

lesson plan **LEARNING CONVERSATIONS WITH HISTORY: THE TRIANGLE FIRE**

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Introduction

On March 25, 1911, a fire in a New York City factory claimed the lives of 146 people. Most of them were young women, workers at the Triangle Waist Company (sometimes called the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory). This seemingly preventable tragedy is well documented. The building, along with many original documents, is preserved and can be visited; it is now part of New York University. An annual memorial service at the site commemorates those whose lives were lost and those who tried to save them.

This tragic event is not an easy topic but it endures and is well worth studying. Not the least of the reasons is, sadly, its continued applicability. Knowledge gained from studying such events can help us to ensure that they are not repeated.

Seeking ways to enable students to interact with and benefit from the abundant materials available on the Triangle Fire, we drew on our work as teachers and UFT Teacher Center staff developers. The lesson plan below, for grades 4–6, has a learning tool, the Inquiry Chart, at its center (see p. 22). It can be used flexibly: in an introductory lesson, as a jumping-off point for various extensions or as an anchor for an entire unit.

We used other tools as well. We selected the Background-Know-Want-to-Know-Learned (BKWL) Chart (see p. 20) as a means of organizing the initial lesson or lessons and a semantic map to clarify the five “Ws” (Who, What, When, Where and Why) and the How. Along with these, we planned instruction to flow with activities for the whole class and small groups.

This lesson might be considered for use on a special occasion, such as within women’s history month. However, many other lessons can develop when this one serves as an introduction to a unit of study designed for a longer time period. An interdisciplinary unit can be developed, bringing together social studies, literacy, mathematics and science. The questions that emerge from this lesson as recorded on the BKWL Chart or the Inquiry Chart can serve both for the planning of and as initial questions for the next phase or phases of study. To us, lesson plans are blueprints. These ideas and tools can be viewed as suggestions and adapted to fit the work you are doing.

THE TRIANGLE FIRE: A LESSON FOR GRADES 4–6

Students learn about the disaster, its background, its main events and its effects on subsequent history, in particular on the history of the labor movement. A guiding and essential question we selected is: How can a disaster lead a society to change for the better?

Getting Ready

Before the lesson, the teacher creates a wall-size version of the chart(s) selected for use along with a version of the graphic organizer, which can be completed in advance or in class with the students. These are posted where all students can see and work on them.

BKWL Chart			
B ackground	What We K now	What We W ant to Know	What We L earned
Our prior knowl- edge. . .	What we learned in the mini- lecture. . . .	Questions we have now are. . .	What we have learned from this whole lesson. . .
(1. This column is completed with/by the whole group before the lesson on the fire begins.)	(2. This column is completed by the whole group after the mini-lecture.)	(3. This column is completed by small-group mem- bers after working together.)	(4. This column is completed by the whole group before the conclu- sion of the lesson.)

Before Introducing the Topic

Connect the students to the topic by giving an initial statement. This quote may be appropriate: “Great tragedies often reveal much about social conditions and the historical problems confronting people” (David Huehner, History 102).

Allow students to access their prior knowledge. Give them a few minutes to think and to quickly write about questions related to the quote, such as:

- What do you think the author of this quote means by this statement?
- What great tragedies that we have studied come to mind?
- Consider one example: What did the details of that tragedy reveal about living conditions at that time?

Next, ask students to share from their notes with a partner (triads are also fine). Ask for volunteers to share aloud some of their responses, and enter them into the Background column of the BKWL Chart.

Introducing the Topic: A Mini-Lecture

Tell the students, “March 25th is the anniversary of the Triangle Fire—an early 20th-century disaster that has shaped our history ever since. I am going to read you a short passage about the Triangle Fire. This will help us to begin to gather information about the events that led up to the fire and where and when it happened. It will tell us something about what life and working conditions were like in 1911. And I would like you to think about this essential question: How can a disaster lead a society to change for the better?”

Read-aloud suggestions include an item from MSNBC’s *Weekend Today* and a selection from *An Age of Extremes: 1870–1917* by Joy Hakim, both reprinted here (see p. 21). Add any explanations or definitions of vocabulary appropriate for your class.

During the read aloud the whole group listens and students jot down what they hear about life and working conditions in New York City on March 25, 1911, noting evidence that the passage offers.

