# “Barriers Burned Away?”: Structuring fire vulnerability prior to and following the 1874 Chicago Fire

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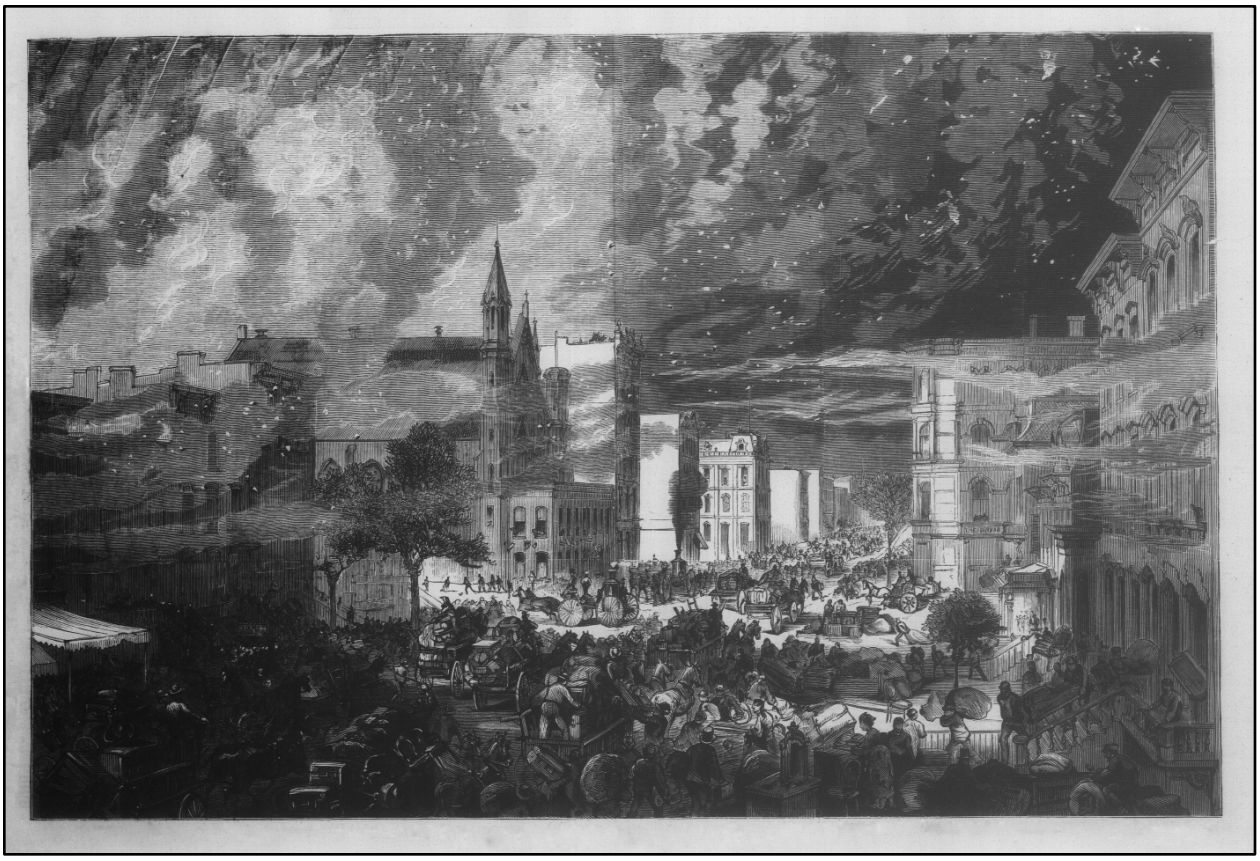

"Chicago, IL. – Conflagration on Tuesday, July 14th – Scene on Wabash Avenue, Near Harrison Street, A few moments previous the burning of the temporary post office –Government Employees Removing the Mails."

**Introduction:**

Booth entered the pulpit absent the Hymn and Book of Discipline that so often accompanied him on his sermons. It had been five days since the Reverend, and most of Quinn Chapel's members lost both home and hearth to fire. A single glance at the makeshift pews now lining Union Hall made its impact clear. The showing was small and its members solemn; the desperation of the hour was palpable. Reverend Booth knew these feelings well and spoke from experience. "Like many of you," he shared, "I lived in the burned district."[1]

It was the city's second "Great Fire," in under four years. While contemporaries were quick to draw comparisons between the two – "it has come to complete, in part, the work left

[1]Elisha Weaver, "Rev. G. C. Booth," *The Christian Recorder*, August, 20, 1874.

undone in 1871" – its large scale made clear that it too was exceptional in its own right.[2] Indeed, by its conclusion, the 1874 conflagration leveled 812 buildings, spanned forty-seven acres, and accumulated $1,067,260 in property damage at the time of its burning.[3] But while Booth and his neighbors mourned their losses, it was soon-forgotten among the public and Chicago's scholars, now representing only a footnote in the city's history.[4]

By contrast, the first Great Fire remains firmly embedded within public memory. This is no coincidence. The 1871 conflagration unsettled fears about a society absent social division, garnering international attention for its perceived ability to "burn away" the "barriers" between residents.[5] Local governments, global elites, and private organizations sent funds en masse for the relief of widespread suffering, donations the city ultimately appropriated to ensure that upper-class, white-Anglo Americans retained their privileged social, political, and economic status.[6] Such early attention has lived on in scholarship and popular media alike. Indeed, historians have since gone to great lengths to dispel the Great Fire's mythical origins and equalizing effects, effectively unmasking the purported natural disaster and rebuilding process as a profoundly political project.[7]

But scholarship has not afforded the same focus on the origins, impact, and ultimate fallout of the 1874 "forgotten fire." This, too, is revealing of the comparably minuscule attention provided to its victims at the time of its burning. The conflagration began and remained

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[2]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 15, 1874.

[3]Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871-1874* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 29; Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society of Disbursement of Contributions For the Sufferers by the Chicago Fire* (Chicago: Riverside Press, 1874), 24-113.

[4]"Know Your Negro History," *Chicago Daily Defender*, February 26, 1964; Jonathan J. Keyes, "The Forgotten Fire," *Chicago History* (Fall 1997): 59**.**

[5]Carl S. Smith, *Urban disorder and the shape of belief* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[6]Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 49.

[7]See, for instance, the latest book chronicling the first Chicago Fire, Scott Berg, *The Burning of the World: The Great Chicago Fire and the War for a City's Soul* (New York City: Pantheon, 2023).

concentrated in the Near South Side, home to roughly sixty percent of the city's African Americans. Chicago's politicians had systematically excluded the district from infrastructural improvement, placing its Black occupants at heightened risk of fire and rendering their lives disposable.[8] But in rebuilding efforts, the press made these structural causes invisible and instead characterized Black Chicagoans, like Booth, as "dangerous," to residential safety and capital accumulation.

The rhetorical and material consequences of these political decisions have since remained naturalized in the city's history. But by paying close attention to the "forgotten fire" of 1874, this thesis unmasks the racist policies and logics that shaped Black residents' disaster vulnerability leading up to and following the conflagration. It further demonstrates how African Americans, those most impacted by the blaze, challenged the narratives and orders that blamed neighborhood occupants, rather than public and private patterns of investment for its spread. Such debates belonged to a broader, contentious political terrain following the Civil War, circulating amongst landowners and displaced occupants, traversing paper and capital flows to the East Coast and regional news outlets. Through attention to newspaper articles, municipal policy, citizen's accounts, and church histories, the paper argues that fire was a crucial site where Chicagoans negotiated questions about security, citizenship, and freedom.

Historiography

Scholars have long documented how newly enfranchised African Americans "made freedom real" following the Civil War.[9] Much of this literature has previously concentrated on the South and the various ways that white supremacist paramilitaries and politicians denied

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[8]F Jackson, *Volunteer Views on the Danger from Fire in Chicago, with Suggestions for Its Prevention* (Chicago: Bulletin Print Co., 1874).

[9]Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 13.

Black Americans the ability to exercise the rights recently enshrined in the 14th and 15th amendments. Throughout the nation, African Americans continued to fight for political participation, representation, and equal access to wealth- and institution-building opportunities.[10] Scholarship has since critically examined freedom in the North, documenting the ways white-Anglo elites limited newly freed persons residential, economic, and political mobility through policy, "scientifically"-backed racist ideology, heightened criminalization, and municipal neglect.[11]

Less well known, however, is how citizens waged this Reconstruction-era struggle in Chicago. As a midwestern city, a growing hub for East Coast investors, and a previous stop on the Underground Railroad, Chicago sits at the conceptual and geographic intersection of questions regarding what citizenship meant for Americans following the 14th Amendment. Contributing to a rich literature, this thesis focuses attention on a history still operating at Chicago's margins, providing scholars with a more comprehensive understanding of the struggle over belonging and freedom in the Reconstruction-era. It argues that racial politics featured prominently within post-disaster rebuilding and positions Black Chicagoans as active agents within a battle for equal rights.

