

Determining the Location of May 22, 1855, Chicago Area Tornado

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Updated:

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1.0 Introduction

Several contemporary sources indicate that a tornado occurred in far northwest portions of Chicago, Illinois (today's city boundaries), on May 22, 1855. It is often told that this is the earliest known tornado to impact the city of Chicago. The most common account is that the tornado struck at least one building near the town of Jefferson – today's Jefferson Park neighborhood of Chicago – and killed three (3) of the house's occupants. Few specifics are generally provided with the account, making exact placement of the tornado track difficult. Another complicating factor is the lack of full names provided in some newspaper articles, along with the loss of many death records for Cook County, Illinois, prior to 1871, the year of the Great Chicago Fire. Recent digitization of historic newspaper articles, availability of genealogical information, and discovery of old property maps has provided a new opportunity to fill in missing details of this tornado. In this manuscript, new theory on the location of the tornado is presented.

2.0 The May 22, 1855 Tornado

2.1 Weather Synopsis

Unfortunately, little information is available about the general weather conditions on Friday, May 22nd, 1855. The earliest weather maps prepared by the United States government were created by the U.S. Signal Office of the War Department (NOAA Central Library, 2021) in January of 1871, over 15 years after the event. The limited weather information known about May 22, 1855, comes from newspaper articles written around the time of the event. The day was reported as warm and humid. The U.S. Signal Service (predecessor to the Signal Corps and today's National Weather Service) briefly mentioned the tornado in their report "Report on the Character of Six Hundred Tornadoes" (Hazen, 1884). The provided information simply indicated the location of the tornado and that hail occurred prior, not after.

2.2 Original Story and Assumed Location

One of the most-frequently cited sources for events in the city of Chicago for most of the city's history is the Chicago Tribune (Figure 1). In the May 24 edition, the paper tells of a "Terrific Tornado" which killed three (3) persons in a single house "in the town of Jefferson" which was "near Jefferson Mills" (Chicago Tribune, 1855). In the report "Character of Six Hundred Tornadoes," the location was indicated as "Jefferson and Cook County, IL" (Hazen, 1884). In 1855, a post office, and perhaps also a small village, by the name of Jefferson existed within Jefferson Township in central Cook County northwest of Chicago. The location of this village was long assumed to be the location of the tornado.

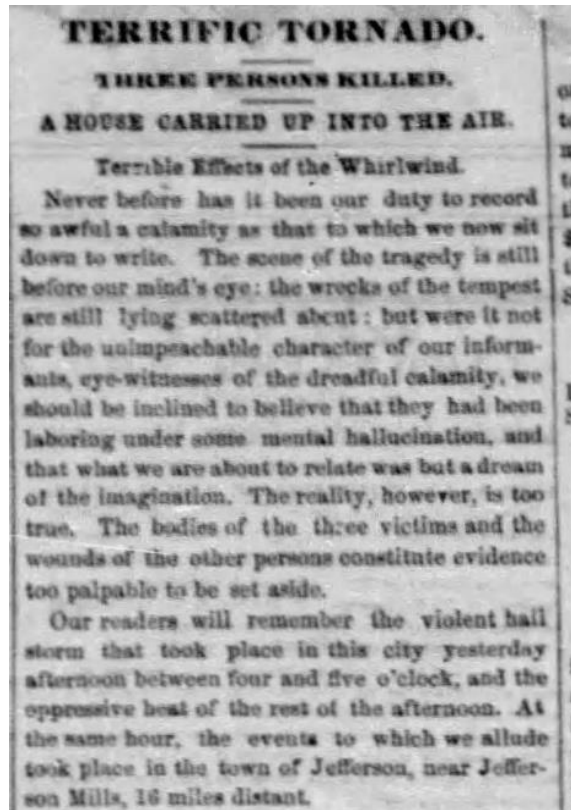


Figure 1. Excerpts from a Chicago Tribune article from May 24, 1855, documenting a tornado which occurred northwest of the city. The full Chicago Tribune article can be found in the appendix.

The story of the tornado which struck the Jefferson Park area of Chicago has been repeated in numerous places, even by the National Weather Service. In summer 2020, a review of tornadoes impacting the city of Chicago was conducted. This included reviewing the known information about the 1855 event to determine if the time and location of the tornado could be narrowed down. At the time, the article from the Chicago Tribune was the primary source, although an additional short newspaper article written by a Chicago area broadcast meteorologist and a web page devoted to tornadoes in Illinois also referenced the event. These other sources provided no unique details, and it is quite possible that they both were entirely based upon the Chicago Tribune article.

To try and find more corroborating sources for this event, important clues were collected from the original Tribune article. The available clues were:

- Hailstorm in the city (Chicago) between 4pm and 5pm
- the town of Jefferson, near Jefferson Mills, 16 miles distant
- funnel-shaped cloud approached from the northwest
- nine (9) persons in the house when impacted by the tornado
- Mrs. Page and two (2) of her children killed, others injured
- Tornado occurred with hail up to walnut size, 9 inches circumference
- No mention of other structures in the vicinity being damaged

2.2.1 Review of Geographical Clues

As mentioned, the reference to “town of Jefferson” was assumed to be Jefferson Township, Cook County, or the small village of the same name within the township. A map showing township boundaries as of 1851 is shown by Figure 2. The search area could not be narrowed down from the entire township of Jefferson, as no information about nearby roadways, sections of the township, or how far the reporter had to travel from a nearby train station or other landmark were provided. Internet searches for a “Jefferson Mills” didn’t provide any leads. A review of Cook County maps from 1851 and 1861 (Rees, 1851; Flower & Mendel, 1861) did not indicate a “Jefferson Mill” near Jefferson or within Jefferson Township. The 1861 map provided names of property owners outside of incorporated villages and cities. A review of the properties in the vicinity of Jefferson did not provide any potential locations for a Page family.

1851 Cook and DuPage County Townships

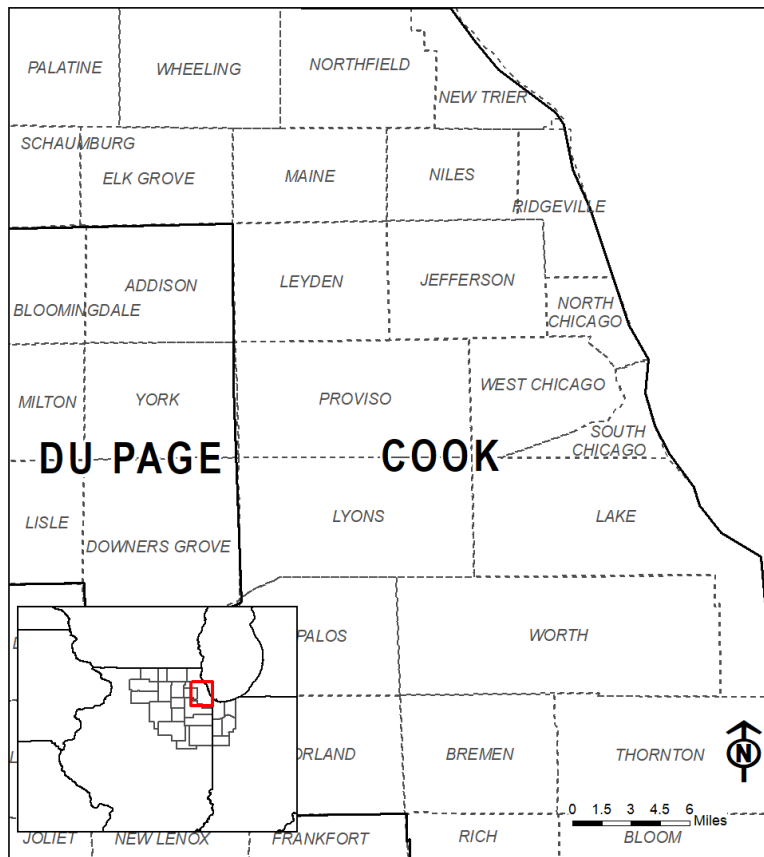


Figure 2. Map of township boundaries in portions of Cook and DuPage Counties as of 1851, digitized from J.H. Rees' "Map of the Counties of Cook and DuPage." Jefferson Township, the assumed location of the May 22, 1855, tornado was located in Cook County northwest of the then-boundaries of Chicago.

