

Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, March 25, 1911

On March 25, 1911, a deadly fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York's Greenwich Village. A tossed cigarette or a lit match ignited the fire on the 8th floor of the building and the flames spread quickly throughout the rest of the building. The 240 female workers on the 9th floor, oblivious to the flames below, continued to stitch. When they finally saw the smoke and rushed for the stairwell, they were met by open flames that prevented their escape. Some of the women piled into the elevator while other attempted to climb down the fire escape which collapsed and fell to the ground almost 100 feet below. The only remaining exit was a door that had been locked to prevent theft. The key was in the foreman's pocket who was in the street listening to the women's cries for help from the street. By the time the fire burned out, 146 people were dead, 129 of them were women, and nearly half were teenagers. About a year prior to the fire, the women, mostly immigrants from Russia or Italy, had joined in what became the largest women's strike in American history. Within 48 hours, more than 50 of the smallest factories in New York gave into their worker's demands for shorter hours, higher wages, and safer shops and unions. However the owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory refused to give in and instead hired prostitutes and police to beat the strikers. The strike continued for 11 weeks after which the owners agreed to shorter days and higher wages but not to a union. This meant that the women still lacked the power to improve their dangerous working conditions. The public outrage that followed the fire and the deaths of the workers forced government to take action. Within 3 years of the fire, more than 36 states passed laws regulating fire safety and the quality of the workplace conditions. The following are images of the aftermath of the fire (see powerpoint) as well as newspaper articles and firsthand accounts of survivors that highlight the injustices and unsafe working conditions that brought about the death the workers.

New York Times

March 26, 1911 (p. 4)

Stories of Survivors

And Witnesses and Rescuers Outside Tell What They Saw

(<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglenytp4.html>)

The rapidity of the flames is shown in the experience of Max Rother a tailor in the employ of the Triangle Waist Company, who was on the eighth floor of the building when the fire started. Rother was on the Washington Place side when he heard the cry of alarm coming from the Greene Street side of the loft. Hanging over the heads of the operators at the machines in the room was a line of clothes ablaze. With the manager of the firm, Max Burnstein, he tried to put the fire out with pails of water. While at this work 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 became of Burnstein, the manager.

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."

Jump Before Firemen Arrive

According to several eye witnesses, the flames were pouring from the windows and the girls jumping to the sidewalk for several minutes before the first fire truck with ladders arrived. Benjamin Levy of 995 Freeman Street, the Bronx, one of the first men to arrive at the burning building, says that it was all of ten minutes after the fire started before the first fire engine arrived. Mr. Levy is the junior member of the firm of I. 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 employes 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 the bodies as they were being shipped to the Morgue told of one heap in which a girl was found still alive when the others were taken off her. She died before an ambulance doctor could reach her.

Elevator Made One Trip.

Samuel Levine, a machine operator on the ninth floor, who lives at 1,982 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."

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 panic stricken crowd in the room behind them.

One of the bookkeepers, Morris Lewine, said he was on the top floor. He threw the books with the exception of a ledger 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 an adjoining building. He did not know what became of the second girl.

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.

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.

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 fire box. 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."

Rescuers on the Outside.

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 workers crowding at the windows. We saw a man leap out and then the girls began to follow him."

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."

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."

Human Bridge Bucks and Falls.

Pauline Grossman, 18 years old, who was injured by leaping from a window of the factory as the fire was gaining headway on the eighth floor, says three male employes 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 centre 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 window sills and fell. Persons who were crossing upon the human bridge dropped with them to the passageway."

New York Times

December 12, 1911 (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtials/triangle/trianglenyt1212.html>)

Girls Fought Vainly at Triangle Doors

Survivors of the Disaster Describe its Horrors at the Harris & Blanck Trial.

HOW ESCAPE WAS CUT OFF

One Young Miss Demonstrates on Court Room Door How She Struggled to Open an Exit.

