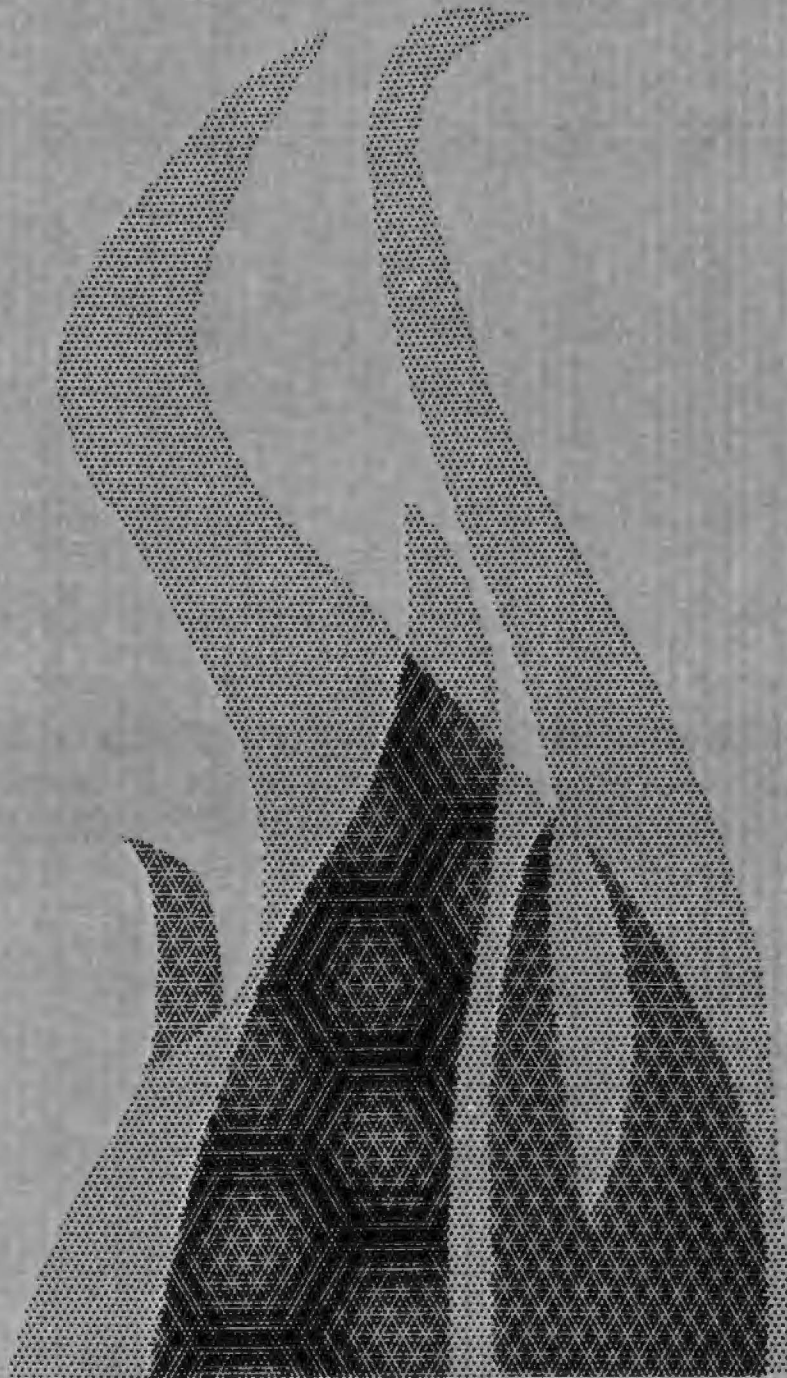


SUMMARY OF INFORMATION

ON THE

SITE OF THE ORIGIN OF



THE CHICAGO FIRE OF 1871

DEKOVEN AND JEFFERSON STREETS

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE, 1971

SITE OF THE ORIGIN OF THE CHICAGO FIRE OF 1871
DeKoven and Jefferson Streets
Chicago, Illinois

LANDMARK SITE: According to all accounts, the fire began at the rear of the property at 558 West DeKoven Street (then numbered as 137 DeKoven Street). This property is now city-owned, and the approximate site of the origin of the fire is within the Chicago Fire Academy building, which occupies the property. The event is symbolized by a bronze sculpture titled "Tongues of Flame", by Egon Weiner, which is located on a paved plaza outside the building, at the northeast corner of the intersection of West DeKoven and South Jefferson Streets. This sculpture is a striking visual representation of the origin of the fire and thus serves as a tangible symbol of this catastrophic event.

