

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the "Fair," which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Great Boston Fire of 1872



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Image of the Great Boston Fire of 1872
From the Boston Public Library

—The danger from fire is ever present. Today, however, we are fortunate to have detectors and sprinklers available to warn and save us. But in the 19th century, coal was necessary for heat, safety regulations for businesses and homes were almost nonexistent and the equipment available to battle blazes relied on horsepower to maneuver through narrow streets. One of the worst years in fire history occurred in Boston in 1872. And while many interested in fire history have read of the “Great Boston Fire” that devastated most of the city’s downtown, few have heard of the fire three months before that foreshadowed the danger ahead.

On August 7, 1872, the Sisters of Notre Dame living at the Broadway Street Convent in South Boston reported on a spectacular blaze originating at the Continental Sugar Refinery located between 1st and 2nd Streets, just a couple of blocks from their home. They wrote that *“about 9 P.M. the Sugar refinery was on fire, at a short distance from our convent. We were at night prayer and perceived our yard illuminated as if all were on fire. We remained in prayer until 10 P.M. when the Sisters retired to the dormitories, two only continued to watch in case of danger. The engines were promptly on the spot and the fire was under control in a short time. The constant pouring of water kept the flames within the four walls of the immense building, all the surrounding houses were preserved D.G.”*

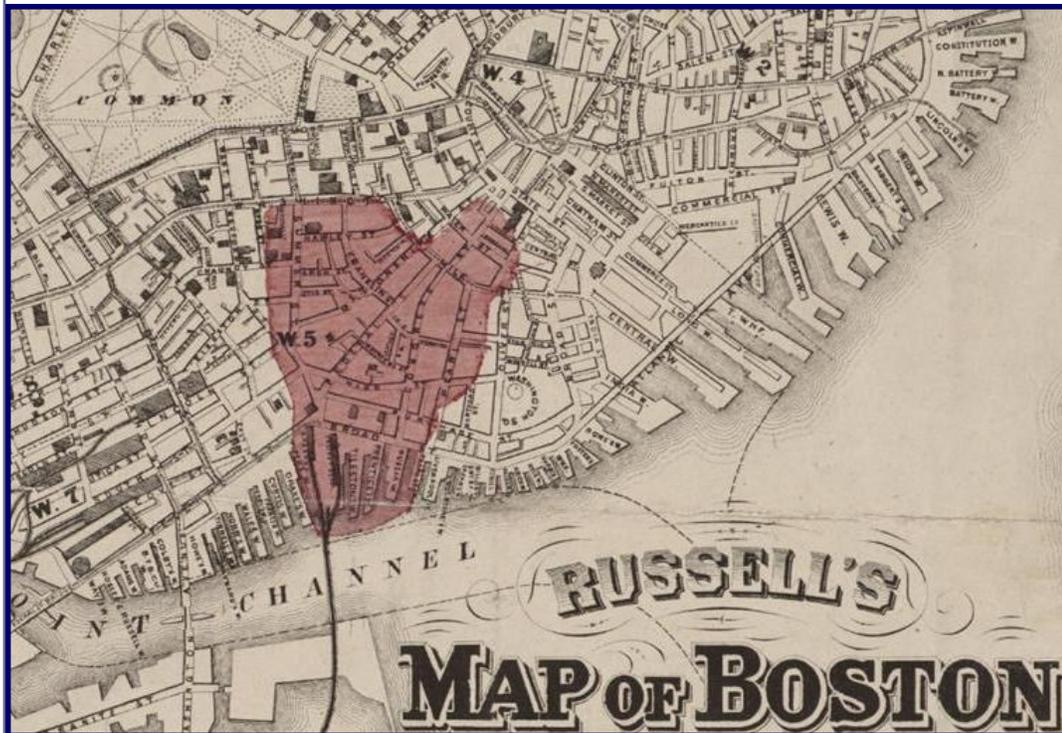
The *Boston Daily Globe* stated on August 8th that the refinery had occupied over 50,000 square feet of land and was six stories high. The fire spread so quickly that in less than half an hour the front walls began to collapse. As the Sisters had said, the fire department appeared to have contained the blaze by 11 p.m., but all the machinery in the factory was destroyed. Unbeknownst to everyone at the time, the flames were not completely under control. The next morning another blaze sprang from burning embers within the ruins, damaging several nearby buildings. But the most terrible cost of that fire lay in the loss of jobs for over 300 men. But that was to be only the beginning of hard times for Boston.

Like most seacoast cities, a good number of Boston’s buildings were constructed of brick. While this offered some protection, window frames, doorways, interior walls and roofs were mostly wooden. And Boston was in the midst of a building boom. Despite some economic woes in recent times, many businesses were not only thriving but expanding. Unfortunately, the regulations for that time didn’t account for such growth. Worst of all, the city’s water mains were not upgraded to endure this rapid expansion with the result that the water pressure for most areas was quite low. Added into this recipe for disaster was the fact that majority of the horses on the Boston Fire Department were suffering from a horse flu epidemic that had spread across the nation.

The Sisters wrote that "on the 9th of November in the evening a fire broke out in a factory of crinolines [located on Summer Street] and in a few hours the houses of several streets were in a blaze and presented a sky of fire. The wind was directed to South Boston but by a providential protection, the flames advanced toward the city of Boston, yet the smoke went to S. Boston in immense clouds. We were aware of the danger as our convent and schoolhouse are at a short distance from the bridge [located on the Fort Point Chanel] which separates S. Boston from Boston. . . .More than twenty streets were the prey of flames in the most commercial part of the city and the most beautiful brick houses were consumed by this fearful element; even many stone buildings shared this fatal fate. If South Boston had commenced to burn, in no time, all would have been destroyed, as nearly all the houses were mere wooden constructions. Two of the Sisters were constantly in prayers day and night replacing each other as long as the danger lasted. A thousand times D.G. We have been spared, with the poor who surround us. . . .On the wharf the coal continued to burn for weeks, we could see from our windows the terrible flames."

The convent on Broadway Street was only about a mile from the factory where the fire began. With most of the horses out of commission because of the flu epidemic, volunteers were drafted to drag the fire engines to the spreading fire on foot. And since the pressure in the city's water mains was so weak, the water couldn't reach the roofs of many of the buildings. This allowed the embers to spread from rooftop to rooftop, carried by the November winds. In addition, the gas lines used to power street lights and lamps in homes couldn't be shut off, causing explosions to ignite across the district.

When most of the fire was finally extinguished 12 hours later, 776 buildings across 65 acres of Boston were destroyed. In the end, thirty people were killed and thousands of people were left homeless and without work.



The shaded area identifies the area of the city damaged by the fire
From bostonfirehistory.org

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Broadway Street, South Boston Convent Annals, 1871-1888.
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- ◆ Boston Fire Historical Society, bostonfirehistory.org
- ◆ Boston Globe Newspaper Archive, 1872-1980.
- ◆ New York Times Newspaper Archive, 1852-2014