

THE EARLY HISTORY OF THE SISTERS OF MERCY IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA

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THE Congregation of Sisters of Mercy is the largest English-speaking congregation of religious women in the world. Founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley in Dublin, Ireland, it numbered thirty thousand sisters within one hundred years. The number of Mercy convents in the United States more than doubles the number of all other Mercy convents in the world.¹

The birthplace of the Congregation of Mercy in the United States was not in Dublin, Cork, or Limerick, Ireland's largest cities, but in the small provincial town of Carlow. The first Mercy foundation in the United States was not in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, or San Francisco. It was in Pittsburgh — the population, 25,000; the year, 1843.

When the Sisters of Mercy were first established in Dublin, they were severely criticized because they left their cloister daily to care for the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. They were called "the walking nuns" in derision, because they went out among the people to serve them. Their ideal was to be religious who were prayerful and contemplative but also active in the service of their fellowmen. They grew rapidly in numbers because both the church and the society of the mid-nineteenth century were ready for an active-contemplative congregation of women; because teachers, nurses, and social workers were greatly needed by the people of that era; and because religious leaders capable of combining personal spirituality with a pioneering spirit of initiative and independence were in demand. No one embodied these qualities more profoundly than Sister Frances Warde, who founded the Sisters of Mercy in Pittsburgh.

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¹ One hundred years after the American foundation of the Sisters of Mercy, there were 861 Mercy convents in the United States. In Ireland, England, Wales, Scotland, New Zealand, South America, Central America, the West Indies, and South Africa combined, there were 648 convents.

The year 1843 marked the American foundation of the Mercy sisters because in that year Michael O'Connor was appointed first bishop of the new Catholic diocese in Pittsburgh. He immediately sought priests, brothers, and sisters to help him in the new apostolic work that lay ahead for him. It was predictable that he would return to his native Ireland to ask the Sisters of Mercy to go to Pittsburgh with him to begin the great task of service to the sick, the orphaned, the deprived, and the uneducated among the hundreds of immigrants to Western Pennsylvania. O'Connor's friend in Rome, Paul Cullen, later cardinal of Ireland, was a native of Carlow who had at least seven relatives among the Sisters of Mercy at St. Leo's Convent there.

O'Connor was successful in securing seven Sisters of Mercy, including Frances Warde as their leader, to come to Pittsburgh. Before her death, she was to establish the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago; Providence; Manchester, New Hampshire; Omaha; Burlington, Vermont; Portland, Maine; Philadelphia; Jersey City, and numerous other cities and towns as far west as California.

The six sisters who accompanied Frances Warde to Pittsburgh were the type of women capable of unusual success in an apostolate to the New World. Josephine Cullen, first cousin of Cardinal Cullen, was a cultured woman and able administrator. Elizabeth Strange, first cousin of Cardinal Nicholas Wiseman of England, was a highly educated and witty girl, a fair poet and a prose writer of style. Aloysia Strange, a novice, was the first Sister of Mercy to make her vows in the United States. Philomena Reid was a well-educated novice of rare promise. Margaret O'Brien, a beginner in the religious life, was destined to be the first superior of the Sisters of Mercy in Chicago in 1846. And Veronica McDarby, a so-called lay sister, volunteered to come to Pittsburgh to devote herself to household duties in the first Mercy convent in America.

The sisters came to the United States in a sailing vessel called the *Queen of the West*. After four weeks and two days on the Atlantic, they reached New York Harbor on December 10, 1843. Their journey across the Allegheny Mountains by stagecoach was memorable. They arrived in Pittsburgh shortly before Christmas. Thanksgiving Day, which was on December 21 in 1843, became the foundation day of the Sisters of Mercy in the United States.

On December 22, 1843, Frances Warde and the sisters opened the first Mercy convent in America in a rented, four-story brick building called the Speer House, located at what was then 800 Penn

Avenue.² The area was residential with attractive homes fronted by lovely gardens which sloped down to the Allegheny River. The convent was called St. Mary's, and the sisters hastened to prepare it for Christmas Day. A lovely young Pittsburgh girl, the daughter of a prominent merchant, sent flowers for the altar. Her name was Eliza Tiernan, and she became the first American Sister of Mercy.

