



The *Forward* Building

Stop 1: The *Forward* Building

173 East Broadway
New York, NY, 10002

Between 1912 and 1972, this impressive ten-story building was home to the offices of the *Forverts*, the Yiddish-language daily founded in 1897 to "spread the ideas of socialism among the Jewish masses." Once one of the most widely circulated Jewish papers in the world, the *Forward* both served and shaped the large immigrant Jewish community that populated New York City in the first half of the 20th century.

The *Forward* building was known as "the principal nerve center of the entire Jewish quarter." The paper rented space to like-minded organizations such as the United Hebrew Trades and the Workmen's Circle, an American Jewish socialist fraternal order. A large auditorium was used for rallies, speeches, and Yiddish theater performances.

The *Forward* provided many immigrants an education in socialism and trade unionism. It made no pretense of neutrality: it organized soup kitchens for striking workers, posted strike bulletins on its building, and printed special strike editions. In addition to supporting the labor and socialist movements, the paper attacked dishonest politicians and exposed the unsafe and unhealthy conditions in which working-class New Yorkers lived and labored.

The paper was responsive to the needs of its many female readers and often carried articles about and by women workers. As a crucial instrument of Americanization, it also urged readers who worked long hours in sweatshops to go to night school, take advantage of activities in the settlement houses, and improve themselves by visiting museums uptown. One of its most popular features, (which endures as a blog), was "*A Bintel Brief*," an advice column that printed questions from anonymous readers and instructive replies from the editors.

Today the building houses residential condominiums. Its unusual height, architecture, and decorative features dominate the neighborhood much as they did a century ago.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/jewish-daily-forward-building>.



Photograph of *Forward* newsboys by Lewis Hine, courtesy of the Library of Congress, 1913.



Lower East Side Tenements

Stop 2: Tenements on 6th and 7th Streets, off of the Bowery

East 6th Street
New York, NY, 10003

The overcrowded, poorly lit and ventilated tenements of the Lower East Side were once home to hundreds of thousands of recent Jewish immigrants. In the late 19th century, many of the apartments in these tenements doubled as garment workshops. Clothing manufacturers could have their products sewn and assembled here and avoid the

costs of maintaining a factory. In the early 1900s the industry began to move from cramped tenements to large loft buildings like the Triangle's, but few safety measures were introduced.

Many of the young women who worked in the Triangle Factory in 1911 lived in buildings much like the ones on this street. For example, 23-year-old Nettie Lefkowitz, who lived at 27 E. 3rd Street, had emigrated from Romania only 18 months before she was killed in the Triangle fire. A few blocks away, at 14 E. 1st Street, lived another Triangle victim: 17-year-old Celia Eisenberg, who was born in Russia and had been in the U.S. since 1906. Another Russian immigrant, 18-year-old Rosie Freedman, made her home nearby at 77 E. 4th Street.

By the time these young women died in the Triangle fire, the tenements they lived in would no longer have combined garment making and living quarters. Conditions were still grim—just as working conditions were still grim in the new high-rise factories—but things had improved since the days when most garment makers worked in sweatshops located in buildings like these.

In a typical tenement sweatshop, the father sewed at a machine near one of the few windows, while up to half a dozen women worked alongside him in the living room, stitching together pieces of fabric. The workers were paid by how many pieces they finished in a day. In the kitchen, a presser (usually an older man) ironed the completed pieces next to the same stove used for cooking meals.

In this system of making ready-to-wear clothing, the manufacturers cut the garments that were marketed under their names. The rest of the process took place in tenements like this one. There were advantages for the workers. People called each other by their first names, conversed in Yiddish, and sometimes even shared meals prepared by the owner's wife. Memoirs describe singing, dancing, smoking, drinking, and eating. Workers could also have a schedule that allowed them to observe Shabbat.

