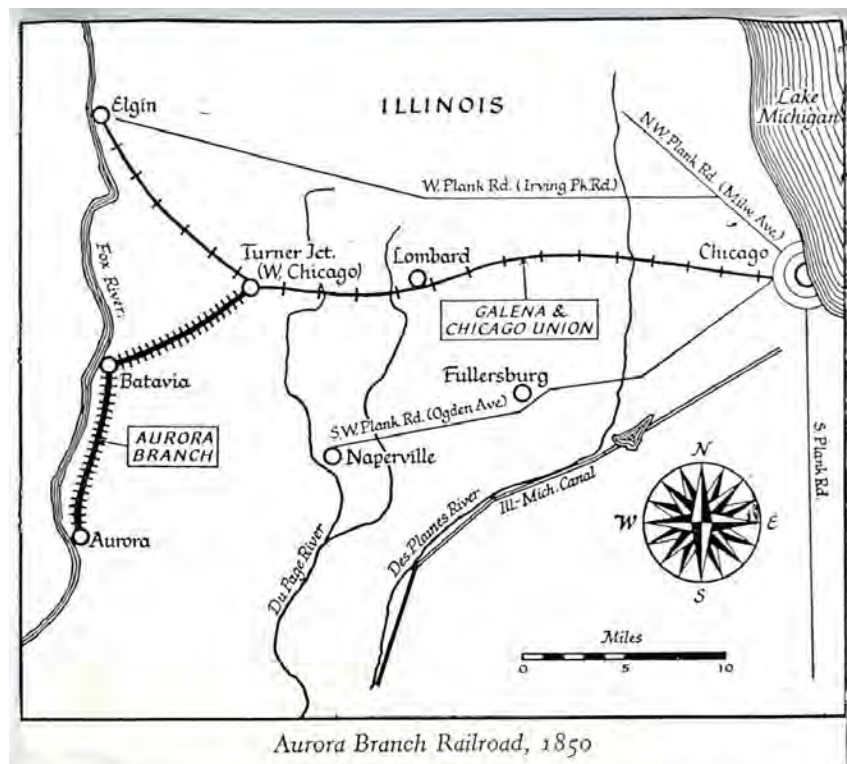


Sailing boats along the Chicago River docks at the Rush Street Bridge, 1858.

The canal's success remade the river itself long before any dramatic economic reversal made headlines. At Bridgeport, where the canal met the South Branch of the Chicago River, engineers built a lock and a steam-driven pumping works to draw water from the river into the canal's channel whenever the season's natural flow ran too shallow for loaded barges. This meant that any day the pumps ran hard enough, they could pull the river's current toward the Des Plaines River instead of Lake Michigan. This was a precursor of the far larger reversal the city would undertake decades later. The South Branch became Chicago's working waterfront: lumber schooners from the pine forests of eastern Wisconsin and western Michigan tied up along its banks to unload at a sprawling lumber district. By the 1850s, young Chicago ranked among the largest lumber markets in the world. As a corollary, tanneries, distilleries, and slaughterhouses upstream had begun treating the same river as

a convenient drain for their waste. This practice would turn into a full-blown public-health crisis within a generation.

Rails Arrive, and Everything Accelerates



Map of the Aurora Branch Railroad, an early Chicago rail line later absorbed into the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy.

In addition to the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848, that year also brought Chicago's first railroad. The Galena and Chicago Union, chartered years earlier but stalled for want of capital, finally laid track running west out of the city. In later years it reached the lead mines in Galena, Illinois. However, the railroad's first small locomotive, the Pioneer, first began hauling wheat in from farms that had previously had only seasonal markets depending as they did on wagon roads running through snow or mud much of the year.

The railroad turned a profit almost immediately, because the farmers were desperate for a faster route to market than canal barges or overland wagons could offer. This set off a scramble to build additional rail lines. Within a decade, a dozen rail lines radiated outward from Chicago into Illinois, Wisconsin, Iowa, and the hinterland beyond. The city was positioned as the funnel through which much of the produce of the entire Midwest passed on its way east and later west. With the canal and railroad together, arriving within the same year, Chicago's destiny was supercharged. More than any other single development of the period the canal proved the concept of Chicago as a transportation hub. The railroads that followed scaled it up far beyond what water transport alone could ever have managed. Unlike canals, rail lines could be built almost anywhere, in any season, regardless of drought or freeze.

Grain, Steam, and the Birth of the Futures Market

That same pivotal year of 1848 also gave Chicago the institution that would turn its farmers' crops into a national commodity. The Chicago Board of Trade was founded that year as a general chamber of commerce for the growing city's merchants. For its first several years, the Board did little more than set weights and settle petty trade disputes. However, the flood of wheat arriving by canal and rail soon forced a more fundamental innovation. Grain had traditionally been hauled to Chicago in

sacks and sold as each farmer's own particular crop. This meant weighing, inspecting, and negotiating over every individual load, a hopeless bottleneck as volumes climbed into the millions of bushels.

In 1856, the Board of Trade solved the problem by introducing a formal grading system. It involved sorting incoming wheat into a handful of quality classes so that grain of the same grade, regardless of whose farm it came from. This permitted the wheat to be dumped together into a single elevator bin and treated as one uniform commodity. A charter granted by the Illinois legislature in 1859 gave the Board's own inspectors binding authority to assign those grades. This effectively made Chicago's grain standard the law of the wheat market.

The change severed, for the first time, a farmer's ownership claim from any particular physical wheat. What a farmer now held was a claim on so many bushels of a given grade, a claim that could be bought, sold, and speculated on independent of any actual grain at all. That severance is precisely what made a true futures market possible. The Board of Trade obliged in 1865, by adopting standardized futures contracts and formal trading rules for margin and delivery. This was a model that commodity exchanges from cotton to soybeans to, eventually, financial futures would copy for the next century and beyond.

Handling that torrent of graded grain required machinery to match. Steam power, first harnessed for a grain elevator in Buffalo in 1842, had reached Chicago by 1848. This was when the city's first steam-driven elevator began lifting grain on a belt of buckets, called "legs" in the trade's language. The elevator was capable of moving thousands of bushels an hour, drawing wheat directly out of canal boats and rail cars and pouring it into storage bins several stories tall along the Chicago River. A Chicago Tribune reporter touring the riverfront elevators in 1861 marveled at the scale involved. He wrote that the roughly 28 million bushels the city's elevators had handled the previous year, if hauled the old-fashioned way in two-bushel sacks, would form "a wall sixteen feet high and seven hundred miles long."

The thousands of houses built in this period were constructed with stacked spruce planking, and framing structures containing millions of board feet originating in the vast pine woods of Wisconsin and Michigan. The South Branch's lumber mills and storage yards district was only a few blocks away from the grain elevators. So, grain, lumber, rails, and the Board of Trade's new futures contracts all together turned Chicago in little more than a decade from a muddy trading post into the commodity clearinghouse for the entire agricultural interior of North America.

An Astonishing Rate of Growth



An 1855 lithograph map of Chicago, based on residents' recollections of the city's 1833 population of 350.

The population figures from these decades are almost hard to believe. Chicago counted perhaps 350 residents when it incorporated as a town in 1833. By the time of city incorporation in 1837 that figure had grown roughly tenfold. By 1850, with the canal newly open and the railroad boom underway, the city's population had reached about 30,000. Twenty years later, in 1870, it stood at nearly 300,000, a hundredfold increase in less than four decades from its town-charter days, and among the fastest sustained urban growth rates the country had ever seen.

Immigration drove much of this surge: Irish laborers who had come to dig the canal stayed on afterward, German immigrants arrived in large numbers throughout the 1840s and 1850s fleeing political upheaval and economic hardship in Europe, and a steady stream of native-born New Englanders and New Yorkers came west chasing opportunity in real estate, grain trading, and lumber. The city that had been a muddy fort a generation earlier was rapidly becoming one of the significant urban centers of the entire country, its downtown filling with brick storefronts, hotels, and the beginnings of a distinct commercial district along the river.

Raising the City Out of the Mud



The Court House and City Hall after the city raised its street grade — a fourth floor was added in 1858 to match the new elevation.

Rapid growth brought a problem that could not be solved by ambition alone: Chicago sat on flat, poorly drained, often swampy ground barely above lake level, and its early wooden buildings and dirt streets turned into seas of mud with every rain. By the 1850s the situation had become a public health crisis as much as an engineering embarrassment, since standing water and inadequate drainage were blamed, correctly, for outbreaks of cholera and other diseases.

The solution the city settled on was a bold one. Rather than dig sewers underground, which the wet soil made nearly impossible, engineers led by men such as Ellis Chesbrough decided to raise the entire grade of the city several feet. New sewers would be laid on top of the old ground level and then streets, sidewalks, and eventually whole buildings would be brought up to match. Through the late 1850s and into the 1860s, Chicago underwent a period in which entire brick buildings, some of them massive hotels, were jacked up on hundreds of screw jacks and raised several feet into the air. Meanwhile, their business inside continued uninterrupted. This went on block by block, until the city's grade had been lifted well above its original swampy footing. It remains one of the more remarkable feats of urban engineering of the era. The process gave Chicago a workable sewer system and a way to reduce against the diseases that plagued it.

Mayors, Machines in Miniature, and the Lager Beer Riot

Chicago's earliest municipal politics were small-scale evolved quickly. The town incorporated in 1833, the city charter followed in 1837, and William B. Ogden, a Democrat, canal, and railroad promoter, won election as Chicago's first mayor, defeating the Whig incumbent town president John H. Kinzie.

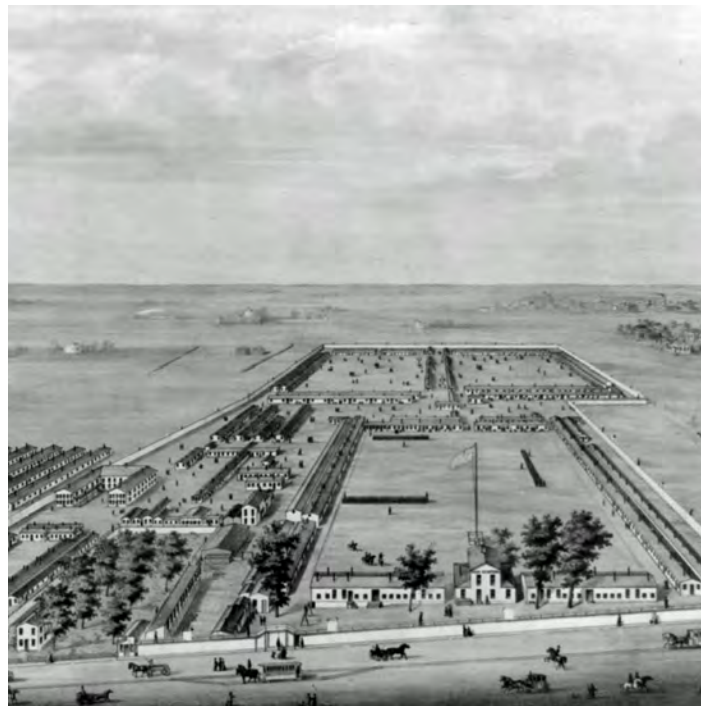
Under the weak-mayor charter of these decades, the real power sat with a City Council of ward aldermen. The mayors served single-year terms in a rapid, boosterish churn that mirrored the town's own restless growth rather than any settled system of governance. That churn turned genuinely violent in 1855, when Levi Boone was elected mayor on the nativist, anti-immigrant "Know-Nothing" American Party ticket. He moved to enforce a long-dormant Sunday closing law and raised liquor license fees sixfold. These were measures aimed squarely at the taverns and beer gardens of the city's fast-growing German and Irish population. When police began arresting tavern keepers that April,

several hundred angry Germans marched on the courthouse in what became known as the Lager Beer Riot. The ensuing clash left one rioter dead and dozens arrested before order was restored. Boone's ordinance was repealed within the year, and the episode discredited nativist politics in Chicago for a generation. This helped cement a durable alliance between the city's Democratic Party and its immigrant voters that would shape Chicago politics for the rest of the century.

Chicago and the Civil War



The Wigwam, at Lake and Market Streets — site of the 1860 Republican convention that nominated Abraham Lincoln.



Camp Douglas, on the South Side, which held up to 30,000 Confederate prisoners of war at its peak.



Chicagoans filing past Abraham Lincoln's body lying in state at the Court House, 1865.

By the time the Civil War broke out in 1861, Chicago's transportation network made it a natural hub for the Union war effort. Camp Douglas, established on the city's South Side on land associated with the late Senator Stephen A. Douglas, began as a training and mustering camp for Illinois volunteers. Later, it became one of the largest Union prison camps for captured Confederate soldiers. It ended up housing thousands of prisoners under conditions that grew notoriously harsh as the war dragged on. Beyond the camp itself, the war accelerated Chicago's emergence as a meatpacking and grain-shipping powerhouse. The Union Army's need to feed and supply its armies funneled enormous contracts through the city's stockyards, lumber mills, and rail lines. The war years, far from slowing Chicago's growth, poured fuel on it. The war cemented the city's role as the logistical engine feeding the western armies and put the postwar decades in a position for Chicago's meatpacking and grain-trading industries to become globally dominant.

From Frontier Post to Metropolis



View from the Water Tower, north on Michigan Avenue toward Oak Street Beach, shortly before the Great Fire.



The first Palmer House, opened September 26, 1870 — and destroyed, like so much else, thirteen months later.

