

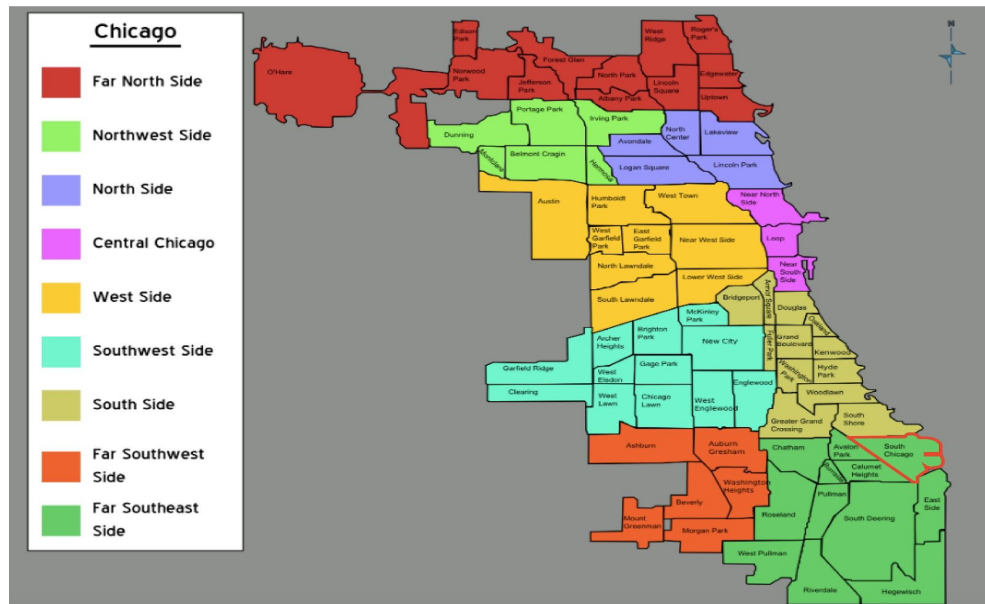
Sandwiched between the mouth of the Calumet River and Lake Michigan lies a 573 acre desolate plot that was once home to the largest steelmaking operation in Chicago.¹ Formally known as South Works, the area remains as a portrait of industrial decline. Almost unnoticeable to cars passing down the adjacent Lake Shore Drive, the site now caters mainly to urban spelunkers like myself hoping to uncover the forgotten past. There is a certain kind of majestic beauty in its imperfection. Vegetation has consumed the last remaining structures as nature reasserts its dominance over the landscape. I can feel the journey of this place as I gaze up at its towering ore walls. Beginning as wet marshland, it grew into an industrial powerhouse, but then just as quickly, it fell into decline, leaving behind the community that once depended on it. While so much of the rest of Chicago has found a new identity as a modern metropolis, South Works has been unable to escape its past, its desolation haunting whoever ventures beyond its walls. But look close enough you may see something else amid the ruins, perhaps a Black Crowned Night Heron taking flight, a field of Little Green Sedge or an adventurous group of actors performing a Shakespeare play; South Works remains alive in a process of transformation.

² But to envision these possibilities you need to go back and understand how we got there, the transformation from first nature -- as it existed before human contact -- to the peak of second or human-altered nature -- and now maybe on to a third nature that is undeniably shaped by all of what came before.³

¹ Charles Vinz, "U.S. Steel South Works," AREA Chicago, January 08, 2012, 1, <http://www.areachicago.org/u-s-steel-south-works/>.

² Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 14.

³ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 57.