This thesis thus necessarily engages with the work of previous historians Christopher Robert Reed and Margaret Garb, who both evidence how expanding federal citizenship

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[10]Tara Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press); Chad Alan Goldberg, *Citizens and Paupers*: *Relief, Rights, and Race, from the Freedmen's Bureau to Workfare* (Chicago: the University of Chicago Press, 2007), 95; Susan M. Ryan, "The Racial Politics of Self-Reliance," In *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 78; Eric Foner, *Reconstruction beyond 150,* ed. Brent J. Morris and Orville Vernon Burton (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2023); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910*, ed. Eric Foner (Manhattan: Penguin Random House).

[11]Joel E. Black, *Structuring Poverty in the Windy City: Autonomy, Virtue, and Isolation in Post-Fire Chicago* (Lawrence: University of Kansas, 2019); Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An archaeology of environmental racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2005); Khalil Gibran Muhammad, "The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America," in *Racism in America: A Reader*, ed. Annette Gordon-Reed (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020), 56-69; Foner, *Reconstruction beyond 150*.

following the Civil War transformed local governance and emboldened an emerging Black political tradition in the city.[12] I am also indebted to the work of Slyvia Hood Washington, Joel Black, and Cynthia Blair for their analysis of race and urban planning during and shortly after the Reconstruction-era Chicago.[13]

Finally, this endeavor draws upon critical disaster studies, from scholars who have long argued that climatic events are neither random nor natural. Such work demonstrates how racist policy and logic structure "every phase and aspect" of an environmental disaster, rendering particular lands and lives as disposable.[14] This thesis extends present analyses to their historical antecedents, identifying the narratives and political choices that shaped disaster risk, vulnerability, and resiliency for Black Chicagoans. The following analysis therefore speaks with and extends generations of scholarship, foregrounding the inherently political origins, impact, and aftermath of the "forgotten fire" of 1874 to de-naturalize natural disaster. It instead presents urban conflagration as an inherently political site where Chicagoans worked out meanings of citizenship and freedom in the post-Civil War context.

Methodology:

"Power" as Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes, "is constitutive of [history]."[15] Historians do not merely "reveal" past events, but also interpret, recast, and introduce silence to stories in

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[12]Christopher Reed, "Freedom and Fire during the Reconstruction Era, 1866-1879," in *Black Chicago's First Century: 1833-1900* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2005); Margaret Garb, *Freedom's Ballot: African American Political Struggles in Chicago from Abolition to the Great Migration* (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2014).

[13]Cynthia Blair, *I've Got To Make My Livin': Black women's sex work in turn-of-the-century Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2010); Black, *Structuring Poverty in the Windy City*; Washington, *Packing Them In.*.

[14]Neil Smith, "There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster," *Social Science Research Council,* June 11, 2006, https://items.ssrc.org/understanding-katrina/theres-no-such-thing-as-a-natural-disaster/; Laura Pulido, "Flint, Environmental Racism, and Racial Capitalism," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 27, no. 3 (2016): 1-16; Richard Keller, *Fatal Isolation: The Devastating Paris Heat Wave of 2003* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

[15]Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), 22.

ways reflective of history itself. I therefore seek, like Trouillet and many others, to declare my subjectivities and make transparent the many perspectives that shape my coming analysis.

I am a white cisgender woman writing about the histories of Chicagoans, paying particular attention to formulations of race and citizenship amidst the Reconstruction-era. I discuss how disaster impacted Black Chicagoans, a group operating at the social, economic, and political margins of the 1874 Northwest. My interest in understanding the impact of disaster on minoritized communities originates from previous work evaluating a Chicago-based guaranteed basic income pilot. Eligible participants often resided in the same neighborhood and confronted similar environmental challenges. Through this work, it became clear that neighborhood disinvestment, structured resident's exposure to and resiliency from climate disaster. I entered this project searching for the histories that inform the present, yearning for alternative configurations of security and freedom following fire by past Chicago residents.

However, the voices of those most impacted by the disaster, Black Chicagoans, are notably absent from the archives, a reality that made clear the ethical and moral dilemmas historians confront. Indigenous studies scholar Dr. Kim Tallbear, helped me think carefully about what stories my sources can tell.[16] Grappling with archival silences, I aimed, like Dr. Tallbear, to "gaze up" at those under-observed by researchers: journalists, upper-class elites, and fire underwriters. In my analysis, I problematize the existing written record dominated by Anglo-American male reformers who speak from a positivist tradition of "objective" social and scientific knowledge. Borrowing from Cynthia Blair, I then consult Black Chicagoans' sources. Given the paucity of relief claims brought by African American residents, my investigation

[16]Kim Tallbear, *Native American DNA: Tribal Belonging and the False Promise of Genetic Science* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

focuses on two other, but related arenas of post-disaster rebuilding: Black religious institutions' mutual aid and civic organization.

I am further indebted to the virtual and in-person assistance provided by archivists at the Wisconsin Historical Society, Newberry Library, Vivian Harsh Library, Abakanowicz Archives, and National Archives. This investigation would not have been possible without their advice locating sources, suggesting research leads, and sending virtual copies of archival material. Finally, I am immensely grateful to my thesis advisor Professor Powers and colloquium leader Professor Ciancia, who both provided me with guidance about how to write as a historian, someone interested in telling stories and making historical arguments rather than "proving" theories.

Research Question and Thesis:

The following analysis makes clear that the 1874 Chicago Fire surfaced competing concerns about security within a newly redefined civic context. Like efforts waged in courts, on the battlefield, or in community buildings, fire relief became a unique site of struggle over meaning and identity. Here, residents offered differing interpretations of security, freedom, and citizenship, each staking claim over how, and who gets to define what it means to live "safe" from fire.

Among the white-Anglo elite, "fire safety" became a code for racial segregation. The city's white, upper-class residents spearheaded rebuilding efforts to assure anxious East-Coast financiers of Chicago's commercial potential. Responding to outside investors' demands, local business interests framed fire as a "purifying" force that transformed previously mixed-use land into a commercial zone. But the land was not yet unoccupied. Instead, capitalists' vision of an expanded downtown necessitated the expulsion of its previous residents, Black Chicagoans.

Soon, the white press leveraged rhetoric of fire "safety" to blame Black citizens, rather than city policies and practices, as responsible for the late fire.

Black church leaders challenged associations between Blackness and residential decay, instead leveraging the freedoms gained following the Civil War to re-establish community within a more "free" place away from residentially marginal locations. In newspaper pages and pulpit stands, Reverends asserted their right to public space, community investment, and residential mobility. These claims largely operated outside of legal apparatuses and financial municipal assistance, demonstrating that fire, and disaster more broadly, became contests over civic belonging. Ultimately, though, business interests profited from the white press' distorted narratives – post-fire rebuilding entrenched and exacerbated existing social, political, and economic inequity.

In the following analysis, I demonstrate that various actors leveraged post-fire assistance to recast racialized categories of blame and deservedness. I first situate my discussion within the nineteenth century United States, detailing the debates regarding freedom following the Civil War (Section One). I then sketch out Chicago residents' construction of the Near South Side as a "precarious geography," at heightened risk of fire (Section Two). In Section Three, I describe efforts by businessmen, Chicago residents, and the white press to assign blame to Black occupants and civic institutions following the disaster. I conclude with a discussion of Black Church leaders' alternative visions of post-disaster rebuilding (Section Four) and the long-term impact of the 1874 fire (Conclusion).

**Section one: An interracial democracy? America in the age of Reconstruction**

In November of 1856, Chicago activist John Jones attended the Illinois Convention of Colored Citizens. Over three days, he and other freedmen challenged the states' stringent Black Codes and declared the same rights as all "citizens of the commonwealth."[17] Meanwhile, white Americans at the federal, state, and local levels actively refuted Black men's claims to citizenship and political representation. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, southern slaveholders, East-Coast businessmen, and Northern manufacturers alike were actively invested in slavery. And while African Americans advocacy succeeded during Reconstruction, an era that saw the repeal of racist social, economic, and political institutions, Black disenfranchisement persisted through alternative mechanisms. Amidst this hostile environment, prominent Black activists continued to resist their communities' marginalization by authorities and citizens alike. Tensions regarding race, citizenship, and freedom were therefore top of mind for Chicago residents leading into 1871, the year of the first Great Fire. And rebuilding itself became a hotly contested process revealing of these politics.

