



# What Caused the Triangle Factory Tragedy?

## An Inquiry Using Primary Source Documents



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### This Activity at a Glance

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This unit was compiled by U.C. Berkeley’s Labor Occupational Health Program from existing lesson plans\* for the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, in which 146 workers—mainly young immigrant women—lost their lives. Students will study this important historical event using primary sources, develop their own understanding and opinions of the root causes of this tragedy and the role of government, labor unions, public advocates in addressing it, and make links to contemporary workplace issues and ongoing efforts to promote safe workplaces.

#### Overview:

1. Introduce the essential question: What caused the Triangle Factory fire tragedy?
2. In small groups, students review and analyze primary sources, and create their own account of the event.
3. With the full class, students share their accounts and discuss and recap the event and its aftermath.
4. With the full class, students take a stand on their opinions about the causes of the tragedy.
5. In small groups, students review contemporary workplace problems and tragedies and compare to the Triangle event.
6. With the full class, students discuss their assessment of contemporary events.
7. Concluding assignment is to write an expository essay on the essential question.

## Learning Objectives

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe working conditions in U.S. garment factories in the early 1900s.
- Describe the causes and conditions that led to Triangle Factory fire deaths.
- Compare historical working conditions to current conditions.
- Understand that present laws are connected to events in the past

## Connection to Standards

11.2 Students analyze the relationship among the rise of industrialization, large-scale rural-to-urban migration, and massive immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe// 1. Know the effects of industrialization on living and working conditions.

## Materials Needed

- Primary documents. Choose from the sources below, so that you have 5 copies for each small group or each student (several are included at the back of this document as Student Resources, but many others are available; links are provide at the beginning of the Student Resources section):
  - Article about the fire itself (SR #2)
  - Information about working conditions (SR #4, 5)
  - Photographs, ballad or cartoon reflecting opinions at that time (PowerPoint and SR #6)
  - Testimony or survivor accounts (SR #3 and 7)
  - Written document about aftermath (SR #8, 9, or 10)
- Handouts #1 (both sides) and #2
- LCD projector and PowerPoint slides if you want to project photos and/or cartoons

**Total Class Time:** 145 minutes (approximately 3-4 class periods)

*\* We gratefully acknowledge the educators and historians who have made many educational and informational resources available online. Please see the end of this document for additional resources.*

*This activity has been compiled from lesson plans developed by **Miriam Laska** as part of the Urban Dreams project of the Oakland Unified School District Office of Instructional Technology (<http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/triangle/index.html>); **Sheri Pavelka** of Los Angeles Unified School District, and **Patricia Bonner**, for the Council for Economic Education (<http://www.econedlink.org/lessons/index.php?lid=542&type=educator>). Special acknowledgments to Miriam Laska who adapted most of the attached Student Resources for the reading level of intermediate English Language Learner, the audience for her curriculum unit.*

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## Preparing To Teach This Lesson

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Before you present this lesson:

1. Review the Instructor's Notes, student handouts, and primary source documents attached.
2. Review other primary sources available online. Decide whether you will have students look for sources online, or whether you will provide selected sources (either some of those attached, or others you download).
3. Select the primary sources you want the students to use. Unless you are asking the students to go online themselves, make copies as needed for each student or each group.
4. Make copies of handouts for all students.
5. If you plan to project the photos and/or cartoons in the attached PowerPoint slides, obtain an LCD projector.
6. Review the contemporary events. Decide if you will use these or seek your own. Make copies of each for each group or each student.

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## Instructor's Notes

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### A. Introduce the essential question: What caused the Triangle Factory Fire Tragedy?

(30 minutes)

1. Introduce this unit on a major fire and consequences by asking class to brainstorm.
  - Ask: Are there laws today that protect people at work and/or school from fire? What are they? (*outward doors, push bars, sprinklers, hoses, extinguishers, emergency plans, multiple exits, clear paths to exits, marked exits, alarms, smoke alarms, fire drill plans, release window-bars*)
  - Explain: Today we are going to read about a fire disaster that happened 90 years ago before most of these laws were in place. For the next few days I'm going to ask you to be the historian and look into this bit of history. First, let's read the background information.
2. Read: *A Description of the Triangle Factory and the Fire*, Student Resource #1.
3. Assignment: Write down three questions that you would like answered about this event.
4. Collect assignment. Save these questions for later in the unit.
5. Write essential question on the board:

What caused the Triangle Factory fire tragedy?

6. Explain that this is going to be the essential question for this unit. The answer is complex, not a simple answer such as "a match" or "a spark." We are looking, as historians, for a larger answer to this question because there were probably many causes or perhaps, many right answers. Historians first ask themselves a question and then try to answer that question. Often questions can best be answered by:

- Listing smaller questions, which would help you, answer; the main question (*What causes fires? What makes fires unmanageable?*).
- Making a prediction as to what the answer might be--forming a hypothesis. And then looking for information that will prove or disprove your prediction. You can examine all the information you've found and make a decision based your on evidence.

7. Explain: So today, I want to show you how a historian would look for information. Do you have any ideas about how you could look for information about this fire? (*library, internet, books, etc.*) Would all of these sources be equally good? Explain the difference between primary and secondary sources. What would be an example of a primary source to any event? (*first-hand observer, photos, diaries, journals, songs, survivor report, newspapers, maps, plans*).

## **B. In small groups, students review and analyze primary sources, and create their own account of the event.**

(35 minutes)

- Choose 5 documents from the list provided on page two. You can provide the same 5 to each group, provide different documents to each group, or have them seek out their own by going online.
- Divide the class into groups of 4 or 5.
- Provide a copy of Handout 1 (both sides) to each student.
- Ask each group to use Handout 1 to review their documents, select key quotes (or their own describing quote), and fill out the chart. The group should then work together to answer the questions on the back, creating their own account or understanding of the event.

## **C. With the full class, students share and discuss the “What matters” sections of their documents.**

(15 minutes)

1. Recap and tell the story of the fire with the help of their documents, filling in the parts they do not know. Use PowerPoint provided if you want to project photos or cartoons.
2. Could this happen again?

## **D. With the full class, students take a stand on their opinions about the causes of the tragedy.**

(30 minutes)

1. Write the following three statements on the board.
  - “All fires are the same size at the start...” but what happens after that is decided by how well prepared the firemen are.
  - “If the workers didn’t smoke inside the factory, the fire would not have happened.”

- “It is the responsibility of the government to make sure that the workers are safe when they are at work.”
- 2. Ask students to think about each statement and, on a piece of paper, write the numbers 1, 2, and 3, and put an “A” (for Agree) or “D” (for Disagree) next to each number, corresponding to the statements on the board.
- 3. Read the first statement. Ask all the students who agree to stand in one corner of the room, and those who disagree to stand in the opposite corner.
- 4. Ask students to justify why they chose the corner they did, based on the documents. Give them the opportunity to change corners if necessary.
- 5. Is there anything that could be changed about the statement so that everyone would agree?
- 6. Repeat this for the remaining 2 statements.

### **E. In small groups, discuss three contemporary workplace problems or tragedies.**

(15 minutes)

1. Find current events or use the three attached articles (Student Resources 11-13) to share stories about workplace problems and tragedies that have occurred in more recent years. Provide copies of one of the articles to each group, along with a copy of Handout 2.
2. Ask each group to work together to answer the questions on Handout 2.

### **F. In large group, discuss three contemporary workplace tragedies.**

(20 minutes)

1. Bring the class back together. Ask each group to report back briefly on their article, and what they think could be done to prevent the problem from happening again.
2. Has there been progress in protecting workers on the job? What is the role of government, workers, labor unions, public advocates?

### **G. Concluding Assignment**

Have students write an expository essay on the question, **What caused the Triangle Factory fire tragedy?** Students can use their notes, charts, and readings to cite sources to show an understanding of the complexity of the causes of the fire. Students may also want to tie the event to contemporary issues, and to whether they think there has been progress since that event.



# Handout 1: Primary Document Analysis (page 1)

Document	Quote	What it means	Why does it matter?

## **Handout 1: Our account of the story (page 2)**

1. Describe the working conditions for women in the textile industry in 1911.
2. What caused the fire? Think about all the things that led to the fire. What caused so many people to be killed in this fire?
3. Who was considered responsible for the safety of the workers before the fire? Did this change after the fire?
4. Describe what happened after the fire, and who was involved in working to prevent similar tragedies.
5. Could this happen again? Why or why not?

