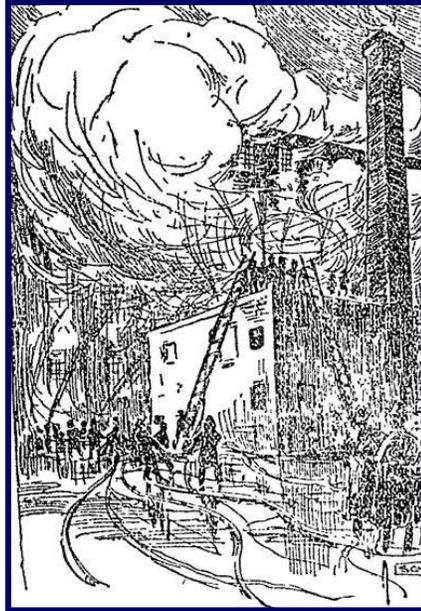


The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the Boston Annals for the year 1811, Columbus, Juan Spatella, and

Annals from the Archives

Christmas Day Fires in Boston, 1890

Boston Fire Department
fighting one of the four
Christmas Day fires in 1890
From the Boston Globe
December 26, 1890



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—Fire has always been an ever present danger through the centuries, especially in cities where the density of the population is much higher than elsewhere. Methods for extinguishing fires, or at least containing them, were usually primitive. In Rome, Emperor Augustus began one of the first efforts noted in history to establish a systematic procedure to combat fire. He appointed watchmen to patrol the streets and sound the alarm whenever they spotted smoke. The watchmen then coordinated the citizens of the city into lines so that they could pass fire buckets filled with water from person to person in an effort to douse the flames. That approach for firefighting remained in use for centuries. In the U.S., many people kept fire buckets in their homes for themselves and to help their neighbors. While there were many volunteer fire departments in the U.S. and in other countries, the first city in the United States to organize a fire department with paid employees was Cincinnati, Ohio in 1853.

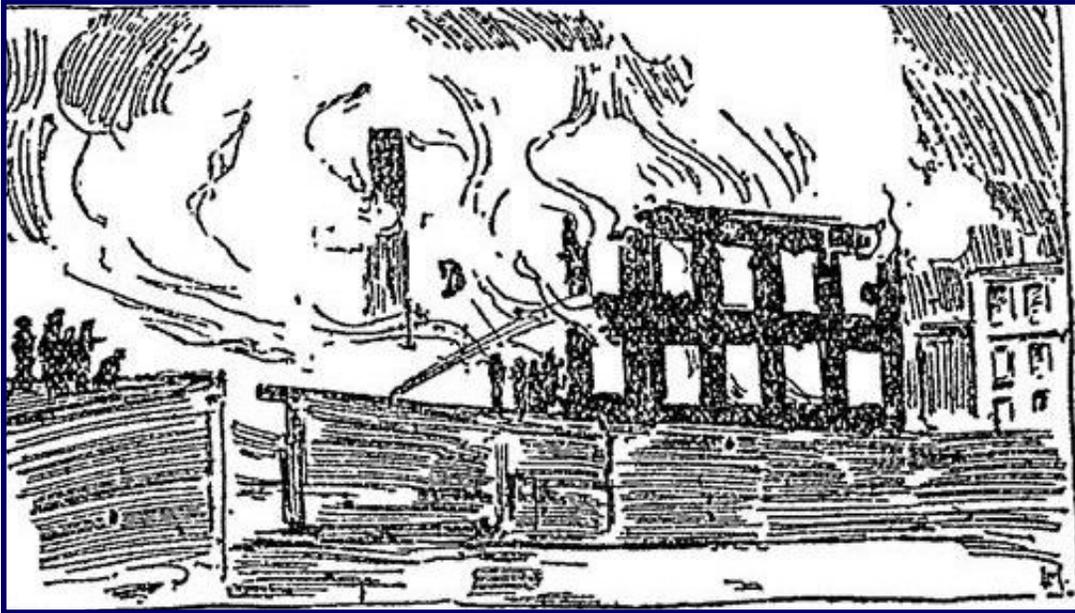
There have been many horrific conflagrations in the past, including the Great Boston Fire of 1872. It is still ranked as one of the worst urban fires in American history. It destroyed 776 buildings across 66 acres, killing thirteen people. Of course, there have been many uncounted smaller fires, both before and after 1872. But as the Annalist at the South Boston convent on Broadway Street noted, Christmas of 1890 “will not soon be forgotten by the parishioners of Sts. Peter and Paul’s, for at about 8:30 P.M. fire broke out in their beautiful church which has just been renovated. What the cause was is unknown.”

Though the sisters do not mention it, theirs was one of four fires that began at approximately the same time within just a few blocks of each other. The first fire began at 7:35 P.M. on a street about an eighth of a mile from Sts. Peter and Paul Church. Despite the alarm being sounded at once, the fire spread to engulf the entire block. Firefighters soon gave up that block for lost to concentrate on preventing the flames from spreading to other areas. As the Boston firefighters struggled with that fire, two more fires began—one at Sts. Peter and Paul Church and another at the New England Piano and Organ Company. Alarms were sounded and the Boston fire department had to divide its forces to deal with these new threats.

As the South Boston Annalist stated, no one could determine the cause of the fires. The sisters at Sts. Peter and Paul convent were alerted to the fire in the church by “a child living on a street in the rear of the church [who] noticed an unusually bright light in the window of the church and seeing it apparently become plainer instinctively said, ‘the Church is on fire.’ And without another word rushed from her house to the Parochial Residence. Our three curates had gone to visit their parents, and our . . . Pastor . . . was the only one at home and when the child entered [he] was administering baptism to an infant. At the announcement of the fire, he, thinking it was a needless alarm, sent the father of the infant to investigate. The little one who had noticed the fire then rushed to the Engine House nearby and warned the firemen. The fire department was at work in an instant, and thus prevented a total destruction of the entire edifice.”

All fires were extinguished by the morning, but people remained on edge, especially with those disasters occurring on a holiday and within a few blocks of each other. And so the next night, the Portress for the Broadway Street Convent was alarmed by the insistent knocking at the convent's front door. When she hurried to answer, she was startled to discover a group of men standing there, determined to enter and help them, as they were positive the convent was on fire. When the Portress informed them there was no fire, they were sure she was wrong and "...they insisted on being conducted to the roof. In the meantime, the Community were calmly eating supper. . ." Once the Superior had been told what was happening, she went to the front door, even more taken aback than the Portress had been to see that the street outside their home was lined with fire engines, hooks and ladders and men prepared to battle a new threat.

"It seems that a gentleman passing imagined he saw smoke issuing from the roof of the school house and ran to sound the alarm. On account of the fire of the previous evening the officials fearing foul play, had sent out a great number of engines. The firemen assured Sister Superior that they would keep special watch during the night."



New England Piano and Organ Company Fire

From the Boston Globe, December 26, 1890

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ South Boston, Broadway Street Convent Annals, 1888-1902.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-2016.
- ◆ <https://www.emergencydispatch.org/articles/historyoffirefighting.html>