The city of Pittsburgh was indeed a new environment for the sisters. The very immensity of America filled them with awe. The whole of Ireland could be placed within the state of Pennsylvania alone with hundreds of miles to spare. Pittsburgh was the "Gateway to the West" — the "Golden Triangle" at the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers where the Ohio River, itself a tributary of the great Mississippi, had its source. The very Indian names had a strange ring to the ears of the young Irish sisters.

Pittsburgh in the winter of 1843 was cold and muddy and smoky. Most of its "streets" were neither paved, graded, nor lighted. But it was already the "Iron City," an industrial center of bridges and aqueducts. Coal and its by-product, coke, were two important factors in its development. Of the entire population, more people were engaged in manufacturing and mining than in any other occupations. The destiny of the city clearly lay in its industry and commerce. The booming traffic on the wharves of the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers represented manufactured products destined for markets as far west as the Rockies and as far south as the West Indies. Despite the growth in industry, handwork still accomplished much that was later manufactured by machinery. Therefore, there was a double demand for labor. Although the great influx of Irish Catholic immigrants did not begin in Pittsburgh until the famine of 1847-1848, there were twelve thousand Irish in the city by 1846. Immigrants from other European countries were also served by the newly-arrived Irish Sisters of Mercy. The expansion of Pittsburgh throughout the 1840s was almost unbelievable. Seldom in the history of American cities did so many men raise themselves by their own efforts to positions of comparative affluence. Within nine months in 1845, as many as twenty-five thousand houses were built in the city and its many suburbs. The Baltimore and Ohio Railroad was soon to be extended through Virginia and Pennsylvania to the Ohio River. By

² Letter of Rev. J. T. Dean, curate at St. Paul's Cathedral Church, Pittsburgh, to Rev. Thomas Heyden, Bedford, Pa., December 15, 1843. Archives, Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh.

1841, the development of Pittsburgh — as well as of similar industrial cities in the United States — was unparalleled in the history of nations.

Sister Elizabeth Strange, in a letter to Ireland, declared that, while there were few millionaires in Pittsburgh, there were few people in real poverty. She meant, of course, that the dire poverty of Irish towns like Naas and Wexford and Westport did not exist in America in the mid-forties. Food was cheap with flour two dollars a barrel and wheat forty-five cents a bushel. Yet side by side with the amazing industrial expansion, ugliness and human misery developed. Housing facilities for poor immigrants did not expand proportionately with the population, and slums multiplied. The suffering of unskilled laborers and their families was an integral part of the technological development of Pittsburgh even before the rise of the "Money Barons" following the Civil War. The "Steel Metropolis of the World" depended for its growth upon exploited laborers who were only beginning the fight for just wages and humane working conditions. Frances Warde and her sisters arrived in Pittsburgh precisely when the city was on the verge of unprecedented growth. They became a significant part of its religious, cultural, and social expansion.

The "first seven" began at once the visitation and care of the sick-poor and the religious instruction of children and adults. Their works of mercy soon became quite extensive in both the city of Pittsburgh and its sister city, Allegheny, across the Allegheny River, as well as in the suburbs of both cities. Each week the sisters visited the poorhouse. Frances Warde herself always visited the inmates of the penitentiary, a fine stone structure just outside the city. The managers of the jail became alarmed, however, when many inmates expressed a desire to become Catholics after meeting Sister Frances. An old statute forbidding visits of "gentle-women who came for religious purposes" was put into effect.³ For many years the Sisters of Mercy were thus denied admittance to the Pittsburgh penitentiary.

