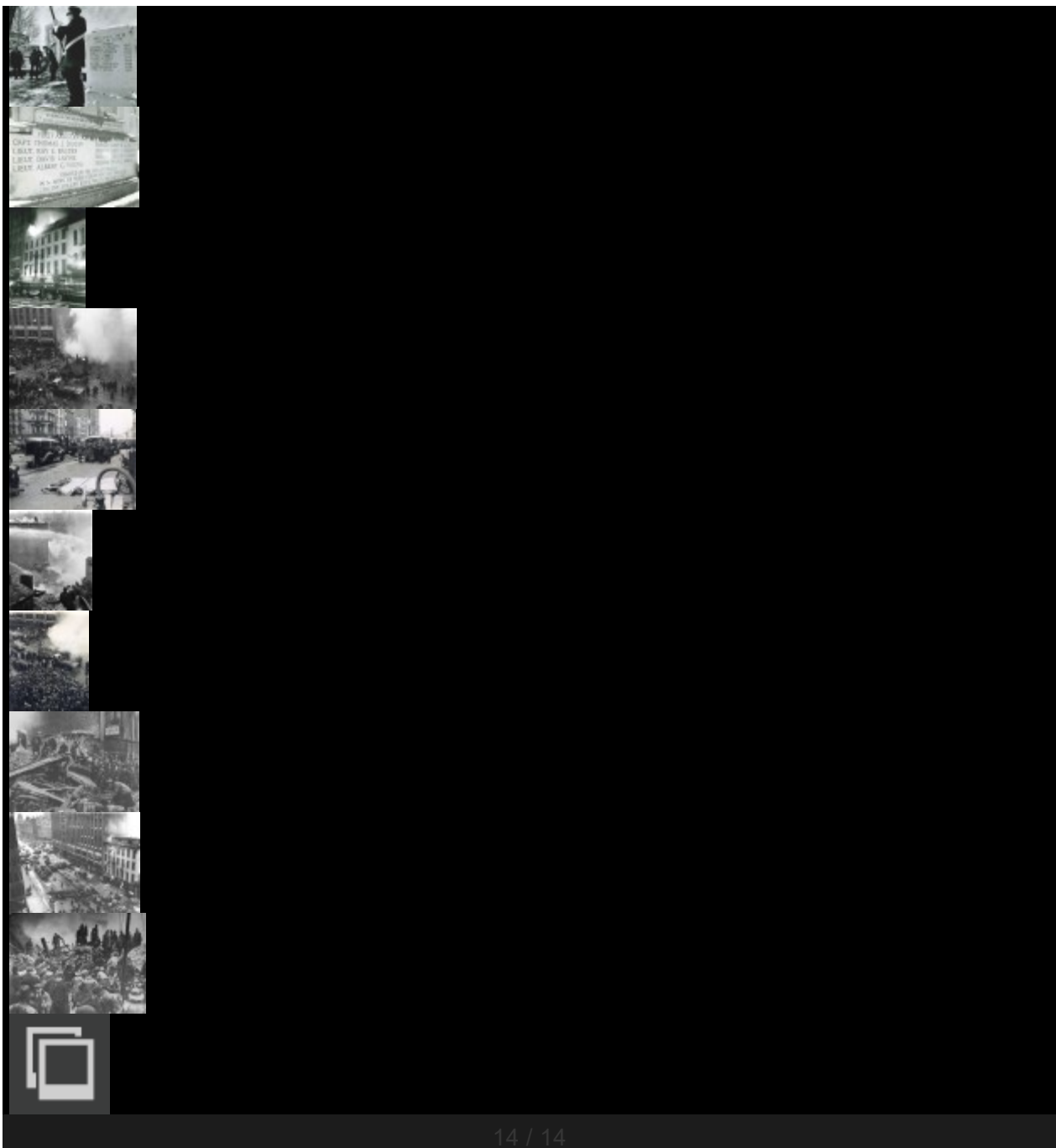


Throwback Thursday: Remembering the 'dramatic, tragic' Collins Block fire (photos)





Firefighters battle the Collins Block fire on February 3, 1939. Photo courtesy of the Onondaga Historical Association.
[Onondaga Historical Association](#)

