

18 RIVER NORTH: BREAK THE SHACKLES AND ESCAPE THE CHAINS

BOUNDARIES: W. Walton St., N. Wabash Ave., Illinois St., North Branch of the Chicago River

DISTANCE: 1¾ miles

PUBLIC TRANSIT: Numerous bus lines and the Red Line El to Grand

Once the marshy home to Chicago's earliest non-indigenous citizens, who needed a place to rest between explorations, River North is now where non-locals need a rest after a night of urban frolic. The blocks east of N. Dearborn St. heave at night with funseekers, finding all they could hope for in huge venues, many of which are chains. Amidst all this, the ceaseless addition of condo and apartment towers boosts the permanent population prowling the sidewalks. To the west, River North is given over to a plethora of galleries and loft-conversions.

- **Start your walk at the point on N. Wabash Ave. where it passes over E. Illinois St.** To the southeast, the otherwise unremarkable old building housing the Jazz Record Mart (probably the best of its kind in the world!) sits about on the spot where John Kinzie, Chicago's first white settler, had his house. A fur trader, Kinzie lived in the cabin that had first been built here by Jean Baptiste Point DuSable, Chicago's first non-Indian resident (he hailed from the Caribbean). Typical of the rough-edged frontier folk of the time, Kinzie set the tone for the city by doing whatever it took to get ahead. In 1812 he kept selling rot-gut booze to the Indians right up until the Fort Dearborn massacre (see Walk 13). The same year he claimed "self-defense" in the killing of a business rival, whose remains were found during excavations for the building in front of you in 1891.
- **Walk down and north on Wabash, crossing E. Grand Ave.** Do your best to avert your eyes from the P. F. Changs on the northwest corner, lest you turn into a pillar of salt. This part of River North, just west of N. Michigan Ave., is wildly popular with suburbanites, who flock to chain restaurants like Chang's that are identical to ones at strip malls near their homes. Go figure. Also, a) we're not going to tell you where to find the Red Lobster, and b) we won't mention what happened to *South Park's* Randy Marsh when he ate at Chang's.

- **At E. Ohio St., turn west. You'll note the lines at the southwest corner for Pizzeria Uno. This is really the place where Ike Sewell claimed to have invented Chicago-style deep dish pizza in 1943. Note two things: 1) the originals here and a block away at Pizzeria Due are much better than their franchised variations, and 2) several others claimed to have invented Chicago-style pizza, and many years ago the vitriol around the claims assumed almost Kinzie-esque proportions.**
- **Turn north on N. State St. and pause to admire the Tree Studios, an 1894 creation that was designed to entice artists to live in Chicago. Above the ground-floor shops were studio apartments with huge west-facing windows. This arrangement lasted through the 1990s, but the area's rampant commercialization caught up with the building in 2004 when the last of the artists were booted and rows of upscale boutiques installed. Shed a tear for Pops for Champagne on the Ohio corner. This once-heavenly Lincoln Park gem moved here, and now cleans up selling small pours of expensive champagne to mobs for whom Miller is really the champagne of beers.**
- **At the corner of Erie St. and N. State St., Bijan's Bistro is definitely the only place in town you can chow down first on escargot followed by steak au poivre after 2 AM. Long a River North stalwart in various iterations, Bijan's is heaven for night owls who need to nail a snail. (The wine list is good too.)**
- **Continue north on State St. to Superior St. Given the range of drop-dead (so to speak) gorgeous churches in Chicago, Holy Name Cathedral on the northeast corner is surprisingly modest. Still, it has solid details and you feel a certain majesty inside, knowing you are in the primo church of one of the largest Roman Catholic dioceses in the world. If you also feel a little hint of hell, just go across State St. to the parking lot, scene of two of Chicago's most notorious gangland hits of the Roaring 20s. Clichés come from somewhere, and the Chicago mobs supplied all of them: In 1924, North Side boss Dion O'Banion was trimming posies in his flower shop at 738 N. State when several men thought to be in the employ of Al Capone walked in and shot him. Two years later, O'Banion's successor and virulent Capone-rival Earl "Hymie" Weiss was crossing State St. toward the flower shop when five Tommy guns opened up from an apartment at 740 N. State. Death was immediate. (And only after tourists had gawked for years did the archdiocese finally fix the substantial bullet damage to the front of the cathedral.)**

- Walk west one block on W. Chicago Ave. and turn north on N. Dearborn St. Given that high-rise apartments/condos have been exploding out of the ground in River North like tulips in the spring, that there are some original residences in the next two blocks is remarkable. The row houses at 802-812 and 827-833 date from the 1870s and provide a contrast between elegant European and classic Chicago brick.
- At Delaware Pl. take a stroll into Washington Square Park, a now-peaceful place with a colorful past. In the 1920s and 1930s it was known as “Bughouse Square” because it was the center of Chicago’s robust free-speech movement. On many days crowds would gather to hear speakers discourse on subjects as diverse as communism, free love, the high price of gas, and more. Look for a plaque commemorating this at the west end. In 1970 it was the center of the city’s first Gay Pride March. On the north side, the grand lines of the 1890 Newberry Library (a private research facility open to the public) provide a mannered backdrop.
- Exit the park and walk south on N. Clark St., crossing W. Chicago Ave. Let the vintage STOP & DRINK sign be your beacon into the Clark St. Ale House, a long-running local with a superb collection of Midwestern microbrews. (Previously the bar was called the Stop & Drink. It was known for its lack of windows, cheap lager and continuous porn on the TVs.) If you hear gunshots, they’re probably coming from the oft-shuttered nightclub just south, where several Chicago Bears have come to headline-grabbing grief.
- Follow the siren song of another classic Chicago tavern by walking west two blocks from Clark St. on W. Superior St. to the northeast corner with N. Wells St. The Brehon

