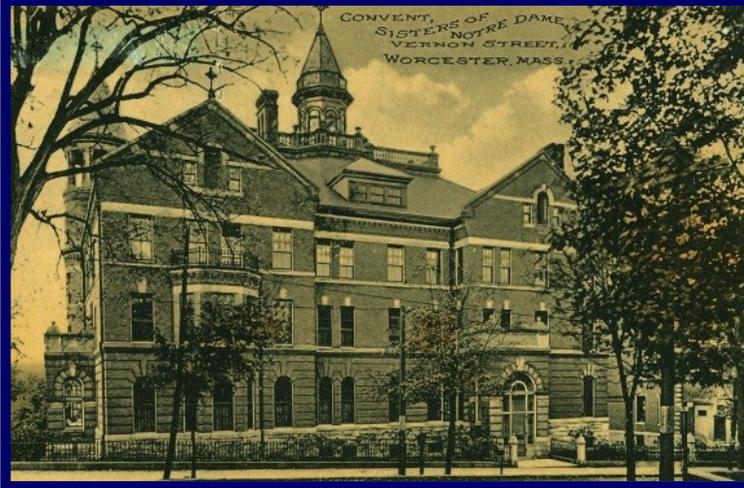


*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the report of the Fair, the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th, 20th, 21st, 22nd, 23rd, 24th, 25th, 26th, 27th, 28th, 29th, 30th, 31st, 32nd, 33rd, 34th, 35th, 36th, 37th, 38th, 39th, 40th, 41st, 42nd, 43rd, 44th, 45th, 46th, 47th, 48th, 49th, 50th, 51st, 52nd, 53rd, 54th, 55th, 56th, 57th, 58th, 59th, 60th, 61st, 62nd, 63rd, 64th, 65th, 66th, 67th, 68th, 69th, 70th, 71st, 72nd, 73rd, 74th, 75th, 76th, 77th, 78th, 79th, 80th, 81st, 82nd, 83rd, 84th, 85th, 86th, 87th, 88th, 89th, 90th, 91st, 92nd, 93rd, 94th, 95th, 96th, 97th, 98th, 99th, 100th.*

# Annals from the Archives

## Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur



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Convent of the Sisters of Notre  
Dame de Namur,  
Vernon Street, Worcester, MA

—The annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame for the Vernon Street, Worcester convent begin in 1872, with the usual descriptions of the foundation of the school and the work to make the convent livable for the sisters. The annals move on rather smoothly until 1888, when the Annalist reported that the sisters welcomed into their midst a Sr. Mary Blanche (c.1854-1908) “*who was obliged to come to Worcester for medical assistance.*”

To tend to their new patient, the sisters called in Dr. Thomas A. O'Callaghan, a physician from Worcester. Delighted with his treatment, the Annalist wrote that “*It is gratifying to be able to relate that this good Superior improved so rapidly, thanks to the skillful treatment of Dr. O'Callaghan, that in a short time she returned to her mission at Milford with a new lease of life. And here it may be said that to this able physician and faithful friend, as also to his sister, Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan, the community of Notre Dame owes an immense debt of gratitude for the unwearied devotedness which both have ever displayed in the services of the Sisters.*”

While Dr. Thomas O'Callaghan treated the Worcester sisters beginning in 1880, Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan went on to become the Worcester sisters' primary physician by the late 1880s. She and her brother, Thomas, and sister, Julia, were the children of Patrick and Ann (Cady) O'Callaghan. The parents emigrated to the U.S. from Ireland and settled in Worcester sometime in the mid-1840s. Their children were—Julia, who was born in 1848; Mary followed in 1852; and Thomas, the youngest, was born in 1854. While Patrick worked as a shoemaker in the city, education must have been greatly valued in their home. All three children attended the local public schools and at least two went on to college. The oldest, Julia, married Edward Fitzgerald in 1867. Mary went to teacher's college and taught in the Worcester schools for about ten years. Thomas was accepted at Holy Cross College in Worcester. After his graduation in 1875, he was asked to remain there as a professor. He taught for two years before going on to McGill Medical College in Montreal, Quebec. He completed his studies in 1880 and set up his practice in Worcester that year.

