

# CIVIL WAR CHICAGO

## *Eyewitness to History*



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# Introduction

*T*HIS BOOK IS about the intersection of two of nineteenth-century America's most remarkable phenomena: the appalling creative destruction of the American Civil War and the emergence of the dynamic city of Chicago, which in two generations blossomed from the seedbed of a fur-trading post to the full flower of major metropolitan status. Chicago in the 1860s was a chaotic, bursting-at-the-seams burg that was a magnet for people, commerce, and industry. One resident described the city on the eve of the Civil War as "alive to the tips of her fingers and the core of her heart and brain" and observed that there was a challenge "in the strong and headstrong life" that demanded a response. Impressed by Chicago's "marvelous growth," an English visitor confessed, "Well, she beats her own brag!" Otto von Bismarck, while in the midst of remaking the map of Europe, observed, "I wish I could go to America, if only to see that Chicago." In this volume, that dramatic story of urban growth is blended with America's most tragic chapter—its bloody Civil War. That conflict brought the young nation to the brink of destruction yet in the end lifted the curse of slavery and manhandled America onto the path of modernity. Chicago illustrates in microcosm the trauma of the challenges and changes wrought by war. Chicagoans played a critical role in the awful sectional contest, and the four years of war were formative in the growth of the metropolis.<sup>1</sup>

The Civil War solidified Chicago's standing as the capital of the emerging Upper Great Lakes region in the Midwest. As a transportation hub, it provided a critical link between East and West, North and South. Poised on Great Lakes shipping routes and access to New York via the Erie Canal, connected by waterways to the Mississippi River valley via the Illinois and Michigan Canal and by train links to all parts of the country, Chicago was able to harvest the region's agricultural bounty and turn its natural resources into steel, lumber, and other manufactured products to supply Northern armies. The Civil War helped make Chicago, and Chicago helped save the Union.

While few cities can be said to be made by war, throughout history war has served as a stimulus for urban development. Chicago during the American Civil War is an example of this phenomenon. The conflict's impact on Chicago, however, is not a simple story of economic development or population growth. Rather, the relationship between the city and the Civil War is also cultural, social, and political but most of all reciprocal. The Civil War shaped Chicago, but Chicagoans also fundamentally shaped war. Through eyewitness accounts of

the war years, this book hopes to bring to life that dynamic era in Chicago and national history.



On the eve of the Civil War, Chicago was just two generations removed from its days as a fur-trading post on the edge of an unsettled wilderness. After the war it became known, in Carl Sandberg's inimitable words, as "Hog Butcher, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation." The experience of war played a critical role in this transformation. While nineteenth-century Chicago was famously dubbed by historian William Cronon as "Nature's Metropolis," the city's ability to improve upon nature is what proved key to its explosive growth and to its commitment to the Union.<sup>2</sup>

In 1848 Chicago became the link between the Great Lakes waterway and the Mississippi River system because a congressional land grant made possible the building of the Illinois and Michigan Canal. By 1860 the city had become the busiest port on the Great Lakes in part because a penurious Congress that had refused to help develop safe harbors for other emerging lake cities nonetheless spent over \$200,000 on Chicago's facilities. Not that Chicagoans simply relied on federal largesse; at times they took matters into their own hands, as they did in 1854 when Secretary of War Jefferson Davis refused to allow army engineers to clear a sandbar blocking Chicago's harbor. The citizens seized the army's dredge and did the job themselves.<sup>3</sup>

When the Civil War started and military forces plied the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers, Chicago solidified its position as the emerging capital of the Midwest and Great Lakes. The war circumscribed the southern hinterlands of competing cities such as St. Louis and Cincinnati at a time when Chicago was able to expand its reach to the north and west. More important, Chicago offered transportation links between West and East that were superior to those of both its Mississippi valley rivals, as well as to its Great Lakes rivals. Chicago's advantages were not simply a gift of nature—they were a product of national politics.<sup>4</sup>



The city's ties to the federal union also helped it to emerge as a metropolis. In 1860 it was the terminus for the world's longest railroad, the Illinois Central, built because of a 2.6 million-acre federal land grant. In many ways, the nation began its march to Civil War because Chicago's most prominent citizen, Senator Stephen Douglas, was determined that Chicago be the point of origin for the even-longer Pacific railroad. The 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act that Douglas ushered through Congress to build that railroad eventually gave birth to the Republican Party and sectional combat.

