

*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, Susan Spatella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Tales of Worcester

**The Swan House in 1899**  
Original Home for the  
Sisters of Notre Dame on  
Plantation Street In Worcester  
from 1900 to 1904  
Image from the  
American Antiquarian Society



**November 2014**  
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—During the 1890s, Sister Julia McGroarty, the Superior of the Eastern Province, started thinking of opening a house for aging and ailing sisters. When word came in 1899 that 145 acres of the Swan Farm on Plantation Road in Worcester was up for sale, she decided it was the perfect place for Sisters to rest. Long before Elliott Swan bought the farm in 1850, it had been known as the Coal Mine Farm. Native Americans had first dug up the coal near Wigwam Hill and when the land was taken over by white settlers, that practice continued. During its history, the farm had many owners before Elliott Swan bought the land. It doesn't seem as if he ever lived on the farm. Instead he rented out the land and the house. In 1884, he also sold 40 acres to the Worcester Natural History Society, which opened a small museum on the site.

The deed of sale was signed by the Sisters on Feb. 2, 1900 and Sister Julia designated the farm as a "health resort where sisters, who would be benefitted by a rest, can go to find it. . ." [Worcester Annals] Several Sisters arrived in early April to begin the work of converting the house into a home. The family who had been renting the place left "a sufficient quantity of their belongings to make three or four splendid bonfires, and if the sweepings, cobwebs, etc. were gathered together and thrown into the flames they [the flames] would have been extinguished." Clearly the Sisters had their work cut out for them.

Not until April 24th was the house finally ready for the Sisters to occupy. Sister Joseph Mary Costello was named the first Superior of the new Notre Dame du Lac. Contributions from neighbors and friends soon arrived, including their first cow. They had four farm hands to assist them with the labor and between the orchard, the cows, chickens, some sheep and other farm animals, the Sisters were able to obtain a small income.

The first dog the Sisters had on the property was Prince. The Sisters wrote that shortly after their arrival, he "strayed or was decoyed away. Search was made for him in vain." For three days they grieved his loss until the morning of May 15th when they were in their carriage returning from Mass at St. John's. "Sr. Supr. directed Sr. M. Bernard's attention out of the window, saying, 'Is that dog not like our Prince?' And sure enough there he was, trotting full speed after the carriage. He was quite wet, and his legs covered with mud, otherwise we would have taken him in. We were then a mile and a half from the Farm, but the poor animal kept up with the horses, whose pace the driver slackened, till he reached the gate, then he sank exhausted on the ground. It was more than a week before he was over the effects of his trip. . ."

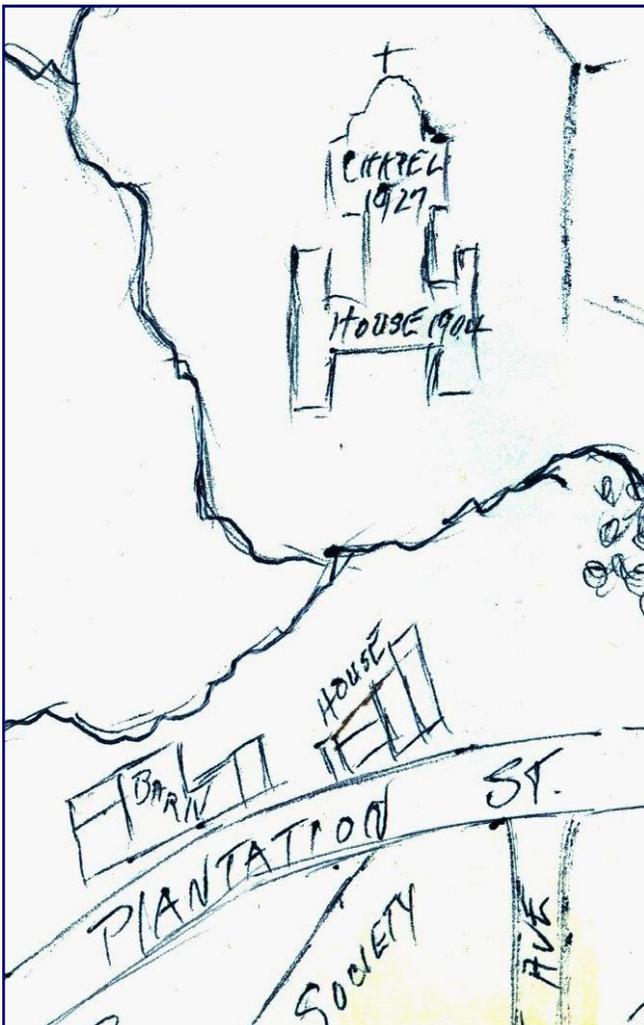
Sometime in August, the Annals report an amusing tale. ". . . a short, thin, old and poorly clad Italian touched the button of our electric bell. . . and when the Portress appeared, he asked. . . if we would buy some blueberries, of which he carried a good sized basket. The Cook was consulted and it was decided to take all he had as his price was reasonable. Next day he called again and was again relieved of his load. Imagine our astonishment, dismay and a few other things when we discovered we had paid for our own blueberries. The poor vendor did not know it (and we never told him) for when asked where he had gathered them, he most innocently point out the spot."

