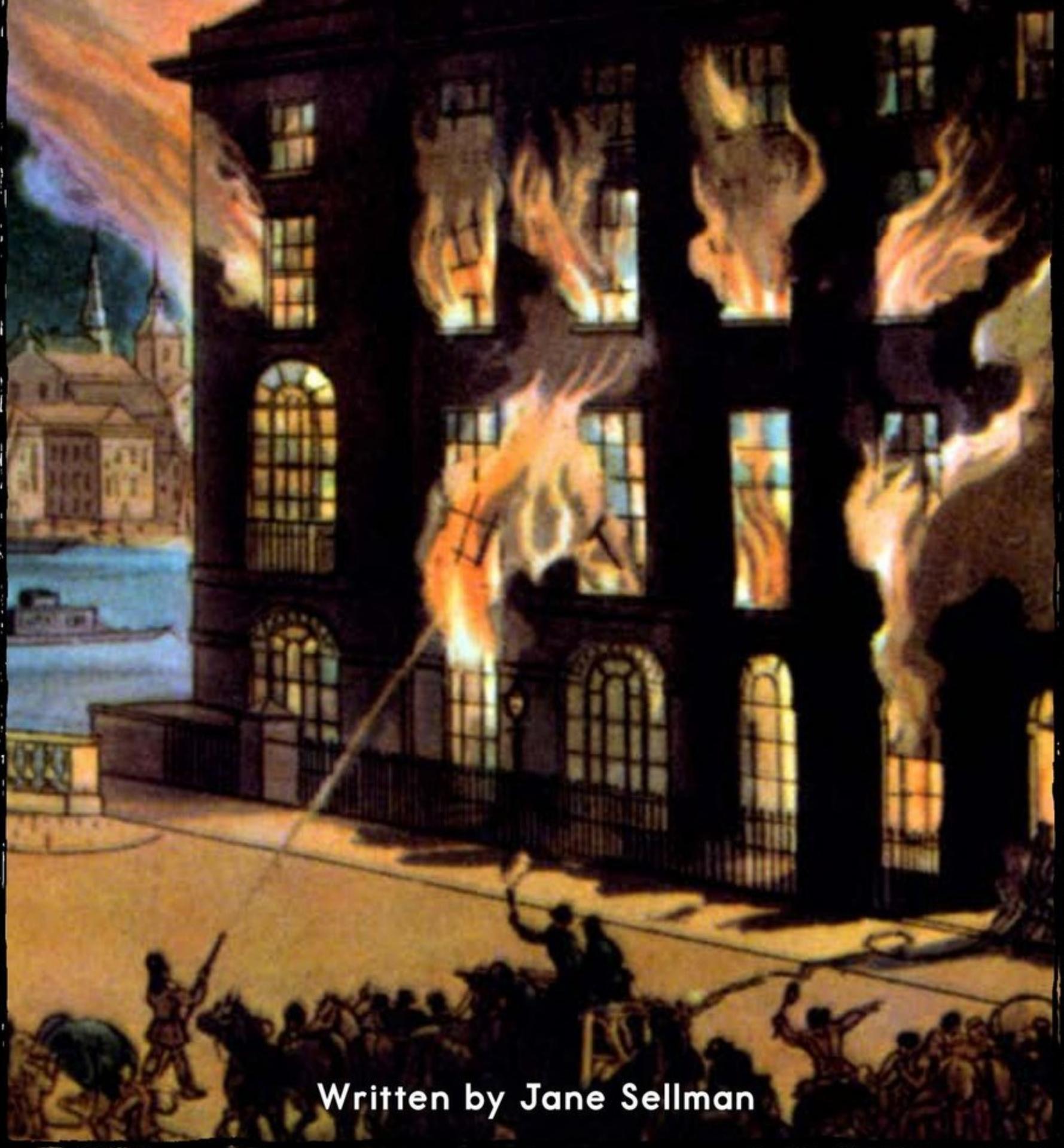


LEVELED Book • Z

Great City Fires



Written by Jane Sellman

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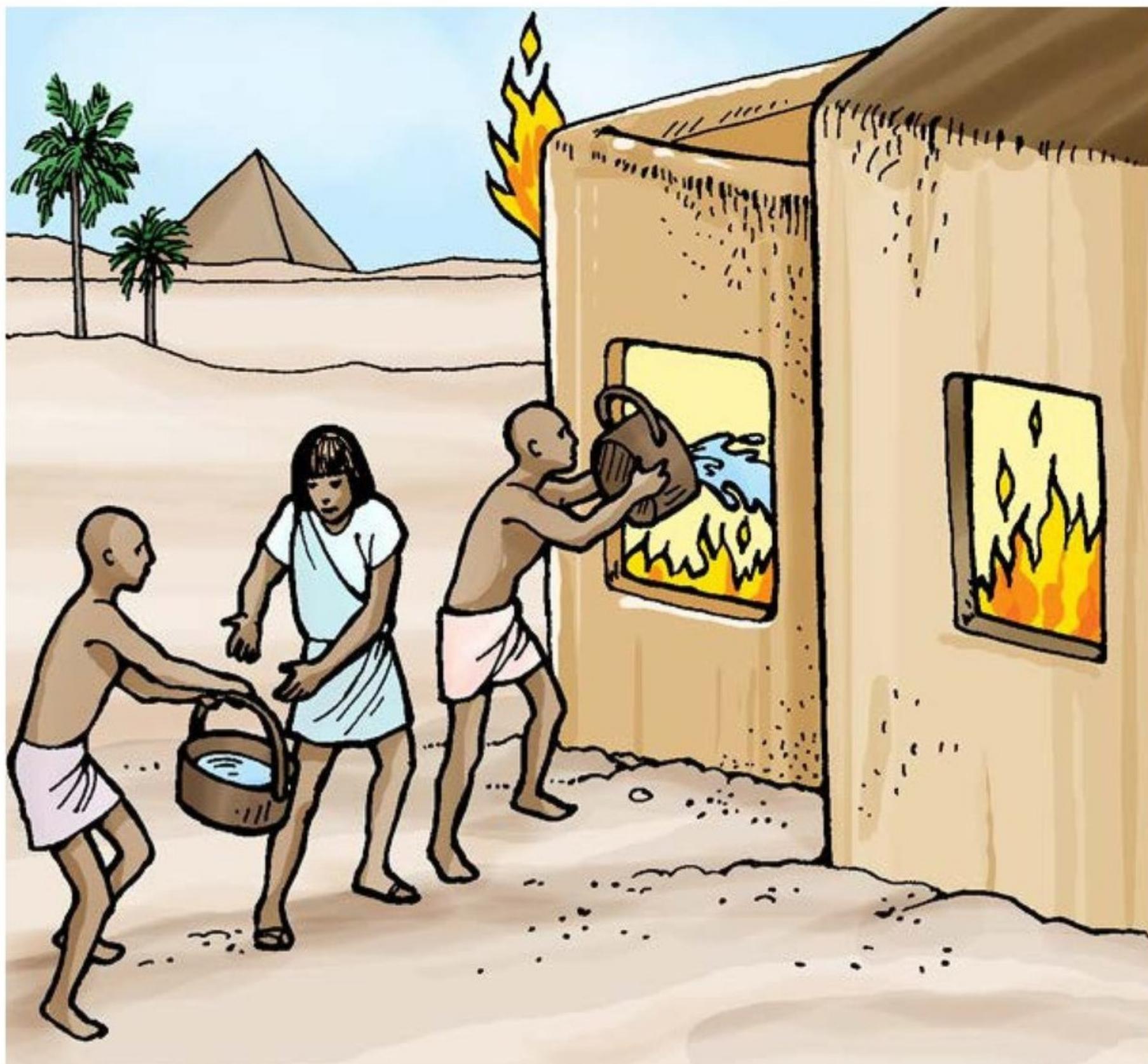
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Fire can be both useful and dangerous.

Introduction

Thousands of years ago, people discovered how to use fire to keep themselves warm and cook their food. But since that time, fire has occasionally escaped our control and ravaged our homes and cities. Arsonists—people who set fires on purpose—kill hundreds of people and cause millions of dollars in property damage each year. People have used fire as a weapon, from burning parts of Jerusalem during the Crusades to firebombing German cities during World War II. But most city fires, large or small, are caused by human accidents and unsafe conditions.



The Egyptians developed ways to fight fires, but only after a destructive fire occurred.

Unfortunately, misfortune is often the best teacher. Victims of city fires became aware of the need for fire safety, fire prevention, and firefighting only after the flames were out. After a great fire in ancient Egypt, the Egyptians invented a water pump and organized **bucket brigades** in which volunteers passed buckets of water down a line of people to the fire. Terrible fires in Rome, London, and Chicago caused great destruction, yet they resulted in new ways to prevent and fight fires.

