Chicago’s Civil War roots run deep
By Kara Spak
April 9, 2011

If the United States Zouave Cadets were the Chicago Bulls of the 1850s, then their leader, Elmer Ellsworth, was Michael Jordan.

The Zouave (pronounced zwävs) soldiers, Chicago men all, traveled the country performing precision military drills modeled after French soldiers fighting in Algeria before roaring, sold-out crowds.

Leading the team was Ellsworth, a 5’6” dynamo who moved to Chicago to appease his wife’s father. His fame and Chicago home led him to President Lincoln, who tapped the world-famous Ellsworth to join him in Washington D.C., calling him “the greatest little man I ever met.”

On May 24, 1861, 39 days after the Civil War began with a Confederate attack on Fort Sumter in South Carolina, a bullet ripped through Ellsworth after he tore down a Confederate flag from a building in Alexandria, Virginia, across the Potomac from Washington D.C.

In an instant, the skirmish in the South hit close to home.

“The country couldn’t believe someone they knew had been killed over this dispute between the south and the north,” said Daniel Weinberg, owner of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop, Inc. in Chicago’s River North neighborhood. “That was before over 640,000 more were killed. But that was the first one.”

With a single shot, a high-profile Chicagoan became the first Union officer killed in the Civil War. And Ellsworth’s death is one of many connections between the war, which started 150 years ago Friday, and Chicago.

Before there was the North Side and the South Side there was the North and the South. While the city never saw direct fighting, the Civil War had a profound effect on Chicago and Chicago on the outcome of the war.

Significant aspects of today’s Chicago were rooted in the days of the War Between States. They could not be erased when fire destroyed the city six years after the Civil War ended.

“The fire is the most overrated event in Chicago history,” said Ted Karamanski, a Loyola University history professor and author of “Rally Round the Flag: Chicago and the Civil War.” “Just show me where the great monument to the Chicago fire is.”

Monuments or markers of the Civil War are sprinkled throughout Chicago. There’s Grant Park and Lincoln Park, Land of Lincoln license plates, the Union League Club (named for the Union Army) and the Grand Army of the Republic Hall in the Chicago Cultural Center.
While the street names and park names memorialize the deadliest war in American history, few regularly make the connection.

“There is an element of consciousness that’s there,” Karamanski said. “But by and large it’s taken for granted.”

Chicago’s place as a leader in transportation, manufacturing, food services and banking is rooted in the Civil War-era.

Chicago also was the home of “sanitary fairs,” fund-raising efforts that were the precursor to both the Red Cross and the modern-day shopping mall.

Finally, Chicago was home during the war to a rank Confederate POW camp in what is now Bronzeville. Called Camp Douglas, the prison was a wretched place where some historians believe the Ku Klux Klan was born but also the home to some of the city’s first running water toilets and running hot water, thanks to an engineer brought in to clean up the mess.

“We’re not a Civil War destination but Chicago should be,” said Olivia Mahoney, chief curator of the Chicago History Museum, a large repository of Civil War artifacts, journals and letters, some of which are currently on display in the museum’s “Abraham Lincoln and Lincoln’s Chicago” exhibit. “It’s such a pivotal moment in our history.”

Key locale for distribution

While the Chicago of the Civil War was wiped out by the fire of 1871, the fire couldn’t destroy many of the bedrock industries that Chicago was built on, industries that developed to support the war effort.

Transportation, food processing, steel and banking all flourished locally during the Civil War, Karamanski said.

“Chicago was already the rail center of the country at the time of the Civil War,” he said. “The Union Army in particular was able to win the war because of their ability to marshal the rail. Chicago became a very, very important distribution point for food, supplies and troops in the course of the war.”

The railroad’s iron rails quickly wore out, so Chicagoans began producing more durable steel rails on Goose Island. On the far South Side, George Pullman’s employees built rail cars.

“This becomes one of the biggest employers in Chicago that gets started because of the boom in railroads in the Civil War,” he said.

Because of the rail lines, Chicago was the pre-Civil War center of grain distribution and beef packing for the United States, Karamanski said.