Just after her brother's graduation from medical school, Mary applied to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She graduated in 1885, set up her practice in Worcester with Thomas and soon after was treating the Sisters of Notre Dame at the Vernon Street Convent. At the time of her practice, women made up about 5% of all the physicians in the United States. That number would fall dramatically in the early 20th century, but during Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan's time, more and more women were being accepted into medical school.

Just after her graduation in 1885, Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan obtained a position as a physician at the Massachusetts State Industrial School for Girls in nearby Lancaster, MA. Her salary of \$200 a year was half of what male physicians received for the same job. She remained the doctor for the girls' reform school for the next ten years. She submitted yearly reports to the Trustees for the school, reporting on the girls' illnesses, which ranged from tuberculosis, to malaria, to pleurisy, and in some cases paralysis. Any cases she couldn't handle at the school were referred to the Massachusetts General Hospital. In 1898,

she was selected as the medical examiner for the Worcester Courthouse and in 1901 was elected to the state prison commission, a position she held until 1907. In addition, Dr. Mary V. O'Callaghan was one of the founding physicians for St. Vincent's Hospital in Worcester. She was also a member of the Worcester Society of Antiquity.

After Thomas' death in 1900, she served as the Sisters of Notre Dame's main doctor who handled the cases that the convent's Infirmarian couldn't. There were several sisters ill during those first years of the 20th century and "Dr. Mary", as the sisters called her was often in attendance. At the beginning of 1903 two sisters—Sr. St. John of Mary and Sr. Mary Sebastian—died within hours of each other, neither knowing the other was failing fast. After they both died, the Annalist wrote, "*Dr. Mary, the attending physician, said on the morning of the funeral, 'What a surprise it will be to Sr. St. John of Mary to meet Sr. Mary Sebastian in the other world.'*"

"Dr. Mary," is mentioned often in the Annals, many times with a humorous observation as above. While attending a Sr. Bridget, Dr. Mary observed that she had the love of all the mothers "*because she had been good to their boys.*" Dr. Mary cared for a wide range of the sisters' ailments, everything from broken bones to fevers that lingered on. In 1914, the sisters were frightened for Sr. Constance of the Passion, who had been unwell for some time. When a high fever at night caused the Infirmarian to fear for her life, she called Dr. Mary who rushed over at once to help. Sr. Constance made a slow but steady recovery under Dr. O'Callaghan's care.

No doubt, it was Dr. Mary O'Callaghan's example and encouragement that helped her niece, Clara Fitzgerald, to also apply to the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. She graduated in 1897 and went into practice with her aunt. In 1921, Dr. Clara Fitzgerald gave a lecture to the girls at Ascension High School on the medical profession.

In 1930, Mary was struck and killed by an automobile. The Sisters wrote in their Annals that "*in late October the sisters lost a most devoted friend in the passing away of dear Dr. Mary. She had been struck by an auto on Saturday and died the following Tuesday. For over forty years she had given devoted service to our Sisters and they in turn loved and trusted her.*" And in a move that reveals just how special Mary was, the Provincial Superior, Sister Rosalia of the Blessed Sacrament, gave a special dispensation for the Sisters to leave the Convent to attend Mary's funeral.

Two weeks after her death, the *Boston Globe* reported that she left \$200 to Holy Cross College, in her brother's memory, and \$200 to the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur in Worcester. The remainder of her estate was divided among her six nephews and nieces.



From the *Boston Globe*  
November 1, 1930.

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Worcester Convent Annals, 1872-1970.
- ◆ *Boston Globe* Archives, 1872-2019.
- ◆ *New York Times* Archives, 1852-2019.