The Fire of Rome

In AD 64, life in Rome had both the good and the not-so-good aspects of a big city. One could visit libraries, art galleries, and markets. Citizens could attend chariot races at the Circus Maximus, Rome's stadium, which could hold more people than most modern football stadiums. The rich had indoor plumbing and comfortable, spacious homes, but most of Rome's citizens, who numbered more than a million, lived in cramped, stuffy apartment buildings up to six stories tall. Everyone in these poorly made, flammable wooden buildings shared a first-floor bathroom and used open flames for cooking and for light.

During the summer of AD 64, the heat in Rome was horrible, everything was dry, and fires in the city were common. On July 19, a fire started in one of the shops near the Circus Maximus. Aided by warm breezes, it spread through the marketplace, parts of the stadium, and neighboring homes. The Roman firemen did their best with hand pumps and leather hoses, but the fire advanced too quickly, and panicked crowds and **unruly** mobs got in their way.

That summer, Emperor Nero had retreated to his coastal home because of the heat, but he



Roman citizens panic as their homes and temples burn.

returned to Rome to supervise the firefighting. Bucket brigades started, and people created **firebreaks**, or areas in the path of the fire that were cleared of anything that could burn. The fire stopped and started several times over nine days, but finally, a combination of firebreaks and plain good luck brought the fire to an end. Thousands had lost their homes and livelihoods, and no one knows for sure how many died.

Nero organized efforts to help the homeless by creating temporary shelters in his own gardens and in public buildings and parks. Extra supplies of food arrived from outside Rome, and Nero ordered merchants to lower the price of grain.

Despite all his efforts, many Romans believed that Nero had started the fire in order to rebuild the city in honor of himself. To avoid being blamed, he led people to believe that Christians had set the fire, and this was used as an excuse to **persecute**, or mistreat, the Christians.



Emperor Nero

The Romans did learn from the fire. They made sure a large supply of water would always be close by, constructed new buildings from stone instead of wood, and even filled in marshy areas with burned debris. A new city with wider streets and safer homes took the place of the old.

Do You Know?

Roman schools taught students to read and write Latin and Greek. One Latin word students learned is *flamma*, one of many Latin words for fire. Some English words that come from the word *flamma* include *flame* and *flammable*.

Great Fire of London

Sixteen hundred years later, people in other parts of the world hadn't made much progress in improving daily life or preventing fires. In London in 1666, people dumped garbage in the streets and considered bathing unimportant. Rats carrying bubonic plague infested most buildings, and their fleas spread the disease by biting people. Thousands had died from the plague in the years before the fire. Wooden buildings with **thatched roofs** had been placed so close together that the upper stories jutted out over the narrow streets, almost touching.

Still, living in London must have been exciting. A person might get a glimpse of the king, Charles II, riding through town, see a good play, or relax in a coffeehouse among local celebrities. For a few pennies, one could buy a fresh, warm roll at the shop of Thomas Farynor, the king's baker, in Pudding Lane.

On the evening of September 1, 1666, Thomas Farynor had finished work and put out the cook fires. Or so he thought! Around one in the morning, a spark from one of the ovens landed on a woodpile and set it ablaze. Thomas awoke to the cry of "Fire!" His family and servants tried

to leave the house, but clouds of smoke came up the stairs. They climbed out an attic window and jumped across to the roof next door.

Neighbors grabbed buckets from a nearby building and tried to put the fire out, but it was soon out of control. Many picked up what they could carry and took their families to safety. Yet the fire still could have been stopped, or at least slowed. A **fire hook**, a long pole, could have pulled building material out of the fire's path to make a firebreak. However, Mayor Thomas Bludworth didn't think the fire was serious enough for such drastic action, and so the fire continued to spread.

Do You Know?

Have you ever kept a diary? Samuel Pepys (*peeps*) lived in London and survived both the plague and the Great Fire. He is remembered as one of the world's greatest diary keepers. Because of his diaries, we know a lot about the 17th century in England. You can find his diary in the library, and parts of it are on the Internet. You might enjoy reading it and learning about what life was like in London hundreds of years ago.



Londoners rush to escape the fire.

