



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative
2026 Volume IV: Resistance from Aristotle to Star Wars

Bombs Dropping over Appalachia: The Battle of Blair Mountain and the Progressive Era

Curriculum Unit 26.04.10, published September 2026
by Raymond Marshall

Introduction and Rationale

America today faces many challenges, as anyone can (and almost certainly will) tell you. Internationally, we face the question of the United States' role in a swiftly changing world, how and even whether to exercise our military and economic strength, and an uncertain relationship with many other nations we have had historically strong ties with. Domestically, division pits parents against children, brothers and sisters against one another, with all parties convinced that their way forward is the only correct one, and that their political opponents are not only incorrect, but in many cases morally evil. In addition, wealth inequality is a growing concern,[1]with a 1,466,177% gap between the wealthiest American and the average, and the top 1% of Americans owning 50% of its stock market shares.[2] News pundits and influencers will often refer to these challenges as “unprecedented”, but are they really? This course unit will argue that not only do precedents for most or all of these circumstances exist in the periods of American history now known as the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, but that the ways in which the United States dealt with them (successfully and otherwise) can be a guide to us a hundred years later.

In many ways, the two ages in question, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, must be discussed in association with one another, for the latter was a response and reaction to the former. These eras of American history also represent two conflicting visions of how America views itself which themselves have echoes in the present. In the Gilded Age, “rugged individualism” ruled the day, the economy, and the public imagination, with the industrialists (or robber barons, depending on your point of view) making millions from the factories of a newly industrial nation representing themselves, fairly or not, as men whose achievements came from the sweat of their brows, as well as personal skill and intelligence. These men, and their economic and political supporters, championed individualism as the ultimate American virtue. By hard work, personal skill, and ambition, their workers could achieve for themselves, on an individual basis, better treatment, pay, and standards of living, achieving the “American Dream.”

Of course, as the workers of the Gilded Era would come to realize, a single excellent worker asking for a raise and more humane treatment was easily fired. After all, the thousands of immigrants streaming into the “land of opportunity” from Southern and Eastern Europe were, by and large, looking for work in any industry that was hiring. Any factory employees who were injured or fell sick from the abysmal working conditions of the

era could be replaced with equal ease. This realization led the blue collar workers of the Gilded Age to agitate for better working conditions and pay, and started what would become known as the Labor movement, one of the two great social movements of the early 20th century.

The other movement would be the one to put its stamp on the period, to the extent that the period from 1890-1920 is often known as “The Progressive Era.” The Progressives of this period embraced new scientific methods and a rational understanding of the world, and attacked with near evangelistic fervor the aspects of society that they considered to be disordered. The rights of women, the evils of alcohol, the relationship between American races, and the devolution of political power away from the elites and toward the common people may seem a wildly varied set of policies, but each can be considered to have its roots in the same, uniquely Progressive soil. Namely, Progressives of the period embraced, nearly uniquely in United States history, a belief in the collective over the individual. This belief, partially a result of scientific analysis of society at the time, partially a reaction to the rampant, uncontrolled individualism of the Gilded Era, led these men and women to seek nothing less than a complete remaking of society into something of a middle-class utopia, where the poor were uplifted and the rich were inculcated with the values of hard work and restraint they so often seemed to lack. Perhaps the most shocking thing about the Progressive era, then, is not the things they failed to accomplish, (Prohibition a failure, a government that adopted *laissez faire* economics well into the Great Depression), but that they managed to accomplish so much in the face of inertia from more than a hundred years of American history, as well as a hundred years of largely unfriendly response since.

Unfortunately, major social change is often heralded by major tragedies that upend the way people think society is “supposed” to function. In the case of the labor movement and Progressive era, two incidents are emblematic of the struggles of the period. The first, which will be discussed in its relation to the achievement of occupational safety regulations, is the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire. The second, the Blair Mountain war, will be used as an example of the very real and violent consequences of the American laborer’s struggle for recognition and better treatment.

