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Triangle Factory Fire

1911

The Merchants' Association of New York

"To foster the trade and welfare of New York"

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54-60 (OLD NO. 66-72) LAFAYETTE ST.

March 27th, 1911.

Hon. William J. Gaynor, Mayor;
City Hall,
New York City.

Dear Sir:

The shocking calamity of Saturday, by which about 150 persons lost their lives in a factory fire, makes imperative the consideration of what this community is doing to protect the lives and property of its people against such awful destruction.

This City is now spending upwards of \$8,000,000. a year for the control of fires, but we may safely say that the measures taken by it for the prevention of fires, or for the control of fires in their incipency, are fragmentary, inadequate, illogical and in large degree resultless. At least five divisions of government are concerned with this function, and no one of them performs it well. The result of delegating this function to several distinct governmental agencies is conflicting jurisdiction, half-way performance of the function, feeble enforcement of the law, constant and needless destruction of property, and an occasional terrible calamity involving great loss of human life.

The branches of government each of which has partial and conflicting jurisdiction over this subject, are the Building Department, the Tenement House Department, the Fire Department, the Department of

TRIANGLE FIRE
&
AFTERMATH

Water Supply, Gas & Electricity, and the State Bureau of Factory Inspection. None of these has the comprehensive powers necessary to deal effectively with fire prevention. The Building Department and the Tenement House Department have jurisdiction over structural features and fire escapes; the Department of Water Supply, Gas & Electricity has control over electric wiring; the Fire Department has control of preventive appliances; and the State Bureau of Factory Inspection has control over sanitary conditions, but none has the comprehensive power of coordinating all the conditions necessary to safety and necessary to continuous and effective inspection and enforcement of law, without which safety is impossible.

The Merchants' Association of New York, therefore, has consistently advocated during the past three years the concentration in the hands of the Fire Department of the authority necessary for effective fire prevention. It now begs to call to your attention the recommendations upon that point contained in the last report made to you by the Fire Commissioner. Commissioner Waldo advocates a Bureau of Fire Prevention which shall be clothed with all the functions and powers as to fire prevention which are now distributed among the several bureaus named, and the conferring upon such bureau of any additional powers necessary to enable it summarily to enforce the provisions of law.

Such a Bureau would have for its fundamental purpose the maintenance of constant and thorough inspection of all premises, with a view to compelling the abolition of dangerous conditions, the installation and maintenance of automatic and other appliances for the prompt extinction of fires in their incipiency, and the provision and maintenance of adequate exits and fire escapes, and possibly the

Hon. William J. Gaynor,

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enforcement of fire drills by employees.

Without constant and comprehensive inspection, the proper enforcement of existing laws and ordinances is impossible. The present system of dividing the jurisdiction among several agencies results in an infrequent and only partial inspection and spasmodic and uncertain enforcement. None of the City Departments having to do with this subject is equipped with an adequate force of Inspectors, and none of them has the summary powers of enforcement necessary to maintain proper conditions. The remedy, we repeat, is to be found in a consolidation of the proposed functions within the Fire Department and the creation therein of machinery adequate to maintain constant and vigilant supervision.

This Association has hitherto repeatedly urged upon Committees of the Legislature and upon City officials the necessity and desirability of such a Bureau of Fire Prevention. It emphatically endorses the views in relation thereto expressed by Commissioner Waldo, and it respectfully requests that you as Mayor urge upon the Legislature the necessity of enacting the legislation necessary for the creation of the desired Bureau. There are now pending before the Legislature two drafts of a proposed new Charter for this City, in which the subject of Fire Prevention is adequately treated by providing for the creation of such a Bureau as that outlined. In view, however, of the possible failure of legislation on the City Charter during the present session, this Association urges that a separate amendment to the present City Charter be prepared and introduced, in order that the effective Bureau of Fire Prevention advocated by Commissioner Waldo, and strongly urged during three years past by this Association, may be provided for by immediate legislation.

Very truly yours,
THE MERCHANTS' ASSOCIATION OF NEW YORK,

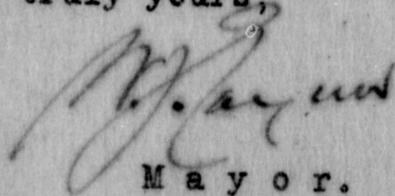
By *Henry R. Lowndes*, President.

Apl. 5, 1911. k

Dear Mr. Underwood:

I thank you for your letter. I visited the big building where the fire was, and had my eyes opened to the fact that you may be no more safe in a fireproof building than in any other kind of a building if the combustible material in the building is sufficient to make a fire.

