

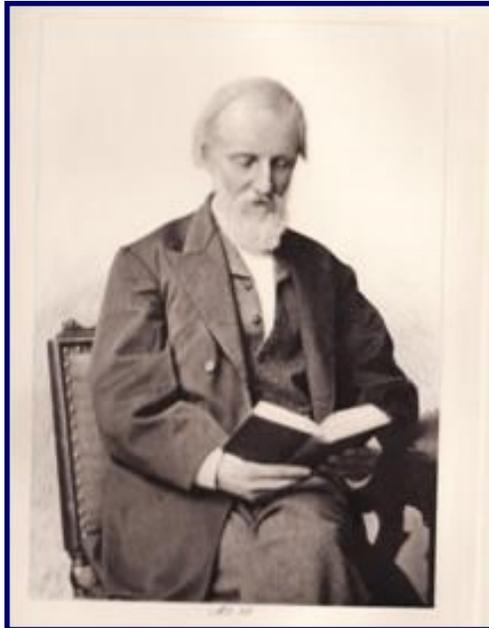
The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the "Fair," which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

Dr. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur

Dr. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch
(1808-1892)

Image from Wikipedia.com



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—It seems an unlikely alliance—a Harvard educated physician descended from an old New England family working on the behalf of Catholic nuns during the 1850s and 1860s, at the pinnacle of anti-Catholic animosity in Massachusetts.

Dr. Henry Ingersoll Bowditch was born the third son of the famous mathematician Nathaniel Bowditch in Salem, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard Medical School in 1832, studied medicine in Paris after his graduation and later founded the Massachusetts Board of Health. He was a fervent abolitionist and organized the Anti-Man Hunting League, which proposed to kidnap slave owners and hold them until they agreed to grant their slaves' freedom. His passion in the cause of abolition caused many of his peers to ostracize him. In his medical practice he helped further the understanding of tuberculosis, increased the use of the stethoscope during examinations, and was active in advancing the understanding of environmental influences on public health.

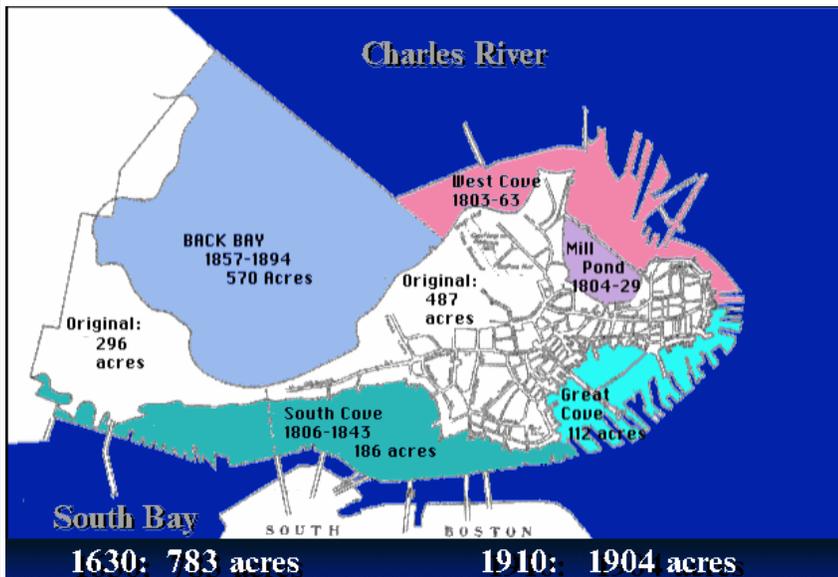
The first Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur arrived in Boston in November 1849 to organize the St. Mary's parish school. They lived for the first three and a half year years in a tiny home on Stillman Street in the North End. The house had three rooms downstairs and the sisters slept in the attic, reached by a ladder. As the work at St. Mary's increased, more sisters arrived to assist in teaching. While at Stillman Street, the sisters also taught night school, for those children who worked during the day. However, the home was too small for more than three or four sisters and so in 1853, they moved to a larger place located on Lancaster Street. At first all was well. Not only did they have more space for themselves, but they now had a bigger school for the children. In addition to teaching both day and night classes, the sisters began an Industrial School for girls, to offer them alternatives to factory work. In 1858, they enlarged the convent to allow for a chapel, more classrooms for students and bedrooms for the sisters. Around this time, though, some of the sisters began to suffer a number of health problems. The convent, like the other buildings in that area, was built on "*made land*," in other words, landfill. Since the early 1800s, the city of Boston had been filling in the waterfront to provide more space for residents. As a consequence of this, "*the tide came regularly into the cellar and left a most unwholesome dampness and odor on retiring; the Sisters could not seek elsewhere the fresh air denied to their little yard, nor live without it.*" [Memoir. Sr. Alphonse Marie, 1821-1877] In addition, they had to endure the stench from nearby tanneries and stables. Such crowded streets encouraged rats to infest the convent. "A Sister was making the Way of the Cross one day, when she felt a weight between her shoulders. She put her hand under her veil and out sprang a rat which scampered along the bench to the window sill, where he sat and blinked at the frightened nun. . ."

