

*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

# Diphtheria Epidemic in Salem



St. James School, Federal Street, Salem, MA  
c. 1900

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—The early Annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur at St. James in Salem describe their struggles in organizing a new school. One of their ongoing problems centered on the location of the convent, just feet from the polluted North River. Because of this, the sisters suffered from typhoid fever and the “summer complaint,” which was most likely brought on by drinking contaminated water. Those dangers from such close proximity to the North River were reported on in the [September 2013 Annals from the Archives](#). As the river was slowly filled in, the sisters’ health began to improve. By the turn of the 20th century, the river had become a narrow canal. Today, it is little more than a stream that flows into the wider mouth of the North River Bridge. Despite the elimination of the source of their illnesses, the sisters, like everyone else in the late 19th century, were subject to other epidemics of the day.

One of those epidemics came in the fall of 1896 when diphtheria swept through much of the United States. This highly contagious disease causes chills, fever, coughing and lymph glands so swollen the neck often resembles a barrel. As a result, the sufferer struggles to breathe and the skin can turn blue from the lack of oxygen.

The Annals kept by the sisters at the St. James convent reported that, “*from Novitiate Days the Sisters had learned that ‘every rose hath its thorns,’ but in the September and October of 1896, this truth was brought home to us for we were obliged to close our school for eight weeks because of a diphtheria epidemic.*” This epidemic was so widespread that it was reported in the *Boston Globe* and *New York Times* starting in September and continued through the remaining months of 1896.

The first hints of the impending epidemic began with a Sept. 5, 1896 *Boston Globe* article. Almost in passing, the paper reported that the board of health in Salem “*learned that there are six cases of scarlet and typhoid fever and two cases of diphtheria in the city.*” Despite the severity of the illness, the paper stated on September 28th that “*the report that diphtheria is likely to become an epidemic in this city [Salem] is without the least foundation.*” That dismissal of the seriousness of the situation changed the very next day, when the newspaper reported that more schools were ordered closed due to the “*prevalence of diphtheria in [Salem].*” The Annals written by the Sisters stated that St. James had already been “*closed by order of the Board of Health [on September 23rd] on account of diphtheria.*” Two days later, the sisters had the school fumigated in an attempt to kill any lingering virus in the classes.

Salem was part of a long list places affected by the disease which seemed to spread like wildfire from Massachusetts to New York, New Jersey and as far west as Nebraska. Before the first diphtheria vaccine was introduced in the U.S. there were

usually between 100,000 to 200,000 cases every year, with a 15 to 20% mortality rate. Because it is highly contagious, schools and businesses would be ordered closed in an effort to contain the epidemic. The New York Times reported on November 16, 1896 that the epidemic was causing an unusually high number of deaths, and that “*diphtheria is so widespread and so fatal that as to cause the public schools to be closed in many places.*” While the first official vaccine wasn’t available in the U.S. until the 1920s, medical professionals had been hard at work trying to find a cure. That same year, the New York Times reported that there was a new “*antitoxine serum*” developed by British doctors, which had been tested in England, and was being promoted as a cure. Unfortunately, that cure wasn’t complete for another quarter of a century in the form of a vaccine that is widely available today.

By mid-October of 1896, the Boston Globe reporters no longer dismissed the seriousness of the epidemic. “*The board of health reports 62 cases in [Salem]. None of the public schools now closed are likely to be reopened until the epidemic has abated.*” An unintended effect of the lingering epidemic was the growing population of unemployed men. Without health insurance, the sick had no means of support during their illness. And when some places of business closed during the epidemic, all the employees also lost their jobs. The Boston Globe stated that “*the diphtheria scare and the need of men for quarantine purposes had brought out the fact a large number of men in Salem are unemployed and have families dependent on them.*” Unfortunately, little was done to offer them any assistance.

St. James School reopened just before Thanksgiving and the sisters wrote that they faced the remainder of the school year “*with new energy. . and did all in our power to repair the ravages which such an extended vacation had made on their little charges.*”



St. James School, Convent and Church  
Federal Street in Salem, c. 1890

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Salem Annals, 1878-1971.
- ◆ Salem Journal, 1878-1906.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-1980.
- ◆ New York Times Archives, 1851-1980.