

# From the Ashes



## Social Restoration After the Great Chicago Fire

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On Tuesday, October 10, 1871, Frank Loesch sat on a rock. It was mid-morning, and the rock, like the weather, was warm; it was probably not altogether unpleasant to sit upon. It might have been a day much like any other day—he had awakened, had gone to his place of work—but today, everything was different. Frank Loesch's rock was all that remained of his office. It was warm from the previous day's conflagration. Smoke and ashes billowed up from the ruins of surrounding buildings. Chicago, his home, was in ashes.<sup>1</sup>

It was, he recalled years later, a dark moment. He had only two dollars to his name. He had neither food nor shelter, had slept underneath a staircase the previous night, and had been wearing the same set of clothing, now his only clothes, for over two days. He did not know if his livelihood still existed. A telegraph clerk, Loesch had only lived in the city for sixteen months. He was a marginal figure who, like many other young single men, resided in a boarding house. It, too, was a pile of ash. And so he sat, stunned, imagining that Chicago was gone forever. Lost in such dismal thoughts, Loesch sat on his rock for over an hour.<sup>2</sup>

1. Frank J. Loesch, *Personal Experiences during the Chicago Fire, 1871* (Chicago: Privately printed, 1925), 21–22, accessed July 22, 2015, <https://archive.org/details/personalexperien00loes>.

2. *Ibid.*

In the weeks after the Great Fire of 1871, Chicago was full of people like Frank Loesch. Of the city's three hundred thousand inhabitants, one hundred thousand were now homeless.<sup>3</sup> Many were sleeping on the prairie; others, like Loesch, had temporary and insufficient lodgings. The damage was immense: the whole of the city's center had burned down, as had much of the residential North Side. Over \$200 million worth of property had simply vanished.<sup>4</sup> But to account for the damage solely in monetary terms is misleading. Gilded Age Chicagoans lived in a world where property and status were inextricably combined.<sup>5</sup> Consequently it was not merely a physical city that had to be rebuilt, but also a social one. Loesch despaired not just because he had lost his home—he despaired because he had lost his entire world.

This paper is about the reconstruction of that world. It examines the effects of the social dislocation caused by the destruction of property; it does not focus on the actual construction of a new city, on which much has been written. The days shortly after the Great Fire presented a quandary: if ascendancy in Chicago was tied to the possession of property and cultural status markers, then how did Chicago's social elites endure the destruction of their material foundations? They reclaimed status in three principal ways: first, in the early months, elites recreated the exclusivity of their distinct cultural world through a network of social associations; second, they privatized control of the city's institutional relief effort and used it to enforce class boundaries by distributing different types of aid to different groups; and third, they confirmed their claims to property through legal action in the following years. Taken together, these efforts constituted what this paper refers to as social restoration.

The business of reestablishing a society reveals what, and more significantly, who, a society values. These preferences quickly became evident

3. Karen Sawislak, *Smoldering City: Chicagoans and the Great Fire, 1871–1874* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 2.

4. *Report of the Board of Police, in the Fire Department, to the Common Council of the City of Chicago* (Chicago: City of Chicago, 1872), 4; Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 2.

5. Robin L. Einhorn, *Property Rules: Political Economy in Chicago, 1833–1872* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 17; Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 14–15.

after the fire: with a third of the city's population homeless, one group was given food, shelter, and the finest supplies in the largest quantity, and the rest were given the scraps. These decisions had to be made before winter. By the beginning of November of 1871, the temperature had begun to drop.<sup>6</sup> But other concerns were equally pressing for elite members of society. Without the material elements of social distinction, the elites feared that they would no longer recognize themselves, nor be recognized, as distinct. The various efforts of October through December came to fulfill not only a humanitarian need but also a class imperative: the processes of status restoration and relief distribution were intertwined, and occasionally synonymous.

Two historiographical traditions shape the histories of Gilded Age Chicago and the Great Fire of 1871. One is the "booster" school, which describes the city's rebuilding almost as a fable. In this view, despite the strictly temporary setback of the Great Fire, the city rose from the ashes, like the phoenix—and such grandiose rhetoric is typical. In this conception, Chicago is the pinnacle of American industrial achievement. It tends not to emphasize class or ethnic divisions; it also tends not to mention the relief effort, focusing instead on Chicago's miraculous rebuilding. Histories of this type can be found in contemporary reports of the disaster and in popular accounts that have been written since. This paper interacts with booster accounts largely in disagreement.

The scholarly historiography emphasizes class divisions and power relations. This paper engages primarily with this historiography and draws upon the analysis of historians like Robin Einhorn and John Jentz, who analyze Chicago's Gilded Age history through ethnic and class lenses, and Karen Sawislak's *Smoldering City*. *Smoldering City* is a political history, chiefly concerned with power and authority as they interacted with "social and civic identities."<sup>7</sup> By focusing on institutions and politics, Sawislak overlooks the social and cultural elements of the

6. Thomas Butler Carter, "Some Facts and Incidents in the Early Life of Thomas Butler Carter..." September 15, 1889, box 1, folder 2, Thomas Butler Carter Papers, 1831–1898, Newberry Library, Chicago, 69.

7. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 16.

reestablishment of privilege—elements that were perhaps more significant. Sawislak relies largely on newspapers, as opposed to manuscripts, which influences her interpretation. This paper draws upon three sources: individual accounts to describe the recreation of cultural distinction, institutional records to detail the political shift in aid relief, and legal records to recount court actions. The paper's interpretations encompass cultural, social, political, and material elements, which mirror the multifaceted nature of elites' supremacy in many aspects of Chicago's public sphere.

To help explain these cultural elements, this paper draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's concept of distinction. Bourdieu's seminal work, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, posits that tastes are created by one's social class. Bourdieu analyzed certain consumption patterns, such as choice of clothing, and argued that social classes distinguish themselves and create distance between themselves and other groups. Bourdieu emphasized how the physical characteristics of the body carries class information, an argument borrowed by this paper.<sup>8</sup>

This paper does not delve into the specifics of formal class definitions. Chicago's class system was only forty years old and not home to multiple layers, such as the "old money" wealth of eastern American cities. Instead, this paper uses the looser groupings of "elite" and "non-elite." Elites, in the context of this paper, possessed a degree of wealth and social and cultural power or prestige; many owned property and almost all were native-born. Elites could be factory owners, professionals, or business people. The telegraph clerk Frank Loesch was not an elite in an economic sense (though he was clearly rising in status), but his account, and those like it, carries many of the themes also invoked by elites. This paper groups elites together who were culturally homogeneous and manifested similar concerns in response to the fire, regardless of their economic status. The social world of Chicago elites was small; many people mentioned in this paper knew one another.<sup>9</sup> The remainder

8. Ian Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007), 120.

9. William Furness and Samuel Greeley belonged to the same church, and Furness

of Chicago's population were nonelites. Many were foreign born, did not speak fluent English, had little property, if any at all, and were wage laborers. This paper primarily follows the stories of elites, because few nonelite accounts survive.<sup>10</sup>

With the exception of several chapters in Einhorn and Sawislak, the aftermath of the Great Fire has been largely unexamined by historians. Even if scholars have rejected the booster school, its basic premise, that the fire's immediate aftermath was some kind of aberration that can be ignored, has been largely accepted.<sup>11</sup> But the months following the Great Fire are not insignificant. The fire substantially distorted the class structure. How elites dealt with this distortion and restored the social order illustrates the meaning of class privilege in Chicago's Gilded Age. In the months following the catastrophe, despite their incredible loss, Chicago's elites were able to reestablish their secure position in Gilded Age society. And this is the story of how they did it.

In such a stratified society, the loss of all of the material aspects of social organization must have been bewildering, if not traumatizing. The mansions and other visual landmarks that delineated social status were gone. It was difficult to tell the poor from the rich. Refugees everywhere looked the same, covered in ash and dirt. A great deal of Chicago's material wealth had vanished, together with many of the assumptions elites held about themselves in relation to nonelites. They would, in time, have these understandings restored. But in the meantime, many were

mentions Greeley in his account. After the fire, Greeley stayed with Wirt Dexter, a leader in the Chicago Relief and Aid Society. Aurelia King mentions Dexter in her account. Mary Blatchford was a close friend of King, and Blatchford's husband was also involved in the Relief and Aid Society. And so on.

10. Where a source uses specific class terms (e.g., middle class, upper class, etc.), this paper replicates the terms in the text.

