

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. — Columbian, Queen Isabella, and Leo XIII.

Annals from the Archives

Ross and Fenton and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur



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Charles J. Ross and
Mabel Fenton
Images from Wikipedia

—In 1912, the Annalist for the Notre Dame Academy in Lowell, Massachusetts made a passing comment regarding a recent visitor—“Mr. Charles Ross, the great actor, came to visit two of his cousins who are boarders. Two of his nieces were boarders for several years. He’s taking part in a play in Boston Massachusetts on December 5th.”

The visitor the Annalist referred to was Charles J. Ross, who for several decades was a well known singer, composer, comedian, actor, and part of the comic duo of Ross and Fenton. Charles J. Ross was born in 1859 in Montreal, Quebec as Charles Joseph Kelley. His early start came when he joined P.T. Barnum’s show as a circus performer. After leaving the circus, he changed his name from Kelley to Ross, becoming a singer and impersonator. Those talents were essential when he turned to comedy and toured the country to perform in parodies of various personages and plays. His first appearance in Boston came in 1881 in a concert held at the Tremont Temple. Though he had a modest success on the road, Ross’ real break came in 1885 when he performed in New York City at the Old Bowery Theater. While on tour later that year in Deadwood, South Dakota, he met Mabel Fenton, another stage performer.

Like Ross, Mabel Fenton had changed her name to go on stage. She was born Ada Towne in 1868 in Lawrence, Michigan. She went into vaudeville during her youth, but the meeting with Ross helped them both, personally and professionally. They married in 1887 and soon formed the comic duo of Ross and Fenton. Their act grew in popularity and, in addition to their comedy, they both performed in numerous stage plays beginning in the 1880s. Boston was a favorite stop for them and they appeared in plays often in Massachusetts. In addition to performing on the road, they were also in over a dozen plays on Broadway. Ross composed many songs for Broadway and produced at least one play. In 1907, he was part of the first Ziegfeld Follies. Charles and Mabel also appeared in at least seven silent films between 1897 and 1916. In the mid-1890s, they opened the Ross Fenton Farm in Asbury Park, New Jersey. It was a popular tourist stop, especially for actors and other performers.

Sometime in the mid-1890s, Charles Ross’ brother Edouard settled in Massachusetts, choosing Fall River for his home. He worked mostly as a railroad foreman. Edouard also changed his surname from Kelley to Ross, perhaps to identify with his famous brother. Edouard and his wife, Clementine, sent their daughter Blanche to the NDA in Lowell, beginning in 1908. That December, the Annalist wrote, “This year holly were a new feature as a large box of it had been sent to us from New York by Mrs. Ross, the aunt of one of the boarders.” For the next several years, the Ross’ send such donations to the sisters every Christmas. The boxes of holly and other greens were used by the sisters to make wreaths and other holiday decorations.

In addition to their donations to the sisters, Charles and Mabel may have also helped support Blanche, as well as other members of their family. A year after Blanche began her education at the NDA in Lowell, Edouard died in 1909. Blanche

remained at the Academy until her graduation, making it likely that Charles and Mabel helped their sister-in-law, Clementine, with Blanche's tuition and other needs. They also seemed to have provided assistance to their cousins and other nieces.

In 1910, the *Annalist* commented on the donation from the Ross', "A large wooden box of holly was sent from Asbury Park New Jersey [the Ross Fenton Farm] by Mrs. Charles Ross, the aunt of Blanche Ross one of the boarders. The sisters made wreaths of the holly and they were suspended from the gas fixtures in the Chapel." In addition to the yearly gifts, Charles and Mabel seemed to have made more than one visit to the Academy to see their nieces and cousins as the *Annalist* noted in 1912 that Mrs. Ross was the sisters' "good friend."

Charles J. Ross died at the Ross Fenton Farm in Asbury Park, New Jersey in 1918 at the age of 59. A few years after his death, Mabel moved to Los Angeles. It was there that she died in 1931 at the age of 63. She left two nieces, one of whom was Blanche Ross, the niece she and her husband helped support after her father's death.



Poster from mid-1890s of play starring Charles J. Ross and Mabel Fenton

Image from Library of Congress

Sources consulted for this article

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- ◆ *New York Times Archives*, 1852-2020.