One noted difference between the 1851 and 1861 maps is the village of Jefferson. In 1851, the village was indicated only as a post office. By 1861, a platted village was noted along the recently constructed Northwestern Railroad, also known as the Illinois & Wisconsin Railroad prior to 1859 (<https://metrarail.com/about-metra/our-history/chicago-north-western-history>). Although property owners were noted on the 1861 map, this was only for rural areas, so property owners within the platted village of Jefferson were not indicated. It was determined that if the Page family lived within the village of Jefferson, that could be a possible explanation for not finding the location of their residence.

2.2.2 Review of Genealogical Clues

Searches of death records in Cook County for the year 1855 did not yield any matches for the last name "Page". It should be noted, however, that most genealogical records for the county prior to October 8, 1871, were lost in the Great Chicago Fire (<https://www.cookcountyil.gov/service/genealogy-records>). Based upon the clues provided in the article, it was assumed that all victims had the last name "Page." No first names or ages were provided to help narrow the search. Census records and other genealogical records were reviewed using FamilySearch (www.familysearch.org). No clear matches were found.

2.2.3 Summary

The review of the 1855 tornado conducted in fall 2020 yielded no new information of consequence. No strong corroborating evidence was found, and the tornado was still assumed to have occurred somewhere near, or possibly within, the small platted village of Jefferson within Jefferson Township, Cook County, Illinois.

3.0 New Searches

In April 2021, a review of newspaper articles covering a significant spring 1881 flood was conducted. This involved a review of articles from numerous dates and numerous different newspapers, all archived within the Library of Congress' digital collection (www.loc.gov). One interesting thing noted during this review was that some newspapers removed from the location of an event seemed to have more detail than newspapers closer to the event. For example, newspapers away from the Chicago area in central or northwest Illinois provided additional details about flooding on the Chicago River in Chicago not found in the Chicago Tribune. It was speculated that this might also be the case for other historical weather events. The search for information on the May 22, 1855, tornado was broadened to include additional sources and dates.

3.1 New Clues from Other Newspaper Articles

Several additional newspaper articles were found digitized by the Library of Congress that covered the tornado, but some of the details differed, and the scope of information provided differed. New sources included the Ottawa Free Trader (Figure 3), the New York Daily Tribune (Figure 4), and the New York Herald (Figure 5).

The first new article reviewed was from the May 26th Ottawa Free Trader (Ottawa Free Trader, 1855). Discrepancies between this account and the accepted account were immediately noted, including mention of the location "Maine" instead of Jefferson. Helpful additional details were noted, including the names "H. Page" instead of "Mr. Page" and a family member, "R.L. Wheeler."

In the May 25th New York Daily Tribune (New York Daily Tribune, 1855), the tornado was described as moving southeast, but it was also mentioned that it briefly dissipated and then reformed before striking the house "one mile from the Illinois and Wisconsin Railroad." This article was consistent with the accepted location of the event "in the town of Jefferson." The article differed in that it indicated four (4) persons killed and nine (9) persons total in the destroyed house. The article also indicates that the fatalities were the wife, son, and two grandchildren of Mr. Page. Additional minor details include mention of the tornado striking a barn after the house, the hail in Chicago, and the "oppressive heat" which was present before the storm.

In the May 29th New York Herald (New York Daily Herald, 1855), the tornado was described as moving slowly, about the speed of a person running. The article's account was similar to the accepted story in that three (3) deaths were indicated. Additional details were provided including the name of an additional occupant of the house "Mrs. Gillett," who was severely injured, and details about the manner in which the house was destroyed. It was mentioned that it was raining at the time of the tornado, and hail occurred prior. It was also indicated that the tornado dissipated shortly after hitting the Page home.

AWFUL WHIRLWIND.—On Tuesday a whirlwind passed over the town of Maine, in Cook county, taking in its course the house of Mr. H. Page, a frame dwelling, which contained at the time his family and that of his son-in-law, R. L. Wheeler. The house was rendered a complete wreck by the force of the whirlwind, and in its ruin involved the lives of three of the inmates, Mrs. Page and two children.

The **Tornado** was accompanied by a fall of hail stones of enormous size, some measuring 10 to 13 in circumference, and "as big as a man's double fist," as an eye witness expresses it.

Figure 3. Article about the tornado in the Ottawa Free Trader, May 26, 1855.

A TERRIFIC WHIRLWIND—LOSS OF LIFE.

CHICAGO, Thursday, May 24, 1855.

Accounts reached this city last night of a most terrific hurricane and whirlwind in the town of Jefferson, Cook Co., and other places north and west of here.

On Tuesday afternoon a revolving funnel-shaped cloud passed swiftly along near the ground, about sixteen miles north of here, carrying up large sticks of wood, stones, &c. It described a semi-circle toward the south-east twisting off large trees and whisking them out of sight instanter.

The whirlwind then broke in two and disappeared, but almost immediately formed again and passed directly back north and west with redoubled violence. It struck a heavy frame house one mile from the Illinois and Wisconsin Railroad, tearing the roof instantly off, and almost immediately afterward taking the whole house bodily up the spout with all its contents.

Nine persons in the house were drawn up and hurled down in different places. Four of their number were killed and others mutilated beyond any prospect of recovery. The whirlwind then passed over a post and rail fence, leaving not the slightest vestige of it.

It next took up a barn and threw it upon the horses and cattle it contained, crushing them at once. The timbers of the house and barn were hurled down to the ground with such violence as to bury them almost out of sight. The house belonged to Mr. Page, whose wife, son and two grandchildren were killed.

SECOND DISPATCH.

Additional intelligence from the locality more than confirms the above. Accounts are given of persons being carried up one hundred feet in the air and then hurled down with great violence.

A number of eye-witnesses have testified to the ravages of the tempest, and describe it as most terrific. The same afternoon a severe hail-storm occurred in this city, after which the sky presented a very singular appearance to the northward, and the weather changed from the most oppressive heat to the most chilling atmosphere.

THIRD DISPATCH.

Later accounts from the region of the **tornado** still have an incredible and Munchausen appearance. More loss of life has not yet been discovered, and it is probable that the reports have been somewhat exaggerated. It is impossible yet to learn the exact extent of the damage.

Figure 4. Article on the tornado from the New York Daily Tribune, May 25, 1855.

Further Particulars of the Whirlwind in Cook County, Ill.

[From the Chicago Press, May 26]

Having conversed with an eye witness of the terrific scene of which we gave a brief account yesterday morning, we are able to add some particulars. The whirlwind was rendered visible some distance by the dust, grass, paper, pieces of cloth and various article which it took up in its path. It appeared in shape of a tunnel, small near the earth and expanding as it extended upward to the rain cloud above. The column indicating the whirlwind swayed to and fro, and the observer thinks it did not move over the earth very rapidly, not more so than a man could run.

When it approached the house of Mr. Page, and was about one hundred feet distant, the house moved toward it thirty or forty feet, when the whirlwind came directly upon it. First the roof of the house went up, and broke into fragments, then the walls writhed and separated, and were carried up and also torn in a thousand pieces, filling the air with timbers and pieces of boards. The pieces of the house now lie in the field, indicating by the manner in which they are strown, the circular motion of the devastating force. Many of the scantling and boards are sticking upright in the ground as if fallen from a great height. The family of Mr. Page numbered eleven persons. They saw the whirlwind coming, and some of them had rushed out of the house. Those outside were also carried up into the air, but how far they cannot say. They are all bruised, by striking the fragments of the house or by concussion with the ground. The body of one of the dead children was picked up forty rods from where the house stood. Another had one arm broken, another had a hand crushed and her shoulder terribly bruised. These two will recover. Mrs. Gillett had her jaw broken, and is so bruised upon her body that the physicians think she cannot survive. A young man of the family had his scalp torn open, one rib broken, besides other severe bruises.