By 1870, the frontier trading post of 1813 was gone entirely. In its place stood a booming rail and grain metropolis of nearly 300,000 people, built in less than two generations. Fort Dearborn had been rebuilt to reassert an American claim on the site, the Black Hawk War and the Treaty of Chicago cleared away the last organized Native presence that might have contested it. Incorporation as a town and then a city supplying the legal scaffolding to grow, and the twin arrival of the canal and the railroad in 1848 handed the young city control over much of the flow of goods between the Mississippi Valley and the Great Lakes. No rival Great Lakes or river city could match it.

The population boom of the 1840s and 1850s, and the sheer civic will required to physically raise the city out of its own mud, were both extraordinary events. With this momentum, the catastrophe waiting just one year ahead, the Great Chicago Fire, would prove only a pause rather than an ending.

Sources: A.T. Andreas, [History of Chicago: From the Earliest Period to the Present Time](#), Vol. 1 (1884); Henry H. Hurlbut, [Chicago Antiquities: Comprising Original Items and Relations, Letters, Extracts, and Notes, Pertaining to Early Chicago](#) (1881); Joseph Kirkland, [The Story of Chicago](#) (1892); William Cronon, [Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West](#) (1991); Francesca Gamber et al., [Nature's Metropolis at 30](#), Commonplace (2021); Chicago Tribune, "Our Grain Elevators" (1861), reproduced with additional history at [Chicagology.com](#); general reference sources on the Illinois and Michigan Canal, the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, and Camp Douglas; Libby Hill, [The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History](#) (2000); Emmett Dedmon, [Fabulous Chicago](#) (1953); general reference sources on Mayor Levi Boone and the 1855 Lager Beer Riot.

Photo Sources: The rebuilt Fort Dearborn, 1816 — Wisconsin Historical Society; Kinzie's 1833 plat map of Chicago — Illinois State Archives, Illinois and Michigan Canal Commission records; Wolf Point, 1832 (George Davis) — Chicago History Museum; Illinois and Michigan Canal Commission map, 1836 — Newberry Library, Chicago; The Court House and City Hall after the 1858 grade raise — Chicago History Museum (Alexander Hesler); The Wigwam, 1860 — Chicago History Museum (Alexander Hesler); Camp Douglas — Library of Congress, Liljenquist Family Collection of Civil War Photographs; Lincoln lying in state, 1865 — Library of Congress (photograph by S. M. Fassett); The first Palmer House, 1870 — Chicago History Museum. Internet sources of other photos are not identified.

Post-Fire Chicago, 1871–1900

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A City Turns to Ash



Mrs. O'Leary's House, 137 DeKoven Street — said to be the source of the Great Chicago Fire. The house survived; the barn behind it did not.



Ruins of the Court House and City Hall after the Fire of 1871.

On the night of October 8, 1871, a fire broke out in a small barn behind a cottage on DeKoven Street, on Chicago's near West Side. Fanned by weeks of drought and a hard wind out of the southwest, it jumped the south branch of the Chicago River within hours, tore through the wooden business district downtown, leapt the main branch of the river a second time, and kept burning north through the wealthy residential blocks along the lakefront until it finally guttered out in the rain early on October 10. By then it had consumed roughly three and a half square miles of the city, destroyed some 17,000 buildings, and killed perhaps 300 people. Many bodies were reduced to ash so no accurate count was ever possible. Drawing on the 1871 city census, contemporary tallies put the number of people rendered homeless at nearly 100,000. This was close to a third of Chicago's entire population.

The popular legend that Mrs. O'Leary's cow kicked over a lantern while being milked and started the blaze took hold almost instantly. It has persisted to this day. Writers who investigated the fire in its immediate aftermath were skeptical. Chicago journalists who toured the ruins and interviewed witnesses within days concluded that while the fire did originate in the O'Leary family's barn. The specific story of the overturned lantern was, in the words of one contemporary account, already "known to be untrue" even as it spread. Mrs. O'Leary herself always denied it, and a Chicago reporter later admitted to embellishing the tale for a better story.

Theories advanced since then range from neighbors sneaking into the barn to steal milk or gamble, to a stray spark from a nearby chimney, to the more colorful notion of a meteor shower connected to the same night's other Midwestern fires in Peshtigo, Wisconsin, and across Michigan. No one will ever know for certain how the fire started. What everybody did know was that during an unusually dry summer, for a city built almost entirely of wood, with wooden sidewalks and wood-shingled roofs, a catastrophe was only a spark away.

The "I Will" City Rebuilds



W. D. Kerfoot's real estate office, Clark and Washington Streets — by tradition the first "building" back up in Chicago's burnt district after the fire.



The second Chicago Tribune Building, Madison and Dearborn — the newspaper's post-fire home, 1872.

What distinguished Chicago from other cities leveled by disaster was not the fire itself but the astonishing speed of what came after. Within days, temporary shacks and tents covered the burned district. Within weeks, construction crews were clearing rubble and pouring new foundations. Within three years, most of the burned area had been entirely rebuilt, often bigger and sturdier than before. Relief poured in from across the country and around the world. There was grain from Milwaukee, cash from London, and blankets from New York. Chicago's business class treated the fire less as a tragedy to mourn than a problem to solve. The city adopted a female figure holding a phoenix as an emblem of renewal, and the phrase "I Will" became an unofficial civic motto, capturing a kind of relentless, can-do attitude.

New fire codes required masonry and stone construction downtown in place of wood. This shift inadvertently accelerating the shift toward the very building methods that would soon make Chicago architecture famous. Population and commerce roared back even faster than the buildings. By the 1880 census, Chicago had more residents than before the fire. By 1890 it had passed the one-million mark, a rate of growth almost without precedent among the world's cities.

That same rebuilding energy also produced Chicago's first wave of private clubs, civic institutions that would shape the city's cultural life for generations. The Chicago Club, founded in 1869 just before the fire and back in operation soon after. It became the informal boardroom of the industrialists financing reconstruction. Among them were Marshall Field, Cyrus McCormick, and George Pullman. The Fortnightly of Chicago, founded in 1873 by Kate Newell Doggett, gave the city its first women's intellectual club, born directly out of the rebuilding fervor. Over the following century, it welcomed speakers from Mark Twain to the Nobel Prize winning "Bard of Bengal," Rabindranath Tagore. And the Chicago Literary Club, founded in 1874, brought together members to write and read aloud their own essays, a tradition, like the club itself, still unbroken a century and a half later.

Inventing the Skyscraper



The Home Insurance Building, 135 South LaSalle Street, 1885 — conventionally credited as the world's first skyscraper.



Daniel Burnham (left) and John Wellborn Root in their top-floor office at the Rookery, 209 South LaSalle Street, 1888.

The rebuilding boom, combined with skyrocketing land values in the Loop, created exactly the conditions that would let Chicago architects reinvent the tall building. Real estate in the central business district was too valuable to be used inefficiently, but existing construction methods limited buildings to perhaps ten or twelve stories before the thickness of load-bearing masonry walls at the base became structurally and economically absurd. The solution arrived in 1884–85 with William Le

Baron Jenney's Home Insurance Building at LaSalle and Adams Streets. Jenney's building used a full internal skeleton of iron and steel columns and beams to carry the structural load, with the exterior masonry reduced to a non-bearing curtain wall hung on the frame. Standing ten stories (with two more added later), the Home Insurance Building is conventionally credited as the world's first skyscraper built on true skeletal-frame construction, though the honor has always been debated among architectural historians, since other Chicago and New York buildings were experimenting with similar ideas around the same time.

Whatever the precise claim to "first," Jenney's innovation opened the floodgates for what became known as the Chicago School of architecture. Louis Sullivan, working first with Dankmar Adler and developing the maxim "form follows function," designed buildings like the Auditorium Building and the Schiller Building (later known as the Garrick Theater). These were commercial towers that treated the skyscraper as an entirely new architectural problem to be solved. Daniel Burnham and John Wellborn Root, partners whose firm designed the Rookery and the Monadnock Building, pushed load-bearing masonry to its absolute limit even as they experimented with steel framing elsewhere in their portfolio.

Their successor firm of Holabird & Roche contributed a long run of steel-framed commercial blocks, refining the "Chicago window." Typically, it was a wide central pane flanked by narrower operable sashes, that became a signature of the style. Together these architects and engineers, competing and collaborating in the same few blocks of the Loop through the 1880s and early 1890s, essentially invented the vertical commercial building as the modern world would come to know it. Helping this along was the parallel development of safe elevators and fireproof terra cotta building materials. Their work was a genuinely original American contribution to world architecture born directly out of the fire's blank slate.

Haymarket and the Labor Question



The Randolph Street Market at Haymarket Square, site of the Anarchists' Riot of May 1886.

Chicago's furious industrial growth after the fire also produced furious labor conflict. Nothing crystallized that conflict, or damaged the city's reputation, more than the Haymarket Affair. On May 4, 1886, a rally was held near Haymarket Square in support of workers striking for an eight-hour day. The gathering was called partly in response to police violence against strikers at the McCormick

Reaper Works the day before. As police moved to disperse the crowd toward the end of the rally, an unknown person threw a bomb into the police ranks, killing one officer. The ensuing gunfire, much of it apparently police firing on each other in the chaos and panic, left several more officers and an unknown number of civilians dead. The bomb-thrower was never identified.

In the trial that followed, eight anarchist labor organizers were convicted . Four were hanged, one died by suicide in his cell, and the remaining three were eventually pardoned in 1893 by Governor John Peter Altgeld. Altgeld publicly denounced the original trial as a miscarriage of justice.

Haymarket's consequences rippled outward for decades. In the short term it triggered a national wave of anti-labor, anti-immigrant, and anti-radical sentiment, associating the eight-hour movement with violence. This set back organized labor's cause in the public mind for a generation. In the longer term, May Day itself became an international workers' holiday partly in commemoration of the Haymarket martyrs. The event remains one of the pivotal moments in the history of the American labor movement. For Chicago, the affair cemented an uncomfortable dual reputation the city would carry into the twentieth century. It was a city of audacious commercial and architectural genius that was simultaneously a byword for class violence, corruption, and radical politics.

Hog Butcher for the World

Even as architects reimagined the skyline, the city's underlying economic engine remained resolutely industrial. Nowhere was that more visible than at the Union Stock Yards. It opened on the South Side on Christmas Day, 1865, and expanded enormously through the post-fire decades. It consolidated what had been scattered, competing stockyards into a single vast facility connected to every railroad serving the city. The Union Stock Yards made Chicago the undisputed meatpacking capital of the United States and, for a time, the world.

Firms like Armour, Swift, and Morris pioneered refrigerated rail cars that let Chicago slaughter and dress cattle and hogs locally and ship the meat fresh to eastern markets. This supplanted shipping live animals at far greater expense and loss. The change amounted to a logistical revolution that reorganized the entire American meat economy around Chicago as its hub. The Yards also pioneered a ruthless division of labor along the "disassembly line" that some historians argue anticipated Henry Ford's automobile assembly line. By the 1890s the stockyards and their surrounding packinghouses employed tens of thousands of workers, most of them recent immigrants, in conditions of danger and squalor that would later draw the attention of reformers and novelists alike.

The scale was staggering. By the century's end, Chicago's yards were slaughtering many millions of animals a year, and the smell and smoke of "Packingtown" were, for better or worse, as much a part of Chicago's international identity as its new skyscrapers.

Carter Harrison, the "Gray Wolves," and Chicago's Emerging Machine

The politics of the rebuilt city found their central figure in Carter Harrison Sr., a Kentucky-born Democrat first elected mayor in 1879. He would be reelected four more times over the following fourteen years. Harrison built his coalition by courting Chicago's immigrant wards directly. He regularly appeared personally at German beer gardens, Irish saloons, and ethnic festivals in a way that polished Yankee reformers of the era rarely bothered to. He engendered a genial, big-tent style of ward politics that would echo through Chicago's Democratic machine for a century afterward. But the City Council he presided over earned a considerably less flattering reputation. A bloc of aldermen the press nicknamed the "Gray Wolves" made a running business of selling streetcar franchises, utility contracts, and liquor licenses to the highest bidder. This was a form of institutionalized graft contemporaries called "boodle." It flourished largely because Harrison's own hands-off style left the Council free to police itself.

No two aldermen embodied the Gray Wolves' style more vividly than "Bathhouse" John Coughlin and Michael "Hinky Dink" Kenna, the First Ward's two aldermen. From the early 1890s they ran the lakefront vice district just south of the Loop, the "Levee," as a semi-official fiefdom of gambling

houses, saloons, and brothels. In the process, they were collecting protection payments that helped keep the ward's vote reliably loyal to the machine on election day. Their annual First Ward Ball, an ostensibly charitable fundraiser that packed the Coliseum with pickpockets, prostitutes, and precinct captains alike, became a byword for the era's tolerance of vice. For them, it was simply another municipal revenue stream. A 1943 history of their reign, *Lords of the Levee: The Story of Bathhouse John and Hinky Dink*, remains the standard account of how thoroughly the Levee's underworld and City Hall's patronage machine had merged.

Harrison's own luck ran out in the final days of his fifth term, on October 28, 1893. Just after the World's Columbian Exposition had closed its gates, a disappointed office-seeker named Patrick Eugene Prendergast, shot Harrison dead at his own front door. He was convinced the mayor had promised him a city corporation counsel post. The assassination, coming within days of the fair's triumphant close, gave 1893 a starkly double character in Chicago's memory. It was the year of the White City's gleaming success and also of a mayor's violent death.

