

## Topic: Labor Conditions - Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire (Weighted Multiple Choice Item)

Historical Thinking Skills Assessed: Sourcing, Corroboration

Grade Level: High

### [National History Standards](#)

Era 7: The Emergence of Modern America (1890-1930)

Era 6: The Development of the Industrial United States (1870-1900)

Standard 3: The rise of the American labor movement and how political issues reflected social and economic changes

**Using the Item:** The question assesses students' historical thinking skills by evaluating the relative reliability of several different sources.

**Background:** In 1911, the Triangle Shirtwaist Company, located in New York City, was the nation's largest shirtwaist manufacturer. The company made its profits, however, at the expense of young immigrant women who operated the sewing machines. The women, and young girls, worked up to 52 hours per week for meager wages on overcrowded shop floors.

On March 25, 1911, a fire raged through the eighth, ninth, and tenth floors of the factory building. Started by a carelessly discarded lighted match, the fire spread rapidly. The workers scrambled to escape the flames, but the only exits were a single narrow fire escape, a stairway, and one passenger elevator. These few escape routes could not accommodate the hundreds of women inside the building. Trapped, more than thirty workers leapt from the building and fell to their deaths on the pavement below. In all, 145 people died in the fire.

The public was anxious to blame someone for the tragedy, and it was alleged that the factory owners, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, kept the doors to the shop floor locked and allowed unsafe working conditions to continue. The two were charged with manslaughter. When the trial began in December 1911, the burden was on the prosecution to prove that Harris and Black had intentionally locked the factory doors.

Source 1 is the trial testimony of employee Ethel Monick, a 16-year-old worker on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor of the factory, who insisted that the Washington Place door was locked at the time of the fire. Source 2 is an article printed in *The New York Times* during the trial that summarizes the testimony of several defense witnesses who believed that the doors were all unlocked. Ultimately, the jury found Harris and Blanck not guilty. But public outrage over the fire led to the creation of a New York City commission to oversee working conditions in factories, drastically improving workplace safety over the next few years.

In order to use this source to assess students' historical thinking skills, students should understand the history of industrialization and the working conditions typical of late nineteenth century factories.

### Source 1

#### Testimony of Ethel Monick (9<sup>th</sup> floor worker – age 16)

A. I seen the fire and then I seen all the girls rushing down to the place to escape. So I tried to go through the Greene Street door, and there were quick girls there and I seen I can't get out there, so I went to the elevator, and then I heard the elevator fall down, so I ran through to the Washington Place side, and there wasn't any girls there, so I ran over the doors and none was over there. So I went over to the door. I tried the door and I could not open it, so I thought I was not strong enough to open it, so I hollered girls here is a door, and they all rushed over and they tried to open it, but it was locked and they hollered "the door is locked and we can't open it!" [Monick rises from her chair and demonstrates the effort to open the door.]

#### On cross examination:

Q. Did you ever go up the stairs?

A. Only when I work on Sundays we have to go up the stairs...I wanted to go on the fire escape, but there were too many girls there. I could not go down, so I went away to see if I could find a better way. So I could not get out there, and I did not think that I could, and I thought that I would go down the elevator – that I would go down there that was. There were too many so I ran over the Greene Street door.

[Monick is asked if she ever asked Mr. Harris about the door.]

A. I did not ask him, I used to be afraid of him.

Q. You were afraid of Harris?

A. Sure. Mr. Harris we saw most of the time on the 9<sup>th</sup> floor. He used to come down sometimes and walk around four or five minutes.

Q. Did you ever see Mr. Blank [sic]?

A. No, not very often...

Q. You like to argue some, don't you, little girl? You do not really mean to say that you were afraid of these two men, were you?

A. Not exactly afraid, but you know they are – I was like nothing to them because I was only a working girl... Well, I know that when a girl don't do anything right, you know, she gets discharged. That is why I was afraid – that is why I did not talk to them.

Q. Were you as quiet and calm at the time as you are now?

A. Just as I am now, because I was never in such a fire and I didn't know it was a fire, so I ran looking for an escape. I didn't know about being excited.

## Source 2

### **“Say Triangle Doors Never Were Locked: More Witnesses Contradict the Testimony of Harris & Blanck’s Girl Employees”**

Max D. Steuer counsel for Isaac Harris and Max Bostwick [sic], proprietors of the Triangle Waist Company, where 147 persons lost their lives in a fire on March 25, and who are now on trial for manslaughter in the first and second degrees before Judge Crain in General Sessions, called several witnesses yesterday, who testified that the Washington Place doors on the night [sic] and ninth floors were always available in case of need, and that the keys were always left in the locks of both doors.

Ida Mittleman and Anna Mittleman, who worked on the ninth floor, the first called both testified that they had never seen the Washington Place door on that floor without a key in the lock, and that it was not locked to their knowledge on the day of the fire.

“Did you turn the key in the door yourself on the day of the fire and find it unlocked?” asked Assistant District Attorney Charles Bostwick while cross-examining Ida Mittleman.

“No I did not try the lock myself. I waited for the Washington Place elevator and then ran to the Green Street side. I met a crowd of girls coming from that place, and we crowded back to the elevators on the Washington Place side. I was pushed into the elevator. Then I saw my sister and gave a scream and she got into the elevator as it was going down.”

“You are sure that there was a string attached to the key you saw?”

“Yes, I am positive about that . . . ”

. . . Samuel Rubin of 307 St. Anna Avenue, a patternmaker, said he was discharged two weeks before the fire, and had never seen the Washington Place door locked. He admitted on cross-examination that he was willing to return to the employ of Harris and Blanck if he could. Hyman Silverman of 142 Carlton Street, Newark, testified that he worked in the Triangle Waist Company for nine years, and that he had often seen the superintendent pass through the Washington Place door. Other witnesses were called who testified to the same thing, but admitted on cross-examination that they were only in the building on special occasions.

Source: “Say Triangle Doors Were Never Locked: More Witnesses Contradict the Testimony of Harris & Blanck’s Girl Employees.” *The New York Times*, December 21, 1911. Accessed June 28, 2010.

<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/trianglenewsaccounts.html>

**In comparing the sources two sources, which witness in the trial is most reliable?**

- A. Ida and Anna Mittlemen (2 points)
- B. Samuel Rubin (0 points)
- C. Hyman Silverman (1 point)
- D. Ethel Monick (4 points) [answer cue]**

*Explanation: This question assesses students' ability to judge the reliability of a source by evaluating its point of view and believability. "D" is the best response. Ethel Monick is the most reliable source because she actually tried the door on the day of the fire and has testimony that can be corroborated by other women on site. Ida and Anna Mittleman ("A") are somewhat reliable because they were present the day of the fire and did not believe the door to be locked, but they admitted that they had not tried to open it. Response "C" is possibly reliable because Hyman Silverman saw the superintendent pass through the door for nine years, but the superintendent might have had a key, and, more importantly, Silverman was not present on the day of the fire. "D" is the least believable because Samuel Rubin's desire to return to the job at the factory from which he had been discharged could have influenced his answers.*

## HISTORICAL THINKING SKILLS ASSESSMENT

**Directions:** Analyze the sources below, and circle the response that best answers the question.

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[Monick is asked if she ever asked Mr. Harris about the door.]

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Source: "Excerpts from the Trial Testimony of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial." *Famous Trials: The Triangle Shirtwaist Trial 1911*. Accessed 6/28/10. <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/triangle/triangletest1.html>

## Source 2

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