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Daughters of Charity Recall the 1871 Chicago Fire: *“It traveled like lightning.”*¹

BETTY ANN MCNEIL, D.C.

¹ *St. Joseph's Hospital, Chicago — 1869-1872 and The Chicago Fire*, Mission History, Chicago, St. Joseph's Hospital 11-2-2-36(7), Daughters of Charity Archives Province of St. Louise, Emmitsburg, MD [APSL], formerly Archives Mater Dei Provincial House, Evansville, IN [AMDPH], p. 12. Hereinafter cited as *Chicago Fire*.

[previous
article](#)

[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)

[next
article](#)

Introduction

The first Daughters of Charity arrived at Chicago in 1861. Bordered by Lake Michigan, their new mission was also near a vast prairie. They came to teach young girls but met unexpected challenges. Civil War casualties increased, resulting in the need for nurses. The sisters traveled eastward to care for sick and wounded soldiers of the Confederate and Union Armies. After the sisters returned and settled into teaching at the Academy of the Holy Name, Chicago, the great fire burst into flames on 8 October 1871.

This is their story of the blaze and the ensuing bedlam of those, “who passed through the frightful ordeal,” described in their own words as the “night of judgment for Chicago.”² The primary source material used is annotated and presented here for the first time. Sister Angeline Carrigan (1826-1908), and Sister Walburga Gehring (1823-1883), wrote their accounts individually, but the sheaves of paper were not bound chronologically; Academy of the Holy Name and St. Vincent’s House of Providence are after St. Joseph Hospital, in the original. The latter document is also the longest, 28 hand-written pages (on one side). For the convenience of readers, the versions appear in chronological order according to the establishment of the missions and ministries.

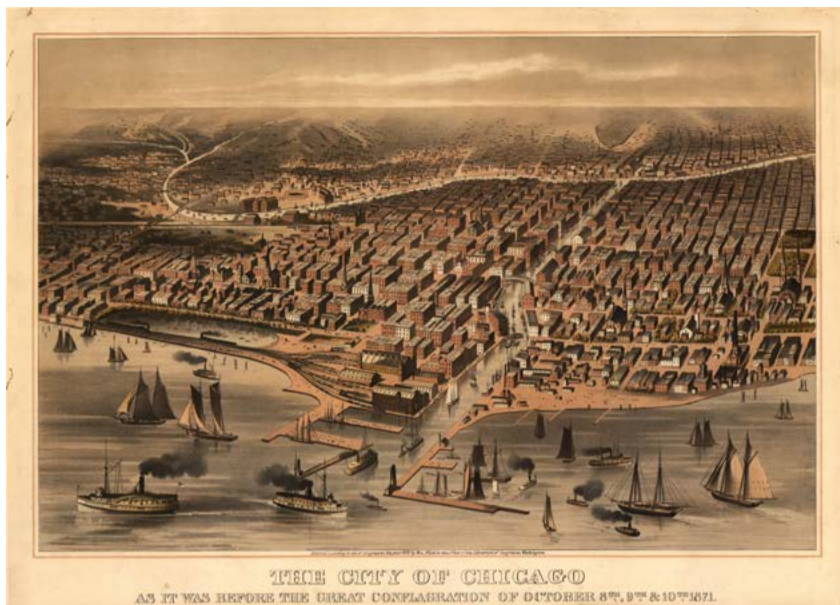
The accounts are written in the form of a lengthy letter, probably to the visitatrix (provincial superior), sent at her request. The sisters recorded their recollections sometime between 1872 and 1882, when Walburga left Chicago for Emmitsburg, Maryland, due to ill health. Gehring wrote a detailed introduction about the establishment of Catholic healthcare in Lake View (then Lincoln Park). Both described their pioneering experiences in nineteenth-century Chicago. This transcription of their accounts preserves each author’s style, language, spelling, and order of events. In addition to the chronological order of presentation, light editing of punctuation, grammar, and spelling has been made for the convenience of twenty-first-century readers. Significant changes are in brackets.³ Clarification and corrections appear in footnotes.

The setting

Chicagoland – October 1871. There had been a fourteen-week-drought the summer the sisters arrived. There were numerous fires, sometimes daily, between 30 September and 7 October 1871. The rapid expansion of Chicago and disproportionate use of wood for construction made the city high-risk for burning; and, it was situated by Lake Michigan where breezes could quickly shift direction, velocity, and direct flames and fiery debris unpredictably. Firefighters were overtaxed that year, their energy consumed on each call,

² *Ibid.*, pp. 35 and 29. For facts about the origin of the fire and the O’Leary family, see Harold Turrentine, ed., “History of the Chicago Fire Department” (Chicago: R.J. Quinn Training Academy and The Chicago Fire Department, 2004), pp. 5-7; available at: https://www.cityofchicago.org/content/dam/city/depts/cfd/general/PDFs/HistoryOfTheChicagoFireDepartment_1.pdf

³ See Alfred Theodore Andreas, *History of Chicago. From the Earliest Period to the Present Time*, 3 vols. (Chicago: The A.T. Andreas Company, Publishers, 1886), 3:101-126. Hereinafter cited as Andreas, *History of Chicago*. Blame was attributed to a cow (knocking over a lantern) owned by Patrick and Catherine O’Leary of 13 DeKoven Street. However, the City Council of Chicago, by public resolution of 7 October 1997, declared them innocent of initiating the Great Chicago Fire. See Andreas, *History of Chicago*, 3:101-126.



A view of the city of Chicago as it stood just before the Great Fire.

Public Domain



whether an out-of-control fire or several fires consecutively, and they required breaks for adequate rest and sleep. Yet, the urgency of calls demanded much of courageous fire fighters as did a fire in the boiler room of the Lull-Holmes Planing Mill on Canal Street in October of 1871. Its flames set ablaze an entire area from Jackson, Adams, and Clinton Street, to the Chicago River.

Just several hours later, the great Chicago fire began at about 9:00 P.M., Sunday, 8 October, on the Southside. Strong winds drove the firestorm toward the center of the city with its wooden streets, sidewalks, shops, and bridges. A superheated draft enabled the fire to leap across the south branch of the Chicago River, consuming vessels and floating grease, burning through the night. By Monday, the fire reached Fullerton Avenue, the northern city limits at that time. Thankfully, rain sufficient to overpower the flames fell the next day. A disaster of death, injury, homelessness, trauma, and ruins lay in its wake. The fire had devoured approximately 2,000 acres of land, 18,000 buildings, and about \$200 million in material goods. One hundred thousand residents lost their homes. Fatalities ranged between 200-300 persons. Although the fire began on the Southside, the greatest destruction was on the Northside, where the Daughters of Charity had ministries of education, healthcare, and social services.⁴ At that time, the sisters had five missions in Chicago and another under construction:

Education

1861 School of the Holy Name, North State and Huron Streets, Chicago.

1867 St. Columbkille (Columba) Academy, Pauline and West Grand Streets, Chicago.

1871 St. Patrick's School, Desplaines and Adams Streets, Chicago.

Healthcare

1869 Providence Hospital, Clark and Diversey, Lake View.

1872 St. Joseph's Hospital (Under construction: Sophia and Burling Streets, Lincoln Park).

⁴ For a detailed account, see Turrentine, "History of the Chicago Fire Department," pp. 5-7.



The School of the Holy Name, at left, and St. Vincent's House of Providence.

Both Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.

Social Services

1867 St. Vincent's House of Providence, 301 Huron Street, Chicago.

The great Chicago fire consumed two missions of the Daughters of Charity: the School of the Holy Name, and St. Vincent's House of Providence. The sisters at St. Columbkille School and St. Patrick's School were not located along the fire's path, and thus were able to minister to refugees. A sudden change in the wind spared Providence Hospital in the township of Lake View, and its replacement, a larger building in Lincoln Park to be named St. Joseph Hospital, then under construction and standing at three floors. During the post-fire crisis, the sisters cared for poor persons of the burned districts at their hospitals and at a Barracks Hospital on Halsted Street.

The mayor assembled a Relief Committee, which developed into a comprehensive organization, The Chicago Relief and Aid Society. The Society established relief districts, and opened district offices and supply depots to address the various devastated areas: providing contributions, shelter, employment, transportation, distribution, and health care. The Society adopted a functional structure of eight committees, headed by prominent civic leaders with expertise in their assigned field. For example, Nathaniel Sherman Bouton (1828-1908) at one time served on the Executive Board of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, and was Chair of the Committee on Charitable Institutions. Bouton was a highly respected community leader and businessman involved with steel manufacturing. Likewise, Col. Charles G. Hammond (1804-1884), a railroad executive and philanthropist, served on the Executive Committee of the Relief and Aid Society, chaired the Committee on Purchasing and Transportation, and became president of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society in 1874.

The sisters were acquainted with most of the committee chairmen, particularly their friend, Dr. Hosmer Allen Johnson (1822-1891), who was chairman of the Relief and Aid

Society's Committee on Sick, Sanitary, and Hospital Measures. Relief was organized according to districts and sub-districts. Each district had a Barracks Hospital. Sister Walburga Gehring superintended the Barracks Hospital closest to the new St. Joseph Hospital, which eventually opened in 1872. Noted Chicago historian Alfred Theodore Andreas lauded the Daughters of Charity and their role in providing quality healthcare, particularly at St. Joseph Hospital, which was:

Admirable from a sanitary point of view, as well as for being easy of access. Both males and females are received as patients, about one hundred of whom can be accommodated. The private rooms are frescoed and comfortably furnished, and the entire building is heated with steam. To the Sisters, who have the care and management of this institution, the increasing measure of its success and recognition is very gratifying and encouraging.⁵

At the wish of Louise de Marillac (1591-1660), Vincent de Paul (1581-1660) had designed the administrative structure of the Daughters so that there would always be a priest of the Congregation of the Mission serving as the ecclesiastical superior (provincial director). This arrangement preserved the Vincentian tradition from the seventeenth century forward. Reverend Francis J. Burlando, C.M. (1814-1873), had filled this role since from 1853 until his sudden death in 1873. Burlando was a confidant and counselor to the sisters, who held him in high esteem. He was familiar with the challenges of the Chicago missions, particularly those of the intrepid Sister Walburga Gehring, who had been commissioned to establish a hospital despite diocesan obstacles. When lamenting their difficulties to Burlando, whether by mail or during a visit, the director responded with kindness and encouragement, which renewed their courage. The sisters attributed their ultimate success to Burlando's support. He visited Chicago twice and responded with practical advice and empathy to their letters. He wrote a consoling message to the sisters after the great fire, and also sent boxes of liturgical items and other necessary things to replace what had been lost. Sometimes he even enclosed a ten-dollar bill. Burlando enthusiastically endorsed the suggestion made by the bishop to name the new medical facility St. Joseph Hospital.

The original manuscripts, the text of which follows, are primary source material. In their diligence, the sisters included as many details as they could recall along with some significant input from others. At times, the reader may have difficulty distinguishing the author's voice as distinct from the voice of additional persons. They seemed aware that a blurring of voices could happen, hence quotation marks were used to enclose direct statements made by others. Vividly describing the ferocity of the event, Sister Walburga Gehring recorded in her account that the fire "traveled like lightning."⁶

⁵ See Andreas, *History of Chicago*, 3:525.

⁶ *Chicago Fire*, 12.