Bubbly Creek and the River's Reversal

The same stockyards that made Chicago "Hog Butcher for the World" also made its river nearly uninhabitable. Blood, offal, and grease from the packinghouses drained directly into the South Fork of the South Branch. It was sluggish inlet behind the Yards that decomposing waste kept perpetually gassy and bubbling. Chicagoans nicknamed it "Bubbly Creek," and the novelist Upton Sinclair would later describe its surface as thick enough to catch fire if a match were tossed onto it.

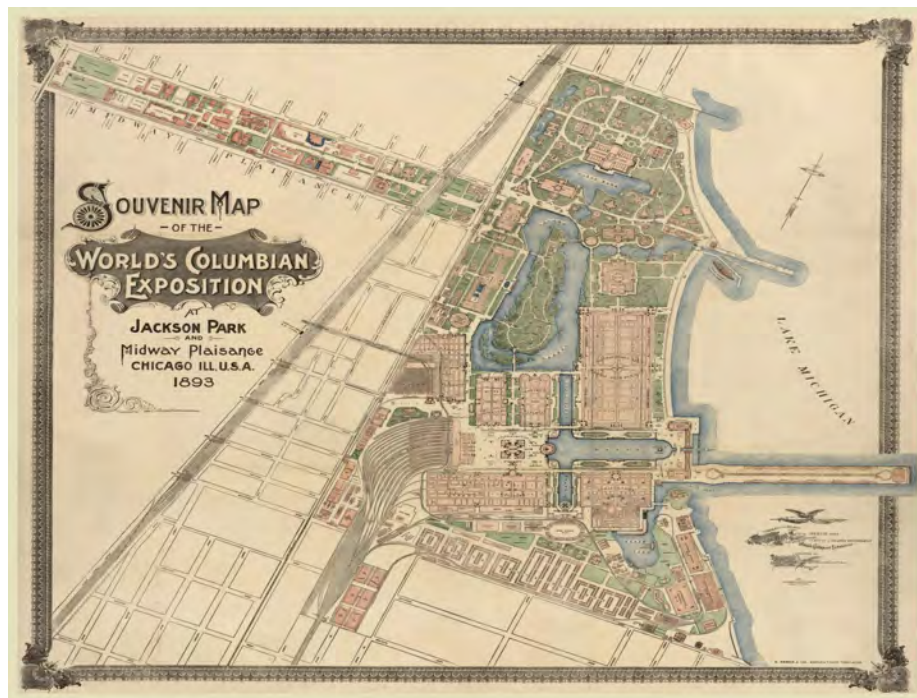
By the 1880s the main channel fared little better, thick with sewage and industrial runoff from a city whose population had passed a million. Periodic outbreaks of cholera and typhoid swept through neighborhoods that were drawing drinking water from the same lake the river emptied directly into. In 1889 the Illinois legislature created the Sanitary District of Chicago specifically to solve the problem. Its engineers settled on a remarkable engineering fix. Rather than treat the sewage, they would reverse the river's flow away from Lake Michigan altogether. They would send Chicago's waste down the Des Plaines and Illinois Rivers toward the Mississippi River instead.

Their solution was construction of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, a channel roughly twenty-eight miles long. In places, it cut through solid rock. Construction proceeded through the 1890s as one of the largest earth-moving projects then underway anywhere in the world. When the final earthen barrier was dynamited away on January 2, 1900, Lake Michigan's flow into the Chicago River stopped and then ran backward. This was a permanent hydrological reversal that protected the city's drinking-water supply, deepened its channels for shipping, and set the template for the locks and controlling works that would manage the river's altered plumbing through the century to follow.

The White City



The World's Columbian Exposition's Court of Honor, Jackson Park, 1893 — the "White City."



Visitors at the fairgrounds, 1893.

Chicago's determination to prove itself a first-rank world city culminated in the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. It was staged on Jackson Park's marshy lakefront to mark (a year late) the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's landing in the Americas. Chicago had lobbied hard and beaten out New York, Washington, and St. Louis for the right to host the fair. It was a victory that briefly earned it the nickname "the Windy City" from a New York editor mocking the boastfulness of its civic boosters, though the phrase stuck as an affectionate nickname rather than an insult.

Architect Daniel Burnham was appointed chief of construction and, working with a roster of the nation's leading architects and with Frederick Law Olmsted, the celebrated designer of New York's Central Park. Together they laid out an entire monumental city within a city. There was a formal Court of Honor of gleaming white neoclassical palaces arranged around a great basin and canals. These were surrounded by Olmsted's more informal, naturalistic lagoons and wooded islands. The scale dwarfed anything Americans had seen. The fairgrounds covered some six hundred acres, and the buildings were finished in a temporary white plaster called staff that gave the fair its enduring nickname, "the White City." Electric lighting illuminated the grounds at a scale that astonished visitors used to gaslight. It uniquely announced the coming electrical age.

More than twenty-seven million visits were recorded over the fair's six-month run. This was an extraordinary figure given the national population of roughly sixty-five million. The exposition introduced Americans to Cracker Jack, Juicy Fruit gum, the first Ferris Wheel (built specifically to rival the Eiffel Tower as the fair's signature spectacle). Countless other technological marvels were displayed in the Palace of Fine Arts and the Manufactures Building, then the largest building in the world. The fair's classical, orderly White City also launched the City Beautiful movement in American urban planning. This directly inspired Burnham's later Plan of Chicago and comparable planning efforts in cities across the country. Nonetheless, critics like Louis Sullivan later complained that its borrowed European classicism had set back the native, modern architectural language Chicago itself had just invented. For a few months in 1893, the city that a generation earlier had been a smoking ruin stood as the physical proof of American ambition to the entire world.

Rebuilding the Stage: Theater, Opera, and Symphony



The Auditorium Building, Michigan Avenue at Congress Street, 1888.



The Auditorium Theatre's auditorium, designed by Adler & Sullivan.

The same “I Will” resolve that raised office towers out of the ashes rebuilt Chicago’s stages just as fast. James H. McVicker’s playhouse on Madison Street, the leading home of comedy in the young city since 1857, burned to its foundations along with nearly everything else downtown in October 1871. The architects Wheeler & Thomas rebuilt it within the year, and McVicker’s reopened on August 15, 1872, barely eleven months after the fire. This proved that the city’s cultural life, and not just its commerce, had survived the flames.

Edwin Booth, who had married McVicker’s daughter, performed there regularly, and in January 1881 the theater hosted the American stage debut of the celebrated French actress Sarah Bernhardt in *Camille*. Adler & Sullivan, not yet the partnership that would define Chicago architecture, remodeled McVicker’s again in 1883. This was a modest preview of the far grander commission the same firm would take on before the decade was out.

That grander commission was the Auditorium Building, incorporated in December 1886 by the businessman Ferdinand Peck. He had set out to build a theater that could rival New York’s Metropolitan Opera House while remaining, as he put it, open to Chicago’s working people rather than reserved for its elite. Designed by Dankmar Adler and Louis Sullivan, with a young draftsman named Frank Lloyd Wright contributing to the interiors, the building opened on December 9, 1889, dedicated by President Benjamin Harrison in a ceremony where the soprano Adelina Patti sang “Home, Sweet Home.”

Briefly the tallest building in the city and the largest in the country, the Auditorium became the first home of both the Chicago Grand Opera Company and, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, founded that year by the German-American conductor Theodore Thomas. Thomas had come to Chicago after the businessman Charles Norman Fay asked whether he would come there for a permanent orchestra. Thomas reportedly answered that he “would go to hell if they gave me a permanent orchestra.” He led the Orchestra until his death in January 1905, three weeks after conducting the dedication of its new home, Orchestra Hall.

The Art Institute and the Fair's Midway



The Art Institute of Chicago's new Michigan Avenue building, shortly after opening, 1895.



The Midway Plaisance's amusement strip, 1893.

The Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, founded in 1879 as both a museum and a school, renamed itself the Art Institute of Chicago in 1882. It outgrew its quarters almost as fast as it filled them. When the city won the right to host the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, the Art Institute's trustees struck a deal to build a permanent Beaux-Arts building at Michigan Avenue and Adams Street. The building, soon flanked by two bronze lion sculptures at its Michigan Avenue entrance, opened as the Art Institute's permanent home on December 8, 1893, days after the fair itself closed. This gave Chicago its first serious civic art museum.

Two of the era's private clubs helped underwrite that cultural ambition. The Union League Club, founded in 1879 in the tradition of the wartime Union League of America, built its own collection of American art substantial enough that the Chicago Tribune would later call it "the other art institute in Chicago."

The fair's own, considerably less high-minded contribution to the city's cultural life ran along the Midway Plaisance. It was a mile-long strip of amusements that a young promoter named Sol Bloom

laid out deliberately apart from the fair's solemn exhibition halls. The area gave the English language the word "midway" for a carnival's entertainment strip ever after. Visitors rode George Ferris's new 264-foot wheel, watched the strongman Bernarr MacFadden demonstrate his exercise machines, and packed in for the "hootchy-kootchy" dancing of a performer billed as "Little Egypt." All of this was alongside a row of national villages and sideshows. However, crude by later standards, this taught Chicago and the country that a fair, like a city, could sell spectacle as readily as commerce. This was a lesson the amusement and entertainment industries of the following century would take fully to heart.

From Ashes to Empire



Chicago at the turn of the century, 1900 — a generation removed from the ashes of 1871.

In the Great Fire, Chicago lost its downtown, a third of its population's homes, and by some measures nearly two hundred million dollars in property in three nights. Yet it emerged within a single generation as the birthplace of the modern commercial skyscraper. It was also the undisputed meatpacking and railroad hub of the continent, and the host of the most spectacular world's fair the United States had ever staged. The city had done so while absorbing hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers into brutal, dangerous industrial jobs, and while enduring a labor crisis at Haymarket that scarred its reputation even as its architecture and commerce dazzled the world.

In miniature, Chicago's post-fire story is America's own story in the Gilded Age. It was breathtaking, unsentimental growth built on immigrant labor and industrial ruthlessness, but redeemed in the popular imagination by genuine, world-changing innovation. The "I Will" spirit that rebuilt the Loop in brick and steel was the same restless energy that, twenty-two years after the fire, could raise an entire gleaming White City out of a lakefront swamp. Chicago's dual identity as both the a modern and a fractious American metropolis was set for the century to come.

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Jazz Age Chicago, 1901–1950

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corridors. Department stores brimmed with shoppers, and the business district pulsed with activity as professionals na

Downtown Chicago, 1930 — the Tribune Tower and Wrigley Building anchoring a skyline built in the half-century between the fair and the Depression.

A City Remaking Itself

By the turn of the twentieth century, Chicago had already rebuilt itself once, after the fire of 1871, and had shown the world its ambitions at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. But the city that emerged in the first half of the new century was something different: bigger, richer, more violent, more creative, and more racially divided than anything the founders of Fort Dearborn could have imagined. In the space of fifty years Chicago went from a booming rail and stockyard town of prosperous chaos to a metropolis that gave America its first comprehensive city plan, its most notorious gangster, some of its greatest poets and novelists, and one of its ugliest race riots. It also, by 1945, became one of the arsenals that helped win a world war. Few American cities changed as much, or as fast, as Chicago did between 1901 and 1950.

Burnham's Plan and "No Little Plans"



Daniel Burnham's 13-story Beaux-Arts building at State and Washington Streets, 1907.

In 1909, the architect Daniel Burnham was fresh off his triumph as director of works for the Columbian Exposition when he published the Plan of Chicago with his collaborator Edward Bennett. Under the sponsorship of the Commercial Club of Chicago, it was the first comprehensive plan for the physical development of any American city. It imagined Chicago transformed. There would be a continuous public lakefront free from railroad yards and private industry. There would also be a system of forest preserves ringing the metropolitan area, wide diagonal boulevards cut through the existing grid, a monumental civic center, and a unified harbor and highway system tying the whole region together.

Burnham is remembered for a phrase urging planners to “make no little plans,” since little plans lack the magic to stir men’s blood and probably will themselves not be realized. Chicago’s lakefront, kept largely free of private development from Jackson Park to Lincoln Park, and threaded by Lake Shore Drive, is the plan’s most visible Plan legacy. Grant Park, the Museum Campus, Navy Pier, and the region’s forest preserve system also all trace their lineage to Burnham and Bennett’s vision. However, the plan’s grander schemes for a monumental civic core were never built as drawn. The Plan of Chicago mattered less as a literal blueprint than as a demonstration that a modern industrial city could think of itself in generations rather than in real-estate cycles. Other American cities studied it as a model for the City Beautiful movement for decades afterward.

Chicago’s own sculptor Lorado Taft gave that same City Beautiful ideal its most enduring physical form. Trained in Paris and based for decades at his Midway Studios near the University of Chicago, Taft filled the city’s parks with monumental public sculpture. These included the Fountain of the Great Lakes (1913) outside the Art Institute. The Fountain of Time (1922) on the Midway Plaisance, was a hundred-foot frieze of humanity marching past a hooded, watching figure of Time itself. Taft’s student and studio assistant Leonard Crunelle carried the same civic-sculpture tradition into war memorials and public statuary across Chicago and downstate Illinois.

Filling In the Lakefront: From Fire Debris to Grant Park



The Victoria Hotel at South Michigan Avenue and Van Buren Street, viewed west from the newly filled Grant Park, 1905.

The lakefront that Burnham's plan celebrated as Chicago's great civic space was, quite literally, built rather than found. Little of what is now Grant Park existed as dry land before the Great Fire of 1871; debris from the burned city was dumped along the shoreline east of Michigan Avenue in the fire's aftermath, and the practice continued for decades afterward as construction rubble, ash, and lakefill steadily pushed the shoreline eastward.