However, workers could never forget that even in this "family like" setting, the boss had ultimate authority. Unsanitary conditions and the never-ending pressure to work faster and faster made the sweatshop "too narrow for the spirit," as a writer for the *Forward* newspaper put it. These conditions also made it difficult for inspectors to enforce the few regulations that were on the books and for unions to organize workers.

By 1900, technology was transforming the garment industry. The availability of electric sewing machines made it profitable for manufacturers to move production into the new high-rise loft buildings that were going up all over lower Manhattan. Between 1901, the year the Triangle Waist Company first rented space in the

new Asch Building, and 1911, nearly 800 of these buildings were built in Manhattan—an average of three every two weeks! These new factories had higher ceilings than tenements and more windows to let in air and light—and, of course, they had electric power. Slowly but surely, the once ubiquitous tenement sweatshop became obsolete.

One change affected Jewish workers in particular. The new factories operated six (sometimes even seven) days a week, making it impossible to observe the Sabbath. In some observant families, the parents still rested on Saturdays, while their daughters went off to earn the money that paid the rent.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/lower-east-side-tenements>.



Cooper Union

Stop 3: Cooper Union

7 East 7th Street
New York, NY, 10003

The Great Hall at Cooper Union has been the scene of lively public debate since it opened in 1858. At a mass meeting in November 1909, Clara Lemlich, a 23-year-old Jewish labor organizer who worked in a garment factory on the Lower East Side, gave an impassioned speech in Yiddish, which inspired a general strike of shirtwaist makers. The owners of the Triangle Factory were among a minority of manufacturers who did not agree to the concessions that ended the strike after 11 weeks.

In late September of 1909, 150 workers from the Triangle Factory had defied their bosses and attended a union meeting. The owners issued an ultimatum: anyone who joined a union would be fired. The unionists held their ground, and the workers were locked out of the factory. They began picketing as the owners advertised for replacements.

Momentum for a general strike was building through the industry. The International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) organized a meeting at Cooper Union's Great Hall on the evening of November 22nd. The 900-seat, windowless space was packed; those who couldn't fit in the Hall filled nearby meeting rooms.

One after another, prominent male unionists made their way to the podium to offer encouraging words. None who rose to speak, however, belonged to the group with the most at stake—the immigrant women who made up the majority of the industry's workers. The male leaders of the labor movement doubted that women had the strength for long days on the picket line or the means to survive without even their meager wages, and were not in favor of a strike they were convinced would fail.

After about two hours, a slight young woman interrupted a speaker. "I wanted to say a few words," she said. A cheering crowd helped Clara Lemlich onto the stage. Most people in the Great Hall that night would have known that this young woman was a respected labor organizer, one of the *farbrente maydlakh*, "the fiery girls" in Yiddish, who dared to strike. Not quite five feet tall, Clara Lemlich had endured harsh treatment for her labor activities. Only recently she had been beaten by hired thugs after she led a walkout at the factory where she worked.

Once on the stage, Clara spoke passionately in Yiddish, transfixing the crowd with her powerful presence: "I have listened to all the speakers. I would not have further patience for talk, as I am one of those who feels and suffers from the things pictured. I move that we go on a general strike!"

As an immigrant woman and garment worker herself, she had been organizing workers for years. In 1906 she had started Local 25, a new chapter of the ILGWU, and had helped lead walkouts in 1907, 1908, and in early 1909.

Clara Lemlich's courage and her ability to rally workers made her a formidable force in the male-dominated labor movement. Looking back at that time in her life, she said "Ah—then I had fire in my mouth! What did I know about trade unionism? Audacity—that was all I had. Audacity!"

Clara Lemlich's audacity ignited the crowd at Cooper Union. Her words struck a cord with the immigrant women in the audience, who were fed up with working conditions in the garment industry where, as Clara described it, "the hissing of the machines [and] the yelling of the foreman, made life unbearable."

At the end of the speech, the workers voted in favor of a general strike, despite the hardships they knew it would bring.