The Burning of Chicago. An 1871 lithograph by Currier & Ives.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHI-02954



THE CHICAGO FIRE⁷

Saturday, 7th October 1871

On the evening of this day commenced the terrible fire which devastated and crumbled into ashes the city of Chicago. Some accounts of what then transpired will here be given which were written by Sisters who passed through the frightful ordeal. Two of our houses were consumed by the flames; The School of the Holy Name, of which Sister Mary [McCarty] was Sister Servant and [at] the [St. Vincent's] House of Providence, Sister Angeline Carrigan, Sister Servant.

Chicago, Illinois

My Dear _____

The grace of our Lord be with us forever!

How shall I correspond with your wishes and send an account of that dreadful fire which desolated our city! No descriptions can give a true idea of the rapidity with which it passed from block to block; the whirling about of the blazing wood by an irresistible wind; the crowd hurrying along, they hardly knew whither, only to be out of the reach of the hungry flames, in some reason being dethroned by the appalling catastrophe; all this and much more would have to be seen, to be realized!

The fire had raged about twenty four hours, and though kept somewhat under control, yet refusing to be extinguished when the water works took fire and the defenseless city was at the mercy of the element. You have heard of that early Communion, which to some of us, at least, seemed almost like a viaticum, so little hope was there that anything could survive; then how our dear Sister Mary [McCarty (1838-1878)], having sent all but one companion as far as possible from the danger, refused to leave the house until it was actually on fire; and how she finally followed, bearing the precious ciborium containing the Blessed Sacrament confided to her by our worthy pastor, he fearing to take it into danger to which he was obliged to expose himself; and

⁷ The account of the Chicago fire that follows comes from a letter written by Sister Angeline Carrigan. Subheadings bracketed in bold are my own and are meant to help identify locations for the reader.



St. Patrick's School on the Near West Side, c. 1900.

Note the Daughters visible standing at the windows in their signature cornettes.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.



lastly, the anxiety caused by some not being assured of the safety of the others, until at last, all were reunited at St. Patrick's School.⁸

There we were found by our dear Mother Euphemia [Blenkinsop] who saw something of the necessity for the relief so generously extended by other cities, and saw too how those who knew the Sisters flocked to them to pour into the deeply sympathetic heart of our dear Sister Mary their tale of suffering, those who, a few days before, had been independent and those always poor, alike in need of shelter, food and raiment.⁹ Truly, it is rare to meet one "who wept with those that weep," as she did! How it gratified her when she could relieve the distressed! And on the other hand, how she suffered when powerless to give the needed succor!

Though out of the district in which the fire prevailed, the Sisters at the [Providence] Hospital, alarmed by the reports that the fire was tending that way, removed to the woods such of their sick as could bear removal, Sister Walburga herself remaining with the others, resolving to die with them, if she could not save them. Late in the evening of the second day, rain commenced and the fire ceased, after laying waste over three square miles of the city, and making nearly 100,000 people homeless.

The number of lives lost has never been truly estimated; some have missed friends ever since that fearful night; many, it is supposed, were smothered in their beds, having had no warning of their peril, and many others striving to avoid it, ran into danger and perished. Some rushed to the Shipping in the Lake, but even the vessels took fire; others board the outgoing trains, and left their families in agonizing grief, before tidings could be brought of them.

⁸ The Daughters of Charity had arrived recently from Emmitsburg to teach at St. Patrick's School, Desplaines and Adams Streets, where many Irish immigrants lived on the Near West Side of Chicago.

⁹ The author refers to the Daughters of Charity whom the fire drove from the Academy of the Holy Name and St. Vincent's House of Providence.



The remnants of Holy Name Cathedral after the fire.

Public Domain



How then did we all escape? God only knows. May we ever prove worthy children of that Blessed Father who so strongly inculcated both by his words and example a steady trust in Divine Providence; and by our unbounded confidence in the Same, may we everywhere [*sic*] rejoice in His protection

[School of the Holy Name]

“The Chicago Fire” commenced on the evening of Saturday, October 7, in a barn belonging to a woman named Mrs. O’Leary. It has been said that the cow while being milked upset a kerosene lamp; hence Mrs. O’Leary’s cow was considered the originator of the “Chicago Fire.”¹⁰ Those however who witnessed it could regard it only as a punishment sent in mercy to a guilty city.

No human agency could produce such a fire. Saturday night and Sunday, through the exertions of the firemen, it was kept under control pretty well. Sunday night, a terrific wind blew up, and then the fire baffled all efforts to extinguish it. During Sunday, the Sister in charge of our dormitory broke a pane of glass in the window near by [*sic*] bed; the wind blowing upon this made such an unearthly noise, that it woke me up, then the dormitory was all lit up from the reflection of the fire still miles away.¹¹ I [woke] got up and woke the other Sisters in the dormitory; it must then have been about 10 o’clock. We went up in the belfry to watch the fire; the flames seemed to jump from house to house with the rapidity almost of lightning, the sparks were as thick as snowflakes in a storm. While the wind carried them eastward to Lake Michigan, we felt safe, but as we stood watching, the

¹⁰ For a repudiation of the story of the O’Leary’s and their culpable cow, see Turrentine, “History of the Chicago Fire Department,” pp. 5-7.

¹¹ Located in Chicago, Ward 20 of Cook County, Illinois. The 1870 United States Census lists the persons at their place of abode the 1st day of June 1870. Daughters of Charity at the School of the Holy Name were as follows: Sister Mary McCarty, Sister Anastasia Ryan (1843-1895), Sister Ellen Connaughton (1838-1878), Sister Anna Frasa (1835-1898), Sister Celestine Adelsberger (1837-1909), Sister Mary Joseph Newman (1846-1902), Sister Elizabeth McDonald (1846-?), Sister Agnes Anastasia O’Reilly (1847-1910), Sister Zoé McGee (1843-1895), and Sister Mary Christine Owings (1847-?).

wind changed and blew towards us, and so strong was it that the burning shingles and large pieces of burning wood carried the fire in every direction.

About three o'clock A.M. on Monday, we went to bed to get a little rest before four o'clock bell rang. We were scarcely in bed, before one of the girls in the house came in terror, to say that the water works near us were on fire; then, and only then, we felt our danger. We had so much confidence in our Lord and our Blessed Mother that we did not think the fire would reach us. One of the Sisters took a bottle of holy water up to sprinkle the roof, and hung up a new picture of our Lady of Perpetual Succor in the chapel for protection. Sister had scarcely come off the roof when part of the belfry was blown in. The doorbell rang and our Sister Servant, dear Sister Mary McCarthy answered it.¹² Father Flanigan, one of the assistant priests, at the Cathedral, came to take the Blessed Sacrament and to tell us that we must leave the house, at once.¹³ Sister asked him if it was as bad as that; he said yes, that there was very great danger.¹⁴ It was the feast of St. Dionysius. Sister asked him to give us Holy Communion and consume the Blessed Sacrament, which he did. During the time we were at the altar railing, the house shook and the stations [of the cross] on the wall rattled so that it was really terrifying. We made a few minutes thanksgiving and Father purified the Ciborium, as carefully, as ever he did, and then we prepared to take leave of our happy mission. Father often expressed regret that he did not take the little tabernacle key. Each one went to get ready. One Sister put on three habit skirts and two cloth aprons; she tried two chemisettes, but was not so successful. With the conferences in her arms and a heavy shawl worn for the first time, over her cornette and held on by her teeth, she was ready to depart.

We found Dr. [John] McMullen, our pastor [subsequently, Bishop of Davenport], at the front door, with a buggy and two men to take two Sisters, both in delicate health at the time. It was the only vehicle he could procure, the two men volunteered to be the horses. After being dragged a little way in this novel way of travel, the Sisters began to think it was too much to expect of the poor men and begged them to let them get out and walk. Seeing a man coming with a dray, the men asked him to take the Sisters to one of our houses in another part of the city but out of the direction of the fire. He refused saying that he had to get a load of furniture in the burning district. After going a little distance, he repented and coming back took the Sisters to St. Columba's School, where they were gladly welcomed by the Sisters.¹⁵ A second band accompanied Father Flanigan, to St. Joseph's Hospital, a distance of about two miles. Father and a Sister walked first, he having the Blessed

¹² Sister Mary McCarty (not McCarthy).

¹³ References to "the cathedral" may reflect the occasional use of Holy Name church for episcopal functions because it had more space than St. Mary's Cathedral. When Chicago became a diocese in 1843, the latter was relocated, expanded, and built to be the cathedral at the southwest corner of Madison and Wabash. The great fire destroyed St. Mary's Cathedral and Holy Name Church. When rebuilt, the bishop dedicated Holy Name as the Cathedral.

¹⁴ Reverend Patrick Michael Flannigan (c.1840-1907).

¹⁵ The Daughters of Charity from Emmitsburg had been teaching at St. Columba (Columbkille) School, located at Pauline and West Grand Streets, since 1867.

Sacrament from the Cathedral.¹⁶ The Sisters walked two and two after them saying the beads. After we had left, Sister Mary asked Dr. McMullen if he had been to the House of Providence, for the Blessed Sacrament. He had forgotten all about it, but ran right away then leaving with Sister Mary the Blessed Sacrament from the Orphan Asylum from which he had just seen the Sisters and orphans safely out. Dear Sister Mary, thinking he would return for the ciborium, waited until the belfry came tumbling down the stairs. Then, she and another Sister started for St. Joseph's Hospital and had the happiness of depositing our dear Lord in a place of safety.

[St. Vincent House of Providence]

Sister Angeline [Carrigan (1826-1908)], Sister Servant of the [St. Vincent's] House of Providence, had packed any articles that could be so carried in trunks.¹⁷ A neighbor took them with his own on his wagon, to a place then supposed to be out of the reach of the fire, but all were burned. Sister Angeline herself had been carried by the wind and flames towards the Lake, when an unknown man drew her out of the flames. She received a slight burn on the face and one hand. The procession of Sisters to the Hospital passed the Sisters of St. Joseph with their orphans.¹⁸

All along the streets were those who had left their houses early in the evening and were too fatigued or too discouraged to go further. The people came out of their houses as we passed crying, "Oh! There are the poor Sisters! So the College burned? O God help us! Ah Sisters, is the Church burned? O Glory be to God! The world is coming to an end." One of our children seeing Father Flanigan cried out "O Father Flanigan, is it the day of judgment?" He told her he thought it was a night of judgment for Chicago. Some of the Sisters were obliged to sit down on the road side, not being able to keep up with the procession (not the one with the three habit skirts).

After reaching the Hospital and putting the Blessed Sacrament away, we asked Sister Walburga, Sister Servant, to give us her carriage and we would go back for Sister Mary and companions and perhaps save something. As soon as it was ready and Father had a cup of coffee, Sister Anastasia and myself, accompanied by Father started for the Holy Name School, when within two blocks of it we could only see the place where it stood, the Cathedral too was gone. The Orphan Asylum, on the opposite side of the street, was a massive stone building; the flames were going through it, as if it were so much paper. Not meeting the Sisters we thought they must have been burned, for it was reported that two Sisters were seen in the house when it was on fire. We started to St. Columba's School,

¹⁶ Holy Name Church.

¹⁷ *Located in Chicago, Ward 20 of Cook County, Illinois. The 1870 United States Census lists the persons at their place of abode the 1st day of June 1870. Daughters of Charity assigned to St. Vincent's House of Providence included: Sister Angeline Carrigan, and Sister Clotilda O'Neill (1829-1893).*

¹⁸ The Sisters of Mercy established the first residential childcare programs in Chicago in 1849 but later transferred their administration to the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1864. The Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet managed St. Joseph Asylum at the time of the Chicago Fire.



