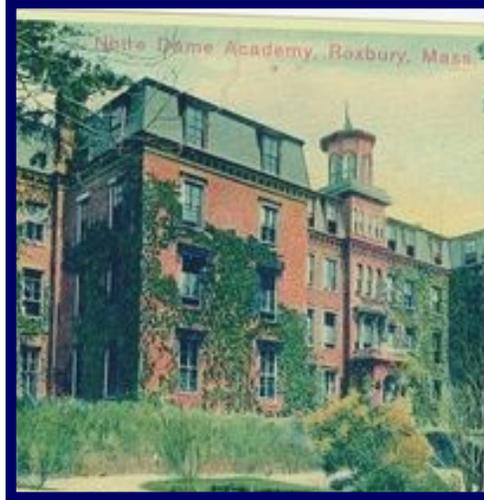


The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See also the report of the Fair, the 13th Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

Women's Struggles



October 2020

Written by

Nancy Barthelemy

Archivist

nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org

snddenewarchives.com

Notre Dame Academy, Roxbury, MA
The original school was only one portion of this larger building.

—Annals kept by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur during the early years of their missions in Massachusetts record the struggles they endured, struggles that often went well beyond the prejudice experienced by many Catholics in the United States. According to the stories they told, their trials echoed the ones common to women everywhere in a world run by men, stories that continue to be familiar to many women to this day. And while there has been much progress since the sisters arrival in Massachusetts in 1849, these tales remind us that there is still much more to do.

In 1854, Sister Mary Aloysius Halthkamp (1823-1874) and four other sisters founded the Notre Dame Academy in Roxbury, MA. Certainly, they expected those first years to be hard, what with the work to begin a new school and to make the convent a clean home. But their efforts were made unnecessarily frustrating by the actions of the parish pastor and other men that worked for them.

The five sisters made a long and exhausting journey from Cincinnati, Ohio the first week of May in 1854. But when they stepped into their new home, they discovered that the pastor of St. Joseph's Church, Fr. O'Beirne, never thought to have someone clean the new home. And so, they were forced to set aside their weariness and begin cleaning the house from top to bottom. Less than a week later, on May 9th, their first boarding pupil arrived, followed by two more girls on the 11th. Their boarding school had now begun.

Their next challenge came on May 22nd. Fr. O'Beirne sent a carriage to convey two of the sisters the half mile to Saint Joseph's church, where they were to begin a parish school in the basement. Unfortunately, just as they'd found the convent filthy, the sisters discovered that the basement was even more dirty than the convent had been. They had little chance to clean it, however, because men were still at work erecting a partition to create two classrooms in the cellar. In addition, forty children were already outside waiting to start school.

It didn't take long for the sisters to realize that the basement would not do. The quality of the air was so dank and unhealthy that in just a few weeks, the two sisters responsible for teaching in the basement became extremely ill. School was scheduled to re-open in September and so Sr. Louise, the Provincial Superior for the Eastern United States, sent two more sisters to replace the sick sisters for the opening of school.

Concerned that another sister might become ill from the unhealthy air in the basement, Sr. Mary Aloysius spoke to Fr. O'Beirne. She told him that, "*if a third sister became sick in that place, they certainly could not continue to work there.*" She urged him to consider building a small schoolhouse to provide a safer environment for the sisters, as well as for the students. He refused. When Sr. Mary Aloysius wrote to Sr. Louise to tell her his response, Sr. Louise wasted no time in writing the pastor. She informed him that if he did not provide a school for the sisters, she would withdraw them from Roxbury at once.

"*This had its effect,*" Sr. Mary Aloysius wrote. The pastor began special collections at St. Joseph's for the construction of a new school for the sisters.

By then, the sisters had eleven boarding students and 130 children in the basement school. Now that Sr. Louise had forced the pastor's hand, Sr. Mary Aloysius hired architect Patrick Keely (1816-1896) in October of 1854 to design a new school.

Keely was known for designing Catholic churches across the United States and Canada. These include St. Augustine's Church in South Boston, St. Mary's in Lawrence, MA, St. Mary's and St. Michaels in Boston and Immaculate Conception in Newburyport, MA. After Keely presented Sr. Mary Aloysius with his design in January of 1855, she acknowledged that it was a *"superb plan [but] . . . it was too small. . .so it was sent back to the architect who drew it on a larger scale but according to the same idea."*

There were many delays, but at last construction began. The sisters hoped the building would be finished by the opening of school in September of 1855, but Sr. Mary Aloysius reported that they [the workers], *"did not hurry at all, and it seemed as if they dallied purposely. So [in September 1855] we were obliged to begin school again in the basement of the church. This was a real trial for the Sisters, but it had to be done for the good of the children."* With two sisters already made unwell by the unhealthy air, *"a good number of children. . . would not return to the basement school and waited [to return] until the new building was finished. That was not until the end of November."*

The boarding school enrollment rose from 19 to 22 girls. The sisters' had counted on the school building being finished in time for the opening of school in 1855, so they could use the upper floor of the building as a dormitory for the older boarders. Since its completion was delayed until November, the sisters were forced to lodge the students in the convent, creating much inconvenience for both sisters and students. Finally in November, the schoolhouse was done. The older boarding school girls were moved into the upper floor of the building, allowing the smaller children to remain with the sisters in the convent.

But Sr. Mary Aloysius' troubles were not over. When she went to retrieve the keys for the schoolhouse from the assistant contractor, he would not give them to her and *"persisted in holding the keys. . . [and] said that we had no right to take possession of the building until it had been accepted by Fr. O'Beirne."* Sr. Mary Aloysius was forced to beg him for the keys to her school. He at last handed them over, but said *"he would come to get them on the following day."*

That next day, however, she had to travel to Boston. No doubt, she was frustrated by being treated as if she had no right to the keys. She hid them so he would not be able to demand them from the other sisters. When he arrived, he discovered that the sisters had no idea where the keys were. He was furious and the *"next morning very early he presented himself again and I had to give him the keys, although we had not yet made the beds or swept the dormitories."*

They were now locked out of their own school. Fortunately, some other workmen soon arrived. Learning what had happened, they climbed through a second floor window to get into the building so they could open the door for the sisters. Not long after, the architect, Patrick Keely, arrived with Mr. Delahunty, the contractor, who though not pleased, said nothing to the sisters.

Sr. Mary Aloysius once again appealed to the pastor, and at last she was given the keys to the new school and life—at least for a while—returned to normal.

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur
Roxbury Convent Annals, 1854-1868.
SNDdeN New England Archives.