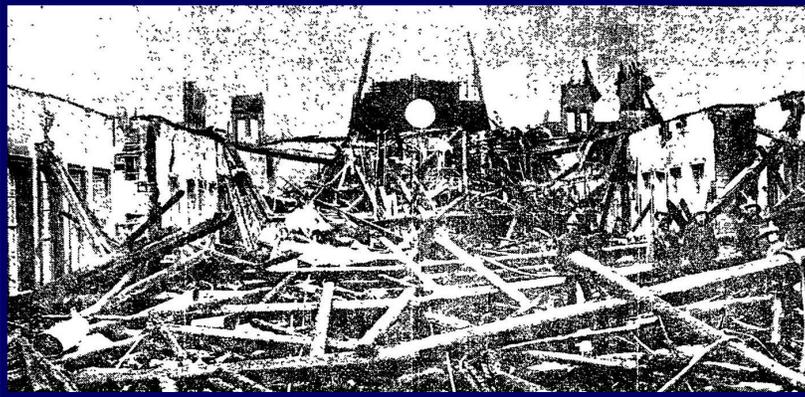


The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. — Columbian, Boston, 1876.

Annals from the Archives

St. Augustine's Fire, 1904

From the
September 25,
1904
Boston Globe



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—Just twelve days after school opened at St. Augustine's School in South Boston on September 12, 1904, disaster struck. The morning of Saturday September 24th had begun calmly enough. The weather was pleasant, partly cloudy and the temperature rose to near 60 degrees. The sisters had just finished their midday meal when a sister rushed up to the convent Superior, Sister Mary of St. Thomas Lavin (1860-1925), crying out that the school was on fire.

Another sister tried to ease her fears by saying that the smoke must have come from the janitor burning the trash. However, when "we hurried to the yard. Too true! . . . from end to end of the long roof rolled the clouds of smoke. It was but an instant when two quick explosions were heard and the roof was torn in twain by the tongues of fire that leaped from the front to rear as if hell had been opened before us." [St. Augustine Convent Annals] The emergency alarms were quickly sounded, but because "the street was undergoing repairs, the hose carriages had great difficulty in approaching the building, so the fire made considerable headway."

The *Boston Globe* reported the following day that workmen had been tinning and repairing the roof. The cause of the fire was later determined to have been caused by a combination of their work and the placement of electrical wires around the three cupolas on the roof. To make matters worse, the Annalist wrote that, "The wind was strong and blowing toward the convent, but owing to the greater height of the school, the burning timbers were carried past us to neighboring houses." It didn't take long though before the convent's roof also caught on fire. By then the fire department had arrived and "the zealous firemen used every effort to extinguish the flames. They got out on the roof and covered it with some powerful chemical while we prayed within." The sisters were unable to stay in the building much longer, however, as it "was decided that it was unsafe for us to remain longer, so we provided ourselves with what was most necessary in case we should never return to the convent." With cloaks and bed boxes in their arms, they hurried out and were greeted by their neighbors, Mr. and Mrs. Trainor, who offered them the shelter of their home to wait until it was determined if the convent would survive the fire.

Rumors spread as quickly as the fire. Some thought that Sr. Mary of St. Thomas had been injured and carried away in an ambulance. Others heard that Sr. Sabina Clancy (1869-1947) had been killed. Fortunately, no one was hurt and since it was Saturday, there were no children in the school. The sisters of the Broadway Street convent offered the E Street sisters a place to stay if their home should be declared a loss. But the convent was spared and by late that afternoon, they were able to return home, where "we found everything just as we had left it—not even a spread or curtain out of order, although firemen and policemen had had possession for three hours. Even the staircases, up and down, which they passed, were none the worse for their presence."

As grateful as the sisters were that their convent was spared, "fear was still entertained regarding the school, so the men toiled on, cutting and sawing, pouring water anew on the smoldering timbers." The *Globe* also reported on the efforts of the fire department, "Although the fire was well under control by 2:30, and there was no danger of it spreading below the third floor, the flames were not entirely extinguished and the all-out did not come until shortly before five o'clock." The sisters quickly assembled food and "between six and seven o'clock, you would have seen wet, tired hungry firemen—many of whom had had no dinner—doing justice to the bread, coffee, and cheese placed before them. How we ever supplied the hundred and more is to us even today a marvel. It seemed like a multiplication of loaves."