Crowds of people attempting to flee the fire over the Randolph Street Bridge.

Print by John R. Chapin, first published in the October 28, 1871, issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02901



hoping they had gone there, but we were disappointed, then not finding them there, we were inconsolable. Back to the Hospital we steered our course where our dear Sisters had arrived safely by another road just after we had left.

Then Sister Mary's anxiety for us was terrible, she imagined a hundred things that might happen to us. About noon, we returned in safety to the Hospital every one pronounced me sick and I had to go to bed. The Hospital, and every spot belonging to it, was filled with furniture and people coming there out of the reach of the fire, and every arrival told a nearer approach of the fire. The last comer said there was only one bridge left and those who wanted to go to the west side ought to start, so we prepared to go to St. Columba's School.

This time our route was across the prairies. None of us knew the way, so we followed the crowd. "The one bridge left" was so crowded that we were obliged to walk under the horses' heads. When we had gone about half the distance, worn out by fatigue, dust, heat and smoke, a poor Irishman named Pat O'Brien came towards us with an express wagon. He hailed us with "Oh! Sisters, where are you going? Aren't ye from the College!"¹⁹ Having told him where we wanted to go, he begged us to get into his wagon, which we did most willingly and rode in state. I sat on the driver's seat between Pat and a half grown boy. Every minute, the poor man would jump down to look at his wheel, which he thought would come off, and I was in mortal terror that I would be thrown from my exalted position. The poor man lost that day all that he had earned in eighteen years; but, "sure he had the best load now that ever he carried! (Eight sisters and six girls all carrying bundles.)"

As we went along, we passed several Sisters of other Communities sitting on the road side. We reached St. Columba's about half past five, P.M. there we found the Sisters of St. Joseph and their orphans, and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd and their children.²⁰ About six o'clock, the Jesuit Fathers came and took the Sisters and children to their Schools.

¹⁹ The diocese relocated a building formerly of St. Mary of the Lake College to be a school for girls, the School of the Holy Name.

²⁰ St. Joseph Asylum was located at Superior and Cass (Wabash) Streets; the House of the Good Shepherd was at Market [now Orleans] Street, Hill Street, and Sedgwick.

The fire was still making progress north, and our Sisters of the Hospital had to move their sick to the woods; the fire came so near, that even there they were obliged to move again. They had at the time, several patients that could not be moved, and who would certainly have been burned, had the fire gone so far. Sister Walburga Gehring, Sister Servant, sent the Sisters away further, to a place of safety, but she could not be prevailed upon to leave her poor sick, saying that if they died she would die with them. Our Lord did not require that sacrifice, for towards midnight rain began and checked the progress of the fire; then all returned to the Hospital. The new Hospital in course of erection was also spared. All through the night, good Father [Thomas] Burke, pastor of St. Columba's[,] kept us informed of the progress of the fire.²¹ At one time the wind changed and they thought it would come west. We did not feel safe until Father came in and told us that we might sleep now and not be afraid, as it was raining and the fire would go out, which it did after burning three and a half square miles of the city and rendering 95,000 persons homeless. Tuesday morning, the Sisters of the Holy Name School went to St. Patrick's School which had been opened a few weeks before. The people of the burned district on the north side of the city flocked to us for help.

Sister Mary McCarty through Mr. [Reverend] Kinsella applied to the Relief Fund and obtained abundant supplies of provisions and clothing for hundreds, every day.²² The School house was turned into a sort of hotel and for about two weeks several hundred were fed and obtained relief.

The Governor of Ohio [Rutherford B. Hayes] called on Sister Mary [McCarty] to learn from her what the people wanted most; and on his return home, all of Ohio's donations came to us, so that we had the pleasure of helping a large number of destitute, some of whom were in affluence a few days before. Our dear Mother Euphemia, then in St. Louis on her way home from California hearing of the distress and sufferings of the City, hastened to our relief bringing with her cooked food of every description, fearing that her poor children were in want of everything; but not so; through Divine Providence and the kindness of our gentlemen friends, we had an abundance. What we suffered most for was clothing for ourselves, and this soon came too, our dear Sisters in Milwaukee, St. Louis and neighboring cities having hastened to our relief.²³

Our greatest consolation was in having with us our dear Mother [Euphemia] who worked with as much zeal as the youngest in assorting and preparing clothing for our poor and by her presence helped to keep us up under so trying an ordeal. The city was in so much confusion that we had a guard of soldiers to keep order round our house. Several attempts had been made to set this part of the city on fire, even in our own house. We had straw on one floor of the school house for a sleeping apartment and among the straw scattered on the stairs was about [*sic*] a box full of matches, but providentially they

²¹ Reverend Thomas Burke (1827-1899).

²² Reverend Jeremiah Kinsella (1812-1875).

²³ The Daughters of Charity already had hospitals in Detroit, Michigan; Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Saint Louis, Missouri; and Alton, Illinois, to name a few sites. Others were located throughout the United States.

were discovered in time to prevent another fire. The city put up temporary buildings or “Shanties” for the people and in about two weeks, our school was resumed [but at St. Patrick’s parish]. Many of our old pupils walked over here during that severe winter. They used to say if the Church and Sisters were only spared to them, they could bear it better. One of the Children of Mary left her home and went to the Church for safety and was burned there.

After our dear Mother went home, she sent us a supply of everything. When the box came, it was so large that one of the young Sisters got into it to empty it; there were not many dry eyes as one package after another was handed out, and we thought we were indeed “the spoiled children of a good God.”

After order was restored [in the burned districts], an officer from the Relief Fund called on Sister Mary to pay the Sisters for their Services, but Sister refused [saying] that the Sister’s Services were for God and they looked to him for their reward.

[Sister Angeline Carrigan]

ST. JOSEPH’S HOSPITAL, CHICAGO²⁴

1869–1872, and later the Chicago fire²⁵

When we want to know how a thing was done, we naturally desire to have one tell it [by] who saw it done. Pet phrases and long words do not always give the clearest ideas. Here is an account rendered at request by Sister Walburga Gehring of the commencement of St. Joseph’s Hospital Chicago, of which she was the first Sister Servant.²⁶

“The Renewal of Obedience and depending on Divine Providence”

19 January 1869

In the year of our Lord 1868 the Sisters of Charity were asked for by Bishop Duggan of Chicago to establish a Hospital with fair promises.²⁷ At the closing of the college the Bishop gave some of the furniture, bedding, etc. for the hospital which was deposited at the Holy Name School.²⁸ A sister was asked for to take charge of the hospital affairs, and one [Walburga Gehring] was sent by Superiors. The choice was not happy, and caused manifest disappointment. The sisters felt all the embarrassment of her position, the more as her coming seemed to cast a damper on future prospects. The Bishop soon after became insane, and was transferred to the Asylum in St. Louis which made all his promises void.

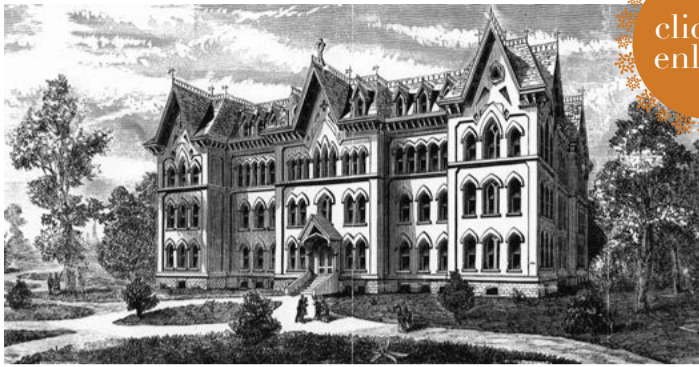
²⁴ Here begins the manuscript of Sister Walburga Gehring’s memoir, which is presented as found until the end. The Potawatomi dwelt in the “Chicagou” area and interacted with seventeenth-century French explorers, missionaries, soldiers, and settlers prior to the incorporation of Chicago as a city in 1837.

²⁵ The last five words are by two different writers: and later / and the Chicago fire. Added in pencil: By Sr. Walburga Gehring. St. Joseph’s Hospital, Chicago, APSL, 36:7.

²⁶ Sister Walburga Gehring. When the scribe uses “we,” she refers to the Daughters of Charity with whom she lived and/or worked. This appears throughout the memoir.

²⁷ James Duggan (1825-1899), fourth bishop of Chicago. Although Sisters of Charity was used popularly, the correct name of the community after 1850 is Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul.

²⁸ Chartered by the State of Illinois, St. Mary’s College (1844-1866) is sometimes called St. Mary of the Lake College.



St. Joseph's Hospital, Chicago, as it has evolved over the years following the fire: first at Sophia Street from 1872 to 1890; then at Burling Street from 1890 to 1963; and at its present location along Lake Shore Drive in Chicago. Lake View was annexed by Chicago in 1889.

All Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.

The sister in charge of the Hospital[’s] affairs was instructed to act under that authority of the Sister Servant of the School of the Holy Name, whose residence for years in the city made her familiar with the character of its inhabitants. The Hospital Sister spent her first six months making bed-ticks, pillows, etc. At the opening of spring, she sent out “collecting,” the result of which was very discouraging. After passing six long months without the slightest appearance of a Hospital, dear Father Burlando came to see how matters stood.²⁹ He considered it necessary to make a start in spite of all opposition. To use his own words, he said: “You must make a beginning, even if we will be obliged to break it up. What would people say about those Sisters who received donations for a Hospital?³⁰ You must try to rent a house, and to make a beginning.”³¹ The poor Sister shed an abundance of tears at which Father Burlando said: “If you undertake the work of God so reluctantly it will grieve me very much.” He then gave her what he called “a big blessing,” cast on her a benign glance, and stepped into the carriage which bore him away.

After the poor Sister had satisfied herself in crying, she summoned up courage to look for a house to rent. It was a difficult task, in fact almost an impossible one: people were not willing to rent their houses for Hospital purposes. At last, we found an old

²⁹ Reverend Francis J. Burlando, C.M.

³⁰ Burlando refers to the visitatrix (superior) and Council of the Daughters of Charity province, which had ultimate authority for personnel and apostolic matters of the sisters.

³¹ Providence Hospital began in Lake View in a rented house near the intersection of Clark and Diversey in 1869. Three years later, a new four-floor facility, renamed St. Joseph's Hospital, opened on Garfield Avenue (then Sophia Street) and Burling Street (near Halsted) in 1872.

summer residence, which had been used for a pleasure garden. It was beyond the city limits and in a most dilapidated condition. But, the owner refused to rent, saying, how could he even live in it himself after its being opened for a Hospital, and as for his wife, she would never consent.

