

*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

## Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur and Women's Right to Vote



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East Boston Convent of the  
Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur,  
c. 1930  
Site of first mention of  
The Sisters going out to vote.

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2013.50

—Though women received the right to vote in national elections in 1920, the movement for suffrage began more than 70 years before. In 1848, the first Women's Rights Convention was held in Seneca Falls, New York. The next two conventions were hosted at Brinley Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850 and 1851. Speakers included Sojourner Truth, William Lloyd Garrison, Lucretia Mott, Abby Kelley Foster, Ernestine Rose and Frederick Douglass. These conventions continued for the next nine years in Cleveland, Cincinnati, Syracuse and New York City. They were interrupted by the Civil War, as the focus for those advocating for women's suffrage turned their efforts to ending slavery. Unfortunately, many of the gains women had made during those previous years were overturned. After the Civil War, conventions advocating for women's suffrage began again, first in New York City in 1866 and again in 1869 in Washington DC.

But the Civil War and the efforts to end slavery brought about a divide within the suffrage movement as many women believed their cause was being minimized. In Massachusetts, women were first granted the right to vote for their local school committees in 1879. Despite that victory, many women felt it was merely a patronizing gesture provided by the state legislature. They also saw the measure as another way of denying poor women the vote, even for a local election, as there were poll taxes levied for all voters. Spurred on by their disappointment at so minor a success, women in Massachusetts and beyond intensified their efforts.

Within the Catholic Church, however, the effort to gain the vote for women created a strong backlash against women's suffrage. Many clergy felt that women obtaining the vote would cause a moral deterioration within the family. Others believed that Catholics and the clergy should remain apart from all political causes. In 1885, for example, Cardinal John J. Williams, the bishop for the archdiocese of Boston from 1866 to 1907, was quoted as saying that, "*I do not believe in the church meddling with politics in any shape.*" He went on further to speak of women's role by saying that, "*I do not think, theoretically, that women ought to take part in politics; they can be much better occupied. [with their families]*" Other clergy went even further. William Stang, the Bishop of Fall River, Massachusetts insisted that education for women threatened the family and further stated, "*smartness is not becoming [in] women.*"

In addition, the Boston Catholic newspaper, *The Pilot*, published many articles opposing women's suffrage. Its various editors from John Boyle O'Reilly to Katherine Conway attacked all efforts to obtain women the vote. And it wasn't just many Catholics and clergy who were against women's suffrage. In 1915, the Massachusetts Association Opposed to the Further Extension of Suffrage to Women [MAOFESW] was formed in an effort to stop women's suffrage.

While such views were at odds with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's mission, the Massachusetts sisters were

familiar with such attitudes from some local pastors. In Chicopee, Massachusetts, for instance, the convent annalist wrote that the parish pastor, Fr. Healey, believed higher education was not in the best interests of the students, all of whom were girls. The Annalist for the Chicopee convent reported, *"It was well known that while Father Healy wanted his children to get a good thorough grounding in the common branches taught in the grammar school . . . he was no lover of the higher branches."* His views were so extreme that the sisters smuggled algebra lessons into their day when they knew he wouldn't be present. Once the classes were over, they made sure to erase any traces of higher math before he returned to the school. Even more astonishing, according to Fr. Conlin, the pastor of the Holy Name Church many years later, Fr. Healey *"had one very peculiar notion in relation to the schools and that was he would not sign a diploma."* None of the girls who completed their high school education at the Holy Name School in Chicopee, MA received the diploma they deserved after completing their education.

But the education of girls was the primary reason for the foundation of the Congregation. And as the years passed by, it became clear that education did not necessarily end with high school. In 1897, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur founded Trinity College in Washington DC, the first Catholic liberal arts college for women. In 1919, the congregation founded Emmanuel College in Boston. Both colleges, begun specifically for women before they were granted the right to vote, countered the view held by many of the clergy.

Despite the Church's opposition, though, almost 7000 Catholic women from Massachusetts voted in the 1888 local elections for school committees for the first time. And in 1895, a Boston area priest, Fr. Thomas Scully of St. Mary's Church in Cambridge, became the first Massachusetts priest to publicly support suffrage for women.

The 19th Amendment was at last ratified in August of 1920. Women across the country eagerly exercised their right to vote. But being semi-cloistered, the Massachusetts Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur make no mention of leaving the convent to vote in November of 1920. Their Annals discuss many other events within the convent and schools during that month, but nothing as momentous as going out to vote.

It doesn't seem that the Massachusetts sisters voted in either local or national elections until 1940. In East Boston, the Annalist wrote that, *"On the 16th of October, a holiday because of conscription, [the statewide day for men to register for the draft] three men came from the Post Office to get the finger prints of Sister Josepha and Sister Marie Rose who are not citizens. That evening two other men came from City Hall to register all the Sisters who are citizens and who have been here since last January. This was done in order that the Sisters could go to the polls to vote in the coming Presidential Election. On election day, machines came to the two schools to bring the Sisters to the polls after school."*

The sisters at the St. Mary's convent in Lynn, Massachusetts wrote in their 1940 Annals with some excitement that, *"Yes, we really did go out to vote this year, at 8:30, Tuesday morning, November 5. All the children who were in the school yard waiting for the opening of school, enjoyed immensely seeing the sisters going off in autos. One little girl on our return, seeing her teacher stepping from the auto ran to her and said, 'Sister, who did you vote for?"*

In Roxbury and in other towns and cities, the sisters were more nonchalant, saying simply, *"The Sisters went out to vote."*

The next report of the Massachusetts sisters voting came in 1946 for the state and local elections. In Lowell, the Annalist wrote that *"For the first time in many, many years, the Sisters exercised their voting privilege, at the earnest request of our Most Reverend Archbishop. On the fifth, Mr. Geary sent machines to take the sisters to the polls on Worthen Street. The officials were so courteous that we experienced no difficulty."* While the Lowell sisters make no mention of voting in 1940, it seems, they, too, were among the many sisters who left the convent during that year to participate in electing their representatives.

The Sisters going out to vote at last in 1940 was not the first step in their becoming involved in the world beyond the convent, but it was certainly the most momentous. During the next decade, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur gradually became more active and influential, not only in voting, but also in other political spheres.

### Sources consulted for this article

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