Several witnesses were called before Judge Crain in General Sessions yesterday at the manslaughter trial of Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, owners of the Triangle Waist Company, where 147 persons lost their lives in a fire last March 25, who testified to the frantic efforts made by those employed on the ninth floor of the building escape from the enrushing flames.

One of the witnesses described the fire down in the smallest detail, and all agreed that the door leading to the Washington Place stairway was locked. The most important testimony was that of Yetta Lublitz, who was employed as an operator on the ninth floor. Describing her experience she said:

"I never knew that there was a stairway on the Washington Place side as we never were allowed to leave on any but the Greene Street side. I was employed as an operator on the ninth floor and was about to punch my time card when I heard some one cry 'fire'."

"I saw smoke pouring up the stairs and started toward the Greene Street entrances when I noticed that there was a crowd of excited persons standing there. I then rushed to the Washington Place side, where I saw others standing about a door and trying to open it. When I tried the door I could not open it.

"I started back to the Greene Street door, but saw flames coming up and changed my mind. Some burning pieces of cloth were blown about the floor and it seemed that fire was all about us. Miss Gordon was with me and she cried: 'Come on! Follow me to the roof!' We ran upstairs then to the roof."

"Did any flames touch you?" asked Max D. Steuer, counsel for the two defendants, on cross-examination.

"Yes, some of the flames reached my hair and burned it. I grabbed up a piece of cloth and put it over my head to protect it from the flames. Burning cloth was being blown about."

"You went to the roof, you said: what did you do there?" asked Mr. Steuer.

"After we reached the roof we were helped to the adjoining roof by some students from the New York University Law School."

Anna Gullo of 437 East Twelfth Street, an operator on the ninth floor, testified that there were never any fire drills by the Triangle Waist Company, and that she never saw a key in the lock of the Washington Place door on that floor. She was dressed in mourning, and in reply to Assistant District Attorney Bostwick's questions she said that she was one girl whom she knew only as "Katie" fall to the floor just before just before she escaped by the elevator.

Ethel Monick, 16 years old, of 164 East Twelfth Street, said she was working as a helper for about three months before the fire. "I was on the ninth floor when I heard the cry of fire," she testified. "I saw smoke pouring from the Greene Street stairs but tried to get out that way just the same. I gave it up when I saw the crowd there, and ran to the Washington Place door, but found it locked. I tried and tried to open it, but could not. I thought it was because I was not strong enough and called to the other girls. It wouldn't open at all."

"How did you try to open it?" asked Mr. Bostwick. "Demonstrate the manner in which you tried to do so on a door in this room."

Judge Crain then directed that the witness open the door leading from the courtroom. This door had been locked, and the witness walked over and, grasping the knob, twisted it and turned it. She pushed it outward and inward in frantic efforts to open it, and then resumed the stand and, continuing her story, said: "I am positive that I never saw the Superintendent on the ninth floor and am sure that once before I tried to open the door but not could not."

"Has any one spoken to you about the fire?" asked Mr. Steuer on cross-examination.

"No: I am glad that they have not, as I don't like to talk about it."

"If you noticed that the door was locked why was it that you didn't tell Mr. Blanck or Mr. Harris about it?"

"I am only a poor working girl," replied the witness.

"Then I take it you were afraid to speak to Mr. Harris or Mr. Blanck, weren't you?"

"No, not exactly afraid," replied the witness, "but I had heard of cases where girls had been discharged for making complaints to the bosses. Maybe they had done something wrong, but I am not sure and can't say exactly."

"You say that you never saw Supt. Bernstein on the ninth floor?" asked Mr. Steuer.

"Yes I am very sure about that. I am under oath and know that I did not see him there, but he might have been there and I might have not seen him, you know."

"No, I have not sued for damages." Several other witnesses were called, who described the fire and corroborated all the other witnesses in saying that the door was locked. Judge Crain then adjourned the case until today.