

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

Mary O'Donnell Letters



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Written by
Nancy Barthelemy
Archivist
nancy.barthelemy@sndden.org
snddenewarchives.com

Notre Dame Academy
Roxbury, MA
c. 1920
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Included with the Roxbury, Massachusetts Notre Dame Academy School collection is a small volume entitled *Student Letters to Mary O'Donnell, Sympathy at her Death*. One of the sad facts of life more than a century ago was the prevalence of death among children and young adults. This slim volume of letters to and from Mary O'Donnell appears to have been assembled by one of the sisters at the Notre Dame Academy in Roxbury not long after Mary's death in December of 1889.

Mary Louisa O'Donnell was born in Malden, MA on Nov. 6, 1869, the daughter of Michael and Louise (Ronan) O'Donnell. While Mary was the oldest of seven, her brother George and two younger sisters, both named Louise, died in infancy. And then in 1886, Mary also lost her mother. No doubt, this was the reason her father sent her and her younger sisters, Maggie and Letitia, to be cared for by the sisters. Though the sisters knew all their boarding students well, Mary seems to have been especially close to Sister Josephine Ignatius Fierney (c. 1850-1922) and Sr. Mary Paula Rich (1863-1947). She wrote to both during her summer vacation in 1889. In addition to Mary's letters to the sisters, she kept up a steady correspondence with her father and grandmother, as well as her friends, Mary Murphy, Minnie Culbert, Minnie Franklin and Agnes O'Connor.

During the early months of 1889, Mary suffered from frequent headaches, which she wrote about to her grandmother. The doctor who came to see her at the Academy mentioned the possibility "*that it is water on my head that makes it ache so.*" Once she and the other boarding students went home for the summer, Mary received many letters from her friends, as well as from Sr. Josephine Ignatius, who told her she would pray that she might have relief from the headaches. Mary saw the doctor a few times while at home in Malden and in late July traveled to New Hampshire with the hope the change would ease her headaches.

Once Mary and her sisters, Maggie and Letitia, returned to the Roxbury Academy in September, Mary wrote to her grandmother about her lessons, the retreat given at the Academy by a Jesuit priest and that she was learning how to darn. In her letters to her father, she spoke about the dreary rain, passing her examination and looking forward to returning home for a few days at Thanksgiving. Unfortunately, not long before Thanksgiving, her sister Maggie grew ill and had to return home. Mary wrote anxious letters to her, fearful of the worst and with good reason. She'd already lost her younger brother and two baby sisters, as well as her mother. Death was an ever present shadow in her life. She had some relief when Thanksgiving came and she could see Maggie for a few days.

But the sisters were also concerned about Maggie. During the Thanksgiving vacation, Sr. Josephine Ignatius wrote to Mary, asking "*How is she [Maggie]? Does she improve or fail? How is Letty? And your dear Grandma and Father. I hope all are well and that Maggie is improving, but do write and let us know. We have ten children here today. What a sad Thanksgiving for thousands yesterday was!*"

Sister Josephine Ignatius was referring to the Great Lynn Fire of 1889, which had occurred just three days before, destroying over a hundred businesses in downtown Lynn. Fortunately, no one was seriously injured. But the destruction caused the loss of thousands of jobs and financial hardship for even more.

The following Monday, December 2nd, Mary and Letitia returned to the Academy. Maggie remained at home, still quite ill. Mary worried for a couple of weeks, anxiously hoping for news of Maggie's return to health. When she didn't hear anything by December 15th, she sent a short letter to her father, telling him she was, "*fearing that she is worse. . . Dear Papa please write and let me know as soon as possible, as I shall be very anxious until I know.*"

Maggie did recover, though very slowly. Unfortunately, not long after Mary went home for the Christmas holiday, she herself died on December 19th of an undiagnosed cause. Upon learning of her death, Sr. Aloyse, a teacher at the Academy, wrote to her father, Michael O'Donnell for everyone at the Academy, telling him that, "*We are too full of sorrow ourselves to try to offer comfort to you, but we have taken the liberty of sending these two dear Sisters of Charity to console you if possible. Your own dear sisters in Malden who loved your dear child so well may, perhaps, like ourselves, be unable to visit you, owing to their rules.*" When the sisters heard nothing from Michael, Sr. Aloyse wrote again on Dec. 26th, asking about Maggie, hoping for her recovery. As she continued in her letter, Sr. Aloyse wrote that, "*Dear Mary! How hard it is for me to realize that she is no more of this world. . . We are reminded of her in so many ways!*"

No doubt, those reminders prompted one of the sisters to assemble the letters left behind by Mary and those offering condolences to the O'Donnell family. The remainder of the letters pasted into the book were written by the Sisters at the school, all addressed to Mary's father offering their heartfelt condolences to assure him he was not alone in his grief. And though Mary is gone, her letters remain, a timeless memorial to a life cut short.



Image pasted into *Student Letters to Mary O'Donnell, Sympathy at Her Death, 1889.*

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Letters to Mary O'Donnell, 1889. 2013.52
- ◆ Ancestry.com