

Teacher's Guide By Tom Ratliff

Adventure in Coltsville: Inferno of Hope

This guide has been prepared by the author and includes activities, historical notes, maps, and a list of resources for further reading.

The Colt fire was a real event. On Friday, February 5, 1864, at about 8:15 the steam gong at Colt Patent Firearms in the South Meadows in Hartford began blaring out the horrible news that the armory was on fire. The fire seems to have started on the third floor in or near the polishing room.

A number of factors contributed to the rapid spread of the blaze: there was a lot of cotton material in the polishing room that quickly caught fire, the wooden floors were soaked with oil and grease, and the roof timbers were exposed and very dry—when the flames reached the roof the fire spread quickly and the eastern wing of the armory was doomed. By 9:00 the blue onion dome collapsed and in another hour the walls had fallen in. The ruins continued to smolder all that day and the fire companies stayed into the night to ensure that the fire didn't restart.

The Hartford Fire Department was ill-equipped to fight the fire. Ladders used to help rescue the workers were not tall enough to reach the second floor, the water pressure in the hydrants was not strong enough to supply the hoses, and most of the firemen were untrained volunteers. Even the response time was poor, as the fire engines were pulled by the firemen themselves, and on the icy February streets this was a challenging task.

As a result of the fire the Hartford Fire Department was reorganized. A full time staff was hired, horses were acquired to pull the engines, and new equipment was purchased. The Colt armory was rebuilt according to safety standards that made it one of the best working environments in the world.

Miraculously, there was only one fatality—E.K. Fox, a cabinetmaker who was employed making gun stocks was killed when the roof fell in. Fox had originally escaped unscathed but had been helping to rescue equipment and personal property and was caught inside when the roof collapsed. Many others suffered from minor burns and smoke inhalation but serious casualties were few—limited to one worker who was described by the newspapers as “badly burned” and another who was “knocked unconscious.” The only other reported injury was a broken wrist.

Much of this story has been written using the newspaper accounts of the Hartford Courant. The characters are all fictional although every effort has been made to make the characters as historically accurate as possible.

Tom Ratliff is the co-author of the Matty Trescott series and has written books about the Civil War and the American Revolution. For more information on his books visit his website at www.MattyTrescott.com.

Chapter 1: Amanda

New Words or Terms:

Fierce – ferocious or sharp, violent

Artisans – a craftsman, someone skilled at making a particular product

Sharps Rifle Manufacturing – see historical note

Armory – a factory where weapons are made

Baggage master – person in charge of loading and unloading baggage

Baggage cart – a wagon for carrying baggage to and from a train

Lurched – jerked or moved forward suddenly

Pockmarked – scarred with small indentations (originally from smallpox)

Collided – bumped into

Questions:

What is the setting (time and place)? How do you know?

Make a chart with two columns and describe Amanda and Sammy.

Who do you think mysterious stranger is?

Why is Amanda at the train station? Do you think her brother is ever coming home?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever waited for someone? Who were you waiting for and why?

Historical Notes:

Union Station, on Asylum Street in Hartford, was built in the 1850s.

Sharps Rifle Manufacturing Company was founded by Christian Sharps. The company was on Rifle Avenue, (Capital Avenue today) not far from the State Capitol building. The Park River, which used to run through Bushnell Park, is now underground.

Chapter 2: Olivia

New Words or Terms:

Clapboard – horizontal, overlapping siding of long thin boards

Anxiously – excitedly anticipating or worriedly

Punctual – on time or exactly on time

Resented – hated or disliked intensely

Scarlet fever – a serious childhood disease characterized by a high fever

Questions:

Describe Olivia's family using a word web.

Who is Betsey O'Toole?

Connect to the story:

How is Olivia's family like yours? How is it different?

Historical Notes:

"All for the money..." During the Civil War some states allowed you to hire a substitute if you were drafted. Matthew Morgan was paid to take someone else's place in the army.

Irish immigrants first came to Connecticut to work on the Farmington Canal in the 1820s and the railroads in the 1830s and 40s. Large numbers also arrived in the late 1840s because of the potato famine. By 1860, the Irish population of Connecticut was significant and in Hartford, Irish made up about one-third of the population.