A large section of the population of the city was literally floating. The railroad did not yet connect Pittsburgh with the East, but boats and steamers moved continually up and down the three rivers. Catholics who came from small settlements called at St. Mary's Convent to be instructed and to be prepared to receive the sacraments. Some of them led lives completely circumscribed by the steamboat on the river and the stagecoach on land. They could participate in the

³ Mother Teresa Carroll, *Annals of the Sisters of Mercy* (London, 1899), 3: 85-87.

celebration of the Eucharist only when they came to the city at intervals of months or years. A beautiful spirit of charity at St. Mary's seemed to attract all. "The Sisters of Mercy are like the first Christians," said Joseph T. Dean, curate at St. Paul's Cathedral, "for all have but one heart and soul." Father Dean knew the sisters well; it was he who had rented the convent on Penn Avenue for them before they arrived in America.

The sisters also took immediate charge of the cathedral Sunday school of over five hundred girls. The boys were taught by the seminarians on the top floor of St. Paul's School (conducted during the week by the Sisters of Charity) which Bishop O'Connor had erected not long before. The girls occupied the second floor. On the first floor, Frances Warde instructed adults in Christian doctrine. Her empathy with adults in Ireland was repeated and reinforced in America. She used striking examples in her discussions and always made a deep impression on those who heard her. After attending her instructions, many non-Catholics asked to be baptized. During her entire religious life in the United States, Frances maintained a singular zeal for all adults who did not know of Christ, and she won them to the gospel she loved with amazing success.

Many young women of Pittsburgh were attracted almost at once to the Mercy convent. First had come Eliza Tiernan, then Bessie, Mary, and Alice McCaffrey, daughters of a prominent physician. Next came Elizabeth Wynne, who was the daughter of a United States Army officer and who was destined to be the founder of the Sisters of Mercy in Baltimore and in Vicksburg, Mississippi. Unlike many religious communities from Europe, the Congregation of Mercy attracted American girls as members as soon as the sisters arrived in Pittsburgh.⁴

In September 1844, Frances Warde opened St. Mary's, a private school for girls, the first academy conducted by the Sisters of Mercy in America, in the little convent on Penn Avenue. The temporary convent was not well adapted to educational purposes. Classes were taught in a long basement room and music lessons in the parlor. A taste for good literature was cultivated. Besides solid subjects like mathematics, needlework "plain and ornamental" was taught at the end of each day. Bishop O'Connor himself instructed the students in Christian doctrine.

Early in the year 1844, a gentleman named Henry Kuhn of West-

⁴ Sisters of Mercy, Register (Pittsburgh, 1844-1971).

moreland County offered his farm of 108 acres, about forty miles from Pittsburgh in the area now called Latrobe, as a site for a boarding academy for girls and a convent for the Sisters of Mercy. Father Michael Gallagher, pastor of St. Vincent's Church, Latrobe, offered the rectory of his church to the sisters until their new building could be built. On April 28, 1845, Frances Warde opened Mount St. Vincent Academy for Young Ladies in this temporary residence, with seven boarding students, daughters of outstanding Pittsburgh families. The Sisters of Mercy also taught the children of St. Vincent's Parish in a small, free day school conducted in the sacristy of the church. This was the first parochial school in the Diocese of Pittsburgh located outside the city.

The curriculum at Mount St. Vincent Academy was outstanding. The *Pittsburgh Catholic*, established by Bishop O'Connor in 1844, stated that the young women were taught English grammar, rhetoric, and composition; history, ancient and modern; philosophy; French; Italian; astronomy; geography; mathematics; music; and Christian doctrine. In 1847, Mount St. Vincent Academy was moved to the new building constructed on the Kuhn farm property. The name of the academy was changed to St. Xavier in honor of Sister Frances Xavier Warde. This academy is still in operation today on its original site.

