

*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 also the Fair at Lowell, Mass., Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Sr. Wilfrid of the S.H. Parsons 1906 Journal

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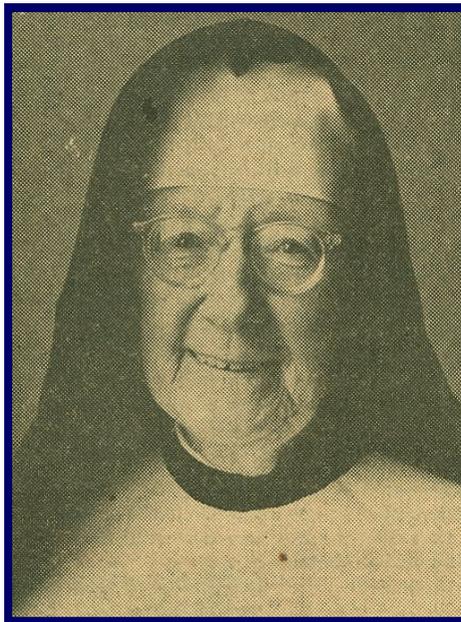
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Sister Wilfrid of the Sacred Heart Parsons  
(1881-1970)



—On May 29, 1904, Trinity College held its first commencement for sixteen graduates, one of whom was twenty-two year old Elsie Marie Parsons. Elsie was born in Philadelphia on November 18, 1881, the oldest child of Paul and Alice (Avery) Parsons. She arrived at Trinity College on Nov. 3, 1900, just about two weeks before her 19th birthday. Along with two other new students and one Sister of Notre Dame, she hurried through the rain, trying to find entry into the new college building. The four women worked their way along a muddy path to locate what appeared to be the front door, but a workman informed them they couldn't enter because the area was still under construction. After trying both the Chapel door and Sacristy door, they finally located an entrance to begin their first days at the new Trinity College. Thirteen more young women, coming from as far west as Salt Lake City, Utah and as far east as Lawrence, Massachusetts, soon joined them to start their life as college students.

Recalling those first days a decade later, Sr. Wilfrid wrote that, *"Who of us, I wonder, who witnessed the opening of Trinity just ten years ago would have dared to prophesy the future which is now her present and her past? A building hopelessly unfinished, a handful of brave religious, a little group of earnest students. . . those were the conditions under which it happened."*

Not long after receiving her Bachelor's in Greek and Latin in 1904, Elsie joined the Sisters of Notre taking the name Sister Wilfrid du Sacre Coeur, after her younger brother, Wilfrid. In 1905, she was sent to Namur, Belgium for her novitiate, where she began a journal of her thoughts and experiences during her training as a Sister of Notre Dame. This journal is the first of more than a dozen journals she kept during her life. Sister Wilfrid began her entries just before St. Julie's Beatification in 1906. As might be expected, this was an exciting time to be a Sister of Notre Dame and even more to be a novice, especially in Namur. On May 13th, she wrote, *"This day of days passed quietly and peacefully here at Namur, but all our hearts and thoughts were in Rome, in St. Peter's, amid the magnificence of decoration, the splendor of myriad lights, the thrilling sweetness of Perosi's music and the singing of the Greek choir. For us there was a "Messe chantee", Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament all day and many visits to the Chapel in the garden, whither there was a constant stream of visitors (outsiders) all day long. The day was warm and brilliant, the heat, becoming oppressive towards midday, was relieved by a thunderstorm in the afternoon. There were flags in the parlor court and on the poor school front; and the church was not the full magnificence of great feasts, but altar and sanctuary were nevertheless very lovely."*

During those months in Namur, she wrote at great length about what would become one of her lifelong passions—gardening. In 1907, just months before her final vows, she described in almost poetic terms her joy with the beauty of the gardens *"The only sounds are of birds calling drowsily, the only motion a continuous fluttering of white butterflies and the gentle swaying of flowers in the soft breeze. Over there the sward is based in the liquid gold of the August sun, athwart its velvety surface. . . the trees all green and gold, the peaches glowing like little fires on their sunny wall, and the stretch of sward before me, cool and*

*restful, is bordered round and touched here in the air with that golden gleam of which the air is full. The Canterbury bells are shaking out their delicate blossoms all along the pathways in all the shades of pink and white that are—and up and down the center path is a riotous mass of bloom glowing with all the colors of the rainbow.”*

While most of her entries recorded her thoughts and experiences as a novice, she also wrote of some amusing times in Namur. One Sunday, while in the garden with three other novices, she wrote as if presenting a play—“A Comedy in 3 Acts. Sunday, June 9, 1907. Time: 3 o’clock on a Sunday afternoon. Place: a quiet secluded corner in an angle of the little Chapel, well shaded and undisturbed. Two benches in said angle and thereon three novices deeply engrossed in as many books. The garden is warm and sunny and beautiful; . . . Suddenly a suppressed outcry and a repressed leap on the part of one novice. A responsive ditto on the part of the two others. The first unfortunate with every sign of distress makes eloquent gestures which mean, “See if there are any on me, will you?” And the two others engage in energetic entomological research work. . . then with some expressive wriggles all settle down again to their books. . . . I for one see the humor of the situation and go indoors, leaving the garden with all its glowing loveliness in undisputed possession of—the caterpillars!”

Sister Wilfrid made her final vows in Namur on August 20, 1907. Her Namur entries end in November when she began teaching in Northampton, England, before being sent to the United States to teach at the Notre Dame Academy at Rittenhouse Square in Pennsylvania. In 1909, she returned to Trinity College as a professor of Latin. While there she began her work for her Master’s Degree, which she completed in 1911. In 1923, she received her Ph.D. in Classical Languages from Catholic University. Her dissertation was entitled, “A Study of the Vocabulary and Rhetoric of the Letters of St. Augustine.” Much of her future writings would continue to focus on St. Augustine’s letters, culminating with her translation of those letters for the five volume work, The Fathers of the Church: St. Augustine’s Letters, published by Catholic University of America between 1951 and 1956.

From 1924 until 1932, she served as Trinity College’s Dean and then was sent to teach Latin and Political Science at Emmanuel College, where she remained for the rest of her life.

To view the first half of Sr. Wilfrid’s 1906 journal, click [here](#).

#### Sources consulted for this article

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