The mail-order magnate Aaron Montgomery Ward, whose State Street warehouse overlooked the park, filed a series of lawsuits between 1890 and 1911 to block the city and private interests from building on the new ground, invoking language dating to an 1836 canal-commissioners' plat that had designated the lakefront "Public Ground, Forever to Remain Vacant of Buildings." Ward's four suits, largely successful, kept Grant Park free of permanent structures and gave Burnham and Bennett's 1909 plan a genuinely open civic lawn to formalize rather than invent. Landfill continued to add acreage through the 1920s, as the Field Museum of Natural History (1921), Soldier Field (1924), and, just south of the park, the Adler Planetarium and Shedd Aquarium (both 1930) rose on newly created ground, forming what became known as the Museum Campus.

A few blocks north, an entirely unofficial variety of landfill was underway. After schooner captain George Wellington Streeter ran his boat aground on a sandbar off the Near North Side lakefront in 1886, he and later opportunistic developers spent years dumping construction debris around the wreck. They gradually enlarged it into inhabitable ground that Streeter claimed as his own "District of Lake Michigan," free of Chicago's jurisdiction. Decades of litigation eventually fixed the reclaimed land's ownership with the city and established developers. By the 1920s the former sandbar had become Streeterville, the dense high-rise district that still bears the captain's name.

Locking the River to the World



Dredging a cofferdam on the Sanitary and Ship Canal at Cicero Avenue, 1924.

The 1900 reversal of the Chicago River had solved Chicago's sewage problem, but it created a new problem. With the River now flowing permanently away from the Lake Michigan, the Sanitary District had to keep careful control over exactly how much lake water was diverted down the new channel. Too much diversion threatened lake levels and navigation across the entire Great Lakes system, and a dispute drew Chicago into decades of litigation with rival lake states eventually reaching the U.S. Supreme Court. The Sanitary District answered part of the problem between 1936 and 1938 by building the Chicago Harbor Lock at the river's mouth. A gated control point there let ships pass between the lake and the reversed river, while limiting how much lake water could slip through.

Further downstream, the federal government completed the Lockport Lock and Dam in 1933. A chain of companion locks followed at Brandon Road, Dresden Island, Marseilles, and Starved Rock. This finished the Illinois Waterway and gave Chicago a fully canalized, lock-controlled water route running all the way from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River. The old nineteenth-century lumber district along the South Branch had mostly faded by this point. Its trade was increasingly carried by rail. But the locks and the Sanitary and Ship Canal kept the river corridor busy with a new generation of industry, including coal docks, and grain elevators. Along the Calumet River to the south, steel mills and shipyards would define the region's heavy industry for the balance of the century.

The Great Migration and the Making of Bronzeville

While Burnham was reordering Chicago's lakefront on paper, a much larger transformation was underway in its neighborhoods. It began around 1916, and accelerated sharply once World War I cut off the flow of European immigrant labor to Chicago's factories and stockyards. Tens of thousands of Black Southerners began arriving in Chicago in what became known as the Great Migration. They came mostly by rail, with many of them following the Illinois Central line north from Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, and Tennessee. They were drawn by wartime industrial jobs, the campaigning of the Chicago Defender newspaper, and the hope of escaping Jim Crow segregation and the sharecropping economy of the rural South. Chicago's Black population, roughly 44,000 in 1910, more than doubled within a decade.

Because of restrictive real estate covenants, hostile white neighborhood associations, and outright violence against Black families who tried to move beyond a narrow strip of the South Side, the newcomers were channeled into an increasingly crowded corridor along State Street that became known as the "Black Belt." It later more proudly became known as Bronzeville. Within that

constrained geography, Black Chicagoans built an extraordinary self-sufficient world of churches, businesses, newspapers, insurance companies, and nightclubs, even as many of the city's businesses and institutions remained closed to them.

That self-sufficient world found its most enduring literary voice in the poet Gwendolyn Brooks. She grew up on these streets and in 1945 published *A Street in Bronzeville*, a collection that turned the neighborhood's kitchenette apartments and hard-pressed lives into art. Five years later she became the first Black writer ever awarded the Pulitzer Prize, for *Annie Allen*, a recognition of both her own gifts and the community that had shaped them.

The 1919 Race Riot

The pressures of rapid migration into a hostile and overcrowded housing market, competition over jobs and union membership, and returning Black veterans who had fought for democracy in Europe only to face discrimination at home, all came to a head in the summer of 1919. The time was remembered nationally as the “Red Summer” for the wave of political and racial violence that swept American cities. In Chicago the spark came on July 27, when a Black teenager named Eugene Williams drifted on a raft across the invisible but strictly enforced line separating a segregated stretch of the Lake Michigan shoreline near 29th Street. White beachgoers threw stones at him and he drowned.

When police refused to arrest the man witnesses identified as responsible, violence erupted and spread through the South Side and the stockyards district. For roughly a week, white mobs, some organized around ethnic “athletic clubs,” attacked Black residents and burned homes. Retaliatory violence also occurred, and the Illinois militia was eventually called in to restore order. When the riot ended, thirty-eight people were dead, fifteen white and twenty-three Black, with over five hundred injured and roughly a thousand families, mostly Black, left homeless after their houses were burned.

The following year, Illinois Governor Frank Lowden appointed the Chicago Commission on Race Relations, an interracial body of civic leaders, to investigate. Its 1922 report, “The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot,” ran to more than six hundred pages and remains a landmark document. It methodically traced the riot's causes to housing discrimination, labor competition, and unequal policing. It also documented in painstaking detail the conditions Black Chicagoans faced in employment, education, and public life. It was among the first attempts by any American city to officially reckon with the structural causes of racial violence rather than treat it as an isolated outburst.

Prohibition, Capone, and the Business of Crime



Al Capone's house at 7244 South Prairie Avenue, Grand Crossing, 1925, when he first became boss of the Chicago Outfit.



Onlookers at 2122 North Clark Street after the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, February 14, 1929.

National Prohibition, in force from 1920 to 1933, turned Chicago into the country's most notorious showcase of organized crime. The Volstead Act did not stop Chicagoans from drinking. It simply moved the liquor trade into the hands of bootleggers willing to bribe police and politicians and to fight rivals for control of speakeasies, breweries, and distribution routes. Al Capone, who arrived from Brooklyn to work for gang boss Johnny Torrio in the early 1920s, took over the operation when Torrio retired after being wounded in 1925. Capone built the most sophisticated criminal enterprise of the era, with estimated annual revenues in the tens of millions of dollars from alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. Capone cultivated a public image as a folk hero and philanthropist, even as his organization fought a running gang war with North Side rivals led first by Dean O'Banion and then by George "Bugs" Moran.

That war reached its grim climax on February 14, 1929, when gunmen dressed as police officers lined up seven members of the Moran gang against a garage wall on North Clark Street. They were shot them dead in what the press immediately dubbed the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. The massacre, though never conclusively prosecuted, was widely attributed to Capone. It turned Chicago's gang violence into international news, thereby feeding a durable image of the city as lawless and corrupt. Capone himself was never convicted of murder. He was finally imprisoned in 1931 on federal charges of income tax evasion, a comparatively mundane end to a career that had made "Chicago gangster" a fixture of American popular culture.

Big Bill Thompson, Anton Cermak, and the Rise of the Machine



The new Cook County Courthouse and City Hall, completed 1911.

Chicago's Prohibition-era gangsterism had a political patron in William Hale "Big Bill" Thompson, the Republican mayor who governed the city, with one term's interruption, from 1915 to 1931. Thompson became a national figure of civic bluster when he threatened to punch King George V "on the snoot" over an imagined slight to American history textbooks. He expanded the lakefront with the Municipal Pier that would later be renamed Navy Pier, and courted Black voters on the South Side with a directness few white politicians of his era attempted. However, his final term became inseparable from Al Capone's bootlegging empire, whose money and muscle Thompson's administration tolerated, and by some accounts actively protected in return for electoral support.

The scandal of that alliance, combined with the Depression's onset, finally broke Thompson's hold on City Hall. Anton Cermak, a Democrat born in Bohemia, had spent decades assembling a coalition of Poles, Bohemians, Germans, and Jews to challenge the long Irish grip on Chicago's Democratic Party. In 1931, he won the mayoralty outright. Cermak's own tenure ended barely two years later, when an assassin's bullet apparently intended for President-elect Franklin Roosevelt struck him during a public appearance in Miami in February 1933. Cermak's hand-picked successors, Mayor Edward J. Kelly and party chairman Patrick Nash, spent the following decade and a half building the disciplined, patronage-driven Democratic machine known as the "Kelly-Nash machine." It would furnish both the organizational template and much of the personal apprenticeship for the man who inherited it in 1955, Richard J. Daley.

The Jazz Age and the Chicago Renaissance



Midway Gardens, Cottage Grove and 60th Street, 1913 — Frank Lloyd Wright's beer garden and entertainment complex, with Alfonso Iannelli sculpture.

As New Orleans jazz musicians moved north in search of work, Chicago's South Side, particularly the stretch of clubs and dance halls along State Street and 35th Street, became the music's new capital. Cornetist King Oliver led his Creole Jazz Band at the Lincoln Gardens Café. In 1922, he sent for a young cornet player from New Orleans named Louis Armstrong to join him as second cornet. Armstrong's arrival in Chicago is often treated as the moment jazz's center of gravity shifted north. His subsequent recordings with his own Hot Five and Hot Seven groups in the mid-1920s helped establish him as the music's first great virtuoso soloist. White Chicago musicians, including a loose circle later called the "Austin High Gang," absorbed what they heard in South Side clubs and helped forge a hot, driving style that came to be called Chicago-style jazz.

At the same time, the city's literary life flourished in what critics later named the Chicago Renaissance. Theodore Dreiser had already drawn on Chicago's commercial hustle in *Sister Carrie*. Robert Herrick anatomized the same rising commercial class in Chicago novels of ambition and marriage. Sherwood Anderson, working in advertising in Chicago, wrote *Winesburg, Ohio* while immersed in the city's literary circles. Vachel Lindsay barnstormed the country reciting poems meant to be chanted aloud to a drumbeat, among them "*General William Booth Enters Into Heaven*" and "*The Congo*." Carl Sandburg, a former Milwaukee newspaperman who settled in Chicago, published *Chicago Poems* in 1916. It opened with the poem "*Chicago*," which famously addressed the city as "Hog Butcher for the World" and "City of the Big Shoulders." Thus, an image of brawling industrial vitality was born that Chicagoans embraced as their own self-portrait for generations afterward. Where Burnham's plan tried to give Chicago a monumental civic face, Sandburg and his contemporaries gave it a different voice, unpolished, muscular, and proud of its own grit.

The novelist Hamlin Garland, a decade removed by then from the stark Midwestern realism of his *Main-Travelled Roads* novel, gave the movement a clubhouse of its own in 1907, when he founded The Cliff Dwellers club. It was a gathering place for many of the city's writers, architects, and artists. In 1922, he won the Pulitzer Prize for *A Daughter of the Middle Border*. For most of the twentieth century the club occupied a penthouse atop Orchestra Hall, itself designed by fellow

member Daniel Burnham, fitted out for the Cliff Dwellers by another member, the architect Howard Van Doren Shaw.

The Cliff Dwellers were not an isolated experiment but part of a much longer line of private clubs that had shaped Chicago's cultural life since the rebuilding years, and further waves of such groups followed within a decade. The Arts Club of Chicago, founded in 1916 partly in reaction to the city's cool reception of the 1913 Armory Show, became the country's most important showcase for modern art before the Museum of Modern Art existed. It hosted Pablo Picasso's first solo American exhibition in 1923. A rowdier counterpart flourished a few blocks north. The Dill Pickle Club was founded in 1917 by the labor organizer Jack Jones. It came out of the soapbox culture of nearby Bughouse Square, and drew many of the same Chicago Renaissance writers among them, including Anderson, Sandburg, and Dreiser. Other members included anarchists, poets, and hoboes, until the Depression closed its doors in 1934.

Essanay Studios and Chicago's Movie Moment



The Theatorium Theater, 178 North State Street, opened 1907, one of Chicago's earliest movie houses.

Before Hollywood consolidated the film industry on the West Coast, Chicago was briefly one of American moviemaking's most important addresses. George Kirke Spoor and the cowboy actor Gilbert M. "Broncho Billy" Anderson founded Essanay Film Manufacturing Company in Chicago in 1907. The studio name was a phonetic spelling of their initials, S and A, and they built the studio on Argyle Street on the North Side. It turned out hundreds of one- and two-reel shorts a year. Essanay's biggest coup came in late 1914, when it lured Charlie Chaplin away from Mack Sennett's Keystone studio with a bigger salary and his own production unit. Chaplin made fourteen comedies for Essanay in 1915 and 1916, including *The Tramp*. This was the film that introduced the wistful closing shot, the lonely vagabond ambling away down a country road, that became Chaplin's signature.

A young Chicago-born extra named Gloria Swanson got her start in bit parts in several of those same Essanay pictures before going on to Hollywood stardom. Decades later, she received an Academy Award nomination for *Sunset Boulevard*. Essanay's Chicago studio couldn't compete for long with Southern California's year-round sunlight and cheaper land, and production wound down through the late 1910s. However, for a few remarkable years, the future of American film ran through a former livery stable on the North Side.

The Goodman Theatre and the Golden Age of Radio



The original Goodman Theatre, designed by Howard Van Doren Shaw, at Columbus Drive and Adams Street, 1925.



WGN Channel 9 goes on the air, 1948, news cameras outside the station.