At the close of the school year in June 1845, the Sisters of Charity, who taught at St. Paul's parochial school and conducted the diocesan orphan asylum, were withdrawn from Pittsburgh. The Pittsburgh diocese thus had an immediate need for teachers and social workers. Frances Warde agreed to close St. Mary's Academy on Penn Avenue temporarily so that the Sisters of Mercy could take over St. Paul's school in September 1845. One hundred twenty-five years later, the Sisters of Mercy still teach in this cathedral school, now located in Oakland. In the spring of 1846, Frances Warde was able to provide sisters to care for the children of St. Paul's orphanage. A beautiful new orphanage was built for both boys and girls in Pittsburgh in 1867, and in 1901 the sisters opened a magnificent complex of buildings in Crafton, near Pittsburgh, where they cared for over twelve hundred orphans. For over one hundred years, the care of the motherless was one of their chief apostolic works in the diocese.⁵

Needing more sisters because of this additional assignment, Frances Warde returned to Ireland in 1845 to recruit sisters for the

5 Sister Pierre Jones, *Memoirs of the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy* (New York, 1918), 34-39.

work in America. Returning to Pittsburgh with her recruits, she was able, after several months, to reopen St. Mary's Academy. When the two-year lease on this first Mercy convent and academy was completed, the sisters moved in April 1846 to "Concert Hall," also on Penn Avenue. This was a large building which had once been a hotel, the ballroom of which had been used for concerts and lectures. Charles Dickens, during his visit to the United States in 1842, had lectured in this same Concert Hall, and Jenny Lind had sung there. The sisters joyfully converted the old building into a convent, and the ballroom was renovated as a classroom and became St. Mary's Academy.⁶

Frances Warde now had the courage, moreover, to open a second free parochial school in St. Patrick's parish in September 1846. The school was indeed a poor one financially. Classes were gathered in one long room, their dividing lines being piles of coal and wood used to build fires in winter. When spring came, long wooden benches separated one class from another. But the sisters were young, energetic, and happy, and the children were eager to learn.

In September 1846, Frances Warde set out for Chicago with five young sisters to establish a foundation of Sisters of Mercy in the windy wasteland of the Midwest. The Chicago foundation of Sisters of Mercy was destined to become one of the largest Mercy institutions in the world. The extreme suffering and exposure experienced by these young women in the service of their fellowmen finds silent testimony in the deaths of three of the five youthful pioneers during their first six years in Chicago. Within twelve years, Sister Margaret O'Brien, the first Chicago superior, was to die in caring for the sick of the city in the horrible cholera plague of 1848 during which three young Sisters of Mercy died within twenty-four hours.⁷

Frances Warde herself almost lost her life from hardship and exposure on her return journey alone to Pittsburgh across the western plains. She returned to Pittsburgh with one thought foremost in her mind. Even before she went to Chicago, a hospital to care for the sick in the "City of the Three Rivers" had been projected. To be sure, there was no public health nursing service in the 1840s. When the sisters visited the sick-poor in Pittsburgh, they bathed their patients, fed them, made their beds, cleaned their homes, and carried out all doctors' directions. Often they carried food and simple remedies with them on their rounds. Meanwhile, the need for a hospital and for

⁶ Ibid., 40.

⁷ Sisters of Mercy, *Reminiscences of Seventy Years* (Chicago, 1916).

nursing care on a more professional level became more and more apparent. Inventions were revolutionizing medicine. In October 1846, ether was discovered and demonstrated as an anesthetic. Soon after, the microscope was examined with amazement in Pittsburgh. Hospitals existed only in the large Eastern cities like New York and Philadelphia. But civic-minded Pittsburghers were beginning to be critical of the way the city took care of its sick, particularly during recurrent epidemics of cholera, smallpox, and typhoid. In the fall of 1846, Pittsburgh newspapers condemned the citizenry for its lack of concern for the sick.

In November of the same year, Bishop O'Connor decided that the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Sisters of Mercy must take the initiative in providing a hospital for the sick of Pittsburgh. The large ballroom of the Concert Hall, used as a classroom, was transformed into a general ward for men, a smaller room into a ward for women, and several adjacent rooms became quarters for private patients. On December 1, 1846, notice was given in the *Pittsburgh Commercial Journal* that a hospital would soon be opened under the auspices of the Sisters of Mercy to "persons of every class, condition, and religious persuasion," and that assistance would be offered "to the poor and destitute to the utmost limit of the means of the institution." On January 1, 1847, the first permanent hospital west of the Allegheny Mountains and the first Mercy hospital in the world was opened by Frances Warde in St. Mary's.⁸ The first patient was a sick marine who had just landed at the Pittsburgh wharf in a riverboat. For sixteen months, the hospital flourished in the Concert Hall. Over two hundred patients received care during this time. Sick soldiers returning broken-down in health from the battlefronts of the Mexican War made up a large number of the early patients.

