

This public information brochure is a synopsis of various research materials related to the *Union Stock Yard Gate*, prepared for the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks by its staff.



**CITY OF CHICAGO**

Richard J. Daley, Mayor

**COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL  
AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS**

Samuel A. Lichtmann, Chairman

Barnet Hodes, Vice-Chairman

Ira J. Bach, Secretary

John W. Baird

Joseph Benson

Jerome R. Butler, Jr.

Ruth Moore Garbe

Lewis W. Hill

Harold K. Skramstad, Jr.

William M. McLenahan, Director

Room 800

320 North Clark Street

Chicago, Illinois 60610

(312) 744-3200

Printed U.S.A./February 1976

Linda Legner, project coordinator  
John Hern, designer

# Union Stock Yard Gate

Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks

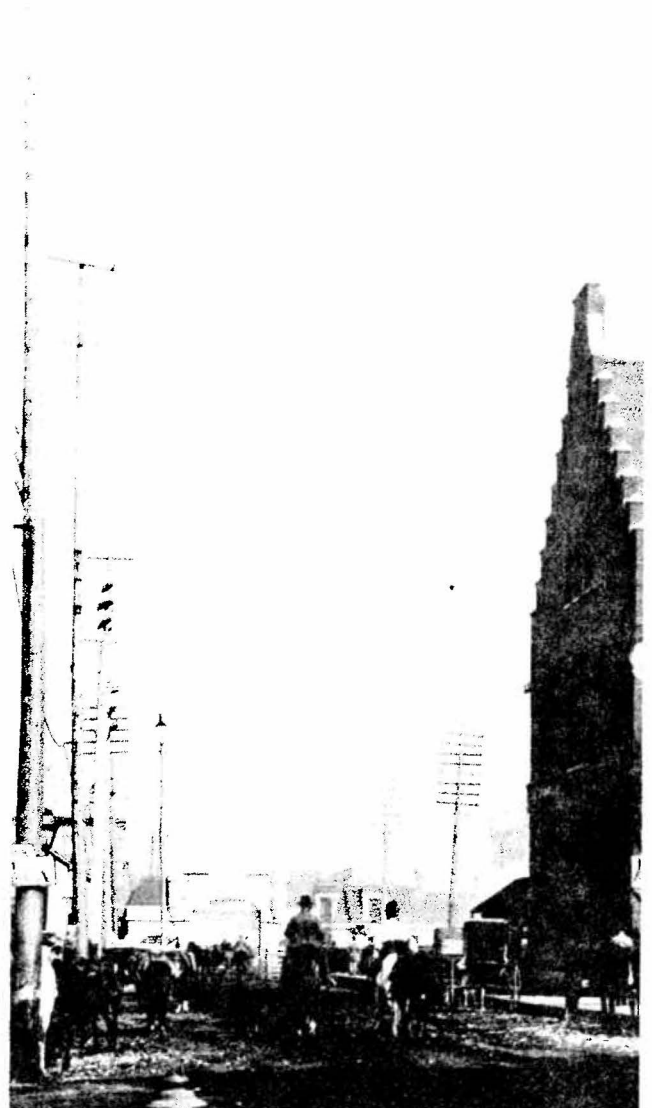


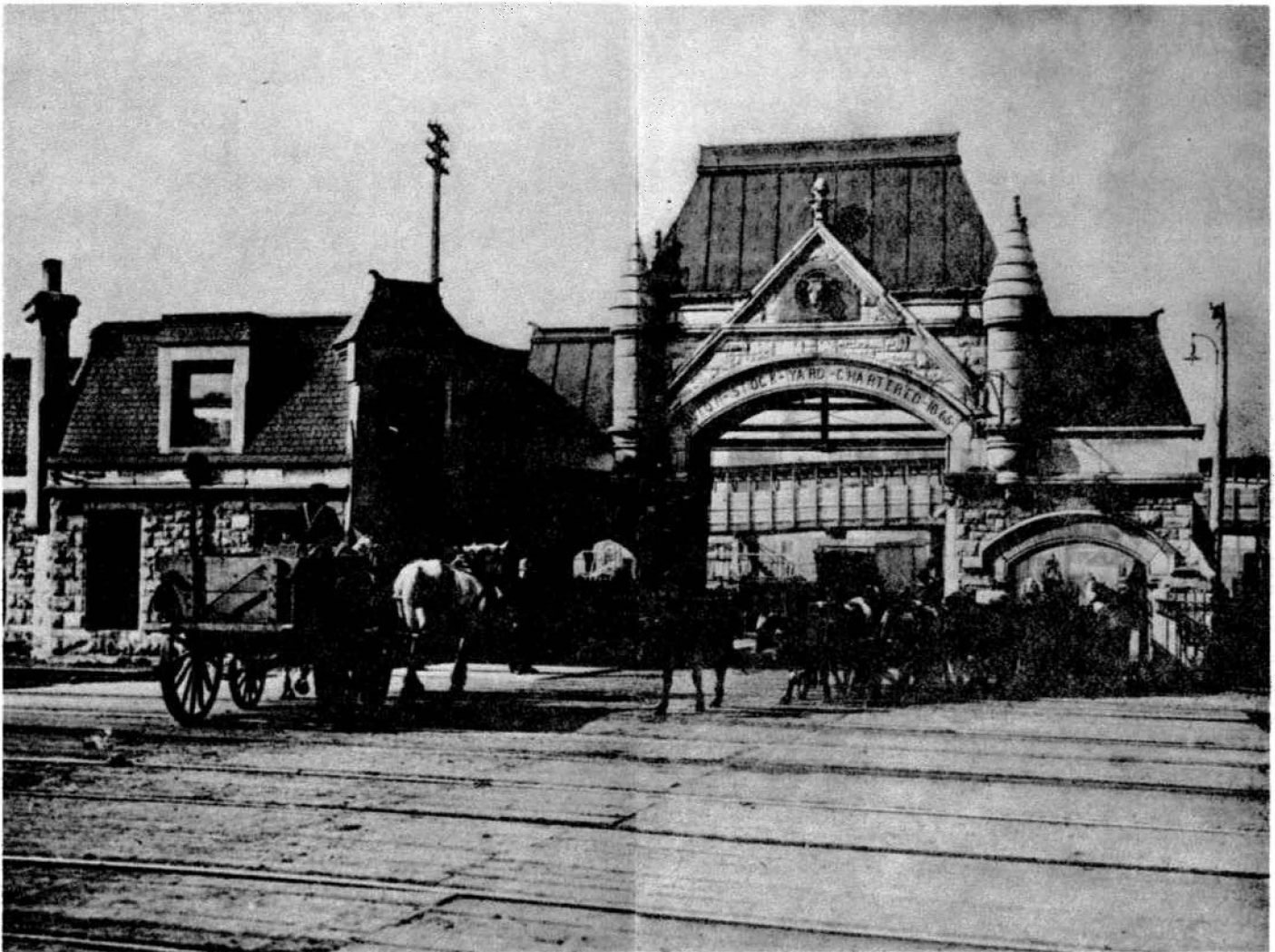
# Union Stock Yard Gate

Located on Exchange Avenue at Peoria Street, the Union Stock Yard Gate was designated a Chicago Landmark by the City Council of Chicago on February 24, 1972.

**1890 view of the yards and Exchange Avenue with the gate in the background.**

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)





The gate and guardhouse as they looked on an average working day around 1905.

(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

The rough-faced limestone gate that formerly marked the entrance to the Union Stock Yard recalls Chicago's once prominent role in the livestock and meat packing industries.

It is not known exactly when a gate was first erected. A map made in 1874 and an engraving from 1878 show a gate, apparently of wood, at the place where the present structure is located. This earlier gate had a large central arch with a smaller arch on each side; a frame building adjoining it on the south was labeled 'Police Station.'

The existing stone gate was probably built in 1879 as part of a program to replace some of the wooden structures at the yards. This new gate, and the building which until recently stood to the south and served as a security station or guardhouse, closely followed the overall design of their predecessors. Costs for the two structures when erected came to approximately \$12,000.

Irrefutable identification of the gate's architect has not been established. Yet, there is evidence to suggest either

that the Chicago firm of Burnham and Root designed the building, or that the gate is possibly an adaptation of a scheme provided by them but which they did not actually execute.

Charles Moore's compendium *D. H. Burnham, City Planner* includes the Stockyard Exchange office of 1875 in its chronological listing of the firm's projects. Volume I of *Industrial Chicago* names Burnham and Root as architects of stockyard buildings as well as the gateway.

