

The New York Times

141 MEN AND GIRLS DIE IN WAIST FACTORY FIRE; TRAPPED HIGH UP IN WASHINGTON PLACE BUILDING; STREET STREWN WITH BODIES; PILES OF DEAD INSIDE

MARCH 26, 1911

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.

ALL OVER IN HALF AN HOUR.

...The fire was practically all over in half an hour. It was confined to three floors -- the eighth, ninth, and tenth of the building. But it was the most murderous fire that New York has seen in many years.

The victims who are now lying at the Morgue waiting for some one to identify them by a tooth or the remains of a burned shoe were mostly girls of from 16 to 23 years of age. They were employed at making shirtwaists by the Triangle Waist Company, the principal owners of which are Isaac Harris and Max Blanck. Most of them could barely speak English. Many of them came from Brooklyn. Almost all were the main support of their hard-working families.

There is just one fire escape in the building. That one is an interior fire escape...

The building was fireproof and the owners had put their trust in that. In fact, after the flames had done their worst last night, the building hardly showed a sign. Only the stock within it and the girl employees were burned.

A heap of corpses lay on the sidewalk for more than an hour. The firemen were too busy dealing with the fire to pay any attention to people whom they supposed beyond their aid.

When the excitement had subsided to such an extent that some of the firemen and policemen could pay attention to this mass of the supposedly dead they found, about half way down in the pack, a girl who was still breathing. She died two minutes after she was found.

The Triangle Waist Company was the only sufferer by the disaster. There are other concerns in the building, but it was Saturday and the other companies had let their people go home. Messrs. Harris and Blanck, however, were busy and their girls -- and some men -- stayed.

LEAPED OUT OF THE FLAMES.

At 4:40 o'clock, nearly five hours after the employees in the rest of the building had gone home, the fire broke out. The

one little fire escape in the interior was never resorted to by any of the doomed victims. Some of them escaped by running down the stairs, but in a moment or two this avenue was cut off by flame. The girls rushed to the windows and looked down at Greene Street, 100 feet below them. Then one poor, little creature jumped. There was a plate glass protection over part of the sidewalk, but she crashed through it, wrecking it and breaking her body into a thousand pieces.

Then they all began to drop. The crowd yelled "Don't jump!" but it was jump or be burned -- the proof of which is found in the fact that fifty burned bodies were taken from the ninth floor alone.

They jumped, they crashed through broken glass, they crushed themselves to death on the sidewalk. Of those who stayed behind it is better to say nothing ...

Messrs. Harris and Blanck were in the building, but they escaped. They carried with them Mr. Blanck's children and a governess, and they fled over the roofs. Their employes did not know the way, because they had been in the habit of using the two freight elevators, and one of these elevators was not in service when the fire broke out.

FOUND ALIVE AFTER THE FIRE.

The first living victim, Hyman Meshel of 332 East Fifteenth Street, was taken from the ruins four hours after the fire was discovered. He was found paralyzed with fear and whimpering like a wounded animal in the basement, immersed in water up to his neck, crouched on the top of a cable drum, and with his head just below the floor of the elevator.

Meantime the remains of the dead -- it is hardly possible to call them bodies, because that word suggests something human, and there was nothing human about most of these -- were being taken in a steady stream to the Morgue for identification... But in the Morgue they received the charred remnants with no more emotion than they ever display over anything...

"It's the worse thing I ever saw," said one old policeman...

NO CHANCE TO SAVE VICTIMS.

Four alarms were rung in fifteen minutes. The first five girls who jumped did so before the first engine could respond... It may convey some idea, too, to say that thirty bodies clogged the elevator shafts. These dead were all girls. They had made their rush there blindly when they discovered that there was no chance to get out by the fire escape. Then they found that the elevator was as hopeless as anything else, and they fell there in their tracks and died.

The Triangle Waist Company employed about 600 women and less than 100 men. One of the saddest features of the thing is the fact that they had almost finished for the day. In

five minutes more, if the fire had started then, probably not a life would have been lost...

GIRLS JUMP TO SURE DEATH. FIRE NETS PROVE USELESS -- FIREMEN HELPLESS TO SAVE LIFE.

