

Topic Page: [Chicago](#)

Summary Article: **Chicago, Illinois**

From *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*

Chicago, Illinois, owes its existence to its location on both the Chicago River and the Great Lakes. From its “discovery,” in 1673, by the French explorers Father Jacques Marquette, a Jesuit missionary, and Louis Jolliet, Chicago developed as a bridge between the natural resources of the North American continent and the vast Atlantic market. Originally, the fur trade encouraged the integration of the Chicago region with the expanding European economy.

Involvement with Europe meant involvement in its politics and wars, especially the French and Indian War, in 1756. After 1763, France lost its North American holdings. Twenty years later, political control of the region passed to the newly created United States. Jean Baptiste Pointe DuSable, the son of a French fur trader and a black Haitian, came to Chicago in 1781 as the first permanent resident after being imprisoned for anti-British activities. His cabin, near the mouth of the Chicago River, provided a focus for the local fur trade.

It took the military campaigns of General “Mad” Anthony Wayne to bring effective American rule. In 1791, Wayne's victories ended in the Treaty of Greenville, which granted federal control to the mouth of the Chicago River. The U.S. Army began construction of Fort Dearborn in 1803. By that time, DuSable had sold his cabin to Jean La Lime, who in turn sold it to John Kinzie. Fort Dearborn provided an American military presence in the West and a focal point for trade. The War of 1812 brought about the fort's destruction by Native Americans. The second Fort Dearborn (1816) marked the permanent establishment of American control in the area. A lively society of fur traders evolved alongside the military post. At the same time, Chicago became a focal point for Yankee migration west from New England and upstate New York.

Chartered as a town in 1833, Chicago became four years later a city of roughly 5,000 inhabitants. The Blackhawk War and an aggressive federal policy forced Indian removal by 1837. The Erie Canal (1825) significantly changed and improved Chicago's ties to the East. Merchants gathered and distributed grain, lumber, livestock, and other natural resources while dispensing manufactured products across the American economy.

In 1836, Chicagoans began building their own canal, the Illinois-Michigan Canal, which allowed the city to compete with St. Louis for the Western trade. The depression-plagued canal finally opened in 1848. In 1847, the McCormick Reaper Works opened in Chicago and helped to usher in both the industrial and agricultural revolutions in the Midwest. By 1848, the city housed roughly 20,000 inhabitants and looked forward to continued growth.

That same year Chicago entrepreneurs embraced yet another transportation technology, the railroad. The Galena-Chicago Union Railroad was the first railroad in Chicago. By 1854, Chicago emerged as an important railroad hub. The trade routes that developed as a result of the canals were reinforced and expanded with railroad connections between Eastern cities and Chicago. In turn, Chicago's railroads pushed west and crossed the Mississippi. The city's population and industrial base increased dramatically between 1850 and 1900. The emergence of the meatpacking and steel industries brought about yet another economic phase, the production of goods for national and international distribution.

Chicago grew haphazardly. Balloonframe buildings accounted for much of the residential construction. Sidewalks, plank roads, and many city streets were wooden. In 1869, the city created a professional fire department replacing various volunteer fire brigades. Still the threat of fire hung over the city. On the night of October 8, 1871, a fire broke out in the barn of the O'Leary family house on the West Side of the city, resulting in the tragic Chicago Fire. Twentyone hundred acres and more than 17,000 buildings were destroyed in the conflagration. But the fire did not destroy Chicago's economic base. The disaster actually provided an opportunity for the young city. In the aftermath, Chicago modernized laws, stimulated a building boom, and attracted many new residents.

Chicago grew to the status of a world-class city when it held the World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. Its population reached more than one million in 1890, making it the second largest city in the United States, a rank it held until the 1990 census. To a degree, this rapid population growth resulted from Chicago's annexation of most of its immediate suburbs in 1889.

Chicago attracted waves of both American migration and international immigration. Northern and Western Europeans dominated early immigration. Native Protestants, primarily from New England, controlled its economic, cultural, and political life. Shortly the Yankee elite lost demographic, and therefore political, dominance. Many moved to the original railroad suburbs just outside the city. Newer groups, largely Eastern and Southern Europeans, came to Chicago. In 1910, the foreignborn and their children made up nearly 80 percent of the city's population.

The outbreak of World War I cut off immigration as wartime production increased, resulting in a new migration. From 1915 to 1920, Chicago's African American population doubled in population. African Americans tended to settle on Chicago's South Side, where a large ghetto emerged as a result of segregation. In July 1919, a race riot broke out that shook the city and resulted in 38 deaths (23 blacks and 15 whites) and more than 500 injuries.