For a city far removed from both “Bleeding Kansas” and the later battlefields of the Civil War, Chicago understood its stake in the crisis and exerted considerable influence over events. It was in Chicago, in part because of the maneuvers of the city’s politicians, where Abraham Lincoln was nominated to the presidency. Lincoln’s chief rival for the White House in 1860 was Stephen Douglas, the first Chicagoan to run for the highest office in the land. When Lincoln was elected president, Chicago ministers hectoring him to abolish slavery; yet once he issued the Emancipation Proclamation, the city’s leading newspaper pilloried the president’s “mania for blood in the cause of negro emancipation.” In 1864, after four years of carnage and seeming stalemate, Chicago hosted the Democratic Party’s national convention, which, egged on by the city’s influential peace advocates, branded Lincoln and his war effort a “failure” and pushed for recognition of the Confederacy.<sup>5</sup>

Like many other midwestern communities, Chicago’s response to the Civil War was complex and at times contradictory. Before 1861 Southerners routinely denounced the city as a “nigger lovin’ town” and a “sink hole of abolitionism” because of the lax local enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law. Yet when the Civil War came, Chicago was decried as a “hotbed of Copperheadism.” The *Chicago Times* was one of the most outspoken anti-Lincoln newspapers, and its opposition to the administration’s war effort eventually led to its suppression at bayonet point in the summer of 1863. A handful of Chicagoans became so incensed by Lincoln’s attempt at a “new birth of freedom” that they acted in concert with Confederate agents in the “Northwest Conspiracy.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet Lincoln once described Chicago as second only to Boston in urging an aggressive war. Chicagoans sent more than fifteen thousand soldiers to the front, and the city acted as a major supply hub for the far-ranging armies of the western theater of operations. As early as the summer of 1862, the city cheered the convicted war criminal General John B. Turchin and called for a “hard war” on the Southern populace. In 1864 the Chicago Board of Trade actually passed a resolution demanding that the rations of rebel prisoners at Camp Douglas on the city’s south side be cut so that the men might “suffer more.” Thousands of Southern soldiers did indeed suffer in the Chicago prisoner of war camp, and today more than four thousand lie on the city’s south side in the largest mass grave in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

The Civil War divided Chicago not as violently as it divided the nation but in ways that were significant and enduring. For more than a hundred years, a special tension existed between Irish Americans and African Americans in Chicago. It was born in bare-knuckle confrontations on the docks of Civil War Chicago’s waterfront, where unskilled Irish immigrants fought to prevent desperate African American workers from displacing them as stevedores. While some Chicagoans risked their lives to win equality for all Americans, many of their fellow citizens

scorned the Union cause and condemned emancipation. In keeping with these sentiments, the Chicago City Council acted in 1864 to legally segregate the races. These years saw the foundation for the persistent racial polarization that led Chicago in the twentieth century to be characterized as one of the most racially segregated cities in the United States.