## **Handout 2: What is happening today?**

1. What happened? What is the problem?
2. Why did this happen?
3. What were similarities or differences when compared to the Triangle Factory fire and deaths?
4. What could be done to prevent this from happening in the future?



## Student Materials

1. Before the Fire: A Description of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and Fire
2. Minute-by-minute account of the events by a reporter for a local newspaper.
3. Stories of Survivors, Witnesses and Rescuers
4. An Immigrant Experience: An Interview
5. Women Trade Unions
6. The Uprising of the Twenty Thousands and Ballad of the Triangle Fire
7. Two New York City Firemen Testify About the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire
8. Blame Shifted On All Sides For Fire Horror
9. Lecture by Frances Perkins
10. 147 Dead, Nobody Guilty
11. Wal-Mart Stores Locked in Nigh Shift Workers with No Key
12. Thai Factory Fire's 200 Victims Were Locked Inside, Guards Say
13. Bangladesh Factory Fire Kills at Least 20
14. PowerPoint: Includes photos and cartoons

## Sources for Additional Materials

<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/> comprehensive

<http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/> comprehensive

<http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/tag/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire/> comprehensive

[http://newdeal.feri.org/library/d\\_4m.htm](http://newdeal.feri.org/library/d_4m.htm) photographs

<http://www.laborarts.org/exhibits/union/triangle.cfm> images

<http://jwa.org/triangle/map/ilgwu> ILGWU

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglefire.html> Trial

[http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F70A15F8395517738DDDA10A94DA415B818DF1D3)

[free/pdf?res=F70A15F8395517738DDDA10A94DA415B818DF1D3](http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=F70A15F8395517738DDDA10A94DA415B818DF1D3) Article on acquittal



## **Before the Fire: A Description of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory and Fire**

Like many other factories in the beginning of the twentieth century, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was a loft factory. This means that the factory was not in a separate building, but in the top three floors of an office building. The Triangle Factory was on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of a building called the Asch Building. The factory produced shirtwaists, a woman's blouse. Shirtwaists were in great demand for the growing number of women office workers during that time, and the Triangle Factory was one of the most successful garment factories in New York City. It employed one thousand workers, mostly immigrant women who knew little or no English. They worked long hours in hazardous and unhealthful conditions for very low wages.

Workers were crowded elbow-to-elbow and back-to-back at rows of tables. Pieces of fabric were scattered on the floor or stored tightly in bins. Cutting machines ran on gasoline. Smoking was not allowed, but workers often smoked while the bosses looked the other way. Water barrels with buckets for putting out fires were not always full. There was one rotting fire hose, attached to a rusted valve.

There was only one exit from the workroom and it was down a hall so narrow that people had to walk one by one. There were four elevators but only was working. The stairway was as narrow as the hall. There were two doors leading from the building; one was closed or locked from the outside and the other opened inward.

### **The Fire Starts**

On March 25, 1911, the day of the fire, the offices below the factory were closed for the weekend. About half of the workers were in the factory on that Saturday. The fire spread too quickly to be extinguished by the small water supply and the fire hose did not work. In the rush to get down the narrow hall and stairways to the doors, people were trampled. Some tried to break through the locked door. Others rushed to the other door and were crushed as they tried to pull it inward to open it. As people crowded into the elevator, others tried to ride down on the tops of the cars, hanging on the cables. Soon there were so many bodies in the shafts that the one working elevator could no longer be used. Women, girls, and men trapped in the workroom threw themselves out of the windows and fell to their death on the street. Others tried to use the fire escape, but it was too weak to hold so many people and soon melted in the heat. Firefighters from Engine Companies 72 and 33 were first on the scene. Once they arrived, they had several problems. The ladders only reached to between the sixth and seventh floors. Water from the hoses only reached to the seventh floor. The nets and blankets that the firefighters spread to catch the jumping workers tore and the people crashed through to die on the street. The number of people who died was 146, including 13 men. Nineteen bodies were found against the locked door. Twenty-five bodies were found in the cloakroom. Some bodies were so badly charred that they could not be identified, even as to sex. Sixty-two jumped nine stories to their deaths. The bodies were taken to the Bellevue Morgue or lined up along the Green Street for parents and family member to come and identify their lost loved ones.

Because of the locked door, factory owners Blanck and Harris were indicted for first- and second degree manslaughter.

*Adapted from Gale Research-Discovering US History, galenet.gale.com*



*William Gunn Shepherd, a young reporter for the newspaper, The New York World, happened to be at the scene of the fire when it began. From a phone across the street, he gave a minute by minute account to his city editor. The World published them the following day.*

### **Minute By Minute**

by William Gunn Shepherd

At 4:35 o'clock yesterday afternoon a fire was discovered in the rear of the eighth floor of the Triangle Waist Company. At two o'clock this morning Fire Chief Croker estimated the total dead as 154. More than a third of those who lost their lives did so in jumping from windows. The first firemen who arrived found thirty bodies on the sidewalks of Washington Place and Greene Street.

Every available ambulance in Manhattan was called to carry the dead to the morgue. Bodies were burned to blackness or reddened to a sickly color or to shoulders or legs sticking out of burned clothing. Men and women, boys and girls littered the street; that is actually the condition—the streets were littered.

The fire began in the eighth story. The flames shot up through the other two stories. The Triangle Waist Company occupied all three floors. The estimate of the number of employees at work was made by Fire Chief Croker at about 1,000. The owners of the factory say 700 men and girls were at work. Before smoke came out of the windows, the loss of life had begun. The first sign that persons in the street knew that these three top stories had turned into red furnaces in which humans were being caught and incinerated was when screaming men and women and boys and girls crowded out on the window ledges and threw themselves into the streets far below. They jumped with their clothing ablaze. The hair of some of the girls streamed up aflame as they leaped. Thud after thud sounded on the sidewalks. It is a horrible fact that on both sides of the building there grew mounds of the dead and dying. And the worst horror of all was that in this mound of the dead an arm or leg moved or a cry sounded.

Inside the building it was frightful. The flames took so many that they died instantly. When Fire Chief Croker could make his way into these three floors, he found sights that stunned him, that sent him back and down into the street with quivering lips. The floors were black with smoke. And then he saw as the smoke drifted away bodies burned to bare bones. There were skeletons bending over sewing machines.

The elevator boys saved hundreds. They each made twenty trips from the time of the alarm until twenty minutes later when they could do no more. Fire was burning in the shaft and at the cables. People ran for their own lives. Some, about seventy, chose to climb a ladder to the roof. A few remembered the fire escape. One narrow door led to this fire escape. They fought and struggled and breathed fire and died trying to get to that door.

Shivering at the fall below them, scorched by the fire behind, some were still on the windowsills when the first firemen arrived. The nets were spread below quickly. Citizens were asked to hold the nets but the force of the bodies in the long falls made the nets useless. Screaming girls and men tore the nets from the grasp of the holders, and the bodies struck the sidewalks and lay just as they fell.

Inside the building the fire burned. The flames caught all the flimsy lace stuff and linens that go into the making of spring and summer shirtwaists and fed upon the rolls of silk. The cutting room

was filled with fabric on long tables. The employees had been working at the rows and rows of machines. Sadly the spring day helped the fire; many of the window facing south and east were open and the wind had full play. The experts say that each floor became a whirlpool of fire. Any way the trapped workers ran they met a curving sweep of flame. Many fell and died. Others fought their way to the windows or the elevator or fell fighting for a chance at the fire escape. This tragedy occurred in a fireproof building. Except for the three stories of blackened windows at the top, you would not be able to tell where the fire had happened. The walls still stood. A thin tongue of flame now and then licked around a window sash. On the ledge of a ninth-story window two girls stood silently watching the arrival of the first fire engines. Twice one of the girls made a move to jump. The other stopped her. They watched firemen rig the ladders up against the wall. They saw the last ladder lifted and pushed into place. They saw that it reached only to the seventh floor. For the third time, the more frightened girl tried to leap. The bells of arriving fire wagons must have risen to them. The other girl pointed in the direction of the sounds. But she talked to ears that could no longer hear. Scarcely turning, her friend dived head first into the street. The other girl drew herself up. The crowds in the street were stretching their arms up at her shouting and begging her not to leap. She looked down as if to assure them she would remain brave. But a thin flame shot out of the window at her back and touched her hair. In an instant her head was aflame. She tore at her burning hair, lost her balance, and came shooting down upon the mound of bodies below. From opposite windows watchers saw again and again friendships formed in the instant of death-girls who placed their arms around each other as they leaped. In many cases their clothing was flaming or their hair flaring as they fell.

