

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 XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

The Seeds of Growth: The Sisters of Notre Dame in Massachusetts, 1849-1973

Eastern and Fitchburg
Railroad Depot in Boston,
c. 1849,
the year the first Sisters of
Notre Dame arrived in
Massachusetts



September 2014

Written by

Nancy Barthelemy

Archivist

nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org

sndbostonlpwlich.wordpress.com

bolparchives.omeka.net

—It cannot be said that Boston offered a warm welcome to the Sisters of Notre Dame when they arrived in 1849. Sister Louis de Gonzague, Sister Magdalen and Sister Mary Stanislaus stepped off the train after sunset on Saturday, November 10, 1849, no doubt exhausted by their trek from Cincinnati. Though the American railway system in 1849 was extensive, the route between Ohio and Massachusetts required many stops and transfers. As was common then, the Sisters wore lay dresses rather than their habits for travel. Aware of the anti-Catholic sentiments in the U.S., the Sisters had good cause for wishing to remain anonymous. Their habits were stowed safely away in a valise. In the confusion of what must have been a bustling train station and meeting the pastor of St. Mary's Church, they left their bags unattended for a short time, just long enough for them to be stolen.

The next morning, they made do by wearing white bonnets and shawls to attend St. Mary's Children's Mass and Sunday School. The level of noise and confusion among the teachers and, consequently, the children offered them their first view of the challenge ahead. And so began the arduous work of organizing the first Notre Dame girls' school in Boston.

Though the first few years were a struggle, St. Mary's began to thrive. Word spread and pastors from other churches invited the Sisters to organize schools in their parish. In 1852, the Sisters opened a school in Lowell. Schools in Roxbury, Salem and Lawrence soon followed. By 1870, there were 12 Notre Dame Schools in Massachusetts and in the century that followed that number continued to rise. With growth came many challenges and changes. California had been a separate province from its founding in 1851. East of the Rockies, the American Sisters of Notre Dame were governed from Cincinnati.

Until 1922, Massachusetts remained a part of the Ohio Province. But as the Congregation in the eastern United States grew, a Canonical division of the province was decreed. The Cincinnati Province now included Ohio and Illinois and the Eastern or Waltham Province originally included Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New York, Pennsylvania, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Twelve years later, in 1934, Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and

Washington, D.C. separated from the Eastern Province into its own province. The Eastern Province became known as the Waltham Province from 1934 to 1959. During those years, the Massachusetts Sisters expanded missions into Connecticut. In 1959, two things happened: Connecticut became its own province and the novitiate moved from Waltham to Ipswich. The province became known as the Massachusetts Province until 1973, when it divided into the Ipswich and Boston provinces.

To commemorate this history, the archives will present a new display and exhibit beginning in September. ***Seeds of Growth: The Sisters of Notre Dame in Massachusetts, 1849-1973*** will be available for viewing in the archives during normal hours Mondays through Thursdays. The display offers a photographic timeline of the expansion of the Massachusetts missions from those early days and struggles until 1973.



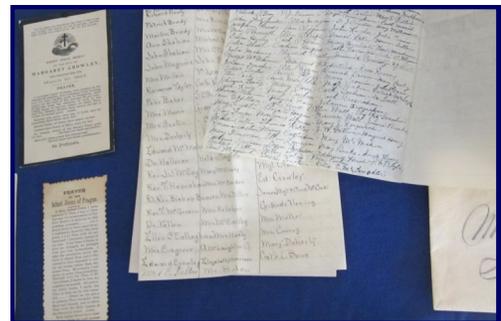
Silvers spoons used by Sisters in Roxbury



Time capsule from cornerstone of Ascension convent, Worcester



Holy water font from St. John's convent, Peabody



Some of the contents from the Worcester time capsule

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ [History of the Foundation of Notre Dame, Boston, 1849-1914.](#) Boston/Ipswich Archives.
- ◆ [Sketch of the House of the Sisters of Notre Dame, Berkeley Street.](#) Boston/Ipswich Archives.
- ◆ [American Foundations of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. 1928.](#)