History of the Chicago Tribune

Summary

The Chicago Tribune, one of the most influential newspapers in American history, has been a pivotal force in shaping the cultural, political, and urban landscape of Chicago for over 170 years. Founded in 1847, the Tribune grew from a local newspaper into a major metropolitan publication under the leadership of Joseph Medill, who used his role as managing editor of the paper to promote the abolitionist movement and support the election of President Abraham Lincoln. Following the Great Fire of 1871, the Tribune played an instrumental role in Chicago's reconstruction as a crucial source of information and a vocal advocate for new building regulations and projects that transformed the city.

Throughout the twentieth century, the Tribune continued to exert significant influence under the leadership of Medill's descendants, particularly Robert R. McCormick. During his tenure, the Tribune went through an ideological shift, developing a distinctly conservative stance as the newspaper expanded its reach nationally and became a distinctly formidable voice in American media. This influence extended beyond print, with the founding of WGN radio in 1924 and WGN television in 1948, both of which became integral parts of Chicago's media landscape.

The Tribune also left a lasting mark on Chicago's skyline with the construction of the Tribune Tower in 1923, a neo-Gothic skyscraper that became an iconic symbol of the newspaper's power and prestige. As the twentieth century progressed, the Tribune adapted to changing sociopolitical landscapes, softening its editorial tone and broadening its perspectives to reflect the diversity of Chicago's population. However, the advent of the internet and the rise of digital media brought significant challenges to the newspaper industry nationwide, leading to declining print circulation and reduced advertising revenue. These changes have forced the Tribune to undergo a series of ownership changes and financial restructurings, including the sale of its landmark Tribune Tower and the Freedom Center publishing center. Despite these challenges, the Chicago Tribune continues to be a leading voice in the media landscape and a vital part of the cultural fabric of Chicago.

Founding and Early Years

The Chicago Tribune was founded on June 10, 1847, during a period of rapid growth and transformation in Chicago as the young city was burgeoning as a hub of commerce and industry. The Tribune was the brainchild of James Kelly, John E. Wheeler, and Joseph K.C. Forrest, who sought to capitalize on the increasing demand for news in a city with a swelling population.

Initially named the Chicago Daily Tribune, the newspaper entered a competitive market where many small papers had already come and gone, often folding after only a few years of publication. The early years of the Tribune were marked by financial struggles and changes in ownership, a reflection of the volatile newspaper industry in mid-nineteenth century Chicago. The Tribune's first office was located in a modest building at the corner of Lake and LaSalle streets. This location, although central, was far from the grandeur that would later characterize the newspaper's headquarters. In 1849, a fire destroyed the building, but the Tribune resumed operations after only a two-day hiatus, reflecting the resilience that would become one of its

defining characteristics. As an early adopter of the telegraph, the Tribune further distinguished itself by bringing distant news to its readers much faster than its competitors. This commitment to providing timely, comprehensive news coverage on both local and national events helped the Tribune attract a dedicated readership.

A pivotal moment in the Tribune's history came in 1855, when Joseph Medill, a Canadian-born newspaper publisher and editor, purchased a controlling interest in the paper. Medill's vision and leadership transformed the Tribune from an inconspicuous local paper into a major metropolitan publication. Under his guidance, the Tribune became a vocal supporter of the nascent Republican Party, advocating for the abolition of slavery and backing Abraham Lincoln's presidential campaign.

Medill's influence extended beyond journalism into the political realm. His editorial stance helped shape public opinion during the Civil War, with the Tribune emerging as a staunch advocate for the Union cause. The newspaper's support for Lincoln and the Republican Party cemented its role as a key player in American political discourse.

Medill's impact on the Tribune and Chicago was profound. After the Great Fire of 1871, Medill temporarily left the newspaper to serve as mayor, where he played a crucial role in the city's rebuilding efforts. During his tenure as editor-in-chief, from 1855 to 1864 and again from 1874 until his death in 1899, the Tribune continued to grow in both influence and circulation, solidifying its place as a cornerstone of Chicago's cultural and political landscape.

Rebuilding and Growth

The Great Chicago Fire of 1871 was a turning point for both the city and the Tribune. The fire devastated much of Chicago, including the Tribune's headquarters in a building which had been touted as fireproof. Despite this loss, the newspaper missed only two days of publication, quickly resuming operations from a small print shop on Canal Street and publishing its first post-fire edition with the bold headline, "CHEER UP." This resilience displayed by the Tribune mirrored the broader spirit of determination that came to define Chicago's rebuilding period. The Tribune's tone during this time was one of optimism and encouragement, helping to shape public sentiment toward reconstruction and growth. The paper's editorial pages became a platform for promoting civic improvements; editors advocated for new fireproof building regulations, the construction of the Chicago Public Library, and the development of the city's parks and boulevards. The Tribune's influence was extending beyond the pages of the newspaper and into the very fabric of Chicago's urban landscape, aligning the paper's growth with the city's burgeoning identity as a major American metropolis.

