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Standing on Their Shoulders



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Stories of the "Irish" Sisters of Mercy
in Newfoundland

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The foregoing stories generally follow the order of the *Register* of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, which is preserved in the Archives at Littledale, St. John's.



Standing on their Shoulders

I am standing on the shoulders
of the ones who came before me.
I am stronger for their courage;
I am wiser for their words;
I am lifted by their longing for a fair and brighter future;
I am grateful for their vision, for their toiling on this earth.
(“Standing on the Shoulders” by Joyce Johnson Rouise)

The story of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland is a story of valiant women, women of faith and vision, of courage and commitment, of hope and fidelity. It is a story pulsating with life and energy, a story to be remembered, celebrated and shared. Although this story has its roots in Irish soil and in Irish hearts, it was from the rocky soil of Newfoundland that the lives of sixty Irish women brought forth a rich harvest, the bounty, fragrance and color of which has given Newfoundland Mercy its spirit and vigor.

Most of the women who crossed the Atlantic between 1842 and 1907 were between the ages of sixteen and twenty years, thus bringing the vibrancy and energy of youth, as well as the wisdom and fruitfulness of their later years to the Mercy mission in Newfoundland. In embarking on such a daring and challenging enterprise, these young women left a lasting legacy of compassion, courage, commitment and creativity to all who followed in their footsteps. It is on their shoulders that we stand. But to appreciate their significance in our Mercy story, we need to look back to our beginnings in Newfoundland in 1842.

From whence we came ...

Mother Catherine McAuley, foundress of the Sisters of Mercy, and Irish-born Bishop Michael Anthony Fleming, who became Vicar Apostolic of Newfoundland in 1829, played a direct role in the establishment of the Newfoundland Mercy mission. In the summer of 1840, on one of his many trips to Ireland, Bishop Fleming met with Catherine McAuley in the Convent of Mercy at Baggot Street, Dublin. What actually transpired in that conversation is

not known; what is known is that shortly thereafter, Catherine was talking about a foundation of her sisters to Newfoundland, even indicating that she herself would accompany the founding community. Since Marianne Creedon, who was to be the key figure in that new foundation, had already entered the Baggot Street community a year earlier, it can be deduced that prior



Catherine McAuley, 1778-1841



Michael Anthony Fleming, 1792-1850

conversations had taken place between Catherine and the bishop. Records from the Archdiocese of St. John's show that Bishop Fleming was actually in Ireland from December 1841 to April of 1842, and it seems likely that he would have visited Baggot Street during those months. In a letter to Archdeacon O'Connell of Dublin, dated February 19, 1844, held in the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's, Bishop

Fleming very clearly articulated the plan he had had in mind from the beginning:

... in compliance with this determination, I sent to their parent institution at Baggot Street, under the care of the sainted foundress, the late Mrs. McAuley, a young lady who had resided several years in Newfoundland and who was intimately acquainted with the circumstances of the country and the peculiar wants that I particularly needed to supply, to pass there her profession, together with such other young ladies as should be inspired to accompany her, in order to found a Convent of Mercy in St. John's, and open a school...

Although it might have been clear to Bishop Fleming that his protégé, Marianne Creedon, was to be the leader of the new Mercy foundation in St. John's, the identity of the first superior of that foundation was far from clear, a circumstance that was to result in a lot of misunderstanding and tension in the early days of the mission.

On May 2, 1842, the *Sir Walter Scott* left Kingstown Harbour (present-day, Dun Laoghaire) in Ireland for St. John's,



Newfoundland. Aboard were three Sisters of Mercy from the Baggot Street community in Dublin, a candidate for the Sisters of Mercy by the name of Maria Supple, two candidates for the Presentation Convent and five clergymen, all Irish citizens bound for the Newfoundland mission. By the time the ship docked in St. John's, Miss Supple had changed her allegiance and went instead with the Presentation candidates.

June 3, 1842, the feast of the Sacred Heart, was certainly a memorable day for Bishop Fleming. He was welcoming eleven new missionaries to his diocese; not only was his work force increasing, but his long-held and cherished dream of broadening educational opportunities for girls and of providing care for the poor and sick of his diocese was coming to fulfillment. The Sisters of Mercy would help make his dream a reality.

The first three Sisters of Mercy to set foot on Newfoundland soil – Sister Mary Francis Creedon (formerly Marianne Creedon), Sister Mary Ursula Frayne and Sister Mary Rose Lynch – were the vanguard of a long line of Irish women to come to Newfoundland shores and leave their imprint on all aspects of life in the towns and outports of this land.

The convent they were about to establish in St. John's would be the first foundation of the Sisters of Mercy outside the British Isles. The little community of three lived in the bishop's home on Henry Street until they moved to the new Convent of Our Lady of Mercy on Military Road on December 12, 1842, the eleventh anniversary of the founding of the Order in Ireland. In July of 1842, just a month after the arrival of the sisters, a particularly virulent form of measles struck St. John's, and many people suffered terribly from the disease. *The Patriot and Terra Nova Herald* of August 3, 1842 describes the work of the sisters in these difficult times:

The Sisters of Mercy ... have ministered with untiring zeal among the poor afflicted from the very moment

of their arrival, and never, we believe, was there greater need for their hallowed services than at this period. But it is when sickness is prevalent – when disease is raging – when death hovers around – that those Sisters – like “Angels of Mercy” – flit from one scene of misery to another, administering to the wants of those who otherwise might suffer without assistance and die from want of it.

