

A Note from
CHS President Gary T. Johnson

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September 6, 2005 *New Orleans and Chicago*

Our hearts go out to the people of New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta area in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. When we think of New Orleans and its connections to Chicago, there are many subjects and many individuals that come to mind. If you turn to the online *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, you will find no less than 34 references to [New Orleans](#). We think of [Louis Armstrong](#), who was born in New Orleans and moved to Chicago. We think of the City of New Orleans train, running along the [Illinois Central](#) tracks, that carried so many families to Chicago. When we think of the Mississippi Delta, which has been hit so hard, we think of the [Great Migration](#) and of the [Blues](#), both of which connect Chicago to the area that now is suffering so much from Hurricane Katrina.

Even as we support relief efforts, we wonder what will become of the unique urban center of New Orleans. To answer this question, thoughtful reporters and leading scholars are turning to the history of Chicago.

In the September 1 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*, the article "If Disasters Are a Guide, the City Will Revive" leads with an analysis of the Great Chicago Fire, including extensive quotations from our staff. It draws the lesson that "while it may take years, cities are resilient and usually bounce back from the worst natural or man-made devastation." There are many similar examples in the press and in message boards around the country.



William D. Kerfoot settled in Chicago in 1881 and entered the real estate business, which he reopened in a shanty the day after the fire ended. His faith in himself and the city, summed up in the crude sign he prepared that proclaimed, "All gone but WIFE CHILDREN and ENERGY," made him seem the embodiment of the undaunted determination of Chicago entrepreneurs.

I am proud of our staff for making the lessons of the Chicago fire and its aftermath available to a nation searching for meaning. I can think of no better time than now for us to retell that story in our new Chicago History Galleries, which will open next year. I can think of no better time to expand our coverage of this city with display areas much larger than before. We are about to launch a new tour on the Great Chicago Fire, which is very timely. Our website offers a particularly rich resource for studying that subject in [The Great Chicago Fire and the Web of Memory](#). Read it today and you will find that your perspective has changed about this milestone in Chicago's history.

There are certain events, such as 9/11 and now New Orleans, that change the very way that

we look at the world. Schoolchildren will come to our museum with new memories from their own lives, the terrible images of New Orleans. When they do, they will see how their own city once recovered from a terrible disaster. They will see the connections between Chicago's music and the music of New Orleans and the Mississippi Delta. They will be able to search for answers in our museum, as never before.

The memories of disaster live on in families and communities. Families touched by the Chicago fire, 134 years ago, still remember. My family remembers that my great-great-grandmother, while pregnant, escaped the fire. I am descended from the baby, who was born unharmed. If your own family lived in Chicago that day, no doubt you have your own memories. Now, my thoughts turn to the mothers who did not escape in New Orleans and the children whose lives were lost.

I think about the museums in the hurricane zone. My understanding is that only two items in our collection survived the Chicago fire, yet here we are, ready to celebrate our 150th anniversary in 2006. No doubt, there are lessons there, too.

As we join other Americans in finding tangible ways to support New Orleans and the surrounding area, I also am pleased to know that the insights of our staff and the resources of our collection can be of use as we look for a way forward.



Gary T. Johnson
CHS President