Chapter 3: Sammy

New Words or Terms:

Frigid – freezing cold

Overseers – men who managed a plantation and gave orders to the slaves

Seceded – left or withdrew from – see historical note

Shiloh – a battle site in southern Tennessee in 1862

Coltsville – the area around the Colt armory – see historical note

Buggy – a four-wheeled open carriage

Questions:

What do we know about Sammy?

What have we learned about Rafer Jenkins?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever tried to solve a mystery or wondered about a strange looking person?

Predict:

What is going to happen next to:

Amanda?

Sammy?

Olivia?

Historical Notes:

“When South Carolina seceded...” After the election of Abraham Lincoln in November, 1860, the citizens of South Carolina held a state-wide convention and the delegates voted to secede from (leave) the Union. In the next few months they were followed by Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas, forming the Confederate States of America.

Coltsville was a community that Samuel Colt had built around his armory. It included houses for his employees, a park, a recreation hall, a band, stores, a farm, and a community center for dances and entertainment.

Chapter 4: Papa

New Words or Terms:

Lye soap – a harsh soap made from animal fat and wood ashes

Hustled – ushered or moved someone along hurriedly or quickly

Questions:

Why do you think the Morgans came to America?

Compare how the Morgans lived in Ireland to their home in Hartford.

How does Olivia wash the clothes for her family?

Connect to the story:

How does your mother or father do the laundry at your house? How is it different from the way Olivia does it? Fill in the chart below.

Olivia	My House

Historical Notes:

“Papa was proud of his job at Colt’s...” Colt’s Firearms, referred to as the armory, was built in the 1850s by Samuel Colt.

Colt’s pays the *“best wages in Hartford...and...not everyone will hire an Irishman...”* The Irish were discriminated against and often found it difficult to find good paying jobs. The Colt armory paid their workers well.

Chapter 5: Dinner

New Words or Terms:

Bolster – support or strengthen

Linen – a fancy cloth that is used to make tablecloths and napkins

Siblings – brothers and sisters

Drawl – a southern accent or way of speaking

Winced – flinched or cringed in pain or surprise

Rarity – something very rare or uncommon

Gettysburg – a Civil War battle site in Pennsylvania in 1863

Resume – restart or begin where you left off

Loitering – hanging around doing nothing

Questions:

Compare supper at Amanda's house to supper at Olivia's.

What do you think of Professor Albright? Is he going to be an important character?

Connect to the story:

How are the meals at your house similar to and different from supper at Amanda's?

Illustrating the Story:

Draw a Graphic Organizer (word web, chart, or story map) that shows the action in the chapter.

Draw a picture or design a collage that illustrates dinner at the Winslow's.

Historical Notes:

"...new English teacher at the Seminary..." The Hartford Female Seminary was founded in 1823 by Catharine Beecher (sister of Harriet Beecher Stowe). It was one of the first modern schools for girls in the country.

Gettysburg was a three-day battle that took place on July 1st, 2nd, and 3rd of 1863. There were over 51,000 men killed, wounded, captured, or missing after the battle. It was the bloodiest battle of the war.

Chapter 7: Grandfather

New Words or Terms:

Exertion – hard work

Overalls – work pants that have straps that go over your shoulders

Overcast - cloudy

Startled - surprised

Steam whistle – a loud whistle that is powered by steam

Questions:

Amanda is so cold her face gets numb on the walk to Grandfather's house. Have you ever had that happen to you? When and why?

Connect to the story:

Describe a visit to your grandparents' or some relative you like to visit.

Activity:

Make a chart or graphic organizer comparing Amanda and Olivia. Include details like where they live, what they do during the day, jobs or responsibilities they have, as well as clothing, food, and what they do for fun.

Historical Notes:

"...it was the steam whistle from Colt's Armory..." The steam whistle was used to signal the beginning and end of the work shifts; it was unusual for the whistle to sound at other times of the day. Amanda knew that something was wrong when she heard the whistle blowing.

