

Grade 11

Length of class period: 65 minutes

THE TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST FIRE: 100 YEARS LATER

From Lorraine Dooley

Inquiry Questions: How did the tragedy at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory change American history? Who was to blame for the fire and the deaths of so many young people? Did working conditions change as a result of the fire?

Are there any working conditions that still need to be improved in the US today?

Objectives: Students will analyze the primary and secondary sources provided and demonstrate critical thinking skills as they work to answer the inquiry questions.

Materials: US history textbook, copies of all documents.

Activities: Prior to class, students should read the chapter/section on working conditions in factories in the early 20th century. Next, lead a class discussion on their observations of general working conditions. Pass out the outline of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. Read the timeline together. Break students into groups of 2-3. Give each group/student a copy of all of the documents. Have them complete the analysis sheet. Have the groups share their observations with the class. Explain homework assignment.

Assignment:

Option 1-Find a current events article that describes a problem faced by workers in America today. Hand in the assignment (include author, date, publisher) and write a 1-2 page analysis of the issue.

Option 2- Create your own political cartoon on an issue related to working conditions in America today.

Assessment- classwork, critical thinking essay, test

Connecticut Grade Level Expectations-

Standard 1.1 (#4 Explain the changing nature of the US economy)

Standard 1.8 (Analyze laws that have been modified to meet society's changing values and needs.)

Standard 3.1 Use evidence to develop an interpretation of an event. Evaluate a historical event using primary and secondary sources.

Triangle Shirtwaist Fire: 100 year anniversary

Student Handout: Please answer the following questions using the documents. Be prepared to share your ideas with the rest of the class.

1. *What types of sources are you analyzing?*
2. *List at least 3-5 facts about the fire that you find in the sources.*
3. *Do you think the owners of the factory were to blame for the deaths of the workers? Why or why not? Explain your answer thoroughly.*
4. *How have working conditions changed during the past 100 years? What problems may still exist? How can people work to improve these problems?*

Document 1

New York Times, March 26, 1911, p. 1.

141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire; Trapped High Up in Washington Place Building; Street Strewn with Bodies; Piles of Dead Inside

Three stories of a ten-floor building at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place were burned yesterday, and while the fire was going on 141 young men and women at least 125 of them mere girls were burned to death or killed by jumping to the pavement below.

The building was fireproof. It shows now hardly any signs of the disaster that overtook it. The walls are as good as ever so are the floors, nothing is the worse for the fire except the furniture and 141 of the 600 men and girls that were employed in its upper three stories.

Most of the victims were suffocated or burned to death within the building, but some who fought their way to the windows and leaped met death as surely, but perhaps more quickly, on the pavements below.

All Over in Half an Hour.

Nothing like it has been seen in New York since the burning of the General Slocum. The fire was practically all over in half an hour. It was confined to three floors the eighth, ninth, and tenth of the building. But it was the most murderous fire that New York had seen in many years.

The victims who are now lying at the Morgue waiting for someone to identify them by a tooth or the remains of a burned shoe were mostly girls from 16 to 23 years of age. They were employed at making shirtwaist by the Triangle Waist Company, the principal owners of which are Isaac Harris and Max Blanck. Most of them could barely speak English. Many of them came from Brooklyn. Almost all were the main support of their hard-working families.

There is just one fire escape in the building. That one is an interior fire escape. In Greene Street, where the terrified unfortunates crowded before they began to make their mad leaps

to death, the whole big front of the building is guiltless of one. Nor is there a fire escape in the back.

The building was fireproof and the owners had put their trust in that. In fact, after the flames had done their worst last night, the building hardly showed a sign. Only the stock within it and the girl employees were burned.

A heap of corpses lay on the sidewalk for more than an hour. The firemen were too busy dealing with the fire to pay any attention to people whom they supposed beyond their aid. When the excitement had subsided to such an extent that some of the firemen and policemen could pay attention to this mass of the supposedly dead they found about half way down in the pack a girl who was still breathing. She died two minutes after she was found.

The Triangle Waist Company was the only sufferer by the disaster. There are other concerns in the building, but it was Saturday and the other companies had let their people go home. Messrs. Harris and Blanck, however, were busy and ?? their girls and some stayed.

Leaped Out of the Flames.