Though most middle-class supporters and many men in the union were opposed to the idea, thousands of women workers, many of them young Jewish immigrants, supported the action, launching the strike that came to be known as the "Uprising of the 20,000."

Fundraising efforts were mounted, including Yiddish plays, silent movies, vaudeville performances, balls, dances, and teas. Non-striking workers were asked to donate half a day's wages to the strike fund. All of these efforts helped, but strikers had to make do on less than \$2 per week. And they had to endure abuse from the police and harsh sentences from judges, which in some cases carried jail time. Factory owners even hired prostitutes to taunt the women on the picket line.

The strike ended in February 1910, when the union won concessions from the owners of 279 factories, which employed 15,000 workers: an increase in wages, a 52-hour work week, and "limited required overtime," as well as at least four paid holidays a year, no discrimination against union members, and the right to negotiate with employees.

Within a few years, in the wake of this relatively positive outcome, 85% of workers in the shirtwaist industry had joined the ILGWU. Before the strike, female membership numbered around 3,000. A year later, over 16,000 women were union members.

However, several of the larger factories, including the Triangle, did not recognize the union or agree to its demands. The owners, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris (who were themselves Jewish immigrants who had once labored in the garment trade), gave striking workers their jobs back and increased wages slightly but ignored most of the union's other demands, including improved safety measures such as unlocking doors and installing better fire escapes.

Near the end of the 1909 strike, the Forward wrote that "With blood this name [the Triangle Waist Co.] will be written in the history of the American workers' movement, and with feeling will this history recall the names of the strikers of this shop." This ominous statement was published 15 months before the deadly fire.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/cooper-union>.

Stop 4: ILGWU Offices

11 Waverly Place
New York, NY, 10003



Site of the 1909 ILGWU offices

The International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) was founded in 1900 and had its offices at 11 Waverly Place at the time of the Triangle fire. The union's male leaders were not especially interested in organizing the women workers who dominated the garment industry. That changed with the "Uprising of the 20,000" in 1909. Once the strike was underway, the leaders of the ILGWU reluctantly supported it, which marked a major change in the status of women in the labor movement.

The leaders of this union for workers who made women's clothing were men who questioned whether women had a role to play in the labor movement. Clara Lemlich understood how important it was for the union to serve women. In 1906, along with six other women shirtwaist makers, she started Local 25.

League (WTUL), formed in 1903 to protect female workers, was an early ally of the ILGWU. The WTUL was unusual in having members from among the working class and the middle and upper classes active in the progressive movement. Cultural, class, and ethnic differences created tension within the League, but the WTUL's help was critical to the success of the 1909 strike.

First, there was financial support. Local 25 had only \$4 in its budget at the beginning of the strike. The financial support of WTUL members such as J.P. Morgan's daughter Ann and the wealthy suffragist Alva Belmont also helped the strikers gain credibility, public sympathy, and physical protection. Police treated strikers far more gently when middle-class women marched beside them on the picket line. And then there was the publicity. The involvement of middle-class and society women ensured that major papers like the New York Times, and not just the Jewish *Forward*, covered the strike.

In the aftermath of the Triangle fire, the relationship between the WTUL and the ILGWU deteriorated as the two organizations took different approaches to organizing. When the ILGWU called for a strike in the fall of 1911, for the first time the WTUL did not endorse it. The League began to focus on organizing American-born women working in uptown shops rather than the immigrant women employed in downtown factories.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/ilgwu>.



Site of the Triangle Factory fire

Stop 5: Asch Building/Brown Building (Triangle Factory)

Washington Place and Greene Street
New York, NY, 10003

The Triangle Waist Factory was located on the top three floors of the Asch Building on Washington Place. More than 500 workers labored here long hours, six days a week. Late in the afternoon of Saturday, March 25, 1911, a fire started on the eighth floor. Flames soon engulfed the factory. Within 45 minutes, 146 workers, more than half of them Jewish women, were dead.