The roar of the flames and wind must have terrified those fleeing the fire. The fire reached warehouses full of rope, paper, and other flammable products. A maid alerted Samuel Pepys, a government official, to the spreading fire, and the alarmed Pepys sped off to tell the king.

King Charles sent soldiers and **militiamen** to fight the fire, and he set up “fire posts” with food, water, and equipment. Trained militiamen gathered at these posts to help out.

Charles put the Duke of York in charge of the fire-fighting effort. The duke and his men created firebreaks by pulling down houses in the path of the fire and using gunpowder to blow up large buildings. Finally, the fire burned out and stopped.



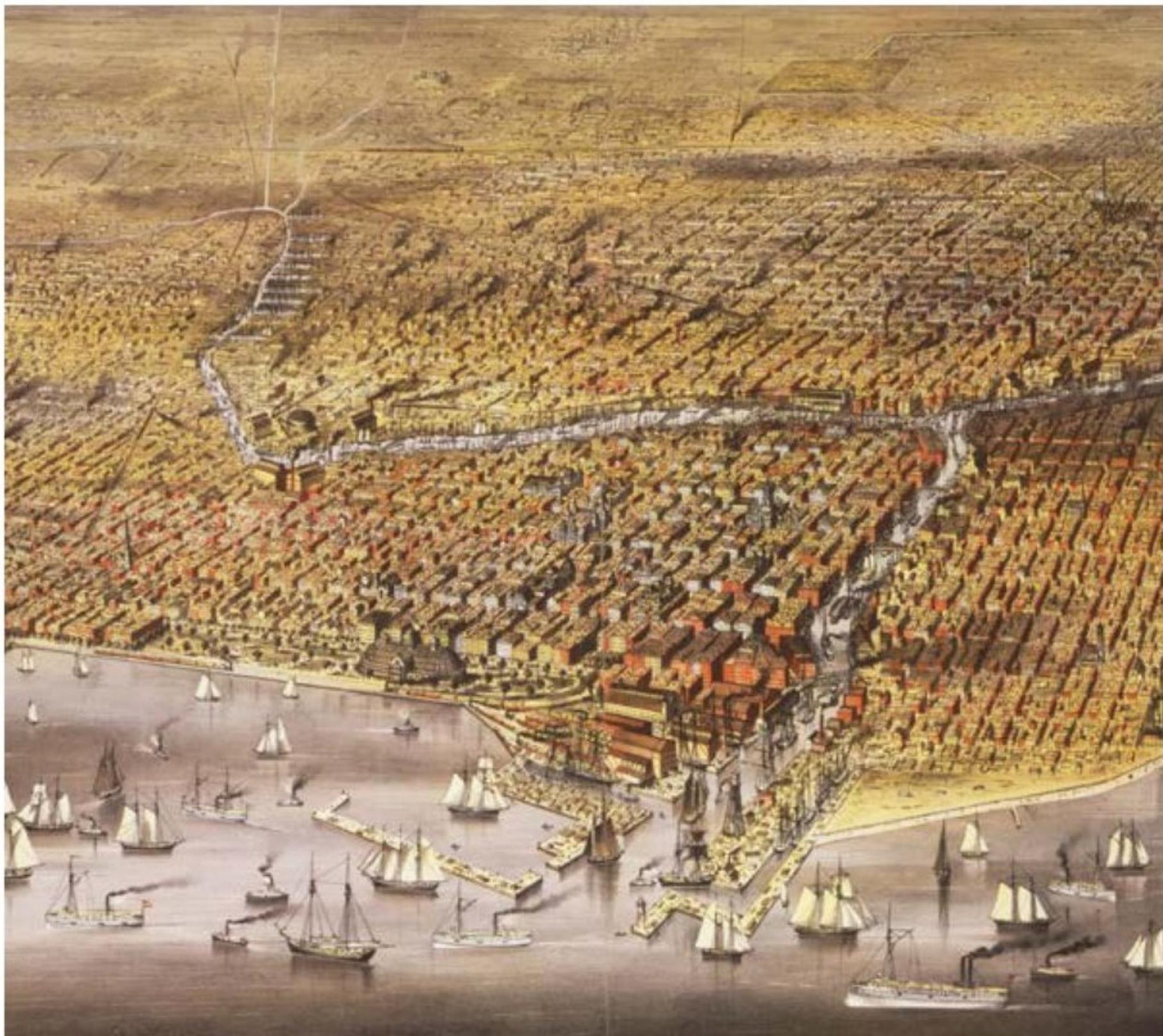
Many medieval buildings in London were lost.

