

Educational materials developed through the Baltimore County History Labs Program, a partnership between Baltimore County Public Schools and the UMBC Center for History Education.

RS#13: Murdered by Incompetent Government

Editorial, *New York World*, March 27th, 1911. This New York City based newspaper was known for its sensational reporting style (yellow journalism) and was a direct competitor with *The New York Journal* and *The New York Times*. This article is an editorial written two days after the fire.

After the disastrous factory fire in Newark last November Chief Croker said: "There are buildings in New York where the danger is every bit as great as in the building destroyed at Newark, and a fire in the daytime would be accompanied by loss of life. We can see that the law is complied with, but that is as far as we can go. What we should have is an ordinance requiring fire-escapes on every building used for manufacturing purposes. Take for instance some of the large loft buildings below Twenty-third street. The employees go up to their work in the elevators and many of them do not even know where the stairways are. I have appeared before many committees trying to have the ordinance amended so that fire-escapes would be required on these buildings. The absence of fire-escapes on the buildings where persons work subjects them to a risk which they should not be compelled to take."

The *World* and other newspapers seconded Chief Croker's demand but nothing was done to prevent in New York a calamity greater than that in Newark. Saturday it came; and more than 150 persons died horrible deaths in the worst disaster since the burning of the General Slocum, victims of official negligence and incompetency in the face of the clearest warning.

Because the building where the fire occurred was of the approved "loft" type, "partly fireproof but not death-proof" as Chief Croker well describes it, there was but one narrow, flimsy fire escape. It led not to the street and safety but to a courtyard below the street level which at that hour there was no exit. This building is one which the Fire Department had "recommended" should be equipped with escapes, but the department has no authority to order fire-escapes put on.

A ten-story loft building, no matter how nearly fireproof it may be, is commonly filled with inflammable material. It should be equipped with automatic sprinklers on every floor. This building was not. It should have broad and ample stairways with wide treads and low risers, enclosed in a fireproof well, This building had two stairways, each no wider than those in a private house; and on the final ninth floor, a door opening inward prevented quick access to one of them. The doors of public school buildings open outward. That is the law. Loft buildings should be subject to the same rule.

The elevators in a loft building are expected to carry all its inmates up and down. They are ample for the purpose except in emergency. There are doubtless many girls who, as Chief Croker says, did not know where the stairs were... Fire-drills are held in schools which are but four stories high. In this loft building of ten stories, in which at times 2,000 girls were gathered, none was ever held. Loft buildings by the dozen are being built today in New York which are legal death-traps. An enormous army of working men and women must starve, or in the law phrase "assume the risk" of working in them.

By what the Washington Place building had not and was not, we know what a loft building should have and should be. If already constructed, it should be equipped at once with ample fire escapes to the street – steep and flimsy, but substantial, wide, easy to use. It should have automatic sprinklers, doors opening outward, compulsory fire drills, placards of instruction, arrows on the walls pointing to stairways and windows, free access to the roof at all times. And no new building of this type should ever again be erected in New York without a well in which nothing that can burn is permitted.

Against such reasonable safeguards we may expect architects to protest lest their designs be "disfigured," and owners and tenants to raise objections of expense. But if such arguments outweigh the mute appeal of those rows of charred bodies in the morgue, of the yawning holes in the sidewalk through which young girls crashed to the vaults below, of the shafts in which dying wretches flung themselves on top of the halted elevators- then what is to-day New York's sorrow will live and last in shame.