

ANNA E. HIGGINSON, *wife of George M. Higginson, real estate broker, writes to Mrs. Mark Skinner, then in Europe with her husband. The Higginson home stood on North Dearborn just north of Chicago Avenue.*



*Elmhurst, Nov. 10, 1871*

DEAR MRS. SKINNER,

I little thought when I received your kind & most welcome letter that so long a time would pass before I acknowledged it, or that so many sorrows & anxieties would crowd the space which lay between your letter & my reply.

I need not tell you of the greatness of the calamity which has fallen upon us. We can all feel that and most of us, I imagine, will feel it more & more as time advances. Men are full of excitement now & hope, the smoke of the battle has as yet not fairly cleared away—the realization, to be followed in many cases by depression & despair, will come soon enough. Nothing can describe the desolation which reigns over the whole North Side & nothing can be more depressing, unless it be the efforts at restoration upon the South. To see the lines of rough sheds which are taking the places of all the magnificent buildings de-

stroyed is simply heart-breaking. Chicago is thrown back now to where it was twenty-five years ago, & I for one do not expect to see it restored to where it was a few short weeks ago. The men of Chicago are heroes; their energy, cheerfulness & determination are something almost sublime; but I fear many a brave heart will sink under difficulties utterly unsurmountable.

You have heard, I have no doubt, account after account of the progress of the fire, so I will not fill my paper with that; indeed it would be a waste of time—no words can give an idea of the horrors of that night. The wind, blowing a hurricane, howling like myriads of evil spirits, drove the flames before it with a force & fierceness which could never be described or imagined; it was not flame but a solid wall of fire which was hurled against the buildings & the houses did not burn, they were simply destroyed. The flames would dash themselves against the sides of a solid block, in one instant passing out through the other side & the whole just melted away & disappeared. The courthouse burned in twenty minutes, while that long block of forty houses on LaSalle St. opposite Lincoln Park, burned in just *seven*. The air was full of cinders; pieces of blazing shingles & boards & great strips of tarred felt fell in every direction, now on the roofs of houses yet unburned & then on the loads of furniture & bedding which people were trying to save & which they were continually obliged to abandon in the street in order to save themselves.

The course of the main body of fire was rather below us, so that the water works & all beyond burned before our house caught & many people thought we would be spared; but the fire worked up gradually along the North Branch & the instant the wind caught it the fire was hurled the whole length of the city; in that way our house was burned at last. As I went out of it & saw the vine-covered walls & the windows filled with



*Chamber of Commerce Building,  
La Salle and Washington,  
Before and After  
the Fire*

flowers all shining so peacefully in the moonlight, it seemed impossible to realize that in a few moments the smoke & flame I saw all around me would seize that too & that I was looking upon my home for the last time. We had time to save most of our furniture if there had been any way of carrying it off or any apparent place of safety for it, the only means of conveyance being a wheelbarrow & our own hands. We saved some clothing, most of our silver & a few pictures, though part of what we rescued from the house was afterwards burned. We succeeded finally in procuring a sand wagon on which we placed ourselves & the few worldly goods which remained to us & rode to the West Side in company with thousands of other refugees like ourselves—dusty, smoky, forlorn in every way, the wind blowing a hurricane, the air full of blinding dust & smoke & behind us our ruined homes, with all their years of accumulated treasures & associations of every kind. It is for those I grieve, not over the loss of money—my Mother's Bible, the clothing & toys of my dead children, all the keepsakes & mementoes of a lifetime.

People sometimes check me for being too despondent when I say I shall never have a home again; a house somewhere, undoubtedly I shall have—I must live out my appointed time—but a house which simply bears the mark of the builder & upholsterer could never be home to me if it were ever so elegant.

We came directly out here to the Bryan's & have been here ever since, most kindly cared for. Indeed, if it be true "that it is more blessed to give than to receive," there must be a great many happy people in the world now, for the outpoured sympathy & kindness of the world is ours & we need it. Hardly a family on the North Side saved a change of clothing, & every shop in the city & every office & bank being burned, no one had any money to purchase anything or anything to purchase if they



# PROCLAMATION!

---

The preservation of the good order and peace of the city is hereby entrusted to Lieut. General P. H. Sheridan, U. S. Army.

The Police will act in conjunction with the Lieut. General in the preservation of the peace and quiet of the city, and the Superintendent of Police will consult with him to that end.

The intent hereof being to preserve the peace of the city, without interfering with the functions of the City Government.

Given under my hand this 11th day of October, 1871.

**R. B. MASON, Mayor.**

were able. You may imagine how I felt on meeting Mrs. Arnold coming from the Relief Society with a bundle of clothing for Mr. Arnold,<sup>1</sup> though I think she felt rather uplifted by the necessity, appearing somewhat in the character of a martyr, & when Dr. Rylance went to see her & seizing her hands with one of his characteristic gushes exclaimed: "You noble woman," I am sure she felt abundantly repaid for all she had undergone.

We have come to the literal fulfillment of the injunction: "Let him that hath two coats, give to him that hath none," for we all share & share around in a way that partakes very strongly of the ludicrous. I found when I examined the sheet which contained my wardrobe that I had *one* nightgown & six white skirts. Mrs. LeMoyné had fifty homeless ones in her house the night after the fire,<sup>2</sup> not one of whom had a change of clothing. Mrs. Ryerson had on a wrapper & man's hat tied down with a handkerchief. Tille D'Wolf had a calico wrapper with a bed blanket by way of shawl, & in that state appeared at Judge Drummond's.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Winston saved a pink silk dress trimmed with lace, but very little else; one lady had a carriage full of party dresses & another a half dozen bonnets. One man was seen running from the fire with two immense turnips & another with a piece of broken furniture of some kind.

