

Chapter 11

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

A Tragedy Moves a Nation *March 25, 1911*

After the turn of the twentieth century much of the factory work in New York City, particularly in the garment industry, was located in "skyscrapers," buildings that rose 10 stories or more above street level. By the second decade of the century, in excess of half a million people in Manhattan worked in factories located at least eight stories high. In testimony before a New York State Assembly investigating committee on December 28, 1910, the New York City fire chief, Edward Croker, was asked the maximum reach of his department's firefighting potential. "Not over eighty-five feet," or about seven stories, was his reply. "I think if you want to go into the so-called workshops which are along Fifth Avenue and west of Broadway and east of Sixth Avenue, twelve-, fourteen- or fifteen-story buildings they call workshops," Croker stated, "you will find it very interesting to see the number of people in one of these buildings with absolutely not one fire protection, without any means of escape in case of fire."



11.1 The Triangle
Shirtwaist Factory
Fire

~~ore~~ *First Impressions*

"My God, Will the Fire Department Never Come?"

March 25, 1911, blossomed into the kind of Saturday afternoon in early spring that gives rise to thoughts of a picnic in the park. But picnics were not part of the weekend routine for the 600 people who worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. Saturday and Sunday found them, not unlike any other day of the week, busy at their sewing machines on the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the Asch Building. Mostly ranging in age from 13 to 23, these employees—over 80 percent of whom were young women who had recently emigrated from Germany, Italy, Hungary, or Russia—had been lured to their jobs by a wage of \$6 to \$10 for a 60- to 72-hour workweek. They were just completing the day's work and preparing to

receive their pay envelopes when the first puffs of smoke were seen on the eighth floor.

Source 1 "154 Killed in Skyscraper Factory Fire," *New York World*, March 26, 1911

At 4:35 o'clock yesterday afternoon fire springing from a source that may never be positively identified was discovered in the rear of the eighth floor of the ten-story building at the Northwest corner of Washington place and Greene street, the first of three floors occupied as a factory of the Triangle Waist Company. . . . At 2 o'clock this morning Chief Croker estimated the total number dead as one hundred and fifty-four. . . .

It was the most appalling horror since the Slocum disaster and the Iroquois Theatre fire in Chicago. Every available ambulance in Manhattan was called to cart the dead to the Morgue—bodies charred to unrecognizable blackness or reddened to a sickly hue—as was to be seen by shoulders or limbs protruding through flame eaten clothing. Men and women, boys and girls were of the dead that littered the street; that is actually the condition—the streets were littered.

The fire began in the eighth story. The flames licked and shot their way up through the other two stories. All three floors were occupied by the Triangle Waist Company. The estimate of the number of the employees at work is made by Chief Croker at about 1,000. The proprietors of the company say 700 men and girls were in their place.

Whatever the number, they had no chance of escape. Before smoke or flame gave signs from the windows the loss of life was fully under way. The first signs that persons in the street knew that these three top stories had turned into red furnaces in which human creatures were being caught and incinerated was when screaming men and women and boys and girls crowded out on the many 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 of flame as they leaped. Thud after thud sounded on the pavements. It is the ghastly fact that on both the Greene and the Washington place sides of the building there grew mounds of the dead and dying.

And the worst horror of all was that in this heap of the dead now and then there stirred a limb or sounded a moan.

Within the three flaming floors it was as frightful. There flames enveloped many so that they died instantly. When Fire Chief Croker could make his way into these three floors he found sights that utterly staggered him—that sent him, a man used to viewing horrors, 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 curious, uncanny feature about this deadly fire is that it was not spectacular from flame and smoke. The city had no sign of the disaster that was happening. The smoke of the fire scarcely blackened the sky. No big, definite clouds rose to blot out the sunshine and the springtime brightness of the blue above.

Concentrated, the fire burned within. The flames caught all the flimsy lace stuff and linens that go into the making of spring and summer shirtwaists and fed eagerly upon the rolls of silk.

The cutting room was laden with the stuff on long tables. The employees were rolling over such material at the rows and rows of machines. Sinisterly the spring day gave aid to the fire. Many of the window panes facing south and east were drawn down. Draughts had full play.

The experts say that the three floors must each have become a whirlpool of fire. Whichever way the entrapped creatures fled they met a curving sweep of flame. Many swooned and died. Others fought their way to the windows or the elevator or fell fighting for a chance at the fire-escape—the single fire-escape leading into the blind court that was to be reached from the upper floors by climbing over a window sill!

On all of the three floors, at a narrow window, a crowd met death trying to get out to that one slender fire-escape ladder.

Source 2 James Cooper, "World Reporter Passing When Fire Started Saw Girls Jump to Death," *New York World*, March 26, 1911

As the first whiffs of smoke came from the windows of the factory building . . . yesterday afternoon, I was passing that corner. Here follows a description of what occurred as witnessed by myself and hundreds of spectators during the first five minutes and later by thousands of men and women:

For fully a minute the spectators seemed in doubt as to whether the smoke meant a fire in the building or was merely simply some unusual smoke that might come from a machine used for manufacturing purposes. Then a little tongue of flame appeared just over the top of an eight-story window on the west side of the Washington place side of the building.