The fire, which was first discovered at 4:40 o'clock on the eighth floor of the ten-story building at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street, leaped through the three upper stories occupied by the Triangle Waist Company with a sudden rush that left the Fire Department helpless. How the fire started no one knows. On the three upper floors of the building were 600 employes of the waist company, 500 of whom were girls. The victims -- mostly Italians, Russians, Hungarians, and Germans -- were girls and men who had been employed by the firm of Harris & Blanck, owners of the Triangle Waist Company... The building had experienced four recent fires and had been reported by the Fire Department to the Building Department as unsafe, on 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.

Girls had begun leaping from the eighth story windows before the firemen arrived. The firemen had trouble bringing their apparatus into position because of the bodies which strewed the pavement and sidewalks. While more bodies crashed down among them, they worked with desperation to run their ladies into position and to spread firenets.

One fireman, running ahead of a hose wagon, which halted to avoid running over a body, spread a firenet, and two more seized hold of it. A girl's body, coming end over end, struck on the side of it, and there was hope for an instant that she would be the first one of the score who had already jumped to be saved.

...Three other girls, who had leaped for a moment after the first one, struck it on top of her, and all four rolled out and lay still upon the pavement.

Five girls who stood together at a window close to the Greene Street corner held their places while a fire ladder was worked towards 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 crashed through 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...

...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.

ALL WOULD SOON HAVE BEEN OUT.

Strewn about as the firemen worked, the bodies indicated clearly the preponderance of women workers. Here and there was a man, but almost always they were women. One wore furs and a muff, and had a purse hanging from her arm.

Nearly all were dressed for the street. The fire had flashed through their workroom just as they were expecting the signal to leave the building. In ten minutes more all would have been out, as many had stopped work in advance of the signal and had started to put on their wraps.

What happened inside there were few who could tell with any definiteness. All that those who escaped seemed to remember was that there was a flash of flames, leaping first among the girls in the southeast corner of the eighth floor, and then suddenly over the entire room, spreading through the linens and cottons with which the girls were working. The girls on the ninth floor caught sight of the flames through the windows, up the stairway, and up the elevator shaft.

On the tenth floor they got them a moment later, but most of those on that floor escaped by rushing to the roof and then on to the roof of the New York University Building, with the assistance of 100 university students who had been dismissed from a tenth story classroom.

There were in the building, according to the estimates of Fire Chief Croker, about 600 girls and 100 men. The bodies of those killed and burned to death were found principally on the ninth floor, where over 50 perished in front of a closed doorway, which they had jammed shut; in the two elevator shafts 30 or more were piled up in the bottom after the elevator had ceased running...

WHEN THE FIRE WAS DISCOVERED.

Samuel Bernstein, the waist factory's foreman, and Max Rothberg, his first assistant, were standing together on the eighth floor when the screams of girls attracted their attention to the southeast corner of the large room. They rang for the elevators, of which two were in the south side of the building, and Rothberg telephoned to the Fire Department and Police Departments. Two hundred girls were working on that floor, most of them still at their machines in the narrow aisles that gave them hardly room to move about. Dynamos used to operate the sewing machines were in the corner from which the fire was spreading.

The two men attacked it with buckets of water, feeling confident at first they would be able to put it out. In the meantime the girls, screaming loudly and in a panic, rushed for the elevator shaft and the staircase, where they encountered a closed door.

Dora Miller of 10 Cannon Street got the door part way open, but it was jammed shut again by the press of people behind her. She struck a glass panel in it with her fist until she had made a hole large enough to climb through, and she escaped. Twenty others followed her before the flames reached them, and the rest of those caught on the floor were only discernible as a mass of charred bones when the firemen at last worked their way up the staircase.

Bernstein and Rothberg escaped by way of the elevator on its last trip to the floor.

FACTORY OWNERS ESCAPE.

The two partners, Harris and Blanck, were both in the building, Harris being on the ninth floor and Blanck on the eighth. with Blanck, according to a statement of Joseph Zito, an elevator man, were his two daughters and a governess. He was telephoning for a taxi-cab to take them home when the alarm was sounded.

Blanck told Zito, the latter declares, to keep his elevator running and take out the women first.

The two passenger elevators, in charge of Zito and another operator named J. Gaspar, made several trips, but never went above the eighth floor as they found more than enough people surrounding the entrance on that floor each time they reached it.