Chicago's live theater found a lasting new institution in 1925, when William O. and Erna Goodman donated \$250,000 to the Art Institute of Chicago to build a repertory theater and drama school. The gift was in memory of their son, the playwright Kenneth Sawyer Goodman, who had died in the 1918 influenza pandemic. Designed by the architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, whose Cliff Dwellers portrait and work appear elsewhere on this map, the Goodman Theatre opened on October 20, 1925. Though later replaced on its site by construction of Modern Wing of the Art Institute, it remains, under later reorganizations the city's oldest continuously operating nonprofit theater.

At about the same time, Chicago became one of the three or four cities that built American radio's first golden age. The flat Midwestern terrain let a strong Chicago radio signal carry from the Atlantic seaboard to the Rockies. Also, because the city sat at the switching point of the young coast-to-coast networks, station WGN, broadcasting from the Wrigley Building, and WMAQ and WLS fed a remarkable share of the nation's daily programming throughout the 1920s and 1930s. WGN's 1926 serial *Sam 'n' Henry*, created by Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, moved across town to WMAQ in 1928 and was reborn as *Amos 'n' Andy*. It later became network radio's first true national phenomenon and, along with homegrown favorites like *Fibber McGee and Molly*, carried the Chicago name into millions of American living rooms years before television existed.

A Fair in the Depths of the Depression



Aerial panorama of the Century of Progress International Exposition on Northerly Island, 1933.

By the early 1930s the Depression had devastated Chicago's industrial economy, throwing hundreds of thousands out of work. Against that backdrop the city staged the Century of Progress International Exposition in 1933 and 1934. Ostensibly to mark Chicago's centennial as an incorporated city, it really served an exercise in civic optimism. Built on reclaimed land along the lakefront south of the Loop, it was unlike the classical white-plaster grandeur of the 1893 fair. The Century of Progress embraced a streamlined, modernist aesthetic, with a theme of scientific and technological progress. It had exhibits from major corporations, a lit-up "Sky Ride," and, in a widely publicized stunt, a beam of light supposedly triggered by starlight from Arcturus. The fair drew tens of millions of visitors over its two seasons and turned a modest profit, a rare feat for a world's fair. For a depression-battered city it offered a controlled, electrically lit vision of a future still worth building toward, even as breadlines and Hoovervilles persisted only a few miles away.

The fair's modernist pavilions took shape under an Architectural Commission that included John A. Holabird, who had taken over his father William Holabird's celebrated firm, Holabird & Roche, after both its founding partners — William Holabird and Martin Roche — died in the late 1920s. Renamed Holabird & Root, the firm was busy reshaping the Loop's skyline under the younger Holabird's direction with Art Deco towers like the Chicago Board of Trade Building (1930) and the Palmolive Building (1929); his son, John Augur. Holabird Jr., later joined the firm as well, becoming a partner in 1970 and carrying it into the postwar era.

Arsenal of Democracy



The Douglas C-54 aircraft factory (later Orchard Field, now O'Hare International Airport), aerial view, 1943.



War bonds for sale at Chicago's Union Station, 1943.

The Depression's grip finally loosened with the mobilization for World War II. It restored full employment to Chicago's factories, rail yards, and steel mills almost overnight. The city's existing industrial base, its rail hub status, and its skilled workforce made it one of the country's most important production centers for the war effort. It quickly began turning out steel, munitions, aircraft engines, electronics, and countless other military goods. The stockyards that had made Chicago famous as a meatpacking center now fed an army as well as a nation. The war years also drew a second wave of the Great Migration, as Black and white workers alike came north for defense jobs. This further swelled and reshaped neighborhoods that had been transformed a generation earlier. Chicago ended the war years as one of the most productive industrial regions on earth. Its factories were

humming even as the city's older social disconnects over housing, over neighborhood boundaries, over political power, all remained largely unresolved and would erupt again in the decades that followed.

The City These Fifty Years Made



Aerial view northeast from Grant Park toward the Loop and Michigan Avenue, 1950.

By 1950, Chicago had become something new again. It was a global industrial power, a cultural capital, a byword for organized crime, and a city whose Black population after migration had remade whole swaths of its South and West Sides, with much of its twentieth-century history still to come. It was the city of Burnham's audacious lakefront plan and Sandburg's brawny verse, of Armstrong's cornet and the Century of Progress, a place that insisted, against considerable evidence to the contrary, that it was building toward something better.

On the other hand, it was also the city of the 1919 riot and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. It was a place whose name became synonymous, worldwide, with both gangland violence and unresolved racial injustice. The Great Migration had permanently altered Chicago's demographic map, creating Black Bronzeville as both a vibrant cultural capital, but also a confined, underserved district whose boundaries had been drawn by fear and discrimination rather than choice. This was a pattern the 1922 Commission report documented in detail and that would continue to shape Chicago's politics and geography for the rest of the century.

Sources: Daniel H. Burnham and Edward H. Bennett, [Plan of Chicago](#) (1909); Carl Sandburg, [Chicago Poems](#) (1916); Chicago Commission on Race Relations, [The Negro in Chicago: A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot](#) (1922); general reference and archival sources on Al Capone, the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, the Chicago jazz scene and Louis Armstrong's 1922 arrival, and the 1933–34 Century of Progress Exposition; Lois Wille, [Forever Open, Clear, and Free: The Struggle for Chicago's Lakefront](#) (1972); Encyclopedia of Chicago, [Lakefill](#); Libby Hill, [The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History](#) (2000); U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Rock Island District, [Lockport Lock](#); Douglas Bukowski, [Big Bill Thompson, Chicago, and the Politics of Image](#) (1998); Roger Biles, [Big City Boss in Depression and War: Mayor Edward J. Kelly of Chicago](#) (1984); Emmett Dedmon, [Fabulous Chicago](#) (1953); Essanay Film Manufacturing Co., [Made-in-Chicago Museum](#); Chicago History Museum, [Chicago's Silent Stars](#); Goodman Theatre, [Chicago's Oldest Theatre — Our Mission](#); Cheryl Honigford, [A Very Brief History of Old Time Radio in Chicago](#).

Photo Sources: Al Capone's Prairie Avenue house, 1925 — Chicago History Museum; St. Valentine's Day Massacre scene, 1929 — Chicago History Museum; Cook County Courthouse and City Hall, 1911 — Chicago

History Museum / Great Chicago Fire & the Web of Memory (Barnes-Crosby photograph); Midway Gardens, 1913 — Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation Archives / Art Institute of Chicago; Century of Progress Exposition, 1933 — Newberry Library, Chicago Aerial Survey Collection. Internet sources of other photos are not identified.

Digital Age Chicago, 1951–2000

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View from the Auditorium Building to the Prudential Building under construction, 1954.

A City Remade

In 1951, Chicago still looked and felt like the industrial capital it had been for a century. It was a city of stockyards and steel mills, of two-flats and streetcar lines, and its skyline crowded with factory smoke rather than glass towers. By 2000, almost none of that description held true. Over the second half of the twentieth century, Chicago lost more than a million residents from its city limits, watched its manufacturing base collapse, endured some of the most bitter racial conflict in the urban North, and was governed for thirty-five of those fifty years by two men who shared a last name and a talent for concentrating power. This is the story of how Chicago became a modern city — not gently, but through demolition, migration, riot, and reinvention.

The Pull of the Suburbs



The Kennedy Expressway at Jackson Boulevard, under construction, 1958.



The Congress (later Eisenhower) Expressway, viewed west of the old Main Post Office, 1955.

The engine of change was, in part, simple geography. Federal housing policy after World War II, cheap mortgages backed by the Federal Housing Administration and the GI Bill, made single-family homes in the suburbs affordable to millions of returning veterans and their families in a way city apartments were not. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 then built the physical infrastructure of dispersal, funding expressways like the Eisenhower, the Dan Ryan, and the Kennedy that could move commuters between new suburban subdivisions and downtown jobs in a fraction of the time the old rail and streetcar network required. Cook County's suburbs, and the collar counties beyond them,

absorbed hundreds of thousands of families and, increasingly, the factories and retailers that had once anchored city neighborhoods.

Chicago's population peaked at 3.6 million in 1950 and began a decline that would not reverse until the 1990s. The people who left were disproportionately white and middle-class; the highways that enabled their departure were often carved directly through Black and immigrant neighborhoods, displacing residents and severing communities that had existed for generations.

Daley and the Machine



Mayor Richard J. Daley walking to City Hall at Clark and Randolph Streets, 1960.

Into this transformed landscape stepped Richard J. Daley, elected mayor in 1955 and reelected five times until his death in office in 1976. Daley was the last great boss of the old-style urban political machine. The Democratic Party organization was built on precinct captains, patronage jobs, and a ward-by-ward turnout operation that could reliably deliver votes on election day. As mayor and, simultaneously, chairman of the Cook County Democratic Central Committee, Daley fused City Hall and party apparatus into a single instrument, controlling appointments, contracts, and zoning decisions with a thoroughness that few American mayors before or since have matched. His power reached beyond Chicago. The Democratic political machine's ability to produce lopsided Democratic margins in the city made Illinois pivotal in national elections, most famously in the disputed 1960 presidential race between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, where Chicago's vote count drew lasting accusations of fraud.



High-rise towers at Cabrini-Green, Division and Larrabee Streets, 1958.

Daley's Chicago was also a city of enormous, visible construction. He backed O'Hare International Airport's expansion into the world's busiest airport, built the University of Illinois at Chicago's Circle campus, and expanded the expressway system inside the city itself. But his signature domestic program was urban renewal, and its most consequential product was public high-rise housing. The Chicago Housing Authority, under pressure from Daley and from aldermen determined to keep public housing out of white wards, concentrated new developments almost entirely within existing Black neighborhoods on the South and West Sides. The results included the Robert Taylor Homes, completed in 1962 as the largest public housing project in the country, and the Cabrini-Green complex on the Near North Side. All expanded through the 1950s and 1960s. Conceived as slum clearance and modern housing, these towers instead concentrated poverty at a scale and density that produced by the 1970s and 1980s some of the most troubled, disinvested communities in urban America, plagued by deferred maintenance, gang activity, and isolation from the city's economic life.

The Preservation Movement Fights Back

Even as Daley's bulldozers cleared whole blocks for public housing and expressways, a countervailing movement was taking shape to save what remained of nineteenth-century Chicago. In 1966 the architect Wilbert R. Hasbrouck helped organize the Chicago School of Architecture Foundation specifically to buy and preserve Henry Hobson Richardson's threatened Glessner House. He served as the young foundation's president for its first four years and went on to found and edit the *Prairie School Review* from 1964 to 1981. The magazine was the first scholarly journal devoted to Frank Lloyd Wright and his Prairie School contemporaries. After a career as chief architect for the Illinois Central Railroad, Hasbrouck turned to restoring landmark buildings including. These included Wright's Dana-Thomas House and Louis Sullivan's Peoples Savings Bank. He also served as president of The Cliff Dwellers arts club as it and other Chicago institutions and businesses opened their doors to women in the 1980s. Hasbrouck's son Charles similarly served a president of the club and also carried the family's architectural bent in preservation work before his career with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill took him to work on large-scale projects from Oman to India. He ended his long career at the absolute other end of the preservation spectrum by leading the architect-of-record team behind architect Jeanne Gang's St. Regis Chicago, the city's third-tallest tower.

Another father-son pair of preservation architects once serving a president of The Cliff Dwellers is Walker Johnson and his son Ben. The elder Johnson trained at Holabird & Root before co-founding

Johnson Lasky Architects in 1992 to carry the rescue-and-restore architectural ethic into the century's final decade. His architect son, Ben, went from preservation work to help shape the world's tallest skyscrapers at Chicago's Adrian Smith + Gordon Gill Architecture. The firm's designs include what will be the world's tallest building, the Jeddah Tower in Saudi Arabia.

From saving the old, worth saving, buildings locally, to designing and building the newest and the tallest megatall structures on the planet, Chicago has given birth to unique multi-generational architectural skill sets. These four professionals, and other Chicago architects like them, have helped set both preservation and megatall building and design standards for the world.

The Chicago Seven Take On the Miesians

A parallel rebellion was brewing within the profession itself in this period. In 1976, invited by his friend Stanley Tigerman, the architect Laurence Booth joined Stuart Cohen, Ben Weese, James Ingo Freed, Thomas Beeby, and James L. Nagle in forming the Chicago Seven. The group was a brotherhood of younger architects who chafed against the city's institutionalized reverence for Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. When the Museum of Contemporary Art mounted a traveling exhibition that told Chicago's architectural story almost entirely through Mies's circle, the group staged a pointed counter-show of its own. Through further exhibitions and writings of their own, they argued for a broader, more generous history that made room for underappreciated architectural figures like Daniel Burnham, John Root, and Bruce Goff.

The O'Hare Strip: Annexation's Last Chapter



O'Hare International Airport's terminal building and parking lot, 1956.

Daley's ambitions for O'Hare exposed a peculiar problem. The airport was then called Orchard Field after the small wartime aircraft plant that had occupied the site. It lay entirely outside Chicago's city limits, ten miles northwest of the Loop. In 1956, the city annexed a narrow, roughly quarter-mile-wide corridor running out along Foster Avenue and Higgins Road to the airport property. This stitched a slender finger of Chicago territory across unincorporated Cook County so that O'Hare would be inside the city itself and under its taxing and regulatory authority.

The "O'Hare Strip," as it came to be known, was one of the last significant annexations Chicago would ever complete. It closing out a much longer pattern of territorial growth that had culminated decades earlier in the sweeping 1889 vote that brought the townships of Hyde Park, Lake View, Jefferson, and Lake into the city in a single stroke. This had added some 125 square miles and 225,000 residents and roughly quadrupled Chicago's area. After the O'Hare Strip, Chicago's boundaries settled into

essentially their present form, and the airport it secured went on through the 1950s and 1960s to become for a time the world's busiest.

