

*The Firefighting Brothers of Notre Dame:
A Legacy of Dedication and Service from Past to Present*

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Renewing the legacy of a great band of men from decades past, the present involvement of the Holy Cross Brothers with the Notre Dame Fire Department began on Wednesday, October 19, 2022. On that day, overcoming his own personal reservations and nerves, a young Brother stepped into the Thomas A. Coleman Firehouse to have a conversation with current Fire Chief Bruce Harrison about how he has understood his career in the fire service as a sort of ‘pastoral ministry.’

As an assignment for his first Pastoral Topics class, this young Brother was to conduct an interview with a pastoral caregiver on the campus of the University of Notre Dame. Defying the expectation that this assignment would be conducted with a member of campus ministry, or at least a more explicitly faith-based connection with the campus community, this young Brother *asked to* and *received* reluctant permission from his professor to complete this assignment by conducting his interview with Chief Harrison as an indirect pastoral caregiver. In this young Brother’s mind, however, members of the fire service, like Chief Harrison, are not indirect but rather quite direct pastoral caregivers as they are the first responders to emerging crises in the lives of those they encounter on a daily basis over the course of their storied careers.

So, on that otherwise ordinary Wednesday in October 2022, our young Brother inserted himself and, consequently, re-inserted the Holy Cross Brothers into the Notre Dame Fire

Department, thus restoring and renewing the legacy of the Holy Cross Brothers within the nation's oldest university fire department.

Upon entering the firehouse and introducing himself as "Brother John," this young Brother, this our current presenter, was met with a question of suspicion, "You're a Brother? But, you're so young!" "Sorry to disappoint you," I responded. And with that interaction began a new chapter in the history of the Firefighting Brothers of Notre Dame. To be fair, however, though I spend much time with the Notre Dame Fire Department, I am by no means a Firefighting Brother, like the Brothers of old. At most, I like to think I offer a positive pastoral presence to a group of men and women who humbly and (except for their sirens) quietly *care for* and *protect* our Notre Dame community. Unlike the Brothers of old about whom we shall learn more about in the rest of this presentation, those who actually manned and donned firefighting equipment, the present involvement of the Holy Cross Brothers with the Notre Dame Fire Department is simply one of active presence and personnel support.

And so, before jumping back into the past and tracing the legacy of the service and dedication of the Holy Cross Brothers within the Notre Dame Fire Department, let us begin by reviewing with some intentionality, the present involvement of the Holy Cross Brother with the Notre Dame Fire Department.

After that first encounter on that fateful Wednesday in October 2022, the relationship between the Holy Cross Brother and the Notre Dame Fire Department (NDFD) evolved informally but authentically. At the conclusion of our first conversation, Chief Harrison said to me, "Come back whenever you'd like," words which he might now regret and an offer which I wasted no time in accepting. The Friday of that same week, I returned to the firehouse for coffee, donuts, and a team meeting with those on shift that day, during which I got to learn more names

and see more faces of the department while also continuing to introduce myself as “Brother John.” In doing so, I was also re-introducing the Holy Cross Brothers into NDFD. From there, I joined the shift in conducting dorm room safety inspections and spent much of that Friday accompanying the on-duty firefighters in their inspections and daily activities. Specifically, I was able to represent the Holy Cross Brothers to NDFD and to demonstrate a continuation of a history and legacy of the Brothers within the firehouse.

By returning to the firehouse just two days after my first exposure, I laid the groundwork for a longer, more intentional, and still unfolding reintegration of the Holy Cross Brothers within NDFD. That first Friday at the firehouse set the stage for the following: many successive Fridays spent at the firehouse, meeting and forming relationships with the personnel, participating in the daily activities of the fire department, riding along for any and all calls received by the department, partaking in full 24-hour shifts by spending the occasional night in the firehouse, offering guidance and a listening ear to firefighters, and, perhaps most importantly, representing both the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department in a positive light to the rest of the Notre Dame community.

Thus, again, the primary relationship that currently exists between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department is one of intentional, committed, and active participation in the life and work of NDFD through the pastoral presence provided by a young Brother with a vested interest in the fire service. Addressing this present relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and NDFD, Chief Bruce Harrison wrote, “the Holy Cross Brothers have been an integral part of the Notre Dame Fire Department since its inception. Therefore, we believe that Br. John’s presence is a blessing to the Notre Dame Fire Department family since we, once again, have a Brother active at the firehouse.”

Precisely, *once again* the Notre Dame Fire Department has a Brother active at the firehouse. *Once again*, a direct and active relationship exists between the Holy Cross Brothers and NDFD. But, if we acknowledge that *once again* this relationship exists, we must also acknowledge where and how this relationship *once* began. In order to examine the origins and development of this relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department, we must rewind to some of the earliest years of the University of Notre Dame.¹

The story of the Notre Dame Fire Department begins within the first five years of the founding of the University of Notre Dame since the earliest account of any fire-suppression organization on campus dates back to 1846.² Not only does 1846 provide the first date of note in the history of the Notre Dame Fire Department, but this year also marks the first date in the longstanding relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and NDFD. According to an official university document from 1846, the first fire company on campus consisted of a small group of Holy Cross Brothers whose main duties were “to procure buckets, axes, and other tools during a fire.”³ A significant piece of these “other tools” to procure during a potential university-threatening inferno was “a piece of pumping equipment that was located in a shed adjacent to the campus’ dog kennel,” which served as the very first “fire engine” for the University of Notre Dame.⁴ Though neither utterly-impressive nor well-established, this first “fire department” for Our Lady’s University perhaps offered some reassurance to the fledgling community of students and Holy Cross religious as they began their work of building Notre Dame into a nationally and internationally-renowned “force for good.” Amid the initial work and many undertakings of

¹ Carol C. Bradley, “A Notre Dame Fire Department Legend: Remembering Brother Frank Gorch, C.S.C.,” *ND Works*, February 2016, 7.

² Carol C. Bradley.

³ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame, “History,” Notre Dame Fire Department, accessed June 10, 2024, <https://ndfd.nd.edu/about/history/>.

⁴ Carol C. Bradley, “A Notre Dame Fire Department Legend: Remembering Brother Frank Gorch, C.S.C.”

building the University of Notre Dame, someone at least saw fit to ensure that some defined organization existed to respond to and extinguish those literal fires that might hinder the ongoing development and early running of the Notre Dame. In particular, this important university operation was initially and, perhaps unintentionally but consequently, long-laid upon the shoulders of the Holy Cross Brothers. Therefore, 1846 saw the beginning not only of the contemporary Notre Dame Fire Department but also the beginning of a long and still-evolving relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department.

Though the small and ill-equipped fire company of 1846 met the needs of the institution as it existed in its small, nascent state, the growth of the Notre Dame necessitated the consequent growth of the University's fire company into a fire brigade. As so, by 1871, the ongoing growth of the Notre Dame precipitated the formation of a more-formalized, better-manned, and more-equipped fire brigade, staffed by Holy Cross Brothers and students.⁵ The incorporation of students into the fire service on campus by 1871 began a longstanding incorporation of students within the Notre Dame Fire Department alongside the Brothers. The expansion of the campus community demanded and saw the expansion of the firefighting community. Though still not yet officially the "Notre Dame Fire Department," the 1871 fire brigade of Notre Dame both had standard equipment and standard drills since this group "utilized a hand-drawn Babcock chemical cart and trained once a month to hone their skills."⁶ Despite its organization, equipment, and training, the haphazard and rudimentary nature of Notre Dame's fire brigade was fully-exposed as a result of its ineptitude and complete underperformance during the disastrous fire of 1879.⁷

⁵ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame, "History."

⁶ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame.

⁷ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame.

The Great Notre Dame Fire of 1879 occurred on Wednesday, April 23, 1879, and destroyed five buildings at the University of Notre Dame, including the second, primarily Holy Cross Brothers-built Main Building with its tin-clad, white-painted dome.⁸ Beginning around eleven in the morning, the fire destroyed the Main Building in about three hours while also consuming the Saint Francis Old Men’s Home, the Infirmary, the Minims Hall, and the Music Hall.⁹ Beyond the buildings lost, the fire also destroyed many precious valuables, books, manuscripts, scientific equipment and collections, paintings, sculptures, furniture items, student possessions, and—at first glance—future hopes for the University of Notre Dame.¹⁰ Though a bucket brigade was begun by students within minutes of the fire emanating from the Main Building, nevertheless, their efforts proved to be *too little, too late* since they quickly realized that additional help was needed from the still-volunteer South Bend Fire Department.¹¹ Though a telegram was quickly sent by University officials to South Bend for mutual aid in combating this disastrous blaze, the assisting volunteers arrived 45 minutes later with a horse-drawn steam fire engine.¹² By that point, the fire was fully-involved and there was no hope for saving the Main Building, nor would it seem was there much hope for saving the scorchingly-eviscerated University of Notre Dame.