DESCRIPTION OF EVENT: On Sunday night, October 8, 1871, the City of Chicago was well into a period of extreme drought. For the past fourteen weeks, only a smattering of rain had fallen to the parched earth. Fires had been springing up all over the area but, fortunately, were put out before any great damage had occurred. However, on this Sunday night, the city's fire department was resting after the previous night's effort of combatting the city's worst fire in nearly three years. This fire had destroyed the Lull and Homes Planing Mill located at 52 South Canal Street and four square blocks of cottages in the vicinity. Eight blocks from the mill fire was located the house and barn of the O'Leary family.

The exact cause of the great Chicago Fire will probably never be known. However, it undoubtedly started in the O'Leary barn located at 137 DeKoven Street (now numbered as 558 West DeKoven Street). Sometime between 8:30 and 9:45 P.M., Daniel Sullivan, a drayman and neighbor of the O'Learys, was sitting directly across the street from the O'Leary property when he noticed flames coming from the O'Leary barn. He shouted, "Fire!" and ran into the barn, attempting to free the two cows and a calf housed there. By this time, the people of the neighborhood had awakened and congregated to watch the fire. Supposedly, Dennis Rogan, another neighbor, awoke the O'Learys. Due to the tinderbox conditions of the city, a 60 mile-an-hour southwest wind, a faulty fire-alarm system, and an overworked and inadequate fire department, the fire raged, impossible to control.

The various versions concerning the particulars of the fire's origin are contradictory. The one most accepted is that 35-year-old Catherine O'Leary, who ran a milk supply route to supplement her laborer husband Patrick's income, went into the barn carrying a lantern to light the way, and while she was attempting to milk the cow, the beast accidentally kicked over the lantern. (The lantern takes prominence in the account due to the fact that a broken lantern was found in the ruins of the barn.) However, although this theory is the most accepted, it was refuted by many, including Mrs. O'Leary. She previously had never milked the cow later than 5:00 P.M. and later said that she had gone to bed early that evening (about 8:00 P.M.), suffering from a sore ankle which would prevent her from going into the barn later that evening to check on her animals.

Another popular version (the one espoused by Mrs. O'Leary herself) stated that the McLaughlins, who rented a cottage on the O'Leary property, were entertaining a group of friends that night in honor of the arrival of a McLaughlin relative from Ireland. They ran out of milk. (The milk was possibly for tea, whiskey punch, or oyster stew; no one

knows for sure what was being consumed at the party.) Not wanting to awaken the O'Learys, a McLaughlin crept into the barn, carrying a lantern, to get some milk. The cow became irritated over an inexperienced milker, kicked in protest, knocking over the lantern, and thus the fire.

Years after the fire, Jim O'Leary, son of Catherine, stated that it was positively caused by spontaneous combustion.

There are also various proponents of the idea that a group of boys who frequently slipped into the barn to surreptitiously smoke cigarettes may have caused the fire with carelessly dropped sparks.

All of the above versions are discussed in detail in A. T. Andreas' *History of Chicago*, Volume II, and in numerous other written accounts.

PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION OF SITE AT TIME OF EVENT: The O'Leary property was a 25' by 100' lot on the north side of DeKoven Street, between Jefferson and Clinton Streets. On it stood two small shingled cottages, one close behind the other, and behind them, a barn. The McLaughlin family rented the front cottage which stood nearly on the street building line. The O'Learys and their two children lived in the cottage behind. The 40' between the rear cottage and the barn was utilized as a back yard. The infamous barn was constructed of wood and was 16' by 20' and 14' high. The upper portion had recently been filled with hay. High wooden fences, which afforded easy means of communicating flames, ran from the barn to contiguous lots.

Besides the lack of rainfall (2-½" of rain had fallen between July 3rd and October 8th, compared to an average rainfall of 8-¾" in previous years), Chicago was a city composed primarily of wooden structures. Houses of pine board and shingle, connected by wooden sidewalks and fences, were located throughout the city. In addition, the city lay directly in the path of the strong southwest gales which were common in the region. These gales counteracted the wet winds off the lake.

All these conditions had for some time made Chicago a prime candidate for the misfortunes of a fire of massive proportions. It simply took the event at the O'Leary barn to set it off.