The Tribune would continue to champion significant causes, including the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. The newspaper's support for this grand event, which celebrated the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's voyage to the Americas, was instrumental in securing Chicago's role as the host city. The event itself was a monumental success, attracting millions of visitors from around the world and showcasing Chicago's architectural and cultural achievements on an international stage. The Tribune played a similarly important role in advocating for major infrastructure projects such as the construction of the Chicago Sanitary and Ship Canal, which reversed the flow of the Chicago River and provided the city with a crucial means of sewage disposal. The support for these transformative projects, along with

many others, engendered the Chicago Tribune to its readers by underscoring the newspaper's commitment to the public good through its belief in the power of Chicago as a center of innovation and progress.

Twentieth-Century Expansion and Cultural Impact

The early-twentieth century saw the Tribune reach new heights under the leadership of Joseph Medill's grandsons, Robert R. McCormick and Joseph Medill Patterson. In 1914, McCormick and Patterson assumed co-editorship of the Tribune, initiating a period of unprecedented growth for the newspaper. McCormick, who became the sole publisher in 1925, was a larger-than-life figure whose conservative views and nationalist isolationism shaped the Tribune's editorial stance for decades. During McCormick's tenure, the Tribune expanded its reach beyond Chicago, establishing itself as a national media powerhouse. The newspaper's daily circulation soared from 230,000 in 1912 to 660,000 by 1925, making it the most widely-read paper in Chicago. This period also saw the Tribune move into its most iconic headquarters, the Tribune Tower. The building's design was the result of an international architecture competition that attracted over 260 entries from around the world. The winning design, an intricate, neo-Gothic skyscraper by architects John Mead Howells and Raymond Hood, was completed in 1925 and quickly became a distinctive symbol of the Tribune's power and prestige.

The Tribune's influence extended beyond its physical presence. Under McCormick's leadership, the newspaper underwent an ideological shift. Its editorial pages took on a conservative bent on issues surrounding World War II and Roosevelt's New Deal. McCormick's staunch isolationism and opposition to Franklin D. Roosevelt's policies reflected the Tribune's role as a mouthpiece for conservative America. Despite its controversial positions, the Tribune remained the dominant voice in Chicago journalism, known for its thorough coverage of local and national events. The Tribune's cultural impact during the twentieth century was profound. The newspaper was a pioneer in the use of photography and illustration, enhancing the visual appeal of its pages and setting new standards for American journalism. The Tribune's Sunday edition, introduced in the late nineteenth century, became a showcase for in-depth features, literary pieces, and editorial cartoons. The paper's regular coverage of theater, music, and visual art aided in the development of many of Chicago's cultural institutions and helped establish the city as a cultural hub. The Tribune's annual literary prize, established in the 1950s, further solidified its reputation as a patron of the arts.

The Chicago Tribune's influence also expanded beyond the realm of print media in the twentieth century with the launch of WGN radio in 1924 and WGN television in 1948. These broadcasting ventures, reflective of a greater cultural shift, were pivotal moments in the Tribune's evolution into a multi-media powerhouse as they became integral components of Chicago's media landscape. WGN radio quickly established itself as a trusted source for news, entertainment, and sports coverage, while WGN television brought visual storytelling to the masses, further cementing the Tribune's role in shaping public discourse and popular culture. By venturing into these new mediums, the Tribune demonstrated its adaptability in the face of changing technologies and consumer preferences. This strategic expansion reinforced the Tribune's status as a leading force in American media, allowing it to reach audiences through multiple channels and solidify its position as a cultural institution in Chicago and beyond. The success of these initiatives not only increased the Tribune's influence but also set a precedent for other

newspaper companies seeking to diversify their operations in the rapidly evolving media landscape of the twentieth century.

Modern Challenges and Adaptations

The death of Robert R. McCormick in 1955 marked the end of an era for the Tribune. The newspaper's editorial stance gradually shifted towards a more moderate position, reflecting the changing political and social landscape of post-war America. The Tribune continued to innovate, embracing new technologies and expanding its reach into the suburbs as Chicago's population dispersed. In 1982, the Tribune completed the construction of the Freedom Center, a state-of-the-art printing facility located along the North Branch of the Chicago River. The facility, the largest newspaper production plant in North America at the time, underscored the Tribune's continued dominance in the newspaper industry.