On March 25th, as they did six days a week, the employees of the Triangle Waist Company would begin arriving at the Asch Building around 8:00 a.m. lest their pay be docked for missing the start of the workday at 9:00 a.m. They would line up and wait at the corner of Washington Place and Greene Street for the freight elevators that would take them to the space rented by the Triangle Company on the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors.

By the time of the fire, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris were already known as the "Shirtwaist Kings." These two Russian Jews had arrived in New York in the early 1890s. They formed a partnership that quickly became one of the most successful in the garment industry. In 1901, the year the Asch Building was built, the Triangle Company signed a lease for the 9th floor. By 1909 the factory had expanded to the 8th and 10th floors. In 1911, the Triangle Waist Co. was the largest factory of its type in New York, turning out 2,000 shirtwaists per day.

Blanck and Harris were known for their disregard of workers' rights. The owners refused to acknowledge the union and violated existing laws, which offered minimal protection to workers. Triangle employees had to buy their own materials, including needles and thread, pay for any mistakes they made, could not talk or sing during the work day, and suffered the humiliation of monitored bathroom breaks.

The women working at the Triangle Factory at the time of the 1911 fire were mainly young immigrants from Italy and the shtetls of Eastern Europe. They had survived pogroms and poverty, made the journey to America (often alone), and were struggling to establish themselves in a new land, while saving to support and bring over family members. They knew that conditions at the Triangle Factory were unpleasant, even dangerous, but that a job there was also desirable: the factory was almost always busy, which meant steady pay.

Fires were common in the garment industry, in part because, due to insurance policies, they provided a way for owners to get rid of excess inventory and keep pace with changing fashions without suffering a financial loss. By 1911, there had already been numerous small fires at the Triangle factory.

In late March, the six-week busy season was almost over. Dresses with lace and embroidered waists made with a sheer, light cotton fabric called "lawn" were a fashion rage that year. To keep up with demand for this

popular style, workers at the Triangle were putting in nine-hour days on weekdays and seven hours on Saturday.

The catastrophic fire began near closing time. The fire marshal would determine that, despite the factory's ban on smoking, a cigarette tossed in a scrap bin on the 8th floor started the fire. The flammable material all around the shop—imagine the cotton scraps in the bin, the tissue paper patterns on the tables, the half-finished blouses, the cotton fibers in the air—made it inevitable that the fire would spread rapidly. There were fire pails scattered about, but they were of little help.

About 180 people were working on the 8th floor. Some tried to escape through the regular exit on the Greene Street side of the building. At the end of a normal day, workers were funneled into a line at this door so that guards could search their bags for a piece of lace, scrap of fabric, or a blouse that might be hidden there. Other workers tried to escape through the Washington Street door only to find that it was locked. Precious minutes passed before anyone on the 9th floor realized what was happening one flight below, making the fire all the more deadly. Meanwhile, workers on the 8th floor alerted the bosses in their offices on the 10th floor—Blanck and Harris were able to escape to the roof unharmed.

Some workers managed to escape by using the elevators until they stopped working. Others climbed onto the rickety fire escape. When terrified workers approached the stairway on the Washington Street side, they found themselves jammed against doors that were designed to swing inward. A machinist finally found a key and opened the doors, allowing some workers to flee down the stairs.

Fire engines left the station less than two minutes after the alarm was sounded. As they approached the building, they saw flames in all the windows on the 8th floor and workers struggling to escape. Neither their ladders nor their hoses reached past the 6th floor, which meant they were about 30 feet too short to help the trapped workers.

The fire was so intense and spread so quickly that within five minutes, desperate workers began jumping. The firemen set up their nets, but no jumpers survived. The nets were simply too weak to sustain bodies falling from such height.

The conflagration was over within half an hour. By 5:15 p.m., the fire was out on all three floors. The fire itself did not last long but its impact would be felt for decades. Many New Yorkers witnessed the horrific event firsthand, including Frances Perkins, F.D.R.'s future Secretary of Labor (and the first woman to hold such a position), who was having tea nearby. She would later say that what she saw that day marked the beginning of her career as a labor reformer.

