

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 Columbian, Lowell, and the Boston Globe, Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

St. Patrick's Fire, 1904



April 2020

**Written by Nancy Barthelemy
Archivist**

**nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org
snddenewarchives.com**

St. Patrick's Church on fire,
after cross and steeple had fallen
Image from
Boston Globe, January 11, 1904

—Fire has always been an ever present danger, more so before smoke detectors and alarms were invented. But in 1904, Lowell, Massachusetts endured a horrendous year for fires. More than 700 alarms were rung—an unfortunate record for the city. Though not all blazes completely destroyed property, by year's end four women and one child had died. Considering there were at least 60 fires every month in the city, it is amazing not more people were killed. Most of the blazes were caused by chimneys, others were caused by grass fires and others by carelessness. The first conflagration in 1904 happened on Saturday, January 9th. The Odd Fellow's Building, located on Merrimack Street, burned so intensely that the flames leapt across the alleyway and threatened to destroy Lowell's Old City Hall. Fortunately, fire fighters kept the blaze contained, though the top two floors of the building were destroyed.

The next disastrous fire in Lowell came two days later, on Monday January 11th. Sr. Josephine of Notre Dame Academy on Fenwick Street rose as usual to begin her week. When she glanced out the window, she saw to her horror that smoke was pouring out of St. Patrick's Church. She rushed to wake two sisters and they grabbed the key for the alarm box on Fenwick Street, just outside St. Patrick's gate. They hurried to the rectory, where Fr. McHugh answered the door, having just returned from a sick call. He immediately telephoned the fire station and then, using the key Sr. Josephine had brought, ran to the firebox to open it and pull the alarm. When the key refused to turn the lock, he gave up, instead rushing into the church to save what vestments and chalices he could, escaping before suffering any injury. Unfortunately, another alarm was pulled just about the same time on Market Street, about a tenth of a mile away from the church. This delayed the fire truck's arrival by many crucial minutes.

Not long before the fire department arrived, an elderly parishioner, Mary Ann Saunders, broke through the vestry window, located on Cross Street, and climbed in to save as many vestments as she could. When the firemen arrived several minutes later, they tried to force her to leave, preparing even to carry all 80 pounds of her outside. Fortunately, Fr. Walsh managed to arrive on the scene and convinced her to get out while she could. Other parishioners also tried to save valuables in the church by rushing in through the smoke to pull out what they could, including candlesticks and small statues. One man managed to find and rescue the church's music collection, which had been originally brought to Lowell from Ireland by one of the priests, Fr. Michael O'Brien. In addition to the efforts of many of the parishioners, the Superior of the St. Patrick's Convent, Sr. Theresa, ordered the gas line to the church to be shut off, which no doubt prevented an explosion. She also had the sisters organize the boarders in the Academy to be evacuated.

At first, it appeared to the fire department that the blaze had started in the boiler room in the basement. Concentrating their efforts there, the fire fighters soon had it extinguished. Convinced the danger was finally over in less than an hour, everyone

gave a sigh of relief. The fire fighters gathered up their equipment, some leaving to head back to the station. No sooner had several of them departed than everyone looked on in horror as smoke and then flames shot out the upper windows.

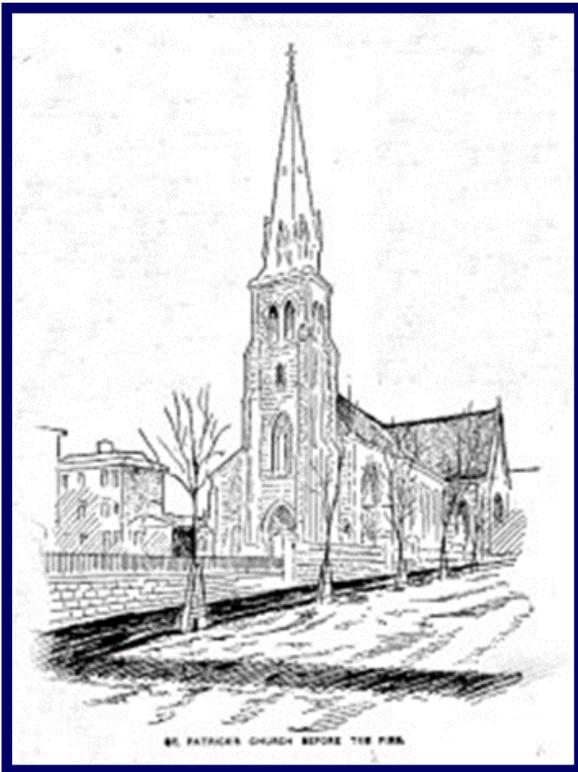
The church's steeple soared to a height of 225 feet. Unfortunately, the Lowell fire hoses could only shoot water up 100 feet. The convent Annalist wrote that by "seven o'clock, the roof, steeple, and interior of the upper part of the church had been completely destroyed by fire." Despite the danger to the convent and school, "the greater part of the community assembled in the chapel and prayed with extended arms. . . we expected every minute to see the convent in flames. . . our chapel windows were hot from the intense heat of the fire . . ."

Also in danger was St. Patrick's Home, a five story boarding house for women. Through the morning, as the fire fighters labored in freezing weather to save the Home, Academy and Convent, the sisters prepared hot food for them. Around eight o'clock, the cross on the top of the burning steeple crashed down into the church's roof. Flames shot up so high most people in the city could see them. Not long after, the steeple fell, sending burning timbers into the church and across the street. Several fire fighters were injured, though not severely. It took until noon before the blaze was completely extinguished.

By that evening, parishioners began the plan to build a new church. For the next several months, Masses were said at Huntington and Associates Hall, located on Market Street.

The very next day, another enormous conflagration consumed the O'Connell and Gilbride Department Store on Fellows Block. With three horrific fires occurring within four days, there was much speculation about arson being the cause of the blazes. Eventually, though, it was determined that the origin of St. Patrick's fire was an overheated smoke pipe in the boiler room. Unfortunately, St. Patrick's temporary home for Mass, Huntington Hall, was also destroyed by fire on November 6, 1904.

St. Patrick's Church was finally rebuilt in 1906.



St. Patrick's Church before fire
Image from ForgottenNewEngland.com



St. Patrick's Church today

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ St. Patrick's Convent Annals, 1852-1904.
- ◆ *The Boston Globe Archives*, 1872-2020.
- ◆ ForgottenNewEngland.com