

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 also the exhibition of the Sisters of St. Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Lawrence Tornado of 1890



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Damage to St. Patrick's Church in Lawrence from the July 26, 1890 Tornado
 Image from Boston Globe, July 27, 1890

—The Sisters of Notre Dame arrived in Lawrence, Massachusetts on August 20, 1859 and settled into the tenement house that Fr. James O'Donnell had fumigated and renovated for them as a convent. The work began at once as more than 300 girls enrolled in three primary grades. Disaster wasn't far off, however. In January of 1860, the [Pemberton Mill collapsed](#), killing more than 150 people and injuring dozens more. Human carelessness and error caused the worst industrial accident in Massachusetts history. The mill was eventually rebuilt and life continued in Lawrence, as did the Sisters of Notre Dame.

The sisters were in Lawrence for another 31 years when disaster struck again, not originating from human error, but from the weather. On the morning of Saturday, July 26, 1890, dark clouds formed on the horizon just after 9 a.m. Most people had arrived at work by then; some were on their way. The air was calm, deceptively so. Roughly at 9:15 a.m. all that changed. Witnesses described a sudden burst of what sounded like artillery. Many people mistakenly assumed it was the sound of machinery in the mills. What followed the blast was the terrifying sight of a funnel cloud descending just south of the Merrimack River, west of Broadway Street leaving a path of destruction 500 yards wide and 2 miles long. As is often the case with tornadoes, houses on one side of the street experienced little damage while the others just a few yards away were flattened. St. Patrick's Church lost part of its roof and most of its windows.

The Sisters living in the convent reported that *"Lawrence was visited by a sweeping cyclone, causing general consternation. The corner of St. Patrick's Church was blown off and several houses that stood in that range were turned over, while giant trees were literally uprooted. Fortunately no lives were lost, though several persons were severely injured."* Either the annalist was recording the events only near the Notre Dame convent or she was unaware of the level of devastation. In fact, eight people were killed in three minutes.

The *Boston Globe* reported that the path of the tornado began at St. Patrick's Church and paralleled the Merrimack River into North Andover. They stated that the tornado was *"the most disastrous catastrophe . . . since the fall of the Pemberton Mills [in 1860]. . . where every house from Springfield St. . . to South Union Station were either destroyed or rendered a partial wreck."*

The first person to be killed by the tornado was 24 year old Mary Lyons, who lived on Emmet Street, near the Merrimack

River. She was found inside her home by husband, her baby daughter alive beneath her, having been saved by her mother's body. Next to die was 23 year old Michael Higgins as he manned his station on the Salem Street Bridge. His body was found 150 feet away from the bridge. The remainder of the people killed were women and children who sought protection in their homes that collapsed on them. More than 600 people were left homeless by the tornado. Houses were either ripped off their foundations, were blown apart by the winds or crushed by falling trees and other debris being blown about by the cyclone.

The funnel followed the Merrimack River, sweeping from South Lawrence into North Andover before dissipating. In the aftermath, the people of Lawrence began clearing away what debris they could and planning funerals for the eight who had been killed. Four of the dead belonged to St. Patrick's Parish. And to add insult to injury, sightseers soon descended upon the city in curiosity to witness for themselves the destruction a tornado can cause.

List of dead from Lawrence tornado
Image from forgottennewengland.com

M. H. Harley - wife of Archie } Elizabeth O'Connell } M. H. August - wife of Jeremiah }	4.	m.	32	-	-	Asphyxia from accidental cause } Cyclone	.. 27 Springfield Housekeeper
Michael Higgins	m.	9.	23	-	-	Fracture of skull - Cyclone	.. On R.R. track Excavator
Mary Lyons - wife of James }	4.	m.	34	-	-	Injuries to the head - Cyclone	.. 6 Emmett Housekeeper
Mary Ann O'Connell	4.	9.	11	9	11	Fracture of neck - Cyclone	.. 27 Springfield
Annie Collins	4.	9.	6	-	-	Suffocation - Cyclone	.. 11 Portland
Elizabeth Collins M. H. O'Connell - wife of Michael }	4.	m.	25	-	-	Asphyxia - Cyclone	.. 16 Portland Housekeeper
Hannah Beatty	4.	9.	8	10	23	Asphyxia - Cyclone	.. 16 Portland
Helen H. Cutler	4.	9.	10	5	22	Accident by Cyclone	.. 104 So. Broadway



Damage in Lawrence, MA
Image is from celebrateboston.com

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Annals of the House of Lawrence, 1859-1907
- ◆ Boston Globe Newspaper Archive, 1872-1980
- ◆ Forgottennewengland.com
- ◆ Celebrateboston.com