

A Quick Romp through Chicago History by Eleanor Nicholson

Introduction

I volunteered to give those who will be at the Woodstock Reunion in Chicago in July 19-22 a tour of Chicago history. As a proud citizen of my beloved city, I wanted our visitors who, even if you have been in Chicago other times, might want to understand more about how this place evolved from a tiny frontier settlement situated on a sluggish river, infused with the smell of wild onion (possibly the source of our name), to one of the great cities of the world. Compared to the settling of both American coasts in the 17th century, Chicago's history is relatively brief but it is remarkable. I'm going to lead you on this Chicago Lite romp through the history of our city through the introduction of the Chicago flag, which you will see everywhere displayed, and to its iconography.

The Chicago Flag

The flag itself has had quite a history and, like Chicago history itself, is not unmarred by echoes of political pressures. In 1915, the Chicago Municipal Flag Commission chose Wallace Rice to set the design rules of a competition; there were over 1,000 submissions, including his. Surprisingly perhaps—or not--Wallace Rice's design won the competition. I don't know if there were concerns expressed about that fact but I do believe that it's a great flag and, by his design, full of meaning. (According to a national survey only a few years ago, it is the second best city flag in the United States. Perhaps Chicagoans skewed the vote; after all, our mantra is "Vote early and often") The City Council of Chicago approved the flag design on April 4, 1917, the same day the U. S. Senate voted to enter World War I.

The Chicago flag displays three strips of white above, below and between two of blue. Across the middle white strip there are four red six-pointed stars. Wallace Rice attached symbolic meaning to every color, to every strip, to every star and to every point of every star. I will be happy to explain all of his enormous attention to meanings but I suspect that it's more than you want to know right now.

But briefly, the two blue strips are for our location on one of the five Great Lakes, Lake Michigan, and on the north and south branches of the Chicago River, one of the shortest and most influential rivers in the world. The confluence of these bodies of water shaped and continues to shape the location and continuing growth of Chicago.

The four stars represent four defining events in our history. **At present**, their placement on the flag, in order from left to right is: the Fort Dearborn Massacre in 1812, the great Chicago fire of October 1871, the extraordinary Columbian Exposition of 1893, and the significant Century of Progress World's Fair of 1933-34.

However, there were originally only two stars, placed on the left side of the flag with the idea that other stars would be added as history evolved. The first two were the Fire and the Exposition of 1893. The Century of Progress star was added on the opening day of the Century of Progress International Exposition—October 11, 1933. The addition of the fourth star and the change of the order of the stars, the

Fort Dearborn Massacre --a more controversial choice—happened in 1939, more than a century after the event. Some critics felt that by 1939 there were other events more deserving, like reversing the Chicago River or Jane Addams founding of Hull House, or, (for some of us, finally winning the World Series after a 110 years drought) and some critics even believed that the white settlers at Fort Dearborn might have deserved their treatment at the hands of the Pottawatomi. It's a point, but we won't go there; colonialism is in the DNA of Western culture as we India wallahs know. And Chicago never lacks for spirited arguments among its critics.

Let's use what happened before and after each star to locate ourselves in Chicago History Lite.

At the Beginning

For the geologically inclined, it's important to know that the deep foundation of the city is its little piece of the Niagara formation, the final remains of the inland sea that once covered a large part of the upper Midwest and still shows its face here and there. On top of its limestone bedrock came a succession of glaciers that left a mess of layers of the clay whose impermeable existence prevented the draining of surface water and left early Chicagoans frequently plodding through seas of mud. The final glaciers –millions of years after the inland sea—advanced and retreated and advanced and retreated again and again, leaving moraines and digging out lakes and rivers, including the small short one issuing from one moraine that formed the Chicago River, and, of course, Lake Michigan itself. By the luck of nature and its irresistible forces, the meeting of a short river and an enormous lake created the destiny of Chicago.

