



SINCE 1841

WOODLAND

HISTORIC CEMETERY & ARBORETUM



Absolutely Fireproof

Our story begins on a cold Wednesday afternoon in late December. At Chicago's brand-new Iroquois Theatre, the seats are packed for a matinee performance of *Mr. Bluebeard*, a musical comedy starring Eddie Foy.

Among them is 19 year old Eleanor Linden, daughter of former Dayton attorney James Linden, who had moved his practice and his family to Chicago some time previously.

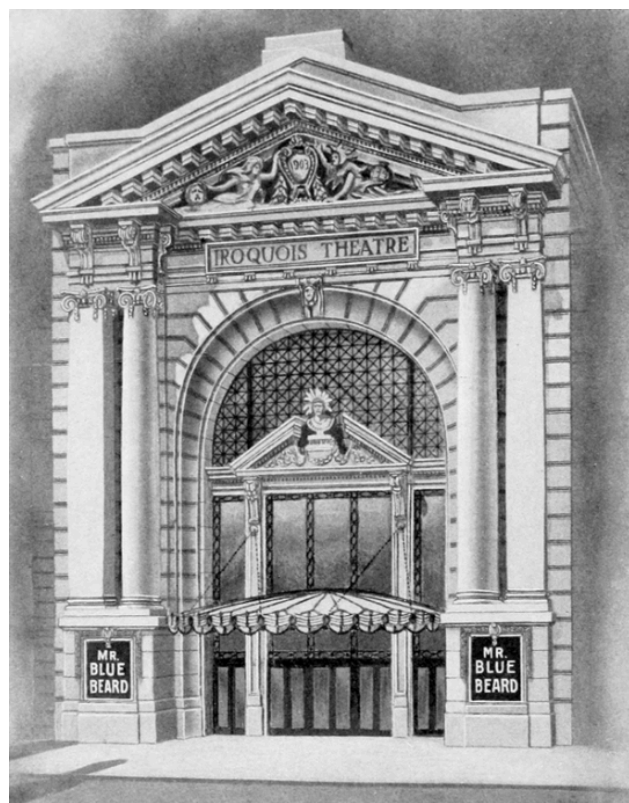


Above: photo of Eleanor Linden, published by the *Chicago Tribune*, 1/1/1904.

Stagehands used the extinguishers they had on hand, but the fire grew too quickly; fed by hundreds of pounds of extremely flammable set pieces suspended above the stage.

Unaware of the growing danger, the show went on until a piece of burning scenery fell among the chorus. Rushing out on stage, Eddie Foy asked that the audience remain calm as the stagehands hurried to lower the theatre's asbestos curtain. This had been intended to confine any fire to the stage.

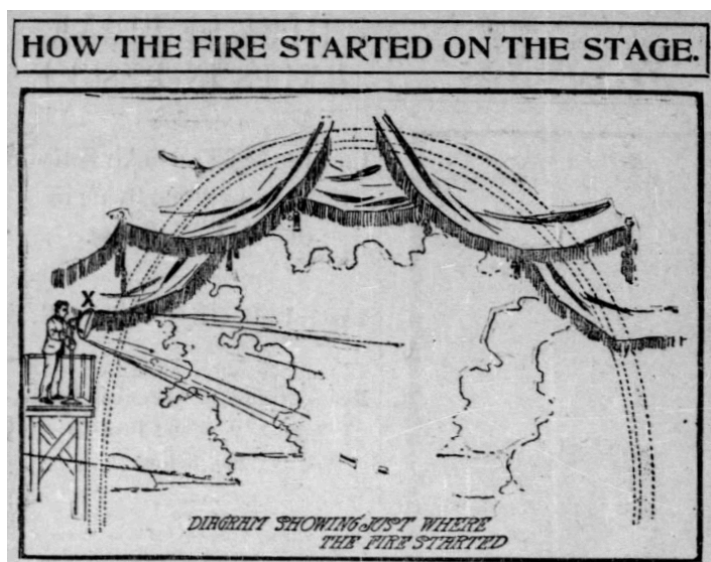
Instead, Foy & the audience watched as the curtain became caught on a protruding light fixture and jammed in its wooden tracks. Foy continued to plead for calm, but it was to no avail; panic swept the crowd and the audience began to rush for the doors.



Above: Exterior of the Iroquois Theatre, 1903. Courtesy of the [Internet Archive](#).

The theatre was well over capacity—more than 100 people were packed into standing-room-only areas. This hadn't worried anyone; equipped with the very latest in fire-safety technology, the Iroquois had been advertised as 'absolutely fireproof'. It would not be long before those words would come back to haunt them.

Just as the second act began, something above the stage sparked a small fire.



Above: Diagram showing the area where the fire started. Published by the *Chicago Tribune*, 12/31/1903



Above: La catastrophe de Chicago Incendie du théâtre Iroquois, by *Le Patriote Illustré* 1/24/1904

Within fifteen minutes, the chaos had ended. Firefighters (who had arrived quickly and extinguished the blaze within half an hour) found a silent auditorium.

Five hundred and seventy-five people were dead; a further 27 would soon succumb to their injuries—mainly women and children.

Within the week, as the city mourned, the coroner's inquest began. What had been a story of tragedy became a national scandal as the public learned that city inspectors had been bribed with 'complimentary' tickets to overlook the fire code—among other failures by theater & city officials. In the end, though many were indicted, the only person to serve time in prison was a tavern keeper whose nearby saloon had been temporarily used as a morgue. He was convicted of robbing the dead.

The tragedy of the Iroquois Theatre fire would be a wake-up call to the entire nation, and led to reforms in the way public spaces took responsibility for the safety of their patrons.

Eleanor Linden's body was finally identified by her older brother Frank. Though not yet a common practice, Eleanor was cremated & her funeral services held in Chicago. In August of 1904, her father James made the sad journey to his former home in Dayton. Tenderly, he placed Eleanor's urn into a marble box and she was laid to rest in her mother's family plot in section 102, lot 1234 at Woodland Cemetery.

Backstage, the frightened cast members had seen enough. As a single terrified body, they fled from the stage door located at the back of the theatre. They couldn't have known that this would create a deadly backdraft & seal the Iroquois' fate:

"The sudden draft of icy air rushed in through the open door, billowing the flames under the partially lowered asbestos curtain. The fireball reached over the heads of those on the first floor like the arm of a demon, spanning the 50-foot gap to the balconies. Everything combustible ignited instantly.¹"

The grand staircase was at a gridlock as people from every level of seating tried to escape at once. Reaching the doors, the panicking crowd found that many of the exits had been blocked by iron gates, intended to prevent patrons in the cheap seats from sneaking downstairs for a better view.

1: [The Iroquois Theatre Historical Society](#)



Above: View of the Iroquois' ruined stage from the balcony. Published by the *Chicago Daily News* 1/4/1904; courtesy of the [Chicago History Museum](#).

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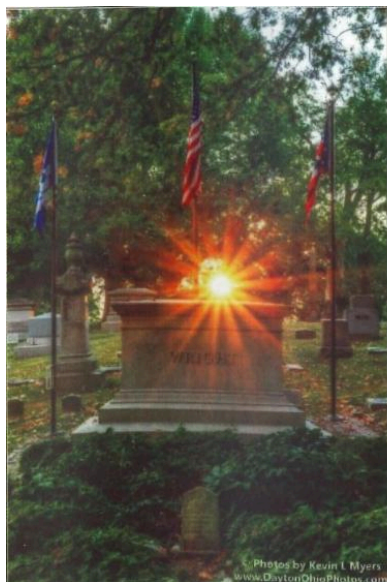
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