

CURRICULUM GUIDE: TRIANGLE FIRE

Volume 3, Issue 1



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An Integrated Curriculum For The Washington Post Newspaper In Education Program

Triangle Fire

KidsPost Article: "The Triangle Fire: New York Tragedy Changed America"

Lesson: The influence of the Triangle fire on worker safety laws

Level: All

Subjects: History, social studies

Related Activity: Language arts and mathematics

Introduction

Washington Post author David Von Drehle tells the story of the Triangle Waist Company fire through the perspective of Rosie Freedman, who was 18 years old when she died of asphyxiation and burns on the ninth floor of the Asch Building. Of the 146 who died in the minutes before the end of the work day most were female, immigrant workers. Workplace conditions and safety, the role of immigrants in the American work force and the power of the vote to bring about change can be addressed through the activities in this lesson.

Read

Read "The Triangle Fire: New York Tragedy Changed America."

Discuss

The following questions are based upon the content of the KidsPost article.

1. In what century did Rosie Freedman travel to America?
2. What job did the 14-year-old find in New York City?
3. For what items did she have to budget in 1911?
4. On what day and in what year did the second worst workplace disaster in New York history take place? Describe the day.
5. How and where did the fire begin?

6. What were workplace conditions in the early 1900s?

7. What was the impact of the Triangle fire on labor and worker safety?

You might also ask these questions for discussion beyond the article.

1. Why did immigrants such as Rosie travel by steamship to America?

2. Nearly 100 years after Rosie and other immigrants left their families and friends in search of employment, do immigrants continue to arrive in the U.S. seeking work? What other reasons do people of the world have for coming to the U.S.?

3. What current laws and guidelines govern immigration to the U.S.?

Read

Give students "Interview: David Von Drehle." The author shares his background and answers our questions. The reproducibles that are included in this guide are built on quotations from Von Drehle's 2003 *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*.

Understand the Work

Give students "The Cutter's Art." You may need to explain more about how the pieces are sewn together to create the final product. In the Asch Building, the Triangle Waist Company had cutting tables and five long tables of sewing machines on the eighth floor; on the ninth floor, about 250 employees worked at eight rows of sewing machines. The fire began on the eighth floor where it is believed that a cutter dropped a match or cigarette ember in a pile of fabric scraps. This exercise gives students practice in spatial relations. Depending on the size of paper you give students, you can have

For Further Study

► <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>

The Triangle Factory Fire

The Kheel Center at the Cornell University Library, in collaboration with UNITE!, provides extensive coverage and resources for use in the classroom. Lives of the workers and the horror of the fire are presented in this Web exhibit through original documents, oral histories and photographs.

► http://newdeal.feri.org/library/d_4m.htm

New Deal Photo Gallery: The Triangle Fire, March 25, 1911

A dozen photographs from the archives of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Library. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins stated that March 25, 1911, was "the day of the New Deal began."

► <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/trials/triangle/trianglefire.html>

The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire Trial, 1911

The site includes New York building code and safety laws, newspaper accounts and trial documents.

► http://www.pbs.org/wnet/newyork/laic/episode4/topic5/e4_t5_s5-tt.html

Learning Adventures in Citizenship: The Triangle Tragedy

A PBS Kids site that covers the fire and its place in the fight for reform. Good for younger students.

► http://www.npr.org/display_pages/features/feature_1416870.html

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

Hear NPR's Bob Edwards' interview with author David Von Drehle and "The Golden Cradle."



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Triangle Fire

Continued

them do the math to determine how much fabric is saved in each student's layout. The student who saved the most fabric could receive the Cutter Award.