One of the men -- which one was not made clear -- deserted his elevator and ran away, crying "Fire" as he ran.

Max Steinberg, a New York University law student, saw him running through Washington Place, and at the same time saw a girl leap from an eighth story window. He pulled a fire alarm box in Washington Square East and then ran to the building, where he entered the deserved elevator and ran it for four more trips before the heating of the cables put it out of commission.

TRAPPED ON THE NINTH FLOOR.

On the ninth story, which like the eighth was filled with sewing machines and was used for cutting and sewing shirtwaists, the girls fared worse than those on the floor below. They crowded about the elevator shaft, but no cars responded to their frantic ringing of the bell. Time after time they saw the cars approach, only to be filled at the eighth and go down again.

Girls who rushed to the staircase were met with flames which bore them down before they could retreat. Those who reached the windows and waited there for firemen saw the ladders swing in against the building two stories below them...

The loss on this floor was not known to the firemen and police until nearly 7 o'clock, when Deputy Fire Chief Binns reached it on the concrete stairway, which remained perfectly solid and unharmed. Binns found the bodies of fifty or more women, those whohad not been burned beyond recognition seeming to be mere girls. They were lying in heaps upon the floor, as if they had huddled together near the stairway and the elevator shaft, and had been overtaken there by the flames. Money from the pay envelopes was strewn about close to them....

POLICE AND FIREMEN ARRIVE.

The call to the police reached Headquarters over the telephone in a brief message that said girls were jumping from the Triangle Waist Company windows...

Headquarters, from First Deputy Commissioner Driscoll and Chief Inspector Schmittberger to the last clerk and doorman, emptied itself, at Driscoll's orders, into the fire zone...

Twenty-five patrol wagons from all the downtown precincts and 150 men came into the fire zone...

The second, third and fourth fire alarms were turned in before any apparatus had appeared, on the receipt of information at Fire Headquarters that there were twenty or more dead on the sidewalks. Chief Croker arrived in time to see his men spreading hopelessly their small and one or two large life nets, and saw many jump to their deaths.

Ambulances from Bellevue and New York and St. Vincent's Hospital -- twenty or more in number -- lined the street in Washington Square East and in Washington Place.

Ten surgeons from Bellevue... threaded their way among the firemen, gathering up the dead. They worked at this task from

6 o'clock until 7, and then policemen came to their assistance. The bodies found... were laid in lines on both sidewalks. Tarpaulins, laid over them, protected them somewhat from the deluge of water which, pouring from the high-pressure towers like a miniature Niagara, flowed down the side of the building and into foot-deep flood along the pavement.

The surgeons could offer little aid except to cover the bodies of the dead. Here and there from near-by stores reports came of injured, and a few ambulances drove away with these to the hospitals. Mostly all there was to do was to determine that life was extinct in the bodies on the pavement, and cover them over.

Deputy Police Commissioner Driscoll sent in an order at 6:30 o'clock for seventy-five coffins, and later another order for seventy-five more. It was not known to the firemen and policemen at first that the death roll would reach anything like its final proportions.

HOW MANY DIED.

A thirteen-year-old girl hung for three minutes by her finger tips to the sill of a tenth floor window. A tongue of flame licked at her fingers, and she dropped to death.

A girl threw her pocketbook, then her hat, then her furs form a tenth-floor window. A moment later her body came whirling after them to death.

At a ninth-floor window a man and a woman appeared. The man embraced the woman and kissed her. Then he hurled her to the street and jumped. Both were killed. Five girls smashed a pane of glass, dropped in a struggling tangle, and were crushed into a shapeless mass...

Chief Croker thought at first it would not go over twenty-five. Then he placed the number at sixty-five -- the total on the streets and reported from the inside. At 7 o'clock, over two hours after the firemen had come, the dead on the ninth floor were found, and those in the elevator shaft, each find sending the total up beyond the largest estimates previously made.

In getting out the bodies, the task proved so formidable that it was late in the night before it was reasonably complete.

TAKING THE BODIES AWAY.

Coroner's Physician O'Hanlon, with Coroners Holtzhauser and Lehaene, arrived at 6:45 o'clock along with District Attorney Whitman and several of his assistants. O'Hanlon... proposed that each body be tagged exactly where it lay, and that records be made by number. He was told by Coroner Holtzhauser to proceed in this manner, and did so with the assistance of 100 or more policemen.