South Works lies within the South Chicago neighborhood (outlined in red), at the far southeast corner of Chicago bordering Indiana. The area is also part of the greater Calumet Region, which stretches from northwestern Indiana to southeastern Illinois. (Photo by Peter Fitzgerald)

Standing on the pier extending from the site's northern slip, it is hard to imagine the rich environmental history that made this place possible. To my right, the billowing smokestacks of Gary, Indiana soar to the heavens, while to my left, the sun radiates off the Chicago skyline. However, the land had once been "possessed in a way that cherished no such vision of urban empire."⁴ In its state of first nature, the landscape was defined by "the lakeshore and its miles of dunes and wetlands."⁵ For thousands of years, indigenous Potawatomi had cohabited the land without altering it, instead creating a first nature-based economy of "seasonal hunting and fishing settlements."⁶ "The glaciers had given this landscape its flatness, its fertility, and its easiest corridors of movement," a combination compatible with the economic desires of white settlers.⁷ Contrasting visions of landscape led to a series of treaties in 1833 that pushed the Potawatomi

⁴ Ibid., 54.

⁵ Stella Brown, South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 4.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), 25.

from their homeland, setting in place “the remaking of the landscape for industrial purposes” and the birth of second nature.⁸



Potential access to three main waterways: Chicago River, Calumet River and Lake Michigan made the Calumet Region desirable for heavy industry. (From Rod Sellers, *Chicago Southeast Side Industrial History*)

While the particular natural advantages of the Calumet Region were crucial to the rise of South Works, and second nature more broadly, the original landscape had inscribed obstacles that resisted the rise of industry.⁹ Among other things, the shallow, sandy Chicago River and marshy ground conditions made construction difficult. However, settlers eventually began to claim the land for their own economic purposes. 1848 marked a year of explosive development and change to the natural landscape. The creation of the Illinois and Michigan Canal made transportation cheaper and easier, cementing the Chicago River as an industrial hub.¹⁰ At the same time, the Lake Shore and Michigan railroad completed tracks, elevated on a trestle over the southern marshland from Englewood to Calumet.¹¹ Infrastructural developments attracted early

⁸ Ibid., 29, Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 4.

⁹ Patrick Leonard Peterson, *South Works Redevelopment Study: A Vision for South Chicago*, Ball State Department of Landscape Architecture/ College of Architecture and Planning, Spring 2005, 22.

¹⁰ Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), .

¹¹ Gladys Priddy, "South Chicago Rebounds After Early Boom, Bust," *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Chicago), January 6, 1955.

industries, like lumber yards and grain elevators, setting the stage for the emergence of an industrial community around the area's transportation networks.¹² "Tall dunes were broken down to flatten the land and were replaced by land made of slag and other industrial materials."¹³



Settlers deconstruct a large sandbar (similar to the sandbar originally located at the mouth of the Chicago River) at the mouth of the Calumet River near the future South Works site in 1870. (From Rod Sellers, *Chicago Southeast Side Industrial History*)

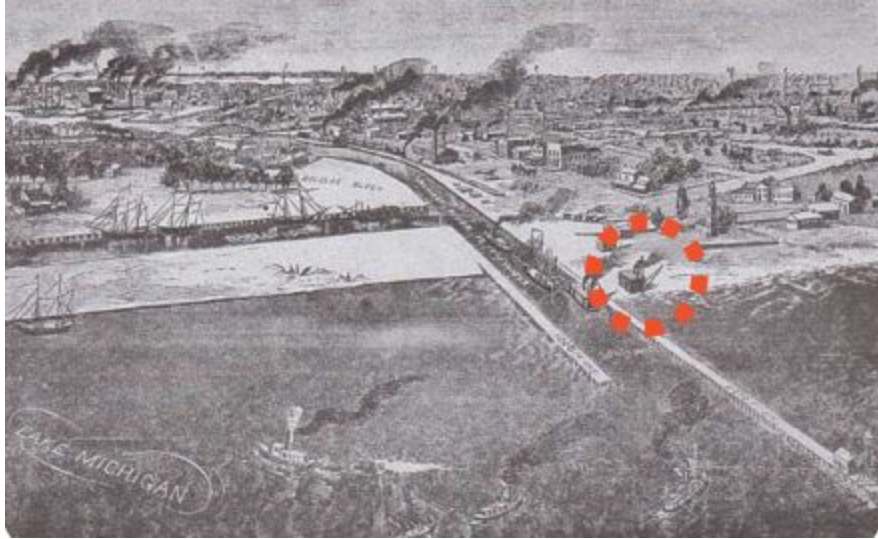
After the Great Chicago Fire decimated much of city center in 1871, industries set their sights south to the growing community in the Calumet Region. South Chicago's transportation advantages caught the eye of the North Chicago Rolling Mill Company, which found the mouth of the Calumet River an ideal place to move from their location just north of downtown.¹⁴ South Chicago offered plentiful fresh water, cheap land to build on and a location far enough from the city center to minimize objections to the negative repercussions of heavy industry.¹⁵