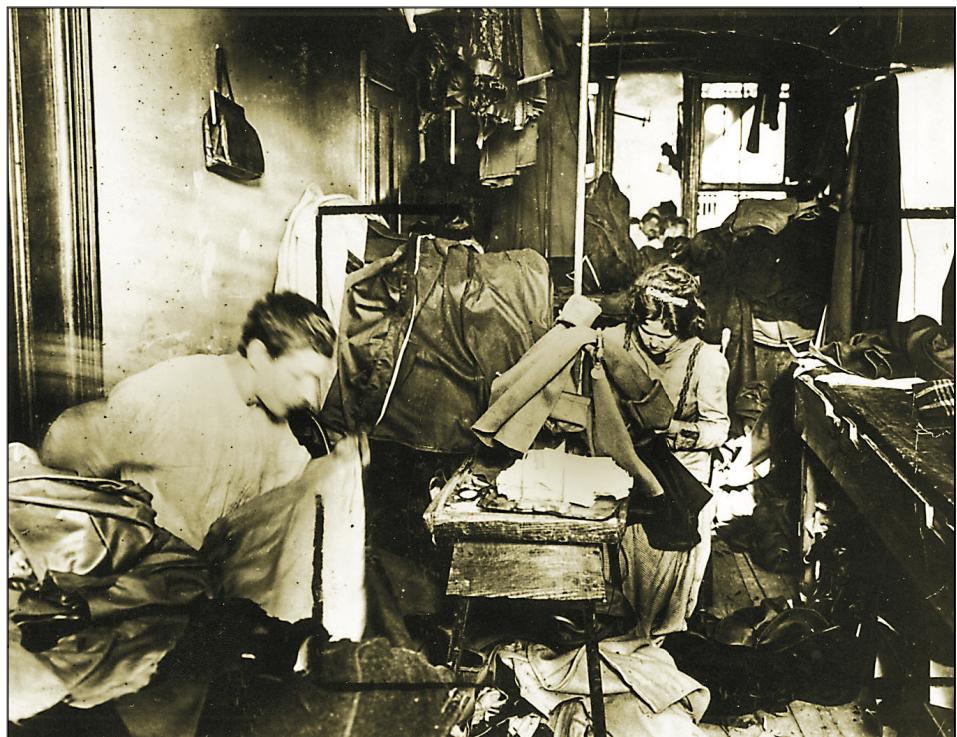
Read, Evaluate, Write

Discuss with students the expectations we have today for wages, hours/week, and safety conditions at work. What do students know about the American economy at the turn of the twentieth century? What were the major businesses? Who were the political and business leaders? Give students "The Workplace at the Turn of the Twentieth Century." Read and discuss Von Drehle's descriptions. Have students write a summary statement about workplace conditions based on the three excerpts from Triangle. Assign further research. Students are then to write their evaluation of American workplace safety based on several sources.

One online starting point is the Cornell University Library site, which, according to designers, was made "specifically to assist high school students in writing a research paper from primary sources." This is an exemplary site that provides resources for the teaching of a variety of American history courses, contains a valuable collection of primary documents for professional historians who want to research workers' lives, and shows the potential of the World Wide Web for introducing a wider audience to the impact of labor unions on American history.

Meet the People

Read the first person account of Rose Cohen, a girl who worked in a shop on Pekin Street and survived the fire. This is found on The Triangle Factory



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A tide of immigrants poured into the fledgling garment industry around turn of the 20th century. Abundant labor drove wages down and set off a brutal competition for work. Tiny tenement rooms became squalid little factories, known as sweatshops.

Fire site: http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/texts/stein_ootss/ootss_rc.html?location=Sweatshops+and+Strikes.

David Von Drehle spent hours pouring over newspaper accounts, court records and first-person sources to compile a list of the 146 victims, six of whom remain anonymous. A similar list, giving the names and ages of most of the victims of the Triangle Waist Factory fire, is found at <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/victims.html>. Have students graph the ages. Students could compare ages and, by using names, the percentage of male and females who were victims of the fire, the percent under 20 and other categories.

Research Reform

Tammany Hall had managed to control the election of most of New York's officials since the 1860s. Its methods and corruption were not secrets, but accepted. For decades, Tammany leaders had resisted factory investigations and reforms. Have students research the reform movement that took place after the Triangle fire to the New Deal. Give students "Tammany Hall and Workplace Safety Reform." A list of possible subjects for research is provided. Students might be asked to present their findings as a PowerPoint presentation, a research paper or a newspaper article or feature series.



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Triangle Fire

Continued



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Before the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the Triangle fire was the worst workplace disaster in New York. More than 50 workers plunged from windows as crowds watched. Afterward, coroners examined bodies for signs of life. Then police tagged the dead.

Write

Using information in the KidsPost article, excerpts from Von Drehle's book and reproducibles in this guide, students are to write a persuasive letter or response to one of these topics: Individual citizens can/cannot influence political change, votes do/do not matter, or vigilance is/is not required for workplace safety. Students should be given no more than 30 minutes to write their response.

Enrichment

1. Have students research the Triangle Waist Company fire. They could present their findings in a paper, Web site or Power Point presentation. A sample research paper written by a senior at The University of Pennsylvania can be found at <http://www.tcr.org/triangle.html>.