In *The Architecture of John Wellborn Root*, Donald Hoffmann states that "In the decorative gable [of Chicago's Central Market produce outlet] he [Root] repeated a detail from the gateway he had once designed for the Union Stock Yards, a roundel representing a bull's head." Hoffmann also points out that John Sherman, who operated one of Chicago's earlier stockyards before becoming an incorporator of the Union Stock Yard and Transit Company in 1865, enjoyed a close association with Burnham and Root. Not only did they design and build Sherman's home (1874) but Burnham married Sherman's daughter Margaret. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to suspect that Sherman used his influence to secure stockyard building commissions for

the young architects.

The gate is composed of a massive center section flanked by two smaller wings; its overall width is about 50 feet while the walls are about 5 feet thick. The center section rises almost 32 feet and is crowned by a steeply pitched roof. The arched opening in this section approaches a height of 17 feet and is approximately 16 feet wide. At one time this opening could be closed by lowering a heavy iron grille through a slot that runs the full width of the underside of the arch; when up, the grille was housed within the roof. Near the spring points of the central arch are tall limestone turrets with conical tops. The finials that originally sat atop these turrets have, over the years, disintegrated or been broken off.

On both the east and west facades, the central arch is surmounted by false triangular gables which also had elaborate finials at their highest points. Projecting from the eastern or front gable is a sculptured limestone steer head molded in the likeness of 'Sherman,' the bull that won the grand sweepstakes at the first American Fat Stock Show. A story is told that the animal's owner named him after Union Stock Yard founder John Sherman.

The two slightly asymmetrical wings are about half the height of the segment between them, with roofs and decorative detail that make them smaller versions of the central section. Both wings have arched openings, 6 feet wide on the south, 7½ feet on the north. The southern arch still displays its original hinged iron gate.

When the yards were closed in 1971, the Central Manufacturing District and its subsidiaries purchased much of the property for redevelopment as an industrial park. Their plans specified widening Exchange Avenue, along with other streets, and consequently, the demolition of the old gate. Through the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, the city initiated extensive negotiations with the new owner to save the structure. Once an agreement was reached, the developer assisted in every way to make the project possible.

After the Department of Streets and Sanitation prepared drawings for the realignment of Exchange Avenue, construction costs for all paving plus new curbs and gutters were donated by the developer. Roadwork was begun in December, 1972. The city, as its contribution, assumed responsibility for restoration of the gate and landscaping of the site, under the direction of the Department of Public Works.

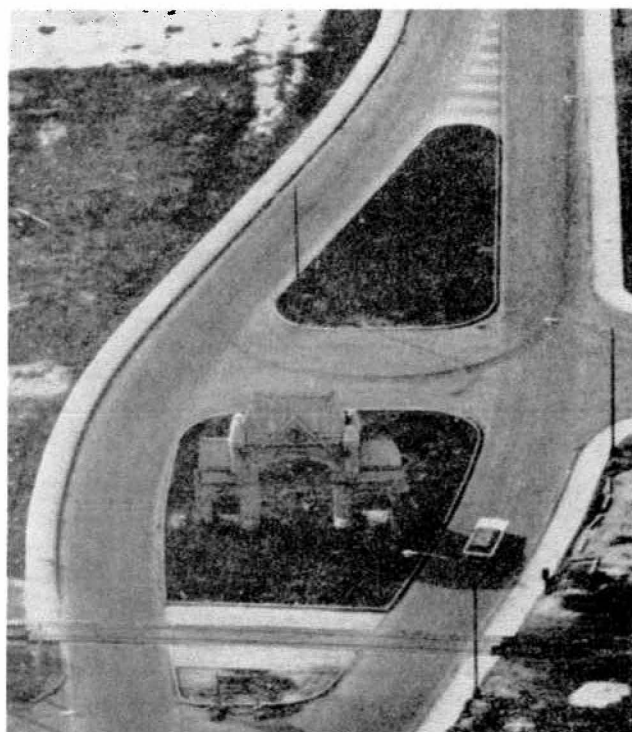
The guardhouse was demolished in November, 1971, and stone cut from this building was used to replace damaged or disintegrated blocks in the gate. The gate's raw southern edge was then refinished as a simple rusticated wall, although matching trim bands were extended around this side. Restoration included removal of the gatehouse from the northern wing, complete electrical rewiring, and replacement of the sheet metal roof with a copper surface. Nine trees and replicas of old street lamps were added to the site. All ground not landscaped was inset with large paving bricks taken from the stockyard pens.