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 4.

¹⁴ Dominic A. Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880-1922* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 30, Patrick Leonard Peterson, *South Works Redevelopment Study: A Vision for South Chicago*, Ball State Department of Landscape Architecture/ College of Architecture and Planning, Spring 2005, 30.

¹⁵ Rod Sellers, *Chicago's Southeast Side Industrial History*, Southeast Historical Society, March 2006, 12.



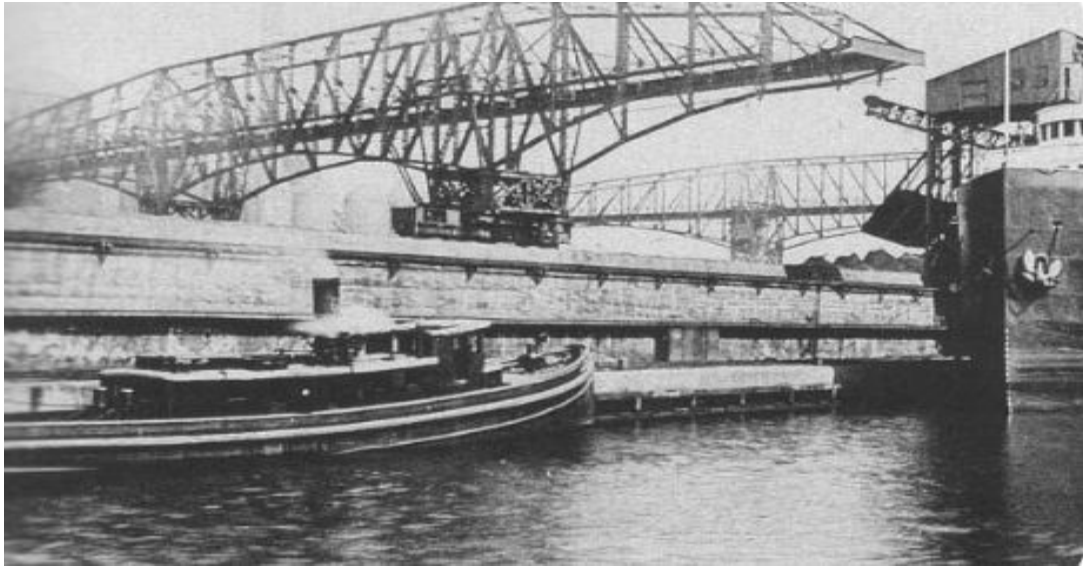
1874 view of the Calumet river and harbor shows early construction of South Works on its northern slip. Easy transportation in and out of Lake Michigan was key to its rise. (Unknown author, property of the Chicago Historical Society, image from Illinois: A Geographical Survey)

Immediate success followed the opening of the mills' doors in 1880, setting off a migration of companies to the Calumet District. The once sparse farming community had been transformed into a full blown steel town.¹⁶ Second nature was taking over its predecessor. By 1898, the new facility, by then known as South Works, was owned by Illinois Steel and one of the most modern mills in the industry, with its size more than tripling to 260 acres.¹⁷ Ships filled with iron ore from northern Minnesota poured into South Work's north slip connected to Lake Michigan, while Indiana limestone arrived by the series of six railroads that met at the site.¹⁸

¹⁶ Dominic A. Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880-1922* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 31.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 7.