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The Chicago Fires of 1871 and '74 occurred shortly after the Civil War (1861-65), their flames fanning tensions already laid bare within rapidly occurring socio-political and economic change. The city, like the country to which it belonged, was amidst a period of flux. Following the Civil War, Black Americans' persistent demands for racial equality took legal shape. In the years following 1865, the federal government extended the abolitionist sentiments of

[17] H. Ford Douglass, H. Douglass King, R. J. Robinson, W. L. Barnes, John Jones, C. C. Richardson, and G. White, "Declaration of Sentiment and Plan of Action," *Proceedings of the State Convention of Colored Citizens of the State of Illinois, held in the city of Alton, Nov. 13th, 14th and 15th, 1856:* 7, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=hvd.32044086332608&seq=23

enfranchised African Americans throughout the nation. Congress passed a series of "Reconstruction Acts," overriding presidential vetoes to expand citizenship to Black men. By 1870, the national legislature enshrined (1) abolition,[18] (2) national, birthright citizenship, and (3) suffrage for Black men within the American Constitution. In law, all citizens - regardless of racial or ethnic identity - now held the same civil rights as whites.[19]

Left to the hands of local enforcement, though, these legal protections did not guarantee equality. Indeed, scholars have long documented the challenges white supremacists posed to the country's "experiment in interracial democracy."[20] Across the United States, violence, Black Codes, Poll Taxes, and a slew of additional economic, political, and social restrictions assailed Black equality and limited the freedoms of the newly enfranchised.[21]

Contests over civic belonging were not isolated to the South. Among white Northerners, concerns about the rising unrest from the working-class, financial toll of the Civil War, and onset of the 1873 Depression replaced questions about equal rights. And by the mid-1870s, the Republican party, once united by "free labor, and legal and political equality," fractured.[22] The upper- and middle- class capitalists increasingly advocated for limited government interference in economic and social issues. The state, they argued, was inherently "wasteful" and "corrupt," not to be relied upon to guarantee or defend civil and political equality.[23]

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[18]It should be noted, however, that the thirteenth amendment did not completely outlaw slavery. It was, and remains, a legal form of punishment for a crime.

[19]Foner, 308.

[20]As Eric Foner characterizes throughout *Reconstruction beyond 150*.

[21]Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1880–1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance: White women and the politics of white supremacy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Noralee Frankel, *Gender, Race, and Reform in the Progressive Era* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1991); Natalia Molina, *Fit to be citizens?: Public Health and Race in LA, 1879-1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*.

[22]Foner, 416.

[23]Ibid., 390.

Liberal reformers applied this free labor ideology broadly. The Reconstruction Acts, they argued, provided previously enslaved persons sufficient access to American freedom. Now, they claimed, "it was up to the freedmen to make their own way in the world."[24] But ambivalence toward racial equality soon transformed into outright racial animus in the Republican party. James S. Pike - former antislavery journalist, Radical Republican, and Northeast native - embodied the party's shifting tune in his 1873 book *The Prostrate State*. In an analysis of the South Carolina General Assembly, Pike characterized the state as being "engulfed by "political corruption and government extravagance."[25] Its cause, Pike argued, was the "barbarism" of Black political leaders. Soon thereafter, newspapers across the political divide echoed Pike's claims. Previously Republican journals, like Scribner's, Harper's, and The Atlantic Monthly, critiqued southern Black leadership and urged for the end of Reconstruction. Only a decade after the Emancipation Proclamation, national politics returned to racial apathy, focused instead on the maintenance of economic and social power for white-Anglo Americans. Municipal governments and hostile white landowners instantiated this animus in Northern and Midwestern industrializing cities. Racist policy and intimidation segregated Black residents in racial enclaves, schools, and federal programs.[26]

But Reconstruction did offer some Black Americans increased opportunity to assert newfound social, economic, and political rights. For the first time, though constrained and incomplete, freedmen could ascend the electoral ranks, seek expanded job opportunities, and, occasionally, acquire land.[27] In the South, scholars have detailed the various social, cultural, and

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[24]Ibid., 360.
[25]Ibid., 407.
[26]Hahn, 482.
[27]Foner, ix; 210.

economic means previously enslaved persons sought freedom from racial oppression.[28] Northern Black activists, in speeches, declarations, and movements to the ballot box, demanded the Supreme Court and Congress to enforce full civil and political rights.[29] But such debates about freedom and citizenship also occurred beyond the political realm; Chicagoans' irreconcilable positions regarding Black equality surfaced within understandings of and conversations about fire vulnerability.

**Section two. Structuring fire vulnerability in the City of Neighborhoods**

Carried home by gusts of frigid wind, a recent Chicago homeowner again expressed gratitude for having purchased one of the new brick constructions on the city's South Side. Only five months had passed since the 1874 conflagration, but the resulting fire ordinance had already criminalized the use of wood when rebuilding. Glancing down, the homeowner returned their attention to the small, worn booklet their neighbor passed along to them early that evening. In it, long-term Chicago resident F. Jackson forewarned his readers. The city, he argued, was in "peril," and its occupants "not sufficiently" aware of the threat looming. Of particular concern, Jackson diagnosed, was infrastructures' uneven distribution throughout the city. Beyond "the present pumping works," the North Side also boasted increased water pressure, a greater number of fire hydrants, and larger water pipes compared to its neighboring districts.[30] The homeowner worried, had they moved to a neighborhood perpetually vulnerable to fire?

What Jackson does not make explicit, and a Chicago homeowner likely did not takeaway, was that infrastructural distribution was far from random. Rather, the municipality's investment

[28]Hahn, 476.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Jackson, 34.

on the North Side reflected whose safety those in political power prioritized: The district was home to Chicago's white-Anglo upper and middle class. However, throughout the late 19th century, homeowners refused African American occupants' entry into predominantly white districts. Disaster vulnerability, then, was a manufactured outcome consequent of racist policy and neglect.

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Upon the advent of America's railroads in the late 1840s, Chicago became a hub for "grain, meat, and lumber" now able to connect disparate urban centers across the nation. The city, once known as the "Urbs in Horto" (City in a Garden) soon transformed into a land of lumber yards, steel mills, and wooden dwellings constructed by hopeful laborers seeking industrial jobs.[31] In ten short years, Chicago's population increased by 175 percent, emerging as the fifth-largest city in the United States by 1870.[32]

While never constituting more than two percent of its occupants, African Americans joined European immigrants in their pursuit of opportunity and freedom in Chicago.[33] From 1860 to 1870, the Black population expanded by over 280 percent, from under a thousand to 3,691.[34] Despite shifts in policy and demography, Black Chicagoans continued to occupy a precarious position within the city. Largely ignored by an increasingly ambivalent Republican government, migrating Black southerners entered the communities forged during the first few

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[31]Homer Hoyt, *One Hundred Years of Land Values in Chicago: The Relationship of the Growth of Chicago to the Rise in its Land Values, 1830-1933* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1933), 288.

[32]Vivian M. Palmer, "The Pre Fire Period 1859 - October 1871," *Study of the Development of Chicago's Northside* (Chicago: the United Charities of Chicago, 1932), 13.

[33]Robert-Reed, "The Early African American Settlement of Chicago," 213.

[34]Robert-Reed, "Freedom and Fire," 172.

decades of the 19th century.[35] In 1870, sixty percent of African American residents lived within a dense enclave between the Chicago River, eighteenth-street, and Lake Michigan, near their work in the business district.[36] While this emerging "Black Belt" provided safety for those navigating supposed freedom, white-Anglo elites actively encouraged and coerced this racial segregation through restrictive leasing practices.[37]

Bethel Church, an all-Black congregation, confronted this reality when attempting to purchase property within a residential neighborhood largely occupied by the white-Anglo elite. Richard Moore, Bethel's historian, documented Reverend Fredrick Myers' efforts to secure a new edifice in 1865, the congregation having since outgrown the previous "carpenter shop church."[38] In negotiations with Fernando Jones, a Chicago businessman, it became clear to Moore that the prospect of Black homeownership "caused a great upheaval among the white aristocracy of that residence district."[39] Eventually, the issue became "so hot and serious" amongst the neighborhood's white residents that Jones "was forced" to renege on the sale."[40] Bethel's board ultimately purchased a plot from Martha Blanks, "a colored lady" and member of another all-Black congregation within the emerging "Black Belt" on the Near South Side.[41] Historians have since concluded that residential discrimination, like that of Bethel Church, did not occur in isolation. Rather, white homeowners systematically denied Black residents'

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[35]Robert-Reed, "The Early African American Settlement of Chicago," 236.

[36]Keyes, "The Forgotten Fire": 59; Washington, 137; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census and Population Housing, 1871* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1870), 1.

[37]Richard E. Moore, *The History of Bethel A.M.E. Church, Chicago, U.S.A.* (Chicago: Fraternal Press, 1915).

[38]Moore, 20.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.

[41]Ibid.

homeownership for decades, seeking to confine African Americans in the "hardscrabble dwellings," of the first, second, and third wards.[42]

Residential segregation reinforced Black residents' marginalization from social levers of power. In the early years of Reconstruction, white occupants professed having little knowledge about the Black Belt. Commenting on the district's racial homogeneity, one resident erroneously concluded that it was African Americans who "huddle themselves together and live socially apart from the rest of mankind."[43] From this logic, their being "unknown and little cared for" by the city was a consequence Black residents' choice.[44] Businessman Mr. W.D. Kerfoot agreed, signaling out "colored people especially" in his admission that "I never kn[e]w what a nest of creatures there were penned up in that section of the city."[45] For white residents like Kerfoot and *Chicago Times* journalists, residential segregation reflected and reified the municipality and homeowners' neglect and hostility toward Black Chicagoans. In Chicago's early years of industrialization, however, the wooden homes adorning the Near South Side resembled those around the city - fire threatened residents of all races, classes, and creeds.

