On Saturday, March 25, 1911, workplace safety changed forever. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory was located on the 8th, 9th, and 10th floors of the Asch Building in New York City. The factory made ladies’ blouses and employed approximately 600 workers, mostly young immigrant women from Germany, Italy and Eastern Europe. Some workers were as young as twelve and thirteen years old, working up to 72 hours a week, including Saturdays.

On March 25, 1911, at the end of the work day, a cutter noticed a fire had started in his scrap bin. The fire spread rapidly, with little opportunity for workers to escape.

146 garment workers died by jumping down elevator shafts and out of 9th floor windows to the pavement below in attempts to escape the fire. Fire escapes failed and stairways were blocked, preventing rescuers from reaching those trapped on the top floors of the Asch Building.

There were several factors that contributed to this preventable tragedy. To begin, doors to each work area opened inward and were locked to prevent workers from taking breaks during work hours. A few buckets of water were the only firefighting tools available. While most people were shocked at the tragedy, there were no regulations in place that would have helped save lives. The owners of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, Max Blanck and Isaac Harris, were ultimately found “not guilty” on charges of manslaughter related to the fire.

The fire led to many milestones for worker safety and health during the last 100 years. Legislation was passed requiring improved work safety for all. Frances Perkins, the first female cabinet member and Secretary of Labor, began her commitment to safety and health soon after being one of the thousands of people in New York City that day in 1911, watching helplessly as workers fell to their deaths.

The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire

The American Society of Safety Engineers was founded in October of 1911 as the United Association of Casualty Inspectors in New York City, just months after the horrific Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.

Today, ASSE is the oldest professional safety organization and represents more than 32,000 occupational safety, health and environmental (SH&E) practitioners committed to protecting people, property and the environment. These SH&E professionals are at the forefront of safety engineering, design, standards development, management and education in virtually every industry.

ASSE has 150 chapters, 35 section and 60 student sections all over the world. There are also members residing in over 64 countries including Australia, Ecuador, Egypt, Kuwait, Mexico, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom.

ASSE is also a secretariat for the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) and members serve on more than 40 standards committees, contributing to new developments in safety rules and regulations, protecting workers worldwide. ASSE members also serve on standards committees for the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). For more information, visit www.asse.org/newsroom.

The History of ASSE

- March 25, 1911: The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire forever changes workplace safety in America when 146 women and men perish due to inadequate workplace safety.
- October 14, 1911: ASSE was founded in New York City.
- 1920: The U.S. Department of Labor Women’s Bureau was established to promote women’s rights in the workplace.
- 1933: Frances Perkins became the first female cabinet member and served as the U.S. Secretary of Labor until 1945. She dedicated herself to work safety after witnessing the tragic Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire.
- 1938: The Fair Labor Standards Act was passed, establishing child labor regulations.
- 1962: ASSE helped revise the 1936 Walsh-Healey Act, resulting in an increased emphasis on SH&E in corporations. There began to be a heavy emphasis on education for safety professionals thereafter.
- 1971: The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) were created.
- 1981: The Fire Safety Institute was founded.
- September 3, 1991: Over 90 years after the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire tragedy, a fire at the Imperial Chicken processing plant in Hamlet, NC, killed 25 workers and injured 49 more.
- In 2000, ASSE joined with the Canadian Society of Safety Engineering (CSSE) to raise awareness of occupational safety, health and the environment through North American Occupational Safety and Health (NAOSH) Week, which occurs the first week in May. Later, NAOSH Week grew to include Occupational Safety and Health Professional (OSHP) Day, which occurs on the Wednesday of NAOSH Week each year.
- September 11, 2001: ASSE members rushed to work in the search and rescue efforts when 2,886 people were killed in terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in NY City, at the Pentagon and in PA where Flight 93 crashed.