Constructing the Legend of the Great Chicago Fire of 1871 Through Media and Memory

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Abstract: The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 is a well-known conflagration that effectively wiped out the city of Chicago and left her citizens in a desperate state. As with any traumatic experience, there are bound to be consequences. In this paper, I explore the way Chicago dealt with these consequences through media coverage and positivity. By envisioning Chicago’s grand re-birth and proclaiming her resurrection as a certainty, a self-fulfilling prophecy was born that allowed the conflagration to transcend its temporal place in history and become the legend we know today. The details of the disaster were overshadowed by the resulting resurrection of the city that allowed Chicago to grow to unprecedented proportions. In addition to looking at how Chicago dealt with the disaster as a city, I also seek to explore how survivors of the conflagration coped with their trauma and how their experiences were remembered. Through the exploration of many memoirs, I sought to understand the conflagration through the perspective of the individual as well as looking at the historical perspective. Much work has been published regarding the aftermath of the conflagration. What I sought to do was look at the event itself; to explore the transformation from disparate details to a single, all-encompassing narrative known as the legend of The Great Chicago Fire of 1871.