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A SAD CONFLAGRATION.

VILLA MARIA CONVENT IN ASHES.

A Magnificent Institution in Ruins—
Hundreds of Thousands Worth of Property Destroyed—A Vast Number of Citizens Visit the Scene—
Efforts of the Firemen—
Affecting and Exciting Episodes—A Sketch of the Institution.

The city was startled last Thursday afternoon by the news that the Villa Maria Convent, at Notre Dame de Grace, was in flames. This unfortunate catastrophe, coming almost immediately after the sad loss sustained by that institution in the death of the venerable Mother Josephine, has awakened a universal sympathy in all sections of the community. We take the account of the fire from a report written, on the scene, by the Herald reporter.

The fire was discovered shortly after the noon hour, and the scene which followed can never be faithfully described by speech or pen. Between two hundred and three hundred women, who had devoted their lives to their God, were in a moment face to face with an awful death by the most terrible of all destroyers—fire.

Through the long corridors and dormitories, the faithful ran for their very lives, but never once did they forget their duty to those who might not have yet heard the dreaded alarm. Doors throughout the vast building were opened and the rooms searched; bells were rung on every floor, and before the fire had got well under way, at least 250 women assembled on the lawn in front of the building and watched their home slowly but surely being lowered to the ground.

It must not be supposed, however, that all sought safety in hasty flight. A few noble women more courageous than their sisters fought for their home without thinking of their lives. Sister St. Elzear, who though a small woman is exceedingly powerful, fought the flames with buckets of water handed to her by those who tried to save the great building. These were like rain-drops on a sea of burning oil, and the flames rapidly extended until all hope of their extinction was gone. Then the Sisters joined those who had reached the open air. A glad shout immediately afterwards welcomed the arrival of the first section of the fire brigade.

The hose was quickly connected with the steamers, the steamers with the wells and tanks, and a powerful stream of water soon found its way to the flames.

At four o'clock it was evident that all would be lost. The attempt at saving the structure was continued, but within another three hours the great building was to sink into a pile of blazing ruins.

STORY OF THE FIRE.

When the alarm of fire was given a Herald representative was on the Cote St. Antoine road, within a short distance of the toll-gate and was one of the first at the scene of disaster.

At that time smoke was pouring from

the windows of the west wing. The fire started near the roof of this wing, where plumbers were at work, and is supposed to have been caused by a plumber's pot being overturned by the strong wind then blowing. When The Herald representative reached the spot the sisters were in a state of consternation, and a resident of the suburb was throwing hand grenades against the slate of the Mansard roof from a fifth story window. At that time a strong westerly wind was blowing and the fire was spreading rapidly, although even then it did not look serious. The sisters removed some twelve sickly nuns from the building about this time, and the alarm having been sent out three fire engines from the city, one from St. Henri and one from Cote St. Antoine were speeding rapidly to the scene. Engine No. 1 was first to arrive at 1.25 p.m., having had to impress two extra horses to get the machine up St. Germaine Hill. At 1.45 p.m., No. 1 engine threw the first stream upon the spot

started, caught fire. The blaze was beyond control, leaping on the strong wings of the wind, from turret to turret and enveloping the whole face of the wing in a blazing sheet. In the room below the blazing turret were four men nobly battling with the flames. They were Alexander Dufour, fireman of No. 10, George Benoit, fireman No. 1, Andrew McCullan, fireman No. 10, and Mr. Edwin Varney, who was the first man on the ground after the alarm was given. The turret, undermined by the fire, fell without a moment's warning.

There was a crash, a blinding volcano of smoke and flame shot up, half of the roof collapsed and a rush was made for the hall. Suddenly young Benoit wheeled; "Where is Alex.?" he cried, and turned back. The others followed, and the gallant Dufour, frightfully burned, was found struggling under a glowing mass of burning timber.

The survivors of the narrow escape carried him downstairs, where Drs. Hurbise, of St. Henri, and Hutchinson, of

an incredibly short time the sacred edifice was completely gutted.