Read-Aloud Sample Selections

MSNBC *Weekend Today* online,
August 28, 2003:

“On March 25, 1911, a fire broke out in the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York’s Greenwich Village. Within minutes it had spread to consume the building’s upper three stories. Firemen who arrived at the scene were unable to rescue those trapped inside; their ladders simply weren’t tall enough. People on the street watched in horror as desperate workers jumped to their deaths. The final toll was 146 people—123 of them women. It was the worst disaster in New York City history.”

Note: Ask students if this story could have been posted on the Internet in 1911. What sources of news would there have been then? Have facsimiles of newspaper stories of the time available for students. Many of these can be traced online at: <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>.



Joy Hakim, *An Age of Extremes*:

“Workers were sometimes locked inside the buildings where they worked because employers didn’t trust them. If the doors were open some might stop working to go outside and get fresh air. So the doors were locked the day in 1911 when the Triangle Shirtwaist Company caught fire. The women workers, who were sewing dresses, were trapped on a high floor. There was no way out. Some leapt out the window and fell to their death; some died in the flames” (p. 99).

Small-Group Activity

- Group Member Roles: Facilitator, recorder, reporter, reader.
- Group Tasks: Members use the questions on the BKWL Chart or the Inquiry Chart to drive the group’s inquiry concerning the Triangle Waist Company disaster. Members read the handouts provided, using the inquiry questions to focus their reading. After reading, groups discuss the information they have acquired on the disaster, recording any new information that answers the questions on the class BKWL Chart or Inquiry Chart.
- Teacher’s Role: After clarifying the group task and facilitating the transition to small groups, circulate, providing guidance, assessing students’ progress and facilitating when necessary.

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Inquiry Chart: The Triangle Fire

Topic:	Question 1:	Question 2:	Question 3:	Question 4:	Other Interesting/ Important Facts	New Questions
Source						
Source						
Source						
Summaries						

Adapted from: Buehl (2001)

Students share what they now know about life in New York City in 1911 and the events that led to the Triangle Fire. Record their responses in the Know column of the BKWL Chart.

Building on Knowledge

Briefly give further details of the Triangle Fire using the semantic map with the Who, What, When, Where, Why and How talking points (see p. 23).

Students formulate questions they now have about the fire. Record these in the Want to Know column of the BKWL Chart and/or as questions on the Inquiry Chart.

Next, organize the class into small groups and give each student a copy of a reading about the Triangle Fire that you have selected (see References and Further Resources for ideas).

The class re-forms as a whole group. Groups' reporters take turns sharing what students have learned, using either the BKWL Chart or Inquiry Chart as discussion points.

The Lesson Summary

Using the L column of the BKWL Chart, students record their answers to the question "What did you learn from the story of

the Triangle Fire?" The L column summarizes what the students have learned from the beginning of the lesson and can be included in the Summaries section of the Inquiry Chart.

