

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Elmhurst and the Great Chicago Fire

On October 8, 1871, a fire tore through the city of Chicago. Known as the Great Chicago Fire, approximately 300 people were killed, and thousands of buildings were destroyed in the disaster. In the aftermath of the blaze, more than 100,000 people from all walks of life were displaced from their homes. The nearby town of Elmhurst, only recently renamed after having been known as Cottage Hill for decades, was the site of several country estates for wealthy Chicago businessmen, as well as the second stop heading west on the Chicago and North Western Railroad. With such ties to the city, the small town could not escape the impact of the fire that destroyed much of Chicago.

On the night of the fire, the residents of Elmhurst could see the conflagration from their homes. The fire “was so brilliant that we read newspapers at midnight by its light 15 miles away,” wrote [John R. Case](#), whose father operated a cherry farm in town.

“After that fire, all available houses in Elmhurst were occupied by refugees, some of whom were fortunate enough to have summer homes in Elmhurst.” Indeed, Chicago residents fleeing the fire began pouring into Elmhurst the next day. Henry King, a wealthy clothing merchandiser, fled with his wife and children to their summer home, [Clover Lawn](#), on the corner of Cottage Hill and St. Charles Road. His wife Aurelia wrote several weeks later to a friend about their time in Elmhurst in the aftermath of the fire:



*Clover Lawn at the time of the King family residence, M2013.1.105*

*The next day came the anxiety as to the fate of friends, the thrilling accounts of different friends, inquiry into losses, etc., and to this day the excitement increases rather than diminishes. There is so much to see and hear. Our house is full—people coming all the time to talk over respective losses—seamstresses, teachers, workwomen whom we have known, following us out to know what they shall do, what we can do for them. We are much more fortunate than most of our friends in having a roof to cover us, and thankful are we for it, though when we go to Chicago and see the desolation there, see the houseless, homeless creatures there, we feel almost ashamed to be so comfortable.*

Other large estate homes belonging to [Thomas Barbour Bryan](#) and Jedediah Lathrop were opened to friends and family, where people slept on floors and billiard tables. “We came directly out here to the Bryan's & have been here ever since, most kindly cared for,” wrote Anna Higginson in November 1871, after she and her husband George lost their home on the city’s north side. Farmhouses in York and Addison Townships were full of Chicagoans who lost their homes in the fire. Henry King was the

president of the Chicago Relief and Aid Society and conducted business from his Elmhurst home until he was able to find and open a new store in the city the following month.



*Cook County Courthouse Finial in Wilder Park in 2021, M2021.2.367*

As time went on, many families who sought refuge in Elmhurst, including George and Anna Higginson, began to put down roots in the community. Growth in the town had been stagnant in the 1860s. “The town did not begin to grow to any appreciable extent until the great Chicago fire in 1871,” recalled early settler Frederick Bates. “Many new families came to Elmhurst, identifying themselves with it and contributing much to its upbuilding.” As Chicago rebuilt from the ashes, Elmhurst too emerged from the event a changed community.

A monument stands today in Elmhurst a reminder of the fire. An architectural finial salvaged from the destroyed Cook County Court House can be found across from the Wilder Park Conservatory, one of only two finials that remain accessible to the public—the other can be seen in Lincoln Park. It was acquired by Chicago ice magnate Seth Wadhams, who also lost his Chicago residence in the fire, to decorate his estate gardens. His home still stands today, known as the [Wilder Mansion](#).

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum Staff, September 2021*