The fire at this part caught in the roof; that was licked up at one gulp and with a rush and roar the flames swept out of the eastern windows to a distance of forty feet. It was all over then and the firemen turned their attention to the extreme western wing, which was then burning slowly at the roof. Meanwhile, at the north side of the building there were a number of outhouses and attached buildings. The most westerly of these, a long low stone building with a mansard roof, was used as a laundry and drying room. It was quite out of the direct line of fire, nevertheless the intense heat had so affected it that when a falling cornice threw a load of melted lead and red hot stone upon the roof it went up in a flash. Further around between the centre wings of the double cross which the building forms were the kitchen, icehouse, coal house, etc. These also were swallowed up. For a short time at this point the heat was simply terrific; a great store of

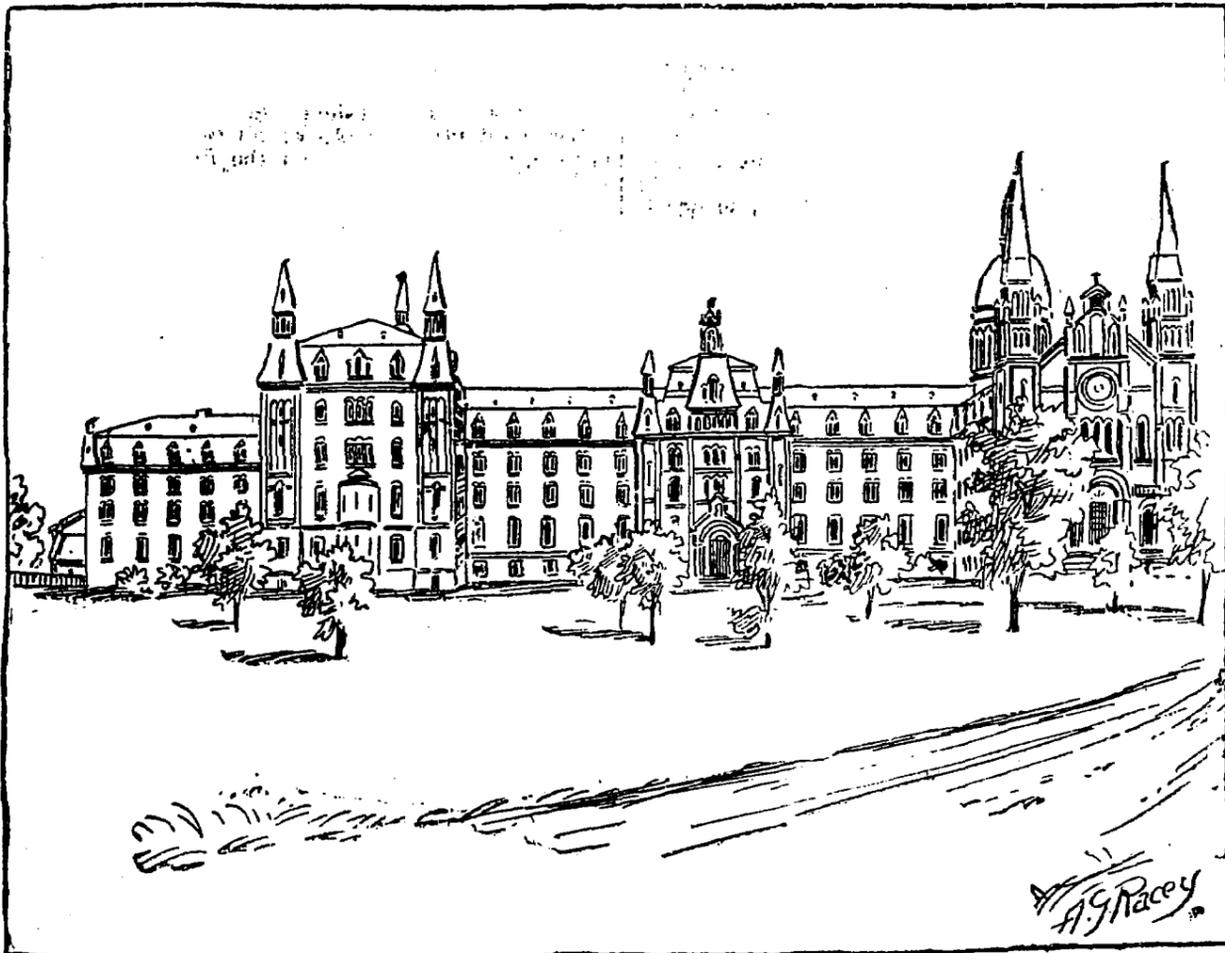
cord wood and coal added to the fire. On this side the only buildings saved were the workmen's quarters, stable and a couple of wooden sheds. From this time on the fire was in the extreme west wing and every effort was concentrated to save a part of it. For a time it seemed almost hopeless, but the efforts of the firemen began to show and with three streams they slowly got that part under, but not until the upper flats had been destroyed. At 11 p.m. the fire was practically out because there was nothing more to burn, but the smouldering ruins still burst into fitful flames and an occasional stone from the bare gaunt walls sent up clouds of sparks which would again start an incipient fire.

