

Analyzing Newspaper Coverage of the General Slocum and Triangle Fire Memorials

“I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work.”

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During the earlier twentieth century, the United States was experiencing an industrial revolution and an increasing number of immigrants. Workers, often immigrants, experienced harsh working conditions which often led to dangerous situations. One example of a dangerous working situation was the fire that took place at the *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory*. This fire claimed the lives of many women and immigrants in a building with few safety regulations. The aftermath garnered a large amount of attention from the public and resulted in legislation that provided more protection for workers. Another fire that claimed the lives of many immigrants was the *General Slocum* fire. Even though the victims were mainly women and children, the fire did not gain nearly as much lasting attention compared to the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. Newspapers provide the public with information about events that occur both locally and nationally. The information presented in newspaper articles can help to shape a person's stance on a tragic event. The coverage provided in newspapers can vary depending on the author, the nature of the situation that is being reported on, and the information available. Newspapers provided important information to the public about these events, however, the coverage that these two fires received, particularly their memorials, varied drastically. The newspaper articles covering the memorials of the *General Slocum* fire and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire in New York City present many differences when they are closely examined, such as length of the articles, the detail of the information included, and the amount of commentary provided. While both fires were tragic events with similar demographics of victims, due to the central location of

the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, the newspaper coverage of the fire was more abundant because it was easier for civilians to emotionally connect with the tragedy and its significant impacts afterward.

The significant differences between the newspaper coverage of the *General Slocum* fire and Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire memorials require the understanding of the events of the fires themselves and the newspaper coverage they received. On June 15, 1904, a fire started in the lamp room below the main deck of the *General Slocum* excursion ship when it was traveling down the East River to the Long Island Sound for a Sunday school day trip. As the fire spread, passengers tried to escape, but many failed to survive due to panic, rotten life preservers, lifeboats tied down by wire, and a rapidly spreading fire fueled by the ship's wood construction.¹ The event became one of New York City's deadliest tragedies before the events of September 11, 2001. One thousand and twenty-one people lost their lives because of the fire, warranting press coverage from newspapers such as the *New York Times*. This press coverage started as early as the day after the fire until years after the disaster. The day after the disaster, the front page of the *New York Times* was consumed by what was known at that time about the fire with the headline "1,000 Lives May be Lost in Burning of the Excursion Boat Gen. Slocum." This article covered several aspects of the fire including the demographic of the victims and the rescue efforts that ensued.² This coverage shows that the event itself was covered by newspapers. If it was not an important event, it would not have made it onto the front page of the *New York Times*, let alone

1. Edward T. O'Donnell, *Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum*, New York, (Broadway Books, 2004), 97-147.

2. "1,000 Lives May Be Lost in Burning of the Excursion Boat Gen. Slocum," *New York Times* June 16, 1904.

occupy the whole front page of that day's edition. The high number of casualties that resulted from the fire and the newspaper coverage it received raises the question of what coverage the memorials honoring the deadly fire received.

With the *General Slocum* fire being such a deadly disaster, it received a monument. According to the *New York Times* the monument received ten thousand dollars in funding by the state senate in January of 1905 in the Lutheran Cemetery, where the unknown victims were buried, at Middle Village in Long Island to honor the unknown victims of the *General Slocum* fire.³ The Monument in the Lutheran Cemetery was unveiled on the one-year anniversary of the fire with the youngest survivor, Adella, helping to unveil the memorial during the ceremony.⁴ The monument provided the families a way to know that their loved ones weren't forgotten and with the featuring of the youngest survivor in the unveiling ceremony highlighted the level of tragedy that occurred considering that over a thousand people lost their lives, including women and children. However, people are resilient, just like the youngest survivor of the fire. In addition to the monument, there is a fountain in Tompkins Square Park in New York City dedicated to honoring the victims of the *General Slocum* fire which was dedicated in 1906 and donated by the Sympathy Society of German Ladies.⁵ The society's involvement in the memorial is reflective of the large number of Germans who were on the *General Slocum* that day. The memorials

3. "For a Slocum Memorial," *New York Times*, January 27, 1905.

4. O'Donnell, *Ship Ablaze: The Tragedy of the Steamboat General Slocum*, New York, (Broadway Books, 2004), 287-96.

5. "Tompkins Square Park: Slocum Memorial Fountain: NYC Parks," New York City Parks, Accessed October 22, 2024, <https://www.nycgovparks.org/parks/tompkins-square-park/highlights/17099>

honoring the events of the deadliest tragedy in New York City before September 11, 2001, logically received coverage from some of the city's newspapers.