The People

First there were the native Americans whose story is long and interesting and sad. This narrative overlaps with the arrival of white faces and, as we know and as it happened over and over, the story includes betrayal and conquest. A number of tribes of Indians were in the area when, in October of 1673, its first white visitors, Father Jacques Marquette and Louis Jolliet, launched their epic journey from St. Ignace, a Jesuit outpost on the far north Straits of Mackinac where Lakes Michigan and Huron join. Building on the French claim to the St. Lawrence River valley and their center in Montreal, Jolliet was chosen to lead an expedition to the Mississippi River to find a way west to China (sound familiar?) and Father Marquette was included as the missionary. They were a remarkable pair. Both were skilled in tribal languages and were somewhat knowledgeable about the territory they were to cover. While Jolliet was to explore the Mississippi River, Father Marquette was to convert the Indians, a task for which he was admirably suited as he was apparently loved by natives wherever he went.

They left St. Ignace, crossed what is now Wisconsin and reached the Mississippi which they canoed to where the mouth of the Arkansas River emptied into the Mississippi several hundred miles above New Orleans. There they turned

back, fearing conflict as they neared Spanish-held territory. They came back up the Illinois and found the portage to what is now the Chicago River, about which they had learned from the Miami Indians further south. They portaged from the head of the Des Plaines River to the head of the Chicago and traveled to the site of present day Chicago, canoed through the Lake of the Illinois (Lake Michigan), leaving Father Marquette in what is now Green Bay, Wisconsin, while Jolliet returned to Quebec to report on their journey. We will never know everything he found out because while navigating rapids in Canada on his way back, he lost his crew and all his notes. Can you imagine? After all that!

A year later, Marquette, although suffering from the dysentery he developed on his first trip, returned to the Chicago site where he wintered, then got as far south as Starved Rock in Illinois. Now too sick to go further, he returned to Chicago, traveled north along the eastern shore of Lake Michigan and finally died near Ludington, Michigan. The beautiful bronze vignettes in the Marquette building on Dearborn Street in Chicago's downtown depict the Marquette and Jolliet story.

Though his documents were lost, Jolliet made a report in Quebec that was destined to start men thinking and ultimately acting. He reported that a canal built across the portage would make it possible to join Quebec with New Orleans. The canal would be about half a league long (one and a half miles approximately) and would join the Chicago and the Des Plaines and create a route directly from the St. Lawrence to Lake Michigan and on to the Gulf of Mexico. A later explorer, Rene Robert Cavelier sieur de La Salle, who did the portage in 1682, found the proposition laughable but, in spite of La Salle's negative report, Jolliet's idea finally took hold and that canal was built—200 years later. After 20 years in the planning, it opened in 1848. the Illinois and Michigan Canal. Jolliet was proved to be a prophet because the canal guaranteed Chicago's place as a direct water link between the Atlantic Ocean, the Gulf of Mexico and the rest of the world.

Fort Dearborn: the first star on the flag

Fast forward to 1763: The treaty between England and France that ended the Seven Years War ceded our area to England, who then lost it at the end of the Revolutionary War or War for Independence. But the English wouldn't leave; they hung around and drummed up resistance to the Americans among the native Americans. The tribes, notably the Potawatamie, were benefiting from the trade with the very early Chicago settlers, such as Jean Baptiste Point du Sable who set up his trading post at the mouth of the Chicago River in the 1770s. Nevertheless, the Indians listened to the whispers of the British.

Du Sable, son of a wealthy Quaker family in Philadelphia and a black mother, is considered to be the first permanent settler of Chicago. By 1800 other settlers had come, foremost among them was John Kinzie who had a successful trading post and befriended the Indians who profited from his sale of their goods. But given the Indian unrest, the US government built the first Fort Dearborn on the south bank of the river in 1803, the most westerly of a chain of forts built through what is now the midwestern states.

Matters with the native tribes worsened and when the War of 1812 with England began, the soldiers and settlers were ordered to evacuate and travel to Fort Wayne in what is now Indiana. Unfortunately, the group had traveled only a mile and a half from the fort when they were ambushed by Indians. Of the ninety-five individuals who set out from the fort, thirty-nine men, two women and twelve children were killed and another twenty were wounded; the children had been put in a wagon for safety but a single Indian killed them all (and was subsequently outlawed by his tribe). The survivors were taken back to the fort and were distributed as captives to the various participating Indians. Some died in captivity but most were ransomed and returned to their families. (How would that look on your resume?) Following the distribution of captives, the Indians burned the fort as they left.

