

Source: www.lawrenceroadfire.org/html_history/1956_1959.html

Wednesday, March 14, 1956, proved to be one of the busiest days in the history of Trenton Fire Department as two general alarm blazes occurred within a few hours of one another. The fires killed three people and destroyed St. Mary's Cathedral and heavily damaged Jefferson Elementary School. Lawrence Road firefighters helped Trenton firefighters battle both blazes. Actually, Lawrence Road firefighters discovered the fire at the Jefferson school while returning from the scene of the cathedral blaze. According to a claim filed with the fire company's insurance company, Lawrence Road firefighters Warren Groover Sr., Thomas Hawthorne, William V. Carroll Jr., and Clinton W. Groover all were injured on March 14, 1956.

The Trenton Evening Times documented the fire at St. Mary's Cathedral with several stories and dramatic photographs that appeared on the front page and several inside pages of that night's newspaper. The Times reported: "Monsignor Richard T. Crean and two housekeepers were burned to death early today as a five-alarm fire destroyed the 85-year-old St. Mary's Cathedral and the adjoining chancery-rectory building. Crean was trapped in flames on the third floor of the rectory where he had raced to rouse priests asleep on that floor. Three priests were injured in the fire, which brought more than 250 city and suburban firemen to the scene. Three of the trapped priests were rescued in dramatic fashion. Father Joseph O'Connor jumped into a fire net from the blazing third floor of the rectory. Father Francis McGuinness crawled from his flaming bedroom to the roof of the rectory. From there he made his way to the roof of the cathedral. As the fire drew closer, he stepped to the edge of the roof. For a time it appeared that he would have to jump to the ground. However, firemen were able to get an aerial ladder into position in time. Father Peter J. Mooney was rescued by firemen as he clung to a radio antenna outside his fourth-floor room. Grasping the copper wire, he hung for several minutes before firemen could raise a ladder to save him. As Father Mooney clung to the wire, flames leaping from a window scorched his legs.

"A Bell telephone operator got the first call about the fire at 4:30 a.m. A man calling from a coin box at Perry and Warren streets shouted: 'Flames are pouring out of St. Marys rectory windows!' The operator immediately relayed the alarm to police and fire dispatcher Walter Parker. The first alarm was sounded at 4:31 a.m. This was quickly followed by the second alarm at 4:33 a.m., the third at 4:34 a.m., and the general alarm at 4:50 a.m. At 4:52 a.m., Deputy Fire Chief Thomas Dvogala put out a call for all volunteer companies from suburban areas. The fire, which started in the rectory, sent flames billowing high above the four-story brownstone rectory-chancery, which adjoins the cathedral, located at North Warren and Bank streets. The blaze spread quickly into the cathedral and for a time endangered the Cathedral High School and St. Mary's Grammar School buildings on Chancery Lane at the rear of the church. Priests said Monsignor Crean apparently gave his life to help save others. Asleep on the second floor when the fire was discovered, the Monsignor raced upstairs shouting out the alarm. As a result he was trapped when the flames engulfed that floor.

"All 15 city companies and all available emergency units were at the scene. Hydrants in a four block area were tapped for water. Torrents of water poured in a steady stream from the three front doors of the cathedral. Fire hoses appeared to be as thick as spaghetti on the four streets surrounding the fire – North Warren, Bank, Chancery, and West Hanover. Two volunteer firemen were injured while fighting the blaze at St. Mary's. Clinton Groover, 23, of 11 Alcazar Avenue, a member of the Lawrence Road Fire Co., stepped on a nail at the scene. He was given a tetanus antitoxin shot at McKinley Hospital. Ron McConnell, 32, a Hamilton Township volunteer, suffered a possible fractured ankle when he stepped on a hose. He was treated at St. Francis Hospital..."

The Trenton Evening Times, with another front page story and several photographs, also documented the fire at Jefferson Elementary School in the paper of Wednesday, March 14, 1956: "Some 700 pupils of the Jefferson Elementary School were led to safety today as the second general alarm fire of the day swept the three-story structure at Brunswick Avenue and Southard Street. The roof and third floor of the Brunswick Avenue wing of the school were destroyed by fire. Tons of water poured into the structure made the lower floors unusable. Part of the roof of the school's newer wing, to the rear, was also destroyed. The blaze broke out on the third floor shortly before 9 a.m., probably in a janitor's storage closet, according to Assistant Fire Chief George Weigand. It spread quickly to the roof and

then to fourth, fifth and sixth grade classrooms on the third floor. Two teachers apparently were the first to discover the blaze. The school secretary noticed smoke and flames in the vicinity of the third floor teachers' room at about the same time. The school nurse phoned an alarm to the city electrical bureau. The word was spread throughout the school and all rooms were evacuated with a minimum of difficulty. The children had to go out into the drenching rain without coats. Most of the children were taken immediately to Junior High School No. 1 at Princeton Avenue and Southard Street. After the children were evacuated, three male teachers attempted to douse the spreading blaze with hand fire extinguishers.

"Hardly any Trenton firemen were in their firehouses when the alarm was received. About nine volunteer fire companies and two Trenton companies responded to the first alarm. The alarm was given first through the fire department radio system. Volunteers still at the scene of the St. Mary's cathedral fire and at fire headquarters received the word and sped to the scene, along with two aerial ladder trucks of the city fire department. Later, all available Trenton fire personnel and some additional equipment were called in by means of the fire department's regular bell alarm system. The flames were shooting through the roof of the old wing when the first firemen arrived on the scene shortly after 9 a.m. At 9:25 a.m., the fire was still raging out of control. The roof of the old wing caved in at about that time, endangering firemen who had ascended aerial ladders. However, only two firemen were injured while fighting the blaze. The men, both from Morrisville, were hurt when a beam collapsed as they were holding a fire hose inside the school. By 9:45 a.m. the fire was under control, although flames were still licking at the roof. Firemen remained at the scene for hours, pouring water on smoldering embers. Police and fire officials said the cause of the blaze could not be determined immediately..."

A sidebar to both fires also ran in the Trenton Evening Times on Wednesday, March 14, 1956, reporting on all the volunteer fire companies that assisted city firefighters. The newspaper reported: "Seventeen fire companies from neighboring communities moved into Trenton this morning to help battle the fires that destroyed St. Mary's Cathedral and damaged Jefferson School. Seven of them were on the fire line; the other ten occupied the city's firehouses vacated by city firemen. Some, called in on the early morning Cathedral fire, started back to their home bases only to be recalled at 9 a.m. when the Jefferson School blaze broke out. At one or both fires today were the Bristol, Princeton, Groveville, Hamilton, Lawrence Road, Mercerville and Colonial fire companies. On standby alert at the firehouses were companies from the state hospital, Yardley, Lawrenceville, Nottingham, Pennington, U.S. Steel, Slackwood, Fairless Hills, and Newtown."