As fast as bodies had been looked over for identifications and tags fastened to them, coffins were brought from a supply depot established in East Washington Place. In these rude wooden boxes, coverless, the bodies were placed in patrol wagons and driven away.

At 7:45 o'clock the searchlights from four Fire Department engines were playing in the upper windows, and a glow came out of them from torches carried within by firemen. Suddenly a black shadow swung out of the ninth-story window, and the creaking of pulleys and a rope and tackle began, as the black mass descended speedily toward the ground. Firemen in windows on the lower floor guided the ropes. It was the

beginning of the work of bringing out the bodies from the floor where the death roll was the largest.

The pulley system worked for an hour, each body being lowered after it had been wrapped in black cloth and tied securely until it resembled just such packages as go up and down daily in the business district, rope-and-pulley fashion.

CORONER'S STATEMENT.

The scene was more than Coroner Holzhauser could stand. Sobbing like a child, the Coroner, who was first to open the fireplace where Ruth Wheeler's body was incinerated in the Wolter flat, said that that scene was easy to stand compared with this.

"And only one miserable little fire escape!" he said. "I shall proceed against the Building Department along with the others. They are as guilty as any. They haven't been insistent enough, and these poor girls who were carried up in the elevator to work in the morning -- now they have come down on the end of a rope."

That investigations from many centres would be started was early made apparent. Building Department officials who arrived at 7:20 o'clock, said they would begin one this morning. Fire Marshal Beers said he would begin another. The District Attorney made a list of witnesses that he will question.

CHIEF CROKER'S VIEW.

Fire Chief Croker, after the fire had flickered down to a few embers still glowing here and there, spoke vigorously against the men who have opposed his plans for better fire protection. "Look around everywhere," he said, "nowhere will you find fire escapes. They say they don't look sightly. I have tried to force their installation, and only last Friday a manufacturers' association met in Wall Street to oppose my plan and to oppose the sprinkler system, as well as the additional escapes."

"This is just the calamity I have been predicting," said Chief Croker. "There were no outside escapes on this building. I have been advocating and agitating that more fire escapes be put on factory buildings similar to this. The large loss of life is due to this neglect."

He said that there was only one fire escape from the building... Leading to the courtyard in the centre of the block of buildings, which would only allow of one person's escape at a time. When he examined this escape, he said, he found on the upper floors that it had become very loose, and it was a dangerous matter to escape by that route.

"A repetition of this disaster is likely to happen at any time in similar buildings," he said. He advocated balcony fire escapes with a wide iron staircase...

[Deputy Commissioner Arthur J. O'Keefe] and Coroner Holtzhauser had a dispute concerning the cause of the fire at 11:20 o'clock. Holtzhauser remarked that there was a terrible responsibility for the Fire Department to meet.

"And for some other departments, too," O'Keefe replied.

"Commissioner Waldo to my certain knowledge had reported this place to the Building Department within the past three months as a building unsafe for use as a factory, since there were insufficient means of egress by stairways, and there were not sufficient fire escape facilities."

"Oh, that makes a difference, then," Holtzhauser concluded.

Winfield R. Sheehan, Commissioner Waldo's secretary, joined the group at that juncture. He said that he personally had mailed the protest to the Building Department and knew of Commissioner Waldo's anxiety because of the unsafe condition of the building and his inability to force the making of changes.

...The building which was burned, it was said by one of the members of the department who stands near to the Commissioner but who refused to be quoted, was one of several thousand which had been recommended by the Fire Department for additional fire escapes.

"These recommendations," said the official, "were made several weeks ago after a thorough investigation by members of the Fire Department of all office, manufacturing, and loft buildings in the five boroughs. These investigations were made by the Fire Department at the request of Commissioner Waldo, although according to law this department had no control over the construction and means of escape on the many large factory buildings in the city.

...The work of the elevator men was spoken of by members of the department with praise, who seem to think had they not kept their heads the total loss of life might have been doubled.

The building, Chief Croker said, was all that could be wished for in the way of fireproof construction. "But it isn't the building that's going to give us fireproof conditions," Croker said to the dripping firemen and others crowded around him. "The lesson of the fire is that a building is just as fireproof as the stuff within it -- fireproof walls, fireproof floors, and fireproof stairways -- then rooms packed with flimsy cloth and trimmings and ran by electric dynamos about which waste and oil were allowed to accumulate..."