Only five days after the fire, Blanck and Harris reopened for business in a different building on University Place. They would remain in business together for several more years and never changed their ways. The new factory was not fireproof, nor did it have fire escapes or adequate exits.

Prosecutors could not prove that Blanck and Harris had intentionally locked the doors of the Asch building. Their criminal trial for manslaughter ended with an acquittal. They even received a \$200,000 insurance settlement. In 1914, Blanck and Harris settled 23 individual civil suits by paying each of the families a week's pay, or \$75 per life lost. The Asch building continued to operate as a factory until 1929 when its new owner donated it to NYU. It was designated a National Historical Landmark in 1991.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/triangle-waist-company>.



Washington Square Park

Stop 6: Washington Square Park

7 Washington Square North
New York, NY, 10003

A week after the Triangle fire, a large funeral procession organized by Jewish unions set out from the *Forward* building. Another procession, made up mostly of non-Jewish union members, suffragists, and socialists, met them at Washington Square. The two groups, numbering over 140,000, marched through a driving rain up Fifth Avenue; close to 250,000 others stood along the route. As a gesture of solidarity and

respect for the dead, the marchers carried no political or religious symbols.

While a majority of the workers at the Triangle fire were Jewish immigrants, the disaster quickly became an American tragedy—one to which the labor movement, the City of New York, and the Jewish community each laid claim.

Immediately after the fire, coroners had taken the bodies to a temporary morgue where for four days, survivors, family members, and friends waited in the rain for a chance to walk up and down the rows of corpses, many burnt beyond recognition. By March 30th, all but seven of the bodies had been identified. Fraternal orders, *landsmanshaft* societies, and synagogues came forward to bury their members. Communal agencies as well as other charitable organizations helped families without such affiliations.

But what would happen to the unidentified dead? Where would they be buried? What prayers would be said? Within days of the fire, labor organizers, the Jewish community, and the city were at odds over who should memorialize the unknown victims.

Unions saw the fire as a terrible and avoidable tragedy, one that could be used to win support for labor causes. Representatives of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) and the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) asked the city to allow them to have a public funeral for the unidentified victims. A public funeral would emphasize the universality of the tragedy and direct attention to the poor working conditions in factories, the need for reform, and the role of unions in fighting for the working class.

While the unions had a large Jewish following, the Jewish clergy objected to politicizing a religious ritual. Many in the Jewish community felt that the unidentified victims should be given a Jewish burial and were offended by the idea that the city would conduct a private funeral.

Meanwhile, Christians—particularly Catholics, who knew that many Italian immigrants had worked at the factory—were opposed to administering Jewish funeral rites to the unidentified victims, one or more of whom might not be Jewish.

With religious and labor groups vying to bury the unidentified dead, the mayor determined that the city should take charge—it would pay the funeral costs and bury the dead at a non-denominational cemetery in Brooklyn.

The decision sparked protest among union supporters. Three days after the fire, Local 25 of the ILGWU, the Women's Trade Union League, and the Workman's Circle distributed flyers in English, Yiddish, and Italian announcing that "a great silent procession" would take place on Wednesday, April 5th.

This procession began on the Lower East Side at the *Forward* building. Six horses pulled an empty hearse, followed by survivors of the fire and members of 60 different ILGWU locals. Meanwhile, non-Jewish union members, socialists, and middle-class suffragists began their procession at Fourth Avenue and 22nd Street.

At Washington Square Park, the two processions converged. Arm-in-arm at the head of the march were three officers of the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) including Rose Schneiderman, a former garment worker and union organizer, who three days earlier had given an impassioned speech at a meeting to memorialize the fire victims at the "Metropolitan Opera House.

Schneiderman marched with her WTUL colleagues, Mary Dreier, the wealthy suffragist and labor supporter, and Helen Marot, secretary of the League, in "the largest demonstration ever made here by working people," as the *New York Times* reported. The march "practically emptied the downtown and Brooklyn lofts and factories."