By eight o'clock the supply of coffins was gone, and those that had already been used began to come back from the morgue. By that time bodies were lowered at the rate of one a minute, and there were not enough wagons, so that four, sometimes six, coffins were loaded on each wagon. At times throughout the night the very horror of their job overcame the most experienced of the policemen and morgue attendants at work under the moving finger of the searchlight. The crews were completely changed no less than three times.

*Adapted from The New York World 26 March 1911. Reprinted in Allon Schoener, Portal to America: The Lower East Side, 1870-1925 (New York: Holt, Rhinehart, and Winston, 1967), 171172. New York Times, March 26, 1911, p. 4*

## Stories of Survivors, Witnesses and Rescuers

**1. Max Rother**, a tailor, was on the Washington Place side of the building on the eighth floor when he heard the cry of "fire" coming from the Greene Street side of the loft. Hanging over the heads of the sewers at the machines in the room was a line of clothes in flames. With the manager, Max Burnstein, he tried to put the fire out with pails of water. While doing this, the rope on which the clothes were hung burned in half and the burning clothes fell over their heads. Soon the room was in flames. Rother ran for the stairs on the Greene Street side of the building and escaped. He does not know what happened to Burnstein, the manager.

**2. Cecilia Walker**, 20 years old, who lives at 29 Stanton Street, slid down the cable at the Washington Place elevator and escaped with burned hands and body bruises. She was on the eighth floor of the building when the fire started. Running over to the elevator shaft she rang for the car, but it did not come. As she passed the sixth floor sliding on the cable she became unconscious, she said, and does not know what happened until she reached St. Vincent's Hospital, where she is now. "A girl and I," she told the doctors at the hospital, "were on the eighth floor, and when I ran for the elevator shaft my girl friend started for the window on the Washington Street side. I looked around to call her but she had gone."

**3. Benjamin Levy** of 995 Freeman Street, the Bronx, one of the first men to arrive at the burning building, says that it was ten minutes after the fire started before the first fire engine arrived. Mr. Levy is the junior member of the firm of 1. Levy & Son wholesale clothing manufactures just around the corner, at 3 and 5 Waverley Place.

"I was upstairs in our work-room," said he, "when one of the employees who happened to be looking out of the window cried that there was a fire around the corner. I rushed downstairs, and when I reached the sidewalk the girls were already jumping from the windows. None of them moved after they struck the sidewalk. Several men ran up with a net, which they got somewhere, and I seized one side of it to help them hold it.

"It was about ten feet square and we managed to catch about fifteen girls. I don't believe we saved over one or two however. The fall was so great that they bounced to the sidewalk after striking the net. Bodies were falling all around us, and two or three of the men with me were knocked down. The girls just leaped wildly out of the windows and turned over and over before reaching the sidewalk.

"I only saw one man jump. All the rest were girls. They stood on the windowsills tearing their hair out in the handfuls and then they jumped. One girl held back after all the rest and clung to the window casing until the flames from the window below crept up to her and set her clothing on fire. Then she jumped far over the net and was killed instantly, like all the rest."

One of the policemen who were checking up on the bodies as they were being shipped to the Morgue told of one heap of bodies in which a girl was found still alive when the others were taken off her. She died before an ambulance doctor could reach her.

**4. Samuel Levine**, a machine operator on the ninth floor, who lives at 1982 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn, told this story when he had recovered from his injuries at the New York Hospital: "I was at work when I heard the shout of 'Fire!' The girls on the floor dropped everything and rushed wildly around, some in the direction of windows and others toward the elevator door. I

saw the elevator go down past our floor once. It was crowded to the limit and no one could have got on. It did not stop. Not another trip was made.

"There were flames all around in no time. Three girls, I think from the floor below, came rushing past me. Their clothes were on fire. I grabbed the fire pails and tried to pour the water on them, but they did not stop. They ran screaming toward the windows. I knew there was no hope there, so I stayed where I was, hoping that the elevator would come up again.

"I finally smashed open the doors to the elevator. I guess I must have done it with my hands. I reached out and grabbed the cables, wrapped my legs around them, and started to slide down. I can remember getting to the sixth floor. While on my way down, as slow as I could let myself drop, the bodies of six girls went falling past me. One of them struck me and I fell to the top of the elevator. I fell on the dead body of a girl. My back hit the beam that runs across the top of the car.

"Finally I heard the firemen cutting their way into the elevator shaft, and they came and let us out. I think others were taken out alive with me."

**5. M. Samilson** of the firm of Samilson & Co., on the second floor of the building, was standing at one of the windows of his office just after the fire was discovered. In the next few minutes, he said, he saw several bodies shoot past the window from above, most of the girls. When the firemen reached him at nearly 6 o'clock, he was still standing there horrified. He says he could not tear himself away.

*Few of the girls that fell from the windows on the ninth floor, it was learned, jumped of their own accord. They were pushed forward by the frightened crowd in the room behind them.*

**6.** One of the bookkeepers, **Morris Lewine**, said he was on the top floor. He threw the books into a safe when the cry of fire was raised. He then made his way to the roof, followed by two girls. He found a ladder and made his way with one of the girls to the roof of the next building. He did not know what became of the second girl.

**7. Thomas Gregory**, an elevator man, who works at 103 Bleecker Street, said he was going home when he came to the fire. He says he ran into the building and made three trips in the elevator, taking down about fifteen persons at each trip. He said he left the hallways of the upper floors crowded with frenzied men and women, who fought to get into the elevator and clawed his face and neck. After the third trip the machinery broke down, he said. He said there were two elevators when he went into the building. One was on the ground floor, and one was on one of the upper floors. He saw no operator.

**8.** A man who said he was **Samuel Tauber** and that he had been employed as a foreman in the Triangle Company shops told about a fire on the eighth floor which happened two years ago. He said that on this occasion the motor, which supplies power for the two hundred sewing and cutting machines on that floor, had emitted a flame, which set fire to some cuttings nearby. He said that this fire had not been serious, but that it had thrown the girls working there into a panic. Tauber said that he believed yesterday's fire might have been caused in the same way.

**9. Frank Fingerman**, employed by the firm of M. S. Work & Co., in Washington Place East, turned in a fire alarm from a Broadway box when he heard the cries of the women in the factory building.

"I saw as I ran," he said, "a boy and a girl standing together at a Greene Street window. He was holding her, and she seemed to be trying to jump. They were still there when I came back from the firebox. As the smoke began to come out of the window above them the boy let the girl go, and she jumped. He followed her before she struck the ground.

"Four more came out of the same window immediately. The crowds were jamming our own door until I could not pass out and the street was packed right up to the fire trucks."

**10. Frederick Newman**, the New York University law student who with Charles P. Kramer, had charge of the rescue party of the New York University students up on the roof of their institution, said this after the work was done:

"We were in the library of the building in the top floor when we noticed a gust of smoke coming from the building across the courtyard. Sparks drifted in at the open library window and as we jumped from our seats we saw the girls crowding at the windows. We saw a man leap out and then the girls began to follow him."

**11. O. S. Smith**, another student, was on his way from the Astor Place Subway station to the law library when he first caught sight of the fire. "I was stopped by police at Waverley Place and Greene Street," he said. "Across the street we could see the bodies of five women. As I looked I saw an arm raised and I knew that one of the women was alive. I called out to a policeman standing near. His only answer was, 'Get back there and mind your own business.' I pointed out the woman to him and told him something ought to be done, as the water was pouring down upon her. He didn't understand me, perhaps for nothing was done."

**12. Alfred K. Schwach**, a student, saw girls rushing to the rear factory windows, their hair on fire, to pause at the window for a moment and then jump out. "I saw four men," he said, "who tried to catch the girls. They seized horse blanket from a truck horse in Waverley Place and held it out. It gave way like paper as the girls struck it."

**13. Pauline Grossman**, 18 years old, who was injured by leaping from a window of the factory as the fire was growing on the eighth floor, says three male employees of the factory made a human chain of their bodies and swung across a narrow alleyway to the building fronting in Greene Street. She declares a number of person's passed across the men's bodies and escaped from the burning building by entering a window of the building opposite.

"As the people crossing upon the human bridge crowded more and more over the men's bodies the weight upon the body of the center man became too great and his back was broken. She said he fell to the passageway below and the other two men lost their holds upon the windowsills and fell. Persons who were crossing upon the human bridge dropped with them to the passageway."

**14. Celia Saltz** was working at her sewing machine when the fire started. She raced to the door and the force of the crowd pushed her into the elevator as soon as the doors opened. She said, "I even forgot that I had a younger sister working with me ... I began to scream for my sister. I had lost her, I had lost my sister." Celia fainted in the elevator but woke up on the floor of the store across the street. I opened my eyes and I saw my sister bending over me. I began to cry. I couldn't help it. My sister, Minnie, was only fourteen."

Adapted from *MuseumNetwork. Com*

**15. Pauline Cuoio Pepe** was a nineteen-year-old sewing machine worker at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. "It was all nice young Jewish girls who were engaged to be married. You should see the diamonds and everything. Those were the ones who threw themselves from the window. What the hell did they close the door for? What did they think we were going to steal? What are we gonna do, steal a shirtwaist? Who the heck wanted a shirtwaist?" asked Pepe. " We never went out the front door. We always went one by one out the back. There was a man there searching, because the people were afraid we would take something, so that door was always locked.

Adapted from <http://www.csun.edu/~ghy7463/mw2.html>

**16. Rose Freedman** was the last living survivor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. She died on February 15, 2001, at the age of 107. Freedman survived the fire by running up one flight of stairs, to the top floor. That's where the company owners and managers worked, and she thought they would have a way to escape. She was right. Rather than unlocking any of the doors below to save the women, the men had run to the roof, where they were lifted to safety. In the following years, Freedman spoke out about the conditions that led to the fire. The owners tried to buy her silence; she refused. Freedman went on to attend college, get married, and raise a family. After almost a century, she found herself back in the news as the oldest survivor of the fire. She gave speeches and granted interviews and a story about her life was made and aired on many public television stations.

Adapted from <http://www.npr.org/programs/watc/features/2001/010325.triangle.html>

## **An Immigrant Experience: An Interview**

*Joan Morrison:* So, back to the early days when you first came and lived in this apartment with the toilet in the street and the coal stove. Did you go right to work then?

*Pauline Newman:* We got here in May. A cousin of mine worked for the Triangle Shirtwaist Company and by the time she got me in there it was October. So between May and October I did many different jobs off and on, you know? But in October she got me to the Triangle.

*Morrison:* Do you remember your first thoughts going in there?

*Newman:* In the first place, it was probably the largest shirtwaist factory in the city of New York. By the time I got there, they had something like two, more than two hundred operators. And they had collars, examiners, finishers. All together probably, they had about four hundred people. And that was a large staff. And they had two floors. The fire took place on one floor. We started work at 7:30 and during the busy season; we worked until nine o'clock in the evening. They didn't pay any overtime and didn't give you anything for supper. At times they would give you a little apple the size of an ashtray-and they would give you that for your supper. That is what we got for our overtime instead of money. Very generous.

*Morrison:* A small child then, like you, would go in and work all day with that and ... ?

*Newman:* You'd work until you got your regular pay from six to nine in those times.

*Morrison:* And what did they pay you?

*Newman:* And what they did, as I said, at times they'd be generous. You could get a little apple pie.

*Morrison:* Yes.

*Newman:* The wages. You forget nothing, as long as your memory still serves, and mine does. My own wages when I got to the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was a dollar and a half a week. And by the time I left during the shirtwaist workers' strike in 1909 I had worked myself up to six dollars.

*Morrison:* Ah, Magnificent.

*Newman:* But you see the hours didn't change. The hours remained, no matter how much you got. The operators, their average wage, as I recall--because two of my sisters worked there--they averaged around six, seven dollars a week. If you were very fast--because they worked piece work--if you were very fast and nothing happened to your machine, no breakage or anything, you could make around ten dollars a week. But most of them, as I remember--and I do remember them very well--they averaged about seven dollars a week. Now the collars are the skilled men in the trade. Twelve dollars was the maximum.

*Morrison:* And that was piecework, also?

*Newman:* You were well paid, twelve dollars a week!

*Morrison:* And how about what you did? What did you do for your six dollars and a half?

*Newman:* Well, what I did really was not difficult. When you finished the shirtwaist at the machine, there are some threads that are left. And I wasn't the only one. We had the corner on the floor. It looked like a kindergarten--we were all children--eight, nine, ten years old. We were given little scissors to cut the threads off, like so. It wasn't heavy work. It was monotonous because you did that from 7:30 until 9:00 at night. You had one half hour for lunch and nothing for supper or anything like that.

Before I left I was promoted to the cutting department. You'd cut the embroidery, which as inserted in the front of the shirtwaist in those days, and that was.... They were the kind of employers who didn't recognize anyone working for them as a human being. You were not allowed to sing. Operators would like to have sung, because they, too, had the same thing to do, and weren't allowed to sing.

You were not allowed to talk to each other. Oh, no! They would sneak up behind you, and if you were found talking you were scolded. If you'd keep on, you'd be fired. If you went to the toilet, and you were there more than the forelady or foreman thought you should be, you were threatened to be laid off for a half a day, and sent home, and that meant, of course, no pay, you know? You were not allowed to use the passenger elevator, only a freight elevator. And ah, you were watched every minute of the day by the foreman, or forelady. Employers would sneak behind your back.

And you were not allowed to have your lunch on the fire escape in the summertime. That door was locked. And that was proved during the investigation of the fire. They were mean people. There were two partners, Rank and Harris, and one was worse than the other. People were afraid, actually. Finally, it took from the time I got there, October 1901, to November 1909, for the people to really rise and say that they could not work under such conditions any longer. And we had 20,000 of them coming out here and 15,000 in Philadelphia, you know? That was the strike, Boston, too. From November 1909 to the end of March 1910.

*Morrison:* That must have been very hard on the workers, to get along without....

*Newman:* It was the coldest winter anyone could remember.

Adapted from *American Mosaic. - The Immigrant Experience in the Words of Those Who Lived It.* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980, 1993) by Joan Morrison and Charlotte Fox Zabusky.

## Women Trade Unions

While male workers in New York City had formed unions, women workers were not organized and had no recognized union. Women discovered that when the men workers won rights, it was at the expense of the women—not the bosses. For example, when the men were given a half-cent pay raise, women's paychecks were a half-cent less. Convinced that women workers would benefit from their own union, several women were able to start the first all women's union in 1909 called the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU). Another important union at the turn of the twentieth century was the Women Trade Union League (WTUL). This union was formed in 1903 to try to bring more women into the unions.

In 1909, garment workers had a strike that was called the "Uprising of the 20,000"—one of the largest strikes in the history of New York City. Workers at the Triangle Factory went out on strike and picketed the factory. They were joined by thousands of immigrant women in the shirtwaist industry. The strike lasted for three winter months. Triangle Factory owners Max Blanck and Isaac Harris hired new workers and called in thugs to break the picket lines. By the strike's end, the women in some factories had won a shorter working day, a small pay increase, and some safety changes, but their union had not been recognized. This meant that the bosses did not have to talk with the union people. Though many factories agreed to make improvements, the Triangle Factory refused to make changes in safety and kept a fifty-nine hour workweek.

Eight months after the strike, one of the strikers came to the WTUL to tell them of a fire in a factory in Newark, New Jersey, in which 25 working women had died. The WTUL demanded an investigation of all factory buildings and unsafe working conditions. However, no action by the city was taken and the women's union remained powerless.

Adapted from <http://galenet.gale.com> Discovering U.S. History.

### Further Reading

Brooks, Tom. "The Terrible Triangle Fire," in *American Heritage*, Vol XIII, no. 5.

Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe. *A Generation of Women*. Harvard University Press. 1979.

Schneiderman, Rose. *All for One*. P.S. Eriksson, 1967.

**The Uprising of the Twenty Thousand**  
*Dedicated to the Waistmakers of 1909*

In the black of the winter of nineteen nine,  
When we froze and bled on the picket line,  
We showed the world that women could fight  
And we rose and won with women's might.

**Chorus:**

Hail the waistmakers of nineteen nine,  
Making their stand on the picket line,  
Breaking the power of those who reign,  
Pointing the way, smashing the chain.

And we gave new courage to the men  
Who carried on in nineteen ten  
And shoulder to shoulder we'll win through,  
Led by the I.L.G.W.U.

