



# Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903

*Nat Brandt*

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## **Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903** Nat Brandt

On the afternoon of December 30, 1903, during a sold-out matinee performance, a fire broke out in Chicago's Iroquois Theatre. In the short span of twenty minutes, more than six hundred people were asphyxiated, burned, or trampled to death in a panicked mob's failed attempt to escape. In *Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903*, Nat Brandt provides a detailed chronicle of this horrific event to assess not only the titanic tragedy of the fire itself but also the municipal corruption and greed that kindled the flames beforehand and the political cover-ups hidden in the smoke and ash afterwards.

Advertised as "absolutely fireproof," the Iroquois was Chicago's most modern playhouse when it opened in the fall of 1903. With the approval of the city's building department, theater developers Harry J. Powers and William J. Davis opened the theater prematurely to take full advantage of the holiday crowds, ignoring flagrant safety violations in the process.

The aftermath of the fire proved to be a study in the miscarriage of justice. Despite overwhelming evidence that the building had not been completed, that fire safety laws were ignored, and that management had deliberately sealed off exits during the performance, no one was ever convicted or otherwise held accountable for the enormous loss of life.

Lavishly illustrated and featuring an introduction by Chicago historians Perry R. Duis and Cathlyn Schallhorn, *Chicago Death Trap: The Iroquois Theatre Fire of 1903* is rich with vivid details about this horrific disaster, captivatingly presented in human terms without losing sight of the broader historical context.

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