During the Civil War, class emerged as a factor even more important than race dividing Chicagoans. Industrialization with its increased scale of production, combined with wartime labor shortages and inflation, increased tensions between employers and their workers. For wage earners, the ethnic and religious differences that had loomed large in 1850s Chicago began to blur for men and women who saw themselves locked into the same economic circumstances. During the war, women took jobs as shop clerks and in the garment industry. Men formed the city's first labor hall and founded its first unions. Alliances formed in 1864 between native-born and immigrant workers laid the foundation for the eight-hour-day movement and the violent conflict between capital and labor that would be later played out in the Haymarket Square Riot of 1886 and in the Pullman Strike in 1894.<sup>8</sup>

While thousands of its most productive citizens left the city to fight the Confederacy, Chicago's rapid growth continued unabated. Between 1860 and 1870 the population nearly tripled, rising from 109,260 to 298,977. Many of those who eschewed military service grew fat on war contracts. Young men of military age with a nose for business avoided service at the front and laid the foundation for Gilded Age fortunes. George Pullman began his railroad car works after avoiding military service by purchasing a substitute to join the ranks in his place. Richard Teller Crane also avoided military service, and his small brass foundry expanded three times during the war. It eventually became the world's leading manufacturer of valves and fittings. Marshall Field, likewise of military age, stayed home and exploited wartime prosperity to cement his dominance in retail sales and real estate.

The Civil War built industrial Chicago not because it brought new business particular to military needs but because wartime spending nourished the city's nascent and natural industries. The Union army rode iron rails to victory. Even before the war, Chicago was the nation's railroad center. The need to replace rails and rolling stock increased tremendously during the war, laying the foundation for car works plants and steel production. The city's inland waterway connections made it a natural meeting place for southern Illinois coal and northern Michigan iron ore. During the conflict, miles upon miles of iron rails were spit out of the city's rolling mills and played a key role in maintaining the efficiency of the nation's all-important railroad network. Throughout the war, at the North Chicago Rolling Mill on the banks of the Chicago River, experiments were made with the new blast furnace technology that could produce steel. Finally, in May 1865, Chicago produced the first steel rail made in the United States. The plant that

succeeded in this innovation later became a cornerstone for the United States Steel Corporation. For this heartland metropolis, food processing was a natural avenue of industrial opportunity. Already the nation's leading grain distribution and beef packing center, during the Civil War Chicago celebrated its acquisition of the title "Porkopolis," which it stole from Cincinnati. On Christmas Day 1865, the Union Stockyards were founded in the wake of the huge number of beef and pigs that arrived in the city to supply the Union's hungry troops.

Finance, along with railroads and food processing, was a third key to Chicago's Civil War-era industrial growth. In 1861, Chicago banks were shaky and untrustworthy. Less than \$150,000 was on deposit in the city. The Lincoln administration stabilized the financial system by ushering in national banking. Nowhere else in the country did the federally chartered banks catch on as enthusiastically as Chicago; by the end of the Civil War there were thirteen national banks in the city, with deposits approaching \$30 million. This was the critical capital foundation that made possible large-scale investment in industrialization. Little wonder that during the decade of the 1860s the number of factories in Chicago tripled.

When Chicagoans think of the nineteenth-century city, they think of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 or the splendid 1893 World's Columbian Exposition. Both events are symbolically honored with stars on the city's official flag. The fire not only destroyed more than three square miles of the city but also erased much of the city's memory of the Civil War. Hundreds of letters, diaries, and artifacts brought home from the war were destroyed by the fire, including an original copy of the Emancipation Proclamation Lincoln gave for auction to the Sanitary Commission. Elites made rich by the war chose to emphasize that a new city was reborn from the ashes of the old.<sup>9</sup> However, the men and women who sacrificed lives and loved ones to create "a more perfect union" refused to let the memory of the war die. They created an elaborate memorial landscape to be their time capsule for future generations. One hundred and fifty years later, the city's people recreate in giant parks named for Lincoln and Ulysses Grant. There is a statue of Grant in Lincoln Park and statues of Lincoln in Grant Park and a score of other places in the city. Chicagoans drive down boulevards named after generals in cars with "Land of Lincoln" emblazoned on their plates as they look out at Beaux-Arts sculptures of Civil War heroes. In the obvious tension of Chicago's racially divided communities, in the bustle of its business district, in its striking economic inequality, in the stars and stripes that wave over a city and a nation, the hand of the Civil War generation still rests upon Chicago's shoulder.<sup>10</sup>

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