So there was nothing left for us but to pray, and depend on Divine Providence. After making a novena, we thought we had better call on one of the Real Estate men, who was what they call a liberal, minded Protestant. He at once entered into our views and as he was an old acquaintance of the owner of the summer residence, he undertook to disabuse [him] of his false impressions and assured him he would never regret renting his house to the Sisters. At last the proprietor consented, agreeing to give us the use of the entire ground with the two buildings for Fifty-Dollars per month. It took us over two weeks to renovate the house and bring it into a condition to be lived in. We converted the cooking shed into a nice, cozy little chapel. The two dwellings, one of which had been used as a residence, the other for dancing was connected. The accommodations suited our purpose very well, and we made the most of them. The owner, accompanied by the Agent, came to pay us a visit soon after we occupied the house, and they were more than pleased and surprised at the change. The owner declared he hardly knew his own house. We were ever after great friends. We opened our small beginning June 30, 1869, with three sisters — Sister Annina Lutzkus, Mary Burke, and myself, the third.³² Our number was soon increased to six. The cozy little Hospital with its cheerful surroundings soon made us known and we had in a short time quite a number of patients. But the poor Sisters had many privations to endure. We had great difficulty in getting Mass. It was seldom a priest could be found willing to come such a distance. We were not able to keep a horse and carriage. Our house being just at the city limits, no cars [trains] reached us until six A.M. It took thirty minutes to ride to a church, and there we waited for seven o'clock Mass. On Sundays there were no cars before nine A.M. Some of us undertook to walk two miles in order to get early Mass and Communion, and so give the other Sisters opportunity to go to late Mass. As we were walking to Mass one Sunday, we met a man, rather a hard looking customer. He gazed at us very intently and as he got near us thrust a Two Dollar Bill into one of the Sisters hands asking her to pray for him. Sometime later we got to know the man, and he became one of our best friends. God gave him the grace to call for a priest on his death bed. We heard of his sickness and called to see him. He was so delighted that when we were leaving he exclaimed, "O, Sisters! I am more pleased with your visit than if the Bishop had come to see me!" and he thanked us over and over again. The poor fellow died happy on Good Friday, 1874.

The severe weather of our first winter sometimes compelled us to lose Mass. The snow was so deep and the wind so high it was to daring to venture to brave it. Christmas

³² Sister Annina Lutzkus (1833-1920), Sister Mary Bridget Burke (1837-1916), and Sister Walburga Gehring.

morning 1870 the weather was bitterly cold but two of us had determined the evening before to make the effort. We started at four A.M. and managed to get to church but our clothing was frozen stiff, and our shivering hearts were the only prayers we could offer our dear Lord. How we would get home was more than we could tell, but at last the thought came [to] our minds to go to our undertaker who lived near the church and ask him to send us home in his carriage. This he gladly did, but our experience had taught us a lesson, not to be so daring again.

The people had befriended us; we were the people's friend, and were called upon for all kinds of services. Christmas of 1871 we received a call to lay out a poor dead woman. On our way from church we stopped in, and found the house in a terrible condition. The poor dead body crawling with vermin. We cut her hair, cleaned and prepared the body for the grave in the best manner we could, and then continued our route home. After giving ourselves some necessary care. We sat down to our Christmas dinner which was waiting for us. Our most comfortable thought was the act of charity which preceded it.

We had things to make us laugh too. A good old Father John Carroll had recently come into the diocese.³³ He was about seventy-six years of age, and was sometimes called "Dexter." He was staying about seven miles distant from us and offered on a certain occasion to give us Mass. The good old Father undertook to walk to us and as may be supposed it was rather late when he came. After he commenced his Mass he beckoned to the Sister in charge, and said to her: "sister, please don't forget my *stirabout* [sic] for "breakfast!"³⁴ The dear old gentleman was about getting a new set of teeth, which did not work very well.

We were favored on a few occasions by an old Belgian clergyman who came to give his Mass on Sundays. The good old Father was very fond of preaching and as there were but few sisters long sermons interfered greatly with our duties; besides it kept the poor sick waiting for their breakfast. The sisters in charge kindly requested the Father to shorten his discourse, which he promised to do. What did he do, but wait until Mass was over, and then doubled his discourse, and was so long that one of the Sisters was obliged to go and look after her duty, at which he was quite displeased. He appeared to think that nothing was more important than to listen to his sermon. The following Sunday he again began to preach after the Gospel, and continued for nearly an hour in spite of all that had been said to him. We came to the conclusion to manage in some way to get a horse and wagon to take us to church. One of our Lady friends begged a gentle horse for us, and our wagon came to be known and was called "Black Maria." Two of us knowing how to drive made us feel quite independent, and we went to church every morning, when the weather was not very bad, in our new property. It appeared to please the clergy and the people. But, altho' better than walking through the snow and wet, we often suffered from the severe cold, and were sometimes so benumbed that we could scarcely get out of the wagon when

³³ Reverend John Carroll (1798-1889), a native of Ireland, ordained in Nova Scotia, eventually ministered in Chicago.

³⁴ Porridge made from oatmeal or cornmeal boiled in water or milk and stirred until the proper consistency.

it stopped at the church. One morning we did not know how bitter cold it was until we were out. We passed a man going to his work who called out to us: "What in the world brings you out so early in the morning! Go home. Go home!" Another morning as we were driving along in the dark, we were almost run into by a dray team. Sometime after the Fire we were trying to find a certain family among small shanties in a labyrinth of brickyards. We were in a narrow curve close by the steam car track when suddenly without whistle or sound we saw the locomotive coming full upon us. The horse began to rear, and the cars struck his head and the carriage. Two young men, who were working near, heard our screams and saw the danger. They ran over and lifted the carriage and ourselves off the track, leaving sufficient space for the train to pass. The horse was wild with fright, and it required all the strength of the driver to manage him. More than once we met with escapes truly miraculous.

One attic was our store house; it contained our trunks and rubbish of all descriptions. One day a Sister was up there overhauling the treasurers, such as they were, when her foot slipped, the floor broke through, and down she came part of the way into the room below, but she received no injury. The floor and ceiling were not so fortunate.... One winter morning the Sister whose duty it was opened the door to ring the four o'clock bell. A patient stood outside her head wrapped in a black shawl. She did not speak and the Sisters was so frightened that she missed her step and fell from the top to the bottom of the stairs, but she was unhurt.... Our little Hospital was fully exposed to the inclemency of the weather. There were no other houses near to shelter us. We stood alone in an elevation a little distance from the Lake, and often and often we thought when rocking in our beds at night from the force of the wind, that we and our little institution would be drifted into the Lake itself.³⁵

One night we were roused by a fearful crash. We did not know what was coming next. Up we sprang; one rushed down to the chapel, another flew for a blessed candle, but upon examining, we found the wind had blown down and carried off part of the back porch. Another night, the chickens gave a fearful alarm. Sister with some help went down to inquire the cause, and found a large dog had got into the yard and killed about thirty. After that the poor dog lost his own life.

"Wash days" seemed to me lucky days for us. We were too poor to hire the work done, and on Sundays we generally all turned in to keep [up] with the washing and cooking. On one Sunday we were to call on a gentleman to ask a donation in real estate. We hurried up with our work, but as we after all believed [the] time, and as we got to our gate the cars started without us. The conductor saw us, and halted, but as we hurried to get in Sister fell full length on the side-walk.³⁶ She was not hurt, and the good gentleman on whom we called gave us two lots for which we afterwards got Two Thousand Dollars in cash.

³⁵ Lake Michigan.

³⁶ The sister has not been positively identified but could be Sister Zoé McGee, who had difficulty walking.

Another “wash day” a good gentleman gave us One Hundred Dollars in cash. The Sister who carried it kept her hands on the money in her pocket, so fearful was she of being robbed, and said to the other Sister: “Let us go home — let us go home. We have done a good day’s work today after us washing.”

We had now collected Four Thousand Dollars to make our first payment on the ground we had bought to build upon. We bought it from W.D. Kerfoot, a Protestant.³⁷ He was a good kind friend to us. He gave us several names on which to call for donations for our Hospital, all Protestants. We received several Hundred Dollars through him. It was he who made sale of our property for the Infant Asylum.³⁸ During fourteen years I have frequent occasion to call on him for instructions, and it always served to give him pleasure to do anything for us.³⁹ We always called him our “Cousin.” While we were waiting for our papers we counted our hard earned money over and over and each time it seemed to multiply, ten, and sometimes Twenty Dollars, which made us, feel quite happy. There was no secure place to keep this money. The sister in charge kept it in the securest place she knew, and that was her straw-tick [mattress]. She alone knew of it being there. One morning the Sisters all overslept their clock. They did not have time to make their beds but hurried off to church. The Sister whose turn it was to remain home kind-heartedly went to work and made all the beds before they should return. The one who possessed the treasure, as soon as she saw the state of affairs, went to reach her money. But no money could be found, then she went to the Sister who made the bed; she declared she had seen nothing of the money. At last the tick was taken to the yard, and everything in it emptied out. Then the money came to light and the scare being over, the Sisters all laughed at the queer hiding place. When we called in the agent to make the first payment we surprised him, “Well Sisters,” he said, “I think you can do anything after this.”

When our beloved Father Burlando came to pay his second visit, he expressed himself much pleased at our humble beginning. He said he was now convinced that God wanted us there notwithstanding the many opposing positions we had met with, and it was a good sign to have them in the beginning. He blessed us with his whole heart for what we had done; and promised to help us with his prayers. He gave us permission also to repose until five o’clock for one year on account of our hard labors and late Mass; and with the consent of the Bishop we might “collect” through the Diocese. Bishop [Thomas] Foley had then taken Bishop [James] Duggan’s place and he willingly gave the permission, signing several small books to be used in collecting.⁴⁰ Bishop Foley was extremely kind to us, encouraging us in every way he could. He came often to see us, and frequently brought his friends with him.

³⁷ William D. Kerfoot (1837-1918), a realtor, established his firm in Chicago prior to the 1871 fire.

³⁸ St. Vincent Hospital and Infant Asylum [St. Vincent’s Orphanage], (1881-1972).

³⁹ Sister Walburga’s efforts resulted in the establishment of St. Vincent’s Infant Asylum ten years after the fire.

⁴⁰ Thomas Foley (1822-1879), coadjutor bishop of Chicago (1870-1879).



An 1871 Currier & Ives lithograph depicting the enormity of the fire and the masses of people attempting to escape.

Public Domain



We have now collected considerable [amount of] money; the ground was bought, plan drawn, and the corner stone was laid August twentieth, 1872, by Bishop Foley. Dr. McMullan spoke on the occasion in English, and then Father Zimmerman, Superior of the Redemptorists, in German.⁴¹ There was present a large number of clergymen besides different Societies with their bands of music. The day was lovely; not too warm. The platform decorated with green, white, red and blue. The singing was grand. English and German. Such a throng of people had rarely, if ever, been seen in Chicago before. A collection was taken up which amounted to six hundred dollars, and it would have been doubled had more collectors been appointed. It was gathered by the clergy.

The building was up to the third story when the great Fire broke out. On the night of October 9th 1871, at three o'clock in the morning we were waked up. A wagon loaded with children and all kinds of furniture drew into our yard. The children told us that the city was all on fire. We could see the great light. The sky was red with it. Very soon after our Sisters from the School of the Holy Name and a clergyman bearing the Blessed Sacrament arrived.⁴² As they were leaving, the church steeple had fallen, and the Sisters' school had already caught [fire]. One of the Sisters in trying to save some things made a narrow escape. She was scorched by the intense heat of the flames. Another in infirm health was unable to walk to the Hospital.⁴³ A man who had himself been burned out put her on his buggy and *drew* here to the Hospital. After the Sisters had their cup of coffee, some of us started for the city to see if we could do anything. As we advanced, we found the heat so great and the

⁴¹ Reverend John McMullen (1832-1883) raised funds to assist families left homeless, and to rebuild churches destroyed by Chicago's fire. The bishop designated the new Holy Name Church as the Cathedral replacing St. Mary's as the bishop's church. Reverend Peter Zimmer, C.Ss.R. (1830-1901) was the rector of St. Michael's Church in Old Town, Chicago, from 1865-1872.