The "Great Fire": October 9 and 10th, 1871

The night of October ninth, a small barn erupted in flames on the city's West side. Born in the quickly built and densely settled wooden district, the fire soon engulfed its surrounding neighborhoods. By its end, the 1871 Great Conflagration displaced 90,000 residents and inflicted $2.5 million in infrastructural damage.[46] Journalists were quick to profess its "leveling" qualities,

[42]Robert-Reed, "Freedom and Fire," 179.

[43]"Fire in Chicago [not Chicago Fire of 1871]," *Chicago Times,* July 16-20, 1874, Oversize Folder: 123, Chicago City-Wide Collection, Special Collections Unit, Harold Washington Library Center.

[44]Ibid.

[45]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 18, 1874.

[46]Chicago Relief and Aid Society, 8-12

arguing that its widespread impact could undermine social divisions once separating the rich from the poor.[47]

The city's residents met these interpretations with ambivalence. While some leveraged the late fire to amass newfound wealth,[48] social elites worked to maintain the existing social hierarchy. Indeed, leading Chicago Fire historian Karen Sawislak has recorded businessmen and politicians' explicit aim to re-inscribe white Anglo-American men's municipal control over urban planning. The city appointed the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, a private organization composed of Republican men, to lead post-fire relief and provide temporary assistance to "deserving" recipients. While multisectoral, the society focused their efforts on providing small families building materials for wooden cottages. Meanwhile, the organization funneled previously impoverished claimants into recently erected barracks, justified by their knowledge of "nothing better."[49] The organization, attune to the social conditions of its applicants, therefore used relief to stratify the city by class.[50]

Politicians, too, addressed concerns about safety that emerged following the conflagration. The mayor enacted a series of fire limits that outlawed the erection of wood homes within "designated boundaries" surrounding the commercial downtown, hoping to protect financial interests from future disaster.[51] The business district soon expanded into the previously residential area, doubling in size and occupied almost exclusively by brick and stone businesses, banks, and insurance buildings.[52] Working class residents unable to afford brick left the district

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[47]Ibid., 24-113.

[48]See Daniel Immerwahr, "All That is Solid Bursts into Flame: Capitalism and Fire in the Nineteenth-Century United States," *Past & Present*, no. XX (2024), for more information about how some Chicago residents used fire to challenge existing social hierarchies.

[49]Chicago Relief and Aid Society, 183.

[50]Keyes, 56.

[51]Ibid., 58.

[52]Ibid., 56; Hoyt, 104.

en-masse; small wooden cottages, purchased at a discount following the fire, and industrial buildings soon flanked the business district's borders.[53] Upper-class homeowners also fled the center city for the more "fashionable avenues of the south," no longer wanting to live in a rapidly industrial downtown or the rebuilt shanty district.[54] Following the 1871 fire, then, Chicago had emerged as the "city of neighborhoods," grouped not only by race, but now class and land-use.[55]

Place-Based Vulnerability: Rebuilding a fire-proof city?

Already isolated from the main social body, the Near South Side and its Black residents escaped the fire relatively unaffected by its flames.[56] But just as rebuilding efforts restructured Chicago's neighborhoods, so too did it restructure fire vulnerability for the city's increasingly minoritized members. Prior to the 1871 Fire, Chicago's landscape housed many of what environmental historian Richard Keller would characterize as "precarious geographies" – overcrowded wooden homes constructed quickly upon industrial workers' emigration. However, the city's reorganization following the Great Conflagration concentrated residential "precarity" in neighborhoods occupied by racial, ethnic, and socio-economic minorities, who were then at increased risk of fire exposure.

The municipally-subsidized wooden structures erected just outside of the city center overtook the similarly located Black Belt.[57] But for reasons unknown, most of Black residents' new neighbors hailed from the Vice District; forty-nine burned out brothels departed from the southwestern portion of the commercial downtown to the block**s** between Clark and State

[53]Ibid.
[54]Keyes, 58; Hoyt, 102, 312.
[55]Keyes, 58.
[56]Robert-Reed, "Freedom and Fire," 187.
[57]Keyes, 62.

Street.[58] Prior to Progressive reform of the 1890s, municipal leaders across the United States believed that sex work, substance-use, and gambling were "inevitable evils," that necessitated regulation, rather than prohibition.[59] Authorities segregated criminalized activity into particular districts, creating quasi-official boundaries that operated free from police intervention.[60] Urban Vice Districts subsequently became the city's center for perceived "illicit" activities, often led and policed by organized crime syndicates.[61] However, in 1857, Chicago Mayor "Long John" Wentworth broke decades of convention and criminalized these activities with brute force.[62] Wentworth, alongside the fire department and police force, tore down the wooden buildings occupying "the Sands," the city's then-Vice district.[63] While ultimately motivated by the land's development value, not moral chastity, Wentworth's action set a dangerous precedent in Chicago: Municipal officials could displace minoritized residents at will.[64]

In response to this threat, Chicago's "mobsters" intentionally relocated to neighborhoods the city would not force their removal. Throughout the early twentieth-century, they settled in regions led and neglected by easily-bribed politicians, where Chicago police force also actively encouraged their expulsion: predominantly Black locales with residents absent a political, economic, or social voice to challenge their movement.[65] While historians tracked these shifts nearly fifty years following the 1874 fire, Wentworth's forced displacement of Sands' residents perhaps informed the Vice District's early re-locations throughout the mid-19th century: To

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[58]Ibid.

[59]Ibid.

[60]Ibid.; Hoyt, 103.

[61]Simon Balto, *Occupied Territory: Policing Black Chicago from Red Summer to Black Power* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 38.

[62]James L. Merriner, *Grafters and Goo Goos: Corruption and Reform in Chicago* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 25.

[63]Merriner, 25-6.

[64]Ibid., 26.

[65]Merriner, 26; Balto, 38-9.

avoid potential criminalization, brothel-, gambling house-, and pub- owners entered neighborhoods that city authorities afforded little care or attention to.[66] Following the 1871 fire, then, residents now declared Chicago's Near South Side, home to most of the city's Black residents, as "Dead man's Alley," the new Vice district.[67]

By 1871, the white-Anglo elite in power already identified sex workers, gamblers, saloon owners, and Black Chicagoans as social outcasts, a comparison apparent in the neighborhood's physical neglect by municipal authorities. Compared to upper-class districts near the lake and business center, the merged district sat closest to open sewers, slaughter-houses, tanneries, and distilleries along the Chicago River,[68] furthest from transportation to the business center, and absent paved streets, sidewalks, or street lights.[69] Indeed, unlike the wealthier residencies on Wabash Avenue and State Street, Third and Fourth Avenue also had comparatively smaller pipes and less water, fire hydrants, and pumping works.[70] In the years before 1874, onlookers also cautioned the city about the "coal offices, sheds, and lumber-yards" that dominated the region's topography. Left unexamined, they argued that industrial yards posed an equal fire risk to Chicago's newly built "palaces" as the "inflammable abodes" that they lie beside.[71]

While wooded homes reflected the working class backgrounds of their residents, the wards' absence of sewers, water pumps, and fire hydrants hinted at something more insidious. The city made residentially immobile, criminalized, and otherwise marginalized citizens

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[66]Balto, 38-9.
[67]Keyes, 62.
[68]Hoyt, 91.
[69]Ibid.
[70]Jackson, 12.
[71]"The Fire: Views of Insurance Men Concerning the Department," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 17, 1874.

invisible, and thus living within "precarious geographies" disproportionately vulnerable to fire. And a flame igniting here, as compared to the city's wealthier regions, was more likely to run amok without proper water pressure, piping, or pumps capable of halting its path. Disaster, then, awaited only the right environmental conditions to ignite.

The Forgotten Fire: July 14th, 1874

On July 14, 1874, strong southwest winds carried a dry heat into the city, a day characteristic of an unseasonably warm summer. Meanwhile, Chicago's three most populous Black congregations, Quinn Chapel, Olivet Baptist, and Bethel Church, organized a Union Sunday School picnic outing for its members.[72] By mid-afternoon, over a thousand churchgoers gathered at the Colehour Yards in a southern suburb.[73] But as it neared dark, an oiled cloth in a small rag shop caught aflame.[74] Fed from the fuel of a neighboring oil factory, the fire took flight north from its birth in the city's Near South Side.[75]

Chief of the Fire Department, Matthais Benner, arrived on the scene shortly after receiving notice, already engaged in extinguishing a flame three miles away. Benner, noting its large scale, quickly abandoned hope of stopping its spread. Instead, with the help of the city's entire department, Benner and his team flanked the fire on its sides, hoping to smother, and ultimately, minimize its potential damage.[76]

Despite their best efforts, the department was no match for the "jumping of the flames," across buildings, "whole squares distant." Indeed, journalists recorded the firemen's difficulties controlling the fire; even as it calmed into steam and smoke, it would burst again "with fully

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[72]Elisha Weaver, "Fated Chicago," *The Christian Recorder,* July 30, 1874.