In their first year in St. John’s, the Sisters of Mercy concentrated on visitation and care of the sick and the poor. It was not until May 1, 1843 that Our Lady of Mercy School opened, with forty-two pupils in attendance. The flexible Rule of the Sisters of Mercy made it possible for them to operate a pension school, with its many and varied extracurricular offerings, among which were the French and Italian languages, plain and ornamental needlework and music. The pension school option where students paid fees also provided needed finances to the sisters and the hope was that it would attract some of its alumnae and other young women of the middle and upper classes of St. John’s society to become Sisters of Mercy. Despite the many responsibilities involved in teaching such a broad curriculum with few human and physical resources, the sisters continued to minister to the sick and the poor, becoming familiar figures in the lanes and alleyways of St. John’s.

Sometime in the autumn of 1842, Maria Nugent, sister of John Valentine Nugent, Sister M. Francis Creedon’s brother-in-law, was accepted into the Mercy community on Military Road, and on March 25, 1843, she made profession of vows as Sister Mary Joseph. Her profession was another source of dissension in the community, because, contrary to the thinking of Sister Mary Ursula and perhaps Sister Mary Rose as well, Bishop Fleming accepted her previous novitiate with the Presentation Sisters as sufficient preparation for becoming a Sister of Mercy. This situation, as well as the lack of clarity regarding leadership in the

community, was likely a major factor in the decision of Sisters Mary Ursula and Mary Rose to return to Ireland in November of 1843.

The departure of two of the founding members would have most decidedly impacted the mission, both in its immediate circumstances and in its future outlook. Despite this setback, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph continued their ministry in the school, teaching music after hours in addition to their regular classes. Their weekends were given to visitation of the sick in their homes and at St. John's Hospital, which was situated in the general area of what is now Victoria Park.

The Newfoundlander of June 24, 1847 attests to the heroic dedication of these two Sisters as follows:

Ever and anon might these two Sisters have been seen, before or after the tasks of the day at school, treading through the snows and pelted by the sleet, to smooth the pillow of the deathbed of the afflicted and pouring into the ear of the infected the words of promise and hope, either in the wretched hovel of the poor or in the Hospital.

In early June of 1847, St. John's had been afflicted with a severe epidemic of typhus. Schools were closed and Sisters Mary Francis and Mary Joseph devoted all their time and energies to caring for the sick and dying. Sister Mary Joseph contracted the dreaded disease and died on June 17th. Sister Mary Francis was now the lone Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. For ten months thereafter, this courageous woman struggled on, continuing her ministries of teaching and visitation of the sick. Even Bishop Fleming, her mentor and main support who was blessed with an optimistic nature, questioned the survival of the fledgling Mercy foundation. However, Francis herself, convinced that this foundation was God's work and that this place was where God

wanted her to be, faithfully and courageously went about the works of Mercy.

Eventually Sister Mary Francis' patience, courage and faithfulness began to bear fruit, and in April 1848, her niece, Agnes Nugent, daughter of Ellen and John Valentine Nugent, asked to be admitted as a postulant. On December 8th of that same year, Agnes received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious name, Sister Mary Vincent de Paul. Her reception ceremony, held in the Old Chapel on Henry Street, was the first of its kind in Newfoundland and one of the last public functions at which the ailing Bishop Fleming presided.

Two years later on December 8, 1850, Bishop John T. Mullock presided over a reception and profession ceremony at Mercy Convent, at which Sister Mary Vincent pronounced her vows as a Sister of Mercy, and a young woman from Limerick, Catherine Bernard, was accepted as a novice. She was given the religious name of Sister Mary Francis Xavier. Meanwhile in October of that year Mary O'Regan Redmond, who became Sister Mary Elizabeth, had joined the community as a lay sister. By the end of 1850, eight years after the foundation, the Mercy Sisters in Newfoundland numbered four – two professed, one novice and one postulant.

The stories of the first seven Sisters of Mercy who lived at Mercy Convent from 1842 to 1850 are inextricably tied to the origins of Mercy in Newfoundland. The seven referred to are: Sister Mary Francis Creedon, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne, Sister Mary Rose Lynch, Sister Mary Joseph Nugent, Sister Mary Vincent Nugent, Sister Mary Francis Xavier Bernard and Sister Mary Elizabeth Redmond. Although the foregoing narrative gives some indication of their role and significance in the overall story of the Newfoundland Mercy mission, their impact was such, that, even at the risk of repetition, their individual stories need to be told. Theirs was the task of putting down and anchoring Mercy roots in

a foreign, inhospitable environment, one that was fraught with uncertainty, hardship and suffering. Ownership of the story of Mercy in Newfoundland necessitates a keen understanding and a deep appreciation of these seven women, who paved the way for more than fifty other courageous Irish women to join the Mercy mission in Newfoundland over the next five decades.

Sister Mary Francis Creedon

Marianne Creedon was the daughter of Ellen and John Creedon of Coolowen, County Cork. She was born in 1811, and, according to the register of St. Mary's Church in Cork, was baptized on December 5, 1811. Marianne's father died in the summer of 1817, when she was not quite six years old. In 1822 her older sister Ellen married John Valentine Nugent of Waