

The Triangle Factory Fire of 1911  
DBQ is intended for Grade 8  
Michael T. Watson  
Mulberry Middle School

**Student Instructions:**

Analyze the documentary evidence that is provided for you to answer the specific questions. Following this analysis of the documents, you will be expected to respond to a comprehensive essay question. You will use the evidence from these documents to respond to the essay prompt.

**Essay Question/Prompt:**

Explain why the Triangle Factory Fire of 1911 caused such a tragic loss of life and what measures might have been taken to avoid this tragedy in the first place. You will want to examine the conditions in the factory as well as focus on the reactions and abilities of people to react after the fire began,

**Historical Background:**

During the time periods of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the working conditions for many low skilled workers in large cities such as New York and Chicago were extremely dangerous. These dangers arose from long hours, crowded factory surroundings, and poor sanitation, to name just a few. These conditions would sometimes lead to tragedies that would shock the country.

**Document 1:**

Three stories of a ten-floor building at the corner of Greene Street and Washington Place were burned yesterday, and while the fire was going on 141 young men and women at least 125 of them mere girls were burned to death or killed by jumping to the pavement below.

The building was fireproof. It shows now hardly any signs of the disaster that overtook it. The walls are as good as ever so are the floors, nothing is the worse for the fire except the furniture and 141 of the 600 men and girls that were employed in its upper three stories.

Most of the victims were suffocated or burned to death within the building, but some who fought their way to the windows and leaped met death as surely, but perhaps more quickly, on the pavements below.

*New York Times March 26, 1911 Page 1*

1. When did this event take place?
2. What happened within the ten-story building?
3. How many people died and how many were thought to be "mere girls"?
4. Explain how the victims died.

**Document 2:**

How the fire started no one knows. On the three upper floors of the building were 600 employees of the waist company, 500 of whom were girls..... The building had experienced four recent fires and had been reported by the Fire Department to the Building Department as unsafe in account of the insufficiency of its exits.

The building itself was of the most modern construction and classed as fireproof. What burned so quickly and disastrously for the victims were shirtwaists, hanging on lines above tiers of workers, sewing machines placed so closely together that there was hardly aisle room for the girls between them, and shirtwaist trimmings and cuttings which littered the floors above the eighth and ninth stories.

*New York Times March 26, 1911 Page 1*

5. For what reason did the Fire Department report that this building was unsafe to the Building Department?
6. What is said about the physical structure of the building itself?
7. Why was the fire able to spread so quickly within the building?
8. Describe the placement of the sewing machines and what effect this had on the girls to be able to move around.

#### Document 3:

***Excerpts taken from the Testimony Before the Fire Investigating Commission Concerning the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of one William L. Beers, the Fire Marshall of New York City, on November 17, 1911***

The result of my investigation and the taking of testimony for ten days after the fire was that I was of the opinion that the fire occurred on the eighth floor on the Greene street side, under a cutting table, which table was enclosed and that contained the waste material as cut from this lawn that was used to make up the waists.

Well, we formed the opinion that it started from the careless use of a match from one of the cutters. They were about to leave to go home, and in those factories they are very anxious to get a smoke just as quick as they get through work.

Q. A man simply lighted a match?

A. Yes; and carelessly threw it under there; then the attention of the occupants was called to it, and they tried to extinguish it before they rang in a fire alarm.

9. According to Fire Marshall Beers, what was the cause of the Factory Fire?
10. Based on this excerpt, why was the fire able to spread so quickly?
11. How did the occupants (factory workers) react to the initial fire?