11. Einhorn discusses relief in a brief epilogue about the fire's role in spurring a new public interest. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 231. Einhorn also mentions the well-documented debate surrounding the extension of the city's Fire Limit, which prohibited low-cost wood-framed structures in the central city and acted as an effective class barrier.

confused and uncomfortable, and some of them were in despair. They were like Frank Loesch, sitting on his rock.

## Prologue

On Tuesday morning, October 10, Chicago awoke from its feverish dream. The fire, which started on Sunday night, had finally burnt itself out. It was safe in some areas to move about. Chicagoans began to creep out of their refuges and take stock of the desolation.

The city had burned from Mrs. O'Leary's barn southwest of downtown to Fullerton Avenue, then the city's northern boundary.<sup>12</sup> Few buildings that stood in the fire's path had survived. The city's new water tower and pump house remained standing, though the waterworks had been rendered useless, and would remain so for several weeks.<sup>13</sup> One house, the Ogden family mansion, had also survived. The central business district, industrial areas on the South Side, and the residential areas on the North Side were gone. What remained was a vast, smoldering ruin, called "the burned district" by survivors.

It was difficult to travel through the city. The remains of structurally unsound buildings dotted the landscape. The city's wood-planked roads and sidewalks had burned or were covered in ash and debris.<sup>14</sup> Almost all of the bridges had burned.<sup>15</sup> Beyond the physical impediments, there was a more harrowing obstacle: the stifling heat. Coal was still slowly burning throughout the city, especially on the South Side, where the

12. "Before and After the Fire: Chicago in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s," *The University of Chicago Library*, accessed on July 22, 2015, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/collections/maps/chifire>.

13. Samuel Greeley, "Memories of the Great Chicago Fire," April 1904, box 4, folder 151, Blatchford Family Papers, 1777–1987, Newberry Library, Chicago, 11.

14. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 20; Greeley, "Memories," 10.

15. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 21.

poor had stored coal in basements in preparation for winter.<sup>16</sup> Stone masonry and debris radiated heat as well.<sup>17</sup> Frank Loesch's rock was not just warm from the sun.

Starting from his temporary refuge at Fullerton and Racine, Loesch travelled down the city's spine, eventually reaching the intersection of State and Sixteenth Streets on the South Side. Before leaving his shelter, he took note of his immediate surroundings:

The prairie ... which we had left tenantless was filled with a mass of refugees who had drifted there since 2 a.m. Some one of our crowd made a rough count and reported over three thousand men, women and children camped there. As I walked about I saw many whom I had earlier seen as refugees.<sup>18</sup>

Such scenes were typical in the first few days after the blaze. Exhausted and hungry, refugees congregated throughout the city. Crowds gathered along Fullerton Avenue, in the streets of the untouched West Side, and in the open prairie around the village of Hyde Park.<sup>19</sup> Where possible, groups scrounged together food:

Every group seemed to be engaged in cooking breakfast. Judging by smell and sight I was of the opinion that the three staples which had been forehandily saved from the devouring flames were coffee, rye bread and sauerkraut. At my refuge a cup of weak tea and one biscuit was served to each adult.<sup>20</sup>

16. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 24, Greeley, "Memories," 11; William Eliot Furness, "Autobiography," ca. 1900, manuscript Alpha F, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, 130.

17. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 22.

18. *Ibid.*, 19.

19. Furness, "Autobiography," 125.

20. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 19.



Loesch set out with a group of men to survey the city. They headed down Lincoln Avenue to Clark Street, past Lincoln Park. They bypassed a large refugee camp in the northern part of the park. As many as seventy-five thousand people were encamped there, the majority of the city's new homeless. It was, "a vast camp of exiles," in the words of one refugee, "an open air store house for household goods, carriages, pianos, and whatever else could be left without the faintest hope of escaping plunder."<sup>21</sup> Dogs were used to guard possessions, and fistfights broke out.<sup>22</sup> The park's concentration of wealthy refugees and their surviving valuables made them perfect targets. It was a confusing scene. People of various ethnicities attempted to make sense of their losses and locate family members among the crowd. One refugee later recounted the confusion:

I met a forlorn Swedish woman weeping bitterly in agony of terror and bewilderment at the rush of people and horses. She was encumbered with a great bundle of bedding, carried a baby in her arms, and dragged several older children, who clung to her skirts. She had apparently given out dazed and exhausted, and seemed to read on an air-drawn portal, 'Ye, who enter here, leave all hope behind.'<sup>23</sup>

Past Lincoln Park, Loesch's group entered the heart of the burned district. Along Clark Street Loesch noted the increasing desolation, and south of North Avenue the damage was overwhelming:

It was a desert—a universal ruin with here and there only showing a stone or brick remnant of the wall of a church or of

21. Greeley, "Memories," 7.

22. Emil Rudolph, "Personal Recollections of Emil Rudolph," 1936, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, 13.

23. Greeley, "Memories," 7.

some former substantial business building, where a big city of people had lived in general happiness just three days before.<sup>24</sup>

Everything had burned. The sidewalks were gone, and even the streetcar rail was “twisted and warped like dead black snakes in agonies of contortion.”<sup>25</sup> Loesch saw at least two charred corpses before he reached the river. Loesch’s group crossed the Chicago River through the LaSalle Street Tunnel. They had to grope through the darkness, amid still-warm bricks. Emerging on the other side, in the downtown, Loesch saw “a mass of smoking ruins.”<sup>26</sup> Only one building stood at nearly full height, the First National Bank Building; it and all others were severely damaged. Bank vaults were exposed, their contents melted or vaporized. And it was here that Frank Loesch found his rock, and fell into despair.

On the West Side, which had remained untouched, there were serious humanitarian concerns: the area was flooded with refugees, many of whom were sleeping on the streets.<sup>27</sup> The waterworks were no longer functional, leaving the entire city parched. The restoration of the waterworks at first did little good: the water was contaminated. Chicagoans had to make do with well water and beer—and prices soared.<sup>28</sup> The fire had also destroyed the city’s gasworks. Rumors of arsonists abounded, and residents felt insecure, both in the immediate sense, and about the long-term health of their city. But the damage was not purely tangible or physical.

Along with the burned-out buildings, the fire had reduced the foundations of the city’s social structure to ashes. Prior to the fire Chicagoans of different groups wore different clothes, ate different foods, and

24. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 20.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*, 22.

27. Aurelia King to Mary E. Blatchford, letter, n.d., box 103, file 1725, Blatchford Family Papers, 1777–1987, Newberry Library, Chicago, 3, 6.

28. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 24; Caroline L. Hamilton, “Experiences during the Chicago Fire,” n.d., Chicago History Museum, Chicago, 11.

did different things; their material and cultural worlds were largely distinct.<sup>29</sup> St. Clare Street “was the boundary between two civilizations” according to one observer.<sup>30</sup> Mansions were on one side, shanties on the other. After the fire, there were no saloons or high-society clubs, and the rigid geographical lines separating different classes and ethnicities had literally melted away. Lincoln Park was full of people of all types; groups mixed that were not supposed to mix.

Still, amidst all the uncertainty and confusion, there were signs of life. Frank Loesch’s spirits were buoyed when he witnessed laborers clearing rubble, and the simple act of eating a slice of pie restored his hope. His ultimate destination, a warehouse turned into a makeshift telegram center, was a hive of activity. Lines of weary residents formed outside to send news to the outside world. Telegrams were free, at least briefly.<sup>31</sup> The city was beginning to stir anew, and so were its people. One of those people was Aurelia King.

## Part I: The Tenor of Her Way The Restoration of Cultural Exclusivity

Aurelia King, the wife of a wealthy Chicagoan, had fled the downtown, eventually reaching her mother’s residence in Elmhurst, a suburb far west of the city. Her family’s wealth was, to the best of her knowledge, entirely ruined by the disaster. On October 21 she wrote to a friend how deeply unsettled she was by her recent experiences. Aurelia’s candid letter grants insight into the mind of an elite sufferer. She does not write specifically of loss in wealth; rather, she writes of her lost things: silverware and sewing needles, her clothes, the fine food her children had come to expect. These were the hallmarks of her elite life, and their loss was traumatic: “To tell the truth,” she wrote, “I have been and still am so bewildered that I can not think nor write... it seems to me I can never resume the tenor of my way.”<sup>32</sup>

29. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 11.

30. Furness, “Autobiography,” 2.

31. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 23.

