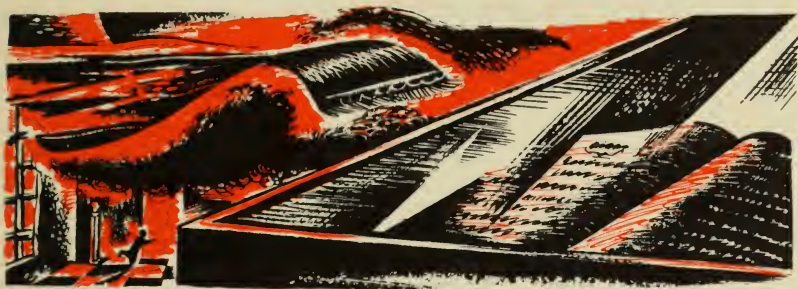


SAMUEL STONE, *assistant librarian of the Chicago Historical Society, describes the burning of the Society's building in a letter to William Barry, through whose efforts the Society was founded in 1856. Its building, first occupied in 1868, stood on the northwest corner of Dearborn and Ontario streets.*



*Chicago, March 26, 1872*

REVD. WM. BARRY, *Secretary of the Chicago Historical Society.*

DEAR SIR,

Herewith is my brief facts & escape from Chicago Historical Society building and my doings while there.

Between 1 and 2 o'clock on the morning of the 9th of Oct. 1871 I was awakened by severe ringing of my house bell. On jumping out of bed, I was told "the city was on fire." About 2 o'clock I made from my house No. 612 North Clark Street,<sup>1</sup> south about one & half miles—there found Clark Street bridge on fire and all eastward towards the lake enveloped in flame.

I then returned north to the Historical Society rooms. Mr. Wm. Corkran, the librarian in charge, was receiving trunks,

<sup>1</sup>Between Schiller Street and North Avenue.



*The Mablon D. Ogden Home,  
Facing Washington Square. This Building  
Escaped the Fire*

boxes and bundles through the basement cellar door.<sup>2</sup> About 3 o'clock sparks of fire were flying near the building. I thought it prudent to prevent any more goods liable to ignite to be deposited—particularly cotton bundles. I told Mr. Corkran the danger. I then immediately took charge of the basement door. Mr. Corkran left for outside, packages continued to come, pressing urgently to be admitted. Duty and danger warranted me stubbornly [to] refuse to open the door. Consequently much abuse toward me. As I could not close the door to lock it (some object at the bottom outside prevented) I was obliged to press against it. After a few minutes Mr. Corkran sang out to me from outside to allow the janitor to the hydrant (in the basement cellar) for two pails of water, saying "the sidewalk [is] on fire." He was admitted but I have no further recollection about him.

Few minutes after a Mrs. Stone in the family of Mr. E. W. Griffin opposite of the Society building, was the last person [to] come to the door with a loud voice through the roaring wind calling me by name and giving her name begging me to receive a small box. I received it saying something that I was in danger—few minutes previous two voices calling me to come out—I was in danger. Believing the building was in danger and as soon as I could leave, I canted a trunk against the door & made for the north end of the basement cellar. I mounted the upper shelf of newspapers, lying on my back with my feet closed the northwest basement (4 light) window. Here I observed in the rear, every part of the yard and the heavens full of flying sparks and some fire brands. I next hurried up one flight of stairs into the reception room, thence up another flight into the upper library room.

<sup>2</sup>The Historical Society building was considered to be the safest structure in the city as far as fire-resistant qualities were concerned.

At this moment a terrible blast of wind, fire and smoke filled the entire Ontario Street in front. The entire casement of the front window was in a blaze, hanging like feathers on every inch of the window. I immediately hurried down into the reception room to get the record book and Lincoln Proclamation.<sup>3</sup> Not finding the record book I attempted to break the frame containing the Proclamation to take from it the Proclamation and fold it under my coat, it being in a stout frame. Not a moment more to stop. Abandoned the frame. At this moment again the wind and fire filled the whole heavens frightfully, dashing fire brands against the reception room windows. A chinking I heard seemed from above, probably from the upper window or roofing broke in. Believing a minute more to try to save the Proclamation would be too late for my escape, I next made for the basement door, stamped fire out of two bundles and canted back the trunk to escape. The strong suffocation from smoking bundles outside of basement door prevented. I then tore open the third bundle (smoking), snatched from it a shawl, covered my head and sprang out with [as] much speed as possible, leaving the door little open. I could not shut it.