HISTORY OF SITE: In 1864, Patrick O'Leary had purchased his property at 137 DeKoven Street for \$500 from one Cyrus Clark. O'Leary sold it on December 8, 1879 (ironically, due to the wind pattern the night of the fire, the O'Leary house had been spared), to an Anton Kolar and his wife. The Kolars tore down the O'Leary cottage and erected in 1880 a two-story stone-front brick structure with an English basement. The next year, the Chicago Historical Society embedded a marble plaque in the front wall of the house explaining the significance of the site. It read:

THE GREAT CHICAGO FIRE OF 1871
ORIGINATED HERE AND EXTENDED TO
LINCOLN PARK
THE CHICAGO HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 1881

After living in the house for ten years, the Kolars sold it to Michael Luchy, who, on July 3, 1905, sold it to Christopher and Angela Parelli. Parelli was a distributor of the old *Chicago Journal*. Sometime after the death of Mr. Parelli, the City Council proposed to buy the site. This was done in 1928 at a cost of \$36,000. Although some felt the price outrageous, it was thought at the time that the land would be used to construct a firehouse.

Nine years later, in 1937, Chicago observed the 100th anniversary of its incorporation as a city. At that time, the Charter Jubilee Committee was formed to work in conjunction with the Chicago Historical Society to declare historical sites in honor of the city's anniversary. It placed a marker on the house which read:

MRS. O'LEARY'S HOME

ON THIS SITE STOOD HOME AND
BARN OF MRS. O'LEARY WHERE THE
CHICAGO FIRE OF 1871 STARTED. ALTHOUGH
THERE ARE MANY VERSIONS OF
THE STORY OF ITS ORIGIN THE
REAL CAUSE OF THE FIRE HAS NEVER
BEEN DETERMINED.

In 1954, the City Council approved sale of the property for \$6,500 to the Chicago Land Clearance Commission, which was acquiring and clearing property in the area for an industrial redevelopment project. The next year, the house occupying the property was burned as a test blaze for the Chicago Plastering Institute, a promoter of fire safety in buildings.

The idea of a firehouse on the site was partially realized when the Chicago Fire Academy was built; it was dedicated on May 15, 1961. The 1937 plaque is located on the first floor of the Academy, near the spot where the great fire is said to have begun.

Also commemorating the calamitous event is a sculpture titled "Tongues of Flame." The bronze work was created by Egon Weiner and conveys the feeling of a rising and growing flame. Its massive scale (over two stories tall) suggests the immensity of the history-changing event that began here. The sculpture, seen against the red-glazed brick of the academy building, is a moving testament to the spirit and determination that soon rebuilt the city.

SIGNIFICANCE OF SITE: The memory of the fire of 1871 prompted the city officials to insure that such a holocaust would not occur again. The fire had destroyed 2,150 acres (almost the entire city). The exceptions were a few scattered buildings. The burned area stretched from the O'Leary house east to the lake and north to Fullerton Avenue. Damage, in statistics and dollars, was astounding. Approximately 18,000 structures valued at 192 million dollars (about 2 billion dollars calculated at today's values) were completely destroyed. These included 80 office buildings, 170 factories, 39 churches, 28 hotels, 39 banks, 6 railroad terminals, 9 theaters, 21 public buildings, 1,600 shops and stores, grain elevators, coal and lumber yards, breweries and

distilleries, warehouses, bridges, and wharves. If all the destroyed structures could have been placed in a row, they would have stretched for more than 100 miles.