The house was a substantial frame house, resting upon boulders. Some of these weigh three or four hundred pounds, and lay upon the top of the ground. They were all rolled from their places by the force of the wind. A board fence in the track of the whirlwind was swept away for several rods, the posts being drawn from the ground and carried some distance. A small barn was thrown down, killing a horse and some calves inside of it.

At the time of this whirlwind it was raining, and just before, a fall of hail had taken place, some of the stones measuring nine inches in circumference. The force of the whirlwind was lost soon after passing Mr. Page's house, and the column disappeared. In going back over the track by which it approached the house, our informant found the ground strewn with debris of articles which it caught up and let fall again, among which were fragments of clothing, bedding, and wall paper, which leads to the belief that some other house had been demolished in its course.

The consequences of this remarkable atmospheric phenomenon are terrible to the family of Page. Besides the death of three, and perhaps more of their number, and the injuries to the living, they have lost their home with all its contents—everything in the house is utterly destroyed. Even the clothing they had on was torn from them. "I have nothing in the world to pay you with, gentlemen," said Mr. Page to Drs. Brainard and Freer, who went out to attend to the afflicted family; "my money, as well as everything else in the house, was the prey of the elements." "Give yourself no trouble on that account," replied they, and went on with their professional services.

Figure 5. Article on the tornado from the New York Herald, May 29, 1855.

Newly available clues were:

- Hail size was 9 inches circumference (2.9 in diameter) or 10-13 inches circumference (3.2-4.2 in diameter)
- Location may have been Maine Township instead of Jefferson Township
- Location was about one (1) mile from the Illinois & Wisconsin Railroad
- Corroboration of nine (9) persons in the house when impacted by the tornado
- Either three (3) or four (4) persons killed
- Corroboration of Mrs. Page being among those killed, but either two (2) of her children or one (1) child and two (2) grandchildren
- Mention of a severely injured person named “Mrs. Gillett” who was expected to die
- Mention of an individual named “R.L. Wheeler” and a first initial (“H”) for Mr. Page
- No other residences indicated as damaged, but damage to a barn and fencing was noted. It was also indicated that the tornado moved slowly and was visible at “some distance” before hitting the house.

Information provided by these additional newspaper accounts provided new potential leads for research. With a first initial for Mr. Page, alternate death records, such as the cemetery inventory FindAGrave (www.findagrave.com) could be used to match names with burial locations and dates of death. Names of relatives could be used to search family trees in genealogy records, such as FamilySearch. The fall 2020 search also did not involve reviewing information for Maine Township, Cook County, Illinois.

3.2 Genealogy

Searches of records for H. Page on FamilySearch didn't lead to any obvious results, but searching for “R.L. Wheeler” provided an interesting hit – a Ransom Lee Wheeler who lived in Maine Township during the 1860 Census (Figure 6), about 5 years after the event, and was residing with multiple individuals having the last name of Page (United States Census, 1860). Reviewing the family tree of Ransom Lee Wheeler provided several additional strong clues. Ransom was married to a Sara Maria Page, who was the daughter of Hubert Joseph Page and Samantha Finch Page. It was indicated that Samantha Page died on May 22, 1855, the date of the tornado. The family tree indicated that Ransom and Sara Wheeler had numerous children, but none born between 1850 and 1860. This suggested the possibility of other children born after the 1850 census that may have died prior to the 1860 census.

In addition to the single, consensus family tree that is constructed by users, FamilySearch also contains a Pedigree Resource File (https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Pedigree_Resource_File) full of numerous small family tree snippets submitted by anonymous users. This resource provides a means of digitizing genealogical data from a person's records, such as family history books, written notes, and oral histories. These family trees can have duplication of names found in separate family trees submitted by other users, and may have errors. The Pedigree Resource File is one source of information used to help construct the main consensus family tree on FamilySearch.

Page No. 93
 SCHEDULE 1—Free Inhabitants in Township of Maine in the County of Cook State
 of Illinois enumerated by me, on the 30th day of June 1860. J. H. Hooper Ass't Marshal.
 Post Office Camfield

	NAME	SEX	AGE	VALUATION	PROPERTY	RESIDENCE
15	Harriet Page	F	20	200		New York
16	R. L. Wheeler	M	37	200	Farmer	"
17	Ellen "	F	30	40		"
18	Mary "	F	10	4		Illinois
19	Sarah "	F	5	4		"
20	John "	M	2	200		New York
21	Chas Page	M	14	200		"
22	Ada "	F	16	4		"
23	Nancy Miller	F	30	200	F. Laborer	"
24	John Page	M	10	2		"

Figure 6. Forms from the 1860 Census showing an R.L. Wheeler residing with family members named "Page" in Maine Township, Cook County, Illinois.

Searching of these user-submitted genealogies yielded more information about the Page/Wheeler Family. In one genealogy submitted by an anonymous user to the Pedigree Resource File, a Samantha Page was indicated as "killed by a cyclone...in Des Plaines" on May 22, 1855, along with a Harriet Page Gillett (Pedigree Resource File, entry for Samantha Finch, 2011). Samantha's daughter Sara Maria Wheeler, married to a Ransom Lee Wheeler, had a note indicating that "two tiny daughters died in the tornado that took others of the Page family" (Pedigree Resource File, entry for Sara Maria Page, 2011). Two additional children were shown in this family tree, Lillian Livonia Wheeler and Eveline Louise Wheeler, both of whom died on May 22, 1855. A note for Ransom Lee Wheeler indicated that their family moved from New York to Maine Township, Des Plaines, Illinois in 1855, to property in the "NE quarter of Section 29" (Pedigree Resource File, entry for Ransom Lee Wheeler, 2011). Another child of Ransom and Sara, Mary Isabelle Wheeler, had a note which indicated that she was "lifted up into the air...during the tornado that killed several family members in 1855" (Pedigree Resource File, entry for Mary Isabelle Wheeler, 2011). From this information, a family tree was constructed (Figure 7). This user-submitted genealogical record strongly corroborated the information already found.

The Des Plaines History Center was contacted to see if additional information about the Page and Wheeler families was available in their records. It was indicated that the tornado was unknown to their staff until they were contacted, but their records confirmed what was theorized about the location of the Page/Wheeler property and the names of those killed in the tornado (Siobhan Heraty, personal communication, May 2021). It was also indicated that there was no record of any Page, Wheeler, or Gillett family members being buried in any of the cemeteries in existence at the time of the tornado, suggesting that the tornado victims may have been buried on the family farm. It was indicated that burial on family farms was a common practice at the time in rural areas.