Restoration and site work have been concluded, and the developer has decided to the city not only the new roadway but also the fully refurbished gate and the land it occupies. A dedication ceremony was held on November 25, 1975.



**Southern wing (left) refinished with rusticated blocks and trim bands cut from the demolished guardhouse.**  
(Barbara Crane, photographer)

**This 1974 aerial view shows Exchange Avenue splayed to run around the gate instead of through it.**  
(Courtesy of the Department of Public Works, City of Chicago)



### *History of the Union Stock Yards*

Chicago's first recorded slaughter house, located on the north bank of the Chicago River, was operated in 1827 by Archibald Clybourne, who had a government contract to supply Fort Dearborn with meat. However, depending on the source of information, Chicago's first yard was either Myrick's, said to have opened in 1837 near what is now Madison Street and Ogden Avenue, or the Old Bull's Head, said to have opened in 1848 near what is now Cottage Grove Avenue and 29th Street. Both were taverns that provided stock pens for dealers who brought cattle to the city to trade.

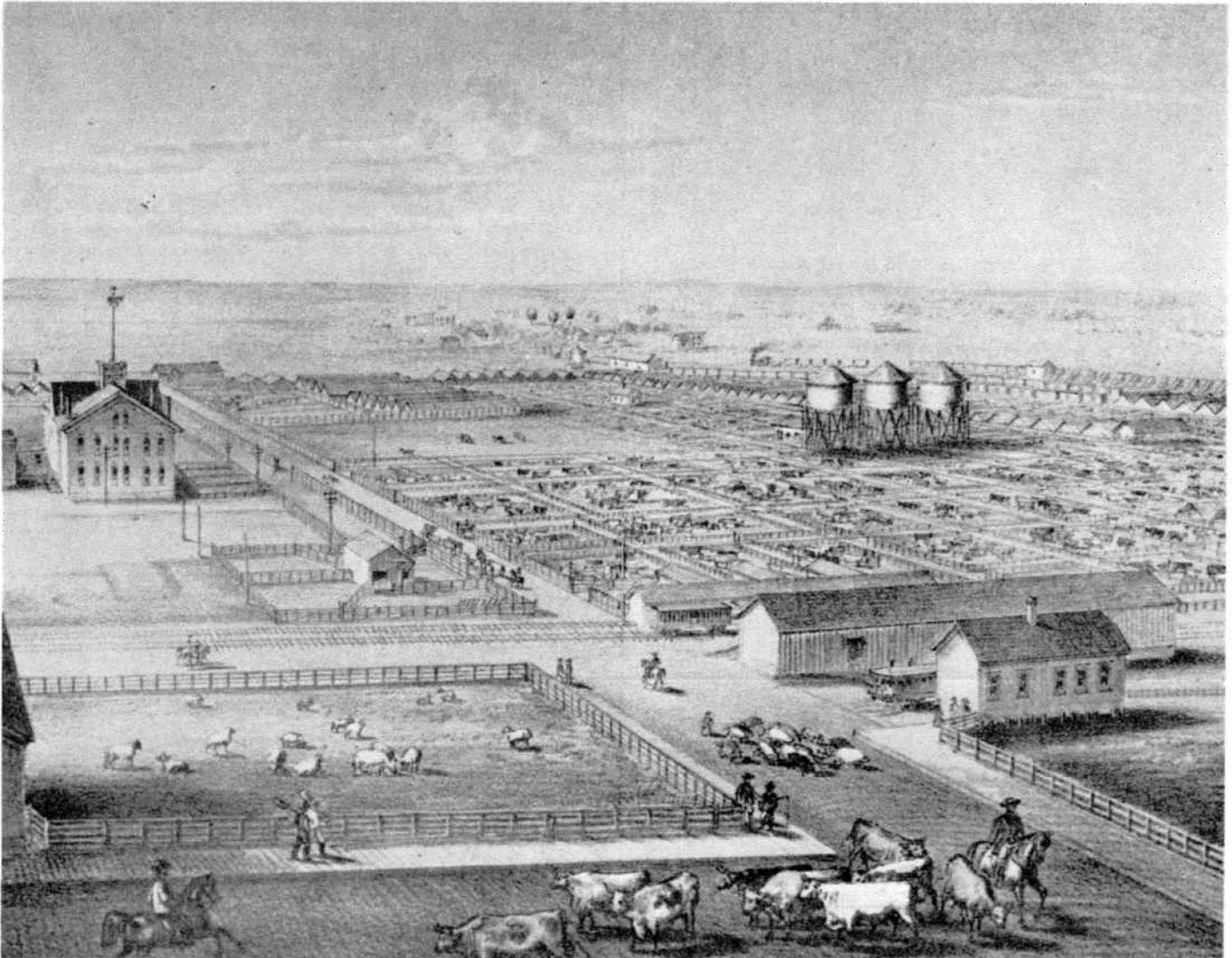
Livestock marketing in Chicago centered around these and two other tavern yards (Darrow's, near what is now 29th and State, and Jackson's, near 12th and State) until 1852, when the Michigan Central and Michigan Southern railroads reached Chicago. The arrival of the eastern railroads revolutionized the industry, enabling livestock to be