"That's a sure enough fire! I'm going to send in an alarm!" said one man on the edge of a little group of men watching the fire. He set out on a run for Broadway, and as he did so there was a little ripple of fire ran around the tops of other windows on the eighth floor.

Within another minute the entire eighth floor of the building was spouting little jets of flame from the windows, as if the floor was surrounded by a row of incandescent lights. From the street there was not the slightest indication that the fire was of a serious nature. As a policeman arrived at the corner opposite the building a man remarked to him:

"It's mighty hard work burning one of these fire-proof buildings, but I guess it's lucky it's Saturday afternoon. It looks as if every one was out of the place."

The increasing light of the flames attracted a large crowd within three minutes. No sign of life in the building had been observed by the spectators on the street front when suddenly something that looked like a bale of dark dress goods was hurled from an eighth story window.

"Somebody's in there all right," exclaimed a spectator. "He's trying to save the best cloth."

Another seeming bundle of cloth came hurtling through the same window, but this time a breeze tossed open the cloth and from the crowd of 500 persons there came a cry of horror.



11.2 The Triangle Fire

sidewalk. I climbed up the wire rope of this and managed to make myself heard by some men on the sidewalk.

They found some way of lowering the elevator, and we all came out through that hole.

A. Narrow Instruction

Less than 30 minutes from the time it was first noticed, the fire at the Asch Building was under control. But in that short, frantic half-hour, 46 people had taken the leap from the upper stories of the factory. None survived the jump. Some hit the sidewalk so hard that their bodies cracked the pavement. They fell through the nets held by the firemen. They lay in heaps on the sidewalk for two hours while the fireman drenched the smoldering structure with hoses.

When they were able to enter the building, the firemen found still bolted the door to the stairs on the eighth floor. They also found the bodies of nineteen more women who had jumped down the elevator shafts. Eighty-two other bodies were strewn around in the debris. The building, as advertised, was indeed fireproof and showed no structural damage.

At dawn on the morning after the blaze, the families of the victims lined up at the gates of a makeshift morgue on the Charity Dock at the foot of East 26th Street. They then began the ordeal of walking along the rows of coffins in hopes of identifying which of the bodies were those of their loved ones. Most of the victims had been burned beyond recognition. Seven victims were never identified.

A memorial parade of five hours' duration drew 100,000 marchers and 500,000 spectators on April 5, 1911. It rained throughout the event. The *New York World* reported that the "skies wept" along with the mourners.

On April 11, the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, who called themselves "the Shirtwaist Kings," were indicted for manslaughter. The trial opened on December 5, amid a near-riot by parents of the victims, who screamed "Murderers! Murderers!" as Harris and Blanck were escorted into the courtroom. The trial revealed that the Shirtwaist Kings had been warned of the hazardous conditions in their facility. There had been a number of nonfatal fires in the factory over the years, it was disclosed. Yet Harris and Blanck had ignored the advice of the city and held no fire drills. They admitted to a policy of locking the exits from the factory as a method of preventing "tardiness" and "theft." Under cross-examination Harris disclosed that his known losses from theft in 1910 amounted to less than \$12.

After 16 days of testimony from survivors, firemen, and city inspectors, the case was presented to the jury. Surprisingly, the jury found the defendants not guilty. Interviews given by jurors following the trial indicated that the panel believed that Harris and Blanck were indeed guilty; their decision reflected a narrow instruction to the jury from the judge. The jurors were instructed that they could not find the Triangle Shirtwaist proprietors guilty because of any general policy of bolting the exit doors, but rather only if they found "the defendants had knowledge that the door was locked" at the moment the fire began. This point had defied proof.

Source 6 Statement of Dr. George M. Price, chairman of special task force, the Fire Prevention Investigating Committee, March 27, 1911

What was expected has happened. Those who knew of the flimsy fire protection in the loft buildings of New York long ago predicted just such a disaster as occurred in Washington Square. If, however, this building were the only one of those unprotected against fire the situation would not be so terrible, but the fact is that there is hardly a large loft building in New York which is better protected against fire, or where there is special care taken to safeguard the limbs and lives of operatives.

The Joint Board of Sanitary Control employed eight Inspectors . . . and the data gathered by these Inspectors throws much light upon the inadequacy of the fire-prevention facilities in most of the 1,243 shops inspected by the board.

In 14 shops no fire escapes at all have been found. In 65 shops the fire escapes were provided with straight ladders, which are, as is well known, very dangerous, and which hardly anyone who is not an experienced ladder climber can make use of.

In 101 shops no drop ladders at all were found, or those found were placed out of reach.

In 491 shops, or 40 per cent of all shops inspected, there were no other exits in case of fire except one fire escape.