The airport's growing ambitions found a fittingly bold architectural expression in 1963, when the architect Gertrude Lempp Kerbis, one of the first women to reach the top ranks of Chicago's modernist design world, completed O'Hare's circular Rotunda Building. Its 190-foot ceiling was suspended from nearly a mile of heavy bridge cable, and as it was built to house the jet-age Seven Continents restaurant.

The Fourth Seacoast That Wasn't: The St. Lawrence Seaway



St. Lawrence Seaway opening ceremonies at Navy Pier, 1959.

Chicago's ambitions to become not just an inland rail hub but a true ocean port crested in 1959, when the St. Lawrence Seaway officially opened. Its ceremonial ribbon was cut jointly by Queen Elizabeth II and President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Decades in the planning and built jointly by the United States and Canada, the Seaway paired a chain of new locks and channels along the St. Lawrence River with the existing Welland Canal around Niagara Falls. The result finally gave oceangoing freighters a continuous deep-draft route from the Atlantic Ocean all the way to Lake Michigan.

Boosters in Chicago, Cleveland, Toronto, Detroit, and Milwaukee promoted the project as creating a genuine "fourth seacoast" for the industrial Midwest. The hope was that the project would let landlocked manufacturers and grain shippers load cargo directly for Rotterdam or Liverpool without the added cost and delay of trucking or rail to New York or New Orleans first. Also, newly discovered iron ore deposits in Quebec and Labrador, badly needed by Midwestern steel mills, only sharpened the case for the investment. Chicago built a municipal port facility on the Calumet River specifically to capture this anticipated ocean trade. For a few years in the early 1960s international tonnage through the Great Lakes did climb toward the levels planners had projected.

The boom did not last. The Seaway's own locks, sized to match the older, smaller Welland Canal rather than the larger Panama Canal, permitted ships no longer than about seven hundred and thirty feet, a limit that seemed generous in 1959 but left the Seaway unable to accommodate the far larger vessels that came to dominate international shipping within a generation. At the same time, the rise of containerized cargo through the 1960s and 1970s rewarded ports that could handle huge specialized container ships and move boxes quickly onto rail and highway networks. This was the model that favored coastal ports like New York and New Orleans over a seasonal, ice-bound inland route that closed for winter each year.

Chicago's own container terminal at Lake Calumet, opened with high hopes, saw its traffic dwindle as ships too large for the Seaway's locks simply bypassed the Great Lakes altogether. They unloading instead at coastal ports for onward shipment by rail. By the 1990s, international cargo moving through the Great Lakes had fallen to a fraction of its early-1970s peak. The Seaway that had promised to make Chicago a world seaport instead stood in retrospect as a costly, underused monument to a shipping economy that had already begun to change by the time construction finished.

Migration, Segregation, and Confrontation

Daley's Chicago was reshaped as well by the continuation of the Great Migration, the decades-long movement of Black Americans out of the rural South into northern and western cities. Chicago's Black population, concentrated at mid-century in the South Side's "Black Belt" and a smaller West Side enclave, grew rapidly through the 1950s and 1960s as new arrivals sought factory jobs and an escape from Jim Crow. But the same forces that built the machine also built and enforced segregation: restrictive real estate practices, banks' refusal to lend in Black neighborhoods (a practice later named redlining), and, at times, violent resistance from white residents when Black families tried to move into previously all-white blocks. Housing segregation in Chicago became so entrenched and so thoroughly engineered through public policy that historians would later describe the city as having built a "second ghetto" — one created not simply by private prejudice but by the deliberate decisions of housing authorities, banks, and elected officials.

These conditions drew the civil rights movement north. In 1966, Martin Luther King Jr. moved into a West Side apartment and, alongside local organizers, launched the Chicago Freedom Movement. The group demanded open housing and an end to slum conditions. Marches into white neighborhoods such as Marquette Park were met with mobs throwing rocks and bottles. King himself was struck by a rock during one march. He later remarked that he had never seen such hatred, even in the Deep South. The campaign produced a negotiated agreement on fair housing that summer, though its practical effects were limited. It left King and his allies with a sober understanding of how deeply segregation was embedded in Northern cities.

Two years later, the assassination of King in April 1968 set off days of arson and unrest on Chicago's West Side, leaving several people dead, and blocks of Madison Street and other commercial corridors burned out. This was a scar on West Side neighborhoods that persisted for decades afterward. Daley's public order to police to "shoot to kill" arsonists during the unrest became one of the most controversial statements of his mayoralty.

1968: The Whole World Watching



Democratic National Convention demonstrators at the General Logan statue, Grant Park, August 1968.



Anti-war protesters gathered at the Logan statue during the convention, 1968.

Chicago's reputation for civic turbulence crested later that same year, when the city hosted the Democratic National Convention in August 1968. The nation was already reeling from King's assassination in April and Robert F. Kennedy's in June, and the convention itself was consumed by the party's split over the Vietnam War. Thousands of antiwar protesters, Yippies, and student activists gathered in Grant Park and around the Conrad Hilton hotel. Over several nights that August, in full view of television cameras, Chicago police clashed violently with demonstrators tear-gassing and beating protesters, bystanders, and journalists alike. A subsequent federal commission would later

label the events a “police riot.” The images broadcast worldwide, with chanting crowds, riot police wielding batons, a haze of tear gas along Michigan Avenue, cemented an image of Chicago as a city of both raw political power and unresolved violence. This was an image the Daley administration spent years trying to counter.

The convention’s violence carried a personal dimension for at least one figure who would later chronicle it. Both William J. Bowe and Bernardine Dohrn were 1967 graduates of the University of Chicago Law School. Dohrn had by the summer of 1968 risen to Interorganizational Secretary of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), whose activists helped drive the antiwar mobilization that converged on Chicago that August for the Democratic Convention. Within a year Dohrn would lead SDS’s “action faction” into founding the Weather Underground, a group *Encyclopædia Britannica* describes as having “sought to advance communism through violent revolution” and having called on America’s youth to “bring about [the government’s] downfall.”

Bowe’s chapter in his memoir [Riots & Rockets](#), “Bernardine Dohrn, The SDS Revolutionaries Then and Now,” traces her path from being a first-year student who “stood out with both her miniskirts and her politics” to the 1070 fugitive from justice named to the FBI’s Ten Most Wanted list. Bowe found himself tracking her radicalization in real time in the 1960s as an Army counterintelligence agent at the Pentagon assigned to assess the likelihood of domestic unrest serious enough to require federal troop deployments.

The Factories Close

Even as these political dramas played out, a quieter but equally transformative process was underway in Chicago’s economy. The manufacturing base that had built the city, steel mills along the Calumet River, meatpacking (the Union Stock Yards finally closed in 1971), garment and metalworking shops, rail-car and machinery plants, all began a steep decline through the 1970s and into the 1980s. National deindustrialization, driven by foreign competition, automation, and the relocation of factories to the Sun Belt and overseas, hit Chicago’s South Side and Southeast Side especially hard.

The closure of the massive Wisconsin Steel plant in 1980 and the contraction of U.S. Steel’s South Works through the 1980s eliminated tens of thousands of union jobs that had sustained entire neighborhoods for generations. The economic fallout deepened poverty and population loss on the South and Southeast Sides in particular. This compounded the effects of segregation and disinvestment that had already concentrated hardship in Black neighborhoods. By the early 1980s, Chicago’s unemployment and fiscal problems were severe enough that the city’s long-term survival as a major economic center was an open and anxious question.

Harold Washington's Breakthrough



The Harold Washington Library under construction, 1991, named for the mayor who broke the machine's grip on Black political loyalty.

It was against this backdrop of economic distress and racial grievance that Chicago elected its first Black mayor. Richard J. Daley had died in office in 1976, and a rapid succession of mayors followed, including Jane Byrne, the city's first female mayor elected in 1979. In 1983, Congressman Harold Washington won a hard-fought three-way Democratic primary against Byrne and Richard M. Daley, the late mayor's son, riding an unprecedented mobilization of Black voters along with support from Latino and liberal white constituencies. His general election victory that April made him Chicago's first Black mayor and a landmark figure in American urban politics.

Washington's first term was consumed by what became known as the "Council Wars." A bloc of white aldermen loyal to the old machine blocked much of his agenda in the City Council. Only after a 1986 special election shifted the balance did Washington gain working control of the council. He was reelected in 1987, but died of a heart attack that November, less than a year into his second term. This cut short a mayoralty that had nonetheless permanently broken the machine's grip on Black political loyalty and opened city government to a wider circle of Chicagoans.

Patronage, the Shakman Decrees, and the Council Wars

The machine Richard J. Daley inherited from the Kelly-Nash organization ran on a single currency, patronage jobs. Tens of thousands of such jobs across city and county government were awarded and withdrawn by precinct captains in direct proportion to how reliably a block of voters turned out on election day. That system faced its first serious legal challenge in 1969, when an independent political candidate named Michael Shakman sued to stop it. He arguing that conditioning public jobs on political loyalty violated the constitutional rights of both employees and the candidates they were never free to support.

The resulting consent decrees, first entered in 1972 and steadily expanded over the following decades, gradually outlawed politically motivated hiring, firing, and promotion across most city and county positions. This was a slow-moving legal siege that took direct aim at the mechanism Daley's machine

depended on most. Full compliance remained an open struggle for years after the relevant court decisions.

The machine's weakened but still formidable resistance to change showed itself most vividly after Harold Washington's 1983 election. That's when a bloc of twenty-nine white aldermen led by Edward Vrdolyak and Edward Burke, quickly nicknamed the "Vrdolyak 29," used their council majority to block Washington's committee appointments, budgets, and legislative agenda almost item by item. It plunged City Hall into the prolonged legislative stalemate the press dubbed the Council Wars. The deadlock finally broke only after a federal court, ruling that the city's ward map had been racially gerrymandered, ordered a 1986 special election in seven wards. The results flipped the council's balance and gave Washington, for the first time, a working majority to govern with.

Richard M. Daley and a Post-Industrial City

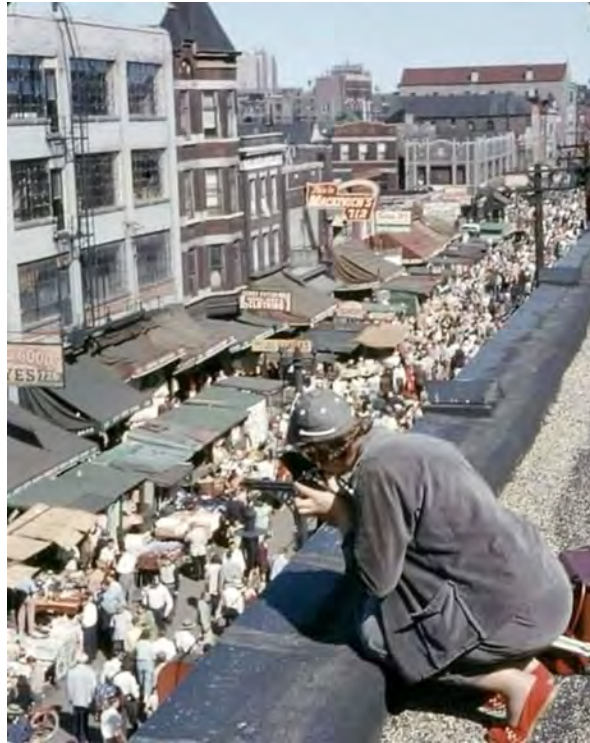


The Prudential Building seen from the Monroe Street Parking Lot, 1964 — later the site of Millennium Park.

After a brief interim mayoralty by Eugene Sawyer, Richard M. Daley won election in 1989. This began a twenty-two-year tenure that would remake Chicago's economy and physical form once more. Where his father had governed an industrial city and built public housing towers, the younger Daley presided over their eventual demolition. He launched the Chicago Housing Authority's "Plan for Transformation" in the early 2000s that tore down Cabrini-Green and the Robert Taylor Homes. Through the 1990s, his administration pursued redevelopment of the Loop and Near North Side, promoted downtown residential conversion, courted corporate headquarters and financial firms, and invested heavily in tourism, culture, and public amenities. This was a strategy that accelerated the city's shift from a manufacturing economy to one centered on finance, services, and hospitality.

Neighborhoods near downtown that had been disinvested for decades, including parts of the Near North and West Loop, saw substantial private investment and gentrification. This occurred even as many South and West Side communities continued to struggle with the legacies of deindustrialization and segregated public housing. By 2000, Chicago's economy and skyline bore little resemblance to the industrial city of 1951. The transformation set the stage for the redevelopment projects, including Millennium Park and the 2016 Olympic bid, that would define the city's next chapter.

The Blues Goes Electric, and House Music Is Born



Maxwell Street Market, 1956, the open-air South Side market famous for its street blues musicians.

Chicago gave the twentieth century two entire genres of music, fifty years apart. Both were born in unglamorous rooms on the South and West Sides. McKinley Morganfield, known to the world as Muddy Waters, arrived from the Mississippi Delta in 1943 hoping to work as a full-time musician. He found that an acoustic guitar simply couldn't be heard over a noisy Chicago club. "When I went into the clubs, the first thing I wanted was an amplifier. Couldn't nobody hear you with an acoustic." His 1948 single "*I Can't Be Satisfied*," cut for the newly formed Aristocrat label, sold out its first pressing in a single day and gave the label's founders, the Polish-immigrant brothers Leonard and Phil Chess. The sound would define Chess Records after they renamed it in 1950.