⁴² Probably Father John McMullen.

⁴³ Sister Zoé McGee.

wind so high that we were obliged to stop, and then turned back. The people came flocking to our house in crowds all day, famished for a drink of cold water, as the Water Works was one of the first-thing[s] destroyed by the fire. The car tracks were warped, standing up, and consumed by the great heat. Horses and cows were lying dead, people rushing here and there trying to find their own, as some were separated and burned to ashes. Two young men were looking for their mother when a blast of flames divided them. The fire caught the two young men; both died at our Hospital. The poor Mother was saved, but did not know where her sons were until the next day; she came in time to see them both die... several persons were burned to death and their bodies recognized by their friends; others never heard of. It was supposed that a little girl, thirteen years of age was buried under the ruins of the Holy Name Church. A hundred little orphans were snatched from their sleep, and hurried half-dressed along the streets, carrying some of their little clothing in their arms. They took shelter in the Good Shepherd Convent, but no sooner had they taken them their cup of coffee than the alarm was given that the fire was approaching. Three hundred inmates of the convent with the poor little orphans had to flee quickly as possible. They all went as far as they could walk towards the prairie and there waited to see what direction the fire would take. It traveled like lightning. Sometime in the afternoon they went west and took possession of a school house offered them by the Ladies of the Sacred Heart.⁴⁴ Hunger and privations of all kinds was endured by the people without complaint. They thought themselves happy that their lives were spared. One poor man came three different times to our house looking for his family; and not finding them the third time he burst into tears, and exclaimed: "My God! What has become of them!" The poor fellow was so exhausted, so covered with smoke and dust that he could hardly see. We gave him some water to wash, and made him take a little lunch to refresh himself and then he left with a little more courage to pursue his search. He at last found his family at a place about five miles distant from us.

People were coming and going all day looking for their friends. We were kept busy trying to have a little something for each. Two persons very ill were taken from their homes and their lives saved at our home; a lady with a young infant and a gentleman with his mother. The fire spread so rapidly that towards evening all who had taken shelter with us during the day took their flight further west, and we were left to ourselves. Our Doctor, although a Protestant, was devoted. Mounted on horseback he rode back and forth watching the moment when it would be necessary for us to move. At seven p.m. he came to tell us to make all haste to get the patients out, for in half an hour the fire would be upon us. He brought with him a carriage which he had hired and a man to assist in moving the dying patients. "For," said he, "it is better for these poor creatures to die in the carriage than to be burned alive." Three of the Sisters accompanied the ill patients to the prairie where they would remain until the fire came nearer. We sent our corn, clothing, etc., to a family living six miles north. About this time, the Redemptorist Fathers and Brothers arrived with the

⁴⁴ Society of the Sacred Heart (*Religieuses du Sacré-Cœur de Jésus*).



Refugees fleeing north toward Lincoln Park during the fire.

Print by Theo Davis, first appeared in the November 4, 1871, issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

Public Domain



Blessed Sacrament. They had seen their new Convent and Church in ashes.⁴⁵ We gave them some supper which they took hurriedly, and gave us all the last Benediction or Exposition before they took our dear Lord from us. It was a sad sight to see four clergymen walking with the Blessed Sacrament six miles to the next village. One of the Brothers remained with us. It was dangerous remaining in the house. It was dangerous to stay out of it; pieces of burning wood carried by the wind came falling and flying around us.

Providence protected our little hospital. About midnight, when the fire was half a mile from us, suddenly the wind changed, and the flames went in the direction of the Lake. Soon after came a nice shower of rain. Our poor patients who were able made their way back to the Hospital and returned to their beds, saying "Our Lord was too good to let the house burn where so many poor people found comfort and relief." The ill patients came back to safety and lived some days after.

The fire took the direction of the Lake. Many persons had buried valuable furniture and clothing in the ground near the Lake hoping thus to save it. It was all consumed by the intense heat. Towards morning the fire subsided, the falling rain had its effect.

There was great distress the following day. There were no water works — There was no water — People got sick lying out all night in the open prairie. Many came to us for shelter, stiff with cold and hunger. We shared the last bit we had, — There was not Five Dollars in the house, and where the next meal was to come from we did not know but trusted in Divine Providence: Friends, provisions, etc., etc., were sent from other cities in abundance, of which we could not expect to share as we were not burnt out. Our friends were burnt out, and as poor as ourselves. As the poor Sister in charge was making her complaints to our Lord, accompanied with many tears, a messenger arrived, asking us to come to [the] headquarters of the Relief [Committee] which was established about five

⁴⁵ Probably St. Michael Parish, founded as a German parish in 1852 and administered by the Redemptorist priests since 1860. Located on the North side of the German community, the parish is now in Lincoln Park, 1633 North Cleveland Avenue.

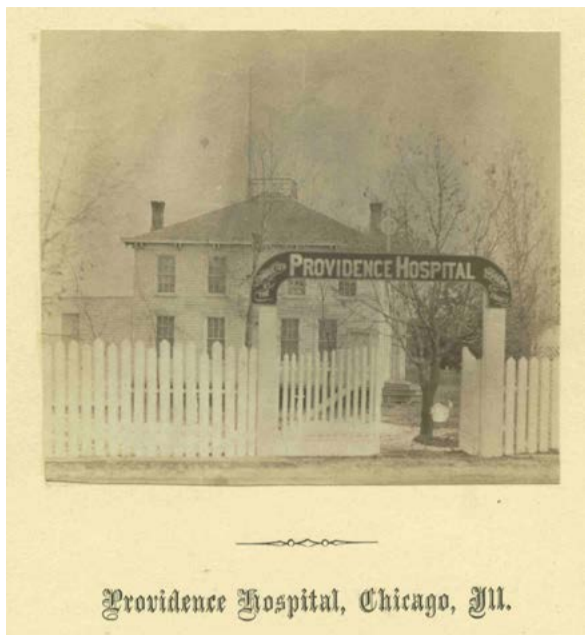
miles from our house.⁴⁶ We went and were received most cordially by the Committee. They expressed their regret at not being able to reach us sooner, and said: "Sisters, you were not burned out but you took care of those who were. State your wants and help all who may apply to you."

From that time we wanted for nothing, — provisions, etc., clothing, fuel, every[thing] was sent in abundance. We were able to help our friends, and the poor flocked to us from all directions. Hundreds of people sought and found relief at our little hospital out of the abundance Providence provided us. Although we knew no want, conveniences were not so plentiful in many aspects as before the fire. No cars could run for some time after the fire, for the tracks and even the iron nails were consumed, and as we were quite a little distance out, we had sometimes to avail ourselves of all sorts of ways in getting back and forth. One time one of our good Catholic friends called to take us to [the] headquarters of the Relief Committee in his buggy. As we returned, we met Bishop Foley. He could not let the opportunity to tease pass. "Is it any wonder" he said, "that we had a fire in Chicago, when two Sisters of Charity go out riding with a gentleman, and in a buggy!" Another day we were perched up on the high seat of an Express Wagon when we met three priests. They saluted us very respectfully notwithstanding the figure we must have cut.

As for our new hospital it was up to the third story when the fire broke out. Four families took refuge in its basement and remained there for several weeks while they were getting their own little houses fixed. At one time the flames had threatened to consume it too, but within two blocks, they changed their course and made towards the Lake. The word came to us that it *was* burned and we did not know under the circumstances whether we should be glad or sorry for our last Dollar had been paid on it. We were just about making a loan when the disaster of the fire came. How could we become responsible for a loan after all our expenditures were burned, was more than we could tell. Just at the time our beloved Mother Euphemia was making a visitation of the houses in St. Louis.⁴⁷ She came to us the day after the fire like a consoling angel and made every possible provision for the Sisters who were burned out. Embarrassed as we were regarding our new hospital in its refurbished state and its future looking so dark. Our beloved Mother [Euphemia] requested Bishop Foley to take the property. The sister could not be responsible for a loan now all their prospects were gone. The Bishop entreated Mother not to take all the Sisters away. "Let Sister Walburga come to me, and we will see what can be done." The Bishop then asked Sister what she was willing to do, and she replied that she was disposed to labor and sacrifice her life for the poor burned out people, but to take the responsibility for the debt was more than she could do. The Bishop said "it appeared to him that a Hospital was more needed when so many were sick, and dying as at the present time" and added: "make a loan, and I will go security for you, and if we break, we will break together." More

⁴⁶ The Chicago Relief and Aid Society.

⁴⁷ Mother Euphemia Blenkinsop (1816-1887), visitatrix [provincial] (1866-1887), Daughters of Charity Province of the United States.



Providence Hospital, located at Clark and Diversey, Lake View, was spared from the flames by a sudden change in the direction of the wind.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.



the bishop could not have said.

Mother then consented to continue the building and make the loan. Sisters felt somewhat encouraged and went to work. She succeeded in making a loan of thirty-thousand dollars at two per cent for five years. Material, labor, everything raised in value in consequence of the fire. Our contract having been broken by not having the money to pay different contractors according to agreement, advantage was taken, and the building therefore came much higher than it was originally estimated.

Sickness and death increased in the city. It became necessary to put up Barrack Hospitals, one in each district. The Doctor of the Relief Committee asked us if we would take charge of the one in ours. Sister [Walburga] consulted the Bishop who appeared to be much pleased, as so much good would result from the arrangement. She also wrote to Father Burlando who replied by telegraph "Take the Barracks. Do your best, and God will bless you."

We were six in number at the time in our little Providence Hospital, Sisters Cecilia Sheehan, Annina Lutzkus, Mary Burke, Aloysia Dougherty, and Cephias Byrne; one of the number was an invalid.⁴⁸ We have not many leisure moments, it may be believed. On the evening of Christmas day we went to the Barracks as a great many things such as provisions bedding, even furniture had been delivered there the evening before.⁴⁹ We slept on the floor without sheets, but had plenty of blankets. The frost was thick on them in the morning and the wall could be scraped. For some time we had only one fire; we tried to keep ourselves warm by working. After we got the place fixed up, it was soon filled with poor sick who enjoyed the comforts of our Barracks. We brought in our invalid Sister who was useful in light-duties able to answer calls, etc. Sisters Annina and myself took

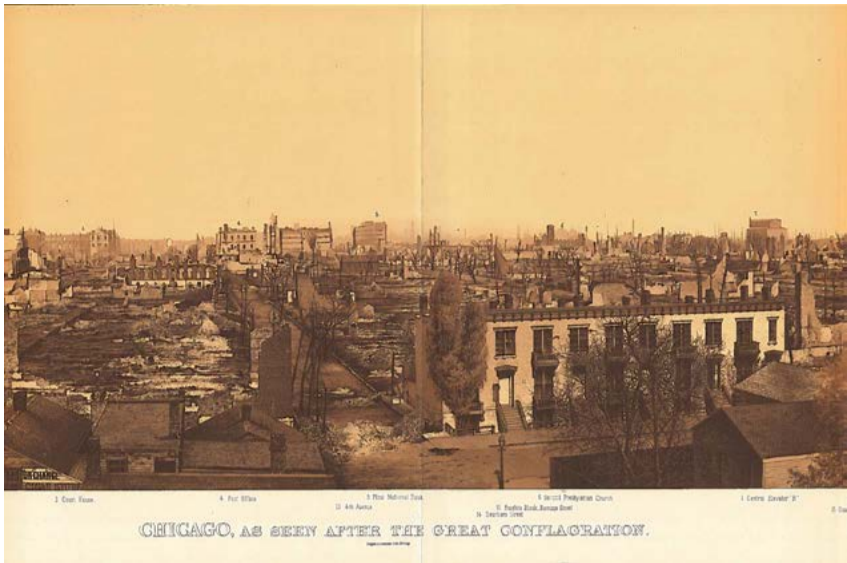
⁴⁸ Sister Cecilia Sheehan (1824-1872), Sister Aloysia Dougherty (1839-1916), and Sister Cephias Byrne (1852-1923), supplemented the labors of Sister Annina Lutzkus, Sister Mary/Bridget Burke, and Sister Walburga Gehring, sister servant.