Yet, *persevering in hope and convicted by mission*, Father Edward Sorin promised and determined upon the rebuilding of the Notre Dame in time for the fall semester by boldly declaring, “If it were all gone, I should not give up,” so as to imbue the grief-stricken

⁸ “Main Building (University of Notre Dame),” in *Wikipedia*, April 23, 2024, [https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Main_Building_\(University_of_Notre_Dame\)&oldid=1220457108](https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Main_Building_(University_of_Notre_Dame)&oldid=1220457108).

⁹ Kathy Borlik, “Fire Has Prompted Rebuilding, Renewal,” *South Bend Tribune*, September 15, 1991, sec. Safety; “Main Building (University of Notre Dame).”

¹⁰ “Main Building (University of Notre Dame).”

¹¹ Kathy Borlik, “Fire Has Prompted Rebuilding, Renewal.”

¹² Kathy Borlik.

community with the necessary morale for ensuring the University's reconstruction.¹³ Not only did the University of Notre Dame rebuild after this disaster, but the fraught and feeble fire brigade rebuilt, such that on November 21, 1879, the Notre Dame Fire Department was officially formed.¹⁴ At the behest of the local Provincial Council for the Congregation of Holy Cross, Father John Zahm was directed to form a three company fire department staffed by Holy Cross Brothers and students, equipped with the old Babcock chemical cart and several hose carts stationed throughout campus.¹⁵ The Holy Cross community knew that the University could not suffer another loss as great as that of the Great Fire of 1879, thus more intentional organization, planning, and designated-equipment was given to the former fire brigade, now Fire Department. Though still a far cry from the standardization and professionalism of modern-day firefighting agencies, the formation of the original and official Notre Dame Fire Department in 1879, demonstrated that the University and the Holy Cross community had learned its lesson in a most unfortunate way and resolved upon dedicating intentional resources and manpower to the regular preservation and protection of the campus community. According to one article regarding foundation of this new University entity following the destruction of the Main Building, "From those ashes, the Notre Dame Fire Department arose...the first and oldest university-based fire department in the nation."¹⁶

Despite the fact that the Great Fire of 1879 prompted the formation of the Notre Dame Fire Department along with the training and organizing of volunteers to staff this department, nevertheless, "within a few years, the volunteer service had passed out of existence."¹⁷ Though

¹³ "Main Building (University of Notre Dame)."

¹⁴ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame, "History."

¹⁵ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame.

¹⁶ "Notre Dame Fire Department," *ND Works*, November 2015, 8.

¹⁷ Kathy Borlik, "Fire Has Prompted Rebuilding, Renewal."

the volunteers had passed out of existence, the stalwart Holy Cross Brothers of NDFD remained. While the precise history of NDFD is a little patchy between the Great Fire of 1879 and Brother Borromeo's assuming the position of Fire Chief in 1939, some facts are clear and placeable.

First, in 1881, eight hydrants were installed on campus and, via *The Scholastic*, the campus community reported, "We feel safe now. Within five minutes eight heavy streams of water will be directed to the Main Building."¹⁸ Then, between 1897 through 1900, eight to ten Gamewell fire boxes were installed on campus at various locations, each of which, when manually activated, transmitted a signal to the dispatch office in South Bend, which then sent South Bend Fire companies to campus without the Notre Dame Fire Department ever receiving these alarms first.¹⁹ Consequently, despite the existence of the Brothers-operated Notre Dame Fire Department, on campus fire concerns were primarily referred to South Bend Fire Department between 1897 and 1939. This reality was concretized by the fact that, in 1903, the University granted the South Bend Fire Department permission to build a new fire station on University property at the northwest corner of Notre Dame and South Bend Avenues on the condition that "fire protection from this station was to be provided free to the University so long as the fire department occupied this property."²⁰ And so, while the Holy Cross Brothers continued to staff and operate the Notre Dame Fire Department during this period from the early 1900s until 1939, most of the fire protection and suppression on campus was made the responsibility of the South Bend Fire Department.