Erie Street Park

Pub dates from the 1800s and is little changed. Among its keg-full of stories: in 1978 the *Chicago Sun-Times* at its journalistic peak bought the place, named it “The Mirage” and staffed the bar with reporters. A “Mr. Fix-it” soon arrived and guided them through the process of bribing all manner of city inspectors and other officials. However, he drew the line at the Chicago Police, saying: “if you pay off a cop, they keep coming around every month, like flies, looking for a payoff.” The resulting stories ran for 25 days. (Two of the reporters wrote a delightful book on the escapade—*The Mirage: A Tale of Cold Beer and Hot Graft*, from Marion Street Press, 2008.)

- Suitably fortified, walk west. You’re in the heart of one of Chicago’s main gallery districts. There are literally dozens in the blocks around the intersection of Superior and N. Franklin St. (under the El). Just a couple of recommendations: the 300 W. Superior building is filled with galleries, including the Judy Saslow Gallery, which has a carefully chosen selection of local artists entering their prime; and the building at 311, which includes the Stephen Daiter Gallery, known for its shows of photographers such as Chicago treasure Art Shay.
- Walk one block north on N. Orleans St. Turn west on Chicago Ave. In a small storefront on the south side (after, oh, four score and seven steps), look for the Abraham Lincoln Book Shop. Since 1938 it has cherished all things related to the 16th president, whose monumental legacy is honored by Illinois license plates (“Land of Lincoln”) if not by the actions of its politicians. Among Lincoln’s many quotes is his famous one on slavery: “A house divided against itself cannot stand.”
- Continue west. As you pass N. Hudson Ave., look on the north side of the street for the fence bearing cheery signs that include GROW, PLAY and SHARE. This is the Chicago Avenue Community Garden, a venture of the Fourth Presbyterian Church (the ritzy Gothic number across from the John Hancock Center on N. Michigan Ave.) and the remaining residents of Cabrini-Green, the once-huge public housing projects that ran north all the way to North Ave. Their size was overshadowed only by their reputation, which was horrible. Now most of Cabrini—and the folks who lived there—are gone, replaced by developments that keep the minority poor in the minority. Those who remain can come here and plant something to see if it grows.

- Continuing west you reach one of the most ambitious reuse projects. The complex of buildings on and near the river was once home to Montgomery Ward, the little-missed department store chain that was forever in the shadow of Sears. The 1970s high-rise on the southeast corner of Chicago Ave. and N. Larrabee St. was the corporate headquarters. Now, where execs once anxiously awaited the overnight sales figures for polyester leisure suits and naugahyde sofas, upscale condo-dwellers cavort on satin sheets—or maybe they just watch their college team on ESPN. The ground floor is home to the posh Brasserie Ruhlmann, a pricey eatery named for the 1920s Parisian Art Deco designer. Run by the same locals behind trendy Japonais (in the old warehouse building on the northwest corner), the brasserie is doing everything to live down the reputation of its sibling in New York City, which got the sort of reviews often reserved for foamy fresh oysters. The stolid brick and concrete former warehouses on Larrabee face over 1,500 feet of the North Branch of the Chicago River. Look skyward for the wispy elegance of *Commerce*, the sprightly statue atop 619 W. Chicago.
- Head south on N. Larrabee St. to its end at W. Erie St. Ahead of you is Chicago's newest park, Erie Park, dedicated in 2006 and with a name that might as well be "The Name is Available to Honor Somebody Park." Although on the barren side now, the sloping, grassy site runs for over 350 scenic feet along the North Branch of the river and is a real breath of (sort of) fresh air. Find a shady spot under a young tree and absorb the city vista in front of you: architecture tour boats, cement barges, frazzled traffic zipping across the Ohio St. Bridge, commuter trains in the distance and O'Hare-bound planes overhead.
- To exit, walk three blocks north to catch a 66 Chicago bus or a half mile northeast to the Brown and Purple Lines El stop at Chicago.

POINTS OF INTEREST

Jazz Record Mart 27 E. Illinois St., 312-222-1467

Pizzeria Uno 29 E. Ohio St., 312-321-1000

Bijan's Bistro 633 N. State St., 312-202-1904

Newberry Library 60 W. Walton St., 312-255-3504

Clark St. Ale House 742 N. Clark St., 312-642-9253

Brehon Pub 731 N. Wells St., 312-642-1071

Judy Saslow Gallery 300 W. Superior St., 312-943-0530

Stephen Daiter Gallery 311 W. Superior St., 312-787-3350

Abraham Lincoln Book Shop 357 W. Chicago Ave., 312-944-3085

Brasserie Ruhlmann 500 W. Superior St., 312-494-1900

Japonais 600 W. Chicago Ave., 312-822-9600

ROUTE SUMMARY

1. Start at the point on N. Wabash Ave. where it passes over E. Illinois St.
2. Walk down and north on Wabash.
3. At E. Ohio St., turn left.
4. Turn right on N. State St.
5. Turn left and walk west one block on W. Chicago Ave., then turn right on N. Dearborn St.
6. At Delaware Pl. take a stroll into Washington Square Park.
7. Exit the park and walk south on N. Clark St.
8. Turn right on W. Superior St.
9. Turn right on N. Orleans St. and go north one block.
10. Turn left on W. Chicago Ave.
11. Turn left on N. Larrabee St. and walk south to its end at W. Erie St.