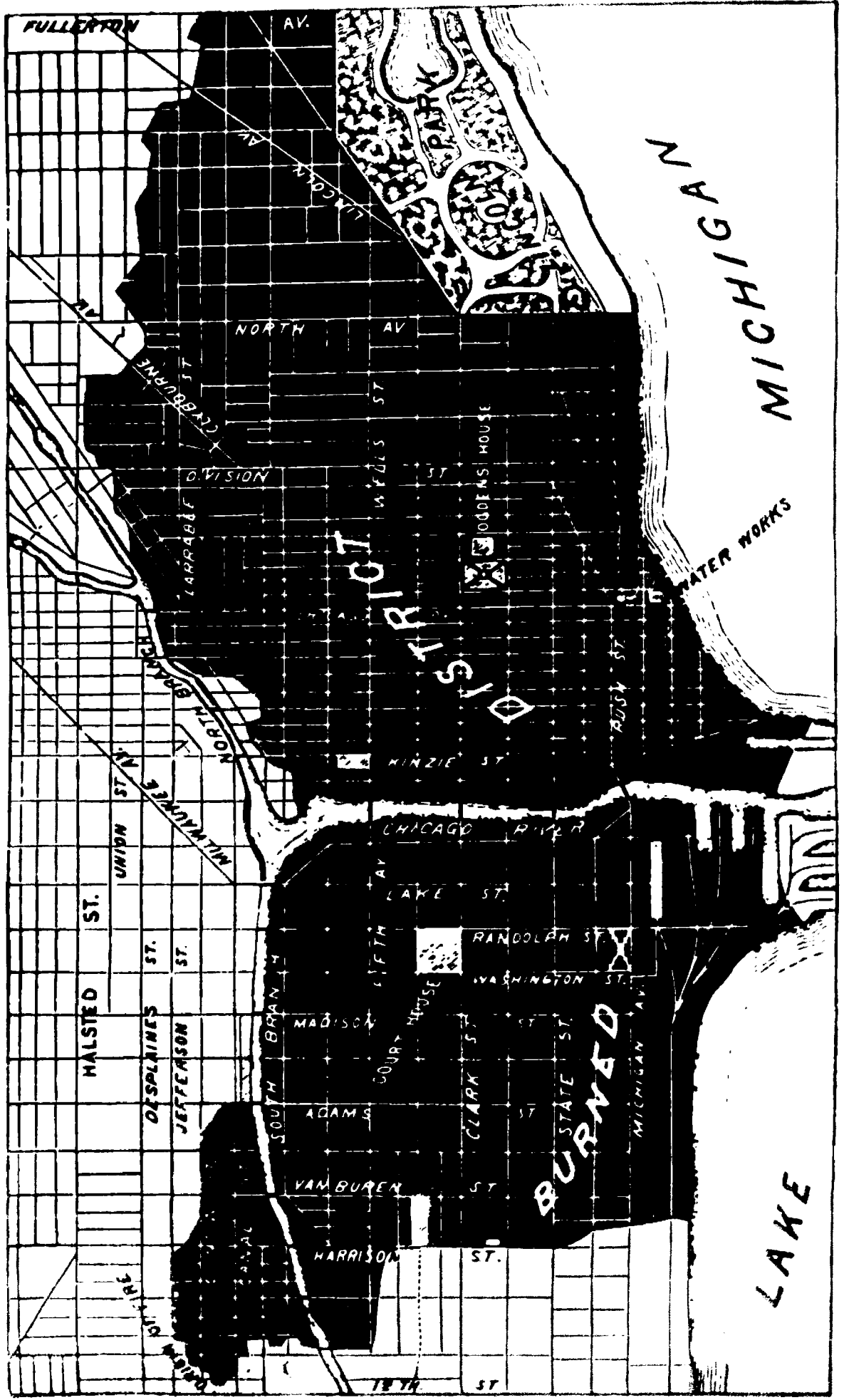
Approximately 30 hours after the fire had started, it reached a house on Fullerton Avenue, which began to blaze. After the walls caved in, the flames died. On early Tuesday morning the great fire was over; it started to rain.

The city was in ruins, and officials realized that negligence concerning fireproofing and building codes could no longer be tolerated. As the city began to rebuild from the ashes, another positive result of the fire was seen. Architectural design and building techniques took on innovative forms. The decades after the fire saw the development and extensive use of the steel-skeleton frame. This enabled Chicago to rise to its position of leadership in building construction in the United States. The determination to rebuild Chicago was indicative of the indomitable "I WILL" spirit which is still alive in the city today.

Nationally, a program commemorating the anniversary of the fire prompted President Warren G. Harding in 1922 to declare the national observance of Fire Prevention Week (the Sunday through Saturday in which October 8th to 10th falls). This anniversary is still being observed today, through this proclamation and under the sponsorship of the National Fire Protection Association.

OPPOSITE

Map of the central portion of Chicago, showing the area that was burned in the Fire of 1871. The O'Leary property, where the Fire began, is at the lower left. (Courtesy Municipal Reference Library, City of Chicago)



FULLERTON

AV.

PARK

NORTH AV

DIVISION

WELLS ST

ODD FELLOWS HOUSE

OLD CITY STRICIT

HINZIE ST

RUSH ST

WATER WORKS

MICHIGAN

HALSTED ST.

