

Button Button: Conflict and Compromise in Muscatine, Iowa

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500 Words

We knew that we wanted to do a topic that related to Iowa because our roots are in Iowa. Additionally, we wanted to do a project on a labor dispute because they are historically full of conflicts. After looking at the list of topics on the National History Day of Iowa website, we initially thought that the Muscatine Button Factory Strike sounded mundane. However, when we did more research into the Button Factory Strike, we discovered that it created many labor and workmen's compensation laws. Also, we were transfixed by the fact that factory owners kept jars of eyeballs and fingers in the factories. Finally, the main people in the conflict were the factory owners and Pearl McGill; therefore, we knew that together we could make a group project showing the conflicts and compromises of the strike.

We conducted our research using a large variety of primary and secondary sources. To start our research, we used Jeffrey S. Copeland's book *Shell Games*. In this book, Copeland visited Muscatine to do most of his research, making it a reliable source. The book focused on Pearl McGill's life in Muscatine and her role in the button factory strikes, changing from a factory spy to a worker sympathizer. Additionally, it contained a list of resources in the index, which we were able to use to discover other primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, our visit to the Muscatine History and Industry Center was extremely useful. Director Mary Wildermuth gave us an in-depth tour and provided us with information on the button making process and the strike. While there, we read McGill's personal letters and other primary resources, which provided quotes for our performance.

We picked the performance category for several reasons. First, when we were researching, we discovered that there were two main sides to the conflict: the owners and the workers. We knew that we could characterize Pearl McGill and the factory owner John Weber to

show both viewpoints in the labor dispute. To write our script, we used many quotes and integrated them into our performance. To depict the shock that we experienced during our research, we choose to set up the stage with a table having jars of eyes and fingers. Also, safety was a big conflict between the two sides, so the jars represented working conditions as well. Likewise, we chose the two poster signs of the Universal Satisfaction button card and AFL-CIO logo to represent the opposing sides. Finally, we researched and found historical costumes to add realism and depth to characters.

Our project fits the National History Day theme of *Conflict and Compromise in History* because the factory owners and union's conflicts triggered the strike and ensuing compromises. These conflicts included the unsafe working conditions, unfair pay, and union demands. Additionally, the owners and workers maintained disputing viewpoints as to the root of the conflicts. However, the strike impacted the owners to compromise by raising the wages, and it impacted Iowa and the nation into creating workplace legislations.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Barnum, Gertrude. "Button Button, Who's Got the Button?" *The Survey: Social, Charitable, Civic: a Journal of Constructive Philanthropy*. Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, 6 May 1911, 253-255.

Gertrude Barnum wrote this article to explain the formation of union in Muscatine during the Muscatine Button strikes. She explained how low wages and unsafe working conditions contributed to formation of unions, and unions were considered illegal. We used this book to understand the formation of unions in Muscatine.

Batten, Samuel Z. "Muscatine: The Strike of a Midwestern Town" *The Survey: Social, Charitable, Civic: a Journal of Constructive Philanthropy*. Charity Organization Society of the City of New York, 1 June 1912, 390-406.

Samuel Batten wrote this article regarding the Muscatine Button Strike. He outlines the wages and the disputes in the town. We used this information to show the national viewpoint toward this strike and for the information on the work conditions and wages.

"Button Workers Are Still Standing Firm." *The Labor World*, 15 Apr. 1911, p. 1. *Newspapers.com*.

This is an article found in a Duluth, Minnesota newspaper. In the article, it states that Pearl McGill is the secretary of the button union and that they claim the conditions were bad for years. We used this information to show that Pearl was important in getting the information to the press and she was vocal.

"Button Workers: Strike at Muscatine Followed Good Wages for Men and Women." *The American Employer*, vol. 1, no. 1, Aug. 1912, 62-63.

The American Employer was a journal for business owners in 1912, and this is an article about the Button Strike. It states the workers were on strike because they were paid too much before the strike. We used this to show the owner's viewpoint to the strike.

"Button Workers to Resume Work." *Des Moines Register*, 3 May 1911, p. 12. *Newspapers.com*.

This newspaper article was written in the Des Moines Register. It explained why the button factory workers were allowed to come back to work, and it explained the conditions for the return including not punishing the workers for being part of the union. We used this to show how the factory owners made compromises to get the button workers back to work.

“Button Workers Win Strike.” *Daily Gate City*, 18 Apr. 1911, pp. 1–2. *Newspapers.com*.