Records state that only nine people died in the fire, including one of Thomas Farynor's maids, but the number is probably much higher. Many Londoners were left homeless and jobless, and 80 percent of the city had been destroyed—including 87 churches and more than 13,000 homes. Tent cities sprang up where **refugees** of the fire had gathered. Organized charity, such as the Red Cross, didn't yet exist, so people relied on family, neighbors, churches, and employers for help.

King Charles put architects Christopher Wren and John Evelyn in charge of rebuilding the city. These planners replaced wood with brick and built wider streets and more space between houses, but the rebuilding took years to complete. St. Paul's Cathedral was not finished until 1712, 46 years after the fire. New laws required businesses and property owners to keep the streets and walkways free of garbage. But the fire was a terrible price to pay to improve the living habits of 100,000 Londoners.



The Thames River, flowing through London, was one of the few safe places.



Before the fire, Chicago was an enormous, booming city.

Chicago Fire

Chicago in the late 1800s really bustled. Its **stockyards**, where livestock was slaughtered and processed into meat, supplied much of the nation with food. Travelers crossing the country often stopped for a visit, and the city boasted fine restaurants and hotels, entertainment, big stores, and museums. Families could visit one of the beaches along Lake Michigan or go to the stockyards to watch cattle coming in from the West.

Like Rome and London, Chicago also had its share of **slums**—neighborhoods with poorly built wooden houses close together. Housing inspection was **lax**, and warehouses, not bound by fire codes, stored all kinds of flammable materials. However, Chicago did have a professional, though very overworked, fire department.

The summer of 1871 had been one of the driest anyone could remember. Only about 3.8 centimeters (1.5 in) of rain fell between the Fourth of July and early October. Dead leaves dropped off dying trees, and firefighters became exhausted fighting the small fires that sprang up around the city.

On the evening of October 8, 1871, a spark ignited the hay in Catherine O’Leary’s barn on DeKoven Street. Mrs. O’Leary made a modest living selling milk, and it was later suspected that a cow started the fire by kicking over a lamp, though this was never proven.

The fire should have been put out quickly, but that night the firefighters went to the wrong address, and the fire rapidly traveled to other buildings. The winds that made Chicago famous as the “Windy City” helped spread the fire before

anyone could stop it. Even the Chicago River, covered with an oily film, caught fire. Then the **gasworks**, the plant that pumped gas for heating and light, went up in flames.

Travelers fled their hotels, and residents gathered their children. Many headed toward Lake Michigan in hope of escaping, and bridges became overcrowded with fleeing people. Hot cinders and sparks fell from the sky as the horrible noise of the fire mingled with the sound of church bells warning people in other parts of town. The smoke was so thick that people could not see a block in front of them.



Panicking people blocked many of Chicago's bridges.

Wind and fire combined to make a **firestorm**, or a super-heated wind that spreads flame wherever it blows. Chunks of burning debris were picked up and flung down upon buildings holding oil, fabric, and kerosene—everything that would make the fire worse. Brave people, professional firefighters as well as citizens, stayed to battle the fire and rescue the helpless. But the flames destroyed even the water-pumping station, blocking the efforts of the fire department.

The luxurious hotels and the humble houses all fell into the flames as the fire burned for three days. Buildings not already on fire were blown up to create firebreaks. Then on October 10, rain fell to help the firefighters extinguish the flames. The fire finally ended.

Though everyone was relieved, they soon realized their loss. About 300 people had died; others remained missing. People's homes, possessions, and workplaces were gone, dust and ash still filled the air, and areas of the city remained too hot to enter.

Federal troops, commanded by General Philip Sheridan, arrived to prevent **looting**. People sent supplies and volunteers to Chicago, and the fortunate survivors collected food and clothing for the homeless.

The Chicago Relief and Aid Society opened homeless shelters and later provided materials for the building of small temporary houses. Business owners set up tables or carts and got back to work, and while many left the city as soon as possible, most stayed to rebuild.

The rebuilding went rather slowly. People resisted making changes that would prevent another fire, but gradually they realized the need for stricter building and fire-prevention rules. They built safer housing, and officials improved the fire department. Again, people had learned a hard lesson.



A bird's-eye view shows the size of the Chicago fire.



Photos of the ruins of Chicago made front-page news across the country.