32. King to Blatchford, n.d., Blatchford Family Papers, 4.

In the weeks after the Great Fire elites like King endeavored to restore some of the tenor of their way. The full restoration of their wealth would come in time, with insurance negotiations and the gradual resumption of commerce.<sup>33</sup> In the meantime, clothing and appearances, shelter, travel, and ad hoc cultural institutions restored some of the exclusive and refined elements of their old world. Clothing and appearances were the first concern. The fire had struck in the middle of the night, forcing many to flee in their nightgowns. There were no fresh supplies of clothing for many refugees until days after the fire. They were dirty and covered with ash—they all looked poor. The effect was shocking. When Mary Blatchford, one of King's friends, arrived at her safe haven, her aunt "gaze[d] at us in wonder."<sup>34</sup>

Bourdieu's claim that "the body is the most indisputable materialization of 'class taste'" was true in Gilded Age Chicago, where clothing played a significant role in distinguishing classes.<sup>35</sup> Mary Blatchford looked poor. Prior to the fire, the material worlds of the different social groups in Chicago had been distinct. An elite might sport a clean collar each day, while a factory worker would find such refinements impossible to achieve. Even if it would take time to restore entire wardrobes, moneyed Chicagoans could at least strive to keep up appearances. In Elmhurst, King and other women tried to resume their old society:

Imagine your friend Aurelia, for instance, with a thousand dollar India shawl ... and not a chemise to her back nor a pocket handkerchief to wipe the soot from her face. A friend of mine saved nothing but a white tulle dress, another lady has a pink

33. Generally, larger national firms, which had the capital to provide compensation, insured elites. Smaller local firms, which were not so well financed, insured nonelites; many went bankrupt after the fire, leaving their insured with nothing. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 77–78.

34. E. W. Blatchford and Mary E. Blatchford, "Memories of the Great Fire," 1921, box 9, folder 223, Blatchford Family Papers, 1777–1987, Newberry Library, Chicago, 13.

35. Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 120.

silk dress but no stockings. I went to town yesterday and was the envy and admiration of my Chicago friends because I had a clean collar and cuffs.<sup>36</sup>

These women still presented themselves, one to another, in the manner they had before the fire, with the same expectations of grooming. Every new article of clothing, every clean collar and cuff, was celebrated as a restoration of the old status quo. This emphasis on clothing raised their morale, underscored the differences between them and their social inferiors, and secured the bonds between themselves. Even talking about clothing was a mark of privilege.

Where new clothing was lacking, elites could still maintain proper poise and social polish. Or, like the family of the wealthy surveyor Samuel Greeley, elites could avoid public presentations:

On Thursday, October 13, we all drove to Mr. [Wirt] Dexter's house where we were most hospitably entertained. We were still in the costumes in which we had left our house four days before, and at my wife's request our host kindly gave us a retired room, where we could hide our poverty from other guests who were dining there.<sup>37</sup>

To Greeley's wife it would have been embarrassing, if not unthinkable, to present herself and her family to a genteel audience without the proper refinements. The actions of the Greeleys' host are likewise noteworthy: she offered the family a private room, so that proper etiquette could be maintained and the Greeley family could hide their downtrodden state. It was important to continue acting as an elite.

By contrast, John Peter Schumacher, a Luxembourgian worker, housed refugees in his small house, with little concern over privacy and refinement, aside from the separation of men and women:

36. King to Blatchford, n.d., Blatchford Family Papers, 4.

37. Greeley, "Memories," 10.

Our house was filled with people we knew, who had lost their own homes and had no place to go. I cannot recall how many there were, but we were so crowded that we slept on the floor covered with thick straw and ticks, lined up on both sides, with our heads to the wall, and our feet meeting in the center of the room. In another room the women slept in the same way.<sup>38</sup>

Lodgings provided a second way in which elites could restore social distinction. Mary Blatchford's experience offers a sharp contrast with Schumacher's. After the fire, she and her children traveled to Evanston to find her Aunt Emily. Her aunt, who ran a boarding school for young women, dismissed her students, and their "cottage" became the Blatchford family residence. This episode illustrates two ways in which the elite Blatchfords reasserted their social position. First, and in contrast to the Schumachers or refugees housed in barracks, the Blatchfords' Evanston cottage was not a temporary structure, it was a home, suitable to their station, where they could rebuild a bourgeois domestic life. It was sufficiently comfortable and private that the Blatchfords were content to reside there for several years, even after their wealth had returned. Second, the Blatchfords took the cottage away from school girls. The Blatchfords' finances were now indistinguishable from the girls,<sup>39</sup> but they lacked the Blatchfords' privileged connections and were cavalierly thrust aside. The eviction had dual meaning: *to* grant themselves a home, they had evicted their social inferiors and thus reasserted their supremacy; and *by* possessing a home, they had been able to publicly resume their genteel lifestyle.

Many elites used domestic life to reestablish their former lives. King stayed with family in Elmhurst.<sup>40</sup> Caroline Hamilton found refuge with aunts and uncles, who watched her children while a friend ferried her

38. John Peter Schumacher, "The Memoirs of John Peter Schumacher," ca. 1940, manuscript Alpha2 S, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, 35.

39. In fact their factory had survived, though none of them were aware of this at the time. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 27–28.

40. King to Blatchford, n.d., Blatchford Family Papers, 4.

about town to protect her furniture.<sup>41</sup> Before arriving at the Dexter residence, Samuel Greeley's family first traveled a great distance to rest comfortably at the Emmanuel School for Boys.<sup>42</sup> Greeley makes frequent reference to wealthy neighbors and associates, all ready to host and entertain elite refugees.<sup>43</sup> These connections allowed elites to recover from the fire in relative comfort and to participate quickly in proper domestic culture.

Another option for wealthy families was to leave Chicago. Lawyer William Furness journeyed with his family to Philadelphia, and Greeley sent his family to Boston.<sup>44</sup> Family patriarchs remained in or quickly returned to Chicago to see to business interests. William Furness returned not three weeks after depositing his family on the East Coast, as did Samuel Greeley. The Blatchford family stayed in nearby Evanston, while the father, E. W. Blatchford, commuted to Chicago to secure his business and public interests.

Those who stayed, such as Greeley, bemoaned the loss of high culture: "With the theatres and public halls all destroyed, families scattered and society largely broken up, few, if any, public amusements were offered,

41. Hamilton, "Experiences," 9, 19–20. During the fire, a scarcity of carriages and the danger of transporting goods brought about a steep increase in price. Many elite accounts mention price increases in outraged terms, surprised that they were unable to find or afford a means to save their property. Elites accused teamsters and other carriage drivers of enriching themselves by the elites' misfortune. Within days of the fire, the city acted to revoke the license of any teamster found to be charging more than the normal fare. O. W. Clapp to the Borrowed Time Club, reminiscences, April 18, 1914, Chicago History Society, Chicago, 3; 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), 17.

42. Greeley, "Memories," 9.

43. *Ibid.*, 6–10.

44. *Ibid.*, 10.

and little social life was possible.”<sup>45</sup> Despite the devastation, Chicago’s elites sought to resume their old habits in whatever way possible; Furness noted that when he arrived at St. Caroline’s Court, a hotel, the neighborhood ladies were paying polite calls to one another in the street, as if nothing unusual had happened.<sup>46</sup> On the North Side, elites formed a temporary “Anonymous Club” to fill the void left by the destruction of high-society venues. Member performed entertainment, funded the club, and brought food. Refreshments were limited to tea, coffee, bread, and butter, and, in deference to newly impoverished members, “formal evening costume” was banned.<sup>47</sup> If the decorum was simple, the entertainment was not: the Anonymous Club featured papers, plays, poems, games, burlesques, and tableaux. It met monthly until social life in Chicago had resumed to the point where it was no longer necessary.

The restoration of cultural hegemony in housing, travel, and entertainment helped elites to achieve self-recognition, to again feel comfortable and respectable. But the return of exclusivity and distinction also helped restore external recognition through class differentiation. Walking down the ashen remains of a street in fine, clean clothing signified to all that although elite property had been destroyed, elite status remained; an elite at the Anonymous Club was, once again, worlds apart from a refugee. These actions reinforced elite status to nonelites and were soon translated into political power. Blatchford was called to public service in the days following the fire:

A number of us were surprised one day by the service of the Sheriff’s Grand Jury summons, served by order of Judge Erastus S. Williams, demanding our presence, accompanied, as I remember, by a personal letter from the Judge himself in positive form, stating the supreme duty of the hour. In some way we got

45. *Ibid.*, 13.