In 28 shops the doors leading to halls and stairways were found locked during the day.

In 60 shops the halls were less than three feet wide.

In 1,173 shops, or 97.5 percent of all shops, the doors leading to halls were opened in instead of out as the law requires.

In a word, the investigation has shown that even with the low standards for fire protection as demanded at present by the labor laws, there are hundreds and thousands of violations in one industry alone.

When we consider the existing regulations about fire protection, we must admit that they are far inadequate and, indeed, a delusion and a sham.

There is no reason why the so-called fireproof buildings . . . where such large numbers are working and women are massed, there is no reason why these should not be compelled to provide fire escapes. Nor is there any reason why the shops which are required to have fire escapes should have but one, no matter how many persons work therein. According to the present law, if a building is provided with one fire escape it answers the purpose of the law, whether ten persons or ten hundreds work thereat.

Source 7 Editorial, "Murdered by Incompetent Government," *New York World*, March 27, 1911.

After the disastrous factory fire in Newark last November Chief Croker said:

"There are buildings in New York where the danger is every bit as great as in the building destroyed at Newark, and a fire in the daytime would be accompanied by loss of life. We can see that the law is complied with, but that is as far as we can go. What we should have is an ordinance requiring fire-escapes

wanted to pay as a start. In two or three weeks they knew how to sew very well. Never mind. For a long time they still got the same low pay. Triangle and the inside contractor got the difference."

The company dealt only with its contractors. It felt no responsibility for the girls. Its payroll listed only the contractors. It never knew the exact total of its workers.

On Saturdays, it was the inside contractor who paid the girls. In each case he took into account the skill and speed, the family relationships or the defenselessness of the individual worker. She, in turn, showed her appreciation by being docile and uncomplaining.

Source 12 Joseph G. Rayback, *A History of American Labor*, 1966

An issue of great importance in the nineteenth century—that of safety and health in factories, tenements, and mines—might have been forgotten in the early twentieth century if it had not been for the Triangle Shirt Waist Factory fire in New York City in 1911. The tragedy . . . renewed the older movement. Under the pressure of the Progressives, led in this case by state federations of labor, northern and western states refurbished their old laws, defining safety regulations in factories more specifically and providing more severe punishment for violations. Some states also enacted more exacting tenement- and mine-safety laws.



11.4 Women in the Workplace: Labor Unions

Source 13 Allen Weinstein and R. Jackson Wilson, *Freedom and Crisis*, 1974

Who was to blame for the tragedy? This question haunted New Yorkers in the weeks that followed the Triangle disaster. . . . The city's fire department bore a share of the responsibility, despite the bravery of those who fought the blaze. The department had failed to enforce even those few mild safety laws that were on the books. Moreover, its equipment was inadequate for fighting fires in the city's new loft buildings. The tallest fire ladders reached only the sixth floor, although half the city's factory workers worked in lofts above this floor. Some of the department's safety nets were so weak that they broke under the force of falling bodies.

The City Buildings Department too had to accept a measure of the blame. The Asch Building, like most of New York City's garment shops, lacked adequate safety features. Several months earlier, a factory inspector had warned the owners of the Asch Building of such violations as insufficient exits and locked stairway doors. But the department made no effort to ensure that these conditions were corrected. There were 47 inspectors in Manhattan to check over 50,000 buildings. Of these buildings 13,600 had been listed as dangerous by the fire department the previous month. Inspectors managed to visit 2,000 buildings in March, but the Asch Building was not among them.

Nor were the fire insurance companies innocent of blame. Insurance brokers in New York suffered heavy losses from the numerous fires that occurred in the city's loft buildings. Yet the insurance industry failed to insist on safety standards that might have reduced fire hazards. Rather, they preferred to pay off after a fire and then raise a company's premiums. Higher policy rates also meant higher commissions for insurance brokers. During the 1890s a group of

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insurance companies attempted to offer cheaper rates to manufacturers who installed sprinkler systems in their factories. These companies were soon driven out of business by the city's powerful insurance industry. It was simply easier and more profitable to leave the "fireproof" firetraps alone and settle afterward.

On April 11, a week after the public funeral for the Triangle victims, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck were indicted by a grand jury and charged with manslaughter. . . . If Harris and Blanck had been convicted, the Triangle fire might have been forgotten more easily. The public might have been satisfied that justice had been done. As it turned out, the acquittal of Harris and Blanck sparked a new effort to improve the conditions under which New York City's laborers worked.



Questioning the Past

1. Search the sources presented and list the various causes they cite for the tragedy at the Asch Building on March 25, 1911. Which of these seem plausible and which do not? What might have prevented the loss of life that occurred?
2. The manner in which the work force of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company was organized is known as the *padrone* system. How did this system function and what were the advantages and disadvantages of it to the workers, contractors, and factory owners?
3. Argue the case for and against the assumption by federal, state, and local government of a responsibility to inspect and regulate privately owned businesses and factories in an effort to guarantee a safe and healthy working environment.

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