“The Minute They Catch on Fire”

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire and the Turning Point in Women's Activist and Labor Laws

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Senior Division

Group Performance

Process Paper = 452 words

Ava: I will be portraying Charles F. Bostwick. He was the lawyer who represented the People of New York in the case of People of the State of New York vs. Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, who were tried for the charges of first and second-degree manslaughter.

Bostwick: The Grand Jury of the County of New York has indicted the defendants Isaac Harris and Max Blanck for manslaughter in its first and second degrees, and all that I am about to say to you, the People will prove by evidence that will be adduced before you. There is a large building at the northwest corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, ten stories in height; the ninth, eighth, and seventh floors were used by the defendants as a factory. The defendants Harris and Blanck did business under the name of the Triangle Waist Company, which was a partnership to manufacture ladies' shirtwaists.

On March 25th at about 4:45 in the afternoon, as the employees were about to finish — or had just finished their day's labor and were about to leave the factory, a fire started on the eighth floor. Some of the workers were still at their machines and tables. There was a considerable accumulation of scraps near the north end of the first cutter's table. These cuttings underneath the table ignited quickly— like tinder — and the fire spread with great violence. More than 500 were employed in the three lofts occupied by the defendants, mostly girls and women. There was only one fire escape in all of the buildings, which collapsed during the rescue. Hallways and doors were obstructed by bulky machines and many people died due to the door opening the wrong way. Firemen's ladders were too short to reach the highest levels, and ineffectual safety nets ripped upon impact.

We bring forth Celia Walker Friedman to tell us about her experience.

Margot: "I could hear [the elevator] rush down and I was left standing on the edge trying to hold myself back from falling into the shaft. I held on to the two sides of the open door. Behind me, the girls were screaming and I could feel them pushing me more and more. I knew that in a few seconds, I would be pushed into the shaft and I made a quick decision. Maybe through panic or maybe through instinct, I saw the center cable of the elevator in front of me. I jumped and grabbed the cable. That is all I remember. The next thing I knew was when I opened my eyes and I was lying on my back and I looked up into the faces of a priest and a nun who were trying to help me."

Ava: Now we bring forth Mary Domsky-Abrams to tell us about how others tried to help those trapped in the building.

Margot: A group of men made a human ladder of themselves in an attempt to make it possible for girls hunched in fear at the windows not yet on fire to cross over to the next building, to which there was a small bridge (or passage.) But all the men, about 10 of them, fell, not being able to bear up under the weight, and were killed together with those who tried to save themselves. We were all deeply moved by the heroism and tried to kiss their bodies as they were being removed to the morgue."

Ava: The manager was reported to have attempted to use the fire hose to extinguish it, but was unsuccessful, as the hose was rotted and its valve was rusted shut. Like many girls trapped, "Daisy and her friend, Freda Polakovski, jumped hand in hand. Amazingly, Daisy and Freda survived the plunge from the ninth floor. A rescue van transported both women to New York Hospital, where Daisy lingered for two days and Freda for three, both finally dying from shock and internal injuries." Even after all of this evidence against Max Blanck and Issac Harris, they were still found not guilty. Though they were not punished for their actions, the women of the factories worked to make their workplaces safer.

One of the loudest voices for this activism was Rose Schneiderman, the founder of the New York Chapter of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union. She gave this speech at a memorial meeting held in the Metropolitan Opera House on April 2, 1911.

Rose: I would be a traitor to these poor burned bodies if I came here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting.
The old Inquisition had its rack and its thumbscrews and its instruments of torture with iron teeth. We know what these things are today; the iron teeth are our necessities, the thumbscrews are the high-powered and swift machinery close to which we must work, and the rack is here in the firetrap structures that will destroy us the minute they catch on fire.
This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in the city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The lives of men and women are so cheap and property is so sacred. There are so many of us for one job it matters little if 146 of us are burned to death.

We have tried you citizens; we are trying you now, and you have a couple of dollars for the sorrowing mothers, brothers, and sisters by way of a charity gift. But every time the workers come out in the only way they know to protest against conditions which are unbearable the strong hand of the law is allowed to press down heavily upon us.

Public officials have only words of warning to us--warning that we must be intensely peaceable, and they have the workhouse just back of all their warnings. The strong hand of the law beats us back, when we rise, into the conditions that make life unbearable.

I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.

Bostwick: And did you achieve what you hoped for Rose?

Rose: Mostly, a large influx of workers who joined the union I founded. The membership of the International Ladies' Garment Workers Union doubled after the fire and in the 1970s, membership peaked at around 20-21 million people.We also got the Sullivan-Hoey fire prevention law and the New York Fire Prevention Bureau was founded. Around 30 other laws were passed as well, but those were the most notable. The Sullivan-Hoey law required employers to install sprinklers in the buildings that they worked in. The powers of the Fire commissioner were expanded as well.