These two movements, labor and Progressivism, would intersect and ignite one of the most violent, yet often disregarded, incidents in American peacetime history in the late summer of 1921.[3]

The United States in the early 20th century ran on coal, with over 667 million tons of coal being pulled from beneath the earth in 1920 alone. However, coal mining in the 1920’s, even more so than now, was a dirty and dangerous profession. Those 667 million tons of coal came at the price of 3.39 worker fatalities per million, meaning that in the single year of 1920, 2,261 coal miners lost their lives in the mines, leaving an unknown but undoubtedly horrifying number of women without husbands and children without fathers. And yet, this was heralded as magnificent progress by the coal industry, as it represented a significant decrease in fatalities from previous years.[4]

Unsurprisingly, the miners did not consider thousands of their brethren to be a reasonable cost of doing business, and so began to agitate and organize with an eye toward better working conditions and pay. In addition to safety, many mining companies of the era owned the housing and shops used by their employees, and often paid their employees in scrip, or “company currency,” usable only in the company store. This meant that miners, if they found themselves unemployed for any reason, immediately thereafter found themselves homeless and without any legal tender usable anywhere else. The final of the most frequently cited problems was the weighing system, whereby a miner’s coal production for the day was weighed at the end of his day, and the miner was then paid according to the amount of coal he had produced. This, in theory, encouraged hard work on the part of the miners, as well as innovation and responsibility (all concepts to make

a Gilded Era industrialist nod approvingly). In practice, there was no governing body regulating the mine scales, and reports were common of weighing scales being inaccurate (always in the mine owners' favor, of course) or weight results being misreported to shortchange the miners.

All of these issues were intermixed with a scientific, Progressive movement in the mines toward increased mechanization. As already mentioned, this did lead to a decrease in mine fatalities, but also created a fear amongst the miners of losing their jobs. Amongst the mine owners, this fear was reflected in an increasing feeling that the miners were themselves rather expendable. Both sides of the ensuing conflict, then, were further entrenched in their positions by these technological advancements. The miners felt that it increased the urgency of their demands, lest the machines replace them and leave them with nothing, while the mine owners were confident that they merely needed to weather a short while before the improving technology could allow them to forever rid themselves of the vast majority of their constantly-complaining workforce.

The Progressive era was a time of great change in American society and, thus far, an almost unique one. Working class Americans, tired of the exploitation of the Gilded Era of the late 1800's, banded together and demanded better treatment from their employers, as well as a government that was truly controlled by the people, and operated for them.

Of course, the moneyed interests in society were loath to give up their power, and fought back, most often with propaganda and policy,

For students today, this period in American history is one that deserves and even requires close study. For the students who might wish to see change in how the nation is governed, and in the relationship between the government and the people, it can serve as a template. For those who perhaps have given up, or have never believed that the course of society can be changed by the actions of its citizens, it can serve as a wake-up call.

My course unit will examine the causes of the Progressive era, the actions American workers took to wrest political and economic power away from those who held them fast, and, finally, the battle that signifies the lengths those with power will go to in order to keep it. Throughout, the themes of resistance discussed in the seminar will be discussed and woven in, with the hopes of instilling in students a sense of their own potential power to correct the problems they see in society around them today.

Classroom Context

My classroom is a majority-minority classroom in Central Texas, with 80% of our student population being black and/or Hispanic. The student body is primarily lower on the economic spectrum, and the community itself is a small town, bordering on rural. In other words, exactly the kind of working- and middle-class families who were seizing power in this period of American history! As such, care will be taken in this unit to highlight the contributions of African American and Mexican American progressives, and to highlight the power for the people that were achieved in the Progressive Era. If your demographics are significantly different, feel free to highlight more relevant agitators, or the responses of the upper class supporters of the progressive movement (women of Hull House, etc.).

Content Objectives

This unit is designed to take about two weeks, in the course of teaching both the Gilded Age and the Progressive era. Teachers should feel free to split it into its component parts, as it is designed to be used in just such a way. For instance, perhaps one would like to utilize the information and lesson ideas about the Triangle Shirtwaist fire over the course of a week at the end of teaching the Gilded Age, leading into the progressive era, and then some weeks later, when finishing with the Progressive Era, use the Battle of Blair Mountain as the capstone of that movement, flowing nicely into the economic tumult of the 1920's.