[73]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874; Weaver, "Fated Chicago."

[74]Newspaper accounts are varied regarding the exact cause of the 1874 fire. Journalists identified an oil rag, factory, and ragshop as its culprit.

[75]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.

[76]Ibid.

renewed vigor" only moments later.[77] Benner soon gave up hope that they might salvage the wooden district, changing from a strategy of containment to defense, safeguarding the newly remade downtown.

As the firemen shifted course, the Near South Side now stood in ruins. Standing atop a building, one journalist recalled the scene, "grand and awful beyond description," from his birds-eye view. A "dense smoke" blanketed the city, accompanied by a wind so strong that it could "almost carry people off their feet." As the "main torrent" continued north, it left the neighborhood leveled and still "alive with fire."[78]

But without proper equipment or water, the blaze continued unabated into the business district, its pace slowing as it engulfed brick buildings. It was not until 11:00pm -seven hours after its initial spark - that the firemen gained an "upper hand" over the flame, due only to a "fortuitous shift of the wind" that pushed the fire east, toward the lake and away from the business district. It took another few hours until the water subdued the flames.[79] By its end, the conflagration consumed 812 buildings, covered forty-seven acres (~eighteen blocks), and caused an estimated $1,067,260 in property damage.[80]

**Section three. (De)Naturalizing constructed vulnerability**

On the Sunday following the fire, *Chicago Tribune* readers would open their newspapers to debates of the city's leading businessmen. Its headline, "Real Estate: Effects, Immediate and Remote," made clear how the white press and city elites conceptualized disaster and valued

[77] Ibid.
[78] Ibid.
[79] Ibid.
[80] Ibid.

Black life.[81] Rather than discuss the fire's human impact for those now displaced, the journalist instead characterized the fire as a blessing for hopeful business investors. It was also no coincidence that the columnist described the disaster as a "purifying" force.[82] Neither was their reference to manifest destiny, a direct evocation of the nation's violent westward expansion.[83] The white press, representing the dispossession and seizure of Black occupants' homes as an act of "purification," closer to their "manifest destiny," framed white-Anglo businessmen as a "civilizing force" that could transform the Near South Side into an investor's treasure trove. It was an explicit (re)categorization of *who* belonged to and could "improve" the civic body: white, male upper-class landowners and financiers. Elsewhere, the white press adopted similar white supremacist language to blame African American occupants and civic institutions as causing the late fire. In the aftermath of the disaster, then, fire "safety" became a code for whiteness and a champion for racial segregation.

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Fire Protection: "Safe" for Business

As the ashes cooled over the Near South Side, East Coast investors expressed increasing unease about the damage incurred so soon after the first fire. Judge Write, a "conservative man" who "represents a large amount of eastern and European capital" warned Chicagoans of investors' waning confidence in the city. Without assurance that "their investments are safe," Write threatened, "who will feel like going into business?"[84] The National Board of Fire Underwriters agreed with Write's conclusions. The men met in New York City the night of July

[81] "Real Estate: Effects, Immediate, and Remote, of Tuesday's Fire," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 19, 1874.
[82] Ibid.
[83] Ibid.
[84] "Fire in Chicago [not Chicago Fire of 1871]," July 16-20, 1874.

15th, only a day after the fire, to discuss how they might secure their investment within an increasingly disaster vulnerable city.[85] Their consensus: threaten the Common Council and demand a series of municipal "improvements" intended to ensure the "safety" of their funds.[86] If Chicago did not adopt their reforms by October 1st, they warned, outside insurance companies would withdraw from the city.[87]

Chicagoans were well aware of financiers' waning confidence. *Chicago Tribune* readers would merely have to glance at the paper's headlines, where columnists derided the city, arguing that they had disappointed "the world" with their continued tolerance for wooden "fire-traps."[88] Local businessmen similarly swarmed the pages, afraid about inflated insurance rates and "abolished" firm branches.[89] Indeed, by re-signifying abolition from anti-slavery to corporate protection, midwestern businessmen further aligned themselves with their northern investors, who expressed similar apathy to issues of racial equality.

To be sure, Chicago's East-Coast financiers had only recently disinvested from the south's "Cotton Kingdom," where they once profited directly from Black laborers' enslavement.[90] After cotton's global decline and textile industry's retreat, investors looked West to extract wealth from stockyards, railroads, and real estate.[91] But while their landscape changed, financiers' bottom-line did not: men, like those on the New York-based National Board of Fire

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[85]"The Fire: Opinions of the Insurance Men,"*Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 22, 1874.

[86]Ibid.

[87]Citizens' Association of Chicago, *Address to the National Board of Fire Underwriters* (Chicago: Hazlitt & Reed, 1874), 5.

[88]"The Chicago Fire Limits - A New Fire Ordinance Proposed," *The Chronicle: A Weekly Insurance Journal,* December 13, 1877, 372.

[89]Ibid.

[90]Noam Maggor, *Brahmin Capitalism : Frontiers of Wealth and Populism in America's First Gilded Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 21.

[91]Ibid.

Underwriters, sought return on investment regardless of its human impact. And as a new addition to their portfolio, Chicago was not faring well.

Indeed, fire "safety" itself was not an innocuous phrase and the Board's slew of demands exposed their concern for profit. Three of the orders, calling for an expanded fire ordinance, new building code, and improved water works, reflected a desire for the increased protection of their investments.[92] But others, pressuring the city to punish incendiarism and reorganize the fire department, pointed at a more sinister desire.[93] That is, underwriters defined "safety" not simply as extending fire "protection," but also assigning blame and weeding out people they deemed "bad" for investment.

Chicago's politicians and concerned residents responded with haste to formulate fire "protective" policies suited to the Underwriter's first set of demands. Before 1875, the city already adopted an extended fire ordinance, increased water works, and a new building code.[94] In the months required to finalize these regulations, Chicago's elite took more immediate measures to temper East-Coast investors' concerns about the city's present precarity. The Board of Public Works, for instance, contended that residents were already far safer absent the hardscrabble dwellings of the Near South Side. In arguments to the Common Council, they characterized the ashen neighborhood as "inferior," with wooden buildings located an uncomfortably close distance to the recently re-constructed business district.[95] But East-Coast investors' ears would prop at the opinions of optimistic businessmen. Fire, industrialist Captain Prineville argued, was

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[92]Citizens' Association of Chicago, 9-12.

[93]Ibid.

[94]Redmond Prindiville, J. K Thompson, and Louis Wahl, *Fourteenth Annual Report of the Board of Public Works* (Chicago: J.S. Thompson & Co., Book and Job Printers, 1875), 4.

[95]Ibid., 3.

a "blessing in disguise" for the entrepreneurially minded property-owner.[96] He insisted that the previous wooden constructions were not only a fire hazard, but also "valueless," and "unproductive."[97] In the coming months, "small retail business" may emerge from the landscape once dominated by "poor" older buildings.[98]

The city was quick to sweeten Prineville's deal for landowners and interested East-Coast investors. Municipal leaders immediately extended fire-proof infrastructure, like that requested by the National Fire Underwriters, into the now burned-out neighborhood.[99] Insurance companies, too, would settle owners' losses if they agreed to "rebuild at once."[100] Now incentivized and fire "safe" according to the Underwriter's first set of demands, construction commenced with haste. A month after the fire, a West-coast visitor noted that the business district is "being rebuilt very fast" and counted "thirty-five" new brick constructions.[101] The vision of a new downtown excluded its former African Americans residents; Black homeownership in the region ceased and its occupants relocated en masse.[102]

Chicago's elite therefore acquiesced to and openly embraced Underwriter's demands for increased fire protection. While ultimately extending to the entire city, it was no coincidence that this work began with the expansion of the business district into the Near South Side. It made clear that the city's leading concern following the fire was to retain East-Coast investment and increase profit margins. But the businessmen's conceptualization of fire "safety" took on

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[96]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.

[97]Ibid.

[98]Ibid.

[99]Prindiville, Thompson, and Wahl, 3.

[100]Ibid., 3-4.; "Real Estate," July 19, 1874.

[101]"The Fleming Girls," *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, August 15, 1874; A.W. Wayman, "Notes by the Way," *The Christian Recorder*, November 26, 1874.

[102]Monroe Nathn Work, "Negro Real Estate Holders" (Master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1903), 13.

particularly racialized valances.[103] Corporate interests evoked colonial rhetoric when extracting already occupied land for purported commercial development. Businessmen, they argued, belonged to the American body politic, actors actively engaged with the violent spread of "civilization," and "progress" to the west. By characterizing the districts' former abodes as "poor" or "valueless," Chicago elites denied Black residents' entry into this vision, insinuating their presence as antithetical, or even dangerous, to America's "Manifest Destiny."

