

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. Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Terrible Tornado of 1953



June 2015

Written by

Nancy Barthelemy

Archivist

nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org

sndboston1pswich.wordpress.com

bolparchives.omeka.net

Devastation in Worcester after the June 9, 1953
tornado ripped through the city

<http://www.wcvb.com/weather/60-years-later-deadly-worcester-tornado/20376844>

—The Annals for the Worcester Convent on Vernon Street were always detailed about the year's happenings, beginning with the new year, describing events in a mostly chronological order, such as the comings and goings of Sisters and the various activities at their schools. Usually kept by the Superior, the Annals were composed after the year's end as an overview. But 1953 was a year like no other for Worcester. While the Annals discussed a few events early in the year, the Annalist soon pronounced that there was only one event that mattered to everyone in the city.

"The year 1953 will always be referred to in Worcester as the year of the tornado. This strange and terrible disaster struck the northern part of the city and the surrounding towns, especially Holden and Shrewsbury, at 5:10 p.m. on June 9."

There was little warning of the impending catastrophe. The *Boston Globe* predicted that the weather for Massachusetts would be humid and warmer, with a high of 90 degrees and winds rising to between 25 and 35 mph. No one could have imagined how wrong they would be for Worcester county. In 1953, the city of Worcester had approximately 200,000 residents. At around 4:25 p.m., boaters on the Quabbin Reservoir watched in shock as 3 tornadoes formed over the water and quickly merged into one massive funnel that crossed the reservoir and continued southeasterly, first through Petersham, Barre and then Rutland. The first warning the people in Worcester had was the sky becoming so black, it seemed night had fallen. That was followed by enormous hail the size of grapefruit. Next, some people reported trouble breathing as the air pressure dropped rapidly. By 5:08 p.m., the tornado, now between a half mile to a mile wide, slammed through Worcester with winds measuring more than 300 mph. The tornado tore through the northern part of the city, as the Annalist noted, destroying most of the area around the Burncoat Hill section of Worcester. The tornado lifted a 12 ton bus into the air for 40 feet and dropped it into an apartment building. The roof was torn off a factory and heavy machinery tossed around. Ponds were sucked dry. Telephone poles were ripped from the ground and flew like missiles through the air. Windows and doors exploded. Because 1953 was at the height of the Cold War anxiety, there were a number of people who feared the Russians had attacked. Many thought an atomic bomb had been dropped. Others felt it was the end of the world. The Sisters of Notre Dame on Vernon Street were located about 5 miles south of the worst devastation. But that didn't prevent them from witnessing the terrible aftermath.

"All night long, ambulances and trucks carrying the injured and the dead sped up Vernon Hill to St. Vincent's Hospital. Several of our pupils suffered from the disaster. Michael Sullivan, a pupil in our eighth grade at St. John's was swept away when the roof of his home was blown off. He died during the night. His father, who had so kindly driven the Sisters down to

school for many months suffered severe personal injuries from which he will never completely recover.” Michael Sullivan was 14 years old and reported in the first casualty list published by the *Boston Globe* the following day.

All local schools were closed to be used for shelters for the over 15,000 people left homeless. More than 4000 buildings and homes were gone and 94 people had been killed and 1288 injured in less than 2 minutes. The Sisters of Notre Dame soon heard of, “the almost total destruction of Assumption College and of the death of one priest and three sisters there. . . . This unfortunate calamity, however, brought out all that was good and noble, not only in our citizenry but in persons far and near throughout the country. . . . One of our Seniors was among the first to donate blood and two others spent the greater part of the night as volunteer ambulance drivers.”

The National Guard was called in and help soon arrived from neighboring communities. The damage to the city was soon estimated to be \$53 million, now equivalent to \$349 million. Tornadoes weren’t rated by any methods until the Fujita scale was introduced in 1971. By that measurement, the 1953 tornado was somewhere between an F4 to F5. No other tornado caused as many deaths and damage until the Joplin, Missouri tornado in 2011. To this day, the 1953 Worcester tornado is still regarded as one of the worst storms in U.S. history.



Path of 1953 Tornado



Photo taken of tornado by resident

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ [Worcester Convent Annals, 1948-1970.](#)
- ◆ *Boston Globe Archives, 1872-1980.*
- ◆ Massmoments.org
- ◆ *Worcester Telegram, June 9, 2013.*