Ships flow into South Works north slip from Lake Michigan. The sites corridors of movement provided it with an advantage in shipping and receiving materials, which separated it from competitors. (Chicago Historical Society, published in Chicago's Southeast Side by R. Sellers)

A series of mergers made Illinois Steel part of the massive national conglomerate, U.S. Steel, in 1901.¹⁹ Soon after, the company expanded its reach across the border to establish Gary, Indiana as a steel mecca.²⁰ With 80% of domestic steel production in one entity, the facility expanded, taking over a larger portion of the south lakefront.²¹ Steel had captured the landscape and had no intent of giving it back. It appeared that first nature would be gone forever.

Meanwhile, a diverse community had begun to form around South Works that was undeniably shaped by the god-like presence steel had over the landscape. The emerging job market attracted immigrants from all over Europe with strong Irish, Polish and Eastern European populations.²² “Like a web, most induced jobs (the grocer, baker, and brewer) in South Chicago could be linked to the direct jobs” created at the steel mills in the area.²³ While the steel industry

¹⁹ Jack Rocha, *What Steel Left Us*, Southeast Side Historical Society, Spring 2015, .

²⁰ Dominic A. Pacyga, *Polish Immigrants and Industrial Chicago: Workers on the South Side, 1880-1922* (Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2003), 31.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, .

²³ Jack Rocha, *What Steel Left Us*, Southeast Side Historical Society, Spring 2015, 4.

had proved itself to be particularly mobile, people residing in its surrounding communities did not experience the same level of freedom. An absence of public transit and affordable housing options forced many workers to live near industry.²⁴ The byproducts of industry seeped into surrounding neighborhoods and environment. Dark, billowing smoke encased the area while deafening sounds of blast furnaces erupted from the mill. Steel had taken control of the senses, creating a kind of industrial trance that hid pollution, worker injuries and the broader alienation of South Chicago. Second nature had reached its peak, where even individual lives were subservient to the demands of industry.

Just as quickly as South Works had risen to power, it began a slow decline, limping along until it finally closed in 1992. The surrounding neighborhood suffered from the plant's slow demise. No single event killed South Works. Yet, the beginning of the end can be traced to South Works losing out on an expansion opportunity that U.S Steel brought to Gary, Indiana instead.²⁵ A site formally with no competitors now had one of the largest plants in the country next door.²⁶ While the production boom of WWII may have deferred South Work's decline momentarily, it soon resumed with a vengeance.

Foreign and domestic competition hit South Works hard following the end of WWII.²⁷ America no longer reigned atop the steel throne as Germany and Japan dominated the market with newer machines and cheaper labor.²⁸ While many other American mills responded to the challenge by updating their facilities or moving to the more efficient non-union, mini-mill design, South Works remained cemented in antiquity.²⁹ Expansion opportunities fell through its

²⁴ Ibid., 9.

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 11

²⁷ John N. Maclean, "A Mighty Engine Expires," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), January 10, 1992.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., Merrill Goozner, "South Works Buyout Effort a Bold Gamble," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), May 5, 1991.

grasp in favor of newer sites like the neighboring Gary Works.³⁰ The site tried to fight back by spending heavily through the 60's and 70's, but to no avail. By 1979, thirteen of South Works' facilities were closed and employment had dropped from 6,800 to 3,500.³¹ The plant blamed unions for high wages and work rules, while unions blamed U.S Steel for falling behind. In an act of desperation, steelworkers banded together for an employee takeover of South Works, but were rejected, leading to its closing in 1992 with only 690 employees left on the payroll.³² The heart of South Chicago's second nature was laid to rest.