Bostwick: One of my biggest regrets is that Issac Harris and Max Blanck were never punished for the murder of all of those women and children. The Diamond Waist Company factory burned twice, in 1907 and 1910, while the Triangle plant was torched twice in 1902. It is suspected that Blanck and Harris set fire to their offices premeditated to get paid for the substantial fire insurance policies they bought—a frequent practice in the early 20th century. Although this was not the reason for the 1911 fire, it did play a part in the catastrophe since Blanck and Harris did not want to put in sprinkler systems or take any other safety precautions in case they had to set fire to their shops again. Other than to avoid stealing, management began to lock the steel exit doors to prevent the women from leaving work to use the restroom. All of their tight and harsh regulations backfired on the women, and they were forced to pay the price with their lives.

Margot: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was a turning point for women activists because it led more women to participate in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and protest for what they believe in. Their protests were successful, meaning they led to the Sullivan-Hoey Fire prevention law and the creation of the New York Fire Prevention Bureau. We made it possible for workplace safety today.

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Ms. Hadaway

AP US History

January 22, 2024

National History Day Process Paper: Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

When I was 9 or 10 I read this graphic novel about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. I didn't know what it was or how it had gotten to me, but I knew it was an important story. I kept the story with me and when we were told about the theme for National History Day this year, I knew it would be a perfect choice. It was a story that not many people knew, but a big enough event that there would be a good amount of resources for us. I particularly remember this story because most of the women and girls who had died were Jewish, just like me. I felt a connection to them since my family had also come through Ellis Island in the early 1900s.

We started our research with a simple Google search about the events. We found many great resources there as well as a database full of testimonials, survivors' accounts, and union leaders' speeches after the event. After we had a good base for our research, we started looking in the Library of Congress archives and found newspaper articles about the event. We also looked in Gale, where we found the transcript of the court case against the owners, Max Blanck and Issac Harris. They were being charged with first and second-degree manslaughter but were found not guilty. This was the base on which we built our script around, incorporating legal aspects and using the legal framework to tell the story.

When looking at our options for the project types, we knew we didn't want to do a documentary or an exhibit. We felt that the best way to showcase our research and turning point was a performance because it gave the audience a way to connect with the people who died.

Watching someone act out what happened and hearing and seeing what they went through gives you a deeper understanding and connection to the event. We wanted our audience to understand how horrific the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was and the outcomes of the women activists who protested for labor reforms.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire was a turning point for women labor activists because many women decided that they wanted to push for labor reform through the International Ladies Garment Workers Union and protest for their safety. This influx allowed for real change to happen in labor laws, including the Sullivan-Hoey Fire Prevention Law and the creation of the New York Fire Prevention Bureau. The Sullivan-Hoey law made it mandatory for sprinklers to be installed in every building that had people working in it. These women's drive and desire made it possible for people today to be safe in their work environment.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

***Asch Building Fire Helps to Better Laws*, March 25, 1912. Accessed January 5, 2024. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83030214/1912-03-25/ed-1/seq-5/#words=fire+Triangle+Fire+Safety+Committee.**

We used this source to show how the accident directly influences bills.

Brewer, Justice. "Waged Work and Protective Laws, MULLER VS. STATE of OREGON, (1908)." New York Historical Society, Women and the American Story. Last modified February 24, 1908. https://wams.nyhistory.org/modernizing-america/fighting-for-social-reform/waged-work-and-protective-laws/.

We utilized this source to demonstrate how the workers at the Shirtwaist Factory were breaking the law, and while some labor restrictions were in effect, they were few. The majority of those who were concerned were women. We also utilized it to demonstrate the limits imposed on women and how the fire was a watershed moment in women's factory safety.

Charles F. Bostwick and J. Robert Rubin, ESQ v. Max D. Steuer, ESQ. (Fed. Cir. Dec. 4, 1911).

Transcript of the Criminal Proceeding, where the Triangle owners were found not guilty. We used this source by quoting it in our script. We discussed how the accumulation of cutter scraps caused the fire to start and spread quickly.

***A Flower for Daisy*. PDF.**

We used this as proof of how devastating the fire was.

"Letters to Michael and Hugh." In *Development of the Industrial U.S. Reference Library*, edited by Sonia G. Benson, Jennifer York Stock, and Carol Brennan, 161-71. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: UXL, 2006. Gale in Context: U.S. History.

We used this source to prove that children were performing less demanding chores that were purposefully hidden from inspectors. Many employees shared the same mindset and understood that they would not readily change employment, resulting in strong friendships.

***The New York Tribune* (New York City, NY). "Saw Factory Door Open, Witnesses in Triangle Fire: Trial Help Defense." December 20, 1911, 14. Library Of Congress.**

We used this source in our script of a testimony by one of the girls who survived.

"Shepherd, William G." In *Industrial Revolution Reference Library*, edited by James L. Outman, Matthew May, and Elisabeth M. Outman, 156-63. Vol. 3. Detroit, MI: UXL, 2003. Gale in Context: U.S. History.

