

Chicago History

You have probably heard Chicago called the “Windy City.” Many people think the name comes from the strong, cold winds coming off Lake Michigan. Other versions have it that politicians were so enthusiastic in promoting Chicago as the site of the 1893 World’s Fair that they were accused of blowing hot air! Both Lake Michigan and the pride of its citizens have been key Chicago assets in building the city as a center of trade and commerce.

As early as 1670, this location at the mouth of the Chicago River on Lake Michigan was noted by fur trappers and explorers as a good site for a trading post. Jean Baptiste Point du Sable, a free black man thought to be from Haiti, came in the late 1770’s as a trader and is considered the town’s first permanent resident.

Chicago was incorporated as a city in 1837 with a population of just 200 people, and its growth as a port was greatly enhanced by the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal in 1848. This canal made it possible to travel from the Mississippi River, up the Illinois River, through the canal to Chicago, across the Great Lakes to the Erie Canal and on to the Atlantic Ocean. Railroads were soon completed to add to the freight and passengers moving to and from the city.

In the first 50 years of Chicago’s existence, its population grew 100-fold to 20,000 people; it further ballooned to over 1.6 million people by the year 1900. All of this growth couldn’t occur without some problems. Cholera, a disease common where drinking water is contaminated by sewage, killed many citizens during the summer months. Chicago citizens took on this challenge in the 1850’s by building sewers, even though this meant raising the sidewalks, streets and buildings by five to eight feet. The buildings and sidewalks were constructed mostly of wood, and dry weather in 1871 set the stage for the great Chicago fire to destroy three square miles of the city. Although many buildings burned, the infrastructure of sewers and streets enabled Chicago’s determined residents to quickly rebuild and continue to grow.

The skyline admired by residents and visitors today shows continued innovation. The world’s first skyscraper, built with a steel frame, went up in 1883. Although that first 10-story structure has long since been demolished, many newer skyscrapers took its place. The tallest building in the United States, long known as the Sears Tower but now called the Willis Tower, is surrounded by many other outstanding examples of architecture.

Chicago continues to thrive as a transportation center for air travel and railways. More lines of train track radiate from Chicago than any other U.S. city. Chicago has long been the most important interchange point for freight traffic between the nation's major railroads and it is the hub of Amtrak. The lake and river have a diminished role today in trade and travel, but these assets provide beauty, education and recreation for residents and tourists. The magnificent lakeshore is dotted with beautiful parks and beaches, and tour boats ply the rivers alongside recreational watercraft.

Take time to visit the vibrant Windy City, home today to nearly 3 million people, many of whom will be happy to boast about its wonders.

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