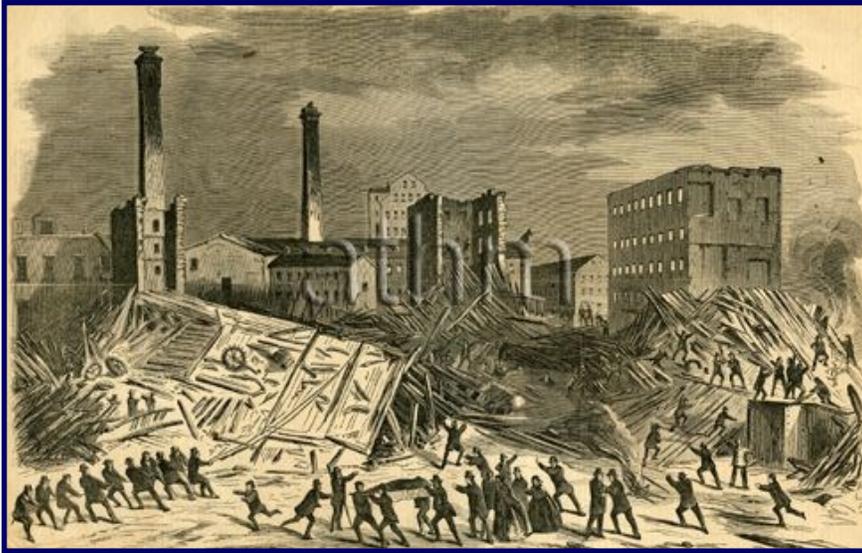


The exhibit of "the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair," which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored.

Annals from the Archives

The Pemberton Mill Disaster



Pemberton Mill, Lawrence, MA in 1860 after collapse
Image from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper
January 21, 1860

January 2015

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—The creation of Lawrence, Massachusetts as a planned city devoted to profit began in the 1830s. Speculators bought property alongside the Merrimack River in Andover and Methuen. Their vision was the formation of a city where the river would power their new mills. In 1845, these speculators were incorporated as the Essex Company. The Essex Company laid out the streets in this newly formed town and sold the land to churches, mill owners, schools, and the emerging local government with restrictions that outlined how the land could be used, as well as how many and what type of buildings were allowed. The new mill workers who poured into this area were mostly Irish immigrants and they were housed in tenements that were rented from the Essex Company. This new community was named for one of the Essex Company investors, Abbot Lawrence. It is rather ironic that Abbot Lawrence never set foot in the city. While other mill cities had similar tenements and rules for their workers, the Essex Company exerted more control over their workers than any other mill town at the time. Their need for control extended to the river—without the Merrimack, their success would be jeopardized. And so, the Essex Company partnered with the city of Lowell's Proprietors of Locks and Canals to buy the water rights of the river from Massachusetts all the way north to Lake Winnepesaukee.

St. Mary's Parish in Lawrence was founded with the beginning of Lawrence in 1848. The first pastor, Fr. James O'Donnell oversaw the construction of a chapel for the parish in 1849. The city continued to grow around the chapel. More mills were completed and more workers arrived. In 1853, a new textile mill was opened, the Pemberton Mill. On February 21, 1856, an article in the *Pittsfield Sun* reported that "Nine years ago the spot where Lawrence stands was a forest: now it contains a population of nearly 20,000." Among the noteworthy mills in operation was the Pemberton Mill, operating with a budget of \$500,000, equal to more than \$10 million today. But that was before the Panic of 1857. That Panic caused stock prices to fall by half and thousands of businesses to fail. The owners of the Pemberton Mill sold at a loss of \$350,000. The new owners soon had more looms and spindles installed in an effort to increase profits.

It was about this time when Fr. O'Donnell wrote to the American Superior in Cincinnati, Sr. Louise, asking if she could send some Sisters to take over the parish school for girls. Though she agreed to his request, there were not enough sisters available at that time. Fr. O'Donnell would have to wait. In 1859, five sisters were finally ready to travel to Lawrence. Fr. O'Donnell planned to offer the new sisters the attic floor of the building where he lived. It was fortunate that Sister Louise decided to visit

Sister Desiree in Lowell a few months before their scheduled arrival. It gave her the chance to inspect the building. When Sister Louise “asked to see the preparations for which were being made. . .Fr. O’Donnell insisted that they must first see his children and led the way to the class-rooms.” While Sister Louise was pleased with the classes, she still wished to visit the attic rooms Fr. O’Donnell had set aside for her sisters.

