



Iroquois Theatre top gallery after the fire, Chicago, Illinois, 1903 Chicago History Museum

But the Iroquois fire, which was one of a series of major headline-making fires in the early 1900s, was a catalyst for systemic changes aimed at preventing another fire of similar magnitude. “The school fires and the theater fires and the opera house fires – those were the ones that in a matter of 15-20 minutes you’ve got 100 people, 200, 300, 400 people - that many people dying that quickly. It’s like a lot of things in society where there’s a tipping point, the frequency becomes too much and the number of people dying becomes too much,” says Solomon. “Then you ultimately have to get policymakers and politicians to take action.”

The fire forced Chicago to take a hard look at how they regulated large public spaces in the booming city. “How much of that was because they had flouted the building codes and how much of it was that the building codes didn’t go far enough?” says John Russick of the Chicago Historical Society. “...[there was] a fair amount of ‘our buildings don’t protect us and we need to do more to them.’ It wouldn’t have been enough even if the building codes had been followed—a lot of people would have died in the Iroquois Theater fire.”

Within days, the city shuttered all theaters in its jurisdiction until they could be inspected and repaired to standard, and national headlines forced other cities across the country to subject their own theaters to similar scrutiny. Within weeks, Chicago's city council passed a new building ordinance by an overwhelming majority that compelled structural changes including new standards for aisles and exits, the use of fireproofing solution on scenery, connected fire alarms, limits on occupancy, the elimination of "standing" tickets, changes to sprinkler requirements, and rules for rooftop flues (like those nailed shut in the Iroquois).

Among the enduring changes were the stipulations pertaining to the lighting of exits, aisles and corridors, including the requirement that "a red light to be kept burning over the exits" during performances. This echoed the words of an electrical engineer who had advocated for signs to be illuminated by "a source of light independent of the theater lighting system," a critical point since the Iroquois' electricity had gone out during the blaze. An April 1904 edition of *Western Electrician* highlighted the adoption of "exit lights [which] are also supplemented by sperm-oil lamps" in the event that "the current supply is interrupted." Although technology has evolved, signs like these were the forerunners to the glowing red exit signs ubiquitous in modern theaters.