*- from Let's Sing!*  
*Educational Department, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union,*  
*New York City, n.d.*

**Ballad of the Triangle Fire**

*By Ruth Rubin*

In the heart of New York City, near Washington Square  
In nineteen eleven, March winds were cold and bare.  
A fire broke out in a building ten stories high,  
And a hundred and forty-six young girls in those flames did die.

On the top floor of that building, ten stories in the air  
These young girls were working in an old sweatshop there;  
They were sewing shirtwaists for a very low wage.  
So tired and pale and worn-out! They were at a tender age.

The sweatshop was a stuffy room with but a single door;  
The windows they were gray with dust from off that dirty floor;  
There were no comforts, no fresh air, no light to sew thereby,  
And the girls, they toiled from early morn till darkness filled the sky.

Then on that fateful day - dear God, most terrible of days!  
When that fire broke out, it grew into a mighty blaze.  
In that firetrap way up there with but a single door,  
So many innocent working girls burned, to live no more!

A hundred thousand mourners, they followed those sad biers.  
The streets were filled with people weeping bitter tears.  
Poets, writers everywhere described that awful pyre,  
When those young girls were trapped to die in the Triangle Fire.

**No Way Out: Two New York City Firemen Testify  
About the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire**

Testimony before the **Factory Investigation Commission**, New York City Fire Chief **Edward F. Croker** and Fire Marshall **William Beers**.

**Edward F. Croker**, called as a witness, being first duly sworn, testifies as follows:

Direct examination by Mr. Elkus:

Q. Chief, will you tell the Commissioners just how long you have been in the Fire Department, what positions you have held, etc., so that we may have it in on record?

A. I was appointed fireman June 22, 1884, and went through the various grades of the department from time to time, until I arrived at the position of Chief of the Department; I served in that capacity for twelve years and retired May 1 of the present year.

Q. Were you present at the fire of the Triangle Waist Company building?

A. I was, sir.

Q. And you made a careful investigation of that fire, did you not?

A. Yes, sir, I did.

Q. Now, just a word about that. Was that a loft building of the kind you described?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. How many stories high?

A. Twelve stories.

Q. And this fire was on one or more floors in that building?

A. It originated on the ninth.

Q. And they had an out-door fire escape there, didn't they?

A. On the rear.

Q. And it led down to an enclosed yard?

A. It led down into an enclosed yard.

Q. What did you ascertain were the facts there with reference to the closed doors?

A. Well, from what we could find-what was left of that place up there-I don't think there was any doubt there was a partition inside of the doorway leading out into the Green Street side of that

building, and from the indication of the number of people we found where that partition was, that door was locked, and the door that opened into it, opened on the inside.

Q. Was it locked with a lock and key, or a bolt?

A. A lock and key, but it opened in.

Q. Was it a wooden door?

A. Yes ....

Q. Now ... did the people jump down the shaft as a means to try to escape?

A. Well, we found them in the shaft. We don't know how they got there....

**William L. Beers**, called as a witness and, being duly sworn, testified as follows:

Q Mr. Beers, were you fire marshal of the city?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Were you connected with the Fire Department, and, if so, for how long?

A. I was with the Fire Department for twelve years, up to November 15, when I retired.

Q. During all that time were you Fire Marshal?

A. Assistant Fire Marshal and Fire Marshal.

Q. Did you visit the Triangle Waist Company Building immediately after the fire?

A. Yes, sir.

Q. Did you make an investigation?

A. I was there all during the evening of the fire, and was there on the ground the next morning at nine o'clock.

Q. Tell us what you observed.

A. The result of my investigation and the taking of testimony for ten days after the fire was that I was of the opinion that the fire occurred on the eighth floor on the Greene street side, under a cutting table, which table was enclosed, and that contained the waste material as cut from this lawn that was used to make up the waists. They were in the habit of cutting about 160 to 180 layers of lawn at one time; that formed quite a lot of waste, which was placed under the cutting tables, as it had a value of about seven cents a pound.

Q. Was it boxed, or just placed on the floor?

A. Well, the boards that were nailed on the legs of the table formed the box.

Q. The outside of that box was wood?

A. Yes; it was all wood.

Q. How did the fire start there in that stuff?

A. Well, we formed the opinion that it started from the careless use of a match from one of the cutters. They were about to leave to go home, and in those factories they are anxious to get a smoke just as quick as they get through work.

Q. A man simply lighted a match?

A. Yes; and carelessly threw it under there; then the attention of the workers were called to it, and they tried to extinguish it before they rang in a fire alarm.

Q. Did you examine the fire escape of that building?

A. After the fire.

Q. What did you find?

A. I found the fire escape on the rear of the building, which was the only one, and was entirely inadequate for the number of people employed in that building.

Q. Why were they inadequate?

A. Too small and too light, and the iron shutters on the outside of the building when opened would have blocked the people passing between the stairway and the fire escape.

Q. How many people were there on the eighth floor?

A. Something over 250, as I recall it.

Q. How many sewing machines?

A. There was a cutting department, and it was partly used for machines for making fine waists. About 220 persons were on the eighth floor, all of whom escaped.

Q. How did they come to escape?

A. They went down the stairway and down the fire-escape, some of them.

Q. How about the ninth floor?

A. The loss of life was greatest on the ninth floor. There were about 310 people there.

Q. How many sewing machines?

A. 288.

Q Now, will you tell the Commission whether or not the place was overcrowded with the machines?

A. Yes, sir. All the space that could be used there was used.

Q Were any attempts made to extinguish the fire?

A. Yes, there were. They used fire pails there, and then tried to use the fire hose.

Q What happened to the fire hose?

A. Well, they claimed they could not get any water to it.

Q. How about the fire pail, why did that not put out the fire?

A. They did not get enough water to put it out. The fire spread very rapidly. The material is very flammable, and the fire traveled very fast, and all the conditions were there to build a fire.

Q. How many fires would you say, Marshal, could have been prevented if ordinary care were used?

A. You mean in the factories?

Q. Yes.

A. I am not prepared to say Mr. Elkus. I am of the opinion that the care that are used to guard these factories by putting in fire extinguishing care would have kept the fire down to a small size. All fires are of the same size at the start, and I think the loss and damage would be a great deal less by having available equipment.

*Adapted from the State of New York Preliminary Report of the Factory Investigating Commission, 1912, Vol. II (Albany: The Argus Company, Printers, 1912), 14, 19-20, And 21.*

## Blame Shifted on All Sides for Fire Horror

Government leaders of the city, county, and state met yesterday to talk about responsibility for the conditions at the Asch Building, at University Place and Green Street, where Saturday evening's fire cost 142 lives, the latest victim dying in a hospital yesterday.

The Building Department was blamed for the inadequate fire escape. But President McAneny of the Building Department said that the Department was in no way to blame for the disaster and that it was "outrageously unfair" to hold it responsible. He went on to say that the plans for the building were filed eleven years ago and at that time, were in agreement with the law. President McAneny said that his Building Inspectors never have time to look at buildings except those being built. He added that several of his small force of inspectors were terribly incompetent. District Attorney Whitman hired two engineers yesterday to look at the building to decide who was responsible and their report will be ready in April. He went on to say that New York State Labor Law says that responsibility for fire protection in factories, particularly for fire escapes is the responsibility of the State Labor Commission.

But State Labor Commission President Williams refused to accept this and said that the Appeals Court in 1903 stated that the Building Department has complete control over fire escapes in New York City.

In Albany, the state capital, the Legislature has been asked to name a committee to investigate the fire. The last report of the State Labor Department on the Asch Building said that stairway conditions made it impracticable to change the doors so that they would open outward and that such a change would increase fire danger. The same report said that the Triangle Waist Company's factory was not overcrowded. The total number of employees then, however, was 400 while on Saturday, the day of the fire it had grown to over 600.

Investigations in New York City are continuing. Fire Marshal Beers had the waist company's owners, the building's owner, and thirteen others before him in an investigation to determine the exact cause of the fire. He said that there was no explosion; that a lighted match thrown into waste near oil cans, or into clippings under cutting table No. 2, on the Greene Street side of the eighth floor, started the fire. In answer to evidence that no smoking was permitted, he declared he had many cigarette cases, picked up near the spot of the fire's start, and could prove that smoking was constantly done.

Fire Chief Croker disagreed with the evidence given by the Fire Marshal that the doors within the factory were not locked. He said that his men had to chop through them to get inside, and if they were not locked, they were at least closed so firmly that only an axe could get through the door.