Chicago's political machine developed late in the history of urban machines. Mayor William H. Thompson's election in 1915 marked an attempt to create a citywide Republican machine. Thompson included the growing African American community in his coalition. The Thompson years also marked the creation of a citywide organizedcrime machine headed by Al Capone and often allied with the local Republican Party. In 1931, the Democratic Party challenged Thompson under the leadership of Czechborn Anton Cermak, the only immigrant mayor in the city's history. Cermak created a powerful machine based on the city's important white ethnic neighborhoods. Blacks joined the Democratic machine in the late 1930s. Cermak's victory marked the end of a vital Republican Party in the city. No Republican has gained the mayoralty since Thompson's defeat in 1931.

Following Cermak's assassination, in 1933, the Democrats placed Edward J. Kelly as mayor (1933- 1947). After the twoterm administration of Martin H. Kennelly (1947-1955), Richard J. Daley became Chicago's most powerful politician, winning six mayoral elections before his death on December 20, 1976. He must be credited with Chicago's development, after 20 years of depression and war, as a stillvital city at the center of an expanding metropolitan area. Nevertheless, the post-1945 era witnessed the erosion of much of the city's traditional manufacturing base. Chicago entered the postindustrial era.

After 1940, Chicago saw the continued growth of the city's African American population. Chicago's white population began to move to the suburbs. In 1940, Chicago contained 73 percent of the population of northeastern Illinois. By 2000, despite renewed population growth thanks largely to Hispanic immigration, that figure slipped to below 35 percent of the metropolitan area. Whites made

up less than one-third of Chicago's population. African Americans, and a quickly growing Hispanic population, provided more than two-thirds of the city's residents.

These demographic developments, in motion since 1950, when the city hit its peak population of 3,620,962, influenced the Democratic Party, as blacks played an increasingly important role. After Daley died, his machine split apart along racial and ethnic lines. Daley's immediate successor, Michael J. Bilandic, kept the machine united for a short period of time, but in 1979 he lost the mayor's office to Jane Byrne, the first female mayor of Chicago. Byrne made an alliance with regular Democrats and seemed invincible, but she lost to Harold Washington in a threeway race for mayor in 1983. Washington served as the city's first African American mayor, winning a second term in 1987. His first administration was bogged down in a fight for power with white ethnic aldermen. Washington died in office on November 25, 1987. A struggle for power occurred immediately, resulting in the brief mayoralty of another African American mayor, Eugene Sawyer (1987-1989). After a special election in 1989, Richard M. Daley, the son of the man who had forged the most powerful machine in the city's history, came to power.

By 2000, Hispanic and Asian immigrants brought change to the city. Gentrification and new investment along the lakefront and in some outlying neighborhoods transformed Chicago. The city still maintained a large industrial base, but the service economy saw the greatest growth. New sports complexes were built. The downtown or "Loop" remained vital, but it also changed as investors converted much of the area's structures to apartments. Educational institutions moved into or expanded in the business district. As Chicago entered the 21st century, it maintained itself as a vital center for northern Illinois, but it was no longer the population, economic, and political powerhouse that it had once been. Much of the region's power had shifted to the suburbs, as the metropolis spread across portions of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Michigan.

See also

Bosses and Machines, Byrne, Jane M., Capone, Al, Chicago Fire, Chicago School of Architecture, Daley, Richard J., Thompson, William Hale "Big Bill", Washington, Harold, World Fairs and Expositions

Further Readings and References

- Biles, R. (1995). *Richard J. Daley: Politics, race, and the governing of Chicago*. DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press.
- Bluestone, D. (1991). *Constructing Chicago*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Cronon, W. (1991). *Nature's metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Green, P. M., & Holli, M. G. (Eds.). (1987). *The mayors: The Chicago political tradition*. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Mayer, H. M., & Wade, R. C. (1969). *Chicago: Growth of a metropolis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Pacyga, D. A., & Skerrett, E. (1986). *Chicago: City of neighborhoods*. Chicago: Loyola University Press.

Pacyga, Dominic A.


APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Pacyga. (2007). Chicago, Illinois. In D. Goldfield (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American urban history*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chicago>

 Copyright © 2007 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

 Copyright © 2007 by SAGE Publications, Inc.

APA

Pacyga. (2007). Chicago, Illinois. In D. Goldfield (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American urban history*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. Retrieved from <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chicago>

Chicago

Pacyga. "Chicago, Illinois." In *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*, edited by David Goldfield. Sage Publications, 2007. <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chicago>

Harvard

Pacyga. (2007). Chicago, Illinois. In D. Goldfield (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of American urban history*. [Online]. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications. Available from: <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chicago> [Accessed 13 November 2019].

MLA

Pacyga. "Chicago, Illinois." *Encyclopedia of American Urban History*, edited by David Goldfield, Sage Publications, 1st edition, 2007. *Credo Reference*, <https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/chicago>. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.