⁴⁹ The Barracks Hospital.

charge of sick nursing. We had two wards male and female, two private rooms, one male nurse, and one woman whose duties were those we could not perform. Three Doctors attended the Barracks and one medical student remained there to compound medicines and keep the measuring records of the patients. We were furnished with everything in abundance; had the privilege of selecting our own marketing and hire our own "help." All that was required of us was to take care of the sick, and keep the place in order. When the Barracks were in running order we had many visitors, and amongst the first came Bishop Foley with his Vicar General, and some of the clergy. The Relief Committee called several times, and were highly pleased at the good order and cleanliness of the place. On one occasion while visiting the different institutions they came to ours about noon. The Doctor invited them to remain for dinner, as they had still several places to visit. They did so, and enjoyed the dinner given them saying "it was fit for a king" and thought it was not such a hard fortune to be sick at the Barracks Hospital where everything looked so inviting. They said the Sisters "were wonderful women" and told their wives to come to us to learn housekeeping. It was optional for us to give the Doctor his dinner, but whenever duty required him to be there at meal time, we always gave him a good dinner, and it was a little act of kindness he never forgot. There were about five hundred people living in the Barracks near us, who were provided for by the Relief Committee, and who when sick came to us to be taken care of. The Barracks seemed to be the pride of the Committee. They had the whole affair taken by photograph, and almost insisted that we should appear at the Hospital divisions, but we knowing the views of Superiors on such matters declined. In addition to what was furnished for the sick, we received quantities of clothing and provisions to distribute amongst the bashful poor who would not go to the general office for assistance. Every favor asked by the Sisters was granted. Our happiest days in Chicago were spent in the six months at the Barracks. We were kept as busy as ever we could be, and believed the Barracks the Little Providence Hospital, and the new building which had to be looked after too. We had enough to do. We took our turns going out every Sunday evening to the little Hospital in order to be there for the Monday morning's washing, for we tried to save every Dollar for the new Building. Which was about half a mile from the Barracks and fully two miles from the Providence Hospital.

The Superior of the Redemptorists, Reverend Father Zimmer, attended to the spiritual wants of the Barracks.⁵⁰ God alone knows all the good he did there. I firmly believe it was his prayers that saved Sister Annina Lutzkus from having the small pox at the Barracks. She had been laid up several days with every symptom. The Doctor called several times during the day, each time he would say[,] "Well Sister! there is something that is keeping it back!" He could not tell what, but we understood the mystery. We would have suffered for spiritual consolation had it not been for this good Father[.] He was an old grey headed gentleman, very devoted. He walked two miles once a week to Lake View to hear our confessions, and gave us Mass frequently. He was often covered with snow when he

⁵⁰ Reverend Zimmer, a Redemptorist priest, was pastor and superior at St. Michael's in 1871.



An aerial view of the city as it stood following the Great Fire.

Public Domain



reached our house at six in the morning. On several occasions he took up collections for us in his church before and after the fire.

It was in rather a singular manner that we got the name for the new Hospital. There were two institutions in Chicago at the time named House of Providence, the Bishop one day said: “You had better change the name for the Hospital and call it St. Joseph’s as there is no institution with that name in the city.”⁵¹ Father Burlando was in New Orleans at the time. He had occasion to write to me and directed his letter to St. Joseph’s Hospital. I wrote to him, and told him about what the Bishops had said, and how he had directed letter. He could not recollect how the house directed it, but he said: “Very well! Next to Providence comes St. Joseph: Call it after him.”

Our good dear Father [Burlando] was so grieved about us when the fire broke out. He knew the hardships we had already undergone. Besides praying for us and doing all he could for us, he sent us a box of beautiful things, pyx cases, scapulars, Agnus Deis, which we found not only beautiful but useful.⁵² And then there was a letter from a Father’s loving heart. Once when I was very much depressed he wrote: “Keep up your head dear child, it is all for the honor and glory of God.” Enclosed was a Ten dollar bill [*sic*].

The new Hospital was not yet completed when the loan of Thirty Thousand Dollars had expired, and Two Thousand more owing which must be paid before another sticke [stick] would be put on the building. What we were to do we did not know. Two of us started out early in the morning after imploring our dear Lord to direct us what to [do] and where to go. We left no means untried to succeed, but our efforts were of no avail.

⁵¹ Most Reverend James Duggan, actively filled the office of bishop of Chicago (1859-1869). Duggan was removed from office due to his mental health. While he still held the title of bishop, an administrator ran the diocese until September of 1880, when Chicago became an archdiocese and Most Rev. Patrick A. Feehan, D.D., was appointed as the city’s first archbishop. At the time of the fire, Duggan was a patient at St. Vincent’s Sanitarium, operated by the Daughters of Charity, Normandy, Missouri.

⁵² Pyx cases are small, round, metal receptacles used to carry the Eucharist (Holy Communion) to the sick. Scapulars are usually two small pieces of cloth with a religious image or verse, which are joined by thin bands. Devotees wear scapulars as religious reminders. Popular in the nineteenth century, an Agnus Dei was a small circle of pure wax, with the impress of a lamb supporting the standard of the cross, and encased in precious metal. Frequently a gift, recipients wore it devoutly around the neck or displayed it in a glass frame.

All the Banks and the money houses had more calls than they could supply. We were at last compelled to call on the Bishop and remind him of his promises. He listened to our representations in a rather dignified manner, and answered at once a positive refusal given in as few words as possible — We were stunned at his manner — He grieved us both to the soul, and we could not keep our tears back walking along the street. His cause for acting as he did was more than we could ever tell. It gave us a lesson to rely on God alone. — It was then 2 P.M. We had had no dinner nor did we feel the want of any. We prayed as we walked along asking God to enlighten us what to do, when suddenly the thought came to call on the Relief Committee, the Doctor of which had told us some time previously that the Committee intended to give us an appropriation, as we asked for no equivalent — for our services at the Barracks, but gave them gratuitously[.] If any steps had been taken, or arrangement made regarding the matter, we knew nothing of it, and we feel that we had little to hope for as our friend Dr. Johnson had gone to Europe for his health.⁵³ Still, we thought it our duty to leave nothing untried, as we would be obliged to give up the building for the debt. We therefore summoned up courage to call at the Relief Office. It was two miles from the Bishop's house and we walked the distance as there were no cars running in that direction. When we reached the office every member favorably disposed towards us, had not yet returned from dinner. Col. Hammond, not at all well disposed toward us⁵⁴ — even bitter as we thought, as he had on former occasions manifested much sternness and prejudice — was the only one in. We both feared him and we looked at each other despondingly. We were on the point of turning back. As we were making our way towards the door, we thought again: Why not go in? he can do us no harm. We stood for a moment, and begged God to strengthen our hearts beating so rapidly, and went in, The Colonel received us very cordially, and said: "Well Ladies, what can I do for you today?" We stated our case to which he listened with great attention, and said at once: "Why not call on your Bishop?" Money has been sent him from all directions. We told him we just came from the Bishop, and that he could do nothing for us as he was himself very much embarrassed on account of the many churches that were burned.

It will not be out of place to mention that the Bishop gave us Mass a few days after our call. He was as friendly in his manners as ever could be. He handed me about Seventy Dollars or so, saying: "This will keep you along, it is all I have at present." But a lesson had been given; money affairs, and former promises were never spoken of from that time. The poor Bishop no doubt felt sorry for treating us in the manner he did. He appeared to try and make up when he saw that Protestants came to our aid —

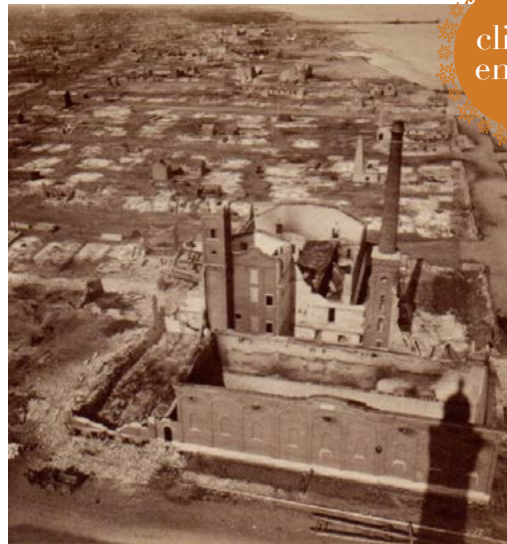
After Col. Hammond had listened to our story, he said: "Well Ladies! You deserve to be helped, you are taking such good care of our sick at the Barracks. I will see what the Committee intends to do for you. If you can wait about fifteen minutes, I will have an answer." The Col. telegraphed to the Chairman of the Committee Mr. Bauthin [Bouton]

⁵³ Hosmer Allen Johnson, M.D.

⁵⁴ Col. Charles G. Hammond.



click to enlarge



click to enlarge



click to enlarge

The remains of Chicago at State and Madison Streets; as well as views northward.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02811; and Public Domain

stating our case.⁵⁵ The reply was: "Give the ladies all the money they want and take this note in order to have it applied on the appropriation of Thirty Thousand Dollars that we are going to give the Sisters." The old Colonel said: "Now here is good news for you! In how [*sic*] large amounts do you wish to receive the notes?" I handed him the different Bills to the amount of Two Thousand Dollars. He then gave me the money to that amount with as much grace and kind heartedness as if he had known us all our lives. — Before leaving he said to us: "Now Ladies, hurry up your building, so that you may be able to move your patients from the Barracks and your little Hospital at Lake View and make them more comfortable. Whenever you want money come to me!"

He ever after was one of our best-friends. As I have occasion to call on him frequently the wrinkles of his countenance disappeared by degrees. His nephew, Mr. Jones a young man about twenty seven, had charge of giving the provisions to poor families living in the Barracks. Mr. Jones had often occasion to come by our department for the Doctor. One day he happened to pass through the kitchen, and saw lemon-pie on the table. Sister Annina Lutzkus saw him looking at the pie very wishfully. She asked him to have a piece which he appeared to enjoy very much. He told Sister he was passionately fond of lemon pie. There was no place for taking a warm lunch in those days. Mr. Jones' home was nearly five miles from our Barracks. He had nothing but a cold lunch every day. Sundays included. He was first as good natured as he could be, the very reverse of his uncle. He would bring us occasionally a pocket full of lemons, and hold them up to us very good-naturedly, ask

⁵⁵ Nathaniel Sherman Bouton.

us a favor if we would not make a lemon pie for his mother. He was the proudest man in Chicago going home at evening with his lemon pie. He was so delighted at our little attention to him that he could not do enough for us. One Sunday afternoon two venerable members of St. Vincent de Paul's Society, Mr. Carney and Mr. Riordan, father of the two Revd. Gentleman Riordan (priests) came to our Barracks with a great number of books for distribution.⁵⁶ They gave us several for poor families and Mr. Jones went through the Barracks with them to all the Catholic families. Both of these two venerable members are now before God receiving the reward of their many acts of charity after the fire. These Sunday afternoons were generally spent in looking up poor families. Mr. Jones was so delighted with this visit he came to us and said: "Well! You would not get our Protestant men to do anything of the kind." Soon after this the Barracks was broken up, Mr. Jones married a very nice young lady of his own religion. One of his first visits was to bring her to our house. Suffice it to say that he and his friends were ours ever after.

