

**WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION FIRE, CHICAGO:
JULY 10, 1893**

In 1893, Chicago hosted the World's Columbian Exposition, a fair celebrating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's voyage to North America. The \$30 million fair, constructed along Lake Michigan in what is now Jackson Park, included 200 buildings, exhibitors from more than 60 countries, and the world's first ferris wheel. To glamorize the fairgrounds, building exteriors were covered with white plaster so that each building looked like it was carved out of marble. This idea, that no buildings in the "White City" appear unsightly, later caused a tragic fire that killed fourteen firefighters and three civilians.

The Cold Storage Building was one of the largest buildings at the fair. Built by Hercules Iron Works and the Ice and Refrigeration Machine Manufacturers, the warehouse housed perishable food used by the various fair vendors and also doubled as an ice skating rink. The six-story building required a 200-foot iron chimney to run the refrigeration units, but designers believed that the smokestack would clash with the fair's other buildings. To remedy this, a wooden tower topped with a decorative cupola was built around the chimney. The base of this cupola was only 30 inches above the chimney's upper rim, creating a serious fire hazard. In fact, on June 17, 1893, there was a small fire in the cupola, but it was quickly doused. Fair management never learned of the blaze, but the acting chief of the World's Fair Fire Department stated, "That building...is a miserable firetrap and will go up in smoke before long."

Shortly after 1 PM on July 10, heavy smoke was spotted rising from the cupola of the Cold Storage building. Twenty firefighters from both the Chicago Fire Department and the World's Fair Fire Department responded quickly, climbing to the top of the tower. The firefighters did not notice when burning debris fell from the cupola into the open space between the chimney and the inner walls of the tower until flames erupted from the tower 50 feet below them. Realizing they had only seconds to escape before the tower collapsed, several firefighters slid down burning hoses and ropes to safety. Fourteen firefighters remained trapped, however, and they either jumped to their deaths or perished in the burning debris when the tower collapsed into the building.

An estimated 50,000 fairgoers witnessed the fire, some with a bird's-eye view from the top of the ferris wheel. Initially the crowd was cheering on the firefighters, but they soon fell silent. The fire department later reported, "never was so terrible a tragedy witnessed by such a sea of agonized faces." Fortunately, 21 engine companies from around the city responded and put out the fire before it could spread to other buildings. The fair's attendance was not jeopardized by the blaze; in fact, 100,000 people visited the fair on July 11, as the still-smoking rubble of the Cold Storage Building was a big draw. Luckily no other fires occurred during the final three months of the fair, but the wood and plaster buildings remained a firetrap. Within nine months of the fair's close, most of the deserted "White City" had been destroyed by fire.