2. Twenty-three individual civil suits were brought against the owners of the Asch building. On March 11, 1913, three years after the fire, Isaac Harris and Max Blanck settled. They paid \$75 per death.

What is this in current dollars? Visit the Cornell site and http://www.yale.edu/yup/ENYC/triangle_shirtwaist.html.

3. Compare the work done by Colonial children with that required of today's children. At www.washpost.com/nie, click on Lesson Plans. Select "Colonial Chores." This guide's KidsPost article and research activity focus on chores of children who contributed to the economic livelihood of their families.

4. Research modern sweatshops: Do they exist and where? A starting point may be to read "For Some, an Uncomfortable Fit," which is found in "Sneaker Supply and Demand" ([washpost.com/nie](http://www.washpost.com/nie)). Web and print resources are provided to begin the study.

5. Read Ashes to Roses by Mary Jane Auch, which tells the story of a girl in the fire. This story is historical fiction—but the story explores true conditions of life in the Triangle factory. This, paired with Meet the People-suggested activities and the Von Drehle article, should blend well.

Labor and Reform

► <http://www.pitt.edu/~press/goldentrianglebooks/childlabor.html>

Child Labor

Overview of child labor conditions and reform. Also features the children's book, Rebels in the Shadows, about brothers working in the mines.

► http://www.pbs.org/wnet/newyork/laic/episode3/topic6/e3_topic6.html

Tammany Hall

PBS Kids Learning Adventures in Citizenship presents Tammany Hall and introduces cartoonist Thomas Nast.

► <http://www.nps.gov/elro/glossary/tammany-hall.htm>

Tammany Hall

The National Park Service and Eleanor Roosevelt National Historic Site provide basic information.

► <http://www.ssa.gov/history/fperkins.html>

Social Security Pioneers: Frances Perkins

Bio, speeches and photo gallery introduce Perkins, FDR's Secretary of Labor for 12 years and the first woman to hold a cabinet position in the U.S.

► <http://www.uniteunion.org/UNITE! - Union of Needletrades, Industrial and Textile Employees!>
After checking the headline news, go to "Research & Teaching" and "UNITE Kids" sections.



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**"The Triangle Fire
New York Tragedy Changed America"**

By David Von Drehle

Imagine: Instead of starting high school, you must leave your family and friends to cross the ocean on a steamship crowded with strangers, bound for a job in a faraway country.

You can't speak the language of your new country. Your new home is with relatives you have not seen in years.

Fear. Loneliness. Homesickness.

Rosie Freedman did it. Rosie was 14 years old in 1907. She had seen her city in Russia burn in a hate-filled riot. Her family sent her across the Atlantic Ocean aboard a steamship to live in crowded, smelly New York City with an uncle and aunt.

Rosie found a job at a crowded factory making clothes from morning to night. At first she earned less than 50 cents a day and had to pay all her own bills. She even had to pay her uncle for a place to sleep in his tiny apartment.

But somehow, by the time she was 18 years old, Rosie was sending enough money home to support her family in Russia. And she was not unusual. Thousands of young people in those days worked to support their faraway families. Rosie worked at the biggest blouse factory in New York, the Triangle Waist Company, with girls such as Kate Leone and Sara Maltese, who were just 14 themselves.

On March 25, 1911, a match or cigarette ember in a pile of fabric scraps started a fire inside the Triangle factory, high above the New York City streets. Rosie, Kate and Sara worked on the ninth floor, along with about 250 other blouse makers, mostly women and girls.

The fire started on the eighth floor, where the workers barely managed to escape. On the 10th floor, workers sur-



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Remains were taken to the Charities Pier on Twenty-sixth Street in New York City, where thousands of survivors, and morbid sightseers, examined the dead. Six victims were never identified.

vived by running to the roof. But most of the ninth-floor workers, 146 of them, were trapped. The fire escape collapsed. The elevators could no longer run. The door to the last staircase was ... locked.

The New York City Fire Department's tallest ladder was raised outside the factory — but it reached only the sixth floor.

Some victims jumped out the windows. Some, including Rosie, Katie and Sara, stayed inside and died. It was the worst workplace disaster in New York history until Sept. 11, 2001.

And just as 9/11 happened in broad daylight, with cameras watching, the Triangle fire happened in broad daylight on a beautiful spring day. Thousands of people rushed to the scene to watch the awful sight.