Later history has suggested that the terrible battle might have been the result of a broken promise. The Commander of the fort, Captain Nathan Heald, knew of the brewing problem and hoped to win Potawatamie help rather than suffer an attack. "He had promised to give the Indians the contents of the fort—food, calico and other provisions. But at the last minute he opted to destroy the fort's supply of alcohol and ammunition, concluding that whiskey would only inflame the Potawatomis and that any powder or shot given to them might eventually be used against the fort's occupants." (Geoffrey Johnson; *The True Story of the Deadly Encounter at Fort Dearborn*, Chicago Magazine, December 2009) A different perspective: The Indians could have used the shot and powder to hunt game for their hungry families. according to an American Indian Studies professor, John N. Low. And as Prohibition demonstrated, people-- regardless of color-- like their booze

The Indian unrest continued to deter incoming settlers so the federal government built the second Fort Dearborn in 1816, which stood until 1837 when danger seemed ended, mostly because Indians of all the tribes had been "removed" further west.

Between the First and Second Star

There was an incredible boom in the development of the city of Chicago between 1812 and 1871. With the native tribes moved west, population soared. When the city was incorporated in 1833, the population was 350. Seven years later, in 1840, Chicago's population was a little over 4000. Ten years later in 1850, it was 30,000 and 20 years after that, the population had reached 300,000, more than half of whom came from abroad. By 1890 and the Exposition of 1893, over one million people lived in the Chicago area, which had expanded due to annexation. By 1890 Chicago had annexed ten small communities it bordered. My own beloved Hyde Park was annexed in 1889. At the 100th anniversary of the annexation, our local Hyde Park Historical Society did a survey, asking if there were a chance to vote again on annexation, would you vote for it or against. The "NOs" flooded in.

What led to this dramatic population increase? Start with Location, Location, Location.

As I've described, Chicago is fortunate in its location, situated as it is where Lake Michigan, one of the five Great Lakes, and the Chicago River meet in the

heartland of the United States. As a result, Chicago became a transportation hub for the entire country. First it was railroads and shipping, then highways, then air travel. And where there is good transportation, there are businesses and manufacturing, the hallmarks of Chicago in those days. Boats brought in lumber from Michigan and Wisconsin; ore boats traveled from Duluth with the ore from the Mesabi Range in Minnesota to meet with the coal brought by train from Pennsylvania and Ohio and the limestone from Michigan to Gary, Indiana, just over the Indiana-Illinois state line. In Gary, the fires from the steel mills blazed night and day. Trains brought in grain and livestock from the Great Plains states and passengers and new citizens from the East coast (and ultimately from the West coast). In 1850 one train line entered the city; six years later there were ten.

The city grew wealthier, busier, more cultured and more crowded. The Potter Palmers, the Marshall Fields, the George Pullmans, the Swifts and the Armours, the Glessners and the Cyrus McCormicks built their magnificent homes near the heart of the city while the succession of immigrants found their national groups in distinctive areas of the city.

The Swedes and Norwegians stuck together on the north side of the city, with the German community north of that. The Irish settled in Bridgeport and the African-Americans from early on were south of the downtown. Then came the Polish immigrants and the other Middle European people and later the Mexicans and those from the Caribbean came to the west side. Unlike Chicago's wealthy, some of these thousands lived in modest homes but many of the newest and poorest lived in wooden tenements and wooden flimsy shacks that could be built quickly because of their "balloon" framework.

The Second Star: the Great Fire of 1871

The summer and fall of 1871 saw little rain so by the evening of October 8, 1871, the stage was set for disaster. There was a brisk wind from the southwest. On De Koven Street in an area just south and a little west of the business center of the city, a fire broke out in the barn belonging to Patrick O'Leary. (yes, they had a cow but there never was any proof that cow and lantern made contact. Just another dig at the Irish.) The O'Leary's neighborhood was made up of those small wooden balloon cottages so the fire spread with dizzying speed. Within minutes that neighborhood was gone and the fire spread rapidly in a northeasterly direction. It leaped over the South Branch of the river, blew up the gas works, and roared into the center of the city. One by one the great buildings—the Chamber of Commerce building, the Court House, the Field Leiter Store, the Palmer House, the Opera House, the Tribune building—the entire commercial district—fell. The flames reached the lake to the east and spread north, leaping over the Chicago River and picking off the great mansions on the North Side. It took three days for the fire to die down, leaving the ruined city in ashes.