SCENES AT THE MORGUE.

MEN AND WOMEN GATHER IN A FRANTIC THrong IN QUEST OF LOVED ONES.

A few minutes after the first load of fire victims was received at the Bellevue Hospital Morgue the streets were filled with a clamoring throng, which struggled with the reserves stationed about the building in an effort to gain entrance to view the bodies of the dead in the hope of identifying loved ones. The frantic mob was reinforced as the hospital wagon brought more of the dead to the institution. The sobbing and shrieking mothers and wives, and frantic fathers and husbands of those who had not been accounted for struggled with the police and tried to stop the wagon that was bearing the dead on its trips to the Morgue. Mothers and wives ran frantically through the street in front of the hospital, pulling their hair from their heads and calling the names of their dear ones.

A few of the surging mob who viewed the situation in a calmer manner attempted to calm the excited ones, but in vain. The police were abused because they would not allow the surging mob in the Morgue, and in many instances they were threatened and had to resort to the use of their nightsticks to keep the struggling mass from breaking in...

POLICE WORK DESPERATELY.

A hundred policemen, most of them ashen and with trembling lips, worked at the heart-rending task of keeping back, without undue roughness, the maddened thousands...

Every few minutes a patrol wagon or a hastily improvised morgue wagon that had done duty as an auto truck earlier in the day appeared at the head of the mob ..., and the reserves of six precincts had to force open a narrow path through the crowd for it. As soon as the path was opened in front, however, the crowd surged in behind it. At the sight of the bodies the crowd broke into fresh weeping and screaming, each seeming to see in the charred and often unrecognizable remains a loved one.

... The Morgue itself became too crowded, early in the evening, for further storage of bodies, and the Charities Department decided to throw open the long public dock adjoining in. Here, as night settled over the city, the bodies were taken from the wagons and laid out, side by side, in double rows along either side of the long docks.

Besides the thirty attendants regularly at the pier, twenty derelicts who had applied at the Municipal Lodging House in East Twenty-sixth Street for a night's rest, were pressed into service for the ghastly work.

In the narrow lane left between the double rows of the dead on the dark pier, the patrol wagons and rude dead wagons crept slowly to where the lines had freshly ended. They deposited their freight, backed slowly out, and returned to the scene of the fire for more bodies.

As fast as the dead were brought to the pier the grimy panhandlers and derelicts were set to work arranging them in rows, and later putting them in the rough wooden boxes that serve as coffins nightly at the Morgue...

Considerable confusion was caused on the pier in numbering the dead. The police of the various precincts had received from the Charities Department small, colored tags bearing numbers to tag the different boxes as soon as the bodies were laid in them. There turned out to be three separate systems of numbers, and the enumeration had to be done all over again.

At 11:30 o'clock, with the mob still storming more and more outside, the police had counted in the Morgue and on the pier 136 bodies -- thirteen men and 122 women. Fifty-six of these were burned beyond all but human semblance and may never be identified...

CLUNG TOGETHER IN DEATH.

Two girls, charred beyond all hope of identification, and found in the smoking ruins with their arms clasped around each other's necks, were conveyed to the pier, still together, and placed in one box.

Horrible cries had burst from the misery stricken mob outside when these two were carried through the narrow lane in the street, and a few of the clamorous throng had forced their way to the wagon and lifted the dark tarpaulin. Everywhere burst anguished cries for sister, mother, and wife, a dozen pet names in Italian and Yiddish rising in shrill agony above the deeper moan of the throng.

Now and then a reporter, the way cleared before him by a broad, white-faced policeman, forced his way to the nearest telephone, to send to his office a report of what was happening there. Each time a hundred faces were turned up to him imploringly, and a hundred anguished voices begged of him tidings of those within. Had he seen a little girl with black hair and dark-brown cheeks? Had he seen a tall, thin man, with stooped shoulders? Could he describe any one of

the many he had seen in there? The poor wretches were hunting for a "story," too.