Chapter 8: Colt's

New Words or Terms:

Din – very loud noise

Repeating pistols – revolvers

Intoxicating – exciting, almost hypnotic

Apprentice – one who is learning a job while working at the job

Muscular – very strong with well-defined muscles

Scrawny – very thin and weak looking

Polishing room – a room in the armory where the finished weapons were polished so they would look shiny and new

Lugged – carried, especially something very heavy

Billowing – blowing up in big clouds or puffs

Impulse – a sudden feeling or desire

Questions:

Why does Sammy arrive so early on his first day of work? What does he do while he waits?

What do you think of Mr. Harrison? Jack Dodd?

What happens to Sammy at the end of the chapter? How do you know?

Connect to the story:

Starting a new job is like the first day of school. How do you feel on first days? Are you excited? Nervous? Eager to make a good impression?

Illustrating the Story:

Draw a picture or collage of the armory.

Draw a picture of Sammy's head and write in all the words that describe how he is feeling on his first day.

Historical Notes:

“...he could not have imagined such a large room existed...noisy machines, clattering, banging, grinding...” The armory that Sammy entered was one of the largest in the world: 500 feet long and 60 feet wide, with several hundred workmen and at least 200 machines of all types.

Chapter 9: The Blacksmith's Shop

New Words or Terms:

Blacksmith – someone who works with metal by heating it and then pounding it with a hammer to shape it

Tongs – grasping tool for picking up hot metal

Forge – a furnace or hearth where metals are heated

Anvil – a large steel platform that hot metal is hammered on

Hades – the ancient Greeks referred to the underworld as Hades

Questions:

What sort of things do you think Olivia's father works on?

How does Tom Morgan react when he sees Olivia? Why?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever been to where your mother or father works?

What would you do if your mother or father forgot their lunch?

Research:

Read more about blacksmiths: What kinds of work did they do? What tools did they use? Are there any blacksmiths today? Why or why not?

Historical Notes:

"I didn't see any guards..." One of the suspicious aspects of the fire is that it happened right at the time of day when the guards changed their shift—about eight in the morning. If someone wanted to sneak into the factory, this would have been the perfect time.

Chapter 10: The Armory

New Words or Terms:

Dread – a feeling of fear

Commotion – noise, agitation, or disorder

Throng – great crowd of people

Spectators – people who are watching something

Billowed – drifted up in a huge cloud

Questions:

Why is Amanda so intent on getting to the armory?

What is the scene when she finally gets there?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever been so excited to get someplace that you ran all the way? Where were you going? What happened when you arrived?

Illustrating the Story:

Draw a picture or make a collage of the armory, or Amanda, or the fire Engine, or all three.

Historical Notes:

“Why aren’t the church bells ringing?” To sound the alarm for a fire the church bells would ring throughout the city. There was a reward of a dollar to the person who first sounded the alarm.

“...she saw a fire engine company coming towards her. Pulled by volunteers...” The fire fighters in Hartford were volunteers and since there were no horses, the men would pull the engines. Because of the fire the Hartford Fire Department was reorganized and horses were purchased to pull the fire engines.

Chapter 11: Inferno

New Words or Terms:

Throbbing – beating rapidly or pounding violently

Timbers – large wooden support beams

Lantern – an oil lamp used like a flashlight

Bucket brigade – a line of people who pass buckets of water along from a well, river, or pond to fight a fire

Nozzle – the metal end of a hose that controls how the water comes out

Water main – a large faucet for connecting a hose

Valve – the handle on a water main

Ball cock – the round piece inside a faucet or water main that turns to let the water flow

Roof trusses – the largest beams that hold up the roof

Smoldering – smoking from intense heat

Debris – rubble, scattered fragments of something that is broken

Questions:

If the fire hose had been able to provide water, do you think that Sammy and the other men could have put it out?

What do you think will happen to Sammy and Jack Dodd?

Connect to the story:

If you were Sammy what would you have done when the roof started to collapse? Write a journal entry describing what you might have done.

Have you ever had to make a difficult decision? How did you figure out what to do?