Afterward, there was plenty of talk about making workplaces safer. But in those days, more than 100 people died

on the job in America every day. Mines collapsed, ships sank, locomotives crashed, exposed machinery grabbed workers by the arm or leg or hair and pulled them in.

Yet the government did little to protect workers — until the Triangle fire.

The people of New York were outraged by what happened to so many young people such as Rosie Freedman.

Over the next four years, New York passed a record number of laws to protect workers, especially very young workers. By the middle of the century, there were new worker safety laws all across America. Rosie Freedman must have felt very insignificant as she sailed to New York. But the courage and sacrifice of young people such as Rosie Freedman changed the course of the 20th century. That's the good part of the awful story of the Triangle Waist Company fire.



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David Von Drehle is a senior national writer for The Washington Post. Formerly, he was the editor in charge of the Style section and the New York Bureau Chief. Triangle: The Fire That Changed America is his third book; his others covered the death penalty in America and the disputed 2000 presidential election. A native of Aurora, Colorado, he lives in Washington with his wife and four children.

What initiated your interest in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire?

I first heard of the Triangle fire just after I moved to New York as a reporter in 1989. I covered another terrible fire. By chance, it happened on the anniversary of the Triangle fire, March 25. Later, I moved to an apartment one block from the scene of the fire, and I used to walk past the building where it happened and look up at the windows and wonder. Enough wondering made this book.

What keeps you going in what might be a mundane and solitary search for information?

In my research, little discoveries keep me going toward bigger and bigger discoveries. I love to work in libraries, because one strand of reading leads to another, and another. I chase these little strands, fascinating, sad, outrageous or funny strands—and if you follow enough of them you will trip across the really important things.

In what way does looking at events and history through the perspective of the children of the time period influence how you tell the story?

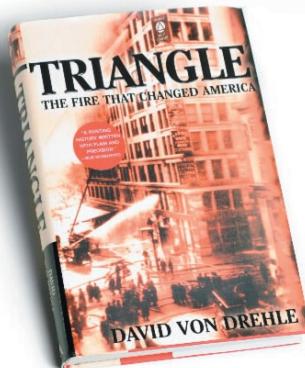
The perspective of children was crucial to this book. I write in "Triangle" about tenement factories in which children as young as 3 and 4 and 5 years old worked long hours for low pay. Two of the girls who died in the Triangle fire were just 14 years old—Sara Maltese and Kate Leone.



Interview

David Von Drehle, author,

"Triangle: The Fire That Changed America



History pivots on the small decisions—to lock or not to lock a door. What are some of these seemingly insignificant decisions made before and after the fire?

The entire story of the Triangle fire and its amazing legacy is one small chance or decision after another. The story of the incredible strike of women blouse makers that begins the book all hinges on the relentless drive of a few young women, like Clara Lemlich, who kept urging the workers on even after she was savagely beaten by hired thugs. The key decision of the book—by political boss Charlie Murphy, who finally decided to embrace a better future —was made in a few short, clear strokes.

At the time of the fire, the average workman made a dollar a day. How much did the girls who worked for the

blouse factory make? How were they able to save enough money to send to their faraway families?

The girls at the Triangle made between 50 cents per day—for workers-in-training—and about three dollars per day, for the most skilled seamstresses. One girl I write about in detail, Rosie Freedman, managed to send about a quarter of her income back to her family in Russia. She paid half her wages to her uncle for room and board. She spent about a quarter of her money (one week's salary per month) on clothing, transportation, entertainment and incidentals. The rest she mailed home. The young women and men were incredible.

How do Alfred E. Smith and Bob Wagner fit into the story of Tammany Hall, which is usually a story of corruption?

Alfred E. Smith and Bob Wagner were classic Tammany men. They were born poor in the immigrant neighborhoods of the Manhattan East Side. They rose through the often corrupt Tammany system. But they were men with good hearts, and the terrible conditions they saw in the streets as they grew up made them dedicate their lives to improving conditions for the poor. They had the hard, tough political sense of Tammany, mixed with the warm, good hearts of reformers. The combination made them two of the most effective politicians in America history.

Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins said that March 25, 1911, was "the day the New Deal began." In what way is this true?

The line from the fire to the New Deal is very simple. From the horror of the fire came the decision by New York's Democratic boss, Charles F. Murphy, to seize the moment and put Tammany Hall on the side of reform.