This was found in the Keokuk, Iowa paper. In the article, they state that the workers won and can watch the weighing of the buttons and they could organize the union. We used this to understand that one of the main conflicts was the method of payment.

Downey, Ezekiel H. *History of Labor Legislation in Iowa*. 1910.

This is a book that discusses different labor laws that were passed through the 1910. In the book, there are a few laws about child labor and it states that there are no employer liability laws, and the book states that the assumption of risk is placed upon the employee. We used this to see the laws before the strike and to get a history of how these laws changed.

“Girl Agitator For Labor is Spunky.” *Salt Lake Telegram*, 19 Dec. 1912, p.6.

Newspapers.com.

This article was found in the Salt Lake Telegram. It describes Pearl McGill as the youngest labor agitator and spunky. We used this to understand that Pearl went on to continue her labor protests and to understand her personality.

Gomper, Samuel. “Special Appeal.” *The Glass Worker*, vol. 9, no. 101, Feb. 1912, 5-6.

This is a letter found in a union magazine from 1912. In the letter, Samuel Gromper appeals for financial support for the Muscatine button workers. We used this to show a call for national support for the strike.

“Haywood Cheered by Many Workers.” *The Daily Times*, 31 Mar. 1911, pp. 11–12.

Newspapers.com.

This article was found in the Davenport Iowa newspaper. This addresses the speech by union representative William Haywood and how the working class was acting for a better living standard. We used this information to show that one of the biggest conflicts was the difference between the factory owner and worker wages.

Henry, Alice. *Trade Union Woman*. Nabu Press, 1915. *The Library of Congress*.

The book examines the history of women's labor organizations and the relationship of working-class women to the campaign for woman suffrage. From this, we learned how there were other strikes than the 1911 button strike pertaining more to women. We used this to tell how uncommon large strikes were.

Jacobs, B. F. “Button Situation .” *The Dry Goods Reporter*, Volume 46, Issue 1, 1915, p.12, 38.

This article was written by B.F. Jacobs describing the numbers and changes in button manufacturing. It states the number of buttons manufactured and the depletion of the

supply of shells in Muscatine. We used this to understand how large the button industry was and the changes that were occurring from the factory viewpoint.

Lundquist, Ernest. Button-Making Machine, *Google Patents*, 4 Apr. 1911.

This is the original button-making machine patent. It shows how the buttons were produced and how workers could easily be injured by using them. We used this information to learn how to use the machine and how people often lost portions of their body and the companies were trying to make the process safer.

“Martial Law Declared in Muscatine.” *Lincoln Journal Star*, 14 Apr. 1911, p. 1.

Newspapers.com.

This article was found in the Lincoln, Nebraska paper. In the paper, they state that there was rioting and troops had to be sent by the governor of Iowa. We used this to understand how there were physical conflicts from the strike.

“Muscatine Button Factories Are Suddenly Shut Down.” *The Rock Island Argus and Daily Union*, 27 Feb. 1911, p. 1. *Newspapers.com.*

This article was found in a newspaper close to Muscatine. It states that the button factories in Muscatine had shut down due to overproduction and that the union was newly formed. We used this to show the factory owners’ viewpoint of why they shut down.

Rodgers, E.C. “Police Chief, Former Bartender, Orders His Men to ‘Bust’ the Heads of Strikers.” *The Day Book*. (Chicago, Ill.) 1911-1917, December 09, 1911, 21-24. *Chronicling America*, Library of Congress.

The Day Book was a newspaper for the working class of Chicago. This article was about E.C. Rodger’s visit to Muscatine during the strike and describes the police fighting against the strikers and the strike hurting the businesses of town. We used this to understand the effects of the strike on the town.

“Social Expert Studies Strike.” *Des Moines Register*, 27 Apr. 1911, pp. 1, 3.

Newspapers.com.

The Des Moines Register published this article regarding the 1911 Muscatine Button Factory Strike. The Register had a Samuel Batten come in to study the strike to examine how it happened and to examine the effects it had on the town and Iowa. We used this article to show the conflicting viewpoints on how the strike as he favored the factories and stated that there was unskilled labor.

“Special Police for Muscatine.” *The Daily Times*, 13 Apr. 1911, p. 1. *Newspapers.com.*

This was an article found in the Davenport, Iowa newspaper. In the article, they state that there were twenty special police in Muscatine from Chicago and St. Louis. We used this to show that additional help was used to police the strike.

