

The Iroquois Theater Disaster Killed Hundreds and Changed Fire Safety Forever

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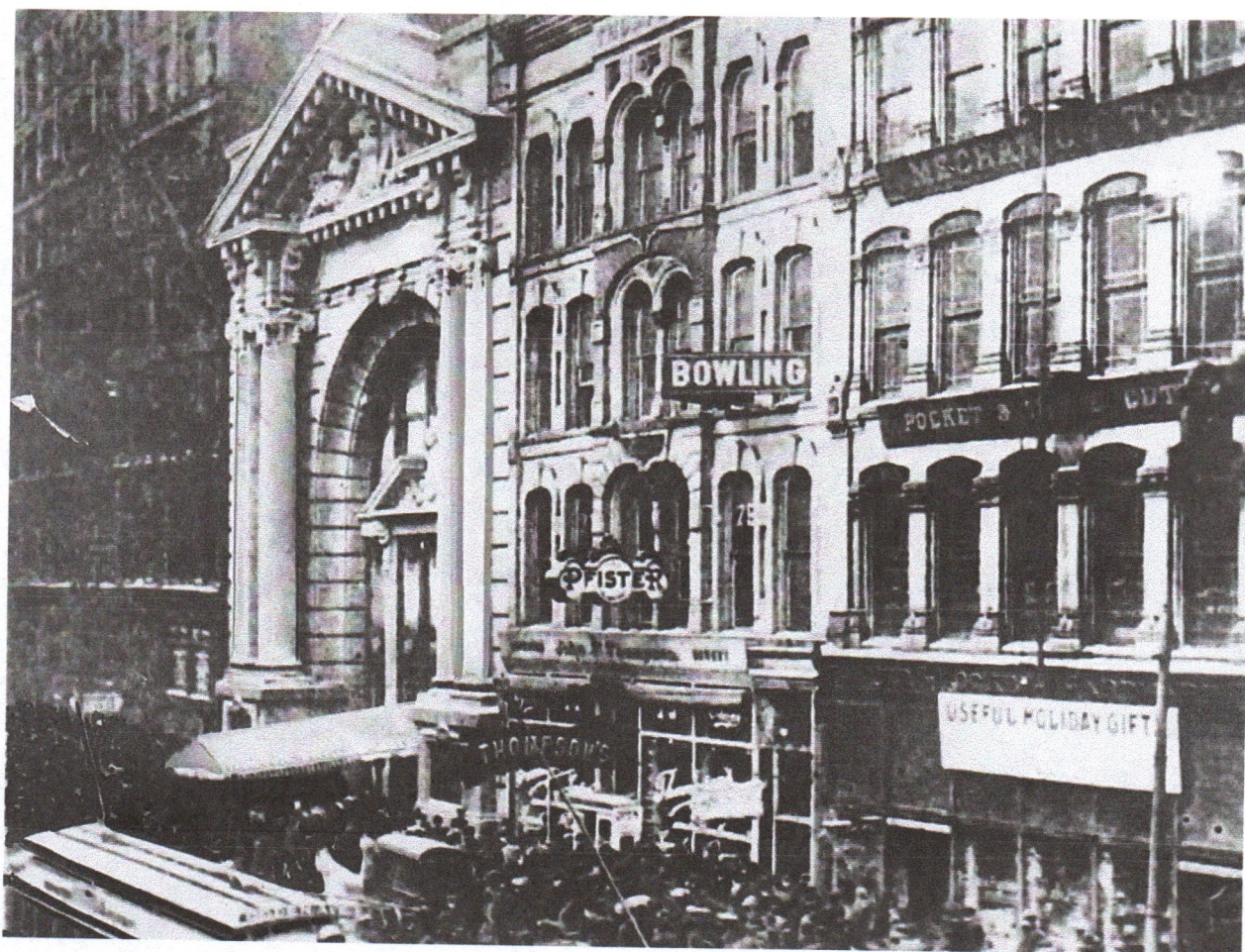
HISTORY

The deadly conflagration ushered in a series of reforms that are still visible today

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Exterior of the Iroquois Theatre, Chicago, Illinois, 1903 Chicago History Museum

On a chilly Chicago winter day—December 30, 1903—the ornate, five-week-old

Iroquois Theater was filled with teachers, mothers and children enjoying their holiday break. They had gathered to see *Mr. Bluebeard*, an over-the-top musical comedy starring Chicago native Eddie Foy. It featured scenes from around the world, actors masquerading as animals and a suspended ballerina. It was a spectacular production fit for a rapidly growing and increasingly prominent city. The eager crowd of more than 1700 patrons could not have suspected that almost one-third of them would perish that afternoon in "a calamity which...bereft hundreds of homes of their loved ones and made Chicago the most unhappy city on the face of the earth," as The Great Chicago Theater Disaster would later recount. The tragedy would be a wake-up call to the city—and the nation—and lead to reforms in the way public spaces took responsibility for the safety of their patrons.

As the show began its second act at 3:15 that afternoon, a spark from a stage light ignited nearby drapery. Attempts to stamp out the fire with a primitive retardant did nothing to halt its spread across the flammable decorative backdrops. Foy, dressed in drag for his next scene, attempted to calm the increasingly agitated audience. He ordered the orchestra to continue playing as stagehands made futile attempts to lower a supposedly flame-retardant curtain, but it snagged.

It was soon apparent that the fire could not be contained. Audience members bolted from their seats toward what few exit doors they could find, but most were obscured by curtains. They were further stymied by metal accordion gates, firmly locked to keep those in upper levels from sneaking down to pricier seats during intermissions. The terrified patrons – an estimated 1,700 with many more standing ticket holders clogging the aisles - were funneling through scant few chokepoints. Quickly the scene had changed "from mimicry to tragedy," as one survivor said. Watching from the stage, Foy wrote in his memoirs, he saw in the upper levels a "mad, animal-like stampede – their screams, groans and snarls, the scuffle of thousands of feet and bodies grinding against bodies merging into a crescendo half-wail, half-roar."

As cast members realized the peril they were in, they opened a rear stage door to escape (the ballerina, trapped by her rigging, would not make it out of the theater alive). The backdraft from the open door caused a sudden ball of flame to explode through the theater, instantly killing many in the virtually inescapable balconies. It was powerful enough to blow at least one exit door open, aiding those frantically trying to work the unfamiliar locks. A few were fortunate enough to find an upper-level fire escape, only to realize it lacked an exterior ladder down to the ground. Workmen in a building across the alley cantilevered planks to create a heart-stopping makeshift bridge, saving a handful of patrons after the first two who attempted it slipped and fell to their deaths.

Within a few moments, hundreds of bodies, unsuccessful in finding an egress began piling up inside the theater. They had died before firefighters arrived on the scene. The