HISTORY

ONIONS, FORTS AND MASSACRES

The Potawatomi Indians were the first folks in town, and they gave the name 'Checagou' – or wild onions – to the area around the Chicago River's mouth. Needless to say, they weren't particularly pleased when the first settlers arrived in 1803. The newcomers built Fort Dearborn on the river's south bank, on marshy ground under what is today's Michigan Ave Bridge (look for plaques in the sidewalk marking the spot at the corner of Michigan Ave and Wacker Dr).

The Potawatomi's resentment toward their new neighbors mounted, and bad things ensued. In 1812, the natives – in cahoots with the British (their allies in the War of 1812) – slaughtered 52 settlers fleeing the fort. The massacre took place near what is today Hillary Rodham Clinton Women's Park (p117). During the war this had been a strategy employed throughout the frontier: the British sought the allegiance of various Indian tribes through trade and other deals, and the Indians paid them back by killing American settlers. The people killed in Chicago had simply waited too long to flee the rising tension and found themselves caught.

After the war ended, everyone let bygones be bygones and hugged it out for the sake of the fur trade.

REAL ESTATE BOOM

Chicago was incorporated as a town in 1833, with a population of 340. Within three years land speculation rocked the local real estate market; lots that sold for $33 in 1829 now went for $100,000. Construction on the Illinois & Michigan Canal – a state project linking the Great Lakes to the Illinois River and thus to the Mississippi River and the Atlantic coast – fueled the boom. Swarms of laborers swelled the population to more than 4100 by 1837, and Chicago became a city.

Within 10 years, more than 20,000 people lived in what had become the region's dominant city. The rich Illinois soil supported thousands of farmers, and industrialist Cyrus Hall McCormick moved his reaper factory to the city to serve them. He would soon control one of the Midwest's major fortunes and have a big mansion on Astor St (see p73).

In 1848 the canal opened. Shipping flowed through the area and had a marked economic effect on the city. A great financial institution, the Chicago Board of Trade, opened to handle the sale of grain by Illinois farmers, who now had greatly improved access to Eastern markets.

Railroad construction began soon thereafter, and tracks radiated out from Chicago. The city quickly became the hub of America's freight and passenger trains, a position it would hold for the next 100 years.

RING ON THE BACON

By the end of the 1850s, immigrants had poured into the city, drawn by jobs on the railroads that served the ever-growing agricultural trade. Twenty million bushels of produce were

TIMELINE

Late 1600s

The Potawatomi Indians have the land to themselves. They paddle their birchbark canoes, fish and ponder a name for the place. How about Checagou (Wild Onions), after the local plants growing here?

1779

Jean Baptiste Pointe du Sable, an enterprising gent of African and Caribbean descent, sails down from Québec and sets up a fur-trading post on the Chicago River. He is the city's first settler.

1803

More settlers arrive and build Fort Dearborn at the river's mouth. The Potawatomi locals do not send a fruit basket to their new neighbors. Rather, they massacre the settlers nine years later.

shipped through Chicago annually by then. The population topped 100,000.

The city's location smack-dab in the middle of the country made it a favorite meeting spot, a legacy that continues to this day (which is why you're paying out the nose for your hotel room). In 1860 the Republican Party held its national political convention in Chicago and selected Abraham Lincoln, a lawyer from Springfield, Illinois, as its presidential candidate.

Like other northern cities, Chicago profited from the Civil War, which boosted business in the burgeoning steel and toolmaking industries, and provided plenty of freight for the railroads and canal. In 1865, the year the war ended, another event took place that profoundly affected the city for the next century: the Union Stockyards opened on the South Side.

Chicago's rail network and the invention of the iced refrigerator car meant that meat could be shipped for long distances, satiating hungry carnivores all the way east to New York and beyond. The stockyards soon became the major meat supplier to the nation. But besides bringing great wealth to a few and jobs to many, the yards were also a source of water pollution (see the boxed text, p124).

STOP THE BACON!

The stockyard effluvia polluted not only the Chicago River but also Lake Michigan. Flowing into the lake, the fouled waters spoiled the city's source of fresh water and caused cholera and other epidemics that killed thousands. In 1869 the Water Tower and Pumping Station built a 2-mile tunnel into Lake Michigan and began bringing water into the city from there; it was hoped that this set-up would skirt the contaminated areas. Alas, the idea proved resoundingly inadequate, and outbreaks of illness continued.

top picks

BOOKS ON CHICAGO'S HISTORY

Beyond the history classics (*Chicago: City on the Make* by Nelson Algren, 1951; *Boss: Richard J Daley of Chicago* by Mike Royko, 1971; and *Working: What People Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do* by Studs Terkel, 1974), here are some more recent additions to the Chicago bookshelf:

- Sin in the Second City (Karen Abbott, 2007) In the early 1900s, sisters Minna and Ada Everleigh opened a brothel called the Everleigh Club in Chicago's notorious Levee district. Their courtesans entertained Prince Henry of Prussia and author Theodore Dreiser, plus moguls and senators. The ladies dined on gourmet food, read Balzac and started a culture war that rocked the nation.
- Murder City: The Bloody History of Chicago in the Twenties (Michael Lesy, 2007) Chicago in the 1920s was America's murder capital – professionals and amateurs alike snuffed each other out with reckless abandon. The book shows that these crimes of loot and love may be the progenitors of our modern age.
- Richard Nickels' Chicago, Photographs of a Lost City (Richard Cahan & Michael Williams, 2006) Nickels was a photographer and preservationist. He snapped buildings in Chicago in the 1950s and '60s, at a point when big construction was really starting to take hold and change the city.
- Encyclopedia of Chicago (2004) The Newberry Library and the Chicago History Museum put together this all-encompassing guide to Windy City history.
- Historic Photos of Chicago Crime (John Russick, 2007) A compilation of 200 photos of Al Capone and fellow thugs, from bloody cadavers to one of Capone at a White Sox game.

1837

Chicago incorporates as a city (population: 4170). It's a happenin' place, having skyrocketed from just 340 people four years earlier. And it continues to boom – within 10 years 16,000 folks call the city home.

1865

The Union Stockyards open, and millions of cows get the ax. Thanks to new train tracks and refrigerated railcars, Chicago can send its bacon afar and becomes 'hog butcher for the world' (per poet Carl Sandburg).

1871

The Great Fire torches the entire inner city. Mrs O'Leary's cow takes the blame, though it's eventually determined that Daniel 'Peg Leg' Sullivan kicked over the lantern that started the blaze.