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The reform agenda that Tammany's men passed over the next three years was hugely popular. Al Smith was elected to four terms as governor. Bob Wagner became a U.S Senator. When another New York Democrat, Franklin D. Roosevelt, became president, the New York reform agenda became the New Deal, with Wagner writing most of the laws, creating things we take for granted today, such as Social Security, public housing and fair labor laws. The New deal was born in the ashes of the Triangle.

**Are we doomed to repeat the tragedy?
What immediate connections do you draw from the past for the present?**

We are not doomed to repeat the tragedy. The legacy of the Triangle

victims is the workers in America today are 30 times less likely to die at work than workers in 1911 were. That is real progress. But there is more to be done, and the example of the shirtwaist workers shows that organizing and voting can eventually make a difference.

The title of your book is Triangle: The Fire That Changed America. What was the change?

The "change" in America was the birth of genuine reform in American government, and the creation of the idea that government can protect workers and improve social conditions. People did not always believe that.

What lessons do you hope students will draw from the Triangle Fire?

Students of the Triangle fire should learn three things, I hope (and maybe more): That this event, often remembered only in passing, was one of the pivotal moments in 20th Century history ... that change came about after the fire not because of altruism or shame, but because the workers of New York were organized and they voted—votes matter in politics ... and that we owe a lot to those brave, mostly anonymous, young people who walked on the freezing pickets lines of the shirtwaist strike and died in the Triangle fire. My book contains the first-ever list of the names of the people who died in the fire, and tells, for the first time, some of their life stories. That is because I feel we owe it to them to remember them.



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In David Von Drehle's new book, "Triangle: The Fire That Changed America," the author argues that The New Deal was born from Triangle ashes above.