A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were in many ways defined by the Progressive movement. This phenomenon grew in response to the coupled excesses and privations of the Gilded Age, and sought to instill in both the lower and upper classes a sense of "Middle Class principles"[5]. To do so, progressive reformers sought to upraise the working classes to better themselves and better appreciate art and literature, and to reject their unwholesome pleasures in dens of alcohol and promiscuity. At the same time, the upper classes were to be shamed for their profligacy and wanton behavior, and for their reliance on family money over the traditional American values of hard work and moral fortitude. How then, was this movement ever to achieve success when striking out at seemingly all sides around it, making few friends in either. McGerr's *A Fierce Discontent* traces the successes and failures of the movement through this period, and reveals that, while seemingly opposed to all parts of society save the middle class, the progressives nonetheless were capable of great appeal to those same parts as well, recruiting many of their most successful supporters from lower- and upper-class neighborhoods and families.

This disparate assortment of supporters of what seems to be a myopically focused social movement pairs well with a larger discussion of how resistance movements can successfully function and achieve buy in from a wider slice of society. For the working classes, the Progressives sought to present their movement as aspirational, and that by adhering to Progressive standards of behavior and social consciousness, working class people could better themselves and achieve more economic success, as well as a happier home life. As will become evident from later discussion, a resistance movement is doomed to very limited success if the working class is not brought onboard, whether by promising them increased socio-economic standing or, at the very least, the standing of their descendants.

Similarly, the upper classes in many cases felt moved to support the Progressives both as a defensive measure (going along with progressive ideas often seemed like the best way to avoid strikes and more violent forms of protest and resistance), and, in some cases, by a genuine desire to better the society which had allowed them to achieve their wealth and power. What this meant for the progressive movement was an influx of cash, and the power it brings with it, as well as the interest of the media, who were, then as now, much more likely to report on the doings and interests of the upper classes than the working or middle class. This illustrates the utility of the upper classes to a resistance. Now, of course, the upper classes are also most likely to be the targets of resistance, and so a wide acceptance of progressive or resistant ideas is unlikely, but a few powerful friends can be of great benefit to a growing resistance movement, for the reasons mentioned above.

The women of Hull House, in particular, serve as an excellent example of positive praxis by the upper classes. The establishment, founded in 1889 by Jane Addams, brought women of every social class together,

encouraging sympathy from the upper to the lower classes, and a desire and example to better themselves from the lower towards the upper. It also created a recognition of the shared humanity of women who otherwise would have been very unlikely to meet in normal society. Gathering spaces such as this might also provide a good example to anyone wanting to recreate a progressive-like movement today. [6]

However, the progressive movement of the 20th century was also very different from the progressives of the modern day in some significant ways. Most obviously, they often supported segregation, believing that both white and black societies would be better served by being separated from one another, rather than integrating. Their reasons for this apparently backward viewpoint varied between speakers, but were primarily rooted in the since-disproved eugenics theories of the era, and the racial essentialism that it promoted. Even in this, undoubtedly a shameful mark on the movement of the period, some inspiration can be drawn from its basis in what was, at the time, a well-respected scientific theory to back up their political theories and positions. [7]

A Fierce Discontent, though written earlier in the 21st century, also invites some fascinating comparison with events in the modern era, as an era of economic and social conservatism could perhaps be giving way to a new surge of progressive momentum, as seen by recent victories by the Democratic Socialists of America in 2026. What can modern progressives learn from the victories and defeats of their predecessors, and what can modern conservatives learn to avoid the stunning series of defeats that led to the Roosevelts, New Deal, and Great Society? Though not addressed directly in the manuscript, such questions are invited by its parallels to the modern day in various ways.

Triangle: the Fire that Changed America

Of the two incidents which this course unit will explore, the first chronologically is the disastrous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist factory in New York City.

In 1911, New York had dealt with various unionization and work safety movements, and conditions were, generally speaking, much improved from the sweat shops and tenement factories of the Gilded Age. Many of the seamstresses and clothing manufacturers of the city were unionized, and a general strike in the industry some few years before had forced most every factory owner to recognize the garment makers' union and meet several of its demands. Not all the workers' demands had been met, however, and the owners of the Triangle Factory in particular were known to be highly resistant to any thought of giving any more ground to the union. [8]

