

The Florida Catholic

Pensacola-Tallahassee Edition

Mercy Convent falls victim to Ivan aftermath

By **Peggy DeKeyser**, Pensacola

The historic house at the corner of Jackson and Baylen in downtown Pensacola had been a wedding gift, a rooming house/hotel, and a convent. Now it is a blackened shell, gutted by fire in the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan.

The fire apparently started during the morning hours of Sept. 19, three days after the hurricane blasted the western panhandle, knocking out electrical power throughout the region. Neighbors in the historic North Hill district reported hearing a loud "pop" coming from the vicinity of the convent shortly before flames were spotted through second story windows.

Fire Chief James Dixon of the Pensacola Fire Department speculated that the blaze started when power was restored to the old building's wiring. The last resident was Sister Robert Ann Jones, SSJ, who resided in the convent until the summer of 2004. St. Michael Interparochial School, next door, used the convent for overflow space and stored some resource materials in the building.

Fire crews from the Pensacola and Tallahassee fire departments fought the blaze for five hours. They were called back the next day when a hot spot rekindled on the second floor. The Tallahassee crews were in Pensacola to assist with hurricane relief.

Judge William Fisher Sr. built the home in 1887 as a wedding gift to his son, William Fisher Jr., and his bride. The family owned the fine home, replete with inlaid hardwood floors, Tiffany lighting sconces, and elegant



TFC PHOTOS BY PEGGY DEKEYSER

Firefighter Brooks Jester of the Pensacola Fire Department carries a crucifix and three Tiffany sconces from Mercy Convent.

paneling, until sometime after World War I. During the Depression and World War II, the spacious home was converted to a rooming house, doing business as the Azalea Hotel.

In 1947, the Diocese of Mobile, of which Pensacola was then a part, acquired the property for use by the Sisters of Mercy who taught at St. Michael's and St. Joseph's elementary and high schools. Purchased for \$38,000, the property came fully furnished. The Sisters of Mercy moved into the convent in August of 1949.

Subject of a story in the Sept. 16 issue of *The Florida Catholic*, the interior and exterior of the building had been photographed just 10 days before the fire, providing the diocese with valuable insurance information.

When the fire had been knocked down, Brock Jester of the Pensacola Fire Department donned safety gear to enter the building. He recovered the original Tiffany sconces from the dining room, along with a crucifix and fireboard depiction of the Last Supper.

Only the Tiffany sconces from the sidewalls remained in the house. According to one source, the sisters, needing cash for poor families, sold the main Tiffany chandelier from the dining room years before, and replaced it with a reproduction. Bishop John H. Ricard, SSJ, gave the crucifix to St. Michael School principal Bill Murphy, along with the fireboard, to be placed in the school. The bishop will bless the items in a later ceremony with students. Bishop Ricard instructed Murphy to "leave them charred and sooty, so we can remember the convent and this day."



Firefighters work on putting out the fire at St. Michael (Mercy) Convent.

The diocese has made no final decision about the disposition of the building or property, pending the analysis of insurance adjusters. It is assumed to be a total loss.

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