

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

The Sisters of Notre Dame and The End of WWI



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Celebration in Boston on the first
Armistice Day, November 11, 1918
Image from *Boston Globe*
Nov. 13, 1918

—This month commemorates the 100th anniversary of the ending of World War I. The Armistice agreement was signed only a couple of weeks after Massachusetts schools and public buildings were re-opened, having been closed for nearly a month because of the horrific Influenza Pandemic. The epidemic wouldn't be completely over until the following spring. So when word finally came that the "Great War" had ended, people everywhere were excited. At last there was some good news on the horizon. Celebrations were held everywhere across Europe and the U.S.

The Sisters of Notre Dame reported in their Annals of the great joy when word came of the war's end. In Lowell, they wrote that, "There was great rejoicing throughout the United States on November 11 because "Peace," had been proclaimed after four years war with Germany. The bells were rung and horns blown for hours. The Mills, Stores and schools closed at once. Men and women formed and went in procession through the streets with flags waving and bands of music playing national songs." And in Worcester, the sisters wrote that, "at three o'clock in the morning of November 11th, we were awakened by the ringing of bells and the blowing of whistles announcing the signing of an armistice between the Allies and Germany. School was dismissed in both parishes. There was general rejoicing throughout the entire country, for this was a harbinger of peace and victory for the U.S."

There was no doubt that the Sisters of Notre Dame shared the country's joy. As a worldwide congregation, they were all too aware of the danger that had faced their sisters in Namur during those perilous years after Germany first invaded Belgium. Four years previous, on August 20th, 1914, the Germans had begun their assault on Namur, bombarding the ring of forts that surrounded the city. The French army was unable to offer much help, as they had only one regiment left after their defeat at the Battle of Charleroi. Namur fell to the Germans on August 25th. Ultimately, the Germans occupied 95% of Belgium during the war. As a result, communications between the American sisters and those in Namur were mostly cut off. Hundreds of thousands of Belgian people fled to England and the Netherlands during the invasion. Those who couldn't escape remained in Belgium under a brutal martial law until the end of the war.

The Belgian sisters who stayed wrote short notes that had to be smuggled from convent to convent, working their way out of Belgium in secret before being sent onto America. Copies of those letters were made and sent to all the convents. The first word the sisters in Namur wrote was penned on August 24th—one day before the fall of Namur. It came from Sr. Bernard of the Assumption. She wrote that the sisters "took refuge in our caves. . . We are living as on an island, cut off from the outer world, no letters received or sent. A gentleman is going to try to go to Brussels in a motor and he will post this, if possible. . . At

present we are living very quietly looking after our wounded soldiers and a few girls who were wounded accidentally in the street. . . Our ambulance is filled to overflowing with wounded soldiers. . . I have had to cut off their coats and trousers steeped in blood several times as they were carried on stretchers. . . This is only the beginning, but God is with us. . .”

The *Boston Globe* confirmed on November 22nd that the Motherhouse in Namur had indeed been turned into a hospital, where the sisters ministered to wounded on both sides. In addition to treating the injured, the sisters also assisted those in need by providing what food and clothing they could. Members of the Boston Notre Dame Alumnae began at once to raise money to help the sisters at the Motherhouse. Their only option for safely channeling the funds to Namur was through the Commission for Relief in Belgium [C.R.B.], which was begun by Herbert Hoover, who later served as President of the U.S. from 1929 to 1933. Getting food and clothing through the blockades set up by the British, as well as keeping their vessels from being sunk by the German submarines was a constant battle for Hoover. Working from London, he negotiated with the Germans, Dutch, and British to get 5.7 million tons of food to war victims, which was enough to feed 9.5 million Belgian people.

On November 7, 1914, Sr. Marie des Sts. Anges wrote another short note, describing the situation in Namur. She managed to insert a bit of humor into her letter. *“We are leading rather a lonely life and know but little of outward events. All our war news comes from a small local paper under German supervision. It usually tells of the wonderful victories their troops are gaining. From their accounts, I cannot understand why they are not masters of Paris, London and St. Petersburg.”*

On November 24th, Sr. Marie Winifred in Namur wrote that, *“Our dear Mother has succeeded in obtaining passports to Holland for ten young Sisters and they hope to mail these cards at the end of their journey. . .”* On December 1st, the convent in Dowanhill, Scotland sent word that, *“Last night . . . two young professed from Namur arrived. Ten of them left Namur Wednesday morning in a furniture van with a German sitting beside the driver and a Belgian gentleman to take care of them. . . From Namur they went to Liege and . . . again started in a wagonette for the frontier. There the Belgian left them and they had about two miles to walk alone into Holland. Fortunately, they had an Austrian among their number and she spoke French and German fluently. . .”*

In late of 1914 a letter sent by Sr. Marie Winifred in Namur to a sister in England wrote that, *“We have no news of the United States since August 18th. I am very sad to think that the notes and cards I have written for our dear Mother have not reached you.”*

While letters of this sort continued to make their way eventually to the U.S., letters directly from Mother General Maria Julienne, still in Namur, were interrupted for two years. The first letter that was able to get through after Namur’s capture was most likely smuggled through Holland before arriving in England in September of 1916. That letter informed the sisters that the Mayor of Namur had been executed by the Germans. Several short notes followed with news of sisters but little else. The sisters dared not write the truth because all letters were censored.

Finally on November 30, 1918, a long letter was able to be sent. It described the Allied bombing that forced the retreat of the Germans and their looting as they fled. It said that, *“We learned about noon on Monday the eleventh that the armistice was signed. We have not been able to profit much yet, because there are no trains, no mail, etc. The joy of victory has been much diminished for us because at almost every step we take, we see the windows, boarded, the doors badly damaged, holes in the walls and numerous other reminders of the sad, sad, terrible days passed during October and November. . . These past two months have been especially full of painful events. It was heart rending to see the house being emptied of its furniture during the hours that the danger of complete evacuation hung over us. The ceding of our buildings one after another to the enemy and the effort to give as little furniture as possible, together with the transportation of the latter to another part of the basement brought much worry and fatigue. . . The bombardments at the beginning were nothing in comparison with the bombardments at the end. On Monday, the twenty-eighth, we were startled by explosives. . . The bombarding continued during the two following nights, forcing us to seek shelter in the cellar. The dropping of bombs became so frequent that our Mother decided to have the bedding brought to the cellar. . . They remained in the cellar for twelve days. . . even taking their meals there. . . . After the departure of the enemy we had much more to suffer, for explosives had been placed everywhere and the damage has been very great. . .”*

The following February, a letter stated that, *“Here at Namur, we are beginning to get back to pre-war conditions. All is yet extremely difficult . . . traveling is risky in many senses and there is considerable delay in the mails. . .”* By the end of 1919, though, Sr. Maria Julienne wrote, *“At this time last year I was happy in being able to send you my wishes. . . although the presence of the censor deprived us of the charm of intimacy. Today, however, under the sway of freedom, I offer you my loving wishes for a joyous Christmas and a holy year of 1920. . .”*

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ SND Correspondence, 1842-1958. SND New England Archives, 2013.92.
- ◆ Mother Superiors and Leadership Papers, 1818-2018. SND New England Archives, 2016.02.
- ◆ Firstworldwar.com/battles/namur.htm.
- ◆ Newspaper Archives, Boston Public Library, bpl.org.