The following Monday, the 950 students at St. Augustine's assembled in the church basement for an hour or so of

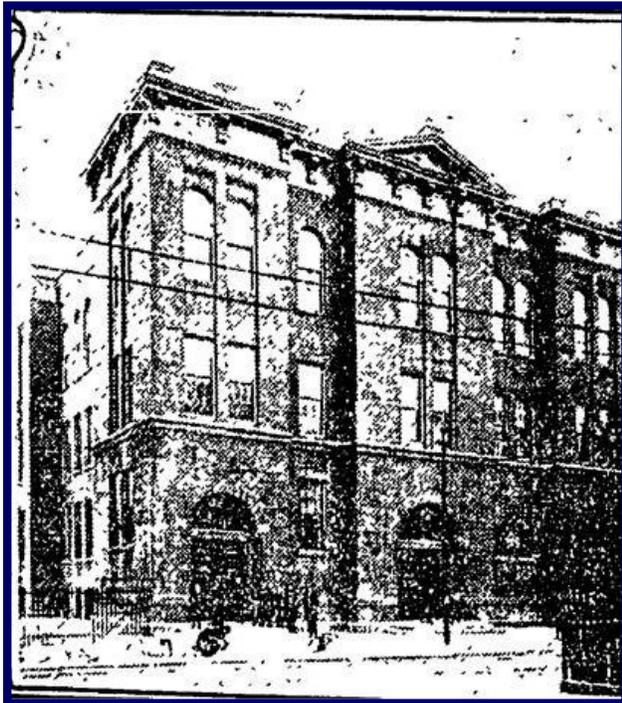
lessons in "Catechism, Bible or Church History." By Thursday of that next week, temporary shelter for the children in grades one to six was found at the Dahlgren Hall. "But the little ones, unable to pronounce the word correctly, gave it a most appropriate name—Danglin' Hall. Truly, the tiny limbs dangled" [because of the oversized chairs]. Partitions were created to separate the classes from each other but as the sisters wrote, "The teachers had many trials to test their patience in those days. A reading lesson conducted in once class disturbed the work of the neighboring grade and one teacher resorted to the cloakroom whenever she took reading."

In addition to the lack of walls in Dahlgren Hall and the children being crammed in as close as possible, another annoyance was that the Hall was "used for dancing parties, meeting of masonic lodges, etc. and when one of these was to take place, all books and school paraphernalia had to be removed. The constant moving told sadly upon the books, many of which were already damaged by water or dampness and soon the covers began to loosen and the leaves to separate."

Not all 950 students could fit into the Hall, however, so other temporary sites for some of the grades had to be found. These included a vacant store on Sixth Street, a two story home on the corner of Sixth and Seventh Streets and another home on Eighth Street. The children were unable to stay in any of them very long and had to move several times.

They were fortunate in not having to be displaced for an extended time as all the students were able to return to the St. Augustine's School by mid-December, a remarkable feat considering the amount of damage. The *Boston Globe* reported on Sunday Dec.11, 1904 that it being completed in so short a time "is striking evidence of the enterprise and energy of Mgr. O'Callaghan, permanent rector of the parish." The new school held 16 classrooms and opened the next day on December 12, 1904.

Looking on the bright side, the *Annalist* concluded her tale by saying, "Never were the sisters in better health or spirits. The long walk [between the convent and the various temporary sites for the school] gave them an excellent appetite and the mishaps of the day enlivened the evening recreation."



St. Augustine's School, rebuilt

Image from *Boston Globe*, Dec. 11, 1904.

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ *Boston Globe Archives*, 1872-1980.
- ◆ St. Augustine's Convent, South Boston, *Annals*, 1903-1927.
- ◆ St. Augustine's Convent, South Boston, *Register*, 1895-1983.