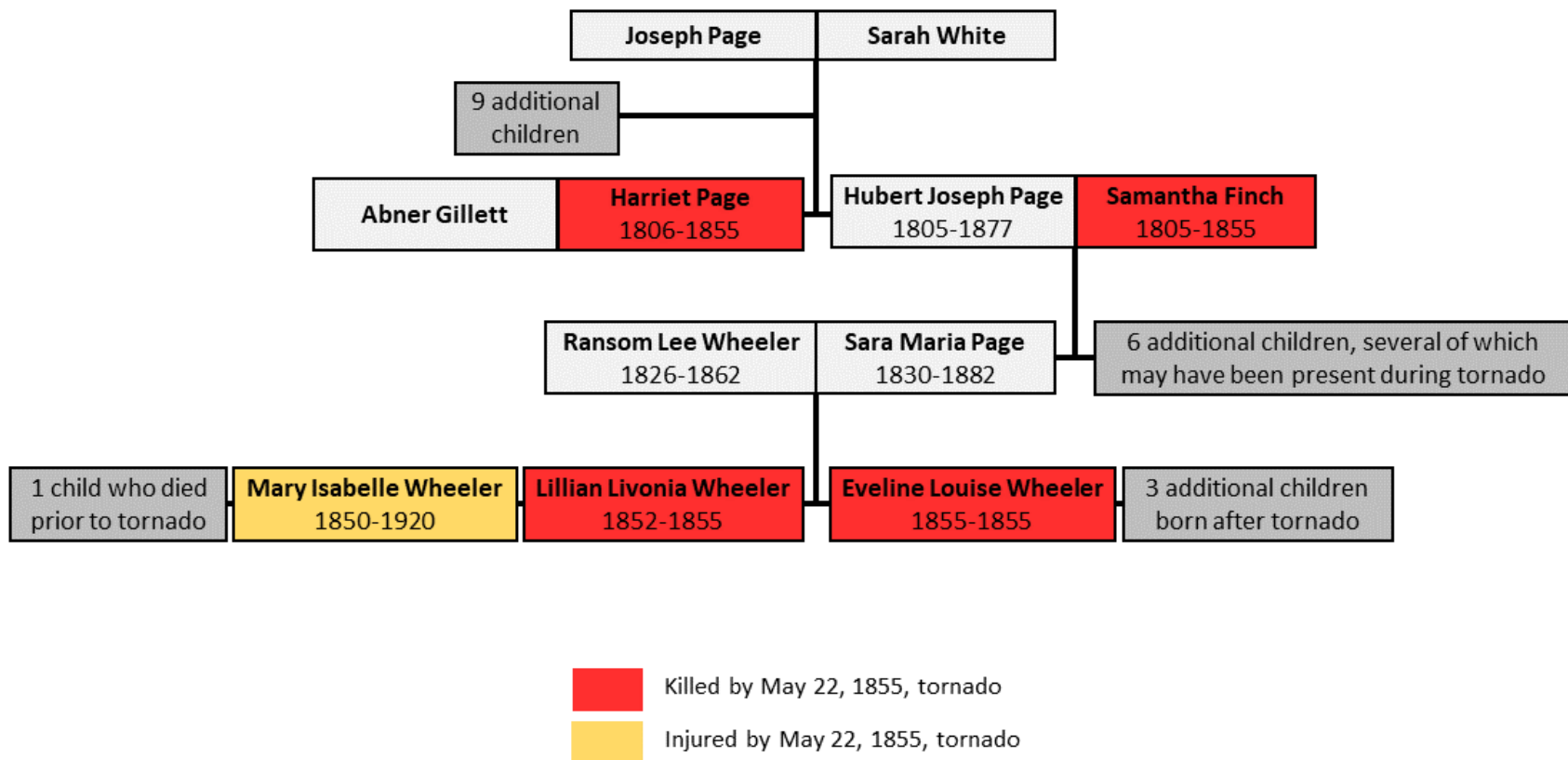


Figure 7. Family tree of the Page and Wheeler family, based upon newspaper accounts and genealogical research. Whether an individual was killed or injured by the May 22, 1855, tornado is marked, if known.

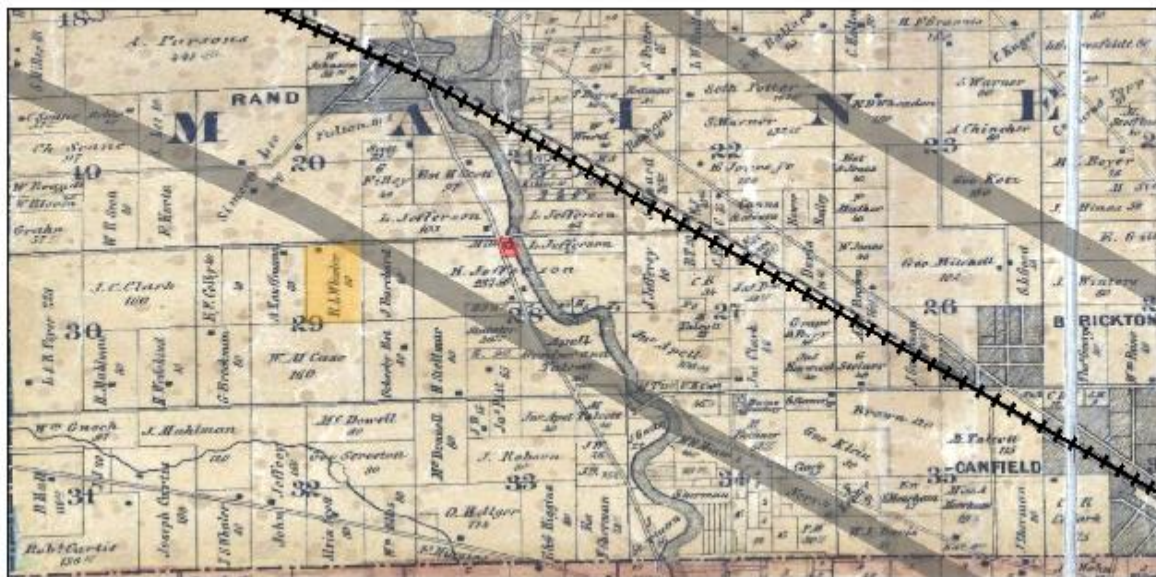
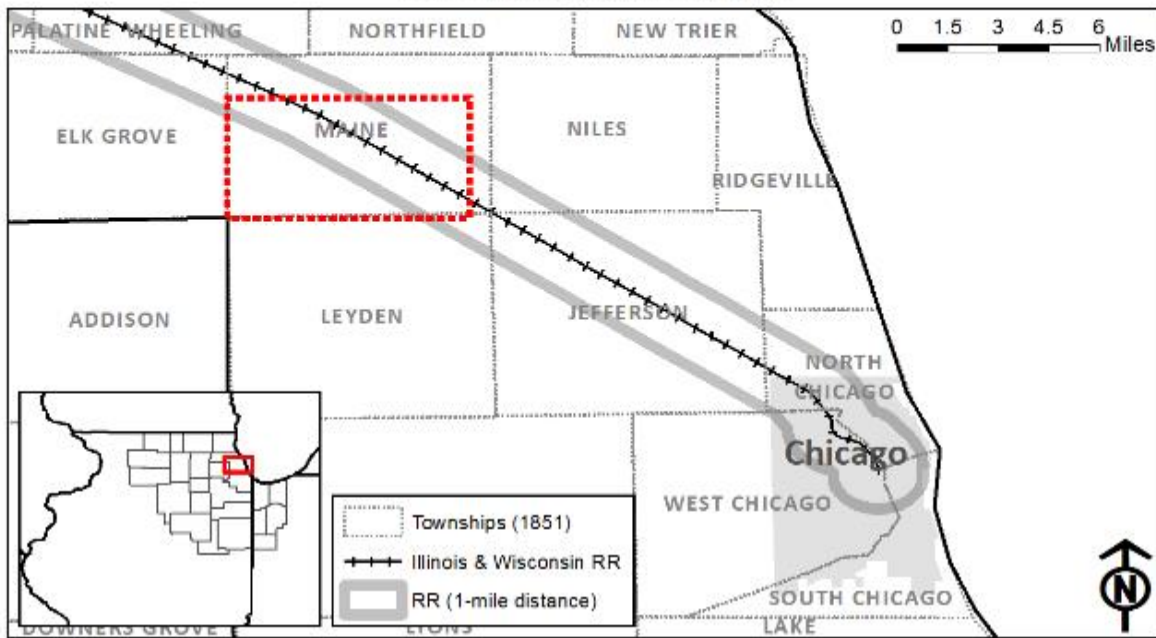
3.3 Review of GIS

Using the information and clues from the additional newspaper articles, the map search was expanded to include Maine Township, Cook County, just northwest of Jefferson Township on the 1861 map (Flower & Mendel, 1861). Following the Northwestern Railroad corridor (known as the Illinois and Wisconsin Railroad in 1855) northwest from Jefferson, properties were reviewed within about 1-2 miles to look for “Wheeler” or “Page.” South of the village of Rand (today’s Des Plaines), just west of the Des Plaines River, the name “RL Wheeler” was noted (Figure 8). This property was in the northeast portion of Section 29 in Maine Township. Interestingly, just east of the Wheeler property along the Des Plaines River were numerous pieces of property owned by the Jefferson family, and a marker indicating “mill.” The R.L. Wheeler property was about 1 mile from the Illinois & Wisconsin railroad, near a Jefferson Mill, but in Maine Township instead of Jefferson Township. GIS information and genealogical information was now coming into agreement on the general location of the May 22, 1855, tornado and its victims.