At the Asch Building itself, the fire lines have been withdrawn and there is only a guard on the sidewalk surrounding the building. Crowds of curious people have come from all directions, blocking traffic in Washington Square and in Washington Place, Waverley Place, and Greene Street.

Adapted from the *New York Times*, March 28, 1911. p. 1



## Lecture by Frances Perkins

*The New York Legislature created an Investigating Commission in 1911 to look into the Triangle Fire and report on unsafe conditions for employees. Francis Perkins was an investigator for the Commission. This is a speech she made many years later about the Triangle Fire and the Commission's work.*

It caught on fire and the blaze spread very rapidly. There was only one way to get out, the other two ways were the elevator and a door leading to the roof. The elevator was on fire almost immediately as the flames got into this open shaft and spread from floor to floor. The door leading to the roof was not a very good way to get out but it would have saved most of the people in that building if it had not been locked.

It had been locked by the employer himself because he feared that on that Saturday afternoon just before Easter a lot of shirtwaists might be stolen. He feared that some of the people in the shop might walk out over the roof with a few shirtwaists rolled up under their jackets or that somebody might come in and take a few shirtwaists. He was afraid he would be robbed either by his employees or by an outsider. I think he was mostly afraid of his employees. I remember the judge scolded him for his attitude toward his employees. It may have been a perfectly good attitude. He may have lost goods that way, one doesn't know, but it was wrong to tell it to the judge on that day in court.

This was a terrible accident; 147 young people were killed. They lost their lives and many others were badly injured. Some of them were injured in the elevator shaft. The boys that ran the elevator had fled. Some of the people tried to get out by jumping into the elevator shaft and grabbing the cables and letting themselves down that way. Some of them fell. Some of them were awkward and didn't grab right and couldn't hold on. Some of them merely blistered their hands, took the skin and flesh off their hands coming down on the cables and there were a number of people badly injured. Everybody who jumped, and a good many did jump from the 9th and 10th floors, was killed. The other people who died were all people who were burned or smothered by the smoke in the factory itself.

I remember that the accident happened on a Saturday. I happened to have been visiting a friend on the other side of the park and we heard the fire engines. We heard the screams and rushed over where we could see what the trouble was. We could see this building from Washington Square and the people had just begun to jump when we got there. They had been holding on until that time, standing in the windowsills, being crowded by others behind them, the fire pressing closer and closer, the smoke closer and closer.

The men on the ground were trying to get out this thing that the firemen carry with them, a net to catch people if they do jump, there were trying to get that out and they couldn't wait any longer. They began to jump. The window was too crowded and they would jump and they hit the sidewalk. The net broke, they fell a terrible distance, the weight of the bodies was so great at that speed that they broke through the net. Every one of them was killed, everybody who jumped was killed. It was horrible. We had our dose of it that night and felt as though we had been part of it all.

The New York State legislature appointed the commission, they asked the governor to appoint two members -- two citizens to represent him, and the others were members of the Senate and members of the Assembly, and we had both Democrats and Republicans in equal numbers.

This Factory Investigating Commission was continued from year to year until it sat for four years and its report was long--I think it had seven volumes. It's in great detail, it's all there, the whole report is there, the recommendations, the testimony. We went all over the state. I was a young person then and I was the investigator, and in charge of the investigations and this was an extraordinary opportunity, you see, to get into factories to make a report and be sure it was going to be heard.

We made the report to the governor or to the commission which met every Saturday morning for four years, except in mid summer, But it was a very useful commission. Although the commission's job was to create ways to prevent accidents by fire in the State of New York, we went on and kept enlarging the job of the commission until it came to be the report on all kinds of human conditions that were unfavorable to the employees, including long hours, low wages, the labor of children, the overwork of women, homework put out by the factories to be taken home by the women. It included almost everything you could think of that had been troubling for years. We were to investigate and report and recommend action on all these subjects. I may say we did.

We finished our investigation in 1915, and gave it to the legislature. We had a very favorable response and much of the report was made into law within a couple of years

So that we really got a lot out of that one tragedy. It seems in some way to have paid the debt owed to those children, those young people who lost their lives in the Triangle Fire. It's their contribution to the people of New York that we have this really magnificent set of laws to protect and improve the law regarding the protection of work people in the City of -- in the State of New York.

*Adapted from a lecture given 30 September 1964, by Frances Perkins at Cornell University, School of Industrial and Labor Relations.*

## 147 Dead, Nobody Guilty

Eight months after the fire, a jury met to hear the case against Max Blanck and Issac Harris, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Their job was to decide if the door was locked and if the owners knew that the door was locked at the time of fire.

Usually the only way out for the workers at quitting time was through an opening on the Green Street side, where all purses were inspected to prevent stealing. Worker after worker testified to the jury that the Green Street stairs were completely engulfed by flames and they were unable to open the doors to their only escape route—the stairs to the Washington Place exit.

A juror, Victor Steinman, who was interviewed by a reporter from the *New York Evening Mail* said, "I felt sure that the door had been locked. I believed that piece of burned wood and the lock with the shot bolt. But then I believed also that the key was usually in the door and that it was tied to it with a piece of string. So the thought in my mind was that during the first rush for the door some girl might have turned the key to open the door and accidentally locked it. And if that was so, then Harris and Blanck could not have known of it."

The jury was out for one hour and forty-five minutes and returned with a "not guilty" verdict. The families of the victims and much of the public felt that justice had not been done. "Justice!" they cried. "Where is justice?"

Twenty-three individual civil suits were brought against Blanck and Harris, the owners of Triangle Factory. On March 11, 1913, three years after the fire, Harris and Blanck settled. They paid \$75 per life lost.

*Adapted from "147 Dead, Nobody Guilty," Literary Digest, January 1912.*  
<http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/narrative6.html>

### Further Reading

"Indictments in the Asch Fire Case," *Outlook*, April 22, 1911.

"Placing the Responsibility," *Outlook*, April 29, 1911.

"List of Witnesses Called to Testify at the Trial,"

Compiled by Kheel Center Archives. Cornell University.



## Workers Assail Night Lock-Ins By Wal-Mart

Excerpts from article first published by the [New York Times](#), January 18, 2004

Looking back to that night, Michael Rodriguez still has trouble believing the situation he faced when he was stocking shelves on the overnight shift at the Sam's Club in Corpus Christi, Texas.

It was 3 a.m., Mr. Rodriguez recalled, some heavy machinery had just smashed into his ankle, and he had no idea how he would get to the hospital.

The Sam's Club, a Wal • Mart subsidiary, had locked its overnight workers in, as it always did, to keep robbers out and, as some managers say, to prevent employee theft. As usual, there was no manager with a key to let Mr. Rodriguez out. The fire exit, he said, was hardly an option - management had drummed into the overnight workers that if they ever used that exit for anything but a fire, they would lose their jobs.

"My ankle was crushed," Mr. Rodriguez said, explaining he had been struck by an electronic cart driven by an employee moving stacks of merchandise. "I was yelling and running around like a hurt dog that had been hit by a car. Another worker made some phone calls to reach a manager, and it took an hour for someone to get there and unlock the door."

The reason for Mr. Rodriguez's delayed trip to the hospital was a little-known Wal • Mart policy: the lock-in. For more than 15 years, Wal • Mart Stores Inc., the world's largest retailer, has locked in overnight employees at some of its Wal • Mart and Sam's Club stores. It is a policy that many employees say has created disconcerting situations, such as when a worker in Indiana suffered a heart attack, when hurricanes hit in Florida and when workers' wives have gone into labor. ...

Mona Williams, Wal • Mart's vice president for communications, said the company used lock-ins to protect stores and employees in high-crime areas. She said Wal • Mart locked in workers - the company calls them associates - at 10 percent of its stores, a percentage that has declined as Wal • Mart has opened more 24-hour stores.

Ms. Williams said Wal • Mart, with 1.2 million employees in its 3,500 stores nationwide, had recently altered its policy to ensure that every overnight shift at every store has a night manager with a key to let workers out in emergencies.

"Wal • Mart secures these stores just as any other business does that has employees working overnight," Ms. Williams said. "Doors are locked to protect associates and the store from intruders. Fire doors are always accessible for safety, and there will always be at least one manager in the store with a set of keys to unlock the doors."

Ms. Williams said individual store managers, rather than headquarters, decided whether to lock workers in, depending on the crime rate in their area.

Retailing experts and Wal • Mart's competitors said the company's lock-in policy was highly unusual. Officials at Kmart, Sears, Toys "R" Us, Home Depot and Costco, said they did not lock in workers....