Relocating Blame: The construction of difference

Amidst the downtown's expansion, the white press turned to the Underwriter's second set of demands, locating who was at fault for the late fire. Their targets: Black residents once occupying the Near South Side.[104] Leading this strategy was the city's respected news source, the *Chicago Daily Tribune.* The newspaper, once credited for supporting Lincoln's political ascendancy and having staunch abolitionist sympathies, shifted its ideological allegiances under the leadership of Horace White. White belonged to the Republican faction that expressed increasing frustration at continued attention to race and emancipation after the Civil War. By 1872, White co-founded the Liberal Republican Party, united by a faith in free-trade and a belief that Reconstruction - namely racial equity - had already been attained.[105] White's *Chicago Tribune* readily aligned itself with the city's elite businessmen, levying blame at Black residents for causing the July fire.

The outlet was quick to document the disaster, releasing a five-page spread just hours after its conclusion.[106] In these early reports, writers echoed the same claims by business

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[103]Ibid.

[104]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.

[105]Harris L. Dante,"The Chicago Tribune's "Lost" Years, 1865-1874," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society (1908-1984)* 58, no. 2 (Summer, 1965): 140, 163.

[106]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.

interests, detailing the "eyesore" that was the Near South Side in great depth.[107] It was a relief, columnists posited, that fire burned away the "low-roofed, dirty structures" and sidewalks blanketed in "inflammable filth of a dozen years."[108]

While some attributed these conditions to municipal neglect, White's hostility toward issues of race and racial equality emerged within the conversations he published about blame in the *Tribune*. One journalist claimed that it was "hundreds of colored people," who had once "occupied the weather-beaten, moldy old rookeries," that now lined relief offices.[109] Another characterized the region as "terrible" with residents, "Bohemians, Scandinavians, Irish, German, and Ethiopians…of the very lowest and poorest classes of society."[110] But it was Black occupants that the white press signaled out as "helpless," having "portrayed the wildest excitement" and "losing control of themselves" as the fire coursed through the city's South Side.[111] From these broad generalizations, a nineteenth-century reader might deduce that Black Chicagoans lacked an intelligence necessary to care for property. One Chicagoan argued as much, claiming that "many of the colored race were least able to bear the blow," not because of fire insurers systematic under-evaluation of Black residents claims,[112] but because they are "too poor to insure, too ignorant to understand the advantage of insurance, or too imprudent to care whether they are insured or not."[113]

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[107]"The Chicago Fire: A Total Loss of Four Millions" *New York Times,* July 16, 1874.

[108]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874; "The Fire: Opinions of the Insurance Men," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 22, 1874.

[109]"Fire in Chicago [not Chicago Fire of 1871]," July 16-20, 1874.

[110]"The Fire: Views of Insurance Men Concerning the Department," July 17, 1874.

[111]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.

[112]As Khalil Gibran Muhammad identified in "The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, Crime, and the Making of Modern Urban America," 68, insurers limited Black residents coverage because of purportedly higher rates of arson among African Americans (representing 46% of men and 61% of women).

[113]"Help the Sufferers," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 16, 1874; Muhammad, 68.

Indeed, the conflation of a physical environment and its resident's morality or civic deservedness would be no far leap within the late 19th century. Here, similar to other rapidly expanding cities, residents became increasingly concerned about the physical and social "ills" consequence of urbanization.[114] In an 1874-5 report, the Board of Health of the City of Chicago confirmed such fears, concerned that "overcrowded, filthy, and ill-arranged apartments," like those on the Near South Side, bred a "sense of shame…and children become exposed to bad examples."[115] While the Board ultimately concluded that residents were not condemned to depravity, and could acquire "moral benefits" if they relocated to more "healthful surroundings," newspapers held a more formidable opinion.[116]

Unlike the city, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* framed Black Chicagoans as a "degraded" people who then "degraded" their neighborhoods. Columnists insisted that Black Chicagoans' "innate" biological, emotional, or intellectual differences befitted their built environment. The paper could then deduce that it was the morally dubious, impoverished, or unintelligent residents that had no "responsibility or care as to the preservation of property," and therefore caused the late fire.[117] This narrative reversal held important implications in the post-emancipation context. It was not simply wooden buildings, as the Board of Public Health might propose, but now Black residents who were dangerous and imposed risk to business and residential well-being. The white press, then, fulfilled the Underwriter's demands for punished incendiarism whilst protecting elite Chicago's financial interests. White landowners and entrepreneurs could point to these

[114]Sawislak, 22.

[115]Chicago Board of Health, *Report of the Board of Health of the City of Chicago for the Years 1874 and 1875* (Chicago: Bulletin Printing Company, 1876), 17.

[116]Ibid., 51.

[117]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.

justifications in their efforts to displace Black communities after the fire, remaking once residential land into a commercial district.

After framing Black residents as supposed incendiaries uniquely at fault for the fire, the white press addressed the Underwriter's last request: the complete reorganization of the Fire Department. Columnists mobilized public support for this aim. For some, it was the fire's large scale was the fault of the newly appointed Fire Chief Matthais Benner and his assumed "incompetence.[118] Even his most sympathetic observers - who admitted that Benner was a "good subordinate" - echoed concerns about his "incapacity as a chief."[119] Others called for his immediate removal.[120]

What onlookers could agree upon, however, was that Benner's perceived failures held department-wide consequences. Complaints about a department absent "discipline," abound in newspaper columns, letters to the editor, and even, in the demands of the National Board of Fire Underwriters.[121] This "discipline" manifested not only in their ability to fight fire, but also firemen's perceived moral sanctity. Columnists took to the *Tribunes* pages to speculate about the unit's sexual promiscuity, describing their "engine houses" as being "little better than places of resort for lewd women."[122] In a meeting with the Chicago Board of Fire Underwriters, the city's Fire Commissioner Ayars postulated that the Department was "full of loafers, deadbeats, and other bad characters."[123] Continuing, he argued that these men lacked "discipline," instead sit,

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[118]"When Greek Meets Greek," *Frank Leslie's Weekly*, August 1, 1874,
[119]"The Fires: Review of the Conflagration of Tuesday," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 16, 1874.
[120]Ibid.
[121]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.
[122]Ibid.
[123]Ibid.

lounge, sleep, and smoke without care for their civic duty.[124] Firemen's perceived failure to contain the July fire was, in these characterizations, reflective of their greater moral failure.

While levied at the entire department, commentators made sure to point out the errors of the all-Black firefighting unit in these critiques. Engine No. 21, the city's sole all-Black firefighting unit, lost a firetruck to the flames featured prominently in editorial recounts. Some journalists did cite its combustion as occurring in "the good duty in the hands…of colored fire company,"[125] but others singled out the Black firemen as uniquely at fault. Reporters attested that the majority of the department "succeeded in getting away," but not "Engine Company No. 21, the colored company of the fire" for they "delayed a minute too long…"[126] Lest readers assume this be a tragedy of fate, *The Chicago Tribune* clarified that it "might have been saved with a little good management and a small amount of courage."[127] In these characterizations, white-Anglo elite made Black firemen symbols of both the entire department's "immorality" and a professional incompetence reserved only for African Americans. To be sure, it was only Engine 21 whom journalists argued lacked "courage" or "discipline" necessary to mitigate an otherwise preventable loss. Here, similar to their treatment of the Near South Side's residents, journalists and "concerned citizens," argued that Blackness was proof of "error" or "incompetency."

With the public's support, the white press and "concerned" residents mounted their attacks on the department and questioned the appointment of the Chief and Engine 21. It was not just Benner's perceived "incompetence" that accounted for the firemen's poor performance, but

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[124] "Local Miscellany," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 30, 1874.
[125] "The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.
[126] "The Chicago Fire: A Total Loss of Four Millions," July 16, 1874.
[127] "The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.

also deep-rooted political influence that prevented him from having a department of "discipline."[128] By the mid-19th century, concerns about political corruption like that by James S. Pike in *The Prostrate State*, had become rallying cries against racial inclusion in government.[129] It was unsurprising, then, when politicians and business interests demanded for the Fire Department's reorganization because of Engine 21's perceived failure.

