

March 25, 1911: Triangle fire tragedy kills 146 factory workers

A beautiful spring afternoon in New York City turned tragic when a factory fire broke out on the top floors of a Greenwich Village building on March 25, 1911. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory occupied the top three floors of a ten story building. About 500 women, mostly young Italian and Jewish immigrants, worked there for about \$15 a week -- 146 did not make it out alive.

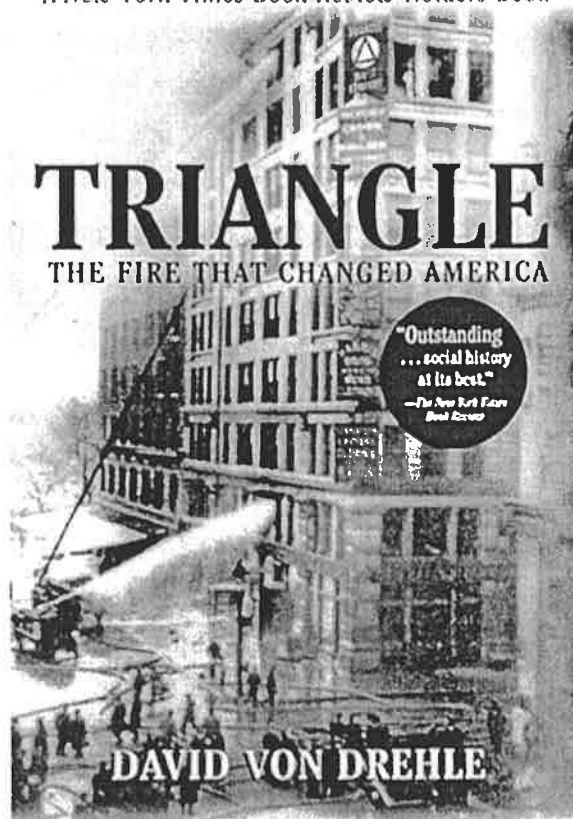
It's unclear exactly what started the fire, but it's believed that someone dropped a match or cigarette. The door leading to the outside was locked -- some think the factory owner locked it to keep union organizers out. There was reportedly only one small working elevator, and no sprinkler system. The fire escape quickly broke under the weight of desperate workers trying to flee. The women were trapped.

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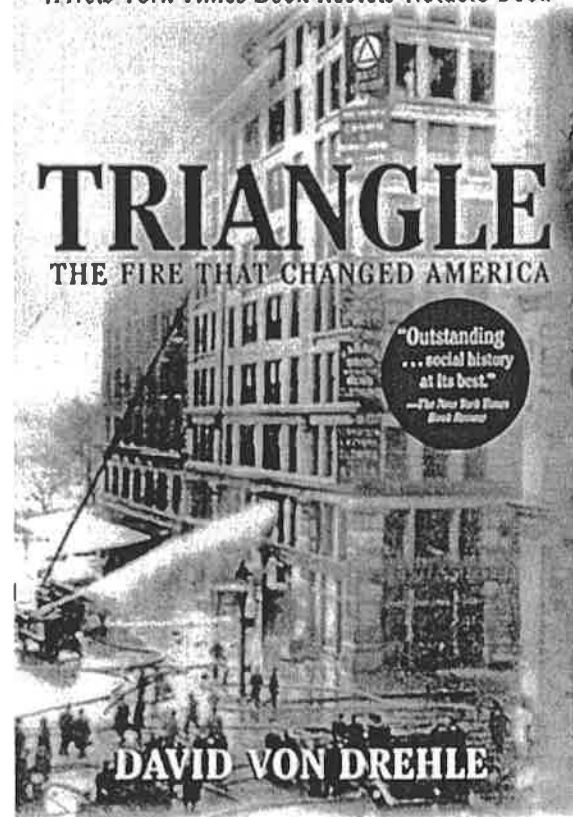
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Firefighters arrived quickly on scene, but their ladders only reached the sixth floor, and their nets turned out to be too weak to catch women jumping from the windows.

Within 18 minutes, it was all over. Forty-nine workers had burned to death or been suffocated by smoke, 36 were dead in the elevator shaft and 58 died from jumping to the sidewalks. With two more dying later from their injuries, a total of 145 people were killed by the fire. The workers union set up a march on April 5 on New York's Fifth Avenue to protest the conditions that had led to the fire; it was attended by 80,000 people.

New York State Labor Laws :

"All doors leading in or to any such factory shall be constructed as to open outwardly, where practicable, and shall not be locked, bolted, or fastened during working hours."

Buildings with more than 2,500 square feet per floor--but less than 5,000 square feet per floor--require two staircases. Each additional 5,000 square feet per floor requires an additional staircase.

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