Illustrating the Story:

Draw a series of images (like a comic book or graphic novel) that shows the action of this chapter. Leave a space under each image for some narrative and add in a few speech bubbles if you want to have direct quotes from the characters.

Chapter 12: The Dome

New Words or Terms:

Blaring – ringing or sounding loudly and continuously

Smolder – smoke

Cinder – a partly burned piece of coal or wood that is very hot

Riveted – fascinated to the point of almost being unable to move

Twinge – to feel a sharp mental or physical pain

Engulfed – completely surrounded

Unscathed – not touched or damaged

Questions:

Why does Olivia carry the toolbox outside with her?

How does she feel as she watches the fire spread?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever helped your mother or father with something?

Write a journal entry as if you were watching the armory fire with Olivia.

Historical Notes:

“...found a place near the river embankment...” The Colt Armory was built in the South Meadows along the Connecticut River. The embankment was a two-mile long dike built by Samuel Colt to protect the armory from floods.

“Atop the dome stood the Colt pony...” This is the famous Rampant Colt that Samuel Colt had designed to represent his company. The colt is considered the first corporate symbol or trademark. The original was destroyed in the fire but a second colt was made and stood atop the armory until the 1980s. Today the colt is a part of the Connecticut History Museum at the State Library in Hartford.

Chapter 13: Together

New Words or Terms:

Embankment – a 30 foot earthen dike built to control the river floods

Frostbite – damage to your skin when it is exposed to the cold for a long time – it can be serious and result in losing your fingers, toes, or ears

Frail – very small and thin

Sheepishly – in an embarrassed way

Store-bought – purchased in a store, as opposed to home-made

Questions:

Describe Olivia's reaction to Amanda. Does she like her at first? What happens to make her dislike Amanda? Does she change her mind?

Do you think that Olivia and Amanda are going to be friends? Why or why not?

Connect to the story:

Do you have a close friend? What kinds of things do you have in common?

Write a journal entry from either Amanda or Olivia's point of view describing how she feels about meeting the other person.

Illustrating the Story:

Draw a picture of Olivia and Amanda as they watch the fire together.

Draw a picture or series of pictures that shows the armory as it burns in this chapter. Remember that thousands of people turned out to watch the fire, and that several of the fire stations sent men and equipment to help battle the blaze.

Chapter 14: Collapse

New Words or Terms:

Torturously – almost painfully

Eerie – strange or chilling

Shuddered – shook or trembled with fear

Soot – fine black particles (mostly carbon) that are left after a fire

Singed – partly burned

Skedaddled – fled or ran

Questions:

Why does Amanda refuse to sit down?

Describe how you think that Tom Morgan met Sammy and Jack Dodd in the fire.

Connect to the story:

Have you ever had to wait for someone and then been really happy to see them?

Activity:

Pretend you were in Hartford watching the fire. Draw a picture or write a paragraph describing what you saw.

Chapter 15: Aftermath

New Words or Terms:

Aftermath – a time after something happens

Tatters – torn or ragged clothing

Buckled – bent

Parlor – a sitting room or living room

Salve – a healing cream or ointment that is applied to the skin

Kettle – a metal pot or teakettle for boiling water

Questions:

How does Olivia know what to do? Why don't they call a doctor?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever had someone bandage injuries or wounds?

Activity:

Fill in the chart describing Amanda and Olivia:

Where?	Amanda	Olivia
At home		
The morning of the fire		
At the fire		
When Sammy and Mr. Morgan appeared		
Back at the Morgan's		

Chapter 16: Friends

New Words or Terms:

Ridiculous – silly or stupid

Questions:

Why does Amanda insist on leaving? Do you think that they are going to catch Jenkins?

Activity:

Why is Amanda convinced that Jenkins set the fire? Use the chart to list your answers and if you can, list the text that supports your answer:

Reason	Where in the text?

Chapter 17: Jenkins

New Words or Terms:

Dump cart – a small, two-wheeled cart

Manure – animal droppings often used for fertilizer

Cylinders – the revolver has a barrel that contains several cylinders that hold the bullets (although in 1864 the guns did not yet use modern bullets)

Questions:

How do they figure out that the gun was stolen?