It was again the Special Committee on the National Board of Underwriters that led and legitimized this conspiracy, arguing that Chief Benner was a political figurehead whose allegiances distracted him from his duties and prevented him from firing firemen at will. M. Y. Young, representative of Tradesman's and Commerce of New York and member of the Board, argued that the Fire Department's "colored company" existed only because politicians "felt it to be necessary…to secure the votes of the colored men."[130] Citizens readily embraced this idea. F. A. Bragg, a real estate dealer and former volunteer in the fire brigade, believed the unit's "political influence" was quite clear.[131] While "there might be good firemen among its members," he argued that, "there are many worthless men, whom it would be well to get rid of." His targets, "the colored men," who "were good drivers and horsemen, generally, but not good firemen."[132] Heeding the calls of East-Coast investors, the press, politicians, and white-Anglo Chicagoans therefore advocated for the department's reorganization because of its perceived corruption, symbolized by the presence and supposed inadequacy of Black firefighters. Paired with complaints about Black residents, it became clear that fire "safety" was not simply

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[128]"Local Miscellany," July 30, 1874.
[129]Foner, 416.
[130]"The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.
[131]"The Fire: Opinions of the Insurance Men," July 22, 1874.
[132]Ibid.

protection of outside investment, but also a cry for racial segregation and a tool to combat African Americans' increasing visibility in Chicago.

But narratives of blame were nowhere to be found within the columns of *The Christian Recorder,* the leading Black newspaper of the Northwest. Rather, bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal, A.W. Wayman challenged the image white-Anglo elite crafted of Black Chicagoans in the press. In reflections sent back to the *Recorder*, Wayman grieved the loss of Quinn Chapel and Bethel Church's buildings, reporting that now, "our people [are] turned out of church and homes."[133] The *Recorder's* editor, Elisha Weaver characterized Black Chicagoans similarly, writing that "our brethren," had "lost everything they had in the world."[134] Weaver and Wayman punctured the flawed logic of the white press that framed Black residents and firemen as causing the late fire and having deserved their fate. By humanizing and forging community with those burned out, the two instead characterized Black Chicagoans as victims of misfortune deserving of assistance, not agents of destruction.

But the Black Press' characterizations held little sway in the city's rebuilding efforts. Instead, Chicago elites swiftly adopted the National Fire Underwriter's profit-oriented demands for a fire "safe" city. They concentrated early rebuilding efforts within the business district, persuading outside financiers of the increased value of their investment portfolio. Entrepreneurs made explicit connections to America's concomitant colonial expansion, arguing that the conflagration wiped the previously mixed-use district clean for development. It is thus no

[133]A. W. Wayman, "Notes by the Way," *The Christian Recorder*, November 26, 1874
[134]Ibid.

surprise that its previous occupants, Black residents, became the white press' targets for incendiarism. In newspaper columns, journalists derided African Americans as "poor" occupants unable to care for the district and at fault for the fire's spread. Finally, the elite persecuted the Fire Department, again singling out the only Black unit as particularly to blame for the conflagration. Each response to the Underwriter's demands rested upon a white supremacist logic that excluded Black residents from the broader polity. By the fire's end, the white-Anglo elite tied Blackness to residential decay and deficient citizenship, associations that continued to limit freedom for African Americans into the 20th century.

**Section four. Challenging imposed vulnerability**

Readers of the *Christian Recorder* were no stranger to reports of Chicago's July calamity. Elisha Weaver took to its pages to publicize Black church leaders' rebuilding efforts for years following the July conflagration. Over a decade removed from fire, Weaver described the "great odds" Black Churches faced, but successfully confronted in their rebuilding efforts.[135] In the absence of municipal assistance to "help them along," the Quinn Chapel instead relied upon the fellow churchgoers, whom they asked to "freely" open their "slender purses" in fundraisers, loans requests, and newspaper appeals.[136] While assuredly unique, the Quinn Chapel provides insight into the struggles of all three burned-out congregations when confronting a city that systematically excluded Black residents from rebuilding efforts. Each Black church leader overcame municipal neglect and outright hostility to African American citizenship through community-based support. Black Chicagoans asserted their claim to the city, conceptualizing

[135]Elisha Weaver, "Chicago's New Church," *The Christian Recorder*, December 4, 1890.

[136]Ibid.

freedom in the post-Civil War climate as residential mobility, community restoration, and homeownership.

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Barriers to Freedom: Political and Economic Marginalization

Despite the white press' attempts to minimize the July conflagration's impact, harried church leaders described the damage left in its wake. Prior to July 14th, the Olivet Baptist Church occupied a brick building "free to all who desire a comfortable place to worship god,"[137] founded less than a decade prior. Reverend Richard De Baptiste estimated that, of its 630 constituents, about half lost their homes from the fire.[138] The Quinn Chapel, recently rebuilt after the 1871 Great Fire, and the Bethel Methodist Church, once occupying a "a very respectable building on third avenue," also both lay in ruins.[139] Their losses were not an exception; Scholars have since estimated that the fire destroyed roughly eighty-five percent of all Black owned real estate in the city.[140]

In addition to property loss, Black congregations experienced long-term financial duress because of discriminatory insurance policies. The Olivet Baptist Church, despite wanting to rebuild immediately, lost $20,000 from the late fire and did not have the resources to purchase a new lot.[141] Indeed, insurers had undervalued their previous brick building; while their burned-down edifice was worth $30,000, fire underwriters appraised it as only $12,000 and ultimately

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[137]"Local Miscellany," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* August 9, 1874.

[138]"Religious News: History of the Churches Destroyed Tuesday," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 19, 1874.; "Local Miscellany," August 9, 1874.

[139]"Religious News," July 19, 1874.

[140]Washington, 139.

[141]"Local Miscellany: M.O. Walker. Ira Brown. The Chess Congress," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 17, 1874.

provided its treasury "only $10,000."[142] Bethel Church similarly required a year "to get matters straightened out," and purchase a new site after scant insurance repayments.[143]

While it remains unclear whether the Quinn Chapel experienced the same discrimination, the congregation shared similar financial difficulties as Olivet and Bethel. On June 19, 1876, Reverend E.C. Joiner wrote the *Christian Recorder* "after a long silence" to "inform the numerous readers…how we are moving along in the great city of the West."[144] In his reflection, Joiner admitted to accepting his position with "reluctance."[145] In his view, the church suffered a doubled misfortune, having been burned out in both 1871 and '74[146] His trepidation was well-deserved. "On my arrival in the city," Joiner described, "I found them really worse than I expected."[147] The church had accumulated "$17,000" in debt with "scarcely a dollar in the Treasury."[148] While eventually paid using borrowed funds, Reverend Joiner again shared the church's ongoing financial difficulties in 1880, citing the late fire as its cause.[149]

While insurance underwriters encouraged business owners to rebuild on the ashen Near South Side, they afforded the regions' previous renters no such luxury. Instead, the city and its corporate elite systematically undervalued Black church property, providing Reverend's comparatively minimal financial assistance for their rebuilding or relocation. Absent financial assistance, the three Black churches experienced long-term financial difficulties that impacted their stability.

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[142]Ibid.
[143]Moore, 28.
[144]E.C. Joiner, "Word From Chicago," *The Christian Recorder,* July 13, 1876.
[145]Ibid.
[146]Ibid.
[147]Ibid.
[148]Joiner, "Word From Chicago."
[149]Ibid.

Rebuilding Freedom: Community Space and Property-Ownership

This neglect was a particular affront given the material and symbolic importance of collectively owned properties to Black Chicagoans. Here, like elsewhere in the nation, the church provided African Americans the ability to purchase land and carve out independent public spaces within an environment increasingly hostile to Black residents.[150] Thus, in lieu of fiscal or political support, all three Black churches instead solicited the help of community members to re-establish their church buildings.

Reverends were quick to locate temporary houses of worship from fellow Congregationalists. De Baptiste negotiated with William W. Everts, the Reverend of the all-white First Baptist Church, for the use of one of their unoccupied properties; Everts deeded Olivet the Shields Mission on State Street for coming prayers.[151] Likewise, Bethel Methodist Reverend J. W. Malone secured the First A. M. E. Church's "old temporary Board building," and Quinn Chapel's G.C. Booth furnished the "union hall" for their use every "morning and evening."[152] These buildings, however, worked only for short-term use. Everts cautioned De Baptist that the Railroad Chapel was "in a rickety condition and needed repairs,"[153] and Malone requested additional assistance to "fix it up and seat" the borrowed edifice, it having since been abandoned after the 1871 fire.[154]

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[150]Cara Caddoo, "Black Newspapers, Real Property, and Mobility in Memphis after Emancipation," *The Journal of African American History* 102, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 473-4.

[151]As described by Christopher Robert-Reed, the First Baptist Church was previously a site on the underground railroad, being abolitionist in both thought and practice; "Fire in Chicago [not Chicago Fire of 1871]," *Chicago Times,* July 16-20, 1874, Oversize Folder: 123, Chicago City-Wide Collection, Special Collections Unit, Harold Washington Library Center; "Local Miscellany," *Chicago Daily Tribune,* July 25, 1874.

[152]"Religious News," July 19, 1874.

[153]"Fire in Chicago [not Chicago Fire of 1871]," July 16-20, 1874.

[154]Ibid.