So, on March 21st of that year, when a fire sprung up on the 8th floor of the building (of which the Shirtwaist factory occupied the top three floors, 8th-10th), a combination of insufficient safety measures in the city's building code, locked doors, and poor workplace safety conditions led to what would become the deadliest disaster in New York City's history until September 11, 2001. The rows of tables, covered in fabric and cloth, with bins stretching beneath them to hold scraps of the same were a perfect nest for any spark to grow and flourish. When what was probably a carelessly discarded cigar or cigarette caught one of the corner bins aflame, fiery scraps of fabric leapt and danced quickly to nearby tables, cracking and shattering the windows which surrounded the factory floor. Fortunately, most of the eighth floor workers were able to reach the doors to the stairs or the elevators. One of the doors to the stairs was locked, but a foreman, one of the heroes of the event for this and other reasons, unlocked it, meaning that casualties were very light on that floor. The flames took some time to reach the tenth floor, and though by the time they did the stairs to the street were impassible, the route to the roof of the building remained open, and the timely assistance of students taking classes at the next-door New York University were able to help the refugees flee to their building before the

fire reached the roof.

Unfortunately, most of the inhabitants of the ninth floor were not so lucky. Reached first by the fire, which soon spread to envelope the stairs in both directions, workers on the ninth floor soon discovered, as fire enveloped the highly flammable room, that one of the exit doors was locked. Some reached the poorly built and rigged fire escape, which collapsed under their weight, dropping the bodies of twenty or more to the street below. Others, seeing the stairs impassible, and the only other exits collapsed or locked, threw themselves from the windows, hoping by some miracle to survive the nine story drop to the pavement below. None did. 146 people died that day, primarily girls and young women, many falling to their deaths or burning to death in full view of the horrified New Yorkers gathered around the building, but unable to help.[9]

The response to this event would ripple outward from New York City to impact the rest of the country, and then the world. The fire revealed the fact that fire and work safety protocols, where they existed at all, were entirely insufficient to the task of keeping Americans safe. From this realization sprang first new and improved building codes in New York City, then a greater concern for worker safety in general, culminating in the establishment, 20 years later, of the Bureau of Labor Standards, which would later be renamed as the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, or OSHA, which today ensures safe working conditions for American workers, so that, hopefully, no disaster like the Triangle fire ever happens again. [10]

The Battle of Blair Mountain

Towards the end of what is considered the “Progressive Era”, and at the beginning of the Roaring 20’s, an event occurred which saw the largest use of force by Americans against other Americans outside of the Civil War.

The 1890’s saw a surge of unionization in the United States, most relevantly to our story amongst the mine workers of West Virginia. The United Mine Workers union, or UMW, was established in 1890 but struggled to gain and retain members in the highly controlled corporate mines of Appalachia. Workers who joined the union were most often summarily fired, and thereby deprived of their homes in company towns, or any way of making even the impoverished living of a coal miner. In 1920, the UMW set its sights on this last holdout in the industry, determined to turn these last mines into union shops.

In response, the mine owners hired the Baldwin-Felts Detective Agency. This agency were wellknown as violent strike breakers, and functioned less as private detectives, as we today understand them, and more as semi-legal hired muscle to intimidate and punish supporters of the union. In this they followed the tradition of the best-known private detective agency, the Pinkertons, who also have a long history of anti-labor practices.

On May 19th, 1920, a band of Baldwin-Felt heavies arrived in the town of Matewan, West Virginia, intent on evicting the families of union miners from their homes. After doing so, the detectives returned to town to board a train and leave. Before they could reach the train station, they were confronted by Police Chief Sid Hatfield (A relative of the Hatfields of “vs. McCoys” fame), a union supporter, who informed the agents that they were under arrest. The Baldwin-Felts men informed Hatfield that, in fact, it was they who had a warrant for his arrest. The situation swiftly devolved into a shootout, in which 10 men were killed, including the mayor of Matewan, Cabell Testerman, as well as the leaders of the Baldwin-Felts delegation, Lee and Albert Felts, brothers to one of the company co-owners. This event, the Matewan Massacre, became a rallying cry for the miners of West Virginia, and represented the first major setback the Baldwin-Felts agents had encountered. It also represents a somewhat rare event in labor history, in which local law enforcement came down unequivocally on the side of union workers against business owners.