Meanwhile, a small group of city officials accompanied the unidentified victims from the morgue to the Brooklyn cemetery where a Catholic priest, an Episcopalian minister, and a rabbi officiated at a private ceremony. In 1912, with little fanfare, a monument created by sculptor Evelyn Longman would be placed at the site. Union leaders erected their own memorial, an eternal flame, next to the plots of 14 victims in a Jewish cemetery in Queens.

In the aftermath of the fire, city and state politicians recognized that the public expected them to take action to improve working conditions. "I can't begin to tell you how disturbed the people were everywhere," the future cabinet secretary Frances Perkins recalled many years later. "It was a terrible thing for the people of the City of New York and the State of New York to face."

In the spring of 1911, the governor of New York created a Factory Investigating Commission, whose members spent five years inspecting factories in every corner of New York State.

The Commission wrote more than 35 bills, which the New York State Legislature adopted. The result was a sweeping revision of the state's labor code and the adoption of fire safety measures that would be a model for the whole country.

Among the commission members was Frances Perkins, who connected the Triangle fire to the enactment of new legislation that protected working people. She said many years later that the laws seemed "in some way to have paid the debt society owed to those children, those young people who lost their lives in the Triangle Fire."

Other states followed New York's lead, and with pressure from labor unions and support from the Roosevelt Administration, the federal government eventually enacted laws stipulating minimum wages, maximum hours, unemployment insurance, and an end to child labor.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/washington-square-park>.



Photo by Keiko Niwa, courtesy of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum

Additional Stop: The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

97 Orchard Street
New York, NY, 10002

Take a look back in time and see what the home life of a Triangle factory worker might have been like at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum that tells the stories of the working-class immigrant families that lived here between 1863 and 1935. The apartments in what was a typical tenement building served as short-term housing for immigrants from 20 different nations.

The Lower East Side Tenement Museum tells the stories of the working-class immigrant families that made 97 Orchard Street their home between 1863 and 1935. The apartments in what was a typical tenement building served as short-term housing for immigrants from 20 different nations.

Guided tours offer visitors the chance to explore six restored apartments and learn how immigrants from Italy, Ireland, Germany, and Russia made their way in a new country at four different historic moments.

Get a glimpse into what the life of a Triangle worker might have been like through the “Piecing It Together” tour, which contrasts the experiences of a garment worker in the piecework system versus a factory like the Triangle.

Outside the building, the museum offers guided walking tours to explore the neighborhood. Tours such as “Immigrant Soles” allow visitors to discover the places central to immigrant life and peel back the layers of history in the neighborhood today. Additional talks, workshops, and living history programs provide other opportunities to explore the immigrant experience.

Committed to promoting tolerance, the museum uses historical perspectives to connect visitors with contemporary labor and immigration issues. By sharing these stories, the Tenement Museum honors the history of ordinary, working-class people and shows how their stories shed light on broader trends.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/lower-east-side-tenement-museum>.



Photograph by Sari Weintraub, courtesy of Henry Street Settlement

Additional Stop: Henry Street Settlement House

265 Henry Street
New York, NY 10002

The Henry Street Settlement, co-founded in 1893 by affluent German Jewish American Lillian Wald, provided healthcare, education, and vocational training for the immigrant community on the Lower East Side. Wald was one of many middle-class progressive reformers who decried and set out to remedy the lack of social services for the poor.

Wald worked tirelessly to aid garment workers, lobbying for workplace safety laws and more stringent fire regulations.

The Henry Street Settlement House began in a tenement at 27 Jefferson Street. Two years later, with a donation from philanthropist Jacob Henry Schiff, it moved to the home it occupies today at 265 Henry Street. Under Wald's leadership, by 1903 the organization had expanded to several nearby buildings.

One of several settlement houses on the Lower East Side, the organization was an important resource for Triangle workers.