The Rumsey's just succeeded in getting out with all their children, leaving all else behind. Old Mrs. McCagg was taken out at the last moment & forced to run, delicate as she is, to Chicago Ave. where she fell exhausted & would have burned in the street if her friends had not seized an express wagon & placed

<sup>1</sup>Isaac N. Arnold. The Arnolds lived in a large house with spacious grounds at Erie and Pine (now Michigan) streets. The Rev. Joseph H. Rylance, characterized with some acidity, was pastor of St. James Church.

<sup>2</sup>John V. LeMoyné, lawyer, lived in Lake View, then a separate community north of the city.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Drummond, judge of the U. S. Circuit Court, lived in Winfield, a village a short distance west of Wheaton.

her in it. Ezra McCagg has lost every dollar of income & all his fine library, though his pictures were saved; his greenhouses look strangely enough in the midst of all the surrounding desolation.

Washington Park is full of the barracks built by the city for the houseless poor—they are the only neighbors Mr. Ogden has within a mile.<sup>4</sup> One of the men whom we employed for a day told Charlie "that they had not many neighbors, but they were very select!" meaning the Ogdens. I think Mrs. O. feels worse, living in her elegant, untouched house, than we do who are altogether homeless, & I do not wonder at it, as they live in fear of their lives, with their house watched day & night by policemen.

The Arnolds have taken a small furnished house on the South Side & one servant. The Scudders are with them;<sup>5</sup> poor Mary lost all her wedding presents; what were not burned in the house were melted in Mr. Magie's lot where they buried them. The Magies had a very narrow escape, as they waited in the house loth to give it up till the fence took fire & were both severely burned; indeed, they gave up all hopes of life & went & stood under one of the trees in their yard to wait for the end, when they saw a place where the fence had burned away & rushed through.<sup>6</sup>

Albert Munger has lost about four hundred thousand dollars, Mr. Ogden about three millions. The losses of that whole family

<sup>4</sup>The home of Mahlon D. Ogden, which miraculously escaped the fire, was located where the Newberry Library now stands, facing what was then called Washington Park.

<sup>5</sup>A daughter and son-in-law of Isaac N. Arnold.

<sup>6</sup>The residence of H. H. Magie stood in an entire block bounded by Ontario, Ohio, State and Cass (now Wabash) streets. The grounds were surrounded by a high picket fence which prevented escape until the fire burned out a section. Lambert Tree (Magie's son-in-law), his wife, child, and the child's nurse were in the Magie home at the time, and had a similar harrowing experience.

are tremendous as they were insured almost entirely in home companies. Mr. Ryerson too, seems to be very much injured by the fire (financially I mean). Mrs. King is out here at their little country place. Mr. King lost heavily, but his credit is unimpaired, so he feels in very good spirits, as he stands with Field, Leiter & Co. & a few others among those who mean to pay dollar for dollar. It must be a great mortification for J. V. Farwell to be obliged to ask for time. I understand that Mr. Bross has lost almost everything but his picture, which he was seen during the fire carrying off on horseback—the only thing he saved.<sup>7</sup> Jessie has behaved nobly, as of course she would; it is said she [is] looking for a situation of some kind. Clarence Dyer had just got nicely settled in his own house & has lost that & his coal yard which must be very hard for him. They were with Mrs. Turnley immediately after the fire;<sup>8</sup> I have not heard since.

All in that part of the town were driven by the flames toward the lake & most of them suffered terribly. Mary Howe & her baby took refuge on the pier with the Arnolds & many others & were there for hours.<sup>9</sup> Some went into the lake itself; some got off in small boats & were out all night before they could get back again. Thousands were out on the prairie & in Lincoln Park all night exposed to the heavy rain which came just twenty-four hours too late. Essie Stockton was married the Thursday

<sup>7</sup>See p. 43, note 3.

<sup>8</sup>P. T. Turnley, vice president of the Traders' National Bank, lived on South Wabash beyond the range of the fire. The Dyer home was on Pine (now Michigan Avenue) a short distance north of the river.

<sup>9</sup>"William B. Ogden had lately constructed a long pier, north of, and parallel with, the old United States pier, which prolonged the left bank of the river out into the lake, and this had been filled with stone, but had not been planked over; hence it would not readily burn. It was a hard road to travel, but it seemed the safest place; and Mr. Arnold and his children worked their way far out upon this pier. With much difficulty, the party crossed from the Ogden slip, in a small row-boat, and entered the light-house, where they, with Judge Goodrich, Edward I. Tinkham, and others, were hospitably received." Andreas, *History of Chicago*, II, 748.





*The New England  
Congregationalist Church,  
Dearborn and White  
(Now Locust) Streets*

after the fire in a white petticoat with a morning dress looped over it & departed on her wedding trip with her "trousseau" tied up in a pillow case! Louise Goodwin & her devoted went off on theirs with passes furnished by the Relief Society! The sick had a terrible time—one lady with a baby a few days old got up from her bed & walked a mile; one with a baby a *few minutes* old was laid on a mattress & driven off in a wagon; hundreds of children were born on the prairies the next few days—but all those things you can imagine.

I fear I have written a very incoherent letter, for I seem to have lost my faculties since the fire. I hardly remember from hour to hour what I am doing, though the last few nights I have begun to sleep more & hope soon to feel better. I long to hear of you all. With much love for all,

*Yours most affectionately*

ANNA E. HIGGINSON.