As is typical on most farms, the Sisters had five cats ". . . four of them are yet in their kittenhood, and strange to say, though all are about the same age and were utter strangers to one another till they met here, they live in perfect peace and harmony. . . they eat from the same dish, and usually sleep with the head of one over the back or neck of another. In fact, as a general thing there is a remarkable fellow feeling existing among our animals. It is not uncommon to see the dog, one or more of the cats and a hen or two dipping into the same dish at the same time; occasionally, however, Prince assumes dictatorship."

That comradery also extended between the workers and the livestock. The Annalist reported in October 1900 that “we had an interesting experience. . . we all . . . pride ourselves on our men’s apartments; and not without reason, for they are convenient and complete as could be constructed in a barn. Besides a reception room, a sitting room, a smoking room, a reading room, a drying room. . . a boiler room in which water for razor operations, weekly ablutions, etc. is heated, and potatoes and other food for the cattle cooked; besides these, each man has his own dormitory. . . our farmers do their own chamber work; a sister, however makes a weekly visitation to change sheets and towels . . . It happened on several occasions that things were not found in a good order. . . the beds had the appearance of not having been made, or if made, made badly. . . in the meantime the chief source of the disorder came to light. Our three lambs, God bless them, had learned the way up stairs and . . . one of the men found to his intense amusement a young sheep sweetly sleeping in his bed. Good naturedly he did not disturb her but passed into the next dormitory and there found another in the bed, fast asleep; anxious to know whether the third had been as good to himself as had his fellows, he opened the adjoining room door and sure enough, there he was. Now the dear boy, instead of giving the alarm and having the beasts arrested, kept their secret. . . but their visits became so frequent . . . and now the men’s dormitory doors are carefully closed. . .”

Not all tales were happy ones. In December 1900, the Annals reported that one of the men, “forgot when retiring to regulate the dampers; the consequence was that in the morning three of them were well nigh asphyxiated.” When the Sisters rose that morning, they were surprised to see that “there was no light or sign of life in the Barn, one of the Sisters went over and the sight that met her gaze will not soon leave her mind. One man, more dead than alive, stood, leaning against the horse he was trying to harness. . . The others, still upstairs, were even in a worse condition. . . Sister hurried over to the House and soon went back with a companion, an emetic and stimulants. All the windows were thrown open and both Sisters went from bed to bed, trying to rouse and relieve the sufferers. It was only by force that they succeeded in making them rise and keeping them awake. The pain in their heads was almost unbearable. We telephoned to three different Institutions where we thought we might find a doctor. . . Finally about 7 o’clock we succeeded in finding one at St. Vincent’s Hospital. . . and we were relieved and thankful to learn that we could have done nothing better. . .” It took several more days before their workers fully recovered.

In February of 1904, it was decided that a new convent was needed for Notre Dame du Lac. The money was borrowed and by year’s end, the familiar building of brick with stone and terracotta trimmings was completed.



Notre Dame du Lac  
Worcester, MA  
c. 1905

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Annals, Plantation Street, 1900-1902.
- ◆ Annals, Plantation Street, 1920-1925.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archive, 1878-2014.