Henry Street not only provided direct services but also functioned as a political base for women, with the staff and volunteers helping female workers to unionize. Lillian Wald's progressive politics extended to the rights of workers, especially women and children, as well as housing, trade unionism, and women's suffrage.

She served on many committees to improve the lives of immigrants, including one she persuaded the governor to form—the New York Commission on Immigration. She also served as a mediator during garment strikes.

To improve workplace conditions, Wald served on the Joint Board of Sanitary Control in the Cloak, Suit, and Skirt industry. By the time of the Triangle fire, the commission had already investigated over 1,200 factories, recommending fire safety and sanitation measures.

After the fire Wald demanded accountability from officials stating, “The conditions as they now exist are hideous and damnable. Our investigations have shown that there are hundreds of buildings which invite disaster just as much as did the Asch structure. The crux of the situation is that there is no direct responsibility. Divided, always divided! The responsibility rests nowhere!”

Today the Henry Street Settlement House carries on Wald's legacy, serving as an important resource on the Lower East Side by providing social services, arts, and health care programs to the community.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/henry-street-settlement-house>.



Photograph of Carnegie Hall by David Samuel

Additional Stop: Carnegie Hall

881 7th Ave
New York, NY 10019

On January 2, 1910, as the shirtwaist strike dragged on, the Women's Trade Union League, the Political Equity League, New York's Liberal Club, and the Socialist Women's Committee sponsored a meeting at Carnegie Hall to protest the mistreatment of strikers and to raise funds to help women who had been arrested.

The hall was filled to capacity with both workers and their upper-class supporters who had come together to discuss the police and magistrates' abuse of power in the arrest of female strikers, some of whom had been sentenced to hard labor at the workhouse.

Over 300 women sat on the stage with paper sashes bearing the word "Arrested," while 20 women in the front row wore sashes that said "Workhouse." Banners reading, "A Striker is Not a Criminal" and "Everyone Has the Legal Right to Picket" hung from the walls.

Speakers decried the actions of police, judges, and other city officials. "We are here because the weakest and most defenseless of our people have been denied the equal protection of the law," one man said. "Strikers described their experiences on the picket line and in the courthouse. An officer of the Women's Trade Union League spoke of the unity and sisterhood displayed throughout the long weeks of the strike.

The unity was already frayed however. Some in the audience were alarmed by socialist undertones in the speeches. J.P. Morgan's daughter Anne, who had strongly supported the strikers, told the *New York Times*, "I believe they have been very badly treated by the courts... but it is reprehensible for the Socialists to take advantage at this time to preach their fanatical doctrines." After the Carnegie Hall meeting, Morgan and other like-minded women tempered their support for the strike.

On the other hand, labor papers questioned whether the upper-class reformers genuinely supported their working-class sisters or were more interested in pushing a suffrage agenda. These divisions would continue to grow in the months ahead.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/carnegie-hall>.



Stereograph of Jefferson Market Courthouse,
courtesy of the New York Public Library

Additional Stop: Jefferson Market Courthouse

425 Sixth Avenue
New York, NY, 10011

Today a branch of the New York Public Library, in 1909 this handsome building served as night court for striking garment workers arrested for picketing. Once here, the strikers could expect to face unsympathetic magistrates who did not hesitate to hand down harsh sentences. Hoping to increase public support and publicity about the treatment strikers received, reformers and society women joined the picket lines. Some even spent the night at the courtroom and provided the necessary funds for bail.

The Tammany political machine, which controlled politics in New York City, sided with the factory owners and looked the other way when they hired scabs, thugs, and prostitutes to disrupt orderly picket lines. An assistant cashier at the Triangle Factory recalled that, “you could get a man on the beat to look away by giving him a box of cigars with a \$100 bill in it. Then the hoodlums hired by the company could do their work without interference. They couldn’t hit women, even on the picket line. So they brought their lady friends-prostitutes. They knew how to start fights.”