At 4:40 o'clock, nearly five hours after the employees in the rest of the building had gone home, the fire broke out. The one little fire escape in the interior was resorted to by any of the doomed victims. Some of them escaped by running down the stairs, but in a moment or two this avenue was cut off by flame. The girls rushed to the windows and looked down at Greene Street, 100 feet below them. Then one poor, little creature jumped. There was a plate glass protection over part of the sidewalk, but she crashed through it, wrecking it and breaking her body into a thousand pieces.

Then they all began to drop. The crowd yelled "Don't jump!" but it was jump or be burned the proof of which is found in the fact that fifty burned bodies were taken from the ninth floor alone.

They jumped, the crashed through broken glass, they crushed themselves to death on the sidewalk. Of those who stayed behind it is better to say nothing except what a veteran policeman said as he gazed at a headless and charred trunk on the Greene Street sidewalk hours after the worst cases had been taken out:

"I saw the Slocum disaster, but it was nothing to this."

"Is it a man or a woman?" asked the reporter.

"It's human, that's all you can tell," answered the policeman.

It was just a mass of ashes, with blood congealed on what had probably been the neck.

Messrs. Harris and Blanck were in the building, but they escaped. They carried with them Mr. Blanck's children and a governess, and they fled over the roofs. Their employes did not know the way, because they had been in the habit of using the two freight elevators, and one of these elevators was not in service when the fire broke out.

Found Alive After the Fire.

The first living victims, Hyman Meshel of 322 East Fifteenth Street, was taken from the ruins four hours after the fire was discovered. He was found paralyzed with fear and whimpering like a wounded animal in the basement, immersed in water to his neck, crouched on the top of a cable drum and with his head just below the floor of the elevator.

Meantime the remains of the dead it is hardly possible to call them bodies, because that would suggest something human, and there was nothing human about most of these were being taken in a steady stream to the Morgue for identification. First Avenue was lined with the usual curious east side crowd. Twenty-sixth Street was impassable. But in the Morgue they received the charred remnants with no more emotion than they ever display over anything.

Back in Greene Street there was another crowd. At midnight it had not decreased in the least. The police were holding it back to the fire lines, and discussing the tragedy in a tone which those seasoned witnesses of death seldom use.

"It's the worst thing I ever saw," said one old policeman.

Chief Croker said it was an outrage. He spoke bitterly of the way in which the Manufacturers' Association had called a meeting in Wall Street to take measures against his proposal for enforcing better methods of protection for employes in cases of fire.

No Chance to Save Victims.

Four alarms were rung in fifteen minutes. The first five girls who jumped did go before the first engine could respond. That fact may not convey much of a picture to the mind of an

unimaginative man, but anybody who has ever seen a fire can get from it some idea of the terrific rapidity with which the flames spread.

It may convey some idea too, to say that thirty bodies clogged the elevator shaft. These dead were all girls. They had made their rush their blindly when they discovered that there was no chance to get out by the fire escape. Then they found that the elevator was as hopeless as anything else, and they fell there in their tracks and died.

The Triangle Waist Company employed about 600 women and less than 100 men. One of the saddest features of the thing is the fact that they had almost finished for the day. In five minutes more, if the fire had started then, probably not a life would have been lost.

Last night District Attorney Whitman started an investigation not of this disaster alone but of the whole condition which makes it possible for a firetrap of such a kind to exist. Mr. Whitman's intention is to find out if the present laws cover such cases, and if they do not to frame laws that will.

Girls Jump To Sure Death.

Fire Nets Prove Useless Firemen Helpless to Save Life.

The fire which was first discovered at 4:40 o'clock on the eighth floor of the ten-story building at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, leaped through the three upper stories occupied by the Triangle Waist Company with a sudden rush that left the Fire Department helpless.

How the fire started no one knows. On the three upper floors of the building were 600 employes of the waist company, 500 of whom were girls. The victims mostly Italians, Russians, Hungarians, and Germans were girls and men who had been employed by the firm of Harris & Blanck, owners of the Triangle Waist Company, after the strike in which the Jewish girls, formerly employed, had been become unionized and had demanded better working conditions. The building had experienced four recent fires and had been reported by the Fire Department to the Building Department as unsafe in account of the insufficiency of its exits.