Chess became the workshop where Delta blues turned electric and urban, recording Muddy Waters, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, Willie Dixon, Sonny Boy Williamson, Etta James, and Chuck Berry. Its records crossed the Atlantic to reshape British rock. The Rolling Stones took their name from a Muddy Waters single, and both they and Fleetwood Mac counted themselves direct disciples after a galvanizing 1958 Muddy Waters tour of England.

Three decades later, a different Chicago dance floor produced a second genre from scratch. The Warehouse, a members-only South Loop club that opened in 1977, hired the DJ Frankie Knuckles as its musical director. Through the early 1980s, Knuckles built sets that spliced disco records with European electronic music and a harder, more mechanical beat, played for a crowd rooted in the city's Black and gay club culture. Regulars started asking record shops for the kind of music they'd heard "at the Warehouse." By the mid-1980s, Chicago DJs and bedroom producers were pressing their own "House" records and shipping them worldwide. The building itself was designated a Chicago Landmark in 2023, and the city renamed its block Frankie Knuckles Way in his honor.

Second City, Steppenwolf, and a New Chicago Stage



The Second City Theater, 1616 North Wells Street, 1961.

Chicago also reinvented American comedy and, separately, American acting in these decades. The Second City opened its doors at 1842 North Wells Street on December 16, 1959. It was founded by Paul Sills, Bernard Sahlins, and Howard Alk and grew out of the University of Chicago's earlier Compass Players group. It built on the improvisational "theater games" developed by Sills's mother, Viola Spolin. Its satirical revues were aimed squarely at the conformity of the era and quickly became a launching pad rather than a destination. Alumni over the following decades included Alan Alda, Joan Rivers, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Dan Aykroyd, Chris Farley, Mike Myers, Tina Fey, Stephen Colbert, and Amy Poehler. They formed an unbroken line running from a Chicago storefront stage to Saturday Night Live and well beyond it.

Fifteen years later, three young actors named Terry Kinney, Jeff Perry, and Gary Sinise staged their first production in a suburban Highland Park church basement in 1974. They named their new company Steppenwolf after the Hermann Hesse novel one of them happened to be reading. Steppenwolf's raw, ensemble-driven realism came to include John Malkovich and Laurie Metcalf. The company built a national reputation from the ground up. By 1991, the company had moved into its own purpose-built home on North Halsted Street, and was sending a string of its productions on to Broadway along the way.

Bellow, Terkel, and Chicago's Postwar Voice

Chicago's novelists and journalists found an equally distinctive postwar voice. Saul Bellow, who had arrived from Montreal as a child, opened his 1953 breakthrough novel *The Adventures of Augie March* with the declaration "I am an American, Chicago born," and went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1976. Studs Terkel spent decades coaxing ordinary Chicagoans to tell their own stories, first on his long-running WFMT radio program and then in oral histories like *Division Street: America* (1967), and *The Good War* (1985), which won the Pulitzer Prize.

Roger Ebert, who joined the Chicago Sun-Times as film critic in 1967, became in 1975 the first film critic ever awarded the Pulitzer Prize. His televised sparring with the Chicago Tribune's Gene Siskel made "two thumbs up" a household phrase. A younger generation carried the tradition forward. Practicing attorney Scott Turow turned his own Harvard Law School diary into the bestseller *One L*

(1977) before reinventing the legal thriller with *Presumed Innocent* (1987), while Stuart Dybek's story collections captured the working-class alleys of Pilsen and Little Village and, in 2007, earned him a MacArthur Fellowship.

The Hairy Who and the Uptown Poetry Slam

Chicago's visual artists and poets built their own scenes just as deliberately outside New York's shadow. In 1966, six recent graduates of the School of the Art Institute, Jim Falconer, Art Green, Gladys Nilsson, Jim Nutt, Suellen Rocca, and Karl Wirsum, began exhibiting together at the Hyde Park Art Center under the name Hairy Who. They were showing loud, cartoonish, deliberately uncool paintings drawn from sources as varied as Surrealism, mail-order catalogues, and medical illustrations. The group disbanded after three years, but it touched off a broader, decade-long wave of exhibitions, Nonplussed Some, False Image, and others, that critics later grouped together as the Chicago Imagists, a body of work as strange and specific to the city as the blues or the skyscraper.

Chicago's literary scene found an equally scrappy, equally lasting home when the poet Marc Smith started a Monday-night open mic at the Get Me High Lounge in Bucktown in 1984. On July 25, 1986, he hosted what he called a poetry "slam," reading aloud judged, competitively, by audience members pulled at random. The show moved to the Green Mill, the old Uptown jazz lounge on North Broadway, where the Uptown Poetry Slam ran every Sunday night and became the acknowledged birthplace of slam poetry as a national and international art form.

A Half-Century of Reinvention



Oak Street Beach, 1995 — a promotional image of the reinvented, post-industrial lakefront city.

By the year 2000, Chicago had survived the loss of its old industrial identity and the trauma of its racial and political conflicts to emerge, however unevenly, as a global city: prosperous and rebuilt in its downtown core, still grappling on its South and West Sides with the consequences of the choices its leaders had made along the way. The passage from an industrial powerhouse, organized around factories, rail yards, and a disciplined political machine, into a post-industrial metropolis defined by finance, tourism, and services was never smooth.

It was driven by highways that hollowed out neighborhoods even as they built suburbs, by a mayor whose iron control of city government also produced the housing towers that concentrated a

generation of poverty, by a civil rights movement that exposed how thoroughly segregation had been built into Northern urban life, and by the shock of deindustrialization that emptied out the manufacturing jobs that had sustained the city's working class. It was also a half-century of hard-won political change, culminating in Harold Washington's election, and of eventual civic reinvention under Richard M. Daley, as Chicago repositioned itself for a service and information economy.

Further reading: Mike Royko, [Boss: Richard J. Daley of Chicago](#) (1971); Adam Cohen and Elizabeth Taylor, [American Pharaoh: Mayor Richard J. Daley — His Battle for Chicago and the Nation](#) (2000); Arnold R. Hirsch, [Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960](#) (1983); Isabel Wilkerson, [The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration](#) (2010); Gary Rivlin, [Fire on the Prairie: Chicago's Harold Washington and the Politics of Race](#) (1992); William J. Bowe, Chapter 1, [Riots & Rockets](#) (2025); William J. Bowe, [Bernardine Dohrn and John Ashcroft Look Back](#) (2022); Ann Durkin Keating, [Chicago Neighborhoods and Suburbs: A Historical Guide](#) (2008); Chicago Department of Aviation, [O'Hare History](#); Paul Kleppner, [Chicago Divided: The Making of a Black Mayor](#) (1985); Paul M. Green and Melvin G. Holli, eds., [The Mayors: The Chicago Political Tradition](#); History.com, [St. Lawrence Seaway Officially Opened](#); Encyclopaedia Britannica, [St. Lawrence Seaway](#); Congressional Research Service, [Shipping on the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Seaway: An Update](#); Illinois Rock & Roll Museum, [Chess Records](#); NPR, [From the Warehouse to the World: Chicago and the Birth of House Music](#) (2023); The Second City, [Alumni & Comedy History](#); Steppenwolf Theatre Company, [History & Founders](#); Art Institute of Chicago, [Hairy Who? 1966–1969](#); Poetry Foundation, [Marc Kelly Smith](#).

Photo Sources: Cabrini-Green high-rises, 1958 — Getty Images archival photograph (March 24, 1958); 1968 Democratic National Convention demonstrators, Grant Park — Chicago History Museum (photograph by Peter Bullock, ICHi-050772); Anti-war protesters at the Logan statue, 1968 — Photo by Lawrence Okrent, CD; Harold Washington Library under construction — Chicago Public Library Archives (Peter Fish Studios construction photographs, 1988–1991). Internet sources of other photos are not identified.

Contemporary Chicago, 2001–Present

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A New Century, A Different Skyline



Aerial view of Millennium Park, 2023.



Visitors at Anish Kapoor's Cloud Gate — “the Bean” — 2024.

Chicago entered the twenty-first century as a city already reinvented several times, from marshy portage to railroad hub, from industrial powerhouse to post-industrial metropolis reaching for a new identity. The opening years of the 2000s gave that reinvention a physical centerpiece. On July 16, 2004, after construction delays that stretched years beyond schedule and a budget that ballooned past \$475 million, Mayor Richard M. Daley presided over the dedication of Millennium Park. The

park was built atop a tangle of old rail yards and parking lots at the northwest corner of Grant Park. Three days of opening festivities drew hundreds of thousands of visitors.

The park's centerpiece sculpture, Anish Kapoor's stainless-steel Cloud Gate, was still unfinished at the ribbon-cutting. Its welds were still unpolished, so its surface was covered for months while workers buffed away every seam. But Chicagoans had already claimed it as their own, nicknaming it "the Bean" long before its formal dedication in May 2006.

Millennium Park did more than add acreage to a lakefront of reclaimed land (see [the Jazz Age chapter's account](#) of the park's landfill origins). It reframed how Chicago wanted to be seen. Alongside Frank Gehry's swooping band shell and the twin glass towers of the Crown Fountain, the park signaled a city investing in public space, contemporary art, and tourism as core civic strategy rather than afterthought.

It became one of the most-visited attractions in the Midwest, a backdrop for wedding photographers and skyline postcards alike. It also anchored a broader wave of Loop and Near North redevelopment, with luxury condominiums rising on former industrial parcels, a resurgent North Michigan Avenue, and a downtown residential population that grew sharply through the decade as young professionals and empty-nesters alike moved back into the center city. For a metropolis long defined by its factories and freight lines, the message of the 2000s was that culture, design, and public amenity could themselves be economic engines.

Chicago's investment in civic sculpture extended a much older tradition into the new century. Richard Hunt, a Chicago native whose seven-decade career made him the nation's most acclaimed sculptor working in welded abstract metal, kept adding major public commissions to his native city right up until his death in 2023, with additional works completed or planned for the DuSable Black History Museum, the Obama Presidential Center, and the Emmett and Mamie Till-Mobley House Museum in Woodlawn.

The Crash and the Long Climb Back

That optimism collided with reality in 2008. The national financial crisis, triggered by the collapse of the subprime mortgage market and the failure or near-failure of major banks, hit Chicago's economy and its neighborhoods hard. Foreclosure rates spiked across the city, with the South and West Sides absorbing a disproportionate share of the damage as the preceding boom years unwound leaving vacant, boarded homes. Illinois and Cook County government finances, already strained by pension obligations built up over decades, grew more precarious as tax revenues fell. The city's convention and tourism sector, still young in its Millennium Park-era confidence, slowed as travel budgets tightened nationwide.

Recovery came slowly and unevenly. Downtown and the North Side rebounded first, buoyed by continued residential investment, a growing tech and professional-services sector, and steady convention business at McCormick Place. But many South and West Side communities never fully recaptured the ground lost in the crash; vacant lots and shuttered storefronts in neighborhoods like Englewood, Austin, and Roseland became durable features of the urban landscape well into the 2010s, a visible marker of how unevenly the city's fortunes had come to be distributed.

A Shifting, Shrinking, Reshuffling City



2010 1852 South Allport Avenue. The Pilsen neighborhood is a living museum of 19th century vernacular architecture

Lawrence Oviatt photo
2010_CD_Oviatt_Lawrence_1852_South_Allport_Avenue01.jpg

1852 South Allport Avenue, Pilsen, 2010 — one of the Southwest Side neighborhoods that grew as Chicago's Latino population expanded.

Underneath the skyline's new silhouette, Chicago's population was moving. The city's total population, which had stabilized somewhat in the 1990s after decades of postwar decline, resumed shrinking in the 2000s and continued to lose residents through the 2010 and 2020 census counts. It dropped from roughly 2.9 million at the century's turn toward a figure closer to 2.7 million by the 2020 count, before a modest uptick was recorded later in the decade. The losses were not evenly spread.

Black population loss was especially pronounced on the South and West Sides, driven by a combination of the demolition of high-rise public housing developments. The Chicago Housing Authority's "Plan for Transformation," tore down Cabrini-Green, the Robert Taylor Homes, and other troubled towers starting in the late 1990s and continuing through the 2000s. This was taking place alongside broader currents of Black out-migration to the Sun Belt and to suburbs, a reversal of the Great Migration patterns that had built those neighborhoods a century earlier.

Meanwhile the Loop, the Near North Side, and swaths of the North Side gained residents. The city's Latino population grew substantially, especially on the Southwest Side and in neighborhoods like Little Village, Pilsen, and Albany Park, even as gentrification pushed some long-standing Latino communities further from the central city. By the 2020s, Chicago's population was more evenly split among white, Black, and Latino residents than at almost any point in its history. This was true even as the neighborhood-level segregation that had shaped the city since the Great Migration remained stubbornly persistent, a pattern chronicled in detail by South Side-focused journalism and scholarship in these years.

Clout — The Rise and Fall of the Democratic Political Machine in Chicago



"Scabby the Rat," the inflatable union protest fixture, outside City Hall, 121 North LaSalle Street.

Before turning to the mayors who governed twenty-first-century Chicago, it is worth understanding the political system many of them inherited, adapted, or dismantled: the Democratic machine, and the peculiar Chicago currency known as clout. As historian Dominic A. Pacyga argues in his 2025 study *Clout City: The Rise and Fall of the Chicago Political Machine*, the machine was never simply a corrupt bureaucracy bolted onto city government, it grew out of the communal, largely Catholic and Jewish immigrant culture of neighborhoods like Bridgeport, on the South Side. There, the De La Salle Institute, a Christian Brothers high school founded in 1889, schooled generations of future ward bosses and mayors, including the Daleys, in loyalty, hierarchy, and obedience.

