

Jacob Spradlin

Instructor's Name

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The Two Most Tragic Fires in History

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire and Hartford Circus fire are two of the worst fires in United States history. Both fires caused a great deal of damage; however, the fires were different in background, cause, and aftermath.

The first main difference between the two fires is their background. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was located in Manhattan and was on the third floor of the Asch Building. The factory was owned by Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, and Blanck and Harris had “employ[ed] young immigrant women who worked in a cramped space at lines of sewing machines.” The majority of the women were teenagers that were unable to speak English and worked twelve hours a day (“Triangle Shirtwaist Factory”). Blanck and Harris were known to treat their employees very poorly and with no respect. They paid their employees only around six dollars a week; in addition, some of the employees were required to bring their own supplies to their work station (“Triangle Shirtwaist Fire”). The Asch Building contained four elevators; however, there was only one that actually worked for the employees. According to the article “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire,” “There were two stairways down to the street, but one was locked from the outside to prevent stealing and the other only opened inward.” There was also a fire escape, but the fire escape was narrow, so it “would have taken hours for all the workers to use it.”

The Hartford Circus fire had a quite different background than the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. The Hartford Circus was located “on a city-owned circus lot” in Hartford,

Connecticut (Kimball 9). The circus tent “was approximately 425 feet long and 180 feet wide and covering an area of approximately 74,000 square feet or better than 1½ acres” (Kimball 11). There were over seven thousand people that were attending the circus (Kimball 9), and there were over one thousand animals that were part of the circus (Berger 1). The circus had been prepared for any fires that could possibly happen with “equipment [that] included four all-purpose water tank trucks having pumps powered by a power take-off and supplying 50 feet of 2-inch hose having a ½-inch nozzle tip” (Kimball 9). Out of the four trucks, three of them had a capacity of over one thousand gallons of water while the fourth truck had only eight hundred gallons of water. In case of a fire, there were emergency exit arrangements that would make it easy for everyone at the circus to have a safe exit. The exits included the main entrance, beside a “bandstand with an exit on each side of the stand”; three exits that were really supposed to be used only by performers; and an exit that was used to bring wires and cords into the tent (Kimball 11).

While the two backgrounds were very different, one of the other main differences was the cause of the fire. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire happened on March 25, 1911. According to the article “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire,” “. . . there were 600 workers at the factory when a fire began in a rag bin.” When the fire began to roar, the manager at the time attempted to put the fire out with an extinguisher. However, the extinguisher was so worn out and rusty that it was closed shut. The women had an elevator; however, the elevator was capable of holding only twelve people per trip. The elevator ended up shutting down completely by the fourth trip due to the fire and extreme heat. When the elevator broke down, the women attempted to take the stairwell. However the door to the outside was locked shut, so many passed away on the stairs (“Triangle Shirtwaist Factory”).

While the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was started in a rag bin, the Hartford Circus began due to a match or a cigarette that had been thrown to the ground near very dry grass (Kimball 13). The Hartford Circus fire happened on July 6, 1944 (Kimball 9). Warren Kimball explained in his article “Hartford Circus Holocaust” that “The fire had began on or near the ground at the outside canvas immediately to the south of and about 20 feet from the main exit.” People said that the flames of the fire were up to five to six feet before anyone noticed them. Therefore, the blaze of fire had already spread throughout the tent, making it nearly impossible for anyone to put out the fire. The fire began to spread rapidly, and ropes that had supported the tent became inflamed, which then made the poles of the tent come crumbling down. The poles fell on innocent bystanders, causing many deaths (13).

In addition to the causes of fire being different, the two famous fires also had very distinct kinds of aftermaths. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire aftermath was very tragic with over 145 people that passed away due to the fire. The fire lasted only about eighteen minutes but did a lot of damage to the factory and affected many people’s lives. “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,” stated the article “Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire.” There were also two people that were in the fire that died later due to the injuries that they had sustained during the fire. Due to how the fire was caused by a work environment issue, many New York workers scheduled a huge march later that year. The march brought in over eighty thousand workers that marched “to protest the conditions that had led to the fire.”

The Hartford Circus had a different aftermath than the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. The Hartford Circus fire caused over 139 deaths, and 174 were badly burned due to the massive fire. According to the news article “139 Lives Lost in Circus Fire at Hartford” written by Meyer

Berger, “At least two-thirds of the dead and injured were children.” During the fire, there were over a thousand different animals at the circus; however, the performers kept the animals under control, and none broke out (1). After the fire, many people wanted circuses to incorporate a flameproof tent to keep them safe from any possible fire. Many people asked to make sure from then on that there would be plenty of exits for everyone to fit through in a safe manner. People also asked that circuses forbid any use of cigarettes or any type of smoking around the tents for everyone’s safety (Kimball 18).

In conclusion, the Hartford Circus fire and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire were very different from one another. They were different in their own background and the cause of each fire. The two fires were also different in their horrific aftermaths.

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