NAME _____

The Cutter's Art

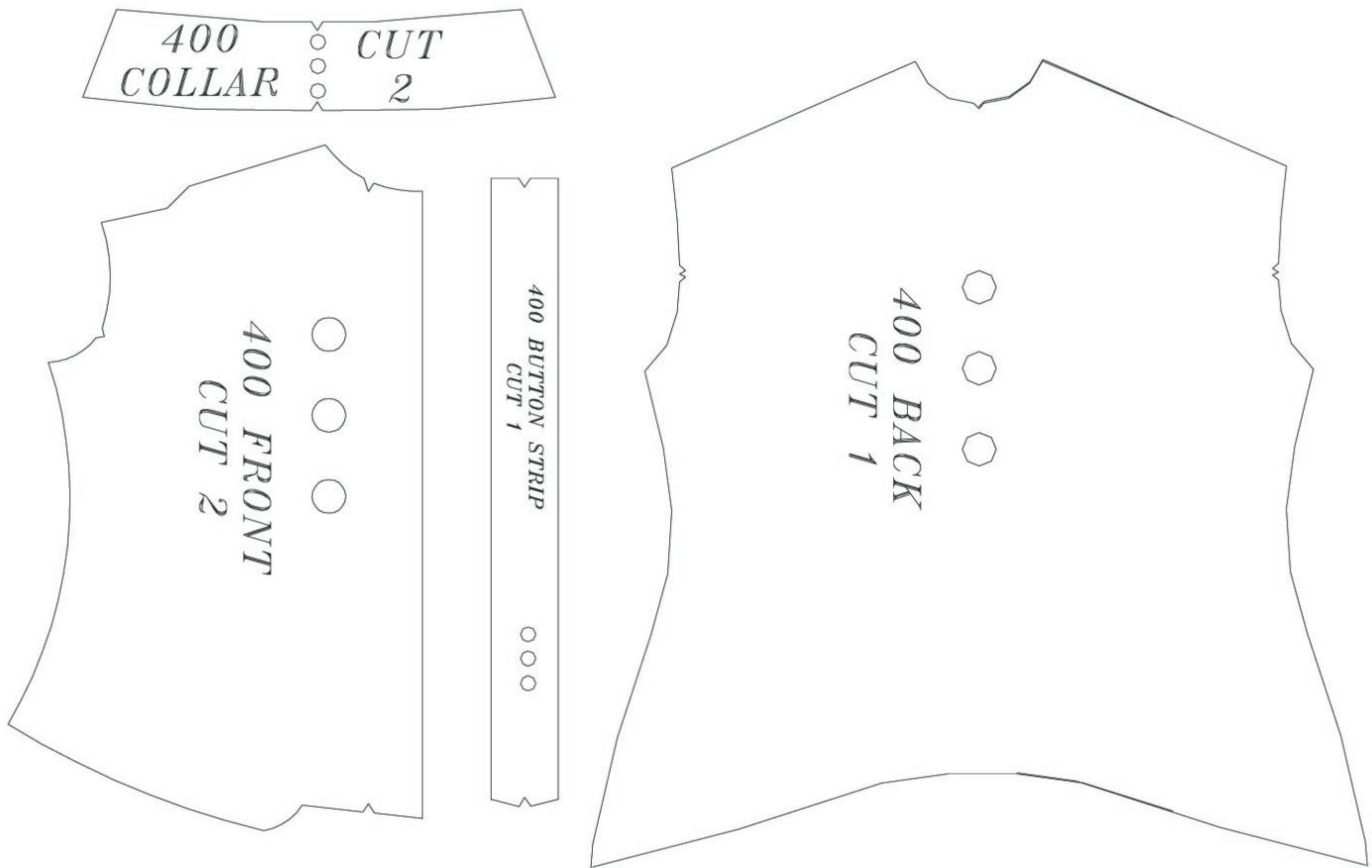
Haste makes waist

"Once the patterns were finished, everything fell to the cutters. They were confident, swaggering men, the divas of the garment district. They hung their coats on pegs beside their big custom-built tables on the eighth floor. When the cutters arrived at work, on each table lay stretched more than a hundred layers of lawn [sheer, cotton fabric popular that season], separated by sheets of tissue paper. ... The cutters took down pattern pieces and fiddled with them like a puzzle until all the pieces fit into the smallest possible stretch of fabric. A wasted inch multiplied by a hundred layers was almost three wasted yards of fabric, and three wasted yards for every hundred waists added up to 360 wasted yards of fabric per week. The cutter's art—of placing the patterns with maximum efficiency and whisking their distinctive knives like industrial cavaliers—was bedrock of the garment industry. As a result, cutters were well paid and well treated."

— Triangle: The Fire That Changed America (page 107)



Directions: To create a waist (blouse) for sale, patterns were created so each waist would have the same appearance, the waist size could be controlled and sewing could be done efficiently. Pretend you are a cutter. Below are the pieces of a 1910-1915 pattern for a "Ladies' Gibson Shirt-Waist with a neckband." Place the pattern pieces on the paper you have been given. Remember you want to configure the placement of pattern pieces to save the most fabric possible. (Patterns below not to scale.)



Ladies Gibson Shirt-Waist pattern
provided courtesy of Past Patterns
(pastpatterns.com).



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The Workplace at the Turn of the Century

From the pages of Triangle: the Fire That Changed America.

1. New York, the most populated state in 1911, had a bustling economy. Read excerpts from David Von Drehle's *Triangle* to learn about the American workplace in the early 1900s.

"More than a thousand blouses had taken shape in the seven working hours of March 25, one stitch at a time. The freshly cut pieces went in bales to the foreman, who distributed them to the wicker baskets on the floor by each operator's feet. Runners and foremen scurried back and forth, up and down the stairs, hunting for the pieces they needed to keep each part of the assembly line busy. The operators fed the pieces through their humming, stuttering machines, and no matter how quickly the foremen cleared away the finished work, the tables always seemed to be heaped with garments. Piece by piece blouses emerged, with each completed step of the process noted in the bookkeeper's ledger."

(*Triangle*, page 110.)

"The Huyler [candy factory] brothers did not like the fifty-four-hour bill. Candy factories were notoriously grim places to work. Boiling the chocolatey, sugary concoctions was steamy, suffocating work, and it was all done standing up—hour after hour hovering over simmering cauldrons. Workers were frequently scalded or cut. All the wrapping was done by hand—numbingly tedious work. During the busy season before Christmas, the factories were kept going almost around the clock. Like cannery owners, the candy makers argued that a limit on hours would make it impossible to run their highly seasonal businesses."

(*Triangle*, page 206)

"In grand progressive style, George Price and Frances Perkins organized Factory Commission visits to plants and mills all over the state. They took commissioners to an Auburn, New York, rope factory where husbands and wives worked alternating twelve-hour shifts, never seeing each other except to kiss quickly as they passed at the gate. They saw a Buffalo candy factory where chocolate boiled over into open gas flames, where the single stairway had no handrail—terribly dangerous in case of a fire—and where two toilets served 300 workers, and one of the two was broken. They hit a Cattaraugus County cannery at dawn, and found children as young as five, six and seven working alongside their mothers. How long is the day? The commissioners wondered. The Answer: Until the children passed out from exhaustion.

