

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 one 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