Shortly thereafter, August 1, 1921, Hatfield was gunned down on the steps of the McDowell County Courthouse by Baldwin-Felts agents. His body was returned to Malewan, incensing the miners, who armed themselves and began to patrol the town under arms. Logan County sheriff Don Chafin sent men to disarm and pacify the miners, but those men were themselves disarmed and arrested. Emboldened, the union miners began a plan to march on the town of Mingo, there to free imprisoned union members and organize the county, officially. To do so, however, would require them to cross through Logan County, across Blair Mountain, through the territory of Sheriff Chapin.

13,000 miners mustered and began to march, but Sheriff Chapin was undaunted, and raised a private army of 2,000 men, fortifying the mountain to resist the miners. After a few false starts, the Battle of Blair Mountain proper began on August 29th, with the anti-union forces heavily outnumbered, but enjoying the advantages of better positions and better weaponry, including several bombers seconded for reconnaissance from the US military. Both sides deployed gatling guns and machine guns against the other. On September 2, US military forces arrived, and the miners, many of whom were veterans, refused to fire upon them. As a result, the siege petered out, with miners hiding their weapons and returning home individually, or in small groups. 985 miners would be indicted for murder, treason, and other lesser charges, though sympathetic juries ensured that the majority were let off lightly or entirely. Nevertheless, the last miner imprisoned for the Battle of Blair Mountain was not released from prison until 1925.

This event, then, in many ways signaled the last hurrah of the Progressive Era leading into the corporate free-for-all of the 1920's. West Virginia coal would not unionize fully until 1935, when Roosevelt's New Deal sparked a resurgence of unionization across the nation.

The Battle of Blair Mountain does not, however, serve as a purely negative example, a failed resistance. Indeed, the bravery of the West Virginia Miners, and the awful conditions which they endured in their places of work, were widely spread across the working class, so that when the tides of public opinion and government once again turned in favor of the unions, many were willing and eager to join up, contributing to the surge in union membership in the 1930's-1950's. This, of course, helped pave the way for a golden American economy after the Great Depression and World War II, some of the advantages of which we are still enjoying (and in some cases trying to recreate) today.

Teaching Strategies:

A major challenge in any history curriculum is, and always has been, drawing and keeping the attention of students for whom the subject material seems extremely remote, or irrelevant to their lives. There are, of course, a multitude of ways to address this issue, but I will review a few that I think will be particularly fruitful when discussing the time period this course unit is primarily concerned with, the Gilded Age and Progressive Era.

Connections with Today

Firstly, endeavor, whenever possible, to connect the events of the period with modern events. This is of course one of the most basic tactics in teaching Social Studies, but nevertheless is foundational to successful practice, and so should be restated. For the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, an opportunity arises to not just

draw parallels between the past and present, but to get students thinking about parallels between the past and our future.

Similarities between the Gilded Age and today are easy to identify, and should be to students as well. Growing wealth disparity, a hesitation (verging on refusal) on the part of the government to regulate businesses, millions of dollars, and the power they confer, being concentrated in the hands of a few industrial/technological magnates, and a general downward trend in the fortunes of any outside of the most wealthy are all traits of American society in the 1870's-1890's as much or more than they are today. A solid class day might be made out of allowing students to discover and describe these similarities and differences on their own.

Once the Gilded Age and its requisite events are discussed, the Progressive Era can then be introduced, not just as an historical era, but as a potential future. After all, if we are living in a second gilded age, as some pundits and economists claim,[11] then perhaps a new Progressive Era can follow? Many students (at least in my district), already have had deeply ingrained the idea that nothing that they can do can affect politics, and that voting and political participation are thus an exercise in futility. The Progressive Era represents a brilliant repudiation of this mindset, and whether you agree with its politics or not, the examples set by the ladies of Hull House and other Progressive demonstrators can set an excellent example for modern citizens wishing for a change in American politics. In order to drive this idea home, utilize exercises which will encourage students to apply the lessons of the early 20th century to today. How might practices such as strikes, organization (union and otherwise) and suffrage demonstrations be utilized in the modern day? What made them effective? What are some ways technology and the digital age has made these practices easier, harder, or simply different?