The building itself was of the most modern construction and classed as fireproof. What burned so quickly and disastrously for the victims were shirtwaists, hanging on lines above tiers of workers, sewing machines placed so closely together that there was hardly aisle

room for the girls between them, and shirtwaist trimmings and cuttings which littered the floors above the eighth and ninth stories.

Girls had begun leaping from the eighth story windows before firemen arrived. The firemen had trouble bringing their apparatus into position because of the bodies which strewed the pavement and sidewalks. While more bodies crashed down among them, they worked with desperation to run their ladders into position and to spread firenets.

One fireman running ahead of a hose wagon, which halted to avoid running over a body spread a firenet, and two more seized hold of it. A girl's body, coming end over end, struck on the side of it, and there was hope that she would be the first one of the score who had jumped to be saved.

Thousands of people who had crushed in from Broadway and Washington Square and were screaming with horror at what they saw watched closely the work with the firenet. Three other girls who had leaped for it a moment after the first one, struck it on top of her, and all four rolled out and lay still upon the pavement.

Five girls who stood together at a window close the Greene Street corner held their place while a fire ladder was worked toward them, but which stopped at its full length two stories lower down. They leaped together, clinging to each other, with fire streaming back from their hair and dresses. They struck a glass sidewalk cover and it to the basement. There was no time to aid them. With water pouring in upon them from a dozen hose nozzles the bodies lay for two hours where they struck, as did the many others who leaped to their deaths.

One girl, who waved a handkerchief at the crowd, leaped from a window adjoining the New York University Building on the westward. Her dress caught on a wire, and the crowd watched her hang there till her dress burned free and she came toppling down.

Many jumped whom the firemen believe they could have saved. A girl who saw the glass roof of a sidewalk cover at the first-story level of the New York University Building leaped for it, and her body crashed through to the sidewalk.

On Greene Street, running along the eastern face of the building more people leaped to the pavement than on Washington Place to the south. Fire nets proved just as useless to catch

them and the ladders to reach them. None waited for the firemen to attempt to reach them with the scaling ladders.

All Would Soon Have Been Out. Strewn about as the firemen worked, the bodies indicated clearly the preponderance of women workers. Here and there was a man, but almost always they were women. One wore furs and a muss, and had a purse hanging from her arm. Nearly all were dressed for the street. The fire had flashed through their workroom just as they were expecting the signal to leave the building. In ten minutes more all would have been out, as many had stopped work in advance of the signal and had started to put on their wraps.

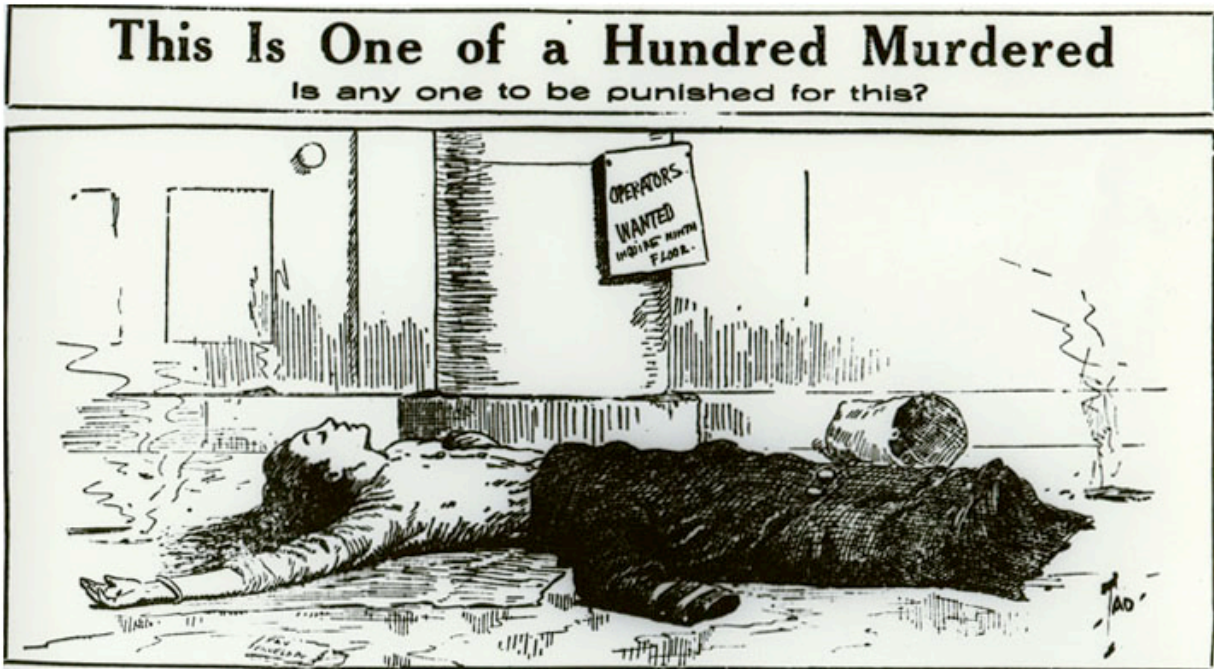
What happened inside there were few who could tell with any definiteness. All that those escaped seemed to remember was that there was a flash of flames, leaping first among the girls in the southeast corner of the eighth floor and then suddenly over the entire room, spreading through the linens and cottons with which the girls were working. The girls on the ninth floor caught sight of the flames through the window up the stairway, and up the elevator shaft.