Both the monument in the Lutheran Cemetery and the fountain in Tompkins Square Park received coverage from the New York Times. In "For a Slocum Memorial" by the *New York Times*, published on January 26, 1905, it is reported that a bill was proposed by the state senate to provide \$10,000 for the memorial which became the fountain in Tompkins Square Park dedicated to the *General Slocum* victims.⁶ The article itself was only two sentences long and provided brief information about the commission that was to be put in place while the memorial was being built. No information was provided on the memorial design or the location. There is not one clear answer as to why that information was not included in the article. Maybe it was not available to the public yet or the plans simply didn't exist. Regardless of reason, the coverage was not detailed. The second article that discusses the *General Slocum* fountain is titled "Mr. Littleton Offended," published by the New York Daily Tribune on May 24, 1905, focuses on a dispute rather than the memorial itself. The dispute in question is one between the borough president and the park commissioner over the borough president allegedly being left off the committee to welcome President Roosevelt for the dedication of the *General Slocum* statue. The park commissioner responded saying that "There is to be no such committee and that he was not aware that the borough president had been ignored."⁷ It is logical that a newspaper would focus on the disagreements surrounding the unveiling of the memorial instead of the memorial design

6. "4,000 At Memorial of Slocum Tragedy: Survivors of Disaster and Kin of Its 1,021 Victims Gather at Queens Cemetery," *New York Times*, June 16, 1932.

7. "Mr. Littleton Offended," *New York Daily Tribune*, May 24, 1905.

because conflict sells and papers need to sell to make a profit. Disagreements are also more lighthearted to cover, than the tragic deaths of over a thousand people. Newspapers cover not only the events themselves, but the circumstances surrounding them. Memorials involve not just the art itself, but the circumstances surrounding the event and how the community responds to it.

Another aspect of the *General Slocum* fire memorial coverage in newspapers was the remembrance services that occurred on the anniversary of the fire. From the articles available, there were three articles discussing the remembrance services that occurred in the years after the disaster of the *General Slocum* fire. The first one was titled “4,000 at Memorial of Slocum Tragedy” published by the *New York Times* on June 16, 1932. It was six paragraphs long and focused on the total attendance, specific figures in attendance, four thousand people to be more specific, and who led the services.⁸ The second article covering the remembrance services was “Slocum Service is Held” by the *New York Times* which was published on June 16, 1938. This article is three paragraphs long and covers how many people were in attendance, this time around one thousand people attended the services, where the service was held, and who conducted the service.⁹ The third article is titled “Slocum Victims Honored” published by the *New York Times* on June 18, 1951. It is two paragraphs long and provides the information that ten survivors of the tragedy attended the service, but not the total number of people in attendance. It also includes a quote from the president of the Organization of the *General Slocum* Survivors, C.R Sackman, which stated “The anniversary of the disaster pointed up the continuing need of enforcing safety

8. “4,000 At Memorial of Slocum Tragedy,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1932.

9. “Slocum Service Is Held,” *New York Times*, June 16, 1938.

regulations on sea, land, and air transportation.”¹⁰ This article focused more on the survivors instead of the memorial and those who lost their lives in the tragedy. It can be theorized that the coverage of the service became sparser since the location and the message stayed relatively the same and less people started to attend the remembrance service, so that space in the paper could be utilized to cover a different story. The articles focusing on the remembrances were often brief and only contained minimal facts about the services compared to telling a story of those who were lost and what the tragedy means for the city.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire happened on March 25, 1911, at a shirtwaist factory in New York City. The fire spread quickly and blocked in workers on the ninth floor of the building, leading to several workers jumping to avoid being killed by the spread of the fire. In the *New York Times* article, the coroner was supposedly “crying like a child” when he gave his statement about the fire.¹¹ The aftermath of the fire brought about discussions of workers’ rights after the poor working conditions of the factory came to light, through investigations, as people were incredibly impacted emotionally by what happened.¹² According to Dr. Howard Markel, a writer for *PBS*, workers “worked seven days a week, in 13 hour shifts with only a 30-minute lunch period, all for a paltry \$6 a week.”¹³ In June of 1911, it was reported by the *New York*

10. “Slocum Victims Honored: 10 Survivors of 1904 Disaster Attend Memorial Services,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1951.

11. “141 Men and Girls Die in Waist Factory Fire.” *New York Times*, March 26, 1911.

12. “Working Conditions.” New York Heritage Digital Collections. Accessed November 30, 2024. <https://nyheritage.org/exhibits/immigration/working-conditions>.

13. Markel, Howard, “How The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Transformed Labor Laws and Protected Workers’ Health.” *PBS*, March 31, 2021.