Its path of destruction was four miles long and, on the average, two-thirds of a mile in breadth. It burned 65 acres per hour and ultimately consumed about 1,688 acres. A third of the population was homeless. By some miracle, the total of deaths—estimated to be around 300-- was remarkably low, considering the speed

and intensity of the fire. But Chicago, the “Queen of the West,” was on its knees. Only the “I Will” spirit could bring about a recovery.

There were positive outcomes—gifts of money, food, clothes, materials poured in from every corner of the United States and from around the world. The huge number of books donated formed the nucleus of the Chicago Public Library. The second great outcome was that the city was essentially a blank canvas. It was a mecca for the most creative and enterprising architects to be found anywhere and the succeeding years heralded the development of Chicago as the architectural showcase that it is today. Third, all of the docks, warehouses, counting houses and boats that had been moored along the dingy dreary bustling lakefront went up in flames, leaving—as with the city itself—the golden opportunity to turn away from commerce and, thanks to the vision of Daniel Burnham and Montgomery Ward and the other city fathers, to create the beautiful “forever open, free and clear” lakefront we cherish today.

The Second Great Boom Town

Rebuilding the city was rapid, which was especially remarkable since the City Council had decreed that there could be no wooden buildings constructed in the downtown area. That meant that those rapidly constructed wooden “balloon” buildings of earlier days were not permitted; materials could be only brick or stone. After a downturn in the 70’s the city boomed even more energetically than before. In addition to the skyscrapers, there were new forms of public transportation. People began to think about ways to celebrate the recovery.

The World’s Columbian Exposition: the Third Star

Word spread that great American cities could apply to be the site of a world exposition in 1892 celebrating the arrival of Christopher Columbus in the New World. Although the judges who came to evaluate Chicago’s potential to hold the Fair on the South Side of the city in a site along the lake that was essentially a swamp were surprised and somewhat dismayed, Chicago got the nod over the competing applicants-- New York; Washington, D.C.; and Saint Louis.

If you have read The Devil and the White City, you know that the Devil part is awful and gruesome but The White City part is an excellent way to learn about the painful, at times tragic, yet exhilarating work involved in draining the swamp, designing, landscaping and building a magnificent tapestry of buildings, fountains, sculptures, avenues, lagoons that constituted the World Columbian Exposition. A remarkable team of planners, architects, landscapers and sculptors brought the extraordinary project to completion. There were Daniel Burnham, Frederick Law Olmsted, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Daniel Chester French and Loreda Taft. Of this group, Saint-Gaudens exclaimed, “This is the greatest meeting of artists since the fifteenth century.”

Even with looking through the various photo books of the Fair, it is difficult to capture the excitement, novelty, expansiveness and beauty of the Exposition. The central buildings were all white and were intentionally temporary. (The structural

skeleton was covered with *staff*, which was a mixture of plaster of Paris and cement) One has to marvel at reflecting on the experience of thousands jamming the grounds on the evening of May 1, 1893, when the President of the United States, Grover Cleveland, pulled a switch and the entire Fair was illuminated with thousands of electric light bulbs. Not only was it a magnificent sight, but for many of the onlookers it was the first time they had seen electric lights! One visitor commented, “Those who come here will wonder how, in less than fifty years, that is, in less than a man’s lifetime, it has been possible to transform a swamp, producing only a sort of wild onion, into a powerful and flourishing city.” To which it must be added that not only did the entire transformation take less than fifty years, but only twenty-two years had elapsed between the glorious opening of that never-to-be-forgotten Exposition and the devastation of the heart of the city by the Great Fire of 1871.

Again, between the Stars—the Fourth

A mere forty years later, Chicago built the futuristic Century of Progress Exposition on the lakefront. Poor thing. It has suffered from its relative obscurity compared to the Columbian Exposition of 1893, which was located a mere six miles further south and still remained alive and dramatic in the public memory. However, not so fast! The great Fair of 1893 opened in the face of a struggling national economy but the worst was in the future; the significant depression bloomed as the Exposition closed. On the other hand, the Century of Progress of 1933 (if you’ve read this whole thing, you’ll remember that 1833 was the year Chicago got its charter) was planned, constructed and took place in the deepest depths of the Great Depression. It was a grim time. Banks had failed, employment in the city was down fifty percent, land value had dropped precipitously.