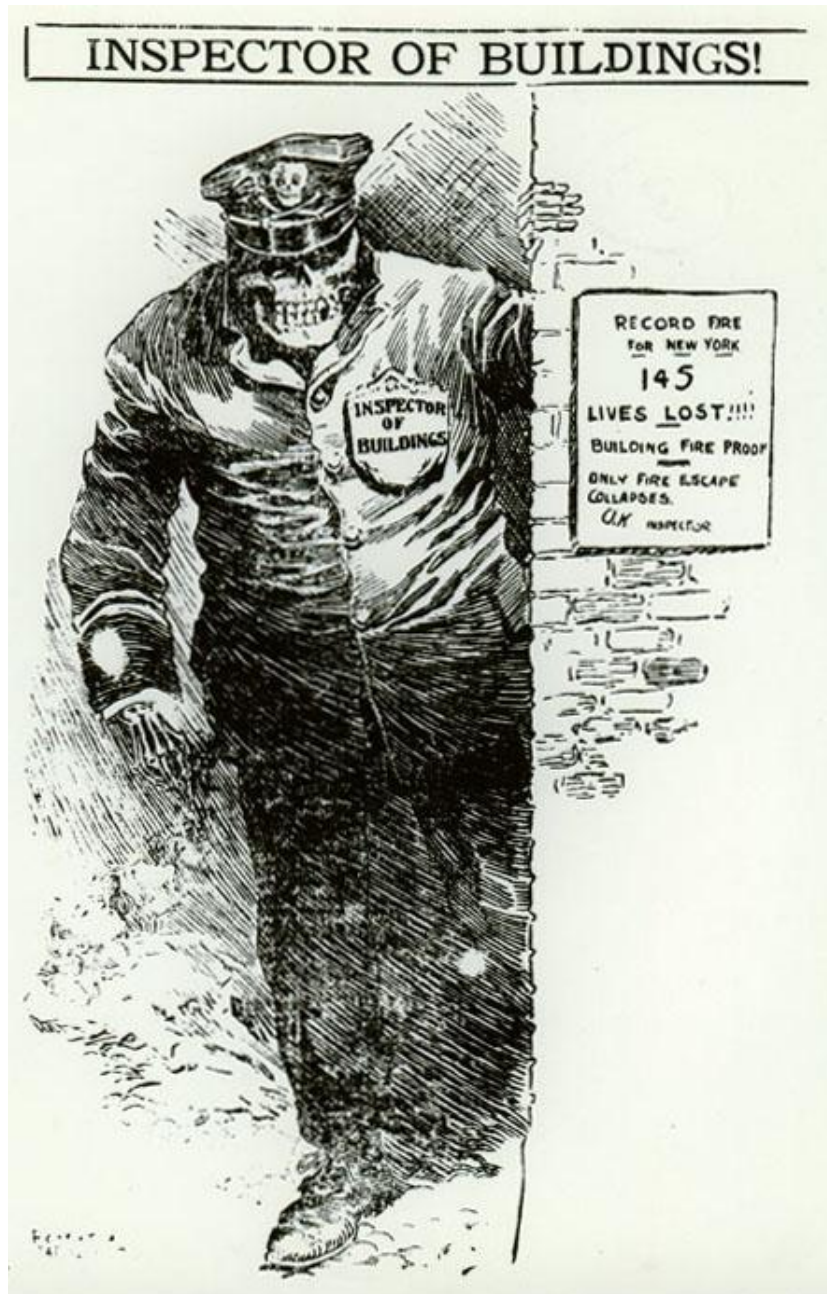
#### Document 4:

**Political Cartoon published in the aftermath of this event:**

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/inspectorofbuildings.jpg>

Answer the following questions/prompts from the image on the following page:

12. What record for New York is represented?
13. What happened to the fire escape?
14. Who does the figure represent?
15. According to this image, does it seem like this figure is thought to be guilty of any crimes? Explain your response.



Document 5:

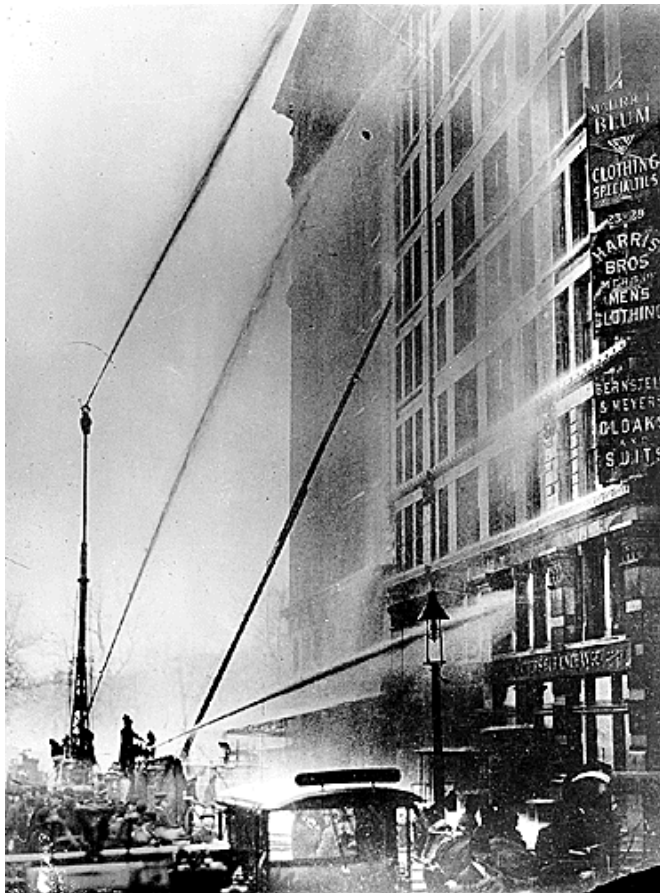
Pauline Grossman, 18 years old, who was injured by leaping from a window of the factory as the fire was gaining headway on the eighth floor, says three male employees of the factory made a human chain of their bodies and swung across a narrow alleyway to the building fronting in Greene Street. She declares a number of persons 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 March 26, 1911 Page 4*

16. Describe the actions of the three male employees in an effort to rescue other factory workers.
17. Describe what happened when the man in the middle suffered a broken back.

#### Document 6:

Photograph taken during the Triangle Factory Fire  
Image courtesy of <http://newdeal.feri.org/images/ac41.gif>



18. Based on this image, what difficulties did the firefighters face in trying to extinguish a fire on the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> floors of the building?
19. What difficulties would be present in trying to rescue victims from the 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, or 10<sup>th</sup> floors of this building?