Story Telling

Both of the two main subjects of this unit lend themselves to being told as stories, as I have endeavored to do, to some degree, above. Feel free to be a bit theatrical with your approach, setting scenes and perhaps choosing a soundtrack for the lesson that is appropriate to the time and subject. Utilize suspense in the telling of both stories. Leave the ultimate results of the Battle of Blair Mountain in doubt until the end. Similarly, with the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, while a warning in the beginning will no doubt be appropriate, it would behoove the storyteller/teacher not to clarify the extent of the disaster and loss of life until the appropriate moment in the story, so as to maximize its emotional impact. If you find yourself having difficulty with this approach, consider utilizing first-hand accounts of the incidents, as referenced above, or finding examples of your own to humanize those affected by the disasters.

Choice Boards

A strategy I have found quite useful, and highly recommend to my fellow teachers, is a choice board. Assuming a weeklong project, create 9-10 possible assignments of various types over the content. For instance, if one were discussing the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, one could ask students to draw a scene from the event, write a newspaper article covering it, record a short new story, or write a short essay about the effects of the fire on the worker safety movement. Assign each mini-project a value based on its difficulty/intensity of study required (I tend to use 1-3 points) and then set them a point goal (Again, for my purposes, usually 5 points). Then simply allow each student to select whichever mini-projects they find appeals to them most. Of course, when utilizing this method, a wide variety of mini-projects is ideal, as some students will be more inclined toward artistic ones, others toward essays, and yet others towards building or modeling projects. Any and all of these can be used as opportunities to encourage the students to do further research on the topic at

hand, and should be considered. A question I often receive is whether students may do multiple selections of the same mini-project, so long as they are sufficiently different, and generally I do not allow this. Requiring each student to select, at minimum, two different mini-projects encourages to learn and approach learning in different ways and from different angles, which often helps them uncover connections and facts they might otherwise never stumbled across.

For example, in teaching this unit, I intend to use a choice board with the following options, with each student required to complete five points worth of work over the course of the unit:

1-point choices:

- Pick 5 words indicative of the Progressive era, define them, and use them in a sentence.
- Look up a map of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, and write 2-3 paragraphs regarding why its position and architecture led to the fire's disastrous consequences.
- Write a short (2-3 paragraph) biography of one of the main figures of the Battle of Blair Mountain, paying special attention to their role in the conflict.

2-point choices

- Write a 1-page (500 word) essay about one of the movements of the Progressive Era. (Women's suffrage, segregation, and workers' rights are possible, but not an exhaustive list of, topics)
- Create a poster or protest sign regarding any of the topics discussed in connection with the Gilded Age and Progressive Era
- Write a one page diary entry from the position of a family member affected by the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire, or of one of the participants in the Battle of Blair Mountain.

3-Point Choices

- Create a podcast/radio broadcast as a news caster covering the Shirtwaist Factory fire or the Battle of Blair Mountain. Broadcast must be at least 5 minutes.
- Create a video of you explaining the impact of the Progressive movement on society today, or on the similarities and differences between today and the Gilded Age.
- Write a 2 page essay (1000 words or more), about the connections between the Gilded Age and Progressive era, and how the conditions of one led to the reforms of the other.

As with any Social Studies Unit, bringing to the fore the human connections of the era is vital, and if you, as a teacher, can also adopt something of the mindset of the storyteller, it will be to both your and your students' benefit.

Disaster Analysis Choose Your Own Adventure

When teaching the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, using the information above, as well as first-hand accounts of the fire, you can construct an opportunity for students to put themselves in the shoes of the Triangle workers, many of whom were of high school age themselves.

There were, ultimately, five major exits from the ninth floor of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory. By the time the workers on that floor knew there was a fire, it had already mostly engulfed the eighth floor.[12] Speed was, therefore, of the essence.

Explain to students that the five exits were the elevators, the Washington Place stairs, the Green Street Stairs, the fire escape, and the windows. Allow students to select which of these they're going to try. Keep track of the order in which responses are turned in, whether by laying out the physical cards, or via some sort of time stamped digital turn-in.

The order is important because several exits quickly closed. For example, the Green Street exit closed when fire engulfed the passage along the outside of the building, but did remain open longer than the others. You can illustrate this by having the first 20% of the class who select that exit to escape alive. Other entrances closed much more quickly. The fire escape collapsed after only a few of the ninth-floor workers had escaped, reflecting about ten percent of the class. The elevators operated similarly, with the operators working them long past the point where they could safely do so, but eventually stopped due to a combination of heat-related mechanical failures and the corpses of desperate people weighing down the tops of the cars after flinging themselves down the shaft to escape the encroaching fire. This can be reflected by an additional 10% or so. Anyone who tries the Washington Place exit is, sadly, doomed, as that exit was locked, and the crush of people trying to escape through it prevented anyone who could have unlocked it from doing so. Similarly, all who tried to escape through a window, swiftly the only option remaining, fell to their deaths on the streets below.