DESPLAINS ST.

JEFFERSON ST.

SOUTH BRANCH

MADISON

COURT HOUSE

ADAMS

VAN BUREN ST.

HARRISON ST.

FIFTH AV

LAKE ST.

RANDOLPH ST.

WASHINGTON ST.

CLARK ST.

STATE ST.

MICHIGAN AV.

BURNED

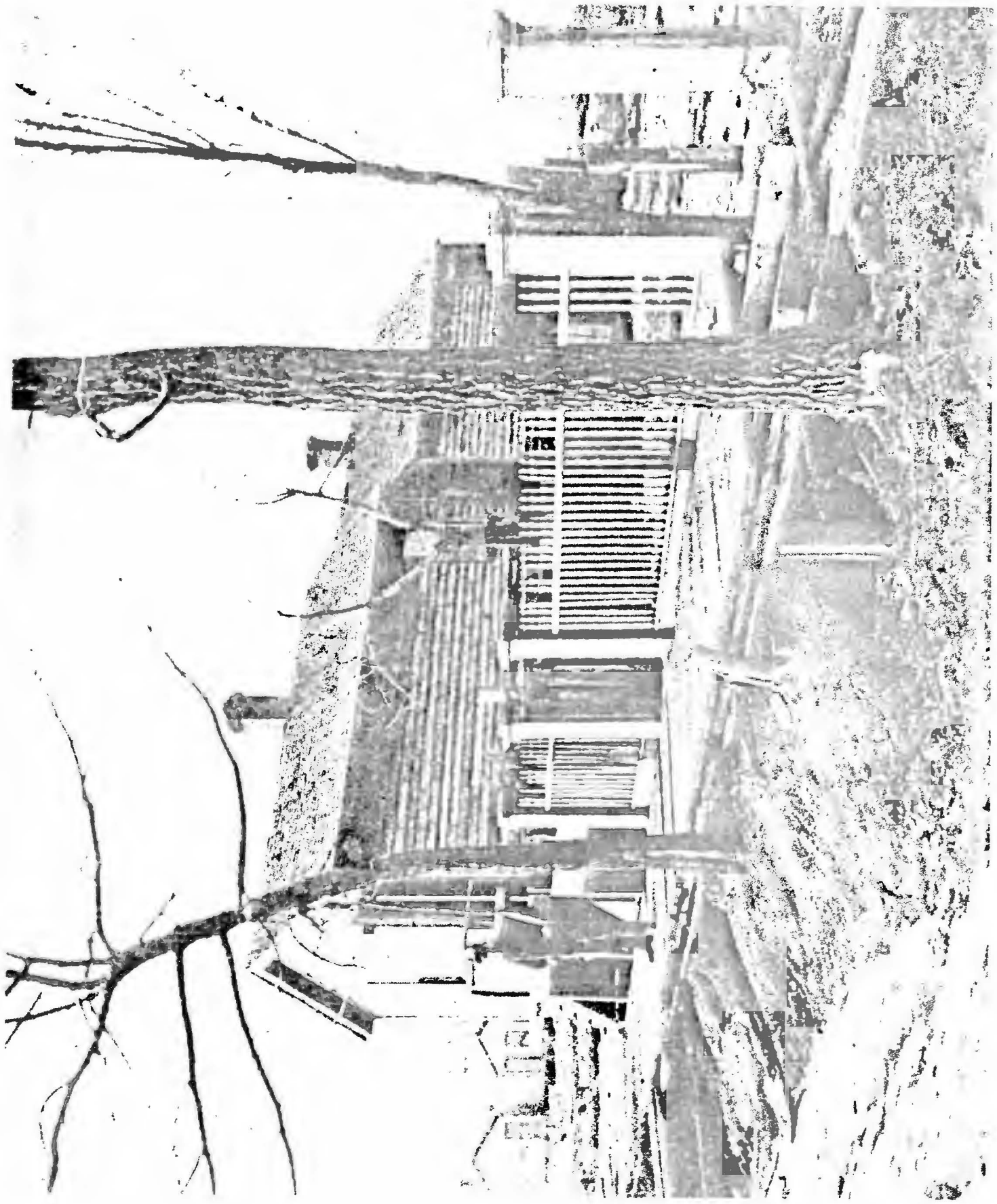
LAKE

18TH ST

ST

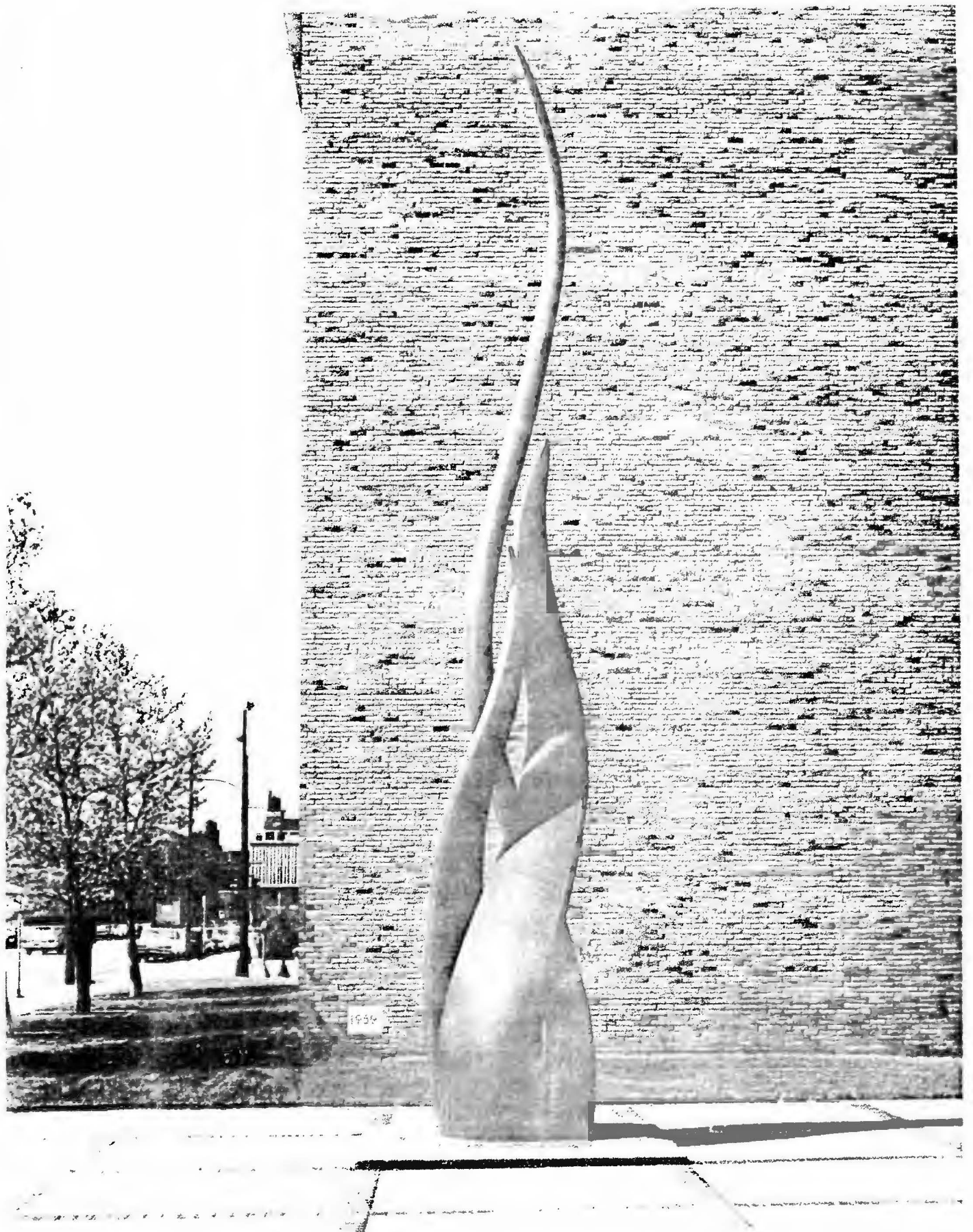
OPPOSITE

Photograph of the O'Leary house, taken just after the Chicago Fire of 1871. (Courtesy Chicago Historical Society)



OPPOSITE

The sculpture titled "Tongues of Flame," by Egon Weiner, against the backdrop of a wall of the Chicago Fire Academy building. (Photo by Richard Nickel)



OPPOSITE

The sculpture as seen from the roof of the Chicago Fire Academy building. Pedestrians enjoy viewing the sculpture and learning of its significance. (Photo by Richard Nickel)





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