

*Great Chicago Fire Disaster* described what awaited them as worse than that “pictured in the mind of Dante in his vision of the inferno.”

The diner next door was transformed into both morgue and hospital as doctors tried to find living victims in a sea of charred remains. Panicked family and friends soon began descending on the restaurant to see if loved ones had somehow escaped. As word of the staggering death toll spread, the city would be overcome by a state of collective mourning.



Group standing inside the Iroquois Theater after the fire, viewing ruins, Chicago, Illinois, circa January 1904 Chicago History Museum

The loss of life struck at the heart of Chicago’s upper-middle class society. They were, as *The Great Chicago Theater Disaster* described them “Chicago’s elect, the wives and children of its most prosperous business men and the flower of local society.” Some had even traveled in by train from nearby cities to enjoy the holiday atmosphere in the heart of downtown Chicago. Their deaths would galvanize the city. “If you have more wealthy, social people that die in an Iroquois theater fire versus the everyday middle-class people unfortunately those are sometimes things that get more attention than they should,” says Robert Solomon of the National Fire Protection Association.

But shock and grief quickly gave rise to outrage. The opulent theater had been

advertised as “absolutely fireproof.” How could hundreds of souls – mostly women and children - perish so rapidly? Who was responsible?

Days later, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a list of regulations that had been flouted by the Iroquois, including the lack of an adequate fire alarm, automatic sprinklers, marked exits, or suitable fire extinguishing devices. Even the two large flues on the rooftop where the smoke and flame could have vented out were boarded shut. The newspaper called for action: “The only atonement that can be made to these hapless victims of negligence is to make the theaters of Chicago absolutely safe, so that none others may meet their fate.”

The task of proving culpability, however, became hopelessly complex. The myriad problems that day turned into an algebra of blame—so many had failed to carry out their duties that no one source could be concretely assigned sole responsibility. An official inquest focused on the theater owners, the architect, and city officials, who in turn were quick to point fingers, including at the victims themselves. The owners, Will J. Davis and Harry J. Powers, issued a statement in the *Tribune* blaming the audience for panicking despite being “admonished... to be calm and avoid any rush”; the architect insisted there were “ample” exits had people not become “panic stricken and stunned.”

“Everybody afterward was washing their hands of responsibility. It was such a total loss of life they didn’t want to be connected to it if possible,” said journalist Nat Brandt, author of *Chicago Death Trap*. An underlying culture of complacency did nothing to narrow things down. “You’re also talking about a city that was notorious at that time with regard to laws and doing what you were supposed to do, and patronage and payoffs,” said Brandt. While a direct link to corruption was never proven in court, the indifference of city officials to known violations contributed to the fact that the theater received only a cursory safety inspection before opening to the public weeks earlier. Although construction had run behind schedule, the theater owners rushed to open it before the lucrative holiday season. But the problems that plagued theaters throughout the city were not unknown. Concerned about pervasive safety violations, Mayor Carter Harrison ordered a review of all theaters just months earlier, but lack of enthusiasm from city officials meant the investigations had petered out.

After numerous investigations, reams of testimony, and three years of legal wrangling, no one was ever held criminally liable. Numerous lawsuits from victims’ families died out, becoming too expensive to maintain against multiple defendants, including the theater owners and city. Davis was tried, but not convicted. In the end, a batch of payouts to families from the construction company that had built the theater was the only concrete liability.