God alone can tell all the assistance we received through the Chicago Relief and Aid Society. There were twelve members. One and all became our friends after we had taken the charge of the Barracks [Hospital]. They all visited the Barracks in turn. They became yearly benefactors of St. Joseph's Hospital after we closed the Barracks.⁵⁷ Through Dr. [Hosmer A.] Johnson, our great friend, we received from the Committee for St. Joseph's Hospital Thirty Thousand Dollars, besides which, I can safely say before God, and in justice to the Society that we received at different times from, 1872 to 1882, to the amount of Forty Thousand Dollars in Cash, and nearly Two Thousand Dollars in furniture, Bedding, Dry-goods, Fuel and Groceries. Which we received besides for poor families during the ten years is uncountable and known to God alone. Indeed we owe our success in Chicago, under God, to the Relief and Aid Society. Mr. C.G. Trusdell, a Methodist minister, gave up his church at the time of the fire in order to devote his entire time to the Relief Society.⁵⁸ It was through him that all our petitions were granted after we had received the Thirty-Thousand Dollars. Mr. Trusdell frequently called to see us to know if all our wants were supplied. I said to him one day that I hoped God would grant him Heaven for all he had done for us and our poor. He replied: "I hope so Sister. I expect to meet you there, but no doubt it will be in a different form." My sincere prayer for him is that God may grant him the gift of Faith before he dies. I can never forget all he has done for our Catholic poor. I have never known him to refuse me a favor either by note or word of mouth.

How we passed through all the after[math of] the Chicago Fire, which was followed by a panic of the Banks and business, is more than I can tell. It was God alone who preserved

⁵⁶ Mr. William Riordan was the father of the two priests: Reverend Patrick William Riordan (1841-1914), later archbishop of San Francisco (1884-1914); and Reverend Daniel J. Riordan (1846-1922), who was chancellor and secretary of the Archdiocese of Chicago during the tenure of Archbishop Patrick Feehan.

⁵⁷ "They" refers to the Directors of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, who became generous supporters of St. Joseph Hospital.

⁵⁸ Reverend Charles Gregory Trusdell (1826-1903), a Methodist minister and former Iowa legislator, was a superintendent of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society for thirty years. One of his responsibilities was the Department of Distribution of Food, Fuel, and Clothing.



The Clark and Van Buren Street Bridge resting in the Chicago River following the fire.

Public Domain



our health through all kinds of weather and exposure besides the many dangers we had to brave. It was scarcely safe to go down town for some days after the fire on account of the great rush, throngs of wagons, etc., accidents happened almost every day. The bridges were half burned — also the Tunnel in which several families had taken shelter; the fire struck in both ends, the gas exploded and smothered all that were in it. Never was there such distress and lamentations heard as there was on the day after the fire.

There was no one to be pitied more than Mother Mary Nativity of the Good Shepherd Convent.⁵⁹ Burned out, penniless and homeless with three hundred inmates of the Convent some of which made their escape and not knowing where to find a home — They at last succeeded in renting a private house. They had nothing saved but a few articles which each one carried in her arms. After they had all crowded in without a bit of furniture, but the few articles [in] their hands, the poor Mother was sitting behind the door on a little bundle unburdening her heart in tears to her Divine Spouse, when suddenly the door opened, and who should walk in but Bishop Foley. He consoled her as best he could, and told her not to want for anything. On leaving he gave her a considerable sum of money. He visited them frequently and gave Mother [Lavoie] Five Thousand Dollars towards rebuilding their own home.⁶⁰ The Chicago Relief and Aid Society gave her Fifty Thousand Dollars besides clothing and bedding in abundance.⁶¹ After Mother Nativity had her convent completely

⁵⁹ Mother Mary Nativity (Adéline) Noreau (1825-1879), R.G.S., had been superior since her arrival from Montreal in 1864, and served in that capacity until her death. Sister Mary St. Catherine of Siena (Vitaline) Lavoie (b.1832) had accompanied her from Canada.

⁶⁰ "Thomas Foley to [Mother Superior, Sisters of the Good Shepherd]," 6 July 1872, Copy, in Archives, Sisters of the Good Shepherd. See Benefactor Book, Right Reverend Thomas Foley, D.D., Bishop of Chicago, n.d., n.p.

⁶¹ The Committee on the Aid to Charitable and Benevolent Institutions recommended in late 1871 that the Chicago Relief and Aid Society allocate \$150 for six months (\$900). The Society contributed \$16,046.56 to the House of the Good Shepherd in 1872. See, *Report of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society of Disbursements of Contributions for the Sufferers by the Chicago Fire* (Chicago: Riverside Press, 1874), 285-91.

rebuilt her beautiful soul took its flight to receive its reward from Him whom she had so faithfully served during her thirty years of convent life. Strange to say she died of the same sickness as Bishop Foley and one month later. May God rest both their noble souls!

Bishop Foley was untiring in his visits after the fire. Where poverty and misery ruined Bishop Foley was seen. The Orphans particularly engaged his attention. He procured for them a beautiful home near the Lake. Once he came to our little Hospital at Lake View after a terrible snowstorm to see if we were not drifted into the Lake. We had no fire in the parlor and he exclaimed: "What! No fire such a day as this." We told him we were too poor to keep a fire in the parlor when we did not expect any visitors. We took him up to our little Community room to warm himself. He was much amused at our being locked up in the snow. He sent several poor girls to our Hospital for treatment and paid for them himself. During my illness in 1875 he visited me several times and once he brought a beautiful little box filled with scapulars, and gold and silver coins to the amount of Fifty Dollars. He told Sister Cephias [Byrne] "To put it under the old lady's plate; it would put her in a good humor." — Nothing pleased him more than to find our front door open. He would walk quietly into the Community room and then take a hearty laugh saying, "Well, well! What are you all doing here? I heard every word you said! Where is the door keeper?"

He was always disposed to do what he could in giving spiritual aid to our poor sick; he told me never to let any of our patients die without Confirmation. Our progress appeared to amuse him. He asked me one day how I managed to pay so much debt? I told him "By hard work and making no presents — depending on Divine Providence and St. Joseph."⁶²

Indeed, it is more than I can tell when I consider that we did not have one dollar to begin our work in time of trouble and disappointment. From all sides, — the [removed] Bishop insane, every one doing — God knows what! —

Our success under God, is due to our departed Father Burlando.⁶³ I felt many times that I must give up. — I would write real scolding and saucy letters to Father Burlando, but he would only reply with words of kindness and encouragement. I often felt sorry and ashamed of my conduct afterwards; then I would set to work with new courage.

Our hardships and many trials were at last crowned by procuring a comfortable and self-sustaining house for the poor sick and dying. I feel more than amply rewarded for the good we have been able to do during the past fourteen years in relieving suffering humanity and saving souls.

We have paid for ground, building and improvements Seventy Thousand Dollars. The City gave us Water, Gas, Sewer, street-cars, and a letter box. There were no improvements

⁶² For post-fire statistics, see Andreas, *History of Chicago*, 3:525. "ST. JOSEPH'S HOSPITAL. Since the completion of this hospital building in 1871, and its occupancy in 1872, many improvements have been made. The situation, on Garfield Avenue, near Lincoln Park and Lake Michigan, is admirable from a sanitary point of view, as well as for being easy of access. Both males and females are received as patients, about one hundred of whom can be accommodated. The private rooms are frescoed and comfortably furnished, and the entire building is heated with steam. To the Sisters, who have the care and management of this institution, the increasing measure of its success and recognition is very gratifying and encouraging."

⁶³ Burlando died of a stroke on 16 February 1873.

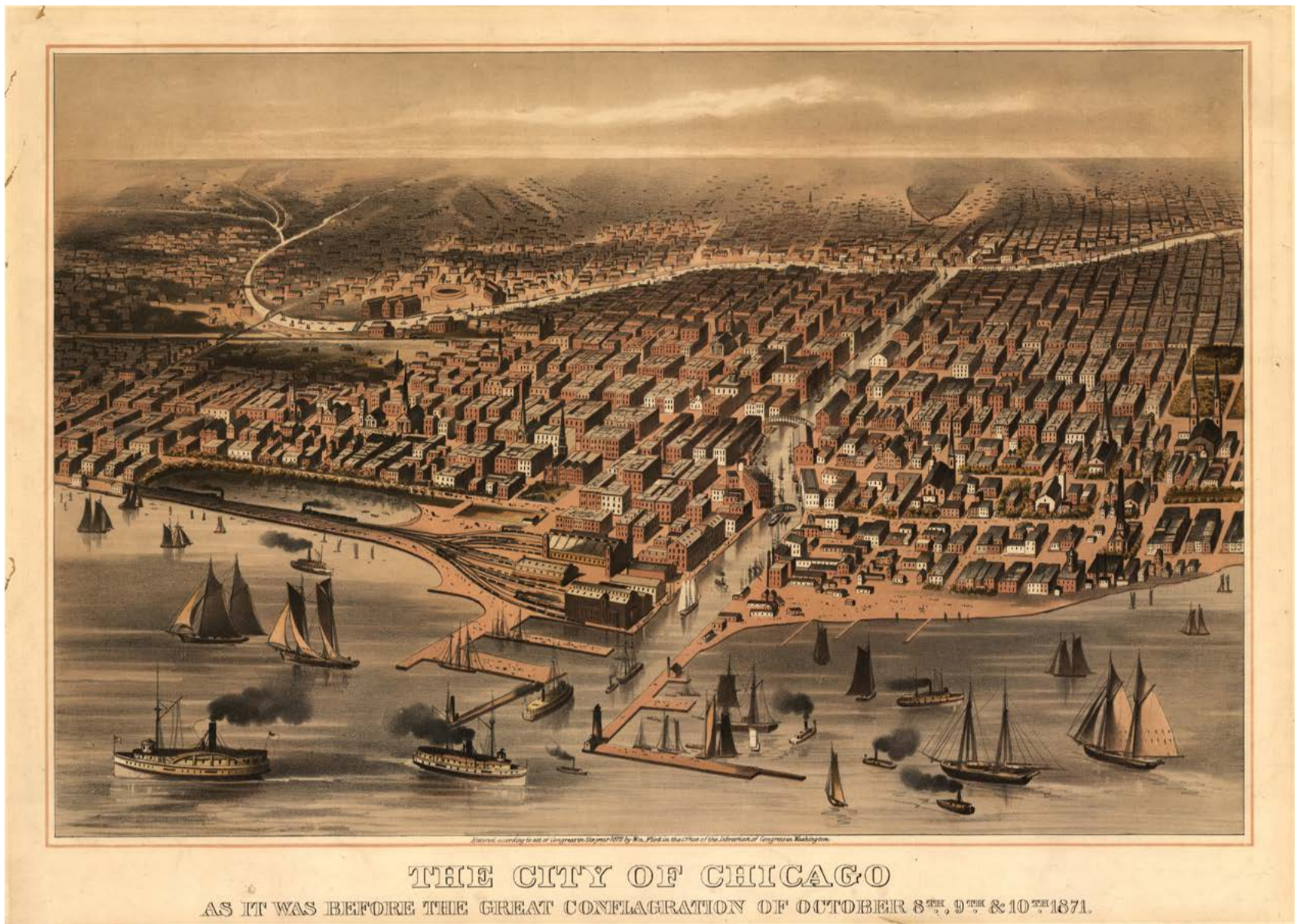
at the time we built there. Since the Fire people have thickly settled around the Hospital. It is a great consolation. To my heart when I now look back and see how God has blessed and made grow the grain of mustard seed that was planted by Holy Obedience January 18, 1869. _____

_____ Well now, my dear Sister, don't you think that I have said enough about Chicago? It makes my tear bag nearly empty.⁶⁴ Please, dear Sister, don't let any one see my scribbling. —

[Sister Walburga Gehring]

⁶⁴ Tears from crying.