From this, you can then transition to the specific changes in worker safety resulting from the different parts of the fire. For example, the situation with the fire escape led to better regulations and enforcement for all fire escapes in New York City, while the locked Washington Place exit led to restrictions on locking exits from workplaces while workers are present. These examples can then be further linked to other disasters or near-disasters where significant loss of life was avoided by the adoption of these safety measures.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

TEKS: (3) History. The student understands the political, economic, and social changes in the United States from 1877 to 1898. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze political issues such as Indian policies, the growth of political machines, and civil service reform;

(B) analyze economic issues such as industrialization, the growth of railroads, the growth of labor unions, farm issues, the cattle industry boom, the growth of entrepreneurship, and the pros and cons of big business; and

(C) analyze social issues affecting women, minorities, children, immigrants, and urbanization.

This unit addresses all of these standards, being particularly engaged with 3C, though the other two will be necessary as background to the Triangle shirtwaist fire and the Blair Mountain war.

(5) History. The student understands the effects of reform and third-party movements in the early 20th century. The student is expected to:

(A) analyze the impact of Progressive Era reforms, including initiative, referendum, recall, and the passage of the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th amendments;

(B) evaluate the impact of muckrakers and reform leaders such as Upton Sinclair, Susan B. Anthony, Jane Addams, Ida B. Wells, and W. E. B. DuBois on American society; and

(C) analyze the impact of third parties, including the Populist and Progressive parties.

The Progressive Era TEKS are well covered in this unit, as each feeds into the two major incidents covered, and should be examined over the course of the unit.

(25) Culture. The student understands how people from various groups contribute to our national identity. The student is expected to:

(A) explain actions taken by people to expand economic opportunities and political rights for racial, ethnic, gender, and religious groups in American society;

The progressive era is, in large part, the story of the fight for political and economic opportunities from groups that had, through the Gilded age, been denied them. This unit is best summed up by this TEK.

Bibliography

Drehle, David Von. 2003. *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. New York, NY: Grove Press. A very well-written account of the Triangle Fire, including a discussion of the labor movement before, the movement for work safety after, and a nearly minute by minute account of the fire itself.

McGerr, M. 2014. *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America*. New York, NY: Free Press. An excellent review of the period, with discussion of most of the social aspects influenced by the Progressives

Notes

[1] Forbes. n.d. "Forbes Real Time Billionaires List - The World's Richest People." Accessed June 26, 2026. <https://www.forbes.com/real-time-billionaires/#a9ac9993d788>.

[2] Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System (US). 1989. "Share of Corporate Equities and Mutual Fund Shares Held by the Top 1% (99Th to 100Th Wealth Percentiles)." FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis. <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/WFRBST01122>.

[3] National Park Service. 2021. "The Battle of Blair Mountain (U.S. National Park Service)." [Www.Nps.Gov. https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-battle-of-blair-mountain.htm](https://www.nps.gov/articles/000/the-battle-of-blair-mountain.htm).

[4] Sep 14, and 2012 | Feature Articles. 2012. "100 Years with Coal Age - Page 2 Of 10." Coal Age. <https://www.coalage.com/features/100-years-with-coal-age/2/>.

[5] McGerr, M. 2014. *A fierce discontent: The rise and fall of the Progressive Movement in America*. Free Press, New York, NY, 44-45

[6] Ibid, 103

[7] Ibid 198-199

[8] Drehle, David Von. 2003. *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. New York, NY: Grove Press. 53

[9] Ibid, Chapters 5 and 6

[10] Ibid, 267

[11] Kurz, Mordecai. 2026. "Welcome to the Second Gilded Age." TIME. Time. <https://time.com/article/2026/04/18/welcome-to-the-second-gilded-age/>.

[12] Drehle, David Von. 2003. *Triangle: The Fire that Changed America*. New York, NY: Grove Press. Illustration pages

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2026 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use