Civil War battles fought closer to St. Louis and Cincinnati brought another vital industry to Chicago — pork, leading to Chicago’s reputation as “hog butcher to the world.” The Union stockyards were created in 1865, the year the war ended, Karamanski said.
“Chicago by this time was a real manufacturing city,” said Mahoney. “The war stimulated the economy here.”

But the growing economy wasn’t only based on war industries, and continued thriving after the war ended, said Bjorn Skaptason of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop.

“You didn’t see arms manufacturing in Chicago,” he said. “They were not making cannons and muskets but were packing meat and making trains.”

The Civil War also impacted banking in Chicago, Karamanski said. Pre-Civil War, there was less than $100,000 in Chicago banks.

“Chicago banking was in disarray,” he said. “There was little regulation and banks were printing their own currency.”

The federal government rolled out national banking during the war. By the war’s end in 1865, there was more than $30 million in deposit in Chicago banks. That money was put to good use, Karamanski said.

“There were the critical capital resources Chicago needed to develop,” he said.

Camp Douglas prisoners

The busy trains weren’t only bringing food, supplies and Union troops in and out of Chicago during the war. After one of the Union Army’s first victories at Fort Donelson in Tennessee in February 1862, 12,000 Confederate soldiers surrendered. Union officials loaded thousands of the prisoners onto trains bound for Chicago, home of the Union training base Camp Douglas.

The camp-turned-prison was located between what is now 31st and 33rd and Cottage Grove and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, the modern-day site of a Walgreen’s, Jewel and Lake Meadows mid-rise apartment development.

Chicagoans weren’t crazy about thousands of Confederate soldiers suddenly in their midst.

The Southerners weren’t crazy about Chicago winters, which were particularly brutal during the war years.

“More than one prisoner said they couldn’t conceive of how people could live in this climate,” said George Levy, an attorney and author of “To Die in Chicago: Confederate Prisoners at Camp Douglas 1862-1865.”

Levy quotes T.D. Henry, one Confederate prisoner, talking about jail guards using the snow to their cruel advantage.

“Another (punishment) is to make the men pull down their pants and sit, with nothing under them, on the snow and frozen ground,” Henry wrote. “I have known men to be kept sitting until you could see their prints for some days afterward in the snow and ice.”
The weather was the least of the prisoners’ problems. Dysentery, small pox and diphtheria were rampant. Jail guards were cruel. At one point two Chicago mayors, Levi Boone and Buckner Morris, were imprisoned in the camp, accused of being “copperheads,” or Confederate sympathizers.

“Chicagoans were very patriotic so they used to send out children and thugs to harass (Confederate prisoners) as they marched from the train station,” Levy said. “There was a lot of harassment of prisoners.”

While Camp Douglas may not have offered the balmy winter temperatures of Andersonville, a notorious Civil War prisoner camp in Georgia, Chicago’s prison had a few things to recommend it.

“It was the most innovative prison camp of the Civil War,” Levy said. “There were running water toilets when the people of Chicago were using the old privies. They had bathhouses with hot water. Such innovation was really unknown.”

More than 4,200 soldiers died at Camp Douglas and many were initially buried in shallow graves in Lincoln Park. Thousands of bodies were moved to Oak Woods Cemetery on the South Side where a 40-foot column marks their grave.

Sanitation fairs

While conditions may have been filthy inside Camp Douglas, another prominent Civil War-era Chicagoan, Mary Livermore, was pushing the idea of sanitation for health through “sanitary fairs,” fund-raisers for the Union effort and the precursor to both the Red Cross and the modern-day shopping mall.

“The idea of sanitation as something that would prevent illness was new,” said Skaptason of the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop. “This was cutting edge to form an organization to help people prevent disease and increase quality of life by focusing on a public effort to increase sanitation.”

The sanitary fairs raised money to aid returning soldiers, gathering local merchants into an enormous building constructed specifically for the fair.

“You think about what Mary Livermore did, she kind of invented the modern shopping mall,” said Loyola’s Karamanski. “They had sections where they were selling shoes, other sections where they were selling dresses, consumers wares. They had a food court and a theater.”

More importantly, they served as a rallying place for Chicagoans left behind as their family members went to war.

“For people in the home front it gave them a chance to feel like they were part of the effort,” he said. “They were very important for morale as well as the practical benefits.”