

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.

Annals from the Archives

The Peabody Fire of 1915

St. John's School Memorial Garden
built in 2005 to commemorate
the victims of the 1915 fire



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—A recent *Boston Globe* article reported that there has been a 90% decline of fires in the city of Boston in the last forty years. Such happy news is mirrored in communities all across the state of Massachusetts. The decline is attributed to a combination of improved building codes, new sprinkler systems and better care taken by most people in dealing with hazardous or flammable materials. But in the early part of the 20th century, fires were a nearly daily event in the Boston area. For example, the *Boston Globe* reported in 1915 that there had been seventeen fires in the Boston area during the first week of that year alone.

When Peabody's St. John's School began a new academic year in September 1915, the school was twenty-two years old. Twenty Sisters lived in the convent; five of those had just transferred in August from other schools. As was common then and now, fire drills were conducted often. The Sisters in Peabody were as aware as everyone of the ever present danger from fire. Only the previous year, the Sisters of Notre Dame in Salem were fortunate to escape injury and damage to their convent when an explosion at the Korn Leather Factory less than a half mile from them caused the Great Salem Fire that left 12,000 people homeless and a wake of destruction across 253 acres of the most densely populated portion of the city.

St. John's School was thriving in 1915. That June, nine girls graduated from the High School. As the school began another year, there were more than six hundred students. An exact number is impossible to determine because enrollment procedures were more lax—children often just *showed up* and were assigned to a classroom. This was typical for many schools in those years, both public and parochial. As was required by Massachusetts law at that time, St. John's had two stairways and two exits. The Peabody building inspector had recently proclaimed the school adequate. But like most public buildings of the time, there were no fire escapes. The need for fire escapes had been debated in cities and towns across the country since the 1880s. But few schools, public or private, had them. On Tuesday, October 26th, Sr. Carmelita Marie, the principal, had been delighted with the performance of the children for their fire drill. The school had been emptied in less than two minutes.

Only two days later, the morning of October 28, 1915 dawned bright and warm. A little after 8:30 a.m., Sister Carmelita Marie climbed the stairs to the third floor to the girls High School to conduct a lesson in shorthand when she smelled smoke. She went to investigate the source. *"On reaching the stairs leading to the girls' basement [she] was horror stricken to find flames leaping along the ceiling and directly under the first floor. With a glance to see that the front exit was open she ran to the other end of the corridor only to find the flames more fierce on the boys'*

side. Calling a Sister to open the back exit, she ran to the bell and rang the fire drill. The children passed out in perfect order but the fire had gained such [terrible] headway. . ." [Peabody Annals, Oct. 1915]

The fire department was only a tenth of a mile away, just around the corner. But it took them 10 minutes to arrive. Until they came, the Sisters frantically fought to help the children escape. But in the rapidly thickening smoke, it was impossible to see and panic ensued. Children helped other children, but being blinded by the smoke, many tripped and fell near the front door and were trampled. On the second floor, Sister Aldegonde quickly realized the best escape was to drop her children out the window one by one to anyone who might catch them. By the time she made it out of the school, she was severely burned over her face and shoulders. Other Sisters also dropped their students out the windows before escaping themselves. Also burned in her struggle to save her students was Sister Catherine of the Nativity. Some of the older children who stumbled to safety feared for their younger siblings and ran back to find them only to be trapped by the flames and die. Maurice Harris, a seventh grader carried his crippled classmate through the hallways and out to safety. Sister Carmelita Marie was the last one to make it out of the school alive and was also burned in her effort to rescue the children. When she learned that 21 children between the ages of 6 and 17 had died, she collapsed and had to be sedated. Many of the children who managed to escape suffered sprains, broken bones and burns.

The fire was reported in the papers from Boston to Cincinnati. The New York Times praised the Sisters' for their heroic efforts, stating there might have been more deaths but for their determination to save their students. For weeks, people pointed blame. Some said the school was too old, despite the fact it was one of the newer schools in Peabody. There was no doubt the dry wood within the building caused it to ignite like a tinderbox. Others said the doors shouldn't have opened inward, making escape harder. And though it took the fire department ten minutes to arrive, the flames had spread so quickly that it might not have made any difference in the outcome.

No one ever discovered the cause of the fire. A few days later, Sister Aldegonde was transferred to Waltham to recover. Sister Carmelita Marie remained in Peabody.

St. James High School in Salem opened their doors for the Peabody High School girls and created double sessions, Salem students attending in the morning and Peabody High School girls in the afternoon. The Town of Peabody offered the Sisters the old High School building on Stevens Street for the elementary school children. It was in some disrepair but workers from A. C. Lawrence Tannery worked feverishly to turn the old space into classrooms for the children. Former students of St. John's donated enough money for the Sisters to buy new textbooks. Friends sent automobiles daily to carry the Sisters from their convent on Chestnut Street to the temporary school on Stevens Street.

A new building was completed in 1917. Sister Carmelita Marie remained Superior through the construction of the school which was now equipped with fire escapes. In 1920, she was transferred to Lowell. She remained there for the next few years and died in Tyngsboro on October 4, 1928 at the age of 54.

Works consulted for this article:

- ◆ Peabody Annals, 1912-1943
- ◆ Peabody Journal, 1920-1931
- ◆ Sisters' Genealogy, Peabody
- ◆ *New York Times*, 1915
- ◆ *Boston Globe*, 1915