Then came the crucial year of test for the heroic charity and mercy of Frances Warde and her sisters in their first hospital. Toward the end of 1847 and early in 1848 numerous typhoid cases were reported in New York, Maryland, and eastern Pennsylvania. One day in January a sick seaman was admitted to Mercy Hospital in Pittsburgh. Dr. William Addison, one of the young city's great names in medicine, diagnosed the illness as typhoid fever. Frances Warde was called to the council table to share in the necessary, immediate decision. Her thoughts went back to the cholera and typhoid plagues in Ireland in

⁸ Sister Cornelius Meerwald, *History of the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital, 1847-1959* (Privately Reproduced, 1959).

1832 and 1840; she had been through it all. She knew that her sisters were ready to sacrifice themselves. She decided at once to use the men's ward as isolation quarters for typhoid patients. Some eighteen more cases were admitted from the riverboats. From January until April the available doctors and the sisters struggled with the disease. When spring came, fifteen of the nineteen patients were restored to health.

The sisters, who exhausted themselves in caring for the sick, did not fare so well. Sister Anne Rigney, a novice, died February 11, 1848. Sister Catherine Lawler, still a postulant, died March 3, and Sister Magdalen Reinbolt, another novice, died March 5. As a crowning sorrow, Sister Xavier Tiernan, director of novices and the first American Sister of Mercy, died March 9. The last did not die of typhoid but of erysipelas complicated by extreme exhaustion. All of the small hospital staff of sisters, with the exception of Sister Isidore Fisher, the administrator, were wiped out. The sad story of sacrifice spread not only in Pittsburgh but throughout the country and beyond the seas. The response of the public was reverential admiration. The holocaust killed all bigotry against the nursing sisters among Pittsburgh residents. The four sisters were buried in a new little cemetery on the grounds of the not yet completed Mercy Hospital. Other sisters took their places. They not only cared for the sick; they buried the dead. The hospital daybook indicates that funerals took place directly from Mercy Hospital. Frances Warde's grief for her young sisters cannot be described. Her trust in God did not waver. Years later the sisters in Pittsburgh, remembering their great tragedy of 1848, recalled the words from the Book of Job which she loved: "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the will of God."

Frances Warde's own health was now shattered. Following her almost fatal journey from Chicago and the deaths of so many of her sisters, the labor and anguish of the typhoid epidemic crushed her. Tuberculosis, moreover, had made its inroads among the young sisters. Aloysia Strange, the second of the "first seven" to die, had succumbed to the "white plague" in July 1847, and Sister Anastasia McGawley, who had returned to America with Frances as a recruit from Cork, had died in December 1847. Death seemed to be a continual visitor at the convent in the Concert Hall. When the last of the typhoid patients was discharged, no new patients were admitted to the hospital. Dr. Addison confided to Bishop O'Connor that he believed Frances Warde would die if she were not removed immediately from

this "house of death." The concerned bishop gave over his own residence near St. Paul's Cathedral to the sisters in April 1848 and found a residence for himself on Grant Street.

Despite her illness, Frances Warde now acted with her usual decisiveness. In the spring of 1848 she had the Congregation of Mercy incorporated by the state legislature as the "Sisters of Mercy of Allegheny County." She purchased property on Webster Avenue with the dowries of the sisters and initiated the building of St. Mary's Convent which was to serve the congregation as a motherhouse for more than half a century. The sisters lived in the episcopal residence for two years until the new St. Mary's was opened December 26, 1850. St. Mary's Academy had been moved in January 1847 to a rented house attached to the convent in Concert Hall, then to rooms in the episcopal residence, and again to quarters on Webster Avenue formerly used by the orphan asylum. Frances Warde planned the new St. Mary's Convent to provide one of the finest private schools in Western Pennsylvania. St. Mary's Academy flourished there until it was moved to Mount Mercy, Pittsburgh, the present site of Carlow College. Our Lady of Mercy Academy, one of the oldest private Catholic schools west of the Alleghenies, is now located in Monroeville near Pittsburgh.

