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Donnelley (R.R.) & Sons

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Introduction

For over a century and a half, R.R. Donnelley & Sons has stood as a testament to the spirit of American enterprise, adaptability, and innovation. Founded in the heart of Chicago during the turbulence of the Civil War era, the company began as a modest print shop and grew into a global leader in printing, marketing, packaging, and supply chain solutions. Its story is deeply interwoven with the economic, technological, and social fabric of America itself—reflecting the country's shifting needs and ambitions across generations.

From its earliest days, R.R. Donnelley demonstrated remarkable resilience. Surviving the catastrophic Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the company not only rebuilt but expanded, capitalizing on the explosion of telephone communications and the rise of mail-order commerce. Its printing presses helped deliver everything from Sears catalogs into rural farmhouses to encyclopedias and world-class magazines onto bookshelves and coffee tables across the nation. As the business landscape transformed in the face of two World Wars, economic upheavals, and the fast-paced innovation of the twentieth century, so too did Donnelley.

At each major inflection point, the company chose not just to adapt, but to shape the industry around it. From pioneering employee training through the Lakeside Press Apprentice School to driving advances in printing technology and taking bold steps into digital mapping (ultimately spinning off the future MapQuest), Donnelley maximized the opportunities presented by change. Its commitment to both precision and creativity attracted celebrated designers and artists, and its devotion to quality set enduring standards for American manufacturing.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries brought unprecedented challenges as the world shifted onto digital platforms and traditional print media faced rapid decline. Donnelley responded through mergers, acquisitions, and diversification, redefining its business model for a new age. Adopting advanced analytics, automation, and digital marketing tools allowed the company to maintain relevance and scale in an increasingly global marketplace.

Today, R.R. Donnelley continues to reinvent itself, investing in cutting-edge technology, fostering partnerships with global leaders like HP, and expanding its suite of services to meet the complex needs of modern clients. Though now privately held, its reach spans continents and industries, and it remains integral to the daily operations of thousands of the world's most influential organizations.

This book tells the story of Donnelley (R.R.) & Sons not just as a business, but as an

evolving reflection of American ingenuity, persistence, and transformation. From humble beginnings to present-day innovations, the chronicle of RRD offers valuable lessons on resilience, vision, and the art of adapting to relentless change in pursuit of excellence.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Founding of R.R. Donnelley: Chicago in 1864

The year is 1864. The American Civil War rages on, tearing the nation apart. Yet, amidst this national turmoil, a vibrant young city on the shores of Lake Michigan is quietly, but rapidly, forging its destiny as a commercial powerhouse: Chicago. This burgeoning metropolis, a hub of transportation and trade, served as a vital strategic point for the Union, supplying vast quantities of foodstuffs and arms to the army. It was here, in this city of immense potential and relentless energy, that the foundation of R.R. Donnelley & Sons would be laid.

Richard Robert Donnelley, a 26-year-old Canadian immigrant, arrived in Chicago that year. Hailing from Hamilton, Ontario, Donnelley was no stranger to the printing trade; he had begun his apprenticeship as a saddlemaker's apprentice and printer at a young age, earning full journeyman wages by 16 and quickly rising to foreman by 18. His early experiences instilled in him a meticulous eye for detail and a deep appreciation for both the artistic and scientific facets of printing—a hallmark that would define his future enterprise.

Chicago in 1864 was a city undergoing a dramatic transformation. Its strategic location and expanding rail and road networks allowed it to emerge as a dominant center for industries such as meatpacking, lumber, and wheat distribution. The war, ironically, fueled this growth, as rival cities closer to the front lines found their trade hampered. The city was also developing financially, with stable banking making its debut. The First National Bank of Chicago, for instance, was founded in July 1863, and by 1865, Chicago boasted more national banks than any other American city. This influx of capital would prove crucial for further industrialization.

It was within this dynamic backdrop that Richard Robert Donnelley established his printing business. Initially, his venture was a partnership known as Church, Goodman, and Donnelley—Steam Printers. The firm specialized in educational, religious, and historical publications, and it wasn't long before it earned a reputation as a significant book and journal publishing house of its era. The name itself, "Steam Printers," was a nod to the cutting-edge technology of the time, highlighting the efficiency and power that steam-driven presses brought to the craft.

Donnelley's decision to set up shop in Chicago proved to be a shrewd one. The city was a melting pot of ambition and opportunity, attracting entrepreneurs and skilled laborers alike. Even as the nation grappled with the grim realities of war, Chicago buzzed with activity, its streets and burgeoning infrastructure reflecting an

unshakeable belief in future prosperity.

While the Civil War cast a long shadow, its presence in Chicago was complex. Union sentiment ran high, with over 22,000 men from Cook County, two-thirds of them from Chicago, serving in the Union Army. Enlistment rallies were common, and generous bounties encouraged volunteers, meaning the draft was rarely needed. Despite this strong Union support, political divisions were palpable, with the city hosting the Democratic National Convention in August 1864. This convention nominated George B. McClellan for president on a platform that, despite McClellan's personal views, was opposed to the continuation of the war.

Against this intricate tapestry of war and growth, Richard Robert Donnelley focused on the meticulous details of his craft. His commitment to quality, a blend of artistic vision and scientific precision, began to win over customers. The modest print shop, Church, Goodman, and Donnelley, was taking its first confident steps in a city that was itself on the cusp of becoming a global economic force. The stage was set for a story of resilience, innovation, and unwavering dedication to the power of print.

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