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The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory. Chicago Historical Society,

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A new, multimedia assessment of the impact and significance of the Great Chicago Fire is now available to World Wide Web browsers through the agency of the Chicago Historical Society and Northwestern University. To commemorate the 125th anniversary of the fire, the Society has mounted an interactive exhibition--not in their galleries, but at a web site on the Internet. This innovative project is the result of a collaboration between the Chicago Historical Society and Academic Technologies at Northwestern University. Historian Carl Smith served as Curator of the Exhibition and author. The exhibit text has been adapted, in part, from Carl Smith's Urban Disorder and the Shape of Belief: The Great Chicago Fire, The Haymarket Bomb, and the Model Town of Pullman (University of Chicago Press, 1995). Smith was assisted in archival research, artifact selection, photography, and digital reproduction by the talented staffs in various divisions of the Historical Society. Design and production specialists from Northwestern had primary responsibility for creating the web site. This portion of the team was led by Paul Hertz, Art Director, and Joe Germuska, Production Supervisor. H-Net, Humanities and Social Sciences On-line provided additional support for the development of this online exhibit. The exhibition has two parts: "The Great Chicago Fire" chronicles the event itself, and "The Web of Memory" explores the mythic significance this event has commanded since it occurred, as well as the many ways that people have remembered it. To aid visitors, the web's creators have employed a standardized format for the exhibition. Both sections are structured around a series of brief scholarly essays, which head each thematic section. Visitors are then offered the choice to view the "Galleries" or the "Library." In the Galleries, as one might expect, are graphic reproductions of maps, photographs, paintings, prints, and other artifacts, as well as sound files and video clips. The Library holds a rich array of topically organized primary sources related to the fire. These include portions of books, articles, personal letters, newspaper reports, and memoirs. "The Great Chicago Fire" introduces its event as Chicago's ultimate historical marker. Beginning with a retrospective of the city's development, "A Bird's Eye View of Pre-Fire Chicago" uses maps and images to lay out the pre-fire landmarks. The central theme of this section of the web is Chicago's newness and the haphazard way in which the city evolved. Here visitors are presented with six views of Chicago, from 1820 to 1871, which graphically demonstrate the rapid pace of the city's growth. A special interactive panorama takes web visitors on a guided tour up to the top of the courthouse. From there they can survey the emerging city in all directions. Unfortunately, this tour requires Shockwave, a special program that can be downloaded for free to a personal computer--but the download can take an hour or more at 14.4kbps. Perhaps future versions of browsing

software will be equipped with this program--mine was not. "The Great Conflagration" looks at the fire as a recurring urban problem for nineteenth century Americans. The essay reveals that Chicago experienced an average of two fires a day during the year preceding the Great Fire. The exhibition hints at a direct linkage between these traumatic events and social stresses or human deficiencies. Instead of placing the entire blame on Mrs. O'Leary's cow, Smith suggests that the dry weather and the abundance of wooden buildings made Chicago highly vulnerable to destruction by fire, regardless of its source. Despite Chicago's existing mechanisms for coping with fire, the flames spread rapidly through the city, consuming private houses and well-known Chicago landmarks alike, leaving personal loss and homelessness in its wake. Maps and first-hand accounts enable visitors to follow the spread of the fire from block to block, as well as experience the ensuing panic and destruction. Among the resources available in the "Conflagration Library" are the published reports on the fire from the Chicago Tribune (housed, we learn, in a new "fireproof" building that was destroyed by the blaze). The chronicle of the Great Fire continues through "The Ruined City," "Rescue and Relief," and "Rebuilding." "The Ruined City" conceptualizes the extent of the losses in geographic, economic, and emotional terms. Maps of "The Burned District," as well as other physical units of measurement (two thousand acres, 120 miles of sidewalk, two thousand lampposts) and insurance dollars ($200 million) help viewers understand the full scope of the disaster. In the accompanying gallery, visitors can see photographic surveys of the destruction and a grouping of before and after stereographs. "Rescue and Relief" provides a useful exploration of specific emergency measures taken during the event, including the responses of the federal government (under the leadership of General Philip Sheridan) and assorted volunteer organizations. "Rebuilding" concludes this portion of the exhibition with an upbeat testament to the resilience of Chicago dwellers, as well as to the power of capitalism to find opportunity and hope even in disaster. The second half of the web site, "The Web of Memory," takes a more epistemological approach, considering the Great Chicago Fire as a product of both history and memory. After 1871, as Chicago resurrected itself, this event achieved mythic significance. "The Web of Memory" traces the evolution of the myth, looking at eyewitness accounts, media interpretations, hype, legends surrounding Mrs. O'Leary's cow, the array of souvenirs generated by the fire, and finally the forms by which the event has been officially commemorated. Ever since the fire, those who experienced the event have used it as a life marker, gaining some measure of personal importance from their involvement with history. Chicago repositories, including the Chicago Historical Society, have been soliciting, preserving, and publishing narratives and mementos of the Great Fire. Included here in the "Eyewitnesses Galleries" is a young boy's drawing of his family's harrowing escape from the fire, as well as a set of professional illustrations of the event made by Alfred R. Waud. Many of these personal narratives, as the exhibit points out, have been influenced by media accounts. In "Media Event," visitors are offered an array of news stories and published images of the fire. They are then asked to think about the role of the media in defining and shaping historical understanding of this event. "Fanning the Flames" makes it clear that representations of the events surrounding the fire were often heavily embroidered appeals to artistic sentiment. This section considers less objective evidence about the fire, including stage presentations, musical interpretations, paintings, prints, poems, hymns, even needlework samplers. One "Arresting Image," a popular lithograph published at the time of the fire, depicts a group of women and children precariously balanced on a fire escape above the flames. And what about Mrs. O'Leary's cow? The exhibit weighs the evidence for and against indicting the careless bovine for starting the fire, and includes both official and