“Yet no statistics could convey the human impact of the Great Depression. How do you measure the hunger, anxiety and despair bred by months and years without regular work or family income? How do you measure the missed opportunity, shattered careers, and unfulfilled hopes? Chicago in the thirties was a place few people of the twenties could recognize, and a city hard to imagine even now.” (Chicago: Growth of a Metropolis: Mayer and Wade, 1969).

Memories of those of us born at this time might remember, even though very young at the time, the drabness, constraints and anxiety our family and their neighbors endured.

For that reason, the Century of Progress Exposition had more impact on the spirit of Chicago than even the Columbian Exposition; it was looking ahead, it was bright, colorful, innovative. While 1893 had looked back to the Beaux Arts, 1933 looked ahead to the modernists and to the future—architecture, transportation, material goods, ideas. Journalist Milton Mayer commented, in his enthusiastic review of the fair, “A green building here. A purple building there. A yellow building there. Filled full of people and light. The people who conceived this Fair and built it struck just the right note at a time when the rest of us did not know where to turn next.” (M & W, p. 361)

President Grover Cleveland had turned on the electric lights in 1893; the star Arcturus “turned on the lights” in 1933, using rays that had emanated from the star forty years before—the year of the Exposition. How’s that for a stunning marriage of science and symbol? In 1893 nations of the world contributed their artifacts, cultures, and peoples: in 1933 great corporations—Nash, Chrysler, General Motors (notice a connection?) contributed buildings as did Time and Fortune magazines. There was a Coca Cola building, one by Quaker Oats, another by Morton Salt, to name only a few. State and international buildings, as had been true in 1893, were also part of the exuberance of places to visit. There were dioramas, murals, exhibits. Ancient artifacts, some set in tableaux, contrasted with modern exhibits. There was a feast of great paintings, loaned for the event.

Westinghouse’s robot was on display as was Admiral Byrd’s three-masted sailing ship, “The City of New York.” A dirigible flew overhead, the revolving seven levels of the Nash Tower displayed the most recent car models, while, in contrast, a model of Fort Dearborn and a Belgian village attracted visitors. A sky train zipped between two tall towers. Beginning at 12th Street, the Fair stretched along the lakefront but many of the exhibits were on Northerly Island, which had been constructed on landfill among man-made lagoons and other small islands. (After the Fair closed, Northerly Island became Meigs Field, a handy airport for corporate planes arriving to do business in the city—Midway and O’Hare were way too far away, thought the big and powerful. After Mayor Richard M. Daley set bulldozers to tear up the landing strip as a rather discourteous message to the Governor of Illinois, the name of the island reverted to Northerly Island.)

It was a remarkable achievement and a distraction for depressed Depression Chicagoans for the time. Somehow it broke even and made a small profit for the investors. It took the urgency of World War II to light the fires of the Gary steel mills, set the trains and planes in motion, and get the economy back on its feet.

In Conclusion

Those are the four stars on the Chicago flag. There has been intermittent talk of a fifth; after all, 1933 was 95 years ago. Has nothing happened since? Well, yes—the problem is which of many significant events rates another star? Martin Luther King’s March through Chicago’s West Side? The construction of the Sears Tower, the tallest building in the world for a period of time? The World Series victory for the Chicago Cubs in 2016, after a drought of 110 years? The return of international shipping after the renovation and widening of the St. Lawrence Seaway? The student protests that ruined the 1968 Democratic convention for Mayor Richard M. Daley? The injustice of Haymarket and its rigged trials? It’s not that nothing has happened; everything has happened and doesn’t stop.

Nor does my Journey through Chicago history include our writers, our poets, our architects, our artists, or our sports heroes, our mobsters or our businessmen (I would like to say “businesspersons” but let’s be realistic—for the most part and most significantly, men built Chicago) and other dreamers who have built and supported our great museums, operas, symphonies, theatres and all the other cultural riches that exist in our fortunate midst.

If this in the end seems to be a love letter to the great city where I was born, returned to, met my husband, reared our children, and where we set deep roots, that's exactly what it is.

Eleanor Nicholson

PS. There is an embarrassment of riches of books about Chicago and about the events memorialized with a star. I will have some for you to glance through at the reunion. Let me know if you want suggestions for good reads before you come.

Eleanor Nicholson