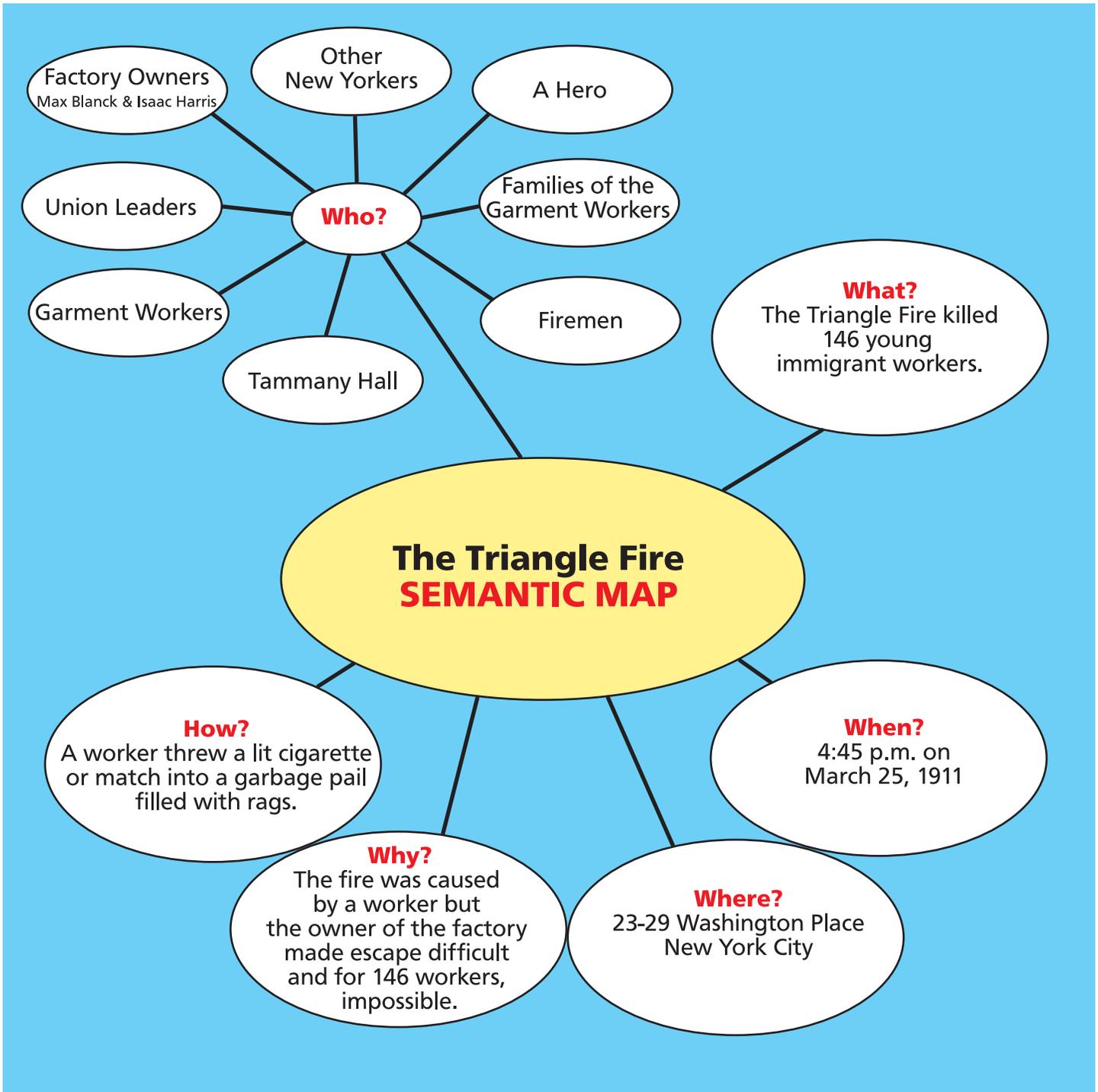
Questions for further consideration include:

- Why, after all these years, do we continue to commemorate the Triangle Waist Company fire?
- What is the relevance of this event for us today?
- What does the labor movement do today to protect workers?

Lesson Conclusion

Returning to the essential question, a sample mini-summary might be: The Triangle Waist Company disaster focused public attention on growing concerns about sweatshops and their exploitation of immigrant workers and other laborers. The Triangle Fire ignited the cause of protecting laborers from unfair practices and gave rise to unions and labor laws that protect citizens, especially children, from exploitation.

LEARNING CONVERSATIONS WITH HISTORY: THE TRIANGLE FIRE



Note: This semantic map was developed from *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America* by David Von Drehle (see References and Further Resources).

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REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

There are many resources available on this topic. The following can be good starting points.

PLANNING AND LEARNING TOOLS

Buehl, D. (2001). *Classroom Strategies for Interactive Learning* (2nd ed.). Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

Danzer, V., Astarita, T., and Messer, R. (May 2000). Inquiry Chart: A Tool for Investigation. *Highlights*, 3, 6. New York: UFT Teacher Center.

Hoffman, J. (1992). Critical Reading/Thinking Across the Curriculum: Using I-Charts to Support Learning. *Language Arts*, 69, 121–127.

Huehner, D. History 102, Web Module #2: The Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. AHA Teaching and Learning in the Digital Age. Online: <http://www.historians.org/tl/LessonPlans/wi/Huehner/TriangleSWF.html>.

THE TRIANGLE FIRE

Internet

Kheel Center, Catherwood Library, and School of Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University in collaboration with Unite! <http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire/>.

MSNBC Weekend Today: <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3079058/>.

University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law (news accounts and other resources): <http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frtrial/triangle/trianglenewsaccounts.html>.

Print

Elementary grades: Hakim, J. (1999). *An Age of Extremes: 1870–1917*. A History of US: Book 8 (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Secondary level: Von Drehle, D. (2003). *Triangle: The Fire That Changed America*. New York: Grove/Atlantic. For an excerpt, see: <http://msnbc.msn.com/id/3079058/>.

Standards

New York State Social Studies Standards. Online: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/social.html>.

Document-Based Questions (DBQs): Course I. (J. Daniels, Ed.). Course II. (J. Corr, Ed.). Online: <http://www.emsc.nysed.gov/ciai/dbq/ssindex.html>.