On the tenth floor they got them a moment later, but most of those on that floor escaped by rushing to the roof and then on to the roof of the New York University Building, with the assistance of 100 university students who had been dismissed from a tenth story classroom.

There were in the building, according to the estimate of Fire Chief Croker, about 600 girls and 100 men.

Political cartoon and photographs

www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/newspaper/nyt_032611_5.htm









The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial: Building and Safety Laws

Factory Exit Doors

New York State Labor Laws (Article 6, Section 80):

"All doors leading in or to any such factory shall be constructed as to open outwardly, where practicable, and shall not be locked, bolted, or fastened during working hours."

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

Whether Section 80 was violated was the key issue in the trial of Harris and Blanck. The case turned on whether the ninth floor staircase door on the Washington Place side was locked at the time of trial.

The prosecution contended the door was locked and introduced witness who testified that at the time of the fire she tried the door "in and out, all ways" and was unable to open the door. The prosecution also showed that many of the victims of the fire died in front of the door. The prosecution argued that Harris and Blanck kept the door locked, especially near quitting time, to force exiting workers to pass through the only other exit, where they could be inspected if they were suspected of trying to pilfer waistcoats.

The defense contended that the door was open, but that the fleeing workers were unable to exit through the door because of fire in the stairwell. The defense introduced a witness who said that on the day of the fire a key was tied to the lock with the string and that she used the key to open the door. (The prosecution claimed the witness lied.)

It was also shown that the ninth floor staircase door did not "open outwardly," but inspectors failed to note a violation because only the width of a stair separated the door from the stairs, making it not "practicable" for the door to open outwardly.

Staircases

New York Law:

Buildings with more than 2,500 square feet per floor--but less than 5,000 square feet per floor--require two staircases. Each additional 5,000 square feet per floor requires an additional staircase.

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company floors had 10,000 square feet of space. Any additional floor

space would have required a third staircase. As it was, two staircases--the number the Triangle factory had--sufficed.

Fire Escapes

New York Law:

New York law left the matter of fire escapes to the discretion of building inspectors. The building inspector for the Asch building insisted that the fire escape proposed for the building "must lead down to something more substantial than a skylight." (The architect's plans showed a rear fire escape leading to a skylight.)

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

The Asch building architect promised "the fire escape will lead to the yard and an additional balcony will be put in." In the final construction, however, the fire escape still ended at a second floor skylight. During the fire, the fire escape collapsed under the weight of the fleeing workers.

Non-Wood Surfaces

New York Law:

Buildings over 150 feet high must have metal trim, metal window frames, and stone or concrete floors. Buildings under 150 feet high have no such requirements.

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

The ten-story Asch building was 135 feet high. If it had one more floor, it would have required non-wood surfaces.

Sprinklers

New York Law:

In 1911, sprinklers were still not required in New York City buildings.

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

The Asch building contained no sprinkler system.

Fire Drills

New York Law:

Fire drills were not required to be conducted.

Triangle Shirtwaist Company Compliance:

The Triangle Shirtwaist Company never conducted a fire drill.

