

Top 10 Most Deadly Industrial Accidents in the U.S.

Top Ten Deadly Workplace Accidents

Written by Lisa Stringfellow

The top ten workplace accidents listed below have much to teach us. The first lesson is how quick we are to forget.

10. TEXAS CITY DISASTER



March 23, 2005, Texas City, Texas, 15 died, 170 injured

A fire and explosion occurred at the refinery in Texas City, Texas. The company was charged with violations of federal environmental laws. OSHA issued a then-record fine for hundreds of safety violations, and subsequently imposed an even larger fine after claiming that the refinery had failed to implement safety improvements following the disaster. OSHA ultimately found more than 300 safety violations.

9. BOSTON MOLASSES DISASTER

January 15, 1919 Massachusetts, 21 died, 150 injured

When a leaking molasses storage tank burst, a wave of molasses rushed through the streets of Boston. Witnesses said that as it collapsed, there was a loud rumbling sound like a machine gun as the rivets shot out of the tank and that the ground shook as if a train were passing by. The collapse unleashed an immense wave of molasses between 8 and 15 feet. Nearby buildings were swept off their foundations and crushed.

8. THE PHILLIPS DISASTER

October 23, 1989, Pasadena, Texas, 23 died, 314 injured

Who would have thought a company in the business of making plastic milk bottles would have been involved in one of the nation's most catastrophic industrial accidents?

The accident resulted from a release of extremely flammable process gases that occurred during regular maintenance operations on one of the plant's polyethylene reactors. More than 85,000 pounds of highly flammable gases were released through an open valve. A vapor cloud formed and traveled rapidly through the polyethylene plant. Within 90 to 120 seconds, the vapor cloud came into contact with an ignition source and exploded with the force of 2.4 tons of TNT. When the first explosion occurred, some fire hydrants were sheared off at ground level by the blast. The result was inadequate water pressure for fire fighting. The shut-off valves which could have been used to prevent the loss of water from ruptured lines in the plant were out of reach in the burning wreckage.

7. IMPERIAL FOODS CHICKEN PROCESSING PLANT FIRE

September 3, 1991, Hamlet, North Carolina, 25 died, 56 injured



Warning signs were posted but not heeded at the Imperial food processing plant. The fire door which had a DO NOT BLOCK sign on it was kept padlocked because the owner worried his employees would steal food if the door was left unlocked. The plant had just one door. The plant had no fire suppression or alarm system. And due to a lack of inspectors, the plant had never received a safety inspection in 11 years of operation. The company's safety violations were so flagrant the company's owner was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

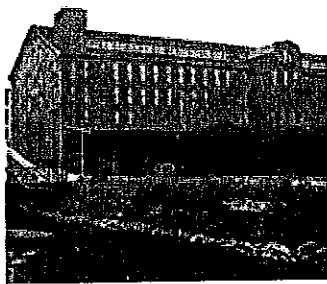
6. GROVER SHOE FACTORY DISASTER

March 20, 1905, Brockton, Massachusetts, 58 died, 150 injured

When an old boiler exploded a series of catastrophes began. The boiler knocked over an elevated water tower. The full tank smashed through the roof and one end of the building completely collapsed. Following the explosion, the four-story wooden building collapsed as the ruins burst into flames, incinerating workers trapped in the wreckage. The Grover disaster brought new attention to industrial safety and led to stringent safety laws and a national code governing the safe operation of steam boilers.

5. PEMBERTON MILL DISASTER

January 10, 1860, Lawrence, Massachusetts, 145 died, 166 injured



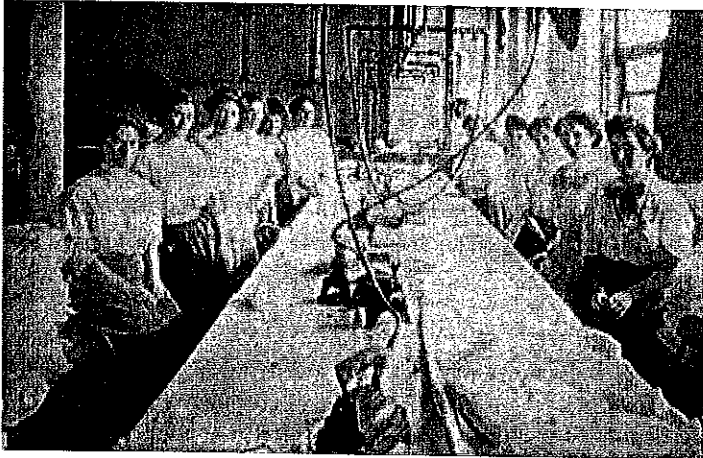
The 1860 collapse of the five-story Pemberton Mill was due to preventable factors. The already questionable load limits were ignored. Too much heavy machinery was paired with substandard construction. And the mill's brick walls were improperly mortared and supported.