(*Triangle*, page 215)

2. Von Drehle did extensive research, studying as many primary documents as he could find. Read at least three more sources of information about businesses and workplace conditions from 1900 to 1912. Write an evaluation of workplace safety in America in the early 1900s. Include quotations from your sources and Von Drehle.



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Tammany Hall and Workplace Safety Reform

"Since the Tweed era in the 1860s and 1870s, the words 'Tammany Hall' had been synonymous with graft, corruption, and the election of puppets to do the work of dishonest bosses. That ignominy was largely deserved, but with the installation of Smith and Wagner in the first days of 1911, Charles Murphy promoted the leadership that would move Tammany into an era of change, an era of reform."

(Triangle, page 210)

On March 25, 1911, the Triangle fire lit a cry for safety. A New York State Factory Investigating Commission was founded. Headed by "Tammany Twins"—State Senator Robert Wagner and State Assembly Speaker Al Smith. Frances Perkins from the Consumers' League became a commission member.

"The work of [of the commission in] 1912 produced a series of new laws in the 1913 legislature that was unmatched to that time in American history. The Tammany Twins pushed through twenty-five bills, entirely recasting labor law of the nation's largest state." **(Triangle, page 215)**

Included were fire safety laws, requirements for automatic sprinklers in high-rise buildings, mandatory fire drills, protection for women and children in the workplace. The New York Department of Labor was reorganized.

Assignment: Study Tammany Hall before and after the Triangle fire, the individuals who had impact on New York and national labor reform and the organizations that sought workplace safety. Select from the following list a person or organization to research.

Consumers' League

New York Factory Investigating Commission

The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union

Frances Perkins

Fiorello La Guardia

Progressive Movement

Clara Lemlich

Jacob Riis and How the Other Half Lives

Anne Morgan

Alfred E. Smith

Charles Francis Murphy

Robert F. "Bob" Wagner

New Deal



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Academic Content Standards (The main lesson addresses these academic content standards.)

This lesson addresses academic content standards of Maryland, Virginia and the District of Columbia. Among those that apply are:

Maryland

Social Studies

United States History (2.0). Students will examine significant ideas, beliefs and themes; organize patterns and events; and analyze how individuals and societies have changed over time in Maryland and the United States.

Social Studies Skills: 4. Students are able to identify and distinguish cause and effect and sequence and correlation in historic events. 7. Analyze issues by stating and summarizing the issue, evaluating different viewpoints, and drawing conclusions based on data.

Writing

Students will demonstrate ability to write to persuade by selecting and organizing relevant information, establishing an argumentative purpose, and by designing an appropriate strategy for an identified audience.

A complete list of State Content Standards of Maryland can be found at <http://www.md.k12.org/mspp/standards/>.

Virginia

History

Turmoil and Change: 1890s to 1945. The student will demonstrate knowledge of the changing role of the United States from the late nineteenth century through World War I by describing the impact of the Progressive Movement on child labor, working conditions, the rise of organized labor, women's suffrage, and the temperance movement.

Civics and Economics, 7.4. The student will compare the policy-making process at the local, state, and national levels of government with emphasis on the ways that individuals and culture, ethnic, and other interest groups can influence government policymakers.

English

Writing: The student will write in a variety of forms, including narrative, expository and persuasive writings.

A complete list of Standards of Learning of Virginia can be found on the Web at <http://www.pen.k12.va.us/>.

Washington, D.C.

Social Studies

Chronology and Space in Human History. Students understand chronological order and spatial patterns of human experiences, by placing the stories of people and events in the context of their own time and place. By the end of Grade 5, the student will understand multiple causes—how people and ideas cause or shape events; By the end of Grade 8, the student will explain how power, roles of individuals, justice, and influences apply to persistent issues and social problems. By the end of Grade 12, the student will identify the occasions on which the collaboration of different kinds of people, often with different motives, has accomplished important changes.

Reading/English Language Arts

Language as Meaning Making. Students comprehend and compose a wide range of written, oral and visual texts.

A complete list of Standards for Teaching and Learning of the District of Columbia Public Schools can be found at <http://www.k12.dc.us>.