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May 22, 1855, Des Plaines Tornado

Tornado location clues



Updated: 2021/05/13 Cartographer: W. Scott Lincoln, NWS Chicago

Based upon news accounts in the Chicago Tribune, Ottawa Free Trader, New York Daily Tribune, and New York Herald.

Figure 8. Map of Cook County townships and the Illinois & Wisconsin Railroad as of 1855 (top). The 1861 Map of central and southwest Maine Township, Cook County, Illinois, by W.L. Flower (bottom). The 1-mile distance from the Illinois & Wisconsin Railroad (gray), the mill at the Jefferson property (red) and the R.L. Wheeler property (orange) are indicated.

3.4 Discussion

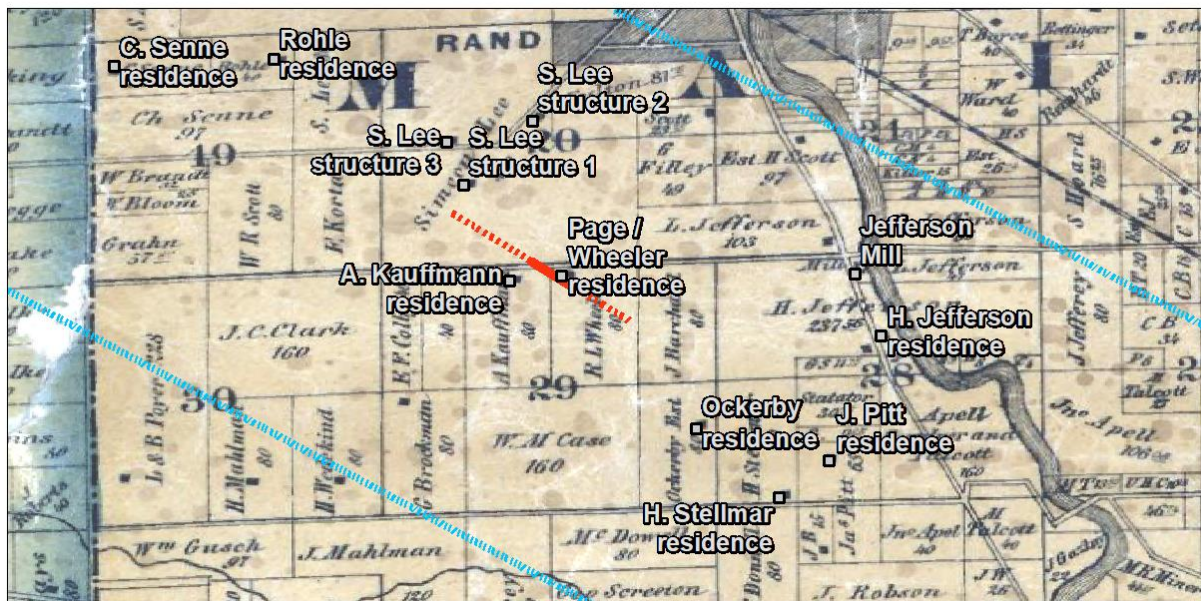
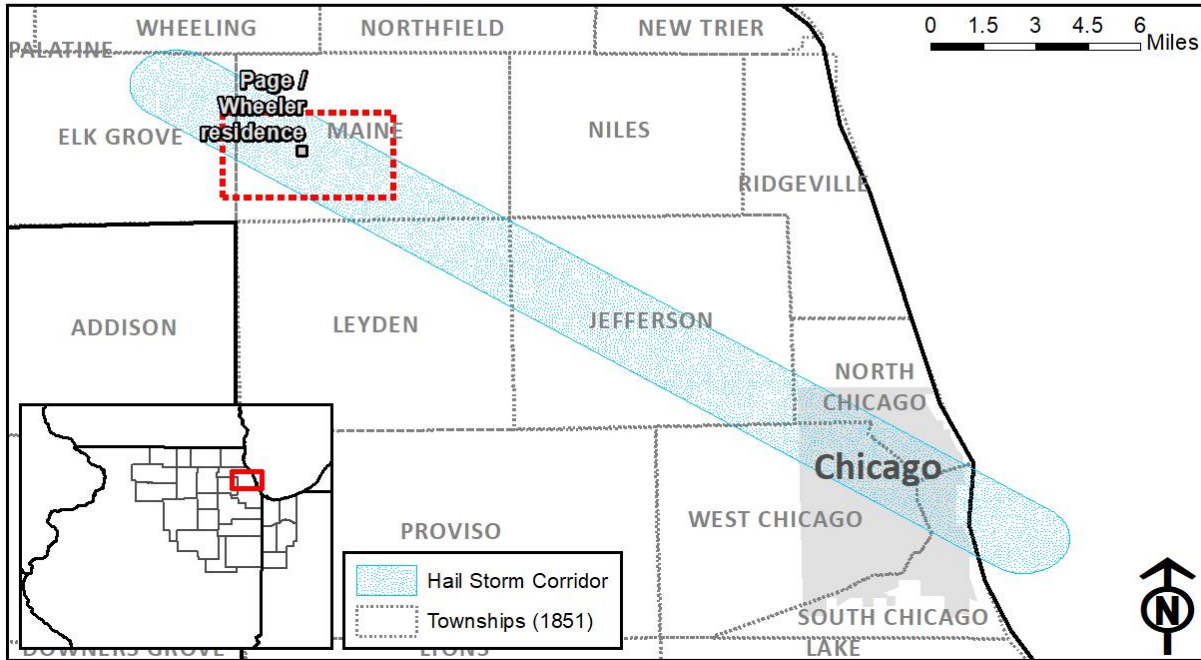
One remaining question is why one of the primary (and geographically closest) sources, the Chicago Tribune, could have indicated the wrong location for the tornado. It's possible that a simple mix-up between the village of Jefferson, Jefferson Township, and the mills on the Jefferson Farm were to blame. Internet searches indicated that Luther Jefferson built a windmill and water mill on his farm south of Oakton Street along the Des Plaines River (<https://www.illinoiswindmills.org/jefferson-windmill>). A newspaper article in 2012 discussed how one of the houses on the Jefferson farm is still in existence today along River Road in Des Plaines, and now is used by the Des Plaines Chapter of the Izaak Walton League (Wolf, 2012). The article also stated that the mill was a very busy establishment in the mid-to-late 1800s, and even included a general store. The Des Plaines History Center records indicate that the Jeffersons were a prominent local family with one of the most prosperous farms in the township at that time (Siobhan Heraty, personnel communication, May 2021). It seems quite possible that this location could have been mistaken by the Chicago Tribune reporter as the village of Jefferson, and the reference to "near Jefferson Mills" was actually in reference to the mills in operation on the Jefferson Farm.

