

# Picturing Chicago

## Visual Images as Historical Texts

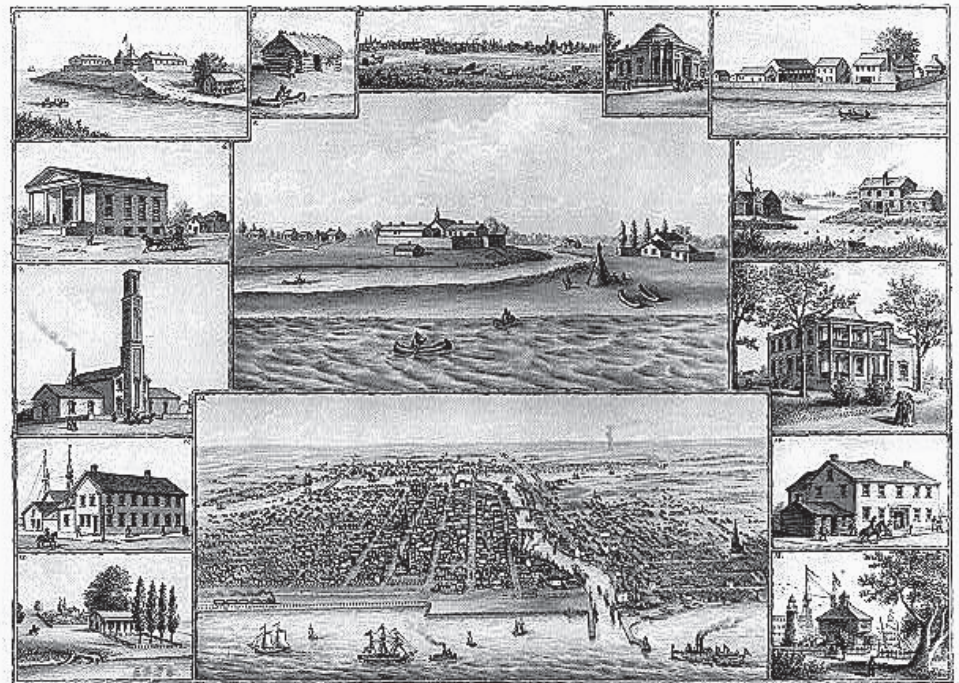
### Visual Images as Historical Texts

Pictures tell stories. Whether they are photos, sketches, drawings, or maps and views, myriad pictures tell the story of Chicago. Each offers a unique glimpse into the city because each lets us see what the person creating the picture saw. Some pictures are eyewitness accounts while others are visions constructed either at a later date or at a different location. Some pictures are accurate renditions of reality and others are much less so.

Pictures are not neutral witnesses and the stories they relate are subjective, influenced by ideas, attitudes, and beliefs of the photographer, cartographer, and artist as well as those of the times and place.

The history depicted in the collage of images tracing Chicago's development from the 1770s to approximately 1880 is selective. The pictures on the edges depict important buildings and changing architecture. The views in the center offer contrasting images of Chicago as a wilderness and a major metropolis. Where does this collage fit and how can teachers use them effectively to promote student learning?

When we see through the eyes of others, it is necessary to correct our vision to see more clearly. The old adage of what you see is what you get applies but here how you



*Picturing Chicago* offers a wide array of visual images of various types to tell stories of Chicago between the 1830s and World War I. In each case, reading the story is aided by providing a people, space, and time context to the visual that relates to the topic of study. In some cases, several images are supplied. To help teachers integrate the image into instruction, a classroom activity is offered for a specific grade level. Suggestions for activities for other subjects and grades are provided either in the *Picturing Chicago* sourcebook or on the project web site.

see determines the getting. Using pictures as historical texts requires care and scrutiny to gain the insight and perspective into Chicago the visual stories provide.

Reading the pictures to see the

story involves a four-step process. It begins with asking questions to open a dialogue with the image followed by analyzing the answers, connecting the story to classroom instruction, and communicating what was learned.

**Using visuals as texts helps students increase  
their knowledge and improve  
their reading, thinking, and communication skills**



**Chicago, 1830**

**These views of Chicago are details from the collage on page 1.**

**What do they suggest about the development of the city between 1830 and 1857?**

**What message were the creators of the collage trying to send about Chicago's growth?**

**How can teachers help students read and analyze these views as texts?**



**Chicago, 1857**



# Using Pictures as Historical Texts

## TOWARDS A MODEL OF READING AND ANALYSIS

### INTRODUCTION:

As is true for any primary source document, using pictures as historical texts requires developing a model of reading and analysis that encompasses the three “Cs”: context, content, connections.

Context implies providing an appropriate people, time, space and instructional context so pertinent background information is supplied about the historical setting of the picture and where it fits in the topic being studied.

Content means that an inquiry model is provided that helps open a dialogue with the picture to facilitate reading and analysis. Here, too, context in terms of the creation of the picture is important, as is the content information it provides on the topic of study.

Connection involves supplying a way to integrate the picture and the textual analysis into the flow of instruction. In this regard, using the picture as historical text is part of the normal teaching and learning routine.

### CONTEXT:

The meaning of context here is different from the way the term is used in reading and analyzing the picture. The idea is to provide background information on the topic being studied as it applies to the picture, including:

- topic and/or themes;
- important people and their actions related to the topic and/or themes;
- a map or other description of the place;
- a timeline, chronology or other description of the general time period of the topic; and
- other supplementary information that helps the teacher develop an effective learning activity and helps students using the picture as a text to increase their content knowledge and build skills.

Equally important and to a certain extent achieved by the context, teachers and students need to know here the picture and the textual activity fit within the ongoing study of the topic. Here, the possibilities are using the picture to open the topic or unit, within the continuing study, or in closing the topic.

### CONTENT:

This is the meat of the use of a picture as a text. A similar triad to the one described above is needed though it is more focused on the actual reading and analysis of the text. What is used for the textual analysis depends on the

In this instance, context includes title, creator, date of creation, type of picture, place of creation, purpose (if provided), audience, and possibly other items depending upon what information is available and what information is needed to do the textual analysis. It is possible that the inquiry model will not include context information.

Content refers to the information to be gained from the picture itself through inquiry. The usual questions of who, what, when, where, how, and why apply but the format can vary. In some cases, a straight inquiry model is relevant. In others, an overarching question might provide direction to more focused queries. It might also be possible to probe the picture by adapting the inquiry from the point of view of the creator. How would a photographer, cartographer, or artist read this image? Or have the textual analysis proceed from the perspective of a subject of the picture.

Connection relates to the application of the picture and the textual analysis to the topic of study. Several scenarios exist. The picture could be used to gauge what students know about the topic and for posing questions to focus their study. It might provide information and direction for reading the textbook or using other resources. Or, the analysis could be part of the evaluation process.

The point is that the purpose of use determines the methods employed to read, make sense of, and communicate findings about the picture.