Consequently, all three church leaders turned to newspapers, rather than politicians or insurance payments, to secure financial support for a longer-term solution. Two weeks following requests from the First Baptist Church, De Baptiste "c[a]me before a generous public,"[155] asking other Northern Black congregations to assist his "needy and deserving church" relocate to a more fire-proof building.[156] Malone, too, requested "a Discipline and Hymnbook" from the *Christian Recorder's* readership, hoping to regain the books "that a Methodist preacher ought to have."[157]

The Quinn Chapel's Reverend, E.C. Joiner also called upon the *Recorders'* audience for help in the years following the fire. While Olivet and Bethel recovered from their financial losses by 1875, the Quinn Chapel had no such luck. In May and July of 1877, Joiner shared that the Chapel's finances were in "embarrassing condition," and appealed to the pastors and congregation members of "more fortunate and wealthy churches" for financial assistance.[158] But by 1880, the church had still not recovered; Rev. E.C. Joiner again appealed to fellow A.M.E. churches for an additional $5,000 for Chicago congregations "destroyed by fire" almost a decade prior.[159]

Despite ongoing financial hardship, all three ministers rebuilt their congregations before the decades end, re-establishing an important symbol of Black space and freedom in the city. Indeed, Bethel Church's building commenced with much fanfare. The city's all-Black masonic order laid the new edifices' first brick, watched over by the state's only African American militia, the Hannibal Guard and a crowd of people "who liberally contributed to the building

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[155]"Local Miscellany," August 9, 1874.

[156]Ibid.

[157]Weaver, "Fated Chicago."

[158]E. C. Joiner, "Notes from Chicago, IL," *The Christian Recorder*, May 10, 1877; E. C. Joiner, "Notice," *The Christian Recorder*, July 5, 1877.

[159]Elisha Weaver, "Afternoon Session," *The Christian Recorder*, May 26, 1880.

fund."[160] Olivet Baptist, too, began rebuilding a year after the fire to a ceremony attended by Chicago's Black churches and prominent African American leaders.[161] And while the Quinn Chapel postponed construction, the congregation broke ground in July 1876, completing the chapel[162] and reducing its "indebtedness" by $4,000 in November of 1877.[163]

Finding Freedom: Seeking Safety on Chicago's South Side

While the Quinn Chapel and Olivet Baptist eventually rebuilt atop their previous site, most former residents "disposed of their holdings" and left the expanding business district.[164] Indeed, in the days that followed July 14th, reporters described the scenes of fleeing residents with "drays, truck wagons, express wagons, and hand carts, light buggies, and hacks loaded with trunks," of their personal belongings.[165] "All" the reporter claimed, "mov[ed] southward…"[166] John Jones, too, postulated that Black residents would "move south of Twentieth Street and between State and Clark Street."[167] Indeed, scholars have since recorded that half of African American residents relocated to this southern district, the Black Belt we know today had begun to take shape.[168]

Quinn Chapel's Reverend Booth urged this movement, perceiving the fire as an opportune moment to break the association between Black residencies and vice. To Booth, the "late fire" was a "blessing," for it allowed residents to move from this "bad locality," that he, and

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[160]Daniel W. Wilder, "Notes by the Way," *The Christian Recorder*, December 23, 1875.

[161]Miles Mark Fisher, *The History of the Olivet Baptist Church of Chicago* (Master's thesis, University of Chicago, 1922), 31.

[162]Joiner, "Notice," July 5, 1877.

[163]Joiner, "Notice," November 15, 1877.

[164]Work, 11.

[165]"The Fire: The Scenes of Oct. 9, 1871, Repeated on a Small Scale," July 15, 1874.

[166]Ibid.

[167]The Fire: Special Meeting of the Council Yesterday Afternoon," July 18, 1874.

[168]Ibid.; Washington, 139-40.

many others, were "obliged to" live in.[169] Now, he argued, Black occupants no longer "her[d] together" in one predefined district and instead could "scatter" around the city.[170]

Booth's desire, for Black residents to leverage disaster to assert themselves as residential equals, was expressed broadly throughout the U.S. After the Thirteenth Amendment's ratification and the subsequent repeal of the Fugitive Slave Law, previously enslaved persons fled southern violence in search "of a more free place."[171] Former Mississippi residents, for instance, settled in Oklahoma to establish a Black state outside of the social, political, and economic violence that "so degraded [African Americans]" in the American South.[172] In a less hostile environment, migrants could both assert and claim their civic belonging.[173]

The second Chicago Fire provided Black residents with a similar mechanism to realize newfound freedoms. The South Side, a more recently incorporated and "less densely settled"[174] district, perhaps presented burned-out occupants a more "free" place further from fire hazard and criminalized Vice. Indeed, Chicago residents characterized the region as more "fashionable" compared to the rapidly expanding downtown and surrounding working-class districts.[175] With a "great many fine residences…splendid business blocks, churches, and innumerable manufacturing establishments," Black occupants became one of several groups moving south to distance themselves from an increasingly industrializing downtown.[176]

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[169]Elisha Weaver, "Rev. G.C. Booth," *The Christian Recorder*, August 20, 1874.
[170]Ibid.
[171]Field, 90.
[172]Ibid.
[173]Ibid.
[174]Keyes, 59.
[175]Hoyt, 113.
[176]"Interesting Items," *Weekly Louisiana*, November 26, 1871; Hoyt, 93.

**Conclusion. Cementing disaster vulnerability and the consolidation of the Black Belt**

But Booth's hope that fire could "burn away" the barriers that restrict Black Chicagoans freedom of movement and homeownership went unfulfilled. Rather, by the century's end, the "city of neighborhoods" remained firmly segregated by race and perceived criminality – Black residents remained living in close quarters with Chicago's Vice District because of policies and narratives similar to those leading up to and after the 1874 fire.[177] Indeed, in 1890, the Quinn Chapel could only relocate near upper-class white-Anglo residencies with the help of Reverend John T. Jenifer, a man "caucasian in appearance and speech."[178] And still over a decade after the 1874 conflagration, "one of [Chicago's] most prominent colored ministers" accused a white priest of "driving" residents of the Vice district to the doors of the Quinn Chapel, the Olivet Baptist and Bethel Church.[179]

For other Black residents, freedom of movement and property ownership also became an increasingly more difficult ideal to attain. Eight percent of Black families, compared to 28.7% of those in the city, owned their homes in 1890, reducing to 5% ten years later.[180] In conversations recorded by Master's student Monroe Work in 1905, landlords erroneously claimed that Black occupants "did not pay up well," and "injured and destroyed the property," justifying conflated rents or denied leases.[181] Here, as in 1874, the politics of blame and naturalized "racial difference" undermined Black occupants' civic freedoms.

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[177]Thomas Lee Philpott, *The Slum and the Ghetto: Immigrants, Blacks, and reformers in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Belmonth: Wadsworth Pub Co., 1991), 140, quoted in Caddoo, 470.

[178]Quinn Chapel, *Quinn Chapel, African Methodist Episcopal Church: 120th anniversary record, 1847-1967* (Chicago: The Chapel, 1967), 2.

[179]St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1945), 56.

[180]Work, 19.

[181]Ibid., 30.

Attempts to build a more fire "safe" city thus became contests over civic identity, security, and freedom that persisted into the late nineteenth century. Chicago's white-Anglo elite oriented rebuilding efforts around securing waning financial investment. Financiers and municipal authorities overlooked the conditions that structured fire vulnerability and shifted blame onto the Near South Side's residents, associating African Americans' increasingly visible presence in the city as threats to white-Anglo business interests. Others, in more explicit attempts to challenge Black Chicagoans civic organizations, faulted the all-Black firefighting unit for the late fire's destruction. Taken together, the white-Anglo elite's calls for fire "safety" advocated for the city's physical, social, and economic marginalization of Black Chicagoans, a rhetorical association that has far outlived the 1874 conflagration.

Therefore, the naturalization of natural disaster erases, renders invisible, and calcifies the causes that structure and perpetuate vulnerability. While municipal leaders have since adopted different mechanisms that shape susceptibility, Chicago's predominately Black districts continue to bear the disproportionate brunt of disasters' impact.[182] Indeed, the 1874 fire makes clear that the environmental crisis and its ramifications belong to a broader (ongoing) history of municipal neglect, racialized blame, and prioritization of profit over people. To challenge continued naturalization of harm to marginalized communities, we might instead consider the ways those most impacted by past disasters envision safety and security within a crisis. In 1874, Black Chicagoans, for instance, articulated more capacious ways to build a fire "safe" city. Due, in part, to their economic and political marginalization, Church leaders relied upon neighbors, congregation members, and sympathetic newspaper readers for financial assistance and

[182]S. Bechteler, K. Kane-Willis, Kareem Butler, and Iliana Espinosa-Ravis, "An Epidemic of Inequities: Structural Racism and COVID-19 in the Black Community," *Chicago Urban League*, May 12, 2020.

temporary shelter; They centered community resiliency and cohesion over business reinvestment. Unlike those of the past, we might take seriously these efforts to prioritize freedom, in all of its articulations, over profit and land development. Absent such considerations we risk perpetuating harm as the climate crisis undoubtedly hastens.

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