

*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 at the Centennial, St. Louis, 1893, Columbus, Queen Isabella, and Leo XIII.*

## Annals from the Archives

# Boston YMCA Fire of 1910 and the Sisters of Notre Dame



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**Convent in Rear Saved Only  
by Strenuous Efforts.**

**Sisters of Notre Dame Calmly Made  
Coffee for the Firemen.**

Image of devastation and caption from  
the *Boston Globe*, January 13, 1910

—Fires are, unfortunately, an all too common experience, especially during winter. In 1910, the city of Boston experienced a horrific fire, beginning on the morning of January 13th at the YMCA, located on the corner of Boylston and Berkeley Streets. According to the *Boston Globe*, the entire building was gutted, destroying the YMCA as well as the George Ellis Provisions store and the Adams and American Express businesses, which were located in the same building. Amazingly enough, the convent for the Sisters of Notre Dame, which was just twenty feet from the fire, escaped serious damage.

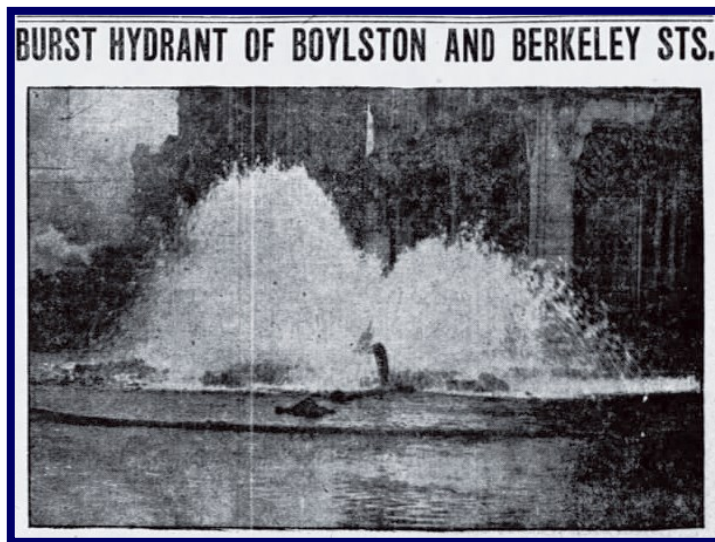
At 5:15 a.m., John Sullivan, a private watchman, noticed smoke pouring out of the windows at the back of the Y.M.C.A. building. He ran for the alarm and pulled it to alert the fire department. The sisters soon heard the commotion, “the clatter of fire-gongs and engines sounded under the windows. The flames leaped out of the Young Men’s Christian Association building, a four story brick structure running from Boylston to Providence Street, the back of it only twenty feet from the convent, on the chapel and Holy Family side.” [NDA Annals, 1849-1925] Once the Fire Department arrived, they soon saw that “the fire was already dangerous and a second alarm was pulled” [BG, Jan. 13, 1910]. That was soon followed by a third and fourth alarm to call as many area firemen to assist with the blaze. Despite the efforts, the fire spread and in a desperate effort to keep it from engulfing the entire building the firemen, “took lines of hose into the Berkeley St. academy of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the other side of Providence St. and from the windows of that building drowned out the fire in the rear.”

The only mention the NDA Annals make of the firemen using their convent to fight the flames was that “morning prayers were said as usual, and Mass and Holy Communion followed in due order, although the rose window, over the altar, was all aglow and firemen came even into the sanctuary, seeking a spot from which streams of water could be directed with advantage.” The *Boston Globe* wrote that “lines were taken to the second, third and fourth floors [of the convent] and gave the firemen a great advantage over the blaze. Even from the windows of the convent and the roofs on the other side of Providence St. the firemen found they could not drown out the fire. . .”

The weather added to the misery of the firemen’s efforts to contain the blaze. The temperature was about 10 degrees when the fire started soon after 5 a.m. and only climbed into the mid-20s after sunrise, with a strong easterly wind and snow predicted for the night. This, most likely, contributed to one of the water hydrants exploding, “at 8 a.m. . . the hydrant in the center of Boylston St., corner of Berkeley St. to which engines 10, 26, 4 and 7 were attached blew up and sent a geyser of icy water into the air.” The sisters wrote that “the bursting of a water-main added to the labor and suffering of the poor firemen, who were all sympathy for the Sisters and admiration of their coolness and courage. ‘Here boys, called out Chief Mullen early in the struggle, ‘these are our own, look out for them,’ and the command was obeyed.”

Despite the sisters' apparent calm and continued attendance to their schedule, the convent was in more danger than the Annals indicated. The *Boston Globe* reporter wrote that, "*the fire assumed such dangerous proportions . . .*" that the firemen doused the walls of the convent with water in a struggle to save the building. And when the firemen "*found it necessary to enter the convent, they found them [the sisters] all dressed, all calm, and all prompt and willing to obey the orders of the superior. There was no confusion and no visible sign of excitement. . . The sisters put great cauldrons of coffee on the fire and dispensed in pails, pitchers and bowls to the chilled firemen as they worked. The firemen were very grateful to the sisters and very thankful they were able to save their home from any serious damage.*"

According to the Annals, the convent lost twenty-eight window panes, broken by the heat. They also had a few scorched spots on the Holy Family floor where some hot slates from the ceiling had fallen. The next day, the sisters wrote to Mayor George A. Hibbard of their gratitude to the firemen for saving the convent. The letter was published in the *Boston Globe* on February 16th. On February 17th, the *Globe* wrote that the sisters had received hundreds of telegrams and letters from graduates offering their congratulations and gratitude that the convent and school were spared. "*Sister Mary Johanna, the superior of the house, has been puzzled as to how to acknowledge the gratefulness of the sisters to those who have expressed their interest in them and the academy. To answer each one would be impossible, and to see each of the chiefs and the firemen who kept the flames from their building would be equally impossible, but the gratitude of the superior and the sisters is nonetheless heartfelt for all who assisted them by their work or encouraged them by their telegrams and letters.*"



Picture of burst fire hydrant on corner of  
Boylston and Berkeley Streets,  
from the *Boston Globe*, Evening Edition  
January 13, 1910

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ History of the Foundation of Notre Dame, Boston, 1849-1925. SND New England Archives, 2013.54.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, [bostonglobe.newspapers.com](http://bostonglobe.newspapers.com), 1872-2019.