Pacyga describes a political structure that mirrored the Catholic Church itself, with the mayor and party chairman as pope, aldermen and ward committeemen as bishops, and precinct captains as parish priests. Each was expected to know every family on the block and to trade favors for votes. The saloon, the parish, the ward office, and at times the neighborhood gambling operation, all fed the same web of reciprocal obligation. It was what Pacyga calls a communal system in which "the priest, the rabbi, and the gangster" could all be, in their own ways, part of the machine.

The machine became a genuinely citywide force under Anton Cermak, a Czech immigrant elected mayor in 1931. He assembled a multiethnic coalition of Poles, Bohemians, Germans, and Jews to challenge the long Irish grip on Chicago politics. He briefly succeeded, until the assassin's bullet intended for President-elect Franklin Roosevelt killed Cermak in Miami in 1933. Irish Bridgeport quickly reclaimed control, and the machine reached its fullest expression under Richard J. Daley, mayor from 1955 to 1976. He ran both City Hall and the Cook County Democratic Party simultaneously and treated patronage as a kind of civic ministry. This could entail writing letters to get a friend's son into dental school, a constituent onto a public-housing waiting list, or a Christian Brother a passport. Alongside this was the far larger business of steering contracts, jobs, and zoning decisions. Pacyga calls Daley "Chicago's patron saint of patronage and clout," a phrase that captures how thoroughly the machine's power rested on personal, neighborhood-level relationships rather than ideology.

That same communal foundation is what eventually gave way. The Second Vatican Council's liberalization of the Catholic Church in the early 1960s loosened the tight parish loyalty that had anchored ward politics. Court-ordered reforms, culminating in decades of litigation that curtailed patronage hiring, stripped the machine of many of the jobs it had traded for votes. Postwar suburbanization drew the Catholic ethnic families who had built the machine out of the city entirely. Richard M. Daley's more technocratic, "neoliberal" mayoralty after 1989, courted new constituencies including Chicago's LGBTQ+ community even as it further reduced traditional patronage, signaled how much the old system had already changed.

Pacyga dates the machine's final collapse to 2023, with the corruption convictions of two of its last powerful figures, longtime alderman Edward M. Burke and Illinois House Speaker Michael J. Madigan. For others as well, it marked the end of clout as a self-sustaining communal system, even as its habits and ghosts continue to shape how Chicago is governed.

The personal, often chaotic texture of the machine's decline is captured in attorney William J. Bowe's memoir *Riots & Rockets*. Byrne's improbable 1979 upset of machine-backed Mayor Michael Bilandic. His account recalls the public fury over the city's bungled response to a paralyzing blizzard, in what briefly looked like a genuine break from the old Democratic organization Byrne's campaign had run against.

But Bowe recounts how her mayoralty quickly became defined by volatility rather than reform. When a transition report she had commissioned from a panel of independent-minded advisers was finally leaked to the press in June 1980, after her administration had kept it under wraps for a year, Byrne response was telling. In answer to the resulting Chicago Tribune story didn't engage the report's findings. Instead, Mayor Byrne banned the paper's reporters from City Hall, igniting a First Amendment uproar that dominated the city's front pages for days. Bowe, who had helped draft part of the report and was summoned in the middle of the night to walk Tribune reporters through its hundreds of pages before the story broke, saw the episode as telling evidence of a mayor whose instinct for combative theater outpaced her capacity to govern. This was a pattern that, within three years, helped clear the way for Harold Washington's historic 1983 victory.

Four Mayors, Four Chicagos



Meigs Field, viewed north after its overnight closure by Mayor Richard M. Daley, 2003.

The era's politics were dominated, in its first decade, by continuity. Richard M. Daley, son of the legendary Richard J. Daley, held the mayor's office from 1989 until 2011, making his combined tenure the longest in the city's history. His later years in office were defined by ambitious, sometimes

controversial infrastructure and privatization deals. Alongside continued investment in parks, bike lanes, there was the 2008 long-term lease of the city's parking meters. This generated an upfront payment, but locked in decades of steep rate increases. The parking meter deal became a byword for fiscal shortsightedness. Daley also pursued an unsuccessful bid to host the 2016 Summer Olympics.

Rahm Emanuel, formerly a congressman and Obama's White House chief of staff, succeeded Daley in 2011 and served until 2019. His administration pushed a data-driven, business-friendly agenda. It expanded pre-kindergarten and full-day kindergarten, and oversaw continued downtown development. It was also marked by a painful seven-day teachers' strike in 2012 over pay, evaluation, and school closings. The 2013 closure of roughly fifty public schools, concentrated overwhelmingly on the South and West Sides, hurt his popularity and Emanuel's second term was overshadowed by the fallout from the police shooting of Laquan McDonald.

Lori Lightfoot, a former federal prosecutor and first-time officeholder, was elected in 2019 as the city's first Black woman and first openly gay mayor. She won every one of the city's fifty wards in the runoff. Her single term, running through 2023, was consumed substantially by the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftershocks. Her continued struggles over crime rates, and police reform led to public frustration and a third-place finish in her 2023 reelection bid. Brandon Johnson, a former teacher and organizer backed heavily by the Chicago Teachers Union, won that 2023 election and took office promising a more progressive approach to public safety, housing, and taxation. He inherited a city still working through the pandemic's fiscal and social aftermath alongside a new wave of asylum-seekers arriving from the southern border that strained city shelter systems beginning in 2022 and 2023.

Violence, Policing, and a Reckoning

Gun violence remained one of the era's most painful and most publicized themes. Chicago's homicide rate, heavily concentrated in a relatively small number of South and West Side neighborhoods, drew persistent national attention and, at times, distorted characterizations of the city as a whole. Crime rates fluctuated across the two decades, falling in the mid-2000s and mid-2010s, and spiking sharply in 2016 and again during the pandemic years of 2020 and 2021. Street crime and became a recurring flashpoint in mayoral politics and national debates over urban policy.

No single episode did more to reshape the era's conversation about policing than the killing of Laquan McDonald, a seventeen-year-old shot sixteen times by a Chicago police officer in October 2014. City officials delayed the release of police dashcam video of the shooting for more than a year. When a judge ordered it released in November 2015, footage contradicted the official account, which ignited sustained protests and a crisis of public confidence in the police department and in Emanuel's administration. Independent reporting, notably by journalist Jamie Kalven had raised early questions about the case before the video's release.

The fallout included the firing of the police superintendent, a U.S. Department of Justice investigation that found a pattern of excessive force and civil-rights violations by the Chicago Police Department, and a subsequent federal consent decree mandating court-monitored reform. In 2018, the police officer was convicted of second-degree murder. The case became a national touchstone in the broader reckoning over police accountability that intensified through the following decade.

The Pandemic Interruption

COVID-19 reached Chicago in early 2020. The city, like the rest of the country, shut down much of its public life that March. Schools, restaurants, theaters, and offices closed or emptied, and the Loop's normally dense sidewalks went quiet for months. The pandemic hit the city's Black and Latino communities hardest in its early waves, exposing long-standing disparities in underlying chronic illness, while also devastating small businesses and cultural institutions that depended on foot traffic and live audiences. The killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 set off large protests in Chicago and other cities, accompanied by episodes of unrest and looting that further strained relations between residents and police in a year already marked by economic anxiety and isolation.

Recovery from the pandemic proved uneven. Downtown office occupancy remained below pre-2020 levels for years afterward as remote and hybrid work reshaped commuting patterns, even as the city's convention business, restaurants, and cultural venues gradually returned to something like their earlier vitality by the mid-2020s.

Still a Global City



Willis Tower, viewed east toward Navy Pier in winter, 2024.

Through boom, bust, scandal, and pandemic, Chicago never relinquished its claim to global relevance. Its skyline continued to draw architecture enthusiasts from around the world, its status cemented by institutions like the Chicago Architecture Center and a biennial architecture exhibition launched in 2015. McCormick Place remained one of the largest convention facilities in North America, hosting trade shows that brought hundreds of thousands of visitors annually. O'Hare International Airport, despite periodic competition from other hubs, remained among the busiest airports in the world, reinforcing the city's nineteenth-century role as a transportation crossroads in thoroughly modern form. Millennium Park, Navy Pier, and the lakefront museum campus continued to anchor a tourism economy that, by the 2020s, was again drawing tens of millions of visitors a year, even as the city's neighborhoods away from the lake continued to wrestle with violence and poverty.

Chicago Hip-Hop, from Kanye to Drill

Chicago's twenty-first-century music scene proved just as inventive as its blues and house pioneers had been. Kanye West, raised on the South Side and mentored early on by the producer No I.D., built a national reputation as a producer before breaking through as a rapper in his own right in the early 2000s. This opened the door for a wave of Chicago-identified hip-hop that ran from the socially conscious Common to the independent, mixtape-driven Chance the Rapper, whose 2016 album *Coloring Book* became the first streaming-only record to win a Grammy. A harder-edged, distinctly South Side sound emerged alongside it in the early 2010s. Drill music, a stripped-down, menacing style built around producers like Young Chop, broke nationally with Chief Keef's 2012 single "*I Don't Like*." Chicago drill went on to shape hip-hop scenes as far away as New York and London, one more case of a genre incubated in the city's neighborhoods reshaping music well beyond them.

Lollapalooza Comes Home, and a New Wing for the Art Institute



The Art Institute's newly opened Modern Wing, viewed from the Gage Building roof, 2009.



Millennium Park's fountain and the Art Institute's Modern Wing, 2009.

Chicago also became the permanent home of a festival that had once toured the country. Perry Farrell's Lollapalooza, launched in 1991 as a traveling alternative-rock package tour, folded in 1997, but was revived in 2003. In 2005, its promoters resettled it for good in Grant Park, drawing 66,000 fans over two days to a lineup of some seventy acts. By 2016 it had grown into an annual four-day fixture on the lakefront that drew hundreds of thousands of visitors from around the world each summer. This cementing Chicago's claim on a festival culture that Lollapalooza itself had helped invent nationally in the first place.

The Art Institute made its own twenty-first-century statement in May 2009, when it opened the Modern Wing, a 264,000-square-foot addition designed by the Italian architect Renzo Piano. Its glass walls were topped by an aluminum "flying carpet" sunshade, and connected to Millennium Park across the street by Piano's Nichols Bridgeway. The largest expansion in the museum's history, the Modern Wing made the Art Institute the second-largest art museum in the country and gave the institution founded in the ashes of the Great Fire a home for modern and contemporary art to match its historic collections.

A City Still Becoming Itself



Aerial view northwest over Millennium Park toward the Pritzker bandshell and the Prudential Building, 2026 — a city still, as ever, remaking itself.

Looking back across the full arc of Chicago's history, we can see it began as a portage between two watersheds, added a fort and a trading post, became a railroad boomtown, was incinerated and rebuilt within a generation, morphed into an industrial colossus fed by waves of migration from the American South and from across the globe, and developed into a sprawling, contested, endlessly self-revising metropolis of the twenty-first century. That's a lot of change. But a single thread runs through all of it: Chicago has never stopped remaking itself in response to the same handful of forces that made it in the first place.

Geography, which once meant a short portage between the Great Lakes and the Mississippi watershed, now means a lakefront reimagined as parkland and a central location that still makes the city a hub for freight, finance, and flights. Migration, which built the Black Belt and Pilsen and Little Village and a dozens of other neighborhoods, continues today in new forms, from international immigration to the ongoing redistribution of the city's own residents block by block. And reinvention, the willingness, born partly of necessity and partly of ambition, to tear down and build anew, to fight over what the city owes its people and who gets to shape its future, remains as visible in a debate over school closings or a fight over a police consent decree as it was in the swift rebuilding after the Great Fire.

Chicago in the 2020s is not the city Jean Baptiste Point du Sable knew, nor the city of the Union Stock Yards, and certainly not the city of the 1968 convention or the Harold Washington years. But it is unmistakably their descendant: a place still arguing, still building, still proving that a marshy crossing between two water systems could become one of the world's genuinely great cities.

Sources: Dominic A. Pacyga, [Clout City: The Rise and Fall of the Chicago Political Machine](#) (2025); William J. Bowe, Chapter 3, [Riots & Rockets](#) (2025); William J. Bowe, [Riots & Rockets: A Dash of the Army, a Dose of Politics, and a Life in the Law](#) (2025); Natalie Y. Moore, [The South Side: A Portrait of Chicago and American Segregation](#) (2016); Ben Austen, [High-Risers: Cabrini-Green and the Fate of American Public Housing](#) (2018); Larry Bennett, [The Third City: Chicago and American Urbanism](#) (2010); investigative reporting by Jamie Kalven and the [Invisible Institute](#) on the killing of Laquan McDonald; NPR, [50 Years](#)

of Hip-Hop History: Chicago (2023); Chicago Sun-Times, **Looking Back at 20 Years of Lollapalooza in Chicago**; The Art Institute of Chicago, **The Modern Wing: Renzo Piano and the Art Institute of Chicago**.

Photo Sources: 1852 South Allport Avenue, Pilsen — Photo by Lawrence Okrent, CD; “Scabby the Rat” outside City Hall — Photo by Jack W. Zimmerman, CD; The Art Institute’s Modern Wing — The Art Institute of Chicago; Millennium Park fountain and the Modern Wing — The Art Institute of Chicago. Internet sources of other photos are not identified.

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