Piteously they pleaded with the policemen to let them -- only them -- past, so that they might see whether their loved ones were on the pier. They would only look around, one short glance, and come straight out. The policemen, struggling with their own emotions more roughly than with the crowd, could only put them off. Presently, they said, in a very little while now, they would let them all in.

... Inspector Walse, Capt. Cray of the East Thirty-fifth Street Station, Commissioner Drummond, his Deputy, Frank J. Goodwin, and Coroners' Physicians Weston and O'Hanlon held a hurried consultation behind the barred doors of the Morgue. They decided to number each body anew, to make sure of the count; to turn over the valuables or money found with the bodies to Lieut. Sullivan for safekeeping, and then to let the throng, in small parties, into the place. As soon as a body was identified they would place the lid on the coffin and remove it to one side.

The mere announcement, spreading through the crowd outside, that the police would let them through and open the doors at midnight threw the mob into a wild hysteria of almost joy...

Inside, as they heard the savage cries of the mob, they sickened and paled at the thought of what would follow when the doors were opened...

Commissioner Drummond realized that when the mad throng was let into the Morgue and on the pier, many of them, already crazed by uncertainty concerning their loved ones, might at the sight of the dead throw themselves into the river. He therefore ordered that every opening in the Morgue building and on the covered pier be boarded up at once, and that no space should be left which would permit the passage of a body.

At midnight, by order of Capt. Gray, the door of the Morgue was opened for a brief moment, and the foremost of the surging mob outside, to the number of fifteen, was allowed to enter. The police squad at the doors could hardly keep the rest back, with promises of letting them, too, presently enter in groups of fifteen.

Each group, shivering and clamoring and weeping, was lined up at the door and allowed slowly to file between the rows of boxes. Two policemen accompanied each of them, ready to support them if they should faint. They looked around with an air of frightened bewilderment at the ghastly array of dead, and then, one by one, looking down at the nearest box at their feet, where the mangled bodies lay, with heads propped up on boards for the light of the attendant beside the box, they collapsed with cries of terror.

Scores of men and women thought they saw in the ghastly bodies propped up in the boxes the relatives they were looking for, but could not identify them positively...

At 1 A.M. eight bodies had been identified by relatives and set aside in sealed boxes. The relatives filed into the improvised Coroner's office in the morgue and tearfully stood in line for their slips, permitting them to have the bodies removed. There was a competitive mob of undertakers with their wagons at the outskirts of the crowd ready to do that.