In 1939, however, with the arrival of Brother Borromeo Malley within the Notre Dame Fire Department, a much-outdated and long-neglected organization was renewed, restored, and

¹⁸ Kathy Borlik.

¹⁹ Kathy Borlik; Brother Borromeo Malley, C.S.C., "1900 Fire Brigade" (University of Notre Dame Fire Department, March 16, 1989).

²⁰ Brother Borromeo Malley, C.S.C., "1900 Fire Brigade."

rebuilt so as to better and more directly serve the needs, growth, and ever-evolving character of the University of Notre Dame. Within the first five years of his fifty year tenure as Chief of the Notre Dame Fire Department, Chief Brother Borromeo obtained a truck chassis for the construction of a modern firefighting apparatus, oversaw and orchestrated the construction of that first motorized fire truck for the department, purchased another modern fire truck, ensured the construction of an official firehouse, and led a group of Brothers assigned to live, work, and conduct the regular rhythms of their religious life in Holy Cross while also serving as the primary firefighters for the University of Notre Dame.²¹ Simply stated, Notre Dame Fire Department would not be what it is today without the leadership of Brother Borromeo Malley. More than anything, what Brother Borromeo did was to oversee the maturation of the Notre Dame Fire Department, such that a 1945 *South Bend Tribune* article stated:

When the alarm flashes today, a modern design combination pumper-ladder truck thunders from an up-to-the-minute station. Aboard are earnest men with a lot of know-how to do the job at hand. It has not always been thus. The department has a rare claim to distinction, too, in that all its six regular members are men of a religious order, being Brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross. This may be unmatched anywhere in the United States. He won't claim credit for it but Brother Borromeo, chief engineer of the power plant, has had a lot to do with the development to its present status and he is its chief. The idea of building up a fire department had never crossed his mind until the day in 1939 when he was instructed to accompany a deputy state fire marshal on a tour of the campus. Before the day was over, he [Borromeo] was a deputy marshal and, in a general sort of a way, was in charge of fire prevention and firefighting at Notre Dame.²²

Again, simply stated, Notre Dame Fire Department would not be what it is today without the leadership of Brother Borromeo Malley. The life and legacy of Brother Borromeo Malley is utterly indispensable to the life of the Notre Dame Fire Department and utterly essential to the legacy and longevity of the relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department.

²¹ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame, "History."

²² John F. Carroll, "Firefighting Matures at ND," *South Bend Tribune*, 1945.

By the end of Brother Borromeo's tenure as Chief of the Notre Dame Fire Department, the fire service was undergoing significant changes and the specific needs of the University's necessary fire prevention were quickly surpassing the capacity of the Holy Cross Brothers. For all intents and purposes, the contemporary Notre Dame Fire Department began in March 1981, when Robert Rogers was hired as the first paid full-time shift firefighter.²³ The arrival of full-time professional firefighters within NDFD signaled the end of an era, wherein primarily Holy Cross Brothers and student volunteers kept the sole and watchful gaze over campus so as to preserve Our Lady's University from any and all potential disasters or emergency situations. According to one source, "The era of religious and student firefighters ended when the last two resident student firefighters graduated in 1991 and when Brother Francis Gorch moved out of the firehouse in 2002."²⁴

Therefore, first with the partial then full staffing of NDFD with professional firefighters, with Brother Borromeo's retirement from the Fire Chief's position in 1989, and with Brother Frank's departure from the firehouse in 2002 then death in 2015, the direct relationship between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department seemingly came to a close. Despite this supposed conclusion, nevertheless, there *still remained* and *will always remain* the indirect relationship via a longstanding and well-founded legacy between the Holy Cross Brothers and the Notre Dame Fire Department. Moreover, at present, the current involvement between the Holy Cross Brother at the Notre Dame Fire Department offers hope that this legacy, this history does not remain a museum item but rather becomes a living, evolving, and dynamic relationship for the betterment of the Congregation of Holy Cross and the University of Notre Dame...God willing.

²³ Liz Foran, "The Making of the ND Fire Dept.," *The Observer*, December 2, 1994.

²⁴ Marketing Communications: Web, University of Notre Dame, "History."

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