Further corroboration comes from the genealogical information. Newspaper sources indicate that a home owned by a family named Page was impacted by the tornado, and a family by the name of Wheeler also lived in the home. A nearly exact match was found in the main genealogical record on FamilySearch, as well as a user-submitted genealogy that also referenced a tornado in the general area occurring on the exact date of the tornado previously believed to have occurred in today's Jefferson Park, Chicago, Illinois. A plausible reason exists for sources to confuse the mill at Jefferson Farm, in Maine Township, with the town of Jefferson, in Jefferson Township. The 1851 Rees Map indicates 548 persons residing in Maine Township and 744 residing persons in Jefferson Township (Rees, 1851). Due to the small population of persons living in these areas in 1855, it is exceptionally unlikely that all of the collected information could have occurred by chance and be unrelated to the tornado in question.

Although there is high confidence in the location of the Page/Wheeler property in 1855, and some confidence in the location of the residence destroyed by the tornado (based upon its location on the 1861 map), the tornado's start and end points as well as direction were a little more difficult to determine. Newspaper articles indicate that hail occurred prior to the tornado at the Page/Wheeler property, and hail was also reported in Chicago shortly thereafter. It was also indicated that the tornado came from the northwest and moved southeast. Connecting a line from the Page/Wheeler property to Chicago and adding a 1-mile buffer produced an approximate corridor affected by the storm. None of the newspaper articles describing the event indicated any damage to nearby residences. Some descriptions mentioned the slow movement of the tornado ("not more than a man could run"), and the fact that it was visible for a short time prior to hitting the structure. Assuming a speed of about 10 mph, a tornado track parallel to the estimated hail corridor, and approximate tornado track was created (Figure 9). This tornado track was limited such that it did not extent beyond structures to the northwest or the southeast, and extended northwest of the Page/Wheeler residence a distance that would be traveled for a couple minutes at the estimated speed.

May 22, 1855, Des Plaines Tornado

Approximate storm track



Updated: 2021/05/12

Cartographer: W. Scott Lincoln, NWS Chicago

Based upon news accounts in the Chicago Tribune, Ottawa Free Trader, New York Daily Tribune, and New York Herald.

Figure 9. Map of Cook County townships in 1855 and the approximate hail corridor from the storm (top). The 1861 Map of central and southwest Maine Township, Cook County, Illinois, by W.L. Flower with structures along the potential tornado track highlighted (bottom). The very likely tornado track (solid red) and possible tornado track (dashed red) are indicated.

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4.0 The Updated Story of the May 22, 1855, Tornado

Sara Maria Page, daughter of Hubert Joseph Page and Samantha Finch Page, moved with her husband, Ransom Lee Wheeler, to Maine Township, Cook County, Illinois, in 1855.

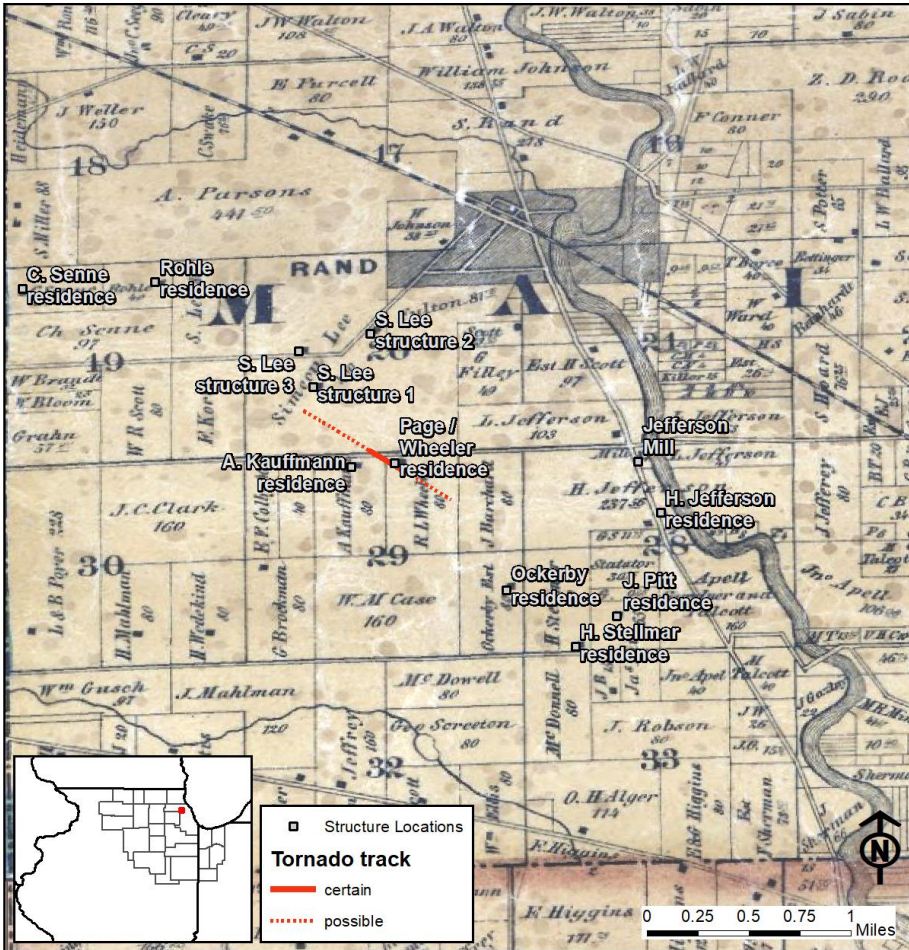
On May 22, 1855, some members of the Page and Wheeler families were outdoors tending to the field. A tornado formed just to the northwest of the residence and moved southeast. The tornado struck the residence within which at least 9 members of the Page and Wheeler family were either inside or nearby. Samantha (Finch) Page, two of her young grandchildren, Lillian and Eveline Wheeler, and her sister-in-law Harriet (Page) Gillett, were all killed. Those killed may have been buried on the family farm, a common practice at the time, although no records exist confirming this or indicating where on the property this may have occurred. Victims may also have been buried in the Town of Maine Cemetery, as it was one of the few cemeteries in existence in the area at the time, but no records of such burials exist.

After the tornado, Hubert Page moved to Lawrence in McHenry County, Illinois, and remarried. Abner Gillett moved back to New York. Ransom and Sara Wheeler had additional children after the tornado, including Lillian May Louise Wheeler (likely named after her deceased younger sisters) in 1856. Census records show Ransom appeared to remain at the same property through 1860, with several of the younger children of Hubert and Samantha Page living with him. Ransom then died shortly thereafter, in 1862. Sara remarried by 1870. One of the oldest children of Ransom and Sara, Mary Isabelle Wheeler, was injured by the tornado and continued to tell family of the story through her later life.

By digitizing and georeferencing old maps of the area, the location of the May 22, 1855, tornado can be overlaid upon today's roads and administrative boundaries. While the tornado impacted mainly rural areas in 1855, if it had occurred today it would have impacted a populated area near the intersection of Mannheim Road and Oakton Street in Des Plaines (Figure 10). Despite newspaper and web accounts to the contrary, the weight of the evidence now indicates that the May 22, 1855, tornado did not occur within today's city limits of Chicago, but instead in Des Plaines (Figure 11).