Document A



Document B



Document C



Document D



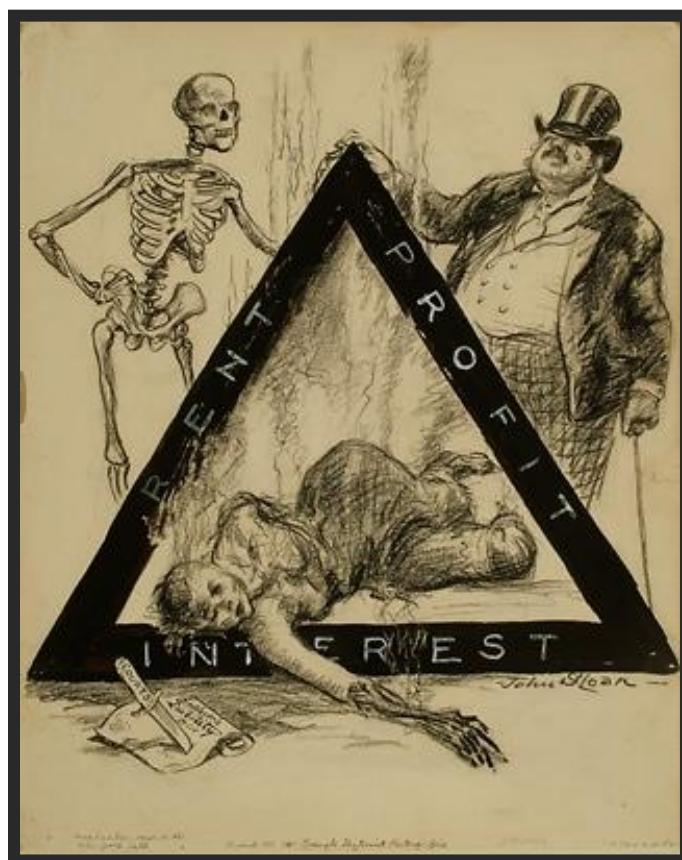
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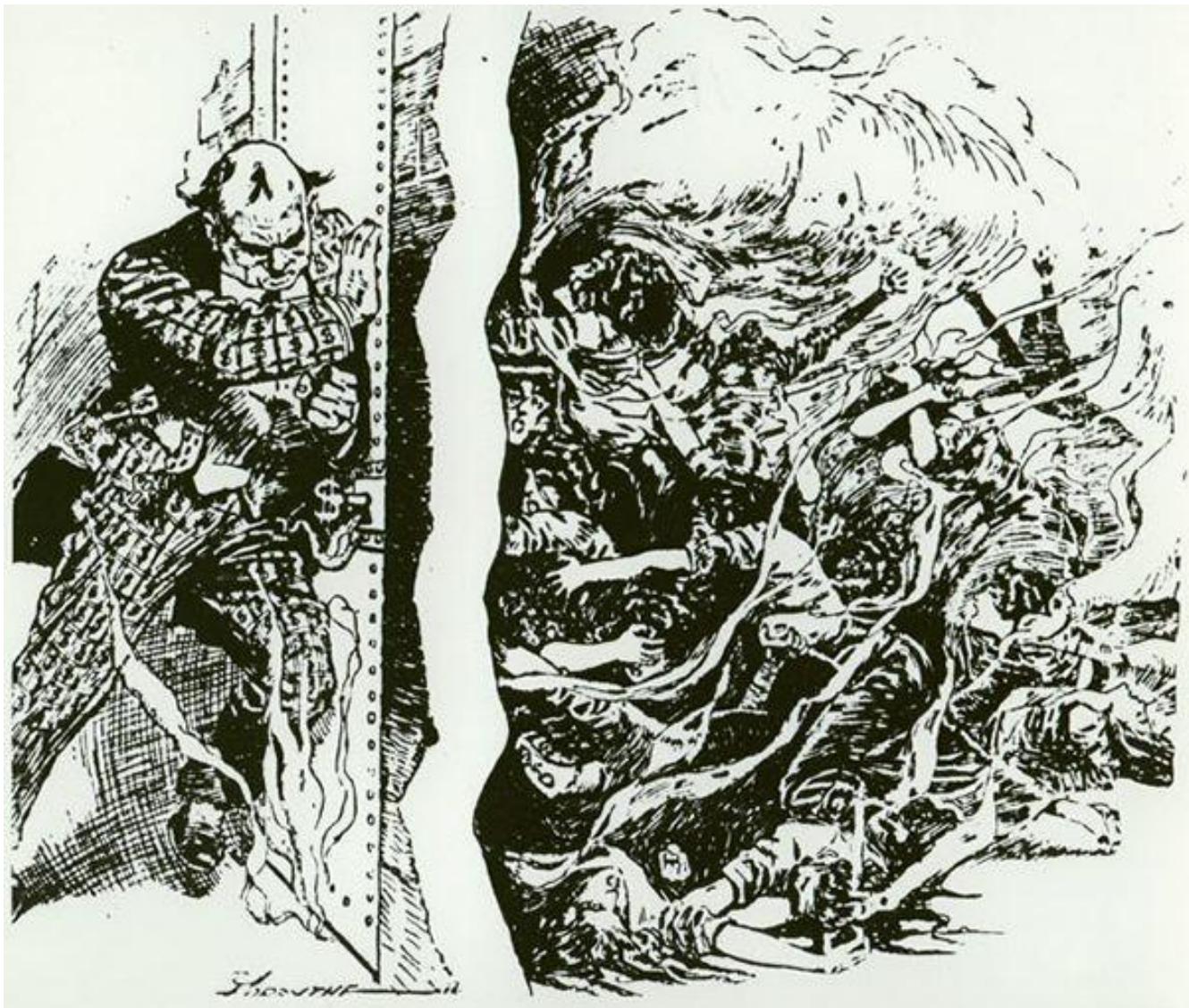
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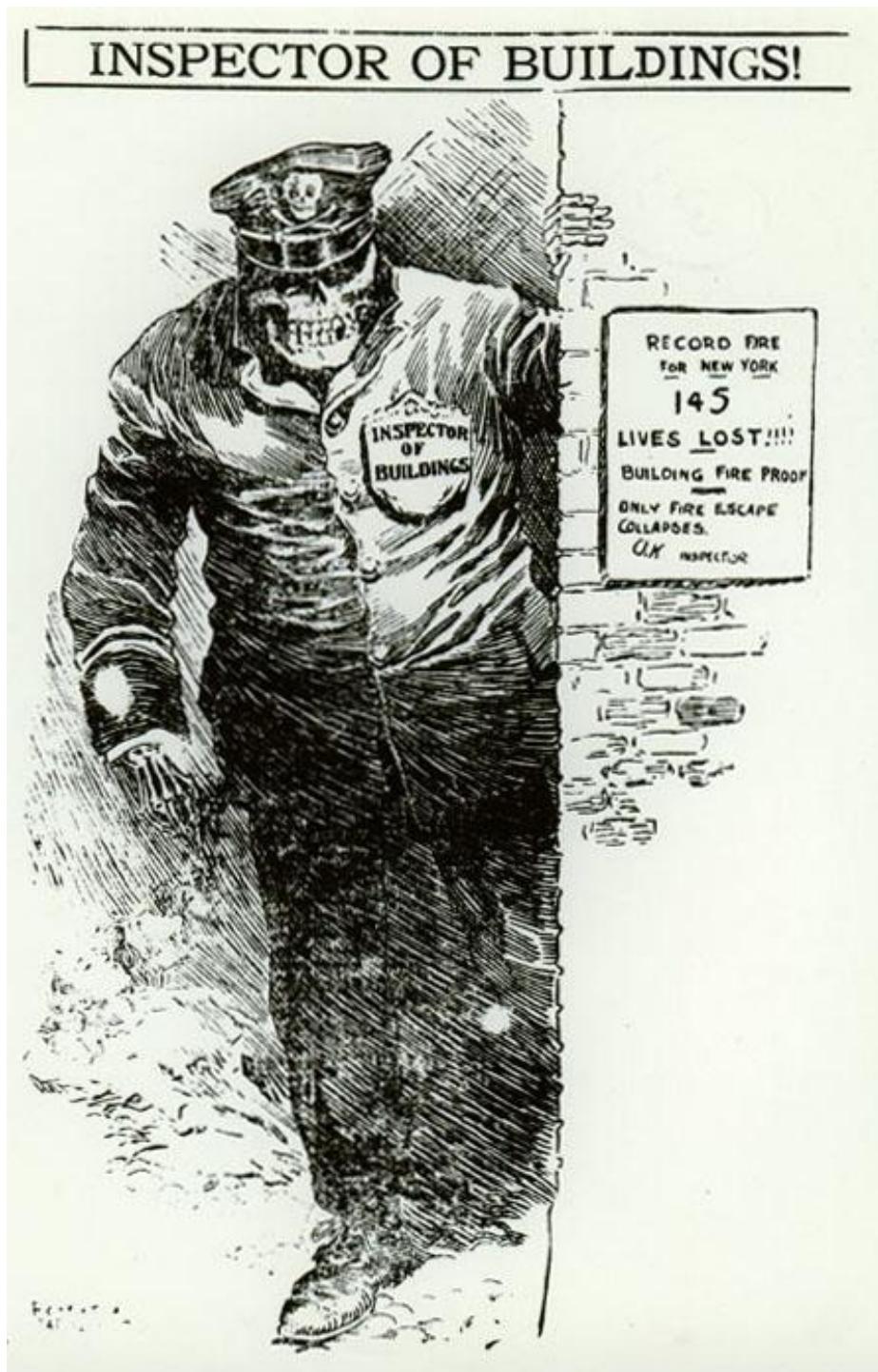
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Document H



Document I



Questions

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2. What attempts were made at the time to prevent this kind of tragedy from happening? Why did they fail?
3. How is the story sensationalized to appeal to the emotions of readers? What do you think is the purpose of this tactic?
4. The owners of the factory were brought to trial for murder and acquitted. Should they have been found guilty? Is another party primarily to blame? Or was it just a horrendous accident?

Prompt

Analyze the significance of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire of 1911. Focus your essay on the measures that might have been taken to avoid such a high death toll, reactions of the public, and the impact on the Labor Reform movement.

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