In 1859, Sister Amelia grew very ill. When their regular physician wasn't available, Bishop Fitzpatrick introduced Dr. Bowditch to the sisters. "The Doctor did not conceal from Sr. Alphonse Marie [the superior] that Sr. Amelia was dangerously ill, preferring however a consultation with a colleague before pronouncing death imminent." After her death, two more sisters grew unwell and it was Dr. Bowditch who proclaimed that their location was the cause of their illnesses. "At this time there were others in the community in declining health, and it was probably their condition that induced Dr. Bowditch to urge a change of residence. . . just seven weeks after the death of Sr. Amelia, Sr. Regina rendered her beautiful soul to God. . . and in March Sr. M. Louise was called to the reward of her short but perfect life. . . These deaths urged more eloquently than any words could have done the necessity of an expedient change of dwelling. . . "

Despite the sisters' health continuing to be at risk, the pastor and parishioners at St. Mary's were unwilling for the sisters to leave. Only when the sisters agreed to continue teaching at St. Mary's would the pastor allow them to move. Even so, it took another two years before the sisters could raise funds and find a new property. They had heard about the land in the Back Bay being sold but most of it was meant for construction of homes for the wealthy. When the sisters learned a property on the corner of Berkeley and St. James Streets was up for sale, they knew that these residents would "resent the idea of having schools or convents in their midst. For this reason it would not be sold to the sisters."

Convinced the health of the sisters would never improve unless they found a new home, Dr. Bowditch bought the property on Berkeley Street for them. The sale proceeded smoothly because, naturally, the owners believed the land would be used by him. When the neighbors discovered the deception, they were outraged. "The good gentleman had to encounter a storm of abuse in the daily papers in which he was scornfully called the champion of the nuns. . ."

The cornerstone for the new academy was laid on May 1, 1863 and the school and convent were completed in June 1864. At first the new Academy only had a few students, but in time the enrollment increased. As promised the sisters continued to teach at St. Mary's, traveling between Berkeley and Lancaster Street by foot, carriage and bus.



Map of Landfill of the City of Boston.
Areas in white are original city.
From www.bc.edu

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ *Memoirs of Sisters who Died in Boston.* Boston/Ipswich Archives.
- ◆ *Memoir. Sr. Alphonse Marie, 1821-1877.* Boston/Ipswich Archives.
- ◆ [The Finger of God: History of the Massachusetts Province of Notre Dame de Namur, 1849-1963](#) by Sr. Miriam of the Infant Jesus, 1963.
- ◆ [A Digital Archive of American Architecture](http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/cas/fnart/fa267/contents.html) by Jeffery Howe.
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