Times that “The Citizens’ Committee of Five to safeguard girls and women who work in factories... is making rapid progress toward bringing about safer working conditions in factories, according to a statement made yesterday by its officers.”¹⁴ The community was galvanized by the fire to create change and prevent a similar situation from happening again with the fire being memorialized in multiple ways.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire has several memorials dedicated to honoring its victims including the factory building which is now a historic landmark, a memorial honoring those that are unidentified, and a recent memorial dedicated in 2023. According to Todd Ellen Wiley, an American Art History Professor, a sculpture was created by Beatrice Longman in 1912 to honor the unidentified victims. The sculpture was dedicated in December of that year and placed in the Evergreens Cemetery.¹⁵ This memorial, while lacking press coverage, was created quickly after the fire, helping to honor those who were lost in the tragedy. The building where the fire occurred, formerly the Asch Building, is now the Brown Building as a part of New York University. The building became a national historic landmark on July 17, 1991, and a New York City landmark on March 25, 2003. The building has plaques to remember the victims as

14. “To Protect City Factory Workers,” *New York Times*, June 12, 1911.

15. Ellen Wiley Todd, “Remembering the Unknowns: The Longman Memorial and the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire” *American Art* 23, no. 3 (2009): 68. <https://doi.org/10.1086/649776>.

well.¹⁶ The protection of the building shows the dedication that some people have to remembering the fire, its victims, and its impact on workers' rights. In November of 2015, the *New York Times* reported that the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition was raising the money needed to build and maintain the memorial, which would consist of steel panels on the sides of the building featuring the names of the victims and reflective panels highlighting the names.¹⁷ A month later, in December of 2015, the construction of the memorial was funded by a \$1.5 million state grant, with additional fundraising done by the Remember the Triangle Fire Coalition to maintain the memorial and finance scholarships.¹⁸ The memorial designed by Richard Yoo and Uri Wegman, was unveiled in October of 2023, with many people who spoke discussing the fire's impact on workers' rights.¹⁹ The recent coverage of the *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory* fire shows that even over a hundred years after the fire, the events still hold valuable lessons for some. The recent creation of a permanent memorial honoring the events of the *Triangle Shirtwaist Factory* Fire and the dedication that some people have to remembering the fire and continuing to fight for workers' rights led to detailed and recent press coverage of the memorial.

16. "Triangle Shirtwaist Factory (Brown Building)," National Park Service, Accessed October 22, 2024. <https://home.nps.gov/places/triangle-shirtwaist-factory-brown-building.htm>

17. Steven Greenhouse, "Coalition Pushes for Memorial to the Triangle Fire," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015.

18. Steven Greenhouse, "\$1.5 Million State Grant to Pay for Memorial to Triangle Fire," *New York Times*, December 23, 2015.

19. Lola Fadulu, "After 112 Years, Triangle Fire Victims Get a Memorial," *New York Times*, October 11, 2023.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire memorial was recently dedicated, so the articles covering it are more recent and happen to be more detailed, especially with the fire's connection to worker's rights. The article "Coalition Pushes for Memorial to the Triangle Fire" written by Steven Greenhouse and published in the New York Times on November 21, 2015, covers the argument for a permanent memorial to honor those who were lost in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, including quotes from those who designed the proposed memorial and relatives of those who died in the fire.²⁰ The arguments of those who supported the memorial were successful as reported in an article published by the New York Times in December of 2015 titled "\$1.5 Million State Grant to Pay for Memorial to Triangle Fire" also written by Steven Greenhouse that covers when a state grant was approved to pay for the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory memorial.²¹ This article also included quotes from supporters of the memorial, and in addition, a quote from an NYU spokesman and the New York governor. This article is a full page. The third article from a New York City newspaper was "After 112 Years, Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire Victims get a memorial" written by Lola Fadulu and published on October 11, 2023, covers the unveiling of the memorial including quotes from the President of Workers United, the acting Labor Secretary, and a civilian, Suzanne Pred Bass, who lost two great aunts in the fire. There was also a quote from the New York state Governor, Kathy Hochul, who commented that "[New York] was the birthplace of workers' rights movement because of

20. Steven Greenhouse, "Coalition Pushes for Memorial to the Triangle Fire," *New York Times*, November 21, 2015.

21. Steven Greenhouse, "\$1.5 Million State Grant to Pay for Memorial to Triangle Fire," *New York Times*, December 23, 2015.

what happened right on this block. That is something we tout to the rest of the world”²²This coverage was in depth, providing background information and information on the impact the fire had on workers’ rights. There was a large group of people dedicated to remembering this tragic event and its impact on workplace protections that are still relevant today, providing reporters with more material to write about and comment on.

The *General Slocum* and Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire memorials received different coverage with the former receiving short and at times vague coverage, while the latter received in depth and long coverage. Both fires impacted groups of people that cared about the impacts of the events, however, because the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire was such a pivotal event for workers’ rights and still has impacts on those in the workforce today, it is a very accessible topic to be covered in newspapers such as the *New York Times*. With such limited space and time to cover the world’s events, sometimes history can be swept to the side in the news, however, the impacts of those historical events can still be felt everyday regardless of whether a memorial is being discussed.

22. Lola Fadulu, “After 112 Years, Triangle Fire Victims Get a Memorial,” *New York Times*, October 11, 2023.

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