On November 23, 1903, the Iroquois Theater opened in Chicago. Dubbed a “virtual temple of beauty” by the *Chicago Tribune*, the Iroquois was reportedly fireproof. In a rush to get the theater open quickly, however, the theater management did not finish many basic fire precautions. Most notably, the theater had no fire alarm or sprinklers and the emergency smoke vents above the stage were nailed shut. Six weeks later, the Iroquois Theater was home to the deadliest fire in Chicago history.

The Iroquois Theater presented *Mr. Bluebeard*, a musical comedy, to a standing-room-only crowd of over 1,900 people on December 30, 1903. Another 400 performers and stagehands were crowded into the basement dressing rooms and backstage areas. Halfway through the show, a floodlight over the stage exploded, setting fire to the red velvet curtain. The fire quickly spread to the oil-painted wood and canvas set pieces hanging in the catwalks and soon flaming debris was falling onto the stage. Despite pleas from the show’s star to remain calm, the audience panicked and attempted to flee the theater, just as smoke began filling the auditorium. The fleeing audience members did not get far. Many of the exits were locked or hidden behind heavy, decorative curtains. Other doors were unlocked, but they only opened inward, trapping the victims in the jam-packed hallways. Some theatergoers were even trapped by illegal, accordion-style metal gates that the theater management locked during the shows to keep audience members in the upper balconies from sneaking downstairs for a better view of the show. As the flames spread into the auditorium, hundreds of theatergoers were burned to death, while hundreds more trapped in the hallways suffocated from the smoke.

As there was no fire alarm in the theater, a stagehand had to run to the nearest firehouse to report that the theater was in flames. When the first firefighters arrived at the theater they found it difficult to enter the auditorium because of the number of bodies stacked up at the doors. Once inside, they were able to quickly douse the flames, as the fire has already consumed most of the flammable materials in the theater. Once the fire was out, one firefighter apparently shouted: “If there is any living person in here, groan or make a sound.” His request was met by silence.

In the end, 602 people, mainly women and children, were killed in the fire. At one locked exit, firefighters counted 200 bodies stacked ten high and twenty deep. The subsequent investigations into the fire uncovered numerous troubling facts, including the lack of sprinklers and fire alarms and the locked exits. In the coming months and years, many laws were enacted in response to the Iroquois Theater Fire, including laws requiring mandatory theater upgrades including outward-opening doors that remain unlocked, exit lights, automatic sprinklers, fire alarm systems, and flame resistant scenery, props, and curtains.

Adam Groves, 2006.