shipped east year round. A stockyard with hotels, scales, rail connections for receiving and shipping, and facilities for commission men and market reports was built near the terminal of each new railroad to reach the city. Consequently, the tavern yards not on the rail lines soon faded and closed, while those along the routes prospered.

The Illinois and Michigan Canal, completed in 1848, connected the Illinois River to Lake Michigan via the south branch of the Chicago River, and opened a new waterway for shipping. To utilize this passage, several slaughter and packing houses were constructed here along the south branch.

With the advent of the Civil War in 1861, packing companies located in war-threatened areas built new plants in Chicago. Much of the meat for the Union army was prepared in these plants; in addition, a large number of cattle were shipped out of Chicago and kept close to the battle-front to be slaughtered when needed. This tremendous rise

**Drawing of the pen area from 1866. Gate now stands where the road crosses the railroad tracks.**  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



in livestock traffic pointed out the inefficiency of operating numerous separate yards. As a result, traders insisted that there be one large united, or "union," stockyard where livestock could be concentrated and sales conducted in open competition.

Chicago's Union Stock Yard emerged in 1865 as a consolidated market to replace many of the smaller yards operating around the city's periphery. The first recorded move to establish a united stockyard came when the Chicago Pork Packers Association passed a resolution in June, 1864, calling for precisely this action. Concurrently, the nine railroads with lines running into Chicago were in the midst of negotiating the abandonment of the separate yards located on their lines; they would then be most responsible for financing the construction of a new union yard.

After a south side site was chosen, the land was purchased from former Mayor John Wentworth for \$100,000. Three eastern railroad officials retained title to the land until a charter for a new company could be secured from the Illinois legislature. The charter was granted to the Union Stock Yard and Transit Company of Chicago on February 13, 1865. A prospectus issued in the autumn of 1864 resulted in the subscription of \$1,000,000 of stock. The major portion (\$925,000) was taken up by the nine railroads, although within the next few years their stock was sold to the general public.

Work on the site was begun June 1, 1865, and on Christmas Day of that year the yards were open for business. The land on which Union Stock Yard was built, located near the south branch of the Chicago River four miles southwest of the city's center, had once been considered almost valueless marsh. However, after the 320-acre site had been drained, pens were constructed which accommodated 21,000 cattle, 75,000 hogs, 22,000 sheep, and 200 horses. Hotels, restaurants, and an exchange were built, and later a bank and a post office were added.

Resembling a miniature city, the yards were laid out in a simple grid pattern with streets and alleys crossing each other at right angles. The nine railroads constructed branch tracks to the yards and a small canal connected the yards with the river. No slaughter or packing houses were built near the yards at first since there were already well-established plants on the river 2½ miles to the north. But in a few years, new plants were built west of the yards in what later became known as "Packingtown."

Nelson Morris, Philip Armour, and Gustavus Swift, considered the Big Three of the meat packing industry, came to Chicago between the 1850s and 1870s.