Do You Know?

On the very same night as the Chicago fire, an even more destructive fire raged through the town of Peshtigo, Wisconsin. That summer, Peshtigo and the surrounding towns suffered through the same drought as Chicago. Forests had been cleared from the land by farmers and railroad workers. The resulting piles of dry wood and leaves had simply been left on the ground.

On the night of October 8, an enormous firestorm engulfed the entire region. Townspeople felt the ground shaking as tornado-force winds drove a wall of fire toward the town. In less than one hour, the entire town had vanished, leaving 800 of its 1,700 citizens dead. An estimated 1,200 people died in the forest fire, which leapt across Green Bay and burned parts of Michigan as well. It is one of the deadliest natural disasters in U.S. history. Those who survived bore terrible physical and mental scars. But the Peshtigo fire has almost been forgotten because it happened to take place on the same night as the more famous, but less deadly, Chicago fire.



Today, even very small towns have well-equipped fire departments.

Conclusion

Today, we are lucky to live in a time when fire safety is given great importance. Every area of the country has strict fire codes, and professional and volunteer fire departments train in fire prevention, firefighting, and lifesaving techniques. Buildings have fire alarms and sprinkler systems, and firewalls are built between houses.

People learn from schools and the media what to do to prevent fires and how to plan for emergencies. Even with all this effort, terrible fires still occur. But because of modern fire prevention and firefighting, we hope to never see fires like the ones of Rome, London, and Chicago ever again.

Fire Safety Tips

Almost two million fires are reported in the United States every year. Fires can be deadly, so always follow these fire safety tips:

- Never play with matches, lighters, or flammable materials such as gasoline.
- Don't cook or use the stove unless you have permission and adult supervision.
- Don't put anything, including blankets or clothes, over lamps, radiators, or heaters. They could quickly catch fire.
- Make sure your family has at least one smoke detector on every floor of your home. It is especially important to have detectors near your bedrooms so they will be sure to wake you up in case of a fire. Test your smoke alarms every six months and replace the batteries at least once a year.
- Always keep a household fire extinguisher handy around any heat or flame in or near your home.
- Have a family fire escape plan. Go through your home and memorize at least two ways

to get out of each room. Your escape may be through a door, a first-floor window, or a window with a safe escape ladder. Plan an easy-to-find meeting place a safe distance from the building, and put someone in charge of counting your family members to make sure you're all safe. Assign another family member to go to a neighbor's house to call 911. Make sure to practice your fire escape plan with your family. Knowing what to do in case of a fire will save time during an emergency, and it may save your life.



In case there is a fire in your home, follow these rules to get you and your family out safely and quickly:

- Get out as quickly as you can and go to your designated meeting place. Do not stop to get your things, no matter how valuable they are. Objects can be replaced. You cannot!
- Try to alert other family members as you are leaving. Yell “Fire!” and bang on doors as you pass.
- Smoke contains poisonous gases, and it can be hot enough to scorch your lungs. Since smoke collects near the ceiling, stay low. Crouch, or crawl if you have to. You can also use a damp towel or cloth around your mouth as a mask.
- Never go back into a burning building for any reason.
- If your clothing catches on fire, immediately stop, drop, and roll. If someone else’s clothing is on fire, have him or her stop, drop, and roll right away. You can cover the person with a towel, blanket, rug, or cloth to help put the fire out.

To learn more about fire safety, check out this Internet link:

<http://www.usfa.fema.gov/kids>

Glossary

bucket brigades	lines of people who pass buckets from one to the other from a water source to a fire (p. 5)
firebreaks	areas that have been cleared of fuel and flammable material (p. 7)
fire hook	long, heavy hook used to pull down structures and create a firebreak (p. 10)
firestorm	a super-heated wind that carries fire over a large area (p. 17)
gasworks	factory that processes and pumps fuel (p. 16)
lax	relaxed; not strict (p. 15)
looting	widespread robbing (p. 17)
militiamen	a group of volunteers that performs police duties (p. 11)
persecute	to mistreat a specific group (p. 8)
refugees	people who flee troubles, but with no place to go (p. 12)
slums	poor, crowded areas of a city (p. 15)
stockyards	place where livestock is slaughtered and processed into meat (p. 14)
thatched roofs	roofs made of straw (p. 9)
unruly	hard to control; disobedient (p. 6)

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Front cover: London firefighters try to put out the inferno while they can.

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