Despite its successes, the Tribune faced significant challenges in the latter half of the twentieth century. The rise of television, radio, and later, the internet, eroded the newspaper's traditional readership base. The Tribune responded by diversifying its offerings, launching new sections and suburban editions to cater to a broader audience. The newspaper also ventured into digital media, launching an online edition in the 1990s in an effort to stay relevant in an increasingly digital world.

The twenty-first century has been a tumultuous period for the Chicago Tribune. Like many newspapers, the Tribune has struggled with declining circulation and advertising revenue, challenges exacerbated by the rise of digital media and changing consumer habits. The newspaper underwent a series of ownership changes and financial restructurings, including a Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing in 2008. In 2016, the Tribune sold its iconic Tribune Tower, marking the end of an era for the newspaper. The Tower, which had been the Tribune's headquarters for over 90 years, was sold as part of a broader restructuring effort aimed at addressing the financial challenges facing the newspaper industry. The sale of the Tower symbolized the Tribune's transition from a traditional print newspaper to a modern media company navigating the complexities of the digital age.

Through these challenges, the Tribune has continued to adapt, focusing on digital journalism and exploring new revenue streams to remain a vital source of news and information for the Chicago region. The Tribune's legacy as a cultural and political force in Chicago remains strong, even as it confronts the uncertainties of the twenty-first century media landscape.

Conclusion

The Chicago Tribune has played an integral role in shaping the cultural, political, and urban landscape of Chicago for over 170 years. From its humble beginnings in a small loft on Lake Street, to its tenure in the iconic Tribune Tower and its current operations in the Chicago suburbs, the Tribune's history is intertwined with that of the city it serves. Through its advocacy for public projects, its influence on political discourse, and its contributions to the arts and journalism, the Tribune has left an indelible mark on Chicago and the nation. As it navigates modern challenges, the Tribune continues to uphold its legacy as one of America's great newspapers, a testament to its resilience and enduring relevance in an ever-changing world.

The Architecture of the Chicago Tribune Freedom Center

The Freedom Center's conception dates to the late 1970s, when the Tribune Company sought to modernize and expand its printing operations with the construction of a new location. The site chosen for this ambitious project was 777 West Chicago Avenue, a 30-acre parcel of land along the North Branch of the Chicago River that had previously been occupied by rail yards and various industrial manufacturing facilities. This location was part of the larger North Branch Industrial Corridor, which had been experiencing decline since the mid-twentieth century as many industries moved to the suburbs or out of state. By the 1970s, the area was characterized by aging infrastructure and vacant lots, prompting city officials and business leaders to seek ways to revitalize this once-thriving industrial zone.

The Tribune Company's decision to build the Freedom Center on this site was part of a broader initiative to breathe new life into the North Branch Industrial Corridor. The company saw potential in the riverside location, which offered both ample space for a large-scale printing facility and convenient access to transportation routes for newspaper distribution. The site's strategic position along a rail line would enable direct delivery of newsprint and other supplies by train, while expansive loading docks would allow trucks to efficiently transport newspapers to distribution points throughout the region. The proximity to downtown Chicago was also a significant factor, allowing for quick delivery of newspapers to the city center.

The Freedom Center, completed in 1981, was designed by the renowned Chicago-based architectural firm Skidmore, Owings & Merrill. It is a sprawling building with a sturdy, utilitarian appearance reflective of its industrial function, characterized by its boxy massing, flat roof, and heavy masonry walls with minimal ornamentation. Its exterior elevations are largely dominated by wide expanses of flat red brick, with occasional accents of light gray concrete evoking a pared-down, modern interpretation of Chicago's historic industrial architecture. The building has very few windows and doors, a deliberate design choice which was made to limit exposure to external elements and protect the sensitive printing operations within. The sparse doors, louvres, and windows that are present are small, often grouped in rows, and adorned with simple concrete arches and lintels that add a subtle classical influence to the otherwise stark design. Prominent signage on the north and south elevations displays the iconic "Chicago Tribune" logo. On the west elevation, large pre-cast concrete panels are punctuated with a row of narrow, horizontal windows, accentuating the broad profile of the building. Single-story projections at ground level entrances provide a more approachable human scale, counterbalancing an otherwise imposing, fortress-like presence.

The Freedom Center's architecture is deliberately straightforward, eschewing the more elaborate styles of previous Tribune properties in favor of a design tailored to its unique purpose. Designed with a clear focus on function and practicality, the Freedom Center is nonetheless a distinct presence along the Chicago River, underscoring the longstanding influence of the Chicago Tribune on the city's cultural and physical landscape.









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