## Document 7

Five girls who stood together at a window close the Greene Street corner held their place while a fire ladder was worked toward them, but which stopped at its full length two stories lower down. They leaped together, clinging to each other, with fire streaming back from their hair and dresses. They struck a glass sidewalk cover and it to the basement. There was no time to aid them. With water pouring in upon them from a dozen hose nozzles the bodies lay for two hours where they struck, as did the many others who leaped to their deaths.

One girl, who waved a handkerchief at the crowd, leaped from a window adjoining the New York University Building on the westward. Her dress caught on a wire, and the crowd watched her hang there till her dress burned free and she came toppling down.

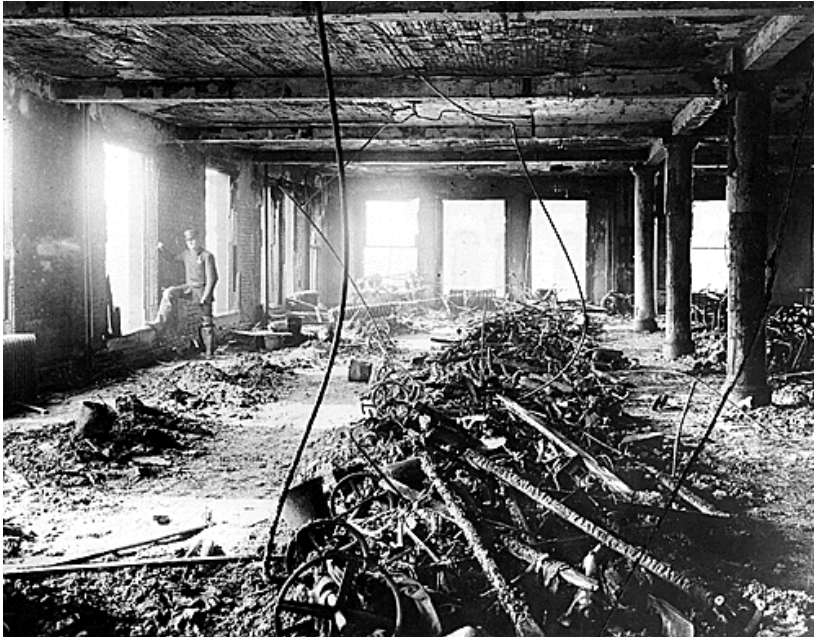
Many jumped whom the firemen believe they could have saved. A girl who saw the glass roof of a sidewalk cover at the first-story level of the New York University Building leaped for it, and her body crashed through to the sidewalk. On Greene Street, running along the eastern face of the building more people leaped to the pavement than on Washington Place to the south. Fire nets proved just as useless to catch them and the ladders to reach them. None waited for the firemen to attempt to reach them with the scaling ladders.

*New York Times March 26, 1911 Page 1*

20. What did the five girls hope for before they jumped from the building?
21. Why did so many of the victims jump from the building?

## Document 8

Photograph taken after the Triangle Factory Fire  
Image courtesy of <http://newdeal.feri.org/images/ac38.gif>



22. Based on this image, does it appear that there was any part of this room untouched by the fire?
23. What exits from this room are evident in this picture?

### Document 9:

*The following are excerpts taken from the New York Times coverage of the investigation following the Triangle Factory Fire.*

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.

*New York Times Dec. 12, 1911*

24. Why were the factory workers unable to exit from the Washington Place side of the work area?
25. What caused Yetta Lublitz to rush from the Greene Street entrance to the Washington Place side in the first place?

### Document 10:

The following is a portion of the Preliminary Report of the New York Factory Investigating Commission, 1912

TO THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF NEW YORK:

that exits to outside fire-escapes and to interior stairways, especially when they lead through other portions of the loft, were often unknown to many of the operatives. It certainly is necessary to indicate clearly the location of these exits.

A contributing cause to the loss of life in the Triangle Waist Company fire was the lack of clear passageways leading to the fire-escapes and stairways. The employees were so crowded together, seated at tables containing machines, with chairs back to back, that when a great number of them attempted to leave at the same time there was panic and confusion.

In the report made by the Superintendent of the New York Board of Fire Underwriters, it was stated that 20 dead bodies were found near the machines "apparently overcome before they could extricate themselves from the crowded aisles." The necessity for clear and unobstructed passageways to exits should be absolutely insisted upon, otherwise with the slightest panic, even without a fire, severe injuries, if not loss of life, would occur.

26. What were the workers unaware of that contributed to such a large loss of life?
27. Why is it stated that "clear and unobstructed passageways" should be insisted upon within these factory workshops?

Essay Question:

**Explain why the Triangle Factory Fire of 1911 caused such a tragic loss of life and what measures might have been taken to avoid this tragedy in the first place.**

You will want to examine the conditions in the factory as well as focus on the reactions and abilities of people to react after the fire began to support your essay.

Your essay should be 5 paragraphs in length and you must provide support for your statements/arguments.