The main reason that Wal • Mart and Sam's stores lock in workers, several former store managers said, was not to protect employees but to stop "shrinkage" - theft by employees and outsiders.

Tom Lewis, who managed four Sam's Clubs in Texas and Tennessee, said: "It's to prevent shrinkage. Wal • Mart is like any other company. They're concerned about the bottom line, and the bottom line is affected by shrinkage in the store."

Another reason for lock-ins, he said, was to increase efficiency - workers could not sneak outside to smoke a cigarette, get high or make a quick trip home.

Mr. Rodriguez acknowledged that the seemingly obvious thing to have done after breaking his ankle was to leave by the fire door, but he and two dozen other Wal • Mart and Sam's Club workers said they had repeatedly been warned never to do that unless there was a fire. Leaving for any other reason, they said, could jeopardize the jobs of the offending employee and the night supervisor.

Regarding Mr. Rodriguez, Ms. Williams said, "He was clearly capable of walking out a fire door anytime during the night."

She added: "We tell associates that common sense has to prevail. Fire doors are for emergencies, and by all means use them if you have emergencies. We have no way of knowing what any individual manager said to an associate."...

Janet Anderson, who was a night supervisor at a Sam's Club in Colorado from 1996 to 2002, said that many of her employees were also airmen stationed at a nearby Air Force base. Their commanders sometimes called the store to order them to report to duty immediately, but she said they often had to wait until a manager arrived around 6 a.m. She said one airman received a reprimand from management for leaving by the fire door to report for duty.

Ms. Anderson also told of a worker who had broken his foot one night while using a cardboard box baler and had to wait four hours for someone to open the door. She said the store's managers had lied to her and the overnight crew, telling them the fire doors could not be physically opened by the workers and that the doors would open automatically when the fire alarm was triggered.

Only after several years as night supervisor did she learn that she could open the fire door from inside, she said, but she was told she faced dismissal if she opened it when there was no fire. One night, she said, she cut her finger badly with a box cutter but dared not go out the fire exit - waiting until morning to get 13 stitches at a hospital.

The federal government and almost all states do not bar locking in workers so long as they have access to an emergency exit. But several longtime Wal • Mart workers recalled that in the late 1980's and early 1990's, the fire doors of some Wal • Marts were chained shut.

Wal • Mart officials said they cracked down on that practice after an overnight stocker at a store in Savannah, Ga., collapsed and died in 1988. Paramedics could not get into the store soon enough because the employees inside could not open the fire door or front door, and there was no manager with a key.

"We certainly do not do that now," Ms. Williams said. "It's not been that way for a long time."...

Roy Ellsworth Jr., who was a cashier at a Wal • Mart in Pueblo, Colo., said he was normally scheduled to work until the store closed at 10 p.m., but most nights management locked the front door, at closing time, and did not let workers leave until everyone had straightened up the store.

"They would keep us there for however long they wanted," Mr. Ellsworth said. "It was often for half an hour, and it could be two hours or longer during Christmas season."

One night, shortly after closing time, Mr. Ellsworth had an asthma attack. "My inhaler hardly helped," he said. "I couldn't breathe. I felt I was going to pass out. I got fuzzy vision. I told the assistant manager I really needed to go to the hospital. He pretty much got in my face and told me not to leave or I'd get fired. I was having trouble standing. When I finally told him I was going to call a lawyer, he finally let me out."

One top Wal • Mart official said: "If those things happened five or six years ago, we're a very large company with more than 3,000 stores, and individual instances like that could happen. That's certainly not something Wal • Mart would condone."

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<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/01/18/us/workers-assail-night-lock-ins-by-wal-mart.html>



## **Thai Factory Fire's 200 Victims Were Locked Inside, Guards Say**

*First published in the New York Times, May 12, 1993.*

The more than 200 Thais who died Monday in the worst known factory fire in history had been locked in to prevent pilferage, security guards said today.

"It's not our fault," one guard said. "The company told us to lock the doors so people would not sneak out or steal."

Many of the bodies, most those of young women, were found piled up before the locked doors or under stairways leading to them that collapsed under the workers' weight as they tried to escape, emergency workers said.

"We had no time," the guard said when asked why the doors had not been opened once the fire started.

An Interior Ministry spokesman told reporters Tuesday night that the death toll had reached 213, while a local television station reported a count of 240.

The worst previous factory fire was the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory blaze of March 25, 1911, which killed 146 women garment workers locked in a factory loft in New York City.

Prawate Tortrakul, Governor of the province, said it appeared the fire was caused by a short circuit, although the police said the cause remained under investigation.

### **Owners Defend Safety Policies**

Executives of the factory's owners, Kader Industrial (Thailand) Company, defended their safety policies to television interviewers, saying they complied with Government regulations. The company was described as a Thai-Taiwanese joint venture.

The factory complex, four large, connected four-story buildings, had been the scene of fires before and had once been closed down for safety reasons, officials said.

"How could you let this happen," Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, on his second visit to the site, said to a provincial engineer Tuesday night.

Workers said there were no fire alarms and no fire escapes.

More than 400 people were injured, many of them seriously. Doctors said many workers had head and back injuries after leaping from high windows.

Workers at the toy factory said they made between \$120 and \$160 a month.

More than 100 bodies, some shrouded with newspapers and sheets, remained at the site today awaiting identification by relatives. Arms and legs could be seen protruding from the rubble as searchers used cranes to lift twisted girders and jagged blocks of concrete from the wreckage. Blackened parts of Santa Claus dolls, novelty figures and other export items littered the site.

About 800 workers were in the building where flames first erupted in the cloth-cutting area on the ground floor and quickly spread to two of the other buildings. Those three structures were destroyed, leaving only one building.

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<http://www.nytimes.com/1993/05/12/world/thai-factory-fire-s-200-victims-were-locked-inside-guards-say.html>

## **Bangladesh Factory Fire Kills at Least 20**

By JULFIKAR ALI MANIK and VIKAS BAJAJ

*A version of this article appeared in print on December 15, 2010, on page A10 of the New York edition of the New York Times.*

DHAKA, Bangladesh — A fire at a garment factory north of Dhaka, the capital, killed at least 20 people and injured dozens on Tuesday, in the latest blow to the country's largest industry. The fire at a 10-story factory in the Ashulia industrial area, about 16 miles from the capital, started on the ninth floor around lunchtime, when most of the workers were outside. Local reporters who had canvassed hospitals said at least 24 people had been killed. Factory officials said they knew of about 20 deaths.

About 5,000 people worked in the building, producing pants for customers in the United States and Europe, said Delwar Hussain, a deputy managing director at the Ha-Meem Group, which owns the factory. Fire officials were still fighting the fire, which spread to the top floor, into the evening as people gathered at the compound to look for relatives.

It was not immediately clear which Western retailers were supplied by the factory. Garment factories employ about three million Bangladeshis, most of them women, to make clothes for stores like Wal-Mart and H & M.

Just days ago, three people were killed in labor protests. Workers have said they were protesting because some factories had not carried out a government-mandated 80 percent increase in the minimum wage, to 3,000 taka a month or about \$43.

It was unclear what had caused the fire at the Ha-Meem factory and whether it was related to the labor unrest. Mr. Hussain said that the company suspected an electrical short circuit, but that investigators from the government and the garment industry association were still working to establish the cause.

Piles of clothes in garment factories are easily combustible. Fires can be very deadly because some factory owners lock exits to prevent workers from leaving their machines. Mr. Hussain said the doors at the company's factory had not been locked.

International labor groups have criticized the safety of Bangladesh's garment factories. A factory fire outside Dhaka in February killed more than 20 people.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association said it would pay the families of workers killed in the Ha-Meem fire 100,000 taka (about \$1,400), and the company has promised to pay another 100,000 taka.

Mr. Hussain said the company hoped to reopen the first eight floors of the factory as early as Tuesday because they did not appear to be damaged. He said the company expected to meet all pending orders. The ninth floor was used as a finishing area where workers prepared shipments, and the 10th floor housed a dining hall, he said.

Julfikar Ali Manik reported from Dhaka, and Vikas Bajaj from Mumbai, India.

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# Teaching about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire: Selected Lesson Plans & Educational Materials

Annotated list of resources prepared by Adrienne Andi Sosin

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire took place on March 25, 1911, almost one hundred years ago. It was, until the World Trade Center was destroyed on September 11, 2001, the worst workplace disaster in the nation. Public outrage over the Triangle Fire led to major changes in health and safety regulation of industry, and in the role of government to control business and labor.

