

*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 exhibition of the Holy Redeemer Convent, Boston, 1890. See also the exhibition of the Holy Redeemer Convent, Boston, 1890. See also the exhibition of the Holy Redeemer Convent, Boston, 1890. See also the exhibition of the Holy Redeemer Convent, Boston, 1890.*

# Annals from the Archives

## The Holy Redeemer Convent



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Holy Redeemer Convent  
East Boston, c. 1890  
SNDdeN New England Archives

—When the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur were invited to teach in East Boston in 1860, they were aware of the conditions they might encounter in their new home. After all, the first convent the sisters had been given upon their arrival in the North End of Boston in 1849 required them to use a ladder to reach the attic bedroom. This was the norm for the next three years until they were able to move to a larger building.

Even with this knowledge, the first eight sisters at the Holy Redeemer Parish School were apprehensive when they visited their new Havre Street home, noting in their annals that, “*The Reverend Father, himself accustomed to leading a life of privations, had furnished the house in conformity with holy poverty.*” The house, it seemed, was something of a hodge-podge affair, added on to with little skill or foresight. The annalist reported that the shoddy construction “*made the house rock like a ship [during storms and] the sisters were often afraid that it would be turned over.*” When the sisters refused to remain in the unstable building, Fr. Fitton was finally forced to repair the foundation. But those repairs were just a stopgap measure and did little to address to real problems with the building.

With every passing year, the number of students at Holy Redeemer School grew. In addition, the sisters took on the teaching of the children at Assumption Parish School, Star of the Sea School and Sacred Heart Parish School. So many more students required that many more sisters, who crowded into the tiny convent. By 1879, the sisters had just over 3000 students at the four schools. Ten years later, 48 sisters were teaching more than 4800 children. That number dropped to 3500 in 1892 when the Xaverian Brothers took over teaching the boys at the Assumption School, but rose once more to nearly 5000 students by 1900 and continued to grow with every passing year.

Since the sisters' arrival in 1860, the convent had never been adequate for their needs. By 1893, however, the situation grew more unbearable with every passing day. Just eating a meal or attending chapel required an almost acrobatic skill as they struggled to find solutions for a home that was never meant to accommodate so many sisters. The annalist wrote that, “*For a long time the Sisters had been very much inconvenienced because their number had outgrown the size of the convent. Thirty-two filled the chapel to its utmost capacity; the remaining sixteen were obliged to occupy an adjoining apartment which opened into the chapel by means of a double door which had been carried to the attic some years ago. It was the same in the refectory. It required some skill to get through a meal without accident. Unless you were at the end of the table, you might as well give up the idea of leaving before the rest of the community as you were hemmed in on all sides, like the Israelites of old; before you was the table, behind you the wall, and on each side a Sister. Like the chapel, an adjoining room served nearly one third of the community as refectory - rotation at table giving each Sister a turn there about twice a year, which they called 'going to Boarding School'. Stools took the place of chairs, the latter taking up too much room.*”

During those years, the Sisters of Notre Dame were also in the midst of dealing with the “*Boy Question*,” that is, should the sisters agree to teach older boys as well as girls. It was the reason the Xaverian Brothers took over the Assumption School. For several years, the Sisters of Notre Dame in Massachusetts had been pressured by a number of parishes to teach both boys and

girls. While the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur often prepared small boys for First Communion, their founding mission had always stressed the importance of educating girls. Sister Louise, the Eastern Superior, refused to have the sisters take on the work of teaching boys as well. Not long before her death, she wrote to all the sisters in Massachusetts *“that the more I have prayed, the more I am convinced that no matter what others do, we should not take the boy’s parochial schools.”* When Sr. Julia McGroarty was named the new Superior for the Eastern U.S. in 1887, she was reluctant to change that policy.

Because of this pressure, the sisters worried that they might be dismissed from Sacred Heart Parish School. If that were to happen, then fewer sisters would be required and the convent would never receive the attention it needed. In addition, the pastor of the parish didn’t want to push for extensive renovations to the convent if the sisters would be forced to leave. Once Fitton School opened in 1893, however, the sisters’ position in the parish and other two schools became more secure. The pastor, Fr. McCarthy, finally decided it was the right time to convert the old Holy Redeemer school into an addition for the convent.

The addition included creating a passageway between the two buildings and as the sisters reported, *“we had either carpenter, or plumbers, or painters, or gasfitters, or masons, or plasterers, or paper-hangers, or roofers, or decorators . . . [always] around. . .”* Not long into the work, the carpenters found—not surprisingly, considering the building’s history—that the main support beam for the entire house was completely rotted. The annalist reported that, *“It was supposed that the work would be finished in a few days, but instead of that, it lasted two months. There was more to be done than had been expected.”* The carpenters finally had to remove the entire kitchen floor and several interior walls in the original convent, forcing their cook, Sr. Margaret of the Sacred Heart, to move a small stove into the cellar where she prepared the community’s meals. As the annalist commented, *“it was a mystery to us how she could prepare all the meals as usual.”* During the work, the sisters ate their meals in primary grade classroom.

Part of the construction required the demolition of the old convent chapel. Until the new chapel was completed, the sisters used the church basement for their chapel. All work was completed by New Year’s Day in 1894. The Annalist wrote that, *“we were well repaid and entirely satisfied with our new quarters. There are not only convenient, but roomy and cheerful. The rooms generally occupied by the Sisters during the day are all near the chapel so they can easily pay our dear Lord a visit occasionally. Former East Bostonians have been heard to remark that it would be useless to try to convince the that their Sisters of Noddle Isle are comfortably lodged in the old school; but when they have an opportunity of seeing for themselves all their doubts vanish, and they cannot find words to express their admiration at the transformation that has taken place.”*

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ [Annals of East Boston, 1860-1921](#). New England Archives, East West Province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur.