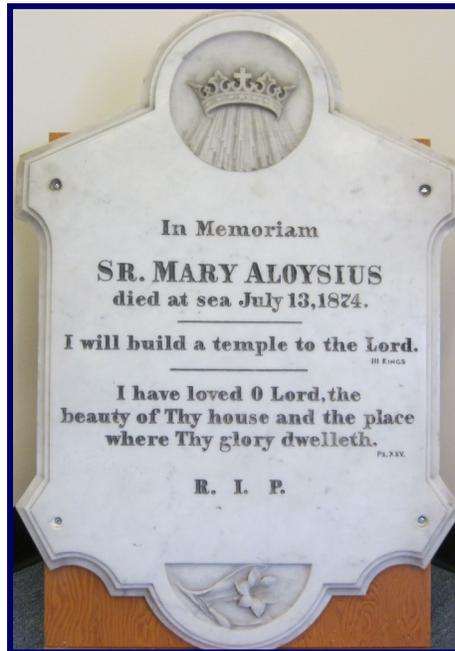


Annals from the Archives

Sr. Mary Aloysius Halthkamp, 1823-1874

Marble Stone Commemorating the death of Sister Mary Aloysius



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—When people enter the archives in Ipswich, one of the first things that is on view is the carved marble stone commemorating the death of Sister Mary Aloysius. As Superior in Roxbury, or “the Boston Highlands,” as it was known then, her death was noteworthy enough to merit a complete article in the local Boston newspaper rather than the death announcement typical of most women’s deaths. Seeing that she died at sea, people who don’t know her story ask, did the ship go down in a storm? While the tale was not so dramatic, her death left a huge hole in the lives of the Roxbury sisters when they finally received word on August 2, three weeks after she died.

Sister Mary Aloysius was born in 1823 as Christine Marie Halthkamp in Aix-La-Chapelle, now known as Aachen, Germany. Little is known of her early life, but she entered the Sisters of Notre Dame in Namur, Belgium in 1843 and took her first vows on September 10, 1844. In December of 1844, she was told she would be joining five other sisters for the long journey to Cincinnati. The voyage was delayed until the following spring, most likely because of the weather. They finally set sail for New York by late April or early May of 1845. After their arrival in New York, the trek to Cincinnati took them through Philadelphia, Baltimore, then onto the town of Wheeling in present day West Virginia. From there they boarded the Steamboat *Alleghany* to sail the Ohio River for the long and winding voyage to Cincinnati, arriving that June. Sister Mary Aloysius remained in Cincinnati for the next eight years.

She was sent to Notre Dame Academy on Lancaster Street in Boston in the early 1850s. When the Academy in Roxbury was founded on May 8, 1854, she was named the superior. She and four other sisters arrived to find that “*the house was very dirty, so we put ourselves at once to the work of cleaning it.*” The following day, May 9th, their first boarding student arrived, followed by 2 more on May 11th. They also opened a day school for the children of St. Joseph’s in the parish basement. They began with 40 students but within 3 months, they had 130 children in their day classes. Sr. Mary Aloysius’ next task was hiring Patrick Keeley, a well known Catholic architect, to design the boarding school. She rejected his first plan as too small but liked the general appearance of the proposal.

It was during this time that the sisters became aware of the election of the anti-immigration party, the Know Nothings, to every office in Massachusetts. As described in the [April 2013 Annals from the Archives](#), a group of 20 men who belonged to the Know Nothings arrived at the convent on March 26, 1855. After searching the house, questioning the students and generally looking into every nook and cranny of their small home, the men left. The ordeal was not over, however. Sr. Mary Aloysius soon received a summons to testify at the Boston City Hall. She was terrified. Accompanying her to court was the Bishop’s sister, Mrs. Boland. “*It seemed to me as if I were being conducted to the gallows. . . . The hall into which we were led by a sergeant-at-arms was filled with men. There was a profound silence and all eyes were fixed on us. They had expected that all seven sisters*