46. Furness, “Autobiography.”

47. Greeley, “Memories,” 13.



a list of those summoned. It was truly a respectable company, and most of us acquainted with each other.<sup>48</sup>

The implication of this summons was clear: Chicago's elites would retain authority despite the disaster. The grand jury was not chosen by lot but from among Chicago's richest and most socially prominent citizens. This respectable group included "the President of our Banks," the vice president of a major railroad, and railroad industrialist George Pullman.<sup>49</sup> They were expected to mete out justice purely by virtue of their social standing. Blatchford had misgivings about the "legal propriety of such proceedings," and his doubts were probably well founded. But the legitimacy of the grand jury was less relevant than its status-granting capacity: Blatchford and his companions were chosen because their public position on the jury served as reminder that elites would retain authority.<sup>50</sup>

## Part II: Relief and Restoration

### The Institutional Response

Elites found another means to distinguish themselves from nonelites by taking over the public-relief effort. In the days following the fire elites had leaned on private and personal networks to restore their cultural capital in housing, travel, and entertainment. When elites decided to lead the public relief effort they deployed their networks of privilege in an external context by exerting influence, if not control, over the government. They first wrest control of the relief effort from the public-private authority, called the Citizens' Committee,<sup>51</sup> whose egalitarian efforts

48. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 42.

49. *Ibid.*, 43.

50. Blatchford also inspected and validated applications for railroad tickets on behalf of George Pullman and became an agent of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, which led the post-fire relief effort.

51. The Citizens' Committee was also called the "General Relief Committee." I will use Citizens' Committee throughout.

they found dissatisfying. Then, through a private philanthropy, the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, they administered relief aid themselves, based on class. A highly paternalistic General Plan of Relief applied to the city's working masses, and a more discrete and preferential Bureau of Special Relief catered to the city's elite.

Which institution should helm the relief effort was not immediately clear. Some institutions could be ruled out: lesser charity organizations, like churches or benevolent societies, lacked the resources and reach to distribute vast sums across a large area. This left broader charities and the city's government. On Monday morning, October 9, Charles C. P. Holden, president of the Common Council created the Citizens' Committee, which was composed of aldermen and an unspecified number of private citizens from the city's three divisions, presumably North, West, and South.<sup>52</sup> Aldermen who represented nonelite and poor neighborhoods would have a say in the distribution of relief supplies.<sup>53</sup> Roswell B. Mason, the mayor, arrived later to the meeting and pledged "the faith and credit of the city of Chicago" to "the preservation of order,... the relief of suffering,... [and] the protection of property."<sup>54</sup> On October 11, the not yet fully staffed committee published a broadside directed to the newly impoverished.<sup>55</sup> The government established distribution points, fixed bread prices, and requested military intervention for the maintenance of public order. It would also revoke the license of any teamster who charged any more than "the regular fare" and closed all saloons in the city at 9pm, which controlled nonelite activities more likely to create dissatisfaction among the elites.<sup>56</sup>

52. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 80.

53. *Ibid.*, 80–81.

54. "Rescue and Relief," *The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory: Chicago History Museum*, accessed July 25, 2015, <http://www.greatchicagofire.org/rescue-and-relief>.

55. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 80.

56. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 17.

The Citizens' Committee commandeered the relief effort as new material and resources started to stream into the city; the first supply train from St. Louis arrived on Tuesday, October 10, but its cargo was distributed in an ad hoc manner.<sup>57</sup> The committee's bureaucratic apparatus expanded to between eight and ten subcommittees, which rationalized distribution.<sup>58</sup> It established depots to store and distribute incoming resources<sup>59</sup> and negotiated with the railroads to provide free transit for fleeing refugees.<sup>60</sup> The committee also built temporary housing. Soon, over two hundred temporary shelters of various types and sizes had been planned. Some large barracks were completed in a few days. At the beginning of October, the government had taken the lead in the relief effort.

Mayor Mason, however, had other plans. Also on Monday the mayor met with J. W. Preston, the president of the Board of Trade, and O. W. Clapp, a businessman involved with the board. The mayor tried to convince Preston to lead the distribution of a segment of incoming donations, and the two nominated Clapp for the job. Clapp would later note that the men nominated him because he had lost his business. He was given a policeman's star, control over all distribution of charity on the South Side, and a verbal order from the mayor "to act on my own responsibility and not bother him."<sup>61</sup> But on Wednesday the mayor gave similar powers to the city's treasurer, who was put in charge of incoming monetary contributions, and the Citizens' Committee, which accepted and distributed in-kind donations.<sup>62</sup> This redundancy persisted, as Clapp ran his own relief operation in the South Side, apart from the committee.<sup>63</sup>

57. Furness, "Autobiography," 127.

58. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 81.

59. *Ibid.*

60. The railroads' rationale for agreeing to such a proposal remains unclear, though they quickly soured on the idea.

61. Clapp to the Borrowed Time Club, Chicago Historical Society, 4.

62. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 18.

63. Clapp to the Borrowed Time Club, Chicago Historical Society, 6. Clapp

Two days later, members of the private charity, the Chicago Relief and Aid Society, appealed to the mayor to let them lead the relief effort; he reversed course and gave the society authority over all relief.<sup>64</sup>

Within a week, Mason had divested the government (and thereby, the public) of control over the relief effort in favor of private elite efforts outside of public control and scrutiny. During its short life, the Citizens' Committee had begun considerable relief efforts, and its bylaws included the involvement of prominent citizens. If the same prominent citizens were involved in the public committee and the private society, then abandonment of the committee can be seen as a method to *exclude* public servants, namely, the aldermen.<sup>65</sup> By excluding aldermen from the relief effort, the wider public, particularly the more downtrodden elements, were also denied input.<sup>66</sup> City aldermen were elected by local constituencies, ensuring that, at least on some level, all of the city's cultural and economic groups were represented in the city's Common Council. Without their presence in the relief administration, many less powerful constituencies—those who were not wealthy enough to join the Relief and Aid Society's cadre of philanthropists—lost their voice. On the other side, elites were concerned that they would be treated the same as the poor by the Citizens' Committee: "Bounty fell upon the deserving and undeserving, as certainly as that the rain falls upon the just and the unjust ... there was neither the leisure nor disposition for careful scrutiny."<sup>67</sup>

managed the South Side distribution almost as a private fiefdom, subject to no oversight. Neither the Citizens' Committee nor the Relief and Aid Society audited his ledgers. *Ibid.*, 8–9.

64. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Chicago Relief: First Special Report of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society* (Chicago: Culver, Page, Hoyne & Co, 1871), 3; "Rescue and Relief," *The Great Chicago Fire*.

65. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 83.

66. *Ibid.*, 81–85.

67. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 11.

Aurelia King referred to the initial distribution as "misapplied." Her husband, the president of the Relief and Aid Society, agreed with her.<sup>68</sup>

E. W. Blatchford praised the Relief and Aid Society as an "honored" and "old," chartable organization, both of which are hardly true.<sup>69</sup> The society was chartered by the State of Illinois in 1857 in an effort to unite and coordinate the city's smaller private charities.<sup>70</sup> It remained dormant until the late 1860s. In 1867 the society finally had a headquarters, met, and released an annual report, which is called, the "First Report."<sup>71</sup>

This largely derelict organization was now responsible for handling millions of dollars in cash and in-kind gifts and for caring for tens of thousands of sufferers.<sup>72</sup> It was given ultimate authority over the relief effort based on the prestige of its board of directors. The names of many Chicago luminaries, such as George Pullman, Marshall Field, and Joseph T. Ryerson, graced the roster.<sup>73</sup> The relief effort would benefit from their talents and connections as administrators in the task of distributing aid. George Pullman, for example, was given oversight over the relief effort's connection with the railroads, particularly the production and distribution of free passes.<sup>74</sup> This authority was largely symbolic, as much of the bureaucratic legwork was done by other parties; still, Pullman's

68. King to Blatchford, n.d., Blatchford Family Papers, 6.

69. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 40.

70. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 4.

71. Otto M. Nelson, "The Chicago Relief and Aid Society, 1850-1874," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 59, no. 1 (Spring 1966): 51-52.

72. Resources poured into the city in the following months, from people, cities, and countries. The relief effort possessed \$2,485,885 by November 18, 1871, and cash contributions were \$4,820,148 in 1874. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 439.

73. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 32.

74. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 40.

connections were frequently employed in first several days.<sup>75</sup> Samuel Greeley's claim that the society was given authority "by common consent" seems to be an overstatement, still, there is little evidence of any major conflict.<sup>76</sup> The aldermen retired to their normal duties, and the relief effort was effectively privatized, leaving it in the hands of a few wealthy philanthropists, with the nominal cooperation of the mayor.