What do you think happens to Jenkins?

Will the police believe Amanda's story about Jenkins? Why or why not?

Assignment:

Write a journal entry from Amanda's or Sammy's point of view.

Write an alternate ending to this chapter.

Take a sheet of paper and fold it in half the long way and then into fourths so you have eight panels. Draw a picture in each panel that shows the development of the action in the story.

Assume that Jenkins got away. Write a paragraph describing how he did and another that tells what he does after his escape.

Chapter 18: Home

New Words or Terms:

Sheepishly – in an embarrassed way

Questions:

Why doesn't Amanda want a doctor?

Why doesn't she tell her parents about Jenkins?

Why aren't her parents angry at her?

What does Mr. Morgan mean when he says it will be hard to prove who started the fire?

Connect to the story:

Have you ever kept a secret? Was it a good idea or did you get in trouble for it?

Historical Notes:

"I'll heat the water while you get undressed." The hot water heater was not invented in the 1860s, so Alice has to heat a kettle or two of boiling water in order for Amanda to take a bath.

"...only two men missing." At the end of the day it was believed that two men had died in the fire but the next day it was determined that only one man had died as a result of the fire.

"...Mrs. Colt has already said she wants to rebuild." Samuel Colt had died in 1862 and his widow, Elizabeth Colt, was devastated by the fire but she was determined to rebuild the factory that her husband had worked so hard to build.

Chapter 19: Hope

New Words or Terms:

Lathe – a machine that turns a piece of wood or metal to help shape it

Sling – a strap that helps support the arm when it is damaged or wounded

Questions:

Amanda says she hardly recognizes Sammy. How is he different?

Assignments:

Imagine you are Amanda. Write a journal entry about your day and include what happens after you get home.

Write an outline for another chapter for the story. What might happen next?

Make a collage that shows the characters and action in the story.

Research Samuel Colt and the armory in Hartford. Make a collage or write a report detailing your findings.

Predictions:

What do you think will happen to Olivia? Will she ever go back to school?

Will Amanda and Olivia remain friends? Why or why not?

Imagine it is five years later. Describe what has happened to each of the characters.

Ask the Author:

Come up with a list of at least five questions to ask the author. Some ideas to include would be about characters, plot, setting, research, or the writing process itself.

Geography:

Plan a trip to Hartford to visit the Colt Armory and other places mentioned in the story. Include details about travel and transportation, as well as where you would stay, and where you would eat your meals.

The Aftermath of the Fire

The Colt fire was one of the biggest industrial disasters of its day and the worst fire in Hartford in the nineteenth century. During the fire a number of things went wrong—there was not enough water pressure in the hoses, ladders used to help workmen escape from the upper floors were too short, and many of the volunteer firemen were untrained and unfamiliar with how to fight a large factory fire.

After the fire, the Hartford Fire Department was reorganized and modernized; a paid force of firefighters was hired, new equipment was purchased, and horses were acquired for the purpose of pulling the fire engines. In addition, new pipes were laid to improve the water pressure at the hydrants.

No one ever determined whether the fire was set or not. There were, at the time of the fire, former Confederate soldiers working at the armory but no formal investigation was ever made. Some thought it a strange coincidence that the fire broke out during the shift change of the watchmen, the only time in the entire work day that the armory was unattended.

Before the fire, the Colt Armory was one of the most modern factories of its day. It had indoor plumbing, as well as heating and lighting, and there were fire hoses inside the building connected to the water reservoir that supplied Coltsville. But there were no safety laws or government inspections of factories and the Colt armory was a fire trap—oil and grease from the machines had saturated the floors, the roof timbers were dried out (which helped the fire to spread quickly when the flames hit the roof), and there were great supplies of gunpowder in the building.

The local papers argued whether or not the fire was set or an accident, but since police investigative methods were almost unheard of during the Civil War, nothing ever came of it. It is interesting to note that a few months later the Springfield Armory in Springfield, Massachusetts also burned down under mysterious circumstances.

Additional Reading:

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