

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. The exhibit was held at the Fair, Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

St. Mary's Church of Lynn, Fire of 1941



The fire at St. Mary's Church, Lynn
Dec. 29, 1941
Image from the *Lynn Item*

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—On Monday, December 29, 1941, the people of Lynn awoke to a cloudy, cold morning, with a few flurries on the horizon. The winds began to pick up and the temperature slowly dropped during the day. School children were out on vacation, perhaps excited at the prospect of snow for sledding. It was just three weeks since the United States had declared war on Japan. Radio programs and newspapers were dominated by news of the war. On Chestnut Street in Lynn, the parents of Samuel Ellis, a Navy cook stationed in Hawaii, still had not received word if their son had survived the attack on Pearl Harbor. That news would not arrive to calm their fears until January 3, 1942.

The morning of Dec. 29th, the Sisters of Notre Dame at St. Mary's Convent used the break in teaching to have a Day of Recollection. At 10:30 a.m., Fr. Leo O'Keefe had finished his talk when the front door bell rang, disturbing the sisters' silence. It was one of their High School Seniors, Mary Jones, warning them that she had just pulled the alarm because the church was on fire. The Superior raced to the phone to call the rectory where no one was yet aware of the danger. More alarms were soon sounded, but by the time the Lynn fire department arrived, flames were not just shooting from the windows as Mary Jones had seen, but also pouring out of "*many parts of the building at once,*" according to the St. Mary's Convent Annalist.

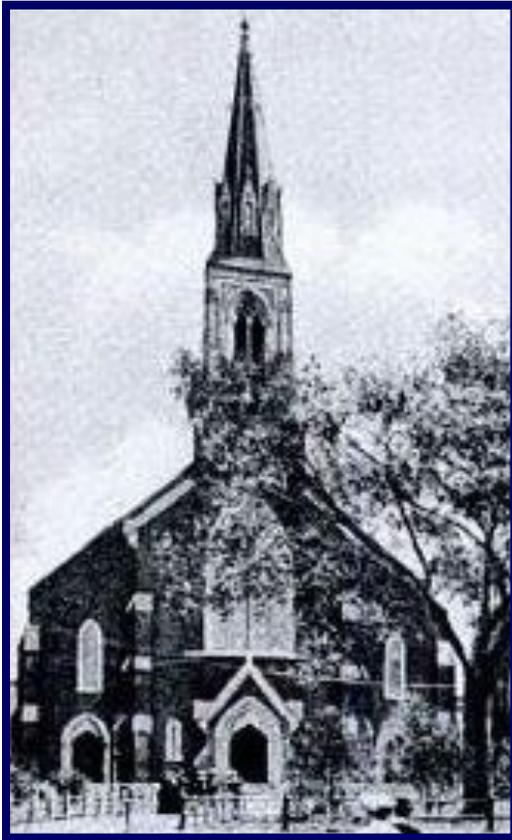
Alerted by the call from the convent, the three priests of St. Mary's wasted no time in rushing into the church despite the thick smoke and obvious danger. They covered their mouths and noses with damp handkerchiefs, hoping to save what they could. Fr. Sherlock, the pastor, carried out, "*chalices, vestments, altar linens, cassocks, and surplices, etc., etc., [which] were brought to [the] Convent. . .*"

More alarms were soon sounded and fire engines from neighboring communities arrived to help. The sisters opened their convent to "*clergymen, firemen and others who came in all day for a hot drink, to use the telephone or for other business connected with the fire. Only a steady stream of water and chemicals from the rooms of the Grammar School saved the fire from spreading. . . . No words are necessary to describe how we felt as we saw the flames leaping from every part of the building, where only the day before, Sunday, thousands had gathered for Mass and admired the beautiful Crib and the festive appearance of the Church, ornamented with Christmas decorations. At one time the Grammar School and even the Convent seemed in danger. . .*" By noon, the church's slate roof gave way, collapsing into the burning building and taking the steeple with it. While the church couldn't be saved, the local fire departments kept all the nearby buildings, schools and convent from catching fire. "*All day and all night the firemen continued fighting the flames and then through another entire day it was smouldering, occasionally breaking into flames again in some part of the building.*" Despite the church being a total loss, part of the main altar was able to be salvaged from the wrecked building. No cause for the fire was ever determined.

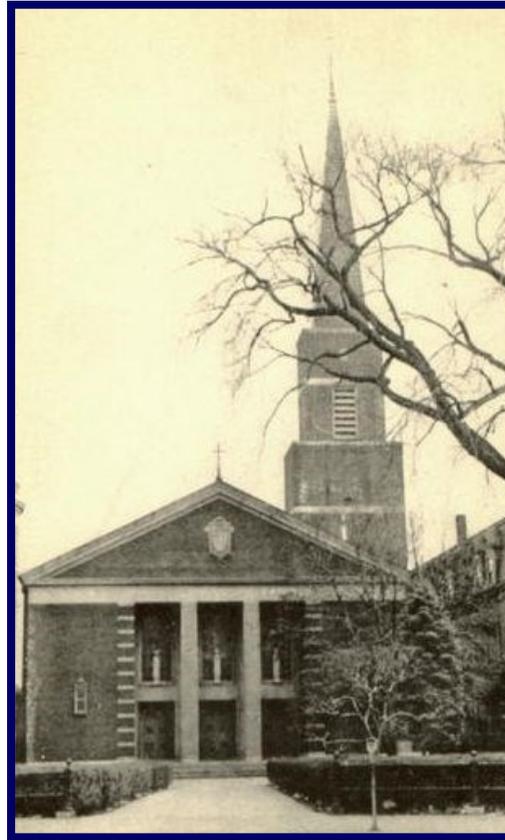
Without their church, the parishioners were offered the Massachusetts State Armory, located less than a quarter of a mile away, as a place of worship until a new church could be built. The parishioners availed themselves of this shelter for seven months until the chapel attached to the destroyed church was enlarged to accommodate the needs of the parish. The pastor went to work at once to organize a fundraiser on April 17, 1942 with the hope that he could begin the process of raising enough funds to have a new parish church built. Such a possibility, though, was quickly overshadowed by the war. Materials needed for such a massive project were impossible to obtain, due to all supplies being diverted to the military for ships and airplanes and other needs.

Finally in 1946, construction could begin. Richard Shaw (1887-1958), a 1912 graduate of the Harvard School of Design, was chosen to be the architect for the new church. He had designed many local churches, as well as Boston's Hatch Shell on the Charles River. Because of cost, the shape and materials used in the original St. Mary's could not be replicated and so a simpler church was built. Fortunately, the walls of the original building were left standing and the foundation could be re-used. Land was bought behind the church on Pleasant Street so that the new church could be larger than the old. In addition, the original altar table from the old St. Mary's was installed in the new church.

The cornerstone of the new St. Mary's was laid on Dec. 6, 1946 and the church was completed in time for its dedication on March 23, 1947.



St. Mary's Church Destroyed in 1941 fire



The New St. Mary's Church Dedicated in 1947

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ St. Mary's, Lynn Convent Annals, 1931-1950.
- ◆ St. Mary's Lynn, Convent Journal, 1935-1953.
- ◆ Labor's Tribute to St. Mary's Building Fund, April 17, 1942
- ◆ Dedication, Remembrance, Eastertide, St. Mary's Church, Lynn, 1947.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2017.