We used this source in our script of the testimony of someone who witnessed the event from a bystander's perspective.

Sione, Patrizia Sione, Barbara Morley, and John Peters, eds. "The 1911 Triangle Factory Fire." *Cornell, ILR School's Kheel*. Last modified January 2011. https://trianglefire.ilr.cornell.edu/.

We utilized this source to create the outline for Bostwick's lines. We may use this as a testimonial while the worker dies behind her. We utilized this to demonstrate how the survivors' memories of that day are clouded by adrenaline and shock, as well as human goodness and how others attempted to assist the women exiting the building. This source

discusses the psychological implications of surviving the fire, including how a worker was unable to work for a while and how survivors were plagued for the rest of their lives.

***The Tacoma Times*. "Criminal Action to Follow Fire Horror." March 27, 1911. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88085187/1911-03-27/ed-1/seq-8/#words=ACTION+FIRE+HORROR+CRIMINAL.**

We used this source to show how some individuals sought change and justice by attempting to lock up the factory owners.

***The Washington Herald* (Washington, DC). "142 Die Wehn Shirtwaist Factory Burns." March 26, 1911, 1632nd edition. Library Of Congress.**

This source mentions one of the few ways that girls escaped the building during the fire.

Secondary Sources

American Society of Safety Professionals. Last modified March 24, 2021. Accessed December 5, 2023. https://www.assp.org/news-and-articles/the-triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire-an-american-tragedy.

We utilized this source to demonstrate the educational initiatives following the fire. After the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was designated a historic site, the Remember the Triangle Disaster Coalition was founded to raise awareness of the disaster and support remembering activities.

"Born for Fire!" NY Department of Labor. https://dol.ny.gov/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-born-fire.

We used this source as a background reference source.

History.com Editors. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." History.com. Last modified December 2, 2009. Accessed October 4, 2023. https://www.history.com/topics/early-20th-century-us/triangle-shirtwaist-fire.

We used this source to discuss the management's shady actions and some information on why they don't have sprinklers. According to one source, the manager attempted to extinguish the fire, implying that he did not create it on purpose. This source also included statistics on how people died and how this directly influenced improvements.

"International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union." National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/international-ladies-garment-workers-union.htm.

We incorporated this quote because the locked door is an important detail in our performance.

"Life Story: Clara Lemlich Shavelson (1886-1982)." New York Historical Society. https://wams.nyhistory.org/modernizing-america/fighting-for-social-reform/clara-lemlich/. This source included background on Clara. She helped form a chapter, spoke at a convention, organized strikes, and protested for labor reforms.

"Perkins, Frances." In *West's Encyclopedia of American Law*, 2nd ed., edited by Shirelle Phelps and Jeffrey Lehman, 428-30. Vol. 7. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005. Gale in Context: U.S. History.

We used this source for background information.

"Shirtwaist Factory Strike of 1909." In *Historic U.S. Events*. Detroit, MI: Gale, 2023. Gale in Context: U.S. History.

We used this source for additional information on strikes related to our topic.

Tikkanen, Amy, ed. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Last modified October 25, 2023. https://www.britannica.com/event/Triangle-shirtwaist-factory-fire.

We used this source for background information.

"Triangle History." The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Memorial. https://trianglememorial.org/triangle-history/.

We used this source for background information on the fire.

"Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. https://aflcio.org/about/history/labor-history-events/triangle-shirtwaist-fire.

This source included more insight into why the workers could not escape the building.

"The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire." US Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration. https://www.osha.gov/aboutosha/40-years/trianglefactoryfire.

This source mentions how all of the safety precautions and the attempts to rescue the girls failed.

U.S. Census Bureau History. Accessed December 14, 2023. https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2016/march_2016.html.

We used this source to introduce how New York approved the Sullivan-Hoey Fire Prevention Law in October 1911.

"U.S. Census Bureau History: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire of 1911." United States Census Bureau. https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2016/march_2016.html#:~:

text=In%20October%201911%2C%20New%20York,powers%20of%20the%20fire%20commissioner.

We read the Sullivan-Hoey Prevention Act to see how dangerous jobs were previously. Furthermore, it should be highlighted as an important turning point. This source also describes how a worker tries to help others get out of the elevators but is unable to do so because her shoulders are too broad, so she jumps and lives but dies from internal injuries, similar to Daisy.

Von Drehle, David von Drehle. "Uncovering the History of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire." Smithsonian Magazine. Last modified August 2006. https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/uncovering-the-history-of-the-triangle-shirtwaist-fire-124701842/.

We utilized this material to assist with the transition from the legal section to the testimony.

Wagner, Ella. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory (Brown Building)." National Park Service. https://www.nps.gov/places/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-brown-building.htm.

We referred to this source to discuss the progression. One of us may be Rose Schndeirman, discussing the catastrophe, how we mended, and the new labor rules. And she explains her tale, including how she utilized her grief to become a powerful figure in American politics.