anecdotal reports in the Library. The essay hints at an Irish conspiracy, covering up Kate O'Leary's carelessness with her lamp--although the exhibit does not dwell here long. Merited or not, Mrs. O'Leary and her cow came to be an essential component of the myth of the Great Fire. The material remains of life before or somehow associated with the fire form another body of evidence. The essay on "Souvenirs" details the strategies that victims of the fire used to save, salvage, or relocate their possessions. As the gallery and library exhibits demonstrate, these "saved" items--a pocket watch, a doll's head, wedding dresses, Bibles, pet birds, paintings--have since acquired a reliquary patina. One of these items, however, "A Better Parlor Suite," underscores the problems of relying exclusively on family memory for historical information. The accompanying label states that the Tuthill King family brought this parlor set, obviously manufactured by the New York cabinetmaking firm of John Henry Belter, in the mid-1830s. Belter, however, did not emigrate to the United States until 1844, and begin to use this carved lamination process after that date. The exhibit concludes with a consideration of the means selected by Chicago residents to commemorate the Great Fire over the years. The Chicago Historical Society itself is a relic of the fire--its original building was destroyed. Since then, the Society has collected fire memorabilia and has also mounted several exhibitions commemorating and interpreting the event. This web site was developed to celebrate the 125th anniversary of the Great Fire. As the essay argues, the fire has served and continues to serve Chicago as defining evidence of the city's greatness and resilience. In a "real" (as opposed to a "virtual") exhibition space, visitors are generally free to wander at will, although their paths are often guided by the exhibition's physical layout and narrative. A web, however, offers visitors infinite ways of experiencing the exhibit materials--which can sometimes lead to confusion. This web site offers an array of helpful tools for navigating its contents, including a detailed table of contents that can be printed out for users wanting an overview. Each section of the exhibition begins with an abbreviated narrative table of contents, with hyperlinks to specific topics. A "How to Navigate" link helps visitors to trace their own way through the topics. "Special Media" icons, for example, allow those interested only in music, film, or stereographic images to go directly to those pages in the web. Viewing the film, however, requires Quicktime (or a twenty-thirty minute download if this software is not on the local computer). Museum exhibitions typically consist of thematic groupings of artifacts, accompanied by interpretive labels, often enhanced by video, sound, and sometimes human interpreters. In that sense, this web is like all museum exhibitions, except, of course, that the power of the "real thing" is not electronically reproducible on a web site. One would hope that web presentations such as this will not discourage visitors from actually going to museums and historical agencies, given the opportunity. The web seems to be an ideal way to expand accessibility beyond the institutional walls to vast new audiences. In terms of language, topic, and presentation, this exhibition has been written to appeal to general audiences. Educators, both K-12 and college-level, will find much useful material here that might be combined with supplementary readings and studies of local resources to enrich a history curriculum. For advanced scholars, the problem here (as with most history museum exhibits) is that the target audience is someone with eighth grade proficiency. But the scholarship is sound, there are links to complex ideas and historiographical issues, and the site delivers a rich array of primary sources for further consideration. On the whole, this exhibition is well worth an initial browse, and will no doubt provide many different types of users with a resource that they will bookmark and return to again and again.

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