May 22, 1855, Des Plaines Tornado

Locations of structures and approximate tornado track

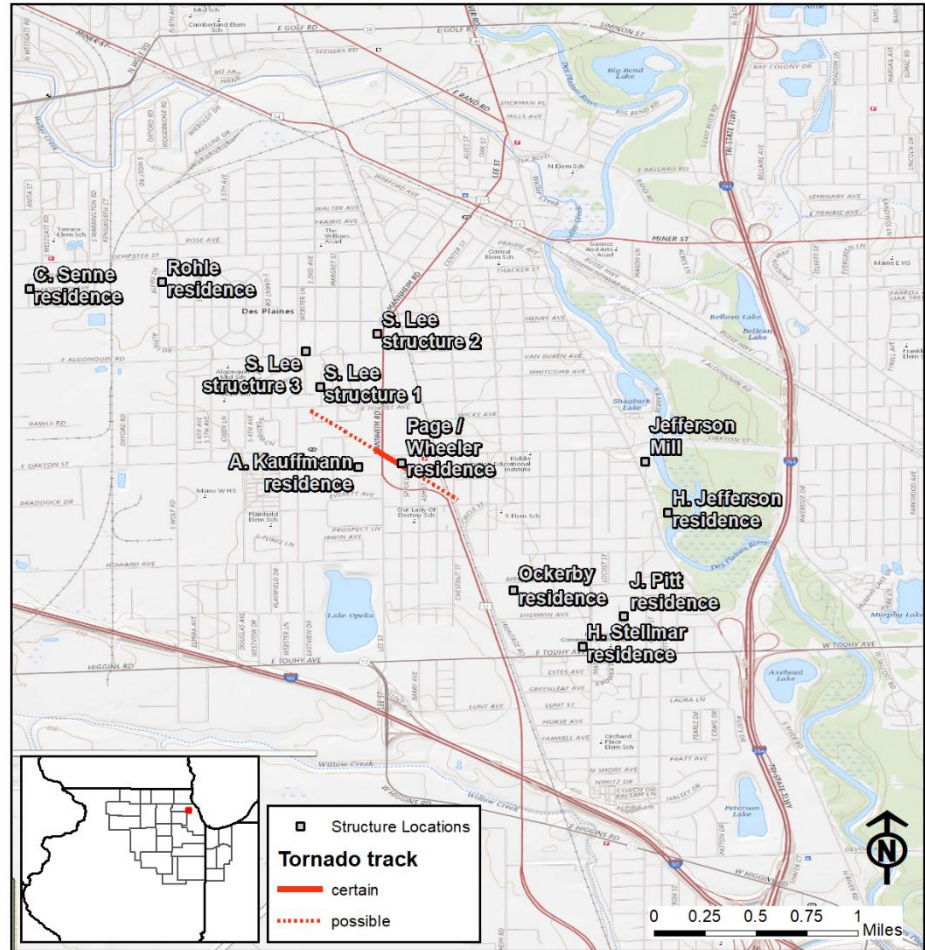


Updated: 2021/05/12 Cartographer: W. Scott Lincoln, NWS Chicago

Based upon news accounts in the Chicago Tribune, Ottawa Free Trader, New York Daily Tribune, and New York Herald, in conjunction with genealogy research on FamilySearch

May 22, 1855, Des Plaines Tornado

Locations of structures and approximate tornado track



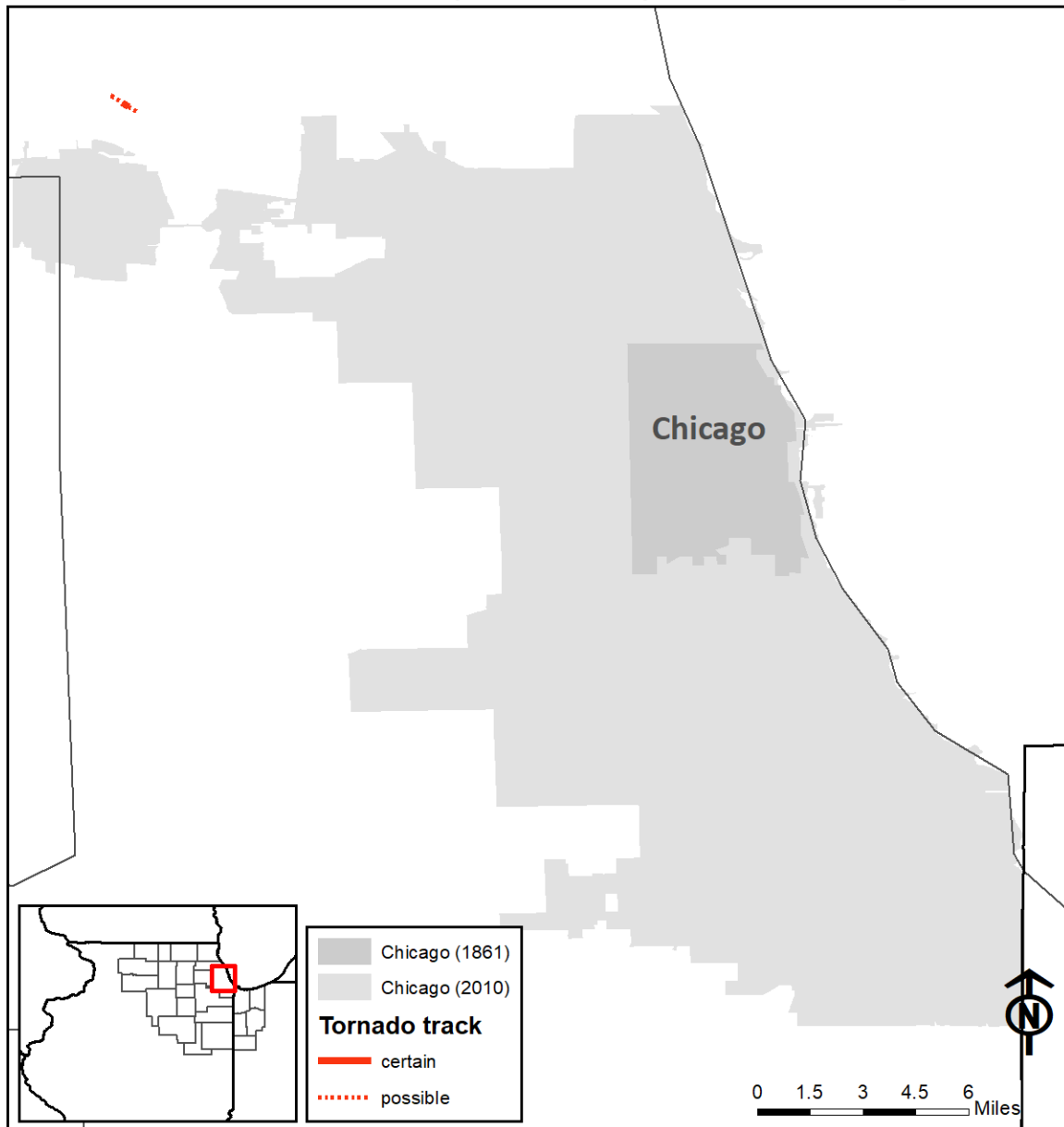
Updated: 2021/05/12 Cartographer: W. Scott Lincoln, NWS Chicago

Based upon news accounts in the Chicago Tribune, Ottawa Free Trader, New York Daily Tribune, and New York Herald, in conjunction with genealogy research on FamilySearch

Figure 10. An updated map of the most likely track of May 22, 1855, tornado based upon the spring 2021 review of newspaper articles and genealogical records. In 1855 (left), the tornado tracked through mostly rural areas south of the town of Rand (today's Des Plaines) and west of the Jefferson Mill, hitting only the Page/Wheeler residence. If this tornado had occurred today (right), it would have begun somewhere northwest of the intersection of Mannheim Road and Oakton Street, then moved southeast to near the intersection of Mannheim Road and Bittersweet Court. The location of the Page/Wheeler home in 1855 is estimated to be near today's intersection of Spruce Avenue and Oakton Street.

May 22, 1855, Des Plaines Tornado

Tornado track compared to city limits of Chicago



Updated: 2021/05/12

Cartographer: W. Scott Lincoln, NWS Chicago

Based upon news accounts in the Chicago Tribune, Ottawa Free Trader, New York Daily Tribune, and New York Herald.