An aerial view of the northern half the site after most the mill was demolished in 1995. Large plots of vacant land dominate the landscape only 12 miles from downtown. (Photo by Okrent Associates, provided by Pamela Austin, McCaffery Interests)

While U.S Steel had left, industry kept a firm grip on the landscape. More than a century of steelmaking had contaminated the land, preventing an immediate sale when U.S Steel put South Works on the market in 1994.³³ U.S Steel spent over \$8 million trying to erase its history, but even after the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency deemed the site cleansed, few

³⁰ Jack Rocha, *What Steel Left Us*, Southeast Side Historical Society, Spring 2015, .

³¹ John N. Maclean, "A Mighty Engine Expires," *Chicago Tribune* (Chicago), January 10, 1992.

³² Ibid., Jack Rocha, *What Steel Left Us*, Southeast Side Historical Society, Spring 2015, .

³³ *McCaffery Project* (Chicago: BW Chicago, 2008), Patrick Leonard Peterson, *South Works Redevelopment Study: A Vision for South Chicago*, Ball State Department of Landscape Architecture/ College of Architecture and Planning, Spring 2005, 26.

potential buyers emerged.³⁴ The site's isolation, combined with the surrounding neighborhood's commercial and residential decline and white flight, further contributed to its stagnation. In order to persuade its first major buyer, Solo Cup, to purchase the site, U.S. Steel revamped surrounding streets.³⁵ Vehicular transportation now was the site's most cherished network. But, Solo Cup's plan to build a new facility fell through only a year after it purchased part of the property, leaving the land once again without purpose.³⁶

Steel had been the language of the landscape for 112 years. Community members and developers have attempted to create a new dialogue in which to speak of the South Chicago landscape, but have been unable to find common ground since its closing. Developers have long discussed building an upscale neighborhood called 'Lakeside' on the grounds of South Works. However, many in the community remain skeptical that such a project would improve their lives.³⁷ While a massive infrastructural development would help mend the neighborhood's high unemployment rate, it risks further isolation. Projects centered on making the area more accessible to the surrounding community have had the most success.³⁸ The opening of Steelworkers Park in 2014, which sits directly next to South Works, has provided a much needed open, public space to a community that had long been without such amenities.³⁹ Just in the past year, a public bouldering wall and geological exhibit have given the site new life. These kind of developments connect the community with the landscape where they can see both the return of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Charles Vinz, "U.S. Steel South Works," AREA Chicago, January 08, 2012, , <http://www.areachicago.org/u-s-steel-south-works/>.

³⁷ Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 18.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Stella Brown, *South Works Geological Study: The Human Role in the Formation of South Works*, Chicago Park District, Public Art Initiative, 2018, 18, Patrick Leonard Peterson, *South Works Redevelopment Study: A Vision for South Chicago*, Ball State Department of Landscape Architecture/ College of Architecture and Planning, Spring 2005, 26.

first nature and the history of second nature -- revitalizing while at the same time memorializing South Chicago and South Works.



A bouldering wall (left) lines the southernmost ore wall, which is around the corner from Stella Brown's geological exhibit (right).

When driving south down Lake Shore Drive, it's hard to imagine the lakefront without upscale condos and beaches. Unlike other rust belt cities like Detroit and Cleveland, Chicago has been able to cover up much of its industrial past with craft breweries, office spaces and housing developments -- the newer, kinder face of second nature. However, these forces have not reached South Works. Not close enough to be seen as part of Gary's (fading) industrial complex, and far enough from downtown for the City to deem it unworthy of beautification, South Works remains a site of contest and contrasts. The generation of people who knew South Works as the engine that helped build the John Hancock and Willis Tower have vanished while its current residents live in the shadow of a forgotten time. Looking out across the vast stretch of vacant properties that line the lakefront from 79th street to 92nd street, it's easy to lose hope.

But those willing to look can see a re-emergence of first nature from its industrial tomb. Illinois prairie and other regional plants have taken over the site that was once the epicenter of

second nature. What is now emerging in something of a third nature, where first nature is growing around and interacting with the relics of second nature. As the original landscape continues to show it will not back down, the rest of us need to adapt with it. Understanding the history of this unique landscape is an important first step. To move forward, we need to know how we got to where we are today.

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