Meanwhile, the new St. Xavier Academy in Latrobe was beginning to develop into one of the foremost private educational institutions in the United States. This select school stood on a tree-covered eminence close to the Pittsburgh-Philadelphia turnpike. Many of the courses offered, especially in theology, philosophy, and languages, were actually on a college level.

On May 9, 1848, the Sisters of Mercy under Frances Warde opened the new Mercy Hospital on Stevenson Street, to the great rejoicing of the people of Pittsburgh. It was actually a simple establishment of forty rooms — wards, private rooms, and maintenance units. The six staff physicians were the finest in the city. Over the years, the Pittsburgh Mercy Hospital was to develop into one of the finest medical institutions in the United States. The sisters served courageously during the cholera outbreaks of 1848-1851, 1854-1855, 1866-1867, and 1873-1877. During the Civil War the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy administered and nursed at both the Western Pennsylvania Military Hospital and Stanton Military Hospital in Washington, D. C. Physical expansion kept pace with developments in medicine until Mercy Hospital today covers a city block. A new multimillion dollar Mercy Hospital is projected for about 1976.

In May 1848, the same year that the new Mercy Hospital was opened, Frances Warde established the Sisters of Mercy in Loretto, Pennsylvania, where they opened Loretto Academy. Later this private school was moved to Cresson, where it became St. Aloysius Academy and the first junior college in Pennsylvania in 1939.

On December 26, 1850, the Mercy sisters in Pittsburgh moved to their new motherhouse, St. Mary's, on Webster Avenue, from the episcopal residence where they had lived since the typhoid epidemic of 1848 when they had moved hurriedly from their old convent in Concert Hall. The threat on Christmas Day of an attack on the episcopal residence by members of the Know-Nothing party precipitated their sudden departure to the new convent, a building which was not quite completed. This beautiful new motherhouse had been planned by Bishop O'Connor and Frances Warde, but Frances, who had moved to St. Xavier Academy, was never to live in it. In later years, many new Mercy convents were to be founded from St. Mary's on Webster Avenue. It was the home in which Sister Katharine Drexel, founder of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament for Blacks and Indians, was to make her novitiate. It was also to be visited by Sister Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first American woman canonized as a saint.

In the early spring of 1851, Frances Warde left Western Pennsylvania for Providence to establish the Mercy sisters in New England.⁹ From Providence, and later from Manchester, New Hampshire, Frances Warde established numerous Mercy convents from Maine to California.

The Pittsburgh Congregation of Mercy, however, was to remain Frances's largest foundation for many years. During the hundred years after she left Pittsburgh, the expansion of the Mercy sisters gave living testimony to the apostolic spirit of their founder. Mercy foundations were sent from Pittsburgh to Baltimore, 1855; Buffalo, 1861; Titusville, 1870; and Wilkes-Barre, 1875. Between 1851 and 1970, more than fifty branch houses were founded — convents, parochial primary and secondary schools, a commercial high school, industrial schools, academies, a diocesan house of studies, a home for working girls, Mercy House for homeless girls, a house of refuge, and Holy Cross Hospital in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Numerous catechetical schools, summer schools, and mission schools were conducted by the sisters. Mount Mercy College, a four-year liberal arts institution, now

⁹ Sister Catherine Morgan, *A Little Sketch of the Sisters of Mercy in Providence, Rhode Island, from 1851 to 1893* (Providence, 1893).

called Carlow College, was established in 1929. Foreign missions were founded by the Pittsburgh Sisters of Mercy in Puerto Rico and Peru.

Frances Warde's name came to be deeply revered in Pittsburgh. In March 1966, when Pittsburgh celebrated the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its charter as a city, Frances Warde was named one of the ten outstanding women in its history. Today she is still as close in spirit to the Pittsburgh sisters as she was a hundred years ago.