Morris, in 1854, journeyed west to Chicago where he found employment in John Sherman's yards. At the end of his first year there, Morris turned down a raise in salary from \$5 a month to \$100 and went into business for himself. At first he traded in disabled and dead stock; he then went into meat packing in 1859. The Civil War gave him an opportunity to obtain army contracts and these, along with European trade, made him a millionaire. The Morris plant, one of the first packing houses opened and operated at the Union Stock Yard, was to expand into an industrial community of 40 buildings occupying more than 30 acres.

Philip Armour, philanthropist responsible for founding Armour Institute, the forerunner of the Illinois Institute of

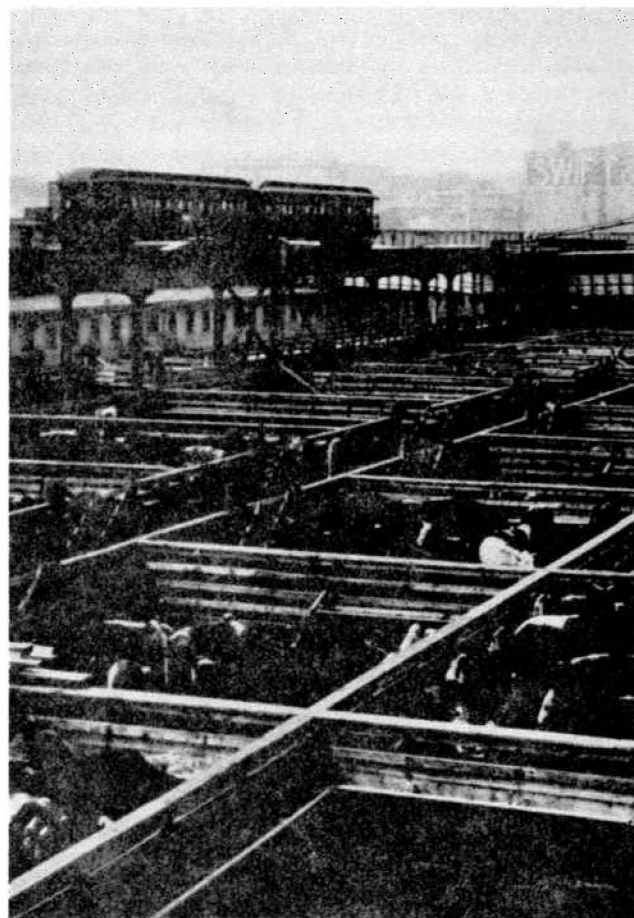


Photo taken around 1910 shows the cattle pens, which held 75,000 animals at capacity.  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)

Technology, went into the pork packing business in Milwaukee in 1863. One of Armour's brothers had established a grain commission firm in Chicago, and in 1868 the firm started packing hogs under the name Armour & Company. By 1871 Armour & Company was the fifth largest of the 26 packers in the city, and in 1875 Philip moved his own headquarters to Chicago, bringing with him Michael Cudahy, superintendent of the Milwaukee plant, who later formed his own company. In the next decade Armour's business grew to include packing as well as grain elevator and storage interests not only in the Middle West but also in the East. By 1890 his wealth was estimated at \$25,000,000. At the time of his death in 1901, Armour's firm owned more elevators than any other company in the world, had 50,000 employees, and was exporting food worldwide.

Gustavus Swift, the third of the triumvirate and an early contributor to the University of Chicago, began in the meat business as a butcher at the age of 14. By 1869 he was operating a small slaughter house outside Boston, and in 1875 he moved to Chicago and formed Swift Brothers & Company. Swift shipped meat over long distances, established a

wide reputation, and in so doing laid the foundation for a great name and a great fortune. The firm was incorporated in 1885, capitalized by \$500,000; by 1905, two years after Swift's death, the company's capital amounted to \$35,000,000. Swift & Company was the first to eliminate waste by manufacturing by-products which included hair-brushes, buttons, chessmen, knife handles, fertilizer, soap, perfume, glue, leather goods, surgical sutures, violin strings, photographic film, gelatin, and oils.

Chicago's standing as a meat center was elevated substantially by the development of the refrigerator car in 1869. Using what at first appeared to be only crude ice boxes on wheels, Swift inaugurated a business which mounted in volume as the years passed. By 1886 Morris, Armour, Swift, and George H. Hammond & Company of Hammond, Indiana, the chief shippers of dressed beef, were using about 1500 refrigerator cars.

