

Great Chicago Fire:  
Out of the Ashes, Building Codes Emerge

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Group Website

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Our topic is the Great Chicago Fire, the destruction it caused, and how it influenced a change in building materials and architecture. In 1871, Chicago, Illinois was changed forever after a fire destroyed roughly 3.3 square miles of the city. Because of the destruction, a new frontier of building codes were created that limited the number of flammable materials used in construction, reducing fire risk in Chicago and other American cities. The implementation of the building codes led to them being carried out by the law in 1875. We chose our topic because it was lesser known and had an intriguing frontier.

We began researching with two field trips to gather books and articles- one to our small, local library, and the other to the big downtown library near us. We found most of our information online. Once we found valid information, we printed it out and highlighted the most important details. We found additional information in an interview with Carl S. Smith over email. While looking up this information, we realized there was much more to the fire than we had originally anticipated. We learned way more than we had thought. One of the most surprising things about the fire that we learned is that nobody knows how it started. There are many theories about it but there is no definitive answer.

We chose our topic because we knew there would be more to teach people and that they would not know much about it. We narrowed it down to the Great Chicago Fire because it had a captivating frontier and was related to architecture, like no one else in our class. We originally planned for our presentation to be an exhibit board, but our teacher realized we used too many words and would go over the limit. We chose a website instead, as there was almost no footage of the fire and its aftermath for a documentary and it would be difficult to turn this topic into a performance. We started by tinkering with the features in the site builder and then putting colorful text boxes with our script in them. The boxes feature muted fire tones to fit our topic and

a font we like. We learned how to work together as a group, how to organize the information we found, and how to persevere through problems that popped up.

The Great Chicago Fire relates to the theme because the destruction caused by this massive fire led certain groups to rally and advocate for the frontier of new building codes. This had a lasting impact on America's skyline. The fire led to codes that required metal skeletons and mostly fireproof buildings, ensuring that cities have a method of protection against fires. Another result was the evolution of skyscrapers. This architectural frontier was kicked into gear by William LeBaron Jenney, the architect who designed the Home Insurance Building (now widely acknowledged as the first skyscraper).