

In neighboring Peabody, the Annalist for the St. John's convent wrote that, "On the afternoon of the twenty-fifth, fire broke out in Salem a short distance from our Convent and School there. Though houses in their neighborhood were burned, our dear Lady and St. Lawrence protected their home. The flames spread rapidly and before night, half the City was destroyed. . . Just before seven o'clock, a violent and continuous ringing of the door bell brought our Sister Portress and Superior to the door. There stood Miss Murphy, the Pastor's housekeeper, asking hospitality for a group of Grey Nuns who were fleeing from the fire. These good religious had charge of the City Orphanage and at the time of the fire had in their house two hundred fifty children and thirty old ladies. All were gotten out and put into vehicles, then driven to a place of safety. We gladly took in the six dear Sisters who stood at our gate while kind neighbors cared for the old people. . ."

The fire raged on for another thirteen hours, and fire departments from twenty-one cities and towns rushed to help the overwhelmed Salem Fire Department. By the time the blaze was controlled, it had decimated more than two hundred fifty acres, which included 1792 buildings and over four hundred businesses. Twenty thousand people were left homeless and more than ten thousand people no longer had work. Amazingly, only a few people were killed.

At St. James, the sisters wrote that the school was opened "as a relief station and both it [the school] and the basement of the Church had afforded shelter to families left homeless and entirely destitute." And while St. James was spared, St. Joseph's Church, less than a mile away, was completely destroyed.

The National Guard set up tents for the homeless at Forest River Park, located beside the ocean and the Salem Armory [decimated by fire in February 1982] was also opened as a shelter to those in need. The orphans mentioned in the St. John's Convent Annals were sheltered at St. John's Prep in Danvers for several months.

The disaster was reported by most national newspapers, including the New York Times. The landscape of the city was changed forever. Fifty-one streets were completely destroyed and another forty-eight others were partially burned. Because so many jobs were lost, thousands left the city to find work elsewhere. By 1915, the city's population fell from 48,000 to a little over 37,000.



Aftermath of the Fire in the City of Salem, MA
From snapshotsofthepast.com

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ St. James, Salem, MA Convent Annals, 1878-1971.
- ◆ St. James, Salem, MA Convent Journal, 1912-1922.
- ◆ St. John's, Peabody, MA Convent Annals, 1912-1943.
- ◆ [The Great Salem Fire of 1914](#) by Barbara Pero Kampas, 2008.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2017.
- ◆ *New York Times* Archives, 1852-2017.