

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. — Columbian, Queen Isabella, and Leo XIII.,

# Annals from the Archives

## The Needs of the Time: Needlework in Notre Dame Schools

Two examples of work from Sr. Sabina Clancy's Sewing Syllabus for Notre Dame students, 1896.



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With gratitude for  
Sister Esther MacCarthy's  
research into the life of  
Sister Sabina Clancy

—From those first days when St. Julie Billiart gathered young girls to teach, the emphasis was always on training them to be able to do for themselves. While the curriculum shifted and expanded in the passing years to accommodate parents' expectations, sewing remained an integral part of the Notre Dame education. But as St. Julie said, the Sisters were not "gathered to teach. . . children all kinds of fashionable work." She believed that girls needed to be trained in manual work. With manual work, they would have the means to support themselves.

In 1895, the American Sisters of Notre Dame privately published their curriculum, Course of Study in the Academies and Parochial Schools of the Sisters of Notre Dame. The volume outlined grade by grade the coursework to be taught. These lessons included mathematics, history, geology, meteorology, science, reading, penmanship, bookkeeping, music, religion, literature, geography, physics, astronomy, languages, and lastly, but by no means least, needlework. The needlework curriculum presented in specific detail the stitches and abilities the girls were to be taught in each grade.

A year after the publication of the curriculum, Sister Sabina Clancy (1869-1947) prepared a visual syllabus of the needlework lessons for the Sisters of Notre Dame. At the time, Sr. Sabina lived at the convent in Somerville. Whether one of her Superiors requested Sr. Sabina to prepare this syllabus to supplement the published curriculum is unknown, but the timing certainly hints at such a possibility. To create this syllabus, Sr. Sabina gathered an 8 inch by 10 1/2 foot long piece of cotton and sewed each of the lessons from Grades 2 to 7 onto it. Because lessons for needlework were unlike those for any of the academic subjects, having such a visual syllabus available insured consistency between schools. When the curriculum instructed the teachers to have children in Grade 6 "herringbone a patch on coarse flannel," teachers might have had questions regarding the size of the patch or the stitches. With the visual syllabus available to illustrate both the stitch and the size of the patch to be used, those questions were easily answered.

How long this project took Sr. Sabina is hard to guess, but the workmanship reveals her proficiency as a seamstress. Needlework instruction began in second grade with the children learning simple stitches and how to knit with two needles. In third grade, the children were taught to hem and the basics of knitting and purling. Each year, the abilities were increased so that by the ninth grade, when most of the girls graduated, they would have learned everything they needed to sew their own clothing. If any of the girls went onto the next three years for high school, they were taught the finer stitches, such as whitework, pulled thread embroidery and how to make lace.

There is little information on Sister Sabina Clancy's life. She was born Elizabeth Clancy in Ireland on March 22, 1869, the daughter of Terence and Elizabeth (Cullen) Clancy. Being named after her mother, it was most likely she

was the oldest daughter in the family. There is no record of when the Clancys emigrated to the United States but they settled for a time in Woburn, Massachusetts. In 1889, Elizabeth Clancy entered the Sisters of Notre Dame and took her first vows in Waltham in 1892. The following year, she was transferred to Somerville where it was very likely she taught needlework to the girls at St. Joseph's.

Because the annals and journals seldom mentioned individual Sisters except when they were ill or transferred (and not always then), tracing Sister Sabina's life is difficult. She remained at Somerville from 1893 to 1899. From there she was sent to E Street in Boston and taught at St. Augustine's School. She was mentioned in the annals at St. Augustine's once when she accompanied a Sister to the doctor. In 1908, she went to Lawrence and in 1915, she was sent to Saints Peter and Paul School on Broadway Street in South Boston for three years. In 1918, she taught at Notre Dame Academy which had just recently moved to the Fenway. There is evidence she was sent to St. Charles in Woburn for a while, but there is no other record of her life until her rather unexpected death in Tyngsboro on Nov. 29, 1947. Her legacy lives on, though, in the lessons she taught to her students and in the syllabus she created for *the needs of the time*.

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Sisters of Notre Dame Entrance Records, 1877-1899.
- ◆ Annals of the Convent of Notre Dame, Somerville, Mass., 1879-1929.
- ◆ Annals of the Convent of Notre Dame, Waltham, Mass., 1889-1896.
- ◆ Annals for St. Mary's, Lawrence, Mass., 1907-1911.
- ◆ Boston Academy, Berkeley Street, Journal, 1916-1954.
- ◆ The Educational Ideals of Blessed Julie Billiart, 1922.
- ◆ Annals of Tyngsboro, 1927-1972.
- ◆ Journal of Tyngsboro Convent, 1939-1953.
- ◆ *Plain and Not Too Fancy* by Sr. Esther MacCarthy, 2002.

## *The Needs of the Time: Needlework in Notre Dame Schools*

Display and exhibit opens January 2014

Boston/Ipswich Archives

30 Jeffrey's Neck Rd. Ipswich, MA

Available for viewing

Monday through Thursday, 8:30 to 3:30.