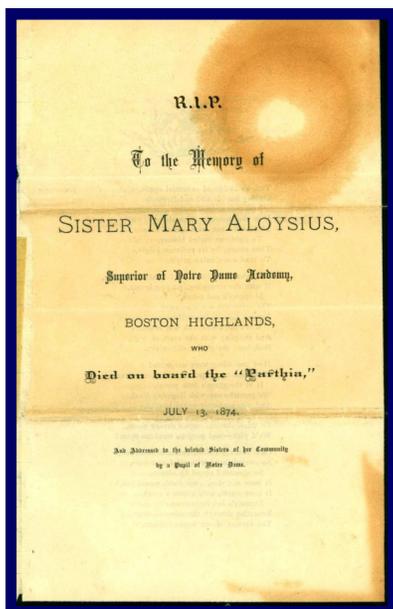
would arrive and here they saw only me. . . I was questioned for a whole hour." The ordeal continued the next day with more questions. "I found myself in the most terrible position imaginable. During an hour and a half they questioned me from right and left—that is to say, the lawyer; Hisself did not open his mouth except to whisper in his lawyer's ear." When the local newspapers reported on the proceedings, outrage over the sisters' treatment finally brought an end to the investigation.

As Patrick Keeley continued working on the design for the boarding school, Sr. Mary Aloysius grew concerned about the effect of the dampness in the cellar of the church on the sisters who taught the day school. She spoke to the pastor of St. Joseph's about having a small school built nearby "which would prevent the further necessity of having our Sisters keep school in the basement of the church. I stated that if a third Sister became sick in that place, they could not continue to work there. . . He listened to me, but did not at that time enter into our views." She turned to Sr. Louise, the Superior for the Eastern American Province. She "told me to say. . . that if our Sisters could not be provided with other schoolrooms then those in the basement of the church, she would feel herself obliged to withdraw them. . . This had its effect." The following Sunday he announced to the parish that collections would be taken for the new school. The construction took longer than expected and wasn't finished until the fall of 1855, which frustrated Sr. Mary Aloysius as the boarding school now had 22 students. With such a tiny house, they struggled to find room for 7 sisters and 22 students. Once the school was completed, they converted the second floor into a dormitory for the boarding students until the Academy school was completed.

It took another year for the plans of the new Academy to be finished and the contractors to be hired. Construction began on September 11, 1856. During the September 19th cornerstone laying ceremony, Sr. Mary Aloysius placed relics from her hometown of Aix-La-Chapelle, water from LaSalette and a number of religious medals into the cornerstone. The building rose swiftly. Sr. Mary Aloysius reported that on November 27th, the well was completed, the brickwork for the walls was done, the tin roof had been finished and work on the inside was just beginning. On May 1st, 1857, the sisters and students moved into the new house.

The enrollment dipped for the next three years but by 1860, the sisters taught 23 students in the Academy and a combined 215 students at 2 parish schools. As Superior, Sr. Mary Aloysius' responsibilities extended beyond planning schools. In the Annals, she wrote about spending many a night caring for sick sisters. She also accompanied children who were too ill to remain in school to their homes to insure their safety. Both the Annals and Journals written by her detail the ongoing work and struggles of those early years.

And so when she was invited to attend the Golden Jubilee celebration for Mother Superior Constantine in Namur in 1874, she must have been thrilled. Traveling with her on the *Parthia* were Sister Mary and Sister Mary Hyacinthe, the superior of Mount Notre Dame in Cincinnati. The ship departed for Europe on July 10th, 1874. According to William Reardon, who was on board the *Parthia*, as well, "On the third day out, Monday July 13. . . Sister Aloysius was coming on deck with her two companions, when at the steps opposite the Ladies cabin, she grew faint and was immediately brought into the cabin. . . The doctor was sent for, and on his return she breathed her last—not two minutes from the time of fainting. . . The other Sisters could scarcely believe it. They asked, Is she not in a trance? . . The death seemed to cast a gloom over the whole ship. . . Tuesday came in foggy as usual, and not till nine o'clock was the burial decided on. . . and it was decided to bury her at four o'clock. . . When all was ready, I said a Litany of Dead over her. Orders were then given to pass the coffin out of the window of the wheelhouse. . . and the coffin was lowered over the stern. . . I reported to the Sisters that all was very quietly and privately done; that she did not sink for about 20 rods and that I did not leave until it [the coffin] was out of sight. . . Truly, the officers were very kind to them and did all in their power. . . The Captain told me that he could not have done more if it had been one of his own family."



Sources consulted for this article

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- ◆ Roxbury Journal, 1861-1894.
- ◆ The Finger of God: History of the Massachusetts Province of Notre Dame de Namur, 1849-1963, by Sr. Miriam of the Infant Jesus. Boston, 1963.
- ◆ *Boston Daily Globe*, August 2, 1874.
- ◆ Sister Louise (1813-1886): American Foundress of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur by Sister Helen Louise. New York, 1931.