The shift to a privately controlled relief effort was not a radical move in the nineteenth century. Chicago operated under a political system later known as segmentation, a complex scheme of private initiative and public-works finance, for much of the nineteenth century. Segmentation left much of the political control of the city in the hands of property owners, who were able to manipulate the system to their advantage.<sup>77</sup> Under segmentation property owners dictated an area's public improvements by petition to the local government; approved projects were financed by a special property-assessment tax. Though segmentation was on the decline by the time of the fire, it was still operative and property owners remained trustees of the public interest.<sup>78</sup> Mayor Mason's decision to cede control of the fire relief to a private organization was not an aberration, but in keeping with common political practice. The prominent citizens whose property taxes had improved the city undoubtedly thought they had the strongest claim to directing its recovery.

Even if the privatization of power in nineteenth-century Chicago was commonplace, the coup was still significant. The movement from a public-private partnership to a private organization shifted the priorities of the relief effort from the equal distribution of relief toward the renewal of class distinctions. Though the Relief and Aid Society claimed, and indeed was ordered, to take the entire city's concerns to heart, its manner was paternalistic and sometimes oblivious to various communities'

75. *Ibid.*, 40–42.

76. Greeley, "Memories," 13.

77. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 76–77; 116–18.

78. *Ibid.*, 234, 237–38, 243.

needs. Its elite leadership had a profound impact on the manner in which relief was distributed, and what groups received the most aid.<sup>79</sup>

As soon as the society gained control of the relief effort the railroads abruptly withdrew their offer of free transit.<sup>80</sup> The society then worked with George Pullman to give free transit only to those unfit for work (widows, children, and the infirm); several weeks later, the program was cancelled entirely.<sup>81</sup> The society blamed the poor for abusing free rail passes, and the termination avoided the "danger of undeserving persons," who were "imposing upon the generosity and good nature of the railroad companies."<sup>82</sup> Blatchford, as a society official, echoed this claim: "a huge impouring [*sic*] of people from distant points... took advantage of the 'free ride' to visit distant friends."<sup>83</sup> By November 18 the railroads had issued six thousand passes, and as many as twenty thousand people had left the city.<sup>84</sup> The city could ill afford an exodus of laborers needed for reconstruction.

The society also took a new approach to housing. The Citizens' Committee had addressed homelessness with large barracks, but the

79. The firemen's fund illustrated what might have happen if the Citizens' Committee had been left in control. The fire department created a commission to reimburse firemen whose own property was lost while they fought the blaze. The commission included both management and members of the rank and file of the fire department. Thomas Barry, a former boilermaker, and David Kenyon, a former carpenter, were entrusted to distribute the aid equitably, together with a member of the Board of Police and the assistant marshal. *Report of the Board of Police*, 16, 26–86.

80. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 40; Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 20–21.

81. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 40; Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 21.

82. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 20.

83. Blatchford, "Memories," Blatchford Family Papers, 40.

84. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 20–21; Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 310.

society's trustees feared so many unemployed living in close proximity:

Some rude barracks were, at the outset, put up by the Citizens' Committee, ... but such structures were open to grave objections as the homes of forty or fifty thousand people in the winter. So large a number brought into promiscuous and involuntary association, would almost certainly engender disease and promote idleness, disorder and vice ... To construct barracks for the homeless, therefore, was only to postpone the problem for a few months, to find us then with a large class of permanent poor ... demoralized by a winter of dependence.<sup>85</sup>

To avoid this "winter of dependence," the society decided that barracks should be reserved for former tenement dwellers who would be strictly supervised by police and public-health officials.<sup>86</sup> For all others the society would facilitate the construction of small individual dwellings, with construction materials distributed to laborers and artisans.<sup>87</sup> Dwellings came in two standard sizes (one for families larger than five and another, for smaller families) and came with a small assortment of furniture and an oven.<sup>88</sup> They were not free. Those who received housing assistance were expected to pay back three quarters of the cost within a year, effectively coercing occupants back into Chicago's now hungry labor market.<sup>89</sup> The society did not see this cost as a hardship, instead, it "frees him [the aid receiver] from being the recipient of public bounty [and] allowed him to retain an honorable feeling of independence."<sup>90</sup>

85. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 8.

86. *Ibid.*, 17.

87. A widow or infirm male would receive assistance with construction. *Ibid.*, 16.

88. *Ibid.*

89. The society did not force aid recipients to pay, possibly for legal reasons. *Ibid.*

90. *Ibid.*, 17.



The Relief and Aid Society's concern was consistent with late-nineteenth-century notions of reform and moral uplift of the poor.

Train tickets and housing were part of General Plan, which the society created a few days after the fire and followed throughout the relief effort.<sup>91</sup> The plan had several guiding precepts. First, aid was not charity. Aid was given only to sufferers that the society deemed worthy.<sup>92</sup> This methodology was known as scientific charity, and it had a number of different goals and effects.<sup>93</sup> In the case of housing, the worthiness criterion was expressed by the restricted nature of the dwellings given to applicants: individual houses were not free, and the barracks were not free of intrusive stipulations.<sup>94</sup>

Second, aid was conditional. Even necessities like food were given on the condition that the receivers worked or were looking for work.<sup>95</sup> The society removed families from relief rosters once they were deemed self-sufficient.<sup>96</sup> Society purchasing agent, Thomas Butler Carter, recalled the rationale behind this compulsion:

Work was abundant, and all but the sick and lazy were able to take care of themselves. Of lazy cranks, the city was full. Thousands of able bodied men would not work as long as the Relief and Aid Society fed them.<sup>97</sup>

A family seeking aid had to register with a relief depot, which would record the family's name, address, and "other circumstances which could

91. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 92.

92. *Ibid.*, 89.

93. *Ibid.*, 88–89.

94. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 16–17.

95. *Ibid.*, 19.

96. Carter, "Some Facts," Thomas Butler Carter Papers, 60.

97. *Ibid.*

identify the applicant.”<sup>98</sup> To wean out the “lazy cranks,” the society employed “visitors” ensure that the aid receivers were not abusing its goodwill:

It is the business of the visitor to keep himself constantly informed as to all the persons who are thus entered in his district, and to make periodical returns at the office. He is to learn by observation and inquiry the exact condition of the registered; whether they are well or ill; whether they are idle or industrious whether they are voluntarily idle, in which case they are peremptorily cut from aid; whether they are entitled to entire or only partial support; whether they have other means of support than public bounty; and in short any circumstances in relation to their condition, or habits, or character which will be a guide as to the care which should be given them at the stations.<sup>99</sup>

Instances of fraud did occur; Thomas Butler Carter recalled several in which families signed up under different names at different stations, and managed for a short time to take supplies from each.<sup>100</sup>

Third, aid must prevent dependency. Barracks were avoided for fear of creating a “permanent poor” class; food and clothing were withheld due to concerns that the recipients might linger too long on the public weal. Implicitly behind the society’s fears was a desire to push laborers back into the capitalist economy quickly.<sup>101</sup> The rationale for this push was in part the elites’ moral values, which valorized work and discipline and dismissed anyone who preferred “to eat the bread of idleness rather than work for his own subsistence.”<sup>102</sup> Pragmatically, idle workers would have created turmoil in Chicago’s labor market; many of the chief beneficiaries of which were the elite employers whose names could be found

98. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 12.

99. *Ibid.*

100. Carter, “Some Facts,” Thomas Butler Carter Papers, 60.

101. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 90, 93.

102. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 22.

on the society's rolls. The cancellation of the railroad passes can be seen in this light: once the exit valve to the city was closed, nonelites would be compelled to find work.

The society's aid *was* generous. Each week a family of five (two adults, three children) received three pounds of pork, nine pounds of beef, a large quantity of flour, sugar, tea, potatoes, rice, beans, and dried apples. The total cost was just under two dollars. A family of five also received one ton of bituminous coal per month. Clothing and blankets were an immediate concern as the winter months drew closer.<sup>103</sup> When the supply of clothing was insufficient, aid receivers were given yard goods to sew clothing. Artisans and mechanics were given tools with which to resume their trades.<sup>104</sup>

Goods were distributed at relief stations throughout the city, which had been divided into five districts for this purpose. Each district was then subdivided further.<sup>105</sup> Supply stations were busy, and aid receivers often waited in long lines.<sup>106</sup> The registration process could be long and confusing, occasionally forcing sufferers to go to multiple stations.<sup>107</sup> Clapp, who ran one of these supply stations (albeit on his own terms), would later write: "Human nature was revealed to me as never before."<sup>108</sup>

The General Plan's paternalistic generosity towards the poor was also heavily tinged with classism. It attempted in its patrons' minds to teach enrollees self-sufficiency, but for elites, who did not understand

103. As part of the gendered aspect of the relief clothing came from women's benevolent groups: "In this work great assistance is rendered by associations of ladies... all of whom employ a large number of sewing women, thrown out of employment by the fire, in making garments, bed comforters, bedticks, and other articles." *Ibid.*, 16.