Figure 11. The May 22, 1855, tornado track (red) compared to today's city limits of Chicago (gray) and the 1861 city limits of Chicago (dark gray).

5.0 References

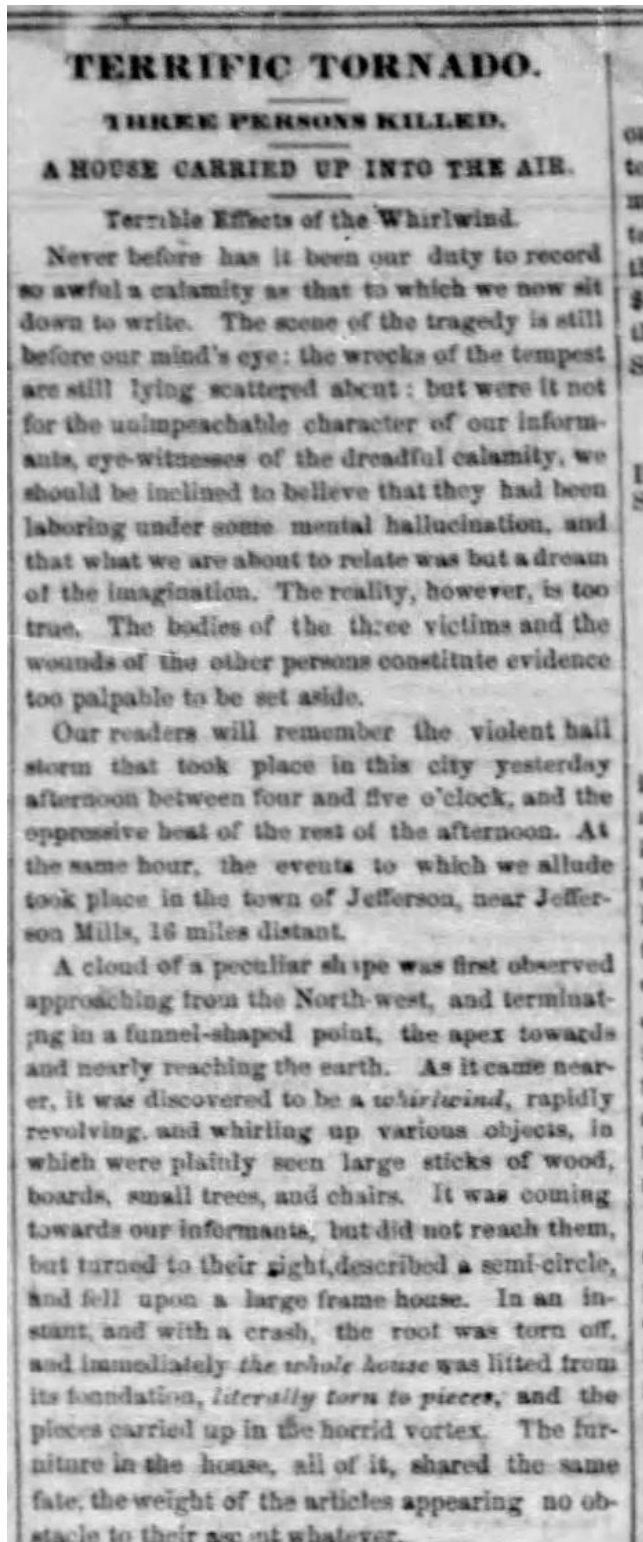
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6.0 Acknowledgements

This report would not have been possible without the help of genealogical records stored and provided for free by FamilySearch. Also helpful were the digitized maps of the Cook County area stored by the U.S. Library of Congress. The authors appreciate the assistance of the Des Plaines History Center, which helped to confirm the majority of the information presented.

Appendix/Misc. Notes

Full newspaper source material



And now we come to a part of the narrative sad indeed to relate. In the house were nine persons. They were all drawn up into the air, and fell, at different distances, and with great violence to the ground. The wife of one of the eye witnesses, Mrs. Page, and two of her children, were instantly killed. All the other persons in the house were greatly injured. The injuries with two exceptions, consist of singular and heavy bruises all over the body. One man had his arm broken, and another his wrist badly sprained. Mr. Page only saved himself from being drawn up into the air, by holding on to a large rock. The house stood upon four large granite boulders. These were all moved several feet from their places.

The whirlwind went on and passed diagonally across a post and rail fence. Of this it tore up twenty rods so effectually, that there is not the slightest vestige of a fence remaining. From this it passed to the barn, tore away one side of it and threw it against a horse, causing his death. The side of the barn then fell down on three calves and injured them so badly that they died during the night.

The whirlwind seemed to pass off in a southward direction.

Many of the fragments of the buildings, etc., fell to the ground from a great height. In coming down they fell nearly perpendicularly, and entered the ground like stakes. Hundreds of these were counted by our informant.

The force of the storm was tremendous. Not only were the boards torn off from the beams to which they were nailed, but the beams themselves were wrenched asunder.

The whirlwind was accompanied by a storm of hail, many of the hailstones being the size of walnuts. Some of them were nine inches in circumference.

We have neither space nor inclination for comment on this sad affair to-day. Nothing like it has ever occurred here before, and we hope never will again. It realizes the utmost horrors of a South American tornado. Had it spent its force in the city, hundreds of deaths might have marked its progress.

Figure 12. Chicago Tribune article from May 24, 1855, documenting a tornado which occurred northwest of the city.

Notes from Pedigree Resource File, FamilySearch

The following notes are from FamilySearch's "Pedigree Resource File." These user-submitted family trees sometimes have notes attached to individuals. Not all of these family trees can be traced to a particular user to credit them for the submission. In the case of the Page/Wheeler family, numerous notes about the tornado were found, but no username or similar way to provide credit was indicated. Entries are pasted here exactly as written, including possible errors, with only minor corrections made to spacing for readability purposes.

Immediate family of Ransom Lee Wheeler and Sara Maria Page

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/2:2:S1RR-PYJ>

From the notes of Ransom Lee Wheeler

In the 1850 census Ransom was listed as a farmer in New York. In 1855 Ransom and Sarah moved to Maine/Des Plaines, Illinois. He was a farmer and a mill-wright. Their location was in the NE quarter of Section 29, Maine Township. A bank now stands at Lee and Miner streets at that location.

From the notes of Sara Maria Page

Sarah lived with her daughter, Mary and husband, William T. Stockwell in Des Plaines, Illinois in 1870.

Two of her tiny daughters died in the tornado that took others of the Page family.

From the notes of Mary Isabelle Wheeler

During the tornado that killed several family members in 1855, Mary Isabelle was lifted up into the air and slammed to the ground, landing on a stick that pierced her side. Her granddaughters witnessed that scar. Mary's father Ransom was out in the field plowing when the storm struck and was alone able to save himself by holding onto a large boulder in the field.

Mary was an accomplished guitarist, playing for many family gatherings.

Mary was buried in Town of Maine Cemetery, Park Ridge, Illinois

From the notes of Samantha Finch

Samantha was killed in a cyclone when the family lived in Des Plaines. Harriett Page Gillett was killed at the same time. The Page family bible was destroyed at that time.

From the notes of Joseph Hubert Page

in the year of 1855 on the 22 day of May, my mother, who was Samantha Finch, was killed in the first cyclone that I ever heard of in Illinois after that my father married again and then he went to live at a

place called Lawrence, in McHenry County, Ill. and after they had one child named Abia Page, the old gentleman died, in the year of 1875 I think, without looking the date up to the more definite, and he is buried here in the city, where I reside.

Immediate Family of Harriet Page

<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/2:2:S1RR-JGM>

From the notes of Harriet Page

Harriet was killed in the tornado that took Samantha Finch Page's life. After Harriet's death, Abner was reported to have returned to New York.

Nancy Komada reports that Harriet and Abner had three daughters.

DRAFT