Very truly yours,



Mayor.

H. M. Underwood, Esq.,
140, Liberty Street,
New York City.

m

April 10, 1911.

Personal

Dear Mr. Wright:

I thank you for your letter and will read it carefully, as I am certain that you wish to advise me properly. I visited the building in which the fire occurred. One thing stood out plainly, that the Chief omitted for some reason to have fire sprinklers in it, whereas I know them to be in buildings where they are of little or no use.

Sincerely yours,

W. J. May
Mayor.

Mr. Wright,
Care of The Globe,
5, Dey Street,
New York City.

April 11, 1911.m

Dear Dr. Crofutt:

I am very glad to receive your letter, but it is my duty to say that you are very much astray. The Tenement House Department had nothing to do with the Asch building, as you call it. It has to do only with tenements in which people live. In the next place the city has no building department. Each borough has a separate building department. I am proposing in the new charter to have a city building department to supersede these five separate building departments. As it is the city government has no jurisdiction over the construction of buildings. The amount of misinformation on this subject is astonishing. Let me also say to you that there has been no cutting of expenses in the reduction of inspectors. Nevertheless you offhand condemn it as criminal. Did you visit the Asch building and go on the floors where the fire occurred? Do you know that the building was absolutely

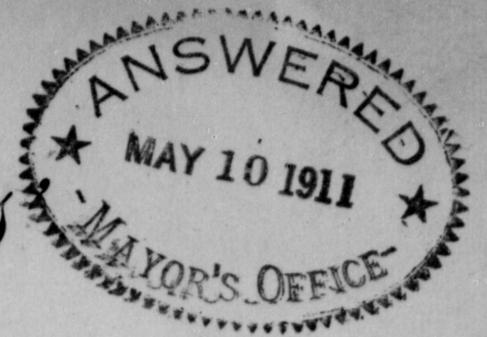
fireproof and practically escaped damage? Do you know that the fire was confined to the combustible material on the floors? It does not matter that a building is fireproof when it is filled with combustible material. Such material will burn up. What is your understanding of the difficulty or fault? Have you examined into the matter sufficiently to know? If so I should be very glad to have you inform me on the subject.

Very truly yours,

W. J. Gaynor
Mayor.

Dr. Edward F. Crofutt,
1053, Southern Boulevard,
N. Y. City.

Board of Coroners
Borough of Manhattan,
New York.
70-74 Lafayette Street.



ISRAEL L. FEINBERG,
 PRESIDENT.
 JAMES E. WINTERBOTTOM.
 HERMAN HELLENSTEIN.
 HERMAN W. HOLTZHAUSER.
 ANTONIO DALESSANDRO,
 CHIEF CLERK.

New York City May 6th 1911.

Hon. William J. Gaynor, Mayor,
 City Hall.

Dear Sir:

We are forwarding herewith a copy of the verdict found Monday, April 17th, by a coroner's jury sitting in inquest on deaths occasioned by the fire in the Asch Building on March 25th last.

The Board of Coroners for Manhattan have not been content with the performance of their routine duty in this case. The disaster was of such terrible extent, the loss of life so great, and, to our minds so totally unnecessary had proper precautions been taken, that we feel that such a sacrifice should not be allowed to pass with the mere punishment of the men responsible. It will double the awfulness of the disaster if no less is learned from the 146 lives sacrificed to modern business greed; the inefficacy of the building laws or the inefficiency of the enforcement of those laws.

A jury composed of architects, builders, engineers, contractors and others interested in the real estate business, have rendered their verdict and accompanied it by recommendations of changes in the laws which shall insure against a repetition of this holocaust. Their recommendations, based on the findings of fact as to the cause of the loss of life in the Asch Building fire and on their knowledge of what the requirements should be in building a structure that shall not afterwards prove a menace to the human beings employed therein, are, we believe, entitled to an unusual consideration.

In making the selection for this jury the Board of Coroners believed that the results now at hand, and which had been anticipated by us, would be but a slight portion of the total results. We hoped that future generations might profit from our work; we believed that factory conditions would be bettered by increased protection against fire; we believed that the conditions for factory workers would be ameliorated by compelling all buildings in which workers were to be crowded, to be so arranged that there should not be added to the ordinary danger of the employment the additional danger of fire or panic. We hoped to see the effort

We find that the said Mary Herman came to her death on the 25th day of March, 1911, at premises 23-29 Washington Place, by asphyxia by smoke, charred, caused by conflagration which originated on the eighth floor of said premises, consuming the interior of the eighth, ninth and tenth floors, in a manner unknown to the jury, and that the body of deceased was found on the ninth floor of said premises close to the doorway of the stairs on the Washington Place side, which door, according to the evidence presented to the jury, was found to be locked at the time of and during said conflagration.