[PrintEmail](#)



By [Jacob Pucci](#) | jpucci@syracuse.com

[Email the author](#) | [Follow on Twitter](#)

on February 04, 2016 at 7:00 AM, updated February 04, 2016 at 7:07 AM

0 shares

CNY NOSTALGIA

- [Throwback Thursday: Remembering the 'dramatic, tragic' Collins Block fire \(photos\)](#)
- [Syracuse's Gothic cottage vacant for 30 plus years is demolished](#)
- [National Signing Day: 10 memorable recruits in Syracuse football history](#)
- [Syracuse's Gothic Cottage: Looking back on the 160-year-old home \(vintage photos\)](#)
- ['The Day the Music Died': Looking back on rock's great tragedy \(videos\)](#)

All Stories

SYRACUSE, N.Y. -- *"Here is a dramatic and tragic story of devotion and sacrifice on the part of a faithful public servant — devotion and sacrifice so great that death was the result."*

So begins a Syracuse Herald column about First Assistant Chief Charles A. Boynton, one of [nine Syracuse firefighters](#) who lost their lives in the [Collins Block fire](#). The Feb. 3, 1939 fire remains the single deadliest fire in the department's history.

Firefighters were first called to the Collins building, 225 E. Genesee St., around 2 a.m. They were cleaning up and preparing to leave the building when, around 4 a.m., the roof of the cellar collapsed.

The eight men fell to the cellar, pinned underneath tons of bricks and debris.

8 DEAD FIREMEN HUNTED IN RUINS
Collins Block Victims Under Mass of Debris

Rescuing the trapped men, a task fueled by the sounds of moans and voices of the still-alive firefighters, continued until 10 a.m. when the front wall fell into Genesee Street and the side walls collapsed into the cellar.

Chief Edward E. Gieselmann spoke following the second collapse.

"Since the falling of the rest of the walls, all possible hope has been abandoned. The men are dead."

The following eight firefighters died at the scene:

- Acting Chief Thomas Dugan, of 313 Bryant Ave.
- Lt. David Lavine, of 259 Leon St. Engine 16
- Lt. Albert G. Young, of 127 Kuhl Ave. Engine 2
- Lt. Ray E. Bauder, of 128 Melbourne Ave. Engine 3
- Firefighter James E. Diamond, of 611 Ulster St. Engine 1
- Firefighter John W. Agan, of 325 Stafford Ave. Engine 1
- Firefighter Frank Kerlin, of 219 Rider Ave. Truck 6
- Firefighter M. Gregory "Mike" Dixon, of 550 Tennyson Ave. Engine 3.

Night Drama in East Genesee Street Beheld by Thousands

Despite freezing temperatures, more than 10,000 people pushed tight against barriers in the street and onlookers watched from neighboring windows as firefighters, family members, volunteers and workers from the Department of Public Works, the Civilian Conservation Corps and Works Progress Administration began the search for the firefighters' bodies.

About 45 members from the American Legion were on hand to aid in the search and provide donuts and hot coffee as crews worked deep into the early morning of Feb. 4. Four of the firefighters killed and one of the injured were members of American Legion Post 41.

The families of the victims held an all-day vigil in a nearby firehouse until around midnight on Feb. 3, when, without hope of finding their loved ones alive, went home. All left except for Rosemary Dugan, the daughter of

Thomas Dugan, who stayed on a cot and mourned for about 24 hours until she left around 3 a.m. on Feb. 4.

It took until Feb. 5 for workers to find the firefighters' bodies in the rubble.

A fund established by the Syracuse Herald raised more than \$34,000 for the victims' families, the equivalent of more than \$579,000 today.

FIRE AID FUND CLIMBS PAST \$34,000 *Defective Heating Plant Found Cause of Collins Fire*

Mayor Rolland D. Marvin, who was on vacation in Florida at the time, hurried back to Syracuse as Police Chief William Rapp and District Attorney Donald Mawhinney opened their investigation of the fire.

At first, the investigation centered around the Keep restaurant, the only tenant in the building at the time. Police investigated tensions between the restaurant's owner, Ada Keep and labor union officials and whether the tensions led to the fire being intentionally set.

