

The Bridgeport Post Report of the Franklin Street Fire on January 25, 1957

5 DEAD; 4 MISSING IN NEW HAVEN FIRE; PANIC BLAMED.
FIREMEN SEEK MORE BODIES; 31 ARE HURT.
NAMES OF 9 BURNED VICTIMS PLACED ON DANGER LIST.
CAUSE UNKNOWN.

STORIES OF HORROR AND PANIC UNFOLDED AFTER FLASH INFERNO

New Haven, Jan. 25 - (AP) Fire flashing through an old four-story loft building at Chapel and Franklin streets an hour before quitting time yesterday brought panic and death. It was panic more than anything else, fire officials said, that killed those who failed to escape the inferno.

The building contained 112 workers.

Five are known dead, four are missing and believed dead, and 31 were injured nine critically. Fifth Body Found. The bodies of three woman were removed from a fire escape while the blaze raged. A fourth died at a hospital.

Firemen entering the ruins for the first time today recovered the body of Joseph Natri, proprietor of one of the dress factories in the building. They continued to search for victims. Occupants of the building made frantic efforts to flee the fire. Woman, their hair and clothes blazing, piled from the building onto fire escapes.

Fire Escape Jammed.

One fire escape, supposed to lower to the ground, jammed, trapping the women against the building. Raymond Washington, 47, who slid down a drain pipe from the third floor said, "I looked up and there was this fire escape jammed. I felt awfully helpless. I felt I ought to do something, but I just couldn't do anything. There was nothing I could do." A few minutes later someone knocked out a pin with a hammer and the fire escape came down.

Fireman James Curry, one of the first up the fire escape, said five women jammed up on its fourth floor landing. "Their clothing was on fire and they were screaming," he said. "Their legs were caught between the steps of the fire escape and we had to pull them apart."

Flames Everywhere

"The flames were everywhere, coming out of doors and windows." Firemen got three down. The other two burned on the fire escape. The sprawling loft building housed six separate shops. Two machine shops occupied the first floor, and the other three floors housed dress shops and a house slipper maker.

Dead were an 18-year-old bride of three months, Mrs. Angelina Di Rienzo; Mrs. Jessie Mongillo, 42, mother of a 15-year-old child; Miss Alma Bradley, 46; And Miss

Grace Pitman, 42. Three hours after the fire started it was still blazing out of control. A huge section of wall collapsed, leaving a wedge-shaped hole two stories deep which exposed the opposite wall. The 70-year-old building was in a drab factory and tenement district, not far from the harbor on New Haven's east side.

Cause Undetermined.

No one knew how the fire started. "Red fire burst out at me," one man said.

Walter Myjak, one of the owners of a first floor metal shop, said he heard a rumbling and opened the door of the elevator shaft. "Red fire burst out at me," he said.

He tried to call the Fire department but the phone was dead. He ran upstairs and kicked open a door to a dress making shop. He said he saw women jammed against an emergency door. They pounded frantically on the door, but in their panic forgot a lever had to be pushed to release the lock. Rick Masselli saw the fire from his tenement home and rushed to help.

Rescuer Driven Back.

"I saw two women come down the fire escape all on fire," he said. "When I went to help them the flames drove me back. You couldn't get near them." Forty-year-old Mrs. Josephine Nastri said she saw her husband in flames on a fire escape after helping her and other women to safety. Later, as she sat numbly in a hospital waiting room, his name was listed among the missing. When the fire broke out, Tony Stawarz was working in a nearby office. He thought he heard women laughing.

No Laughter.

"I looked out the window and saw flames," he said, "then I realized the women weren't laughing, they were screaming." At the same time Thomas Dombroski was working in the yard. "I heard some one yell 'fire' and I ran to the office door," he said. "When I opened it the flames drove me away. Then I climbed on a car and some of the women jumped to me and I helped them to the ground. Then someone found a ladder and others came down that. One man, I don't remember who, found a hammer and released the pin that was holding up the lower part of the fire escape. There were women on it whose clothing and hair were on fire. How they got out I don't know." Burned and suffering from shock and smoke inhalation, he was admitted to a hospital.

Fire Marshal Eugene Mulligan said "panic as much as anything else" accounted for the deaths. Eight women burned in the fire are on the danger list in New Haven hospitals. Those in Grace-New Haven hospital were: Miss Winifred Freeman, 40, New Haven, 50 per cent burns; Mrs. Anna Jones, 40, New Haven, 50 to 60 per cent burns; MRS. Mary Santino, West Haven, 44; Mrs. Theresa Sullo, 43, New Haven, 90 per cent burns; Mrs. Lina Yaegerr, 53, New Haven, 20 per cent. Those in St. Raphael's hospital were: Sophie Cistendopolus, 47, North Haven, 60 per cent burns; Matilda Di Ruccio, 65, burns of the arms, legs, face and feet; Anna Villano, 49, East Haven, burns of both legs and possible head injuries.

Blaze Was Too Fast.

New Haven's fire department has been praised as one of the best in the country, and every last piece of equipment was rushed to the general alarm fire, but they flames sweeping through the building and up stairwells with one huge puff, was too fast for them. Clergymen of all faiths rushed to the scene. Firemen working in bitter cold were sheathed in ice.

Water gushed from the first floor of the building in creamy yellow waterfalls, icing sidewalks and hose lines, and flooding the streets four inches deep. Salvation Army and Red Cross trucks stood by, giving coffee and sandwiches to firemen, police and rescue workers. Late at night Fire Chief Thomas Collins stared tiredly at the huge brick shell. One wall caved in, hose lines still pouring tons of water into it, the gutted hulk threatened to collapsed at any moment.

Mayor Bars Entry.

Mayor Richard C. Lee, said it will be knocked down. He ordered Collins to allow no one in the building before morning. Across the street a man in a fish market wanted to know about his car. It was parked inside the ruined loft. He was told it was a dead loss. "The insurance company won't pay me what it's worth to me," he complained. "I need it." At New Haven hospital a morgue was set up. The completely charred bodies of the women victims were lined up there, on metal tables and covered with white sheets. Several dozen relatives and friends of the dead and missing crowded tensely in a hospital auditorium set up to care for them.

Anxious Vigil.

They paid little attention to anyone. Their time was taken up feverishly questioning each other. "When did you call last? I called four times, maybe she's home. I'll call again." Nurses and doctors stood around in white, chatting to each other. Social workers were called in from the city welfare department to help care for the families. One by one they were taken, accompanied by a policeman wearing a bizarre green surgical gown, with his badge on the outside, down the hall and around the corner to the brightly lighted morgue. When they came out they were either still tense and anxious or else sobbing uncontrollably. No one seemed to be able to think of anything to say to them.

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