“UI Collection Guides -McGill Family Papers, 1885-2005.” Edited by Karen Manson, University of Iowa Libraries, *University of Iowa*, 2006.

This resource was a collection of the letters that Pearl McGill sent to her family and friends, so we consider it primary. This correspondence gave us insight into her view of the button factories and what she experienced in Muscatine. We used these letters as reference to her opinion on the matters of labor rights and the button factories.

United States. Cong. Senate. Committee on Finance. *An Act to Amend Section 339 of the Tariff Act of Oct 3, 1913, Nov. 15-16, 1919.* 66th Cong. 2nd sess. Washington: GPO, 1920.

This report was a summary of the Senate discussion regarding Section 339 of the Tariff Act. This act discussed wages and taxes for workers around the United States because of the tariff. We used this bill to explore the wage gap and the decrease of pay during 1911 in the Muscatine Button Factories.

“US Button Co.” *Kaboodle, Muscatine, 1911.*

This is a picture of one of the button cards that the Universal Satisfaction Button Company used. From this, we learned how there are different button cards for different genders and ages: men usually had darker colors, women had brighter colors, and kids usually had kids on the front. We chose to display this to represent the button company as it came from Muscatine.

“Wholesale Robbery of Workers Causes Strike.” *Evansville Press*, 8 Dec. 1911, p. 1. *Newspapers.com.*

This is an article found in the Evansville, Indiana paper. In the article, they state that there are prices for the fingers and eyes but the workers pay the bills, and the article states that sixty-five percent of the buttons in America were from Muscatine. We used this article to show the lost fingers and to show how big the button factories were to Muscatine and the United States.

Secondary Sources:

“The 10 Biggest Strikes in American History.” *Fox Business, Fox News*, 9 Aug. 2011.

Fox News published this article to discuss the ten biggest strikes in American history. Though the Muscatine strike did not make the list, it listed many good comparisons to see the scale of the strike. There were not many strikes in the early history of America, with most happening around the Civil Rights Movement. We used this resource to compare the Muscatine Pearl Button Factory strike to previous strikes.

Anderson, Kari. “Muscatine's Pearl Buttons.” *Kari Pearls...a Trusted Resource for Natural Pearls.*

Kari Anderson is a renowned jewelry expert that grew up in the town of Muscatine, Iowa. She writes this online article to provide background information on the 1911 Muscatine Button Factories Strike, and she provides her expertise to explain the importance and

value of the buttons. We used this article to gain background information and to achieve the understanding of the importance of pearl buttons in 1911.

Cable, Steve. "Pearl McGill - Early Health and Safety Activist." *The Tony Mazzocchi Center*, 27 July 2012.

This is a website that discusses Pearl McGill. It talks about how McGill was a big help for the workers in benefiting the workers. We used this information to help understand the life of McGill and what she had changed.

Copeland, Jeffrey S. *Shell Games: the Life and Times of Pearl McGill, Industrial Spy and Pioneer Labor Activist. Paragon House, 2012.*

Jeffrey Copeland's book about the life of Pearl McGill and her impact on the Muscatine Button Factory Strike of 1911 was a very valuable resource for us. He describes the process of Pearl McGill from her arrival to Muscatine to the end of her involvement with the Muscatine button industry. We used this book for many quotes and most of our information about Pearl McGill's life.

Ferguson, Mike. "The Hole Truth." *Muscatine Journal*, 11 Apr. 2012.

This is a website that talks about what had happened through Pearl McGill's life. From this, we learned about different information that she had discovered while she was at the Pearl Button Factories. We used this to show that there were many areas that the button factory could be improved in.

Ferrel-Beck, Jane, and Rebecca Hatfield-Meints. "The Role of Technology in the Fresh-Water Pearl Button Industry of Muscatine, Iowa 1891-1910." *The Annals of Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa*, 1983, pp. 3-18.

Jane Ferrel-Beck and Rebecca Hatfield-Meints wrote this article to explain the different technologies used in the button industry. They explain the different cutting, sorting, dying, and facing machines. These machines made the button-making process quicker, safer, and more efficient. We used this book to explain the new, automatic button-making machines at the time of the strike.

Hurd, Frances. "The Pearl Button Industry of Muscatine, Iowa." *The Annals of Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa*, 1966, pp. 401-411.

Frances Hurd published this article in 1966 to explain the button industry centralized in Muscatine. She also explains how the entire town was affected when the factories issued their shutdowns. We used this book for information about the impact of the industry on the town of Muscatine.