The Syracuse Herald reported at the time that Glenn Keep, Ada Keep's husband and president of the Syracuse Typographical Union, had interfered with restaurant employees trying to unionize.

The investigation, which also involved four experts from the New York City Fire Department, determined the fire was accidentally started by defective heating equipment.

CHIEF BOYNTON DIES OF EXERTION IN COLLINS BLOCK FIRE DISASTER

On Feb. 6, Charles A. Boynton suffered a heart attack in his bathtub at home and died. A doctor attributed his death to exertion, excitement, shock and long hours of work since the Collins Block fire.

[Collins Block firefighters honored](#) Members of the Syracuse Fire Department, Mayor Stephanie Miner and guests gathered at Firefighters Memorial Park on South Townsend Street this morning for the 73rd annual Collins Block Memorial Service. The service named for nine firefighters who lost their lives when the Collins Block collapsed during a fire in 1939 honors all 45 firefighters who've died in the line of duty.

Fire department physician Dr. George Wright told the Syracuse Herald that Boynton had heart problems for about a year, including a heart attack about three weeks before the fire. Despite his health, Boynton kept himself on active duty.

Boynton was on the first floor of the Collins building, only inches away from where the cellar ceiling collapsed and the firefighters fell. He tried to reach for Lavine, but the lieutenant was out of reach.

A snippet from a Feb. 7, 1939 column on Boynton's death reads as followed:

"Men and woman of imagination, who can conjure up in their minds the picture of this experienced fire-fighter with his faltering health fighting to get his men out alive after the Collins Block had collapsed, then struggling for days to reach them, finally dying of an overworked, broken heart, may get just a glimpse of what heroism, devotion and self-sacrifice really mean."

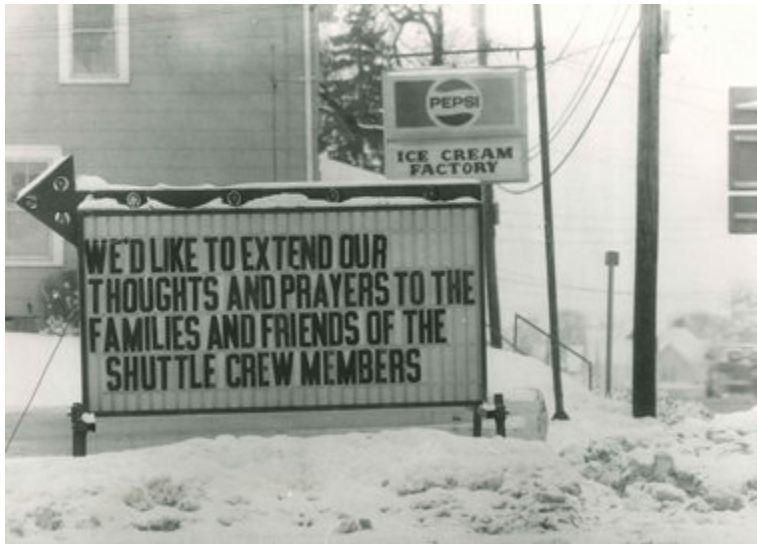
Syracuse's Tribute to Collins Block Fire Heroes

In February 1939, the Scranton (Pennsylvania) Fire Department presented the Syracuse Fire Department with two carved anthracite tablets, one in honor of Boynton, the other in honor of the other eight firefighters who died.

In October 1939, the city erected a monument in Fayette Park in honor of the nine fallen firefighters. The park, which also houses the Phillip Eckel Memorial and the Hamilton White Monument, both dedicated to fallen

Syracuse firefighters, was later renamed Fayette Firefighter's Memorial Park.

The Syracuse Fire Department holds a memorial service at the park each year on Feb. 3 to honor the 45 Syracuse firefighters who have died in the line of duty in the department's history.



[Throwback Thursday: Remembering the Challenger disaster, 30 years later \(photos\)](#)

On Jan. 28, 1986, the Challenger Shuttle broke apart 73 seconds after liftoff.

This feature is a part of CNY Nostalgia, a section on syracuse.com. Send your ideas and curiosities to Jacob Pucci: [Email](#) | [Twitter](#) | 315-766-6747