Chronology of Events

[www. Law.umkc.edu](http://www.Law.umkc.edu)

July 13, 1900 Plans for a new building for Joseph Asch at Greene Street and Washington Place in New York City are approved.

January 15, 1901 Construction of the Asch building is completed.

1906 The Triangle Shirtwaist Company opens a factory on the eighth floor of the Asch building.

June 1909 A fire prevention expert writes a letter to Triangle Shirtwaist management suggesting that they hold a meeting to discuss improved safety measures, but the letter is ignored.

September 1909 Local 25 of the ILGWU declares a strike against the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. By November, the strike spreads to other shirtwaist manufacturers. The strike ends after thirteen weeks that saw over 700 striking workers arrested.

October 15, 1910 The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory passes a routine fire inspection.

November 25, 1910 A factory fire in Newark kills 25 workers, setting off renewed calls for improved fire prevention efforts.

January 15, 1911 The last time an accumulation (over a ton's worth) of cutaways is picked up from the Triangle Shirtwaist factory by a dealer. (The heavy accumulation of cutaways will help fuel the fire two months later.)

March 16, 1911 A report on fire traps is published. The report argues that many New York City buildings lack "even the most indispensable precautions necessary."

March 25, 1911 (4:40) Shortly before quitting time of 4:45, a fire breaks out on the eighth floor of the Asch building, housing the Triangle Shirtwaist factory. The fire will claim 146 victims, mostly young women.

March 25, 1911 (4:46) NYFD Company 72 arrives at the Asch building. The fire is spreading towards the ninth and tenth floors, also the workplace for Triangle Shirtwaist Company employees. Employees on the eighth floor head down, those on the tenth head to the roof, many on the ninth floor have nowhere to go.

March 25, 1911 (4:57) The last of dozens of bodies falls to the sidewalk from the ninth floor ledge.

March 25, 1911 (5:05) The fire is effectively brought under control.

March 25, 1911 (5:15) The fire is described as practically "all over."

March 25, 1911 (6:20) Fire fighters make their way to the badly burned top three floors of the Asch building, finding dozens of badly burned bodies as they do so.

March 25, 1911 (6:45) Throngs of grieving people push through police lines and move toward the Asch building.

March 25, 1911 (8:00) By now, 60 bodies have been lowered from the upper floors. The Death wagon returns to the Asch building for its second load.

March 25, 1911 (8:15) A Triangle Shirtwaist worker stuck in water in the bottom of an elevator shaft is rescued by fire fighters.

March 25, 1911 (9:05) A row of lights strung around the outside of the Asch building is turned on.

March 25, 1911 (11:15) The last body is taken down from the upper floors.

March 26, 1911 More than 100,000 grieving relatives and curious members of the public stream through a temporary morgue on the Twenty-sixth street pier, identifying loved ones or just looking.

April 2, 1911 A meeting is held to discuss concerns over lack of safe working conditions in New York City's factories. Resolutions are passed demanding new legislation.

April 5, 1911 A funeral parade is held for the seven bodies of fire victims that remain unidentified.

April 11, 1911 Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, co-owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, are indicted for manslaughter in connection with the fire deaths. Reports indicate that the escape route from the ninth floor was blocked by a locked door.

June 30, 1911 New York creates a Factory Investigating Commission to examine the need for new legislation to prevent future fire disasters. The Commission will inspect 1,836 establishments and interview 222 witnesses before issuing its report. In part because of the work of the Commission, "the golden era in remedial factory legislation" is launched. Over the next three years, New York will enact 36 new safety laws.

December 4, 1911 Jury selection begins in the manslaughter trial of Harris and Blanck.

December 5, 1911 An angry crowd of women shout "Murderers! Murderers!" at the two defendants as they exit an elevator in the courtroom.

December 27, 1911 The jury retires to deliberate. After just less than two hours of discussion, the jury returns a verdict of not guilty.

March 21, 1912 The District Attorney moves for a second trial of Harris and Blanck, based on manslaughter indictments involving different victims than those in the first trial. The case will be dismissed, however, on Double Jeopardy grounds.

March 11, 1914 Twenty-three individual suits for damages against Triangle are settled for an average of just \$75 per life lost.

February 22, 2001 Rose Freedman, the last survivor of the Triangle Fire, dies at age 107. She had been a lifelong crusader for worker safety.