The Triangle Shirt-Waist Factory Fire, 1911

It was Saturday, March 25, 1911. The work week was ending at the Triangle Waist Company factory in Lower Manhattan, and the men and women who operated the sewing machines and cut the cloth were pushing away from their tables, with some anticipating a night on the town and all looking toward to their one day of rest.

On the 8th floor, flames suddenly leaped from a wastebasket under a table in the cutters’ area.

While workers frantically struggled with pails of water to douse it, the fire hopscotched to other waste bins and snared the paper patterns hanging from strings overhead.

The fire spread quickly — so quickly that in a half hour it was over, having consumed all it could in the large, airy lofts on the 8th, 9th and 10th floors of the Asch Building, a half block east of Washington Square Park.

In its wake, the smoldering floors and wet streets were strewn with 146 bodies, all but 23 of them young women.

The Triangle shirtwaist factory fire, as it is commonly recorded in history books, was one of the nation’s landmark disasters, a tragedy that enveloped the city in grief and remorse but eventually inspired important shifts in the nation’s laws, particularly those protecting the rights of workers and the safety of buildings.

The tragedy galvanized Americans, who were shaken by the stories of Jewish and Italian strivers who had been toiling long hours inside an overcrowded factory only to find themselves trapped in a firestorm inside a building’s top floors where exit doors may have been locked. At least 50 workers concluded that the better option was simply to jump.

Triangle was one of the nation’s largest makers of high-collar blouses that were part of the shirtwaist style, a sensible fusion of tailored shirt and skirt. Designed for utility, the style was embraced at the turn of the century by legions of young women who preferred its hiked hemline and unfettered curves to the confining, street-sweeping dresses that had hobbled their mothers and aunts.

The company had become notorious two years before when its owners, immigrants themselves, managed to withstand a 13-week industry-wide strike, without giving in to demands for better conditions and union representation.

The fire accomplished what the strike could not. From the city’s grief sprang government investigations and transformative legislation, first in New York State and then the nation.

In New York a state legislative commission was formed to study the fire and the safety of factories. The commission was led by two unlikely reformers, the Tammany Hall
politicians Robert F. Wagner and Alfred E. Smith. Aware of the public outrage, they spearheaded changes in state legislation to require fire sprinklers, fire drills and unlocked and outward-swinging doors, and inspired a bill limiting work to 54 hours without overtime.

Leon Stein, author of the definitive history, “The Triangle Fire” (ILR/Cornell University Press, 1962), noted that the commission’s first year of work “resulted in the addition of eight new laws to the labor code; it produced twenty-five new laws the following year, and three in 1914.” Wagner and Smith’s work helped them vault respectively to the United States Senate and the governor’s mansion.

That reform spirit also made its way to Washington, where the National Labor Relations Act, also known as the Wagner Act, was passed in 1935, assigning rights to workers, including strengthening their right to organize.

And by a striking serendipity, one of the fire’s onlookers was 30-year-old Frances Perkins, who had been having tea at a patrician townhouse on Washington Square and heard the wail of fire engines.

Perkins, who was part of the New York commission, went on to become Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s secretary of labor, the first female cabinet member. In that job, she helped craft federal laws that limited working hours nationally and the age children could work, set floors on wages and inaugurated the social security system. Years later she said the New Deal was “based really upon the experiences that we had had in New York State and upon the sacrifices of those who, we faithfully remember with affection and respect, died in that terrible fire on March 25, 1911.”

Perkins pledged that the victims would never be forgotten. And, indeed, labor unions and their descendants every year mark the anniversary of the fire at the former Asch Building (now called the Brown Building, which houses science laboratories and classrooms for New York University) by reciting each victim’s name with the toll of a bell, and chalk outlines drawn on the sidewalk where so many bodies fell.

But six of the 146 had never been identified. The day those “unknowns” were buried by the city in the Cemetery of the Evergreens, on the border of Brooklyn and Queens, had been the culmination of the city's outpouring of grief, as hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers turned out in a driving rain for a symbolic funeral procession sponsored by labor unions and other organizations, while hundreds of thousands more watched from the sidewalks.

A century later, a researcher, Michael Hirsch, finally put names to each of the six. And so in 2011, at the centennial commemoration of the fire, the names of all 146 dead would finally be read.
REACTION...

The Triangle Shirt Waist Fire of 1911 was a major catalyst towards Progressive reform in America. Describe the specific actions each of the following types/groups of people most likely took in the wake of this tragedy.

1. A muckraker
2. Citizens of Manhattan
3. Other garment workers
4. A garment industry owner
5. The mayor of New York City

Each response should be a MAXIMUM of 4 sentences in length and should include a SPECIFIC reaction. (ex: the muckraker publishes a graphic political cartoon that shows the business owner at fault.)