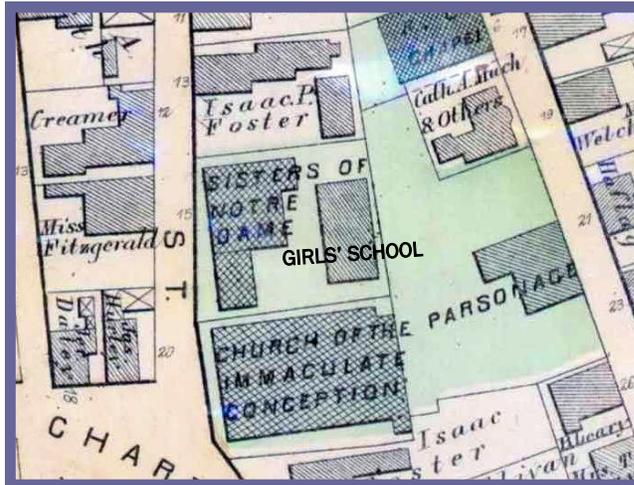


*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the exhibition of the Sisters of the Holy Family, Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## The Sisters of Notre Dame in Salem



**September 2013**  
**Written by**  
**Nancy Barthelemy**  
**Archivist**  
**nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org**  
**sndboston@pswich.wordpress.com**

Map of Walnut Street in Salem, 1872, showing the location of the Sisters of Notre Dame's Convent on Walnut Street beside the Immaculate Conception Church  
 From SalemDeeds.com

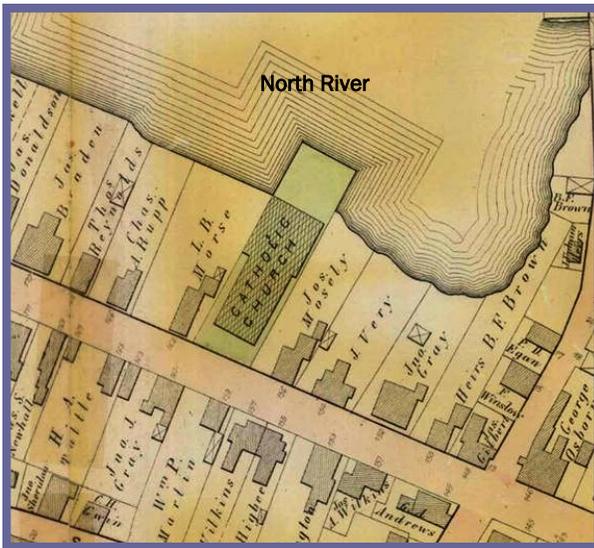
—The Sisters of Notre Dame arrived in Salem in 1855, in the midst of an anti-immigration movement, one that powered the rise of the American or *Know Nothing* Party. The Know Nothings were responsible for the formation of the Massachusetts *Nunnery Committee*, an organization that forced its way into numerous local convents for “inspections.” \*\* It was during this time that Fr. Conway, the pastor of the Immaculate Conception Parish wanted to start a school for girls. In 1850, Salem had a population of around 20,000. Catholics made up about a fifth of the city and more immigrants arrived every day, drawn to Salem and Peabody because of their thriving leather industry. When the convent and school were completed in 1855, they were located on the present day site of the Boys and Girls Club in Salem. Then the street was called Walnut Street. Today, it is Hawthorne Blvd. Despite the anti-Catholic sentiment, there were enough Catholic immigrants hungering for a spiritual home as they struggled to make their way in a new country—enough to support more than one church in Salem, as well as a girls’ school. Five years before the Sisters’ arrival, St. James Church on Federal Street had been completed.

Seeing the success the Sisters had at the Immaculate Conception School, the pastor of St. James, Fr. Thomas Shahan, bought Nonantum Hall on Warren Street in 1864, with the intent to turn it into a girls’ school as well. Appropriately enough, Nonantum means *blessing* in the Algonquin language. The Hall was converted into a four room school for Catholic girls and Fr. Shahan asked four Sisters of Notre Dame from the Immaculate Conception Parish to teach. Naturally, they agreed.