Because the great Chicago Fire of October, 1871, did not come near the yards and packing plants, business was not interrupted; in fact, it continued to grow. Consequently, the city was able to maintain financial credit, and stability was restored soon after the fire. Furthermore, because so much of the economy was based on livestock, Chicago was better able than any other big American city to withstand the depression of 1873.

**Aerial photo of the yards taken around 1940. The Union Stock Yard Gate is in the lower left corner at the entrance to the pen area.**  
(Courtesy of the Chicago Historical Society)



The 70s and 80s were marked by a notable shift from the marketing of live cattle and swine to their conversion into processed meat. Morris, Armour, and Swift, among others with similar economic imagination and expertise, guided this shift and began shipping packed meat across the country.

As animal-raising areas moved westward, slaughtering and packing establishments developed around the country. By the late 1880s, Chicago packers had satellite plants in Nebraska, Iowa, and Missouri. Not content with establishing new markets for their products in the United States alone, the Chicago packers and livestock dealers tapped a lucrative market across the Atlantic; American cattle and, in particular, dressed beef were shipped to England, France, and Germany. By 1890, as Libby, McNeil & Libby's canning methods were perfected, the Chicago export market expanded appreciably through the shipment of compressed beef.

By 1900, the yards had grown to 475 acres and had a capacity for 75,000 cattle, 50,000 sheep, 300,000 hogs, and 5,000 horses. The Union Stock Yard and Transit Company itself employed 1000 people. There were 200 commission firms employing 1500 and there were 100 packing firms employing some 30,000 men in the packing and slaughter houses.

Despite the amazing growth which had taken place, in the early years working conditions and sanitation standards at the yards were poor. In 1906 Upton Sinclair wrote his famous exposé *The Jungle*. Sinclair described the unsanitary conditions under which meat was processed, the unhealthy surroundings of the workers, and their lack of recourse in dealing with their employers. Investigations followed and eventually higher sanitation standards resulted. The present Mary McDowell Settlement, founded in 1894, was one of the first attempts to assist yard workers and their families. By the late 1890s, the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workers of North America had formed a small union which steadily grew in size and influence. Ultimately, in the 1930s, additional unions were organized to respond to workers' needs.

Record livestock receipts were recorded from 1910 to 1925, and the large packing companies enjoyed relative prosperity through the late 20s. The depression years, however, brought a decline in meat consumption, and a fire in 1934 gutted most of the yards. Despite these setbacks, the packing industry began a steady return to productivity.

In 1940, when the 75th anniversary of the yards was celebrated, current statistics showed that since 1865 a total of 896,000,000 animals had been sold through the yards. After 1940, though, livestock receipts began to dwindle, and during the 1950s the exodus of the major packers began. For a time, the sales and trading of livestock in the Union Stock Yard remained up, but this too began to decline. In 1958, although shipping from the yards continued and smaller firms took the place left by the larger companies, the Union Stock Yard and Transit Company concentrated operations to a smaller area at the south end of the yards. By 1960, all the large packing companies were gone. The drop in livestock receipts reflected the loss.

Several causes may be found for the departure of the great meat packing companies. For one thing, the firms

were eliminating jobs. For another, the labor force was diminishing and many of the workers were over 40. Still, the primary reasons were technological. The eight- and ten-story buildings originally constructed were uneconomical; long one or two story assembly line buildings proved more efficient. Yet it would have cost far more to remodel these multi-storied structures than to relocate where land was less expensive. The growth of major cities on the west coast encouraged packers to set up slaughtering plants closer to the farms where the animals were raised, and the spread of new highways coupled with the upsurge of the trucking industry offset Chicago's former advantage as a rail center. Where there were 64 yards throughout the country in 1929, there were 2300 in 1959.

As an instrument of the livestock and meat packing businesses, the Union Stock Yard contributed to the economy, growth and development of Chicago, but it also became famous for the national political conventions which convened in the International Amphitheater in 1952, 1956, 1960, and 1968.

Commercially, the area has been quiet since the yards ceased to operate in 1971, yet the Stock Yard Gate remains as a visual reminder of Chicago's past and often colorful supremacy in the livestock and meat packing industries.



The restored gate with site work partially complete. Trees have been planted, lamp posts installed, and eventually all ground not landscaped will be inset with paving bricks saved from the pen area. (Barbara Crane, photographer)