104. *Ibid.*, 23.

105. *Ibid.*, 12.

106. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 87.

107. *Ibid.*, 86–87.

108. Clapp to the Borrowed Time Club, Chicago Historical Society, 7.

themselves in need of such instruction, the General Plan's paternalistic restrictions and uniformity of aid were cumbersome and insulting. Elites expected more than equal aid; they expected favoritism. Clapp encountered this as a distribution official:

[There was] but one fault finder, an eliete [*sic*] Clergyman who demanded better goods, because he had a high class of parishioners. Upon his request I sent his church the last of the Warehouse supplies that Wednesday evening at about 6 P. M. He wanted better quality delivered. Being informed I had sent all I had in store he departed with bent head.<sup>109</sup>

The minister expected superior aid supplies due to his congregation's social status, and Clapp did not protest the minister's claims to favoritism but did his best to fulfill them. Neither thought that anything was unjust about such a diversion; indeed, both expected that elites should have their wants satisfied.

It was difficult for elite favoritism to take place within the confines of the General Plan. Registration and visitation were mandatory, along with the coercion to rejoin the workforce. A more systemic solution was necessary for elite Chicagoans:

Among the sufferers by the fire is a large class of persons who, it was soon apparent, would not be reached by the established method of relief, but who were the least accustomed to deprivation and hardship. They shrunk from any exposure of their poverty, though it was no fault of their own, and, though sufferers in common with tens of thousands of others, from a great public calamity, they would perish rather than appear as the recipient of public bounty. If they were to be helped at all, they must be helped in some special way.<sup>110</sup>

109. *Ibid.*

110. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 17.

Key to the society's understanding is that the beneficiaries of special relief would not be "laboring people":

There was a class of sufferers by the fire, consisting of persons before the event in comfortable circumstances, who were suddenly reduced to conditions of the greatest privation and distress. This class of our population were the keenest sufferers of all. They were not accustomed to exposures and hardships which were easily borne by the laboring people, and at the same time the change in their condition and circumstances was greater and more disastrous. They were borne in a single night from homes of comfort and plenty into absolute destitution.<sup>111</sup>

Accepting public relief would embarrass elite citizens to such a point that some would rather suffer than seek out aid; to admit to their poverty publically would be to "shock" their "sensitiveness and reserve."<sup>112</sup> Motivated by "public opinion, as well as private feeling" towards members of their own class, the society created the Bureau of Special Relief, an autonomous body apart from the General Plan.<sup>113</sup>

As a tool of class differentiation, the Bureau of Special Relief was in many ways everything that the General Plan was not. The first, and largest, distinction was in the form of granted relief: where the General Plan granted relief in kind, the Bureau of Special Relief dispensed some of its aid in cash as a rent subsidy, which allowed elites to live apart from the General Plan's small shelters.<sup>114</sup> By late December it also dispersed cash for business purposes, including tools, machines, and professional books.<sup>115</sup>

111. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 198.

112. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 17.

113. *Ibid.*

114. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 196.

115. *Ibid.*, 200-1.

Second, elites could obtain Special Relief by written application through a church or fraternal society.<sup>116</sup> The private distribution further reinforced class differentiation: elite aid receivers avoided standing in the same lines as “the hundreds of very poor, degraded, and foreign applicants.”<sup>117</sup> Though the Bureau of Special Relief did investigate that funds were used properly, it did not repeatedly send General Plan visitors to evaluate the sufferer’s progress towards independence.<sup>118</sup> Instead, elites were granted privacy and discretion in their use of allotted funds.

Historians of the Great Fire have long thought that the Bureau of Special Relief served middle-class sufferers.<sup>119</sup> The bureau gave tools and machines to middle-class sufferers, particularly a program that granted (at a cost) sewing machines to women, thereby giving them “the means of immediate and comfortable subsistence.”<sup>120</sup> The final report of the Relief and Aid Society lists middle- or upper-middle-class professions, from bookbinders to dentists, as beneficiaries of Special Relief.<sup>121</sup>

The distribution of sewing machine was a flagship effort of the bureau. The program distributed 132 sewing machines between early October and November 18, 1871, and over five thousand by the end of 1873. The program reinforced notions of bourgeois female domesticity by enabling middle-class women to work from the home.<sup>122</sup> The program

116. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 17.

117. Reverend E. J. Goodspeed in Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 103.

118. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 198.

119. “The preservation and reconstruction of middle-class independence lay at the ideological core of Special Relief. Bureau policy reflected this commitment: reputations, social standing, and notoriously fragile middle-class constitutions all received a sort of protected status.” Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 102–3.

120. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 18.

121. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 201.

122. Stuart M. Blumin, *The Emergence of the Middle Class: Social Experience in the American City, 1760–1900* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 188.

targeted elites and deliberately excluded nonelites. Petitioners had to make a formal application and provide "satisfactory evidence that they had been sufferers by the fire."<sup>123</sup> The women were expected to pay between twenty and twenty-five dollars upfront as a "first installment," about half the cost of the machine,<sup>124</sup> with the assumption that they would pay the remainder of the cost; about half of the sewing machines thus distributed were later marked as "Full Paid."<sup>125</sup> By requiring upfront payment, the bureau prevented the destitute from subscribing to the program; instead, they were given different options, such as employment as wage laborers for the society.<sup>126</sup>

According to the Bureau of Special Relief's ledger (see Table 1) the cost of sewing machines was second only to direct monetary aid ("Special Relief"). Did the Special Relief money go to elite sufferers as well? The bureau's nationality rosters list the top four ethnicities to receive Special Relief as Germans (5,013), Irish (4,280), American (most likely native-born whites) (2,933), and English (1,385).<sup>127</sup> Chicagoans of English and German descent were more likely to be middle class, or at least skilled workers.<sup>128</sup> Irish immigrants were more likely to be unskilled laborers, though a small percentage was middle class.<sup>129</sup> According to census and population data 31 percent of the city's work-

123. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *First Report*, 18–19.

124. *Ibid.*, 18; Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 105.

125. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 202.

126. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 105.

127. Chicago Relief and Aid Society, *Report of Disbursement*, 202.

128. John B. Jentz, "Class and Politics in an Emerging Industrial City: Chicago in the 1860s and 1870s," *Journal of Urban History* 17, no. 3 (May 1991): 232–33.

129. The Irish on the Special Relief rolls were probably middle class. Nonelite Irish were often illiterate or lacked the connections or membership in high-status fraternal and social organizations that a successful Special Relief application required. *Ibid.*, 231–33.

**Table 1: Abstract of Disbursements on Account of Special Relief, November 6, 1871–May 1, 1873.**

*Source: Chicago Relief and Aid Society, Report of Disbursement, 201*

Special Relief	\$281,289.03
Sewing Machines	\$138,855.26
Rent	\$6,371.80
Tools	\$10,742.00
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$437,458.09</b>

force was native-born, or “American.”<sup>130</sup> It is possible that the Relief Effort was less precise about its categorization of “Americans” than was the census, especially given its statistical preference for family and community units over individuals; some aid receivers were likely identified with the ethnicities of their parents and neighbors, and their addresses. The “Americans” aided by the Bureau of Special Relief could instead have consisted of another group, in addition to native-born laborers. Most elites were native-born.<sup>131</sup> It seems possible that some share of Special Relief money, the quantity of which it is difficult to ascertain, found its way to those elites, thus easing the “private feeling” that was the cause for the society’s heartache.

The Bureau of Special Relief was about creating distinction and finding a way to aid elites (and middle-class people sharing in their bourgeois mores) without wounding their pride. In treating elites separately from the working masses, Special Relief bolstered their claims to privilege. It was thus part of a larger pattern in the Relief and Aid Society’s work: different classes were to be treated differently. Equality in relief was neither expected nor given. Chicago’s elites had already regained some of their old cultural power through the use of their networks of

130. Many native-born laborers had foreign-born parents and lived in immigrant communities. *Ibid.*, 231.

131. Jentz, “Class and Politics,” 234. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 11.



privilege; it remained for the city's institutions to recognize that, despite the losses, the social position of Chicago's upper classes had not been harmed. This they did; first by assuming control, and then by launching a private relief effort categorized by its recognition of class.