We find that the deceased attempted to escape by the said door, and that her failure to so escape from smoke and flame which caused her death is due to the fact that said door was locked.

We find that Isaac Harris and Max Blanck, doing business under the firm name and style of The Triangle Waist Company, lessees and occupants of said floors, are responsible for the death of the deceased, because of culpable and criminal negligence in failing to observe the required legal precaution of leaving the said door unlocked.

Legislation cannot eliminate all loss of life by fire or panic, but proper laws, properly enforced can certainly lessen the loss of life from these causes. The evidence submitted

to this jury shows that there were employed on the eighth, ninth and tenth floors of said premises about five hundred persons, of whom about eighty per cent. were females, and of whom about two hundred and thirty-five were employed on the ninth floor, where nearly all the loss of life by flames and smoke occurred.

We are convinced by the evidence that, not only had no attention been given to, and no means provided for, the hasty exit of those employed in the said premises, but on the contrary, their safety had been utterly disregarded.

We find that one of the tables on which the machines were attached, at which the employes worked, was seventy-six feet long; that it extended from within thirteen and one-quarter ($13 \frac{1}{4}$) inches of the front wall, at one end, to within sixteen (16) inches of a partition, at the other end, thus leaving only two passageways, of about thirteen and one-quarter ($13 \frac{1}{4}$) inches, and one of sixteen (16) inches, through which the said employes were obliged to pass, to reach the stairs and elevators.

The foregoing is a condition that certainly should not obtain. If there is any law that permits it, it should be immediately repealed. If there is no law governing it, such a law should at once be enacted, which will prohibit such a con-

dition; and the law should be so framed that its enforcement should rest upon one single department of the city government. There should be no divided responsibility.

It is the opinion of this jury that all fire escapes should be regularly inspected by the Fire Department, and when such inspection reveals non-conformity with the law it should be immediately reported in writing to the Bureau of Buildings, which shall at once order the owner of the building on which said fire escape is installed to have such changes made as to make it conform to the law, and the Bureau of Buildings shall have power to enforce such order.

We recommend that where plans are filed with the Bureau of Buildings for the erection of a new building, or for alterations to a building, the application for such sets forth for what purpose said building is to be used; that the use of said building, or any part thereof, should not be permitted for any purpose other than stated in such application, without the written consent of the Superintendent of Buildings, who shall not give such consent unless the building shall be so constructed as to conform to the law governing that class of buildings, and for which purpose it is to be used when so altered that it will conform to such law.

We recommend that before any building, or part thereof,

shall be used for manufacturing purposes, plans shall be filed with the Bureau of Buildings showing the location of machinery, stationary tables, work benches, etc., with exits, and stating the number of employes; that these plans shall meet the approval of the Superintendent of Buildings, who, before approval shall issue, shall find that the means of exit are such as will enable the escape of employes in case of emergency.

We recommend that in all buildings where a large number of employes are engaged, a compulsory fire drill shall be established under a system to be approved by the Fire Department.

We recommend that a system of inspection of Buildings used for factory purposes, at intervals not exceeding six months, shall be established, to insure conformity with the laws and regulations of the Fire and Building departments.

We recommend extended use of automatic sprinklers.

We recommend that all stairways to the top floors of all buildings used for manufacturing purposes hereafter constructed shall be extended to the roof.

We recommend the requirement that in all buildings where there are more than twenty occupants, and more than an average of one person per one hundred (100) square feet of floor area

there shall be posted rules to be followed in case of fire, and that a copy of such rules shall be required by the Fire Department.

We further recommend that a suitable axe be placed at each exit door in all lofts used for manufacturing purposes.

Imperial
Russian Consulate General

No. 1021.

New York, June 30, 1911.



*See DeForest
July 5/11*

Sir:

Among the victims of the Ash Building disaster were many Russian subjects, whose relatives in Russia have addressed this Consulate General with the request to procure for them benefits from an association or committee for the relief of relatives of the victims, which I understand was organized under the patronage of your Honor. I therefore take the liberty of addressing your Honor with the request kindly to inform me whether such an association in fact exists, and if so, whether relatives of the victims living outside the United States have any title to benefits.

I have the honor to be,

Yours very respectfully,

fe Russian IMPERIAL Consul General.

Baron Ushakov

To the Honorable

William J. Gaynor,

Mayor of the City of New York.