"Iowa's Role in Labor History." *Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters*.

The Chicago Regional Council of Carpenters detail the history of Iowa and its involvement with labor history in this article. Iowa contributed greatly to the wage earned, first dealing with men until the suffrage movement, and eventually moved on to contributing to safer working conditions, shortening the wage gap, and passing legislation

to cement these effects. We used this to research the legislation passed after the strike occurred.

Knopp, Lisa. *What the River Carries: Encounters with the Mississippi, Missouri, and Platte.* University of Missouri Press, 2012.

Lisa Knopp wrote this book to describe what is contained within three different rivers: the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Platte River. She describes the many oysters with pearls lying within the Mississippi and how important they were to the economy of Iowa. She mentions Muscatine, and she describes the impact of the button industry. We used this book to explore the button-making process and to understand the importance of the button industry.

Modes, Wes. "The Pearl Button Capital of the World." *A Secret History of American River People*, 7 May 2016.

Wes Modes wrote this blog to display his knowledge of Muscatine. He describes how the Muscatine Strike heavily affected the town and the workers in the town. Modes also describes his experience visiting the Muscatine Button factories. We used this for background information on the town of Muscatine.

"Pearl Button Capital of the World." *Muscatine History and Industry Center*, 2008-2018.

This is the official website for the Muscatine History and Industry Center, which is the official museum for the Muscatine Button Factories. This website gave us very good information, and it offered more sources to explore the topic. We were also able to contact the experts at the center and ask questions. It also taught us about the nine smaller strikes that had occurred prior to the main strike. We used this information to gain background knowledge about the strikes.

"The Pearl Button Story." *The Goldfinch*. Volume 2, Issue 2, Nov. 1980, pp. 11-13.

This is a magazine article that talks about how manufacturing has improved in the past 100 years, 1880 - 1980. From this, we learned how the button cutting machines had improved. This information was used to show how the owners compromised to help with the number of injuries that had occurred annually.

"The Pearl Button Story." *Iowa Pathways, IPTV*, 19 May 2017.

This article was written about the origin of the pearl button industry and its importance and found on the Iowa Public Television. It describes the first discovery of the mussels with the pearls inside in the Mississippi. It also briefly describes the process of creating a button. We used this article for background information about the discovery of buttons.

Quinnell, Kenneth. "Highlights from Day One of the AFL-CIO Convention." *AFL-CIO*, 21 Dec. 2017.

This is the AFL-CIO official website. From this site, we learned about America's unions and used their logo. We used their logo to show the two different sides of the conflict, the union, and the button factories.

Rousmaniere, Kate. "The Muscatine Button Workers' Strike of 1911-12." *The Annals of Iowa, State Historical Society of Iowa, 1982, 243-262.*

The showed in this resource is a description of the conflict and its effects on the town of Muscatine and the button industry. It highlights Pearl McGill's impact on the event and helps display her mannerisms throughout the strike and the compromise brought about. We used this book for its chronology of the strike and its impacts.

Rousmaniere, Kate. "The Short, Radical Life of Pearl McGill." *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas, Academia, 2009.*

This article detailed the life of Pearl McGill and her involvement in the 1911 Muscatine Pearl Button Factory strike. This book informed us about her association with the strike and how she assisted the strikers during this event. We used this book to gain background knowledge of Pearl's life and what she achieved during the strike.

Schen, Agie. "Notes on the Muscatine Button Workers' Strike." *Iowa Radical History, 17 June 2011.*

This is a website that has a letter from Pearl's diary. She was specifically talking about how the City of Muscatine had to employ the help of the St. Louis and Chicago Police. We used this to show the start of the compromise.

Theisen, Colleen. "The University of Iowa Libraries." *News from the Archives, 13 Feb. 2017.*

Colleen Theisen is the assistant curator of the Iowa Women's Archives at the University of Iowa. Janet Weaver has produced many articles regarding women working rights. We used some of her ideas of how the rights and working conditions have changed through the years as a result of strikes.

Wildermuth, Mary. "Interview from Director of Muscatine History and Industry Center." 17 Feb. 2018.

When we were conducting our research, we reached out to the Muscatine History and Industry Center to conduct an interview. The director of the center, Mary Wildermuth, allowed us to interview her, and she told us many pieces of useful information. She also allowed us to look at Pearl McGill's personal papers and other resources the general public doesn't have direct access to. We used this interview for most of our information throughout the project.