

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. The exhibit was also commended by Leo XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Sisters of Notre Dame in East Boston

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Notre Dame Convent

Havre Street, East Boston, c. 1890



Notre Dame Convent, Havre Street

East Boston, c. 1935

—Reading the Annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame when they first came to Massachusetts has the potential to leave one breathless. The East Boston Annals, for instance, record the unrelenting struggle the Sisters faced. In 1860, Father James Fitton of the Most Holy Redeemer Church invited the Sisters of Notre Dame to East Boston. The last 23 years had seen the population of East Boston multiply from 1000 residents to over 16,000 people. Many of these were immigrants from Ireland and Italy who were eager for their children to attend a Catholic school. Upon arrival, however, the 8 Sisters discovered that Fr. Fitton was “*accustomed to leading a life of privations*” and “*had furnished the house in conformity with holy poverty.*” Unfortunately, this meant a convent that was unstable, so much so that “*storms made the house rock like a ship.*” Fearful for their lives, they “*objected to remaining in this house and we were told to ask hospitality from our neighboring sisters. Some went to Lowell, others to Boston, others of us went even to South Boston.*” Eventually, the convent was repaired and the Sisters returned.

The Holy Redeemer parish school expanded from 5 classrooms to 7 and as more families settled in East Boston, more Sisters were needed. By 1875, the Sisters not only taught school for the Holy Redeemer parish, but also for the 2 new parishes that had been formed, the Assumption and Sacred Heart. In addition, they taught Sunday School at the nearby Star of the Sea parish. The classrooms were so crowded that the 1878 Annals report “*the children were obliged to sit on footstools beside the teachers. However we had to be patient because*

the good father [Fitton] did not see the means of carrying out such work.” In 1879, 29 Sisters taught over 3200 students at the 4 parishes. By 1885, that number rose to over 3700.

All of this was endured in the old building that they’d lived in since 1863. In 1879, an attempt was made to repair the leaky roof, but “*when the old roof was removed, it began to rain so heavily it penetrated everywhere. . . we hastened to go downstairs and the water followed us down the staircases, through the ceilings, the more we collected it the more there seemed to be. We were forced to bring our bedding into the Sodality chapel in the other building where we slept pell-mell on the benches and on the floor.*” A new convent was long overdue. The following year, the Sisters took matters into their own hands. They bought a small piece of land on Havre Street and construction of their new convent began.

The population of the area continued to grow at an amazing rate. In 1902, 56 Sisters taught over 5300 children. 1916 would see the population of East Boston at its height, over 64,000 people. The normal wear and tear during the next 50 years brought the Sisters the same problem they faced in 1879. In 1930, the building was condemned and construction for a new expanded convent began once again.