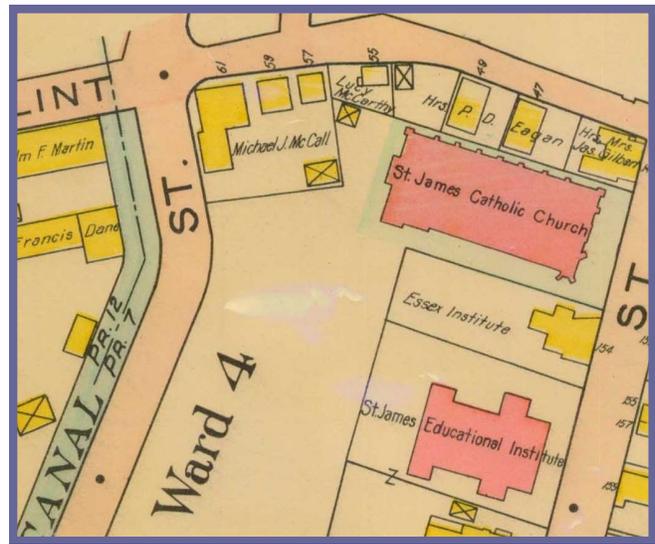
*“For the first fourteen years, the Sisters came daily from Immaculate Conception Parish and the half-hour’s walk frequently furnished them with annoyance from the Protestant children who seem to have inherited the intolerant spirit of the ‘Witch Days.’ The Normalists made it a custom to walk three or four abreast on the narrow sidewalk, thus forcing the Sisters to take the road; while the smaller children often peered into their faces, inquired if they had head-aches. . . The less bold, fearful of approaching, contented themselves with calling ‘Black Witches’ from a safe distance.” [From the Salem Annals, 1878-1971]*

The new St. James School was quickly overcrowded and Fr. Shahan had another school built directly

\*\* For more information on the “Nunnery Committee” refer to the April 2013 Annals from the Archives



St. James Church and school in 1874 when the North River was within a few feet of its foundation  
From the Atlas of the City of Salem, 1874



St. James Church and school in 1911 after the river was filled in and the school expanded.  
From the Atlas of the City of Salem, 1911

behind the church. But its location—beside the North River—resulted in so much dampness in the building, that the Sisters found it almost impossible to teach on the first floor. In 1878, St. James Parish finally completed a convent beside the church and ten Sisters took up residence there, probably glad not to have to make the daily trek through rain, snow, sleet and insults. Being so close to the river, the dampness continued and some Sisters grew ill with diseases of the lungs, such as asthma and the scourge of that time—tuberculosis.

They also struggled with other ailments common in those days—*“Doctor Gaffney was called for some Srs. Had been ailing with the summer complaint.”* The ‘summer complaint’ was either dysentery or something similar to it, which was caused by contaminated water. Some Sisters were *“obliged to leave by the advice of the Doctor, the air not agreeing with [them].”* [From the 1878-1906 Salem Journal]

These struggles didn’t prevent the Sisters from giving to those in desperate need. The Journal for St. James recorded that for Christmas in 1878, the Sisters made gifts of gloves and pies to the children at the City Orphan Asylum, who were cared for by the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, also known as the Grey Nuns.

Some typical early entries were:

Nov. 16, 1878: *“Went to visit Sr. M. Felicienne, found her improving . . .”*

Dec. 14, 1878: *“Six Sisters went down to Walnut St. to profit of the ‘Exposition.”*

Dec. 26, 1878: *“Six Sisters came up from the Im. Con. Had recreation for dinner.”*

Pentecost Sunday, June 1, 1879: *“1st Comm. of 105 children who seemed so well disposed. . .”*

June 4, 1879: *“Spent the time of instruction and evening meditation filling the wood in the cellar.”*

July 3, 1879: *“Sr. Berchmans du S.C. arrived from Cin<sup>ti</sup> to replace Sr. M. Edmund who leaves for Cin<sup>ti</sup> . . .”*

By the end of the 19th century, the North River that had once flowed near the church was only a canal. The river had been filled in. Not only were the Sisters lives easier, but the land also allowed the children space for a playground.



St. James Church, School and Convent, c. 1900  
From the Boston/Ipswich Archives