THE BUILDING AND ORDER.

In 1880 the buildings were erected at a cost of \$650,000. The architect was Mr. H. M. Perrault, and from cellar to roof everything was so arranged as to suit the desires of Rev. Provincial St. Justin, the sister who had charge of the building. The sister superior who presided at the time of the erection of the convent believed in insurance, but when she died,

two years afterwards, her successor brought it down to \$100,000, at which it has since remained. Twice before since the organization of the order of the Congregation of Notre Dame their head convent has been destroyed by fire, but never as it was yesterday. The order was inaugurated in 1657, by the famous Margaret Bourgeois, and has now 108 missions in the United States and Canada. The convent which was burned yesterday was built and used for the purpose of training and educating the nuns who, after passing through the novitiate, were sent to the many stations constantly calling for assistance. Every year there is held at the Notre Dame de Grace Convent a retreat, at which about 1000 sisters attend. This retreat had not commenced at the time of the great disaster. English as well as French-speaking women were received, and of the former the majority came from the United States. A story spread through the city yesterday that the building

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VILLA MARIA CONVENT BEFORE THE FIRE.

where the fire started in the west wing. The fire by this time had run rapidly along the wing and Sub-chief Beckingham had a line of hose up to the fifth story, which, however, was unable to check the rapid advance of the flames. The first ladder was then raised, when the fire made its appearance in "Dortoir Sacre Coeur," and flames burst from the windows. Captain Prevost, the indomitable, appeared then at one of the highest windows doing heroic work, but sadly handicapped by want of aid. There were then about 250 nuns escaping from the building. Up to this time the fire had been confined to the garrets. At 2.20 p.m. The Herald man and a fireman carried Chief Benoit out of the "Dortoir Sacre Coeur," where he had become insensible after doing a giant's work. The chief was pulled into a window on the fifth floor and was later carried down stairs, when he recovered somewhat and insisted upon returning to his post. Shortly after this, one of the small turrets over the room, where the flames

Cote St. Antoine, received him. During this time the fire had been making rapid progress through the top stories of the main building, and now threatened the temporary chapel, the windows of which burst out at 3.50 p.m. At 3.55 the main tower was a mass of flames and a few minutes later a tremendous explosion like the bursting of a steam boiler occurred.

THE BUILDING DOOMED.

In a very short time the whole building east of where the fire originated was seen to be doomed. With almost incredible rapidity the flames raced along the corridors and danced from window to window, swallowing up partitions, floorings, ceilings, everything in their path, and leaving behind a wreck of falling beams, crumbling stone work and red hot coals, until the church, the most easterly section of the great institution, was reached. In less than 15 minutes this magnificent addition to the building was wiped out. The fire seemed to break out simultaneously in every part, and in