Despite the fact that it was perfectly lawful to picket peacefully, hundreds of women were fined or jailed on charges such as vagrancy, solicitation, disorderly conduct, and assault. Recognizing the abuse that strikers suffered at the hands of police and the violation of their rights, middle-class members of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL) sought to publicize the plight of their working-class sisters. WTUL women joined the picket lines, hoping to dissuade police from unlawful arrests or abusive behavior. When police mistakenly arrested WTUL members, including on one occasion the League’s president Mary Dreier, public opinion shifted to the side of the striking women.

In December 1909, the wealthy suffragist Alva Belmont spent an evening observing the proceedings at the Jefferson Market Courthouse. Adorned with furs and a large black hat with feathers, Belmont sat for hours on a hard wooden bench. She watched through opera glasses as the magistrates dealt with a series of petty criminals. Just before midnight, police began to bring in striking garment workers; their offense had been yelling ‘scab’ at strikebreakers.

Several hours later, four more strikers were brought in; their bail was set at \$100 each. Alva Belmont offered to pay the \$400. Since she did not have the full amount with her, the judge was required to ask whether she had property worth at least twice that amount above and beyond any debts. Mrs. Belmont offered her Madison Avenue mansion — worth nearly half a million dollars.

Belmont’s offer to use her mansion as collateral for striking workers was a public relations triumph for the strikers. The *New York World* wrote, “For almost the first time women of widely different social ranks have joined forces in the common cause which, though directly for the betterment of one element, is for the ultimate political advancement of all.”

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/jefferson-market>.



The Metropolitan Opera House (1883-1967), Detroit Publishing Company, 1905

Additional Stop: Metropolitan Opera House

88 West End Avenue
New York, NY 10023

Barely a week after the Triangle fire, a meeting was held at the Metropolitan Opera House to memorialize the victims. The crowd was galvanized when organizer and former garment worker Rose Schneiderman stepped onto the stage. A 29-year-old Jewish immigrant, she demanded accountability and called for a strong working-class movement. Her powerful speech would influence reform efforts for decades to come.

Frances Perkins, F.D.R.'s future Secretary of Labor remembered that in the days following the fire, there was a need to turn the tragedy "into some kind of victory, [take] some kind of constructive action." The Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) sponsored one of the largest post-fire meetings on April 2, 1911.

With a mixed audience of garment workers and middle-class reformers, the upper galleries of the Opera House were filled with Lower East Siders, and the orchestra with women "trailing furs and feathers." Speakers talked about reform efforts in the wake of the Triangle tragedy. Middle-class progressives advocated for a Bureau of Fire Prevention; the workers were unenthusiastic since such committees rarely involved anyone from the unions.

As the two groups continued to disagree, emotions ran high. WTUL organizer and former garment worker, Rose Schneiderman, a petite red head known for her oratory skills, began to speak. She told the crowd of 3,500:

"I would be a traitor to those poor burned bodies, if I were to come here to talk good fellowship. We have tried you good people of the public and we have found you wanting... This is not the first time girls have been burned alive in this city. Every week I must learn of the untimely death of one of my sister workers. Every year thousands of us are maimed. The life of men and women is so cheap, and property is so sacred! There are so many of us for one job, it matters little if one hundred and forty-odd are burned to death. *We have tried you citizens!* ... I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here, too much blood has been spilled. I know from experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. And the only way is through a strong working-class movement."

Many years later Frances Perkins recalled that this was the first time she had ever heard Rose Schneiderman speak. She described "a very small [woman with] red hair, fiery red hair, and blazing eyes and pretty too... she made a remarkable speech which really stirred people."

Over the next decades, Schneiderman would act on her frustration with the "good people" who spoke of reform but tolerated a system which exploited labor. She would help make New York State's fire and workplace safety legislation a model, and through her friendship with Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, in time she would influence the federal government's policies, too.

On the web at <http://jwa.org/triangle/map/metropolitan-opera-house>.