THE CITY OF CHICAGO

AS IT WAS BEFORE THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION OF OCTOBER 8TH, 9TH & 10TH 1871.

A view of the city of Chicago as it stood just before the Great Fire.

Public Domain





School of the Holy Name, Chicago, Ill.



St. Vincent's House of Providence, Chicago, Ill.

The School of the Holy Name, and St. Vincent's House of Providence.

Both Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.





The Burning of Chicago. An 1871 lithograph by Currier & Ives.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHI-02954





St. Patrick's School on the Near West Side, c. 1900.

Note the Daughters visible standing at the windows in their signature cornettes.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.





The remnants of Holy Name Cathedral after the fire.

Public Domain





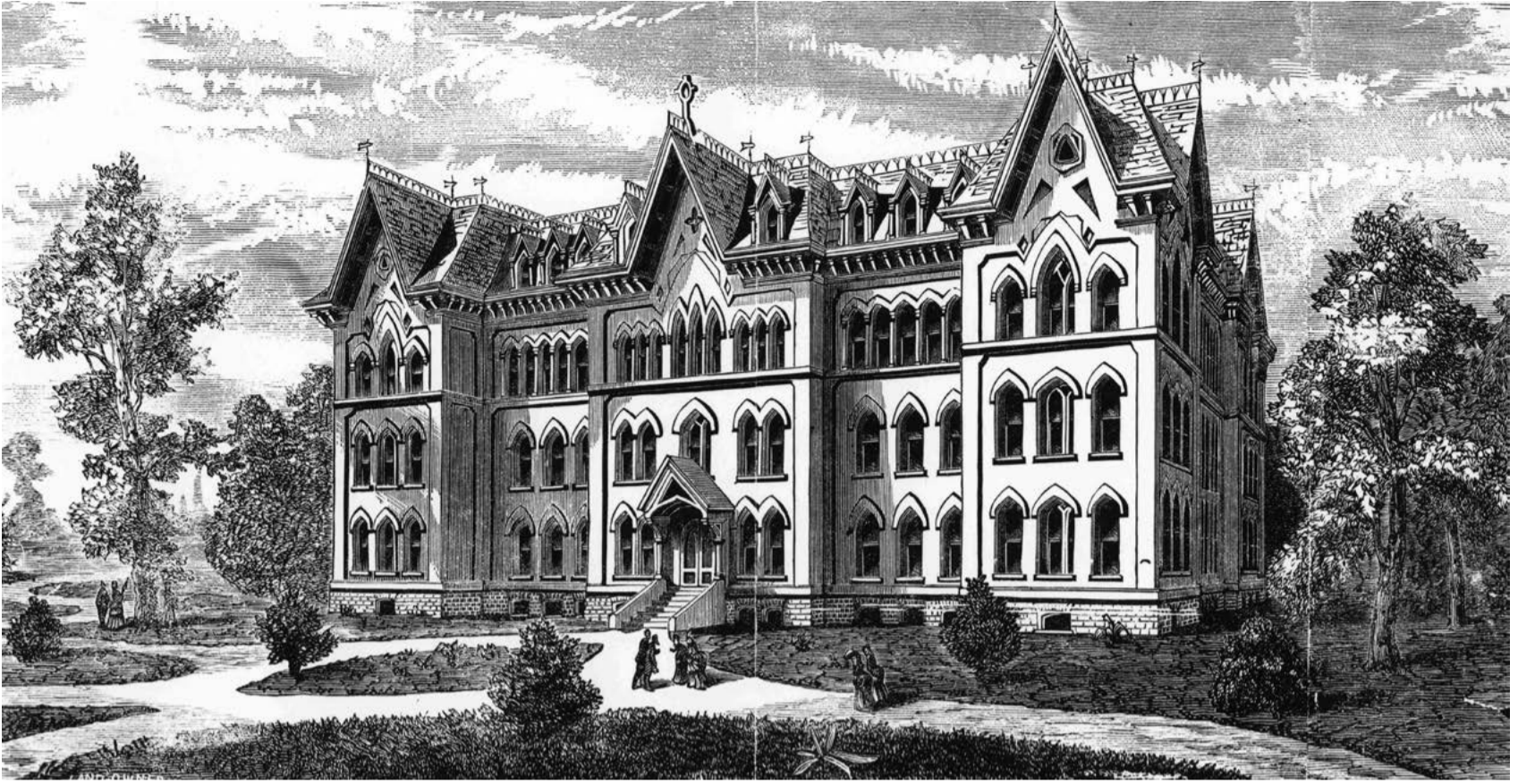
CHICAGO IN FLAMES—THE RUSH FOR LIFE OVER RANDOLPH-STREET BRIDGE.—FROM A SKETCH BY JOHN R. CHAPIN

Crowds of people attempting to flee the fire over the Randolph Street Bridge.

Print by John R. Chapin, first published in the October 28, 1871, issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02901





St. Joseph's Hospital, Chicago, as it has evolved over the years following the fire: first at Sophia Street from 1872 to 1890; then at Burling Street from 1890 to 1963; and at its present location along Lake Shore Drive in Chicago.

All Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.





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All Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.





An 1871 Currier & Ives lithograph depicting the enormity of the fire and the masses of people attempting to escape.

Public Domain





THE BURNING OF CHICAGO—RUSH OF FUGITIVES THROUGH THE POTTER'S FIELD TOWARD LINCOLN PARK.—FROM A SKETCH BY THEO. R. DAVIS.—[SEE PAGE 1028.]

Refugees fleeing north toward Lincoln Park during the fire.

Print by Theo Davis, first appeared in the November 4, 1871, issue of *Harper's Weekly*.

Public Domain





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Providence Hospital, Chicago, Ill.

Providence Hospital, located at Clark and Diversey, Lake View, was spared from the flames by a sudden change in the direction of the wind.

Courtesy, Daughters of Charity Province of St. Louise, St. Louis, MO.





An aerial view of the city as it stood following the Great Fire.

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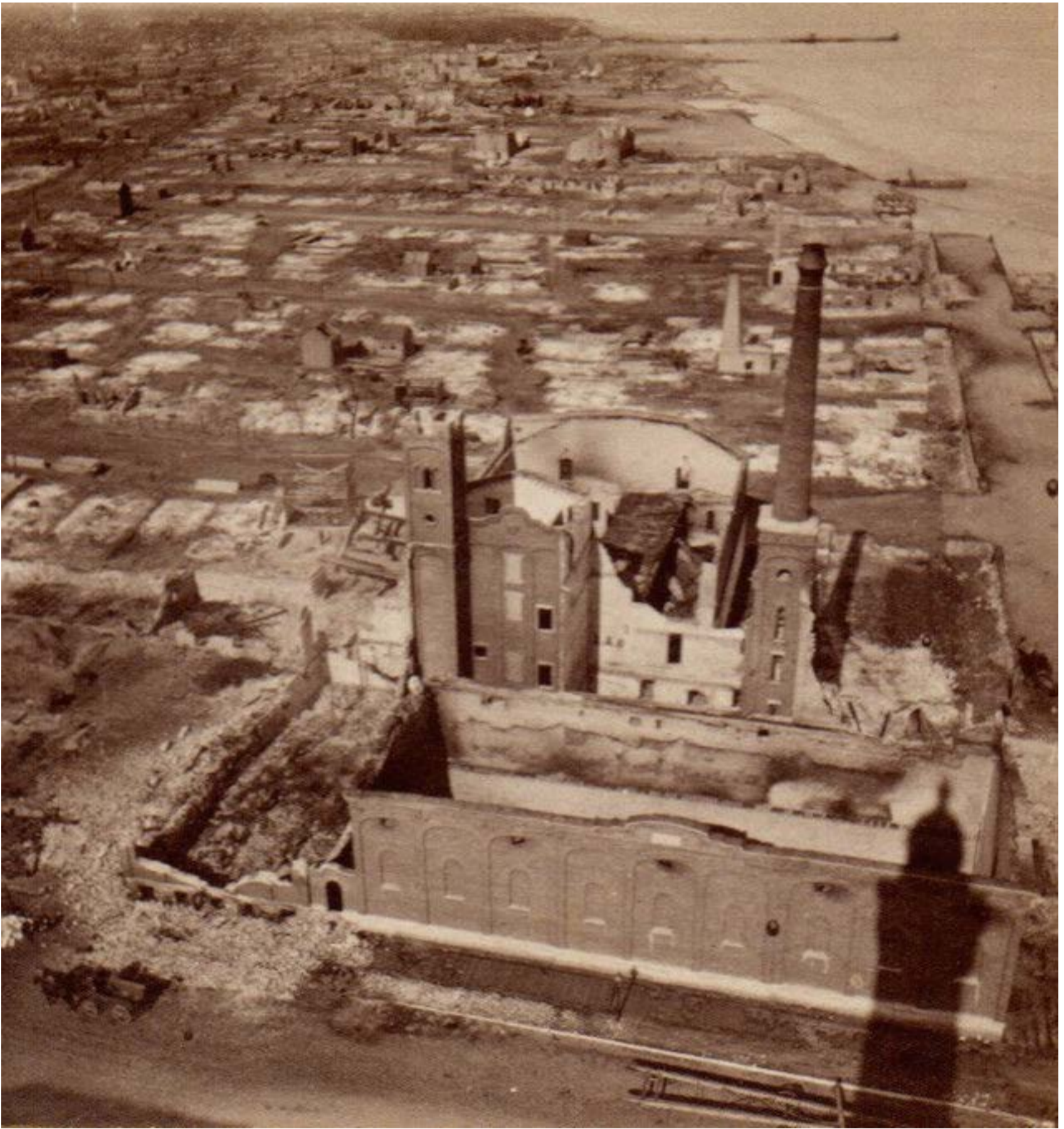




The remains of Chicago at State and Madison Streets; as well as views northward.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02811; and Public Domain





The remains of Chicago at State and Madison Streets; as well as views northward.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02811; and Public Domain





The remains of Chicago at State and Madison Streets; as well as views northward.

Courtesy Chicago History Museum, ICHi-02811; and Public Domain





The Clark and Van Buren Street Bridge resting in the Chicago River following the fire.

Public Domain