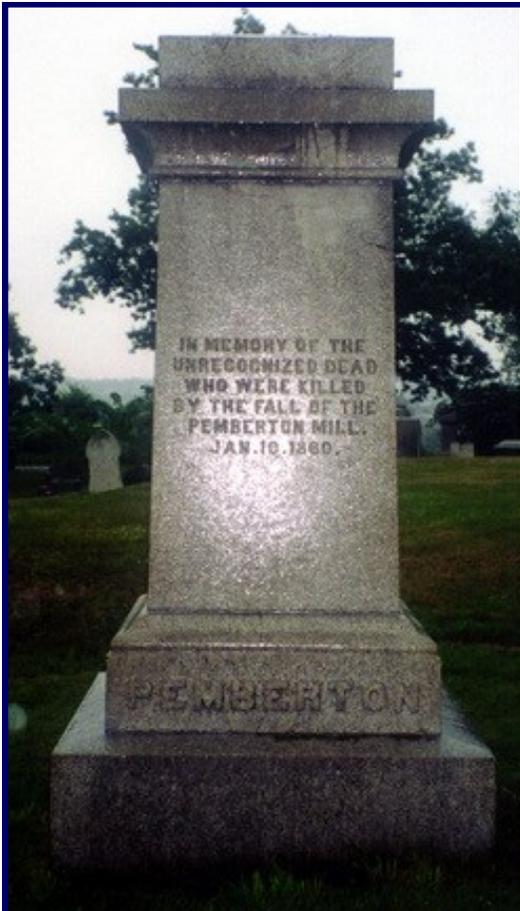
The Annalist reported that the attic “was divided into five apartments, each ventilated and lighted by a single sky-light. On entering you had to stoop, so as not to strike the ceiling or knock your eye out by the projecting rod. A room at the west end, had the luxury of a sash window and green shutters. . .The floor was made of rough boards without much support, as they extended across the width of the building. In stepping upon them you felt as though they were giving way, and you were to fall through space. In consequence, Sister Superior did not go far, her dread and consternation being evidently visible.”

It was obvious the attic rooms wouldn’t suffice. At Sr. Louise’s insistence, Fr. O’Donnell found a tenement house and had it converted into a livable home. The first five sisters arrived in Lawrence on Saturday, August 20, 1859. They quickly settled in and opened school on Monday, August 29th, with about 300 girls in three primary grades. As enrollment grew, they soon had to send for more help. Part of their work included preparing older girls who worked in the mills for their First Communion.

Life proceeded as expected for the newly installed sisters. The Annalist reported on the usual happenings in the house and school. The first citation for 1860 changed all that. “On Jan. 10, 1860, it was arranged that these children [those preparing for First Communion] should ask permission from the superintendents of their departments in the mills to leave sooner than usual. The operators at the Pemberton Mill were refused. . . . At 5:30, the Pemberton collapsed, burying nearly all who worked in it in the ruins. To add to the horror of the situation, the debris took fire, so that many who could have been extricated alive, were doomed to a terrible death. Never did Rachel mourn more for the loss of her loved ones than did the bereft for their dead. . . .the school building was turned into a morgue, where the bodies that had been rescued from the debris before it was all ablaze, were placed to be recognized.”

At the time of its collapse, the Pemberton Mill held 700 looms and 2700 spindles. When the walls gave way that Tuesday evening over 600 workers were trapped, most of whom were women. The fire the sisters mentioned began around 9:30 when one of the oil lanterns being used to help locate the trapped was accidentally knocked over. When the flames were finally extinguished, almost 150 people were killed and hundreds more injured. The disaster was reported in newspapers from London to California and as far south as Texas.

The disaster was the worst industrial accident in Massachusetts’ history. And the cause—like the attic room Fr. O’Donnell wanted to offer the sisters—the mill had been shoddily constructed. An inquest later that month found that all the extra looms and shuttles the new owners had installed just a couple of years before were too much weight for the brittle iron pillars.



Memorial to those who died at the Pemberton Mill on January 10, 1860

Sources consulted for this article

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