The following lesson plans and materials focus on teaching and learning about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire as an example of historical inquiry and because it represents a singularly important moment in American social history. Studying about the Triangle Fire teaches students about the labor movement, civil rights and human rights, and provides thematic context for teachers and students to improve literacy and technology skills as they acquire content information about society's heritage and present conditions for working people.

This annotated list is a result of research undertaken for the Education & Labor Collaborative (<http://education.adelphi.edu/edulc/>), to address the injustices youth will face as future members of the workforce in a global economy due to lack of foundational knowledge of the history of working men and women, the importance of unions and advocacy groups that speak out for working people, and the benefits of collective action.

The lesson plans, online resources, print resources and miscellaneous materials listed below are largely addressed toward teachers and students at the middle school level and above, but can be modified to meet the needs of younger students. These items have been selected for their topical focus, presentation quality and availability to teachers. While the lessons differ in how they address the topic and resources used, each source has been reviewed for accuracy, bias, and currency. Additional resources are continually being added to this list. They will be available at the resources page of the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition (<http://rememberthetrianglefire.org/>).

## Lesson Plans

**Learning Conversations With History: The Triangle Fire** by Anne Campbell And Irene Rabinowitz. Published by the UFT Teacher Center Professional Development Program, a collaboration of the United Federation of Teachers, the New York State Education Department, New York City public schools and participating school districts, as well as metropolitan area universities and cultural institutions. The lesson is designed for Grades 4-6 and includes guided reading selections, small group activity suggestions and KWL, inquiry & Semantic Map graphic organizer exercises. <http://www.ufttc.org/ftp/pub/specialedition/SpecialEdition17.pdf>.

**The Triangle Fire: From Industrialism to Progressivism** by Joanne Reitano, La Guardia Community College CUNY. This US History module is part of the American Social History Project. It is intended for use in the college introductory U.S. history survey course. <http://www.ashp.cuny.edu/investigatinghistory/m9.html>

**Worker Safety - The Triangle Fire Legacy** by Patricia Bonner. An EconEdLink Online lesson available from the Council for Economic Education. Includes worksheet activities and website resources about Triangle as well as more recent worker tragedies. <http://www.econedlink.org/lessons/index.php?lesson=EM542&page=teacher>

**Teaching American History in Maryland** by Nancy Bramucci. The Triangle Fire lesson is keyed to national standards developed by the National Center for History in the Schools. <http://nchs.ucla.edu/standards.html>. Access to primary, secondary, and media sources at: <http://teachingamericanhistorymd.net/000001/000000/000024/html/t24.html>

**11th Grade Inquiry Unit into the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911** by Miriam Laska . Urban Dreams was a project of the Oakland Unified School District Office of Instructional Technology designed to support History and English teachers

grades 9-12, by providing technology tools and professional development opportunities.  
<http://urbandreams.ousd.k12.ca.us/lessonplans/triangle/index.html>

**Triangle Fire and Labor Movement: A Cincinnati Museum Center Online Exhibit** prepared by Ethel Rowe. Lesson questions reference materials at the Cornell ILR Triangle website and other websites.  
<http://www.350th.org/er/lp/haven/lp11.html>.

**Fire in the Sky: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Causes and Consequences** by Christopher Czajka of the National Teacher Training Institute.  
<http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/ntti/resources/lessons/fireinthesky/index.html>

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Disaster.** A teaching guide keyed to a video segment from the documentary *The Jewish Americans* produced by WNET Channel 13. Focuses on characters, setting, plot, and theme using graphic organizers.  
<http://www.teachersdomain.org/resource/vtl07.la.rv.txt.triangle/>

**The Triangle Fire: A Curriculum Guide** from Washington Post Newspapers in Education. Includes an interview with David Von Drehle and an activity to develop sensitivity about how important cutters were to the process of making shirtwaists.  
[http://www.washpost.com/nielessonplans.nsf/0/C227D93127B86A7385256D9D006FB99D/\\$File/1-TriangleFinal.pdf](http://www.washpost.com/nielessonplans.nsf/0/C227D93127B86A7385256D9D006FB99D/$File/1-TriangleFinal.pdf)

**Go & Learn: Primary Documents and Lesson Plans** from the Jewish Women's Archive. Features speech by Rose Schneiderman at Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire protest. Lessons contain religious content.  
<http://jwa.org/teach/golearn/sep08/>

#### Online Resources

**Cornell School of Industrial & Labor Relations Kheel Center.** This website is a resource for documents, teaching ideas, images, and an extensive bibliography. <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>

**American Labor Studies Center.** Contains additional online resources that supplement the Triangle Fire

accounts, making it an indispensable resource for teaching labor studies. <http://labor-studies.org>.

**The Triangle Fire of 1911** by John M. Hoenig, Article appeared in *History Magazine* April/May 2005.  
<http://www.fisheries.vims.edu/hoenig/pdfs/Triangle.pdf>

**The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911** by Robert W. Whalen. Scholarly paper presented at Gotham Center for NYC History. <http://www.gothamcenter.org/festival/2001/confpapers/whalen.pdf>

**EyeWitness to History.** "City Life at the turn of the 20th Century." Describes the fire and subsequent trial looking at Immigration in the Early 20th Century.  
<http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/snpim3.htm>

**Curriculum of United States Labor History for Teachers** sponsored by the Illinois Labor History Society. <http://www.kentlaw.edu/ilhs/curricul.htm>

**Places Where Women Made History.** National Parks Services website.  
<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/pwwmh/ny30.htm>

**Trial By Fire.** By David von Drehle. Smithsonian magazine, August 2006  
<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/presence-aug06.html?c=y&page=1>

#### Online Images: Art & Illustrations

**Graphic Depiction of the Asch Building** shows a cut-away layout of what the Triangle factory would look like as the fire began on the 8th floor.  
<http://www.nickrotondo.biz/triangle.html>

**History of the Needlecraft Industry.** A mural commissioned by the International Ladies Garment Workers Union depicts the Triangle Fire.  
[http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m\\_r/pinsky/triangle.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/MAPS/poets/m_r/pinsky/triangle.htm)

**Ben Shahn mural.** A triptych depicts immigrants arriving through Ellis Island, workers organizing through unions for better working conditions.  
<http://www.njn.net/artsculture/shahn/mural.html>

**Library of Congress Exhibit.** Includes images from Shirtwaist Fire. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/haventohome/haven-century.html>

### **Selected Print Books and Resources**

Argersinger, J. (2009). *The Triangle Fire: A Brief History with Documents*. Bedford Series in History and Culture.

Bigelow, W. & Diamond, N. (1988). *The power in our hands: A curriculum on the history of work and workers in the United States*. NY: Monthly Review Press.

Boyer, R. & Morais, H. (2003) *Labor's Untold Story*. Pittsburgh, PA: UE. See pp.184-187.

Finn, P. (2009). *Literacy With an Attitude: Educating Working-Class Children in their Own Self-Interest*. 2nd Ed. Albany: SUNY Press.

Greenwald, R. (2005) *The Triangle Fire, the Protocols of Peace, and Industrial Democracy in Progressive Era New York*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University.

Lieurance, S. (2003). *The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire and Sweatshop Reform in American History*. Enslow.

Linné, R., Benin, L. & Sosin, A. (2009). *Organizing the Curriculum: Perspectives on Teaching the US Labor Movement*. Rotterdam, NY: Sense Publishers.

Stein, L. (2001). *The Triangle Fire*. Cornell University.

Stein, L. (1977). *Out of the Sweatshop: The Struggle for Industrial Democracy*. NY: Quadrangle.

Von Drehle, D. (2003). *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. Atlantic Monthly Press.

Wertheimer, B. (1977). *We Were There: The Story of Working Women in America*. NY Pantheon Books. Chapter 16.

Zinn, H. (2003). *A People's History of the United States*. NY: Harper Perennial. Chapter 13.

### **Literature, Media & Dramatic Portrayals**

Burns, R. *New York: Part IV*. PBS. DVD format.

Coles, N. & Zandy, J., eds. (2006) *American Working Class Literature: An Anthology*. Oxford University. Includes Rose Schneiderman, "A Cap Maker's Story" (1905), Rose Schneiderman, "Triangle Memorial Speech" (1911), Morris Rosenfeld, "Requiem on the Triangle Fire" (1911), and contemporary poetry.