Impossibly, things turned worse when someone accidentally knocked over an oil lantern. Flames raced across the cotton waste and splintered wood —some of it soaked with oil. One trapped man cut his own throat rather than be consumed by the approaching flames; he was rescued, but died from his other injuries. As the fire grew, rescuers, physicians, families of the trapped victims, and spectators were all driven back. The screams coming from the ruins

were soon silenced, leaving rescuers to eventually discover only the burned, smoldering remains of "brick, mortar and human bones mingled."

4. TRIANGLE SHIRTWAIST COMPANY FIRE

March 25, 1911, New York City, New York, 146 died, 54 injured.



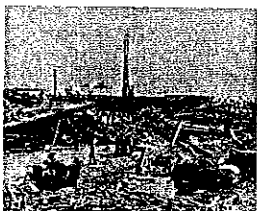
No one quite knows what started the triangle shirtwaist fire. The Fire Marshal said the likely cause was the disposal of an unextinguished match or cigarette in the scrap bin. A New York Times article suggested the fire was started by the running of sewing machines.

With textiles strewn about, the fire moved quickly. Within minutes the burning factory had trapped more than 100 women. Many died trying to force open locked doors. Others threw themselves from the windows. The disaster killed 146 of the factory's 500 employees, most were young immigrant women and girls of Italian and European Jewish descent.

As the factory burned, firefighters and onlookers were horrified to find that their hoses could only reach the sixth floor. Impromptu rescue strategies, largely unsuccessful, included human chains and nets and blankets to catch those who began jumping. The tragedy sparked a nationwide debate about workers rights, representation and safety.

The Triangle Shirtwaist factory still stands at 23-29 Washington Place beside Washington Square Park in Manhattan.

3. PORT CHICAGO DISASTER



July 17, 1944, Port Chicago, California, 320 died, 390 injured

This deadly explosion occurred at the Port Chicago Naval Magazine (ammunition depot) in California. Munitions detonated while being loaded onto a cargo vessel bound for the WWII Pacific Theater of Operations. The fatalities

included 320 sailors and civilians and 390 others were injured. Most of the dead and injured were enlisted African-American sailors. A month later, continued unsafe conditions inspired hundreds of servicemen to refuse to load munitions. Their protest became known as the Port Chicago Mutiny. Fifty men—called the "Port Chicago 50"—were convicted of mutiny and sentenced to long prison terms. 47 of the 50 were released in January 1946. The remaining three served additional months in prison.

2. TEXAS CITY DISASTER

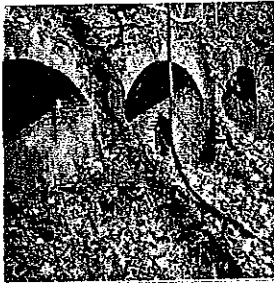
April 16, 1947, Texas City, Texas, 405 dead, 63 never identified and 113 classified as missing

An accidental fire in the engine room caught workers off guard while loading a cargo ship with explosive-grade ammonium nitrate. An estimated 2,300 tons of ammonium nitrate were already aboard the SS Grandcamp when the first of two explosions occurred. The explosion, damage and heat were so intense that 16 hours later a second cargo ship, the SS High Flyer, also carrying ammonium nitrate, exploded violently. The ammonia nitrate was being used for fertilizer and on its way to farmers in Europe.

1. HAWK'S NEST TUNNEL DISASTER

1927, Gauley Bridge, West Virginia, workers were dying too fast for proper recording, but estimates range from 764 to more than 1,000 fatalities. (The Hawk's Nest Incident. Yale University Press)

The Hawk's Nest tragedy is the most fatal workplace accident in U.S. history. Yet few among us have ever heard of this industrial accident. At least 764 men, mostly African-American, died on the project. The men were digging out a 3-mile, hydro-electric water-diversion tunnel. But the confined space and the incessant drilling and digging exposed workers to the highly dangerous silica dust, a lung-destroying disease known to be fatal within a year.



Surprisingly, the Hawk's Nest Tunnel Disaster was not a coal mining disaster as so many of our nation's worst disasters are. The tunnel was dug through high-grade, silica-rich sandstone. When drilled, the sandstone produced a fine, crystal-like dust, comparable to finely ground glass particles.

The men hired to dig through the tunnel were migrant workers desperate for work during the Great Depression. These men quickly fell victim to silicosis, a deadly accumulation of silica particles in the lungs. The men tolerated these conditions for no more than a couple of months before they were ill and had to be replaced. Managers in charge of the operation decided the most cost-effective way to handle the crisis was to ignore the workplace accident dangers, keep working and keep hiring a steady stream of new workers. The goal was to complete the tunnel as quickly as possible and at any cost. The companies involved in the Hawk's Nest tragedy never acknowledged responsibility, or provided information to help account for the total number of workers who died or were disabled by the tunnel's construction.