At a glance I could see the steps overhead, the sidewalk, front fence, Mr. Girard cottage and every building south in one mass of blaze & firebrands flying furiously. My only escape was to the rear of Mr. Girard cottage in a midst of dense smoke. Not a moment to feel for the gate. With a bound upon a box or something next to the fence I sprang over the low picket fence into Dearborn Street. At this moment a blaze, probably

<sup>3</sup>The original of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, January 1, 1863. The President had donated it to be sold for the benefit of Chicago's first Sanitary Fair, opened in October, 1863. Thomas B. Bryan purchased the document and presented it to the Soldiers' Home. The managers of this institution placed it in the Historical Society after the new building was completed in 1868.





*Ruins of the E. B. McCagg Home,  
North Clark Near Chicago Avenue,  
Showing the Undamaged  
Conservatories*

from Mr. Girard building, struck me with much force. I felt it to my skin. I dropt my burnt shawl and ran to the corner of Erie St., following me in the middle Dearborn St. a bellowing cow with scorched back. Again another terrible blast of wind forced the poor cow out of sight in dark smoke to the east. I purposely dropt down on my hands [to] prevent being blown down for such was the force. I next made to mount one of the high stone steps of the three brick buildings facing south on Erie Street between Dearborn and North Clark Street directly in rear of Chicago Historical Society building, to take the last look of the destruction of our fifteen (15) years of labor of valuable gatherings. The entire front, top & sides of the building was in one mass of flame and everything surrounding. It was painful to see it. The heat being too intense, I was obliged to leave to the west. There were no persons near me. All the houses were abandoned.

As I came to the corner of Dearborn and Erie Street from the Society building, a woman was running directly east into the fire. I understood a woman was found burnt near there. At this moment a great blast of wind and smoke, seemingly a blaze of about 200 to 300 feet in length, perhaps 150 feet in height, passed nearly over me little to the right making N.E. diagonally, pouring the entire volume over two entire blocks into the top of the spire of the Church of Holy Name, situated east side of State Street between Huron and Superior Sts. In an instant the top was in a blaze. There were moments I could see buildings appear to melt down from three to five minutes. Such sights I never saw before.

Had I known the speed and heat of the coming fire, I could have left my post at the basement door earlier and secured the records and Proclamation. The unprecedented calamity was beyond all of my experience. Another fact worth noticing.



*The Chicago  
Historical Society  
Building  
After the Fire*

# CHICAGO NOT YET ALL DESTROYED!

OFFICE OF "THE KIRBY,"  
No. 600 South Morgan Street,  
Chicago, Ill., October 14, 1871.

TO OUR AGENTS AND FRIENDS:

GENTLEMEN.—The story of terrible destruction by fire in this city, from last Saturday night to Monday night, cannot have failed to reach you. We dare attempt no description of it. No history will ever be written, no picture ever painted that will convey to those who did not witness it, more than a faint realization of its utter devastation.

We print this on our little press in our own office, as the most available means of informing you that WE ARE SAFE; that the fire was not in the vicinity of our warehouses, and our only losses are through other parties who are sufferers.

We are adding our "mite" to the bounteous charity of the whole world in aid of the suffering, and hope to promptly receive from all who are indebted to us—AND WHO ARE NOT SUFFERERS—that which is due.

Remittances, for the present, should be made in Currency by Express, Drafts on New York, or in Post Office Orders; as all Drafts on Chicago for a time will need to be returned, causing great delay, inconvenience and loss of the use of money.

Very respectfully,

**D. M. OSBORNE & CO.,**

By DANIEL RANSOM.



While I was on the high stone steps on Erie St. I saw the entire west side of the Society building in one great sheet of blaze burning apparently every brick. There was no woodwork on that side of the building. The fact of Mrs. Stone above mentioned calling me by name and giving her name in the hearing of persons near her gave reason of some to [tell] the Press that "Old Col. Stone and wife perished." In regard to others sheltered in the Chi. Hist. Socy fireproof building supposed perished. If there, they would have been seen by me, unless they were hidden in the Lecture room and in the wash room. It is fair to presume I was the last person [who] left the Chicago Historical building.

Mr. E. W. Griffin, owner of the buildings south side and opposite the Society building on Ontario St. remaining, so he told me, to the last in and near his houses, backing north by the force of heat on Dearborn St. and knowing I was in the Society building and but one way to escape—not seeing me, presumed I had perished.

*Letter to Rev. Wm. Barry, Secy.* DEAR SIR—Allow me to state some facts of the burning of the Chicago Historical Society building Oct. 9, 1871. As life is uncertain and believing I was the last person [who] left it, I have penned all facts from entering [to] leaving the building that came to my knowledge. I do not wish to come into controversy with others who have made statements, nor to have my letter appear sensational to call sympathy, but to be credited, if thought worthy, after reading the accompanying statement.

*Very truly yours,*

SAM. STONE

*Chicago, March 26, 1872.*