### Part III: The Burnt Records Cases and the Reestablishment of Property

Although political power is generally not tangible,<sup>132</sup> in Gilded Age Chicago social, cultural, *and* political power was notably material in one aspect—property.<sup>133</sup> Property ownership acted as a stand-in for investment in the community; the more property one possessed, the greater political power one held.<sup>134</sup> Substantial property owners, like the Relief and Aid Society philanthropists, were expected to play a large role in civic life. But property, and more importantly, the records describing property ownership, had been destroyed by the fire.

The loss was far more pernicious than the destruction of buildings. Indeed, reconstruction was a quick process for some: famously, Potter Palmer ordered a new, more lavish Potter House immediately after the Great Fire. Potter had the connections and resources to rebuild; he was also lucky to know where to rebuild. The fire had wiped out many of the recognizable elements of the city's grid-based lot system.<sup>135</sup> Before serious reconstruction could begin, the grid would have to be re-platted. Years later, the surveyor Samuel Greeley described the scene:

It soon became evident that a task of great magnitude, difficulty and delicacy had fallen upon the surveyors of Chicago. The boundary line of thousands of lots in the burned district

132. Woodward, *Understanding Material Culture*, 120.

133. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 17.

134. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

135. Greeley, "Memories," 10.

must be retraced for re-occupation and rebuilding; and this must be done in streets still hot and smoking, and that would burn and smoke for months. Land marks were destroyed or covered by fallen ruins; and worse than all, the recorded plats, maps, and deeds of property in the city and county were burned.<sup>136</sup>

As with the loss of merchants' ledger books, the destruction of paper instruments undermined the system by which markets functioned. Without ledger books merchants were unsure of their pecuniary standing, and with the destruction of land titles came precariousness in the real-estate market. Merchants, aware of their dependence upon ledger books, went to great lengths to save them. Because the same transactions would appear in both the creditor and debtor's ledgers, enough information survived to restore the status quo.<sup>137</sup> But the exchange of physical titles did not always accompany real-estate sales. For many property owners city hall processed the only legal titles, which the fire had destroyed.

Elites quickly turned to the courts to reconfirm land ownership and to replace missing documents through arbitration. The courts were removed from the public; their legal practices could be difficult to understand for the uninitiated; and judges and lawyers were elites with close ties to other prominent Chicagoans. These factors combined to make the "Burnt Records" cases, as they became known, very friendly to elite interests, and almost entirely free of contention.

The Burnt Records cases began in 1872 and continued to be heard until the late 1940s in the Cook County Court of Chancery, a court of

136. *Ibid.*

137. Merchants made grueling efforts to reconcile surviving financial accounts: "Mr. Bowen was the director, and he sent me there to become a book-keeper, while still trying to get some kind of 'balance inventory' off from the old books of the C. C. Canal & Dock, as saved from the fire, and checked partially by the papers left at Calumet. ... It was a grinding job ... The bank officers and the tellers['] counter was crowded into the two large connecting parlors of the residence, and I was one of six book-keepers occupying the dining room." George van Zandt, "My Early Years in Chicago: George Van Zandt Memoirs," 1928-1929, manuscript Alpha I V, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, 23.

equity.<sup>138</sup> Courts of equity involve arbitration, unlike the plaint and defense of common-law courts. In the Burnt Records cases, equity provided flexible, even haphazard, proceedings, which involved only testimony of the interested (and sometimes uninterested) parties. Justice was dispensed summarily, without jury trials, which excluded the public from the procedures. Casework was conducted by the masters in chancery, officials who brought cases before the court and verified relevant claims. In 1872 eight cases were heard, and three—*Schwab v. Cahill*, *Hapgood v. McArthur*, and *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.*—will be examined here.<sup>139</sup> Conducted during the time of the Relief and Aid Society's aid effort, these cases are equally a part of elite social restoration.

*Schwab v. Cahill* is the most representative of the Burnt Records cases. The petitioner, Charles H. Schwab, sought to verify title on land he had purchased from Joseph Cahill in 1871 for over thirteen thousand dollars.<sup>140</sup> Schwab, thirty six, would later serve as the city's comptroller and on the board of the World's Columbian Exposition.<sup>141</sup> Not long after the fire, he coowned Selz, Schwab & Co., a major shoe manufacturer.<sup>142</sup> The lot was located approximately at the intersection of State

138. "Equitable relief is generally available only when a legal remedy is insufficient or inadequate in some way. This could be when a claim involves a particular piece of real estate ... [I]n America some states created 'chancery courts' dealing with equitable relief only." "Equity: An Overview," *Cornell University Law School*, accessed July 24, 2015, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/equity>.

139. A note about sources: I chose these three cases because each represent a certain type of case and each is complete, except for *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.* Other Burnt Records cases are very fragmentary or lost. The archive is in no particular order, without paginations or titles. Therefore, I cite the case name only.

140. *Schwab v. Cahill*, Burnt Records Cases, Records and Archives of the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois (1872).

141. "Death of Charles H. Schwab," *Abendpost*, January 18, 1919, accessed in 2013, [http://flps.newberry.org/article/5418474\\_6\\_1123](http://flps.newberry.org/article/5418474_6_1123).

142. Mark R. Wilson, "Selz, Scwab & Co.," *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, 2004, accessed in 2013, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/2842.html>.

and Harrison Streets, then as now close to Chicago's downtown.<sup>143</sup> Fortunately for Schwab, though the property's title had been lost to the flames, the fire missed the lot by half a block.<sup>144</sup> There is little mention of *any* construction on the lot, which Schwab likely purchased for its location. He must have considered the lot valuable: his case was the second burnt records heard.<sup>145</sup>

The proceedings of Burnt Records cases were simple: each party testified before the court, either in person or in writing. The masters in chancery conducted examinations, which a clerk recorded partially. The court devoted the most time in tracing the legal history of the property. The sale of the property by Cahill to Schwab was not contested.<sup>146</sup> In fact, none of the property's history was disputed by the interviewed parties.<sup>147</sup> After hearing testimony, the court delivered a verdict and the matter was closed. The process took only a few days.

The harmonious nature of these proceedings begs the question of why property owners bothered to go to court in such haste. No one had threatened Schwab's claim to legal ownership. But the possession of property was an important aspect of social and political power, and Schwab's haste is part of the broader movement toward elite restoration. Though social distinction had been restored earlier through cultural and political means, the Burnt Records cases provided a more material and final assurance.

143. The plat was "the South half of the 23rd lot in block 137 in the School Section Addition to the city of Chicago." *Schwab v. Cahill* (1872).

144. "Before and After the Fire," *The University of Chicago Library*, accessed on July 22, 2015, <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/collections/maps/chifire>.

145. Index of Burnt Records Cases, Cook County, Illinois.

146. *Schwab v. Cahill* (1872).

147. Francis Cahill and Joseph Cahill acquired the property from P. Singh in 1865. When Francis died in 1868 his children inherited the land; Joseph Cahill, administrator of Francis's estate, sought to partition and sell the land. The lot was auctioned and Joseph Cahill made the winning, and perhaps only, bid. The children became beneficiaries to a six thousand five hundred dollar trust, half of the value of the sale.

All of the parties involved in the surviving Burnt Records cases had similar levels of wealth; cases that involved modest properties were conducted among parties of similar wealth.<sup>148</sup> *Schwab v. Cahill* was no exception: both Charles Schwab and Joseph Cahill were equally prosperous.<sup>149</sup> There are no examples of class-based exploitation: no elites usurped property from nonelites, or vice versa. Nonelites might have balked at the need to hire counsel, and for elites the returns on subverting nonelite holdings would hardly be worth the effort.

In 1872, only one Burnt Records cases, *Hapgood v. MacArthur*, was brought over title to commercial property, which involved a lot just to the east of the North Branch of the Chicago River.<sup>150</sup> The front was used for offices and storage and the rear for warehousing lumber and other materials. A previous owner, the Chicago Glass Company, had used the lot for industry.<sup>151</sup> *Hapgood v. McArthur*, like other Burnt Records cases, involved reestablishing the property's public record. The lot, which originally belonged to Mary Buckner, had been sold at some point to the

148. Other cases involved hundreds of dollars, rather than thousands. Burnt Records Cases, Cook County, Illinois.

149. Schwab was wealthy at the time of the proceedings. In 1868, Cahill repurchase the lot at auction for thirteen thousand one hundred dollars. As a beneficiary of the sale, half of this was returned to him, but he had to front six thousand five hundred for his deceased brother's children. Other Burnt Records Cases note when mortgages were involved; thus, it appears that he had over six thousand in capital.

150. Given the existing maps and fragmentary information about plot location recorded in the case, this seems to be the most likely location. The plat address is "the Young Subdivision of the East Half of the Northwest Quarter of Section 9 Township 39 North Range, Fountain [perhaps formation] 14[1?] East of the 3rd Principle Meridian." It is safe to assume that it means North Range 14. Given the nature of the property (warehousing lumber, office, storage), the location is probably downtown with river access, rather than the other possibilities: one to the west, close to Oak Park (Range 13) and the other further west (Range 12).

151. *Hapgood v. McArthur*, Burnt Records Cases, Records and Archives of the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois (1872).

Chicago Glass Company. On January 1, 1869, this company sold the property to Charles Hapgood and his manufacturing firm, Hapgood & Company.<sup>152</sup> After the fire Hapgood left Chicago for St. Louis, and his interest in the property diminished; Hapgood leased the property to John McArthur, who was the sole “resident defendant” at the time of the case.<sup>153</sup> McArthur did not obtain a demurrer to Hapgood’s claim to ownership, so the case was a default much like *Schwab v. Cahill*.<sup>154</sup>

Mary Buckner played a peripheral role in the case. The court repeatedly mentions that Buckner was “supposed” by some to have made a claim on the property.<sup>155</sup> Buckner did not possess title, and her last recorded assertion of claims was in 1857. Despite the court’s inferences that she had standing, she did not, ultimately, pursue the claim that she was “supposed” to have.<sup>156</sup>

The uncertainty over Buckner’s actions lays bare the possibility that a person could bring forward a claim, real or imaginary, that was unverifiable. By their very nature, the Burnt Records cases relied entirely upon testimony, and thus, some degree of honesty, or at least authority, on the part of the witnesses. In the majority of the 1872 cases, such confidence was not misplaced. But not every case was uncontested, and not all litigants were honest. The destruction of the city’s records created an unprecedented opportunity. *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.* disrupts the trend of harmonious, undisputed proceedings that characterizes the other Burnt Records cases of 1872.

Like *Schwab v. Cahill*, this case involved reestablishing title, based on the testimony of previous owners and their families. The land was located south of the city, probably in the area bounded by 89th and 91st

152. Hapgood, thirty-six, identified himself as a manufacturer. *Ibid.*

153. McArthur’s residency suggests that the industrial buildings no longer existed. *Ibid.*

154. *Ibid.*

155. *Ibid.*

156. *Ibid.*

Streets and Jeffery and Yates Avenues.<sup>157</sup> A great deal of the proceedings traced the history of the lot's ownership. The Jessups, Ebenezer, Julia, and their daughter, had obtained the land from Samuel T. Bartol in the 1850s. Ebenezer died sometime in the late 1850s, and his widow, Julia, was the executrix of his estate.<sup>158</sup> Unlike the litigants in *Schwab v. Cabill*, Julie found the case proceedings confusing. Before relocating to Rensselaer, New York, she gave the land in trust to Thomas Lord; Julie later expressed surprise when Lord was able to sell the property.<sup>159</sup> The property changed hands several times, finally culminating in a sale to Samuel Pike.

Pike appears to have desired the property for some time.<sup>160</sup> And though he eventually did purchase it, he seems to have seen, in the destruction of the public records, an opportunity to gain *something*. What, exactly, is unclear.<sup>161</sup> Perhaps he was attempting to recuperate funds he lost in obtaining it. Pike asserted that at some point after obtaining the property in the 1850s Ebenezer Jessup had promised Pike some claim to the property.<sup>162</sup> The court and Julie seemed skeptical of his claim. Each time it was brought up, Julia asked that the court demand a strict standard of proof from Pike, as she had no recollection of any deal between Pike

157. The plat address is "the east half of the north 20 acres of the south half of the east half of the northeast quarter of Section 1, township 37, north of range 14, east of the 3rd principle meridian, in the County of Cook, IL." *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.*, Burnt Records Cases, Records and Archives of the Clerk of the Circuit Court of Cook County, Illinois (1872).

158. Ibid.

159. Ibid.

160. The records suggest that Pike had tried to obtain the land from Ebenezer Jessup. Ibid.

161. Samuel Pike's testimony does not survive.

162. It is not clear whether Pike knew Jessup personally, though it seems likely, at least according to Pike's assertion, that their friendship (or at least acquaintanceship) was real. Ibid.

and her husband during her long marriage.<sup>163</sup> The value of the property was in the thousands of dollars, which made it potentially worthy of Pike's deception.<sup>164</sup>

The outcome of *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.* does not survive, but the tenor of the existing testimony suggests that the court did not side with Pike. His claim was unverifiable, and it was questioned by the original owner's widow, on whose testimony the case relied. Burnt Records cases were contests of authority—authority that Pike appeared to lack. The courts were elite institutions, and elites could appeal to their authority in reestablishing their titles, confident that an elite judge would be sympathetic. Pike, on the other hand, was not seen as trustworthy, he appeared to lack the authority necessary to make a bold claim.

Throughout the nineteenth century owning property in Chicago gave elites not only wealth but also access to cultural capital and political power.<sup>165</sup> With the Burnt Records cases they moved quickly to remove any ambiguity concerning their ownership and, thus, restored an important pillar of their status and privilege. The Burnt Records Cases carried on for decades, eventually tapering off in the mid-twentieth century. Together with the Relief and Aid Society's attempts to instill certainty into Chicago's tenuous social world, the cases had fulfilled their purpose by the end of first year of cases: property, once the bastion of social power in Chicago, could become so again.

163. *Ibid.*

164. Although the value of the property was never mentioned in *Wheeler/Smith/Hill v. King Jr.*, in subsequent cases the property was valued at \$6,675.

165. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 76–77; 116–18.



## Conclusion

Class privilege returned to Chicago. First, elites worked privately to regain their domestic footing; second, they commandeered the public institutions involved in relief; and third, they restored legal title to their property holdings. Chicagoans like William Furness called their families back; the Blatchford family returned from Evanston and rebuilt their mansion; and even Frank Loesch, the ambitious clerk, could continue his rise, eventually heading the Chicago Bar Association. The Great Fire and its aftermath are noteworthy illustrations of the social world of the Gilded Age. No surviving evidence suggests that the fire caused any upheaval in the city's social world. Although nonelites increasingly applied to the Special Relief for aid, their applications were largely ignored or rejected without notable outcry.<sup>166</sup> Although Einhorn credits the fire with abetting the rise of a "new public interest" governmental philosophy, she notes that the propagators of this philosophy were the same group of elites in power before the blaze.<sup>167</sup>

Historians such as Einhorn or Sawislak imagine that class in Chicago existed solely in terms of wealth, property ownership, ethnicity, and political power. The restoration of cultural capital by elites after the Great Fire illustrates the shortcomings of this perspective. There was an Anonymous Club long before there were Burnt Records trials. Chicago's elites had held a considerable degree of cultural dominance before the fire; they restored this cultural capital quickly after the fire, before institutional apparatuses could even begin to respond in a meaningful way. In so doing, they did not encounter any substantial resistance. Chicago, before the fire, had been a city of boundaries. This had been their world. And ultimately, after such a disaster, they simply wanted things to return to normal.

166. Sawislak, *Smoldering City*, 106.

167. Einhorn, *Property Rules*, 234, 237–38, 243.

Frank Loesch did not disagree. Walking further south after sitting on his rock, Loesch saw a pie in the window of a bakery, and had an epiphany:

Fearing the price would be more than two dollars, I entered with some timidity to inquire. Finding the price to be only twenty cents, which I joyfully paid, my courage rose to the point of asking permission to eat the whole pie in the shop. This being courteously granted, I promptly disposed of said pie with no crumbs left and with remarkable mental results. I walked on with the most intense feeling of pride that Chicago would come back and I must stay right here.<sup>168</sup>

Stay he did. And much as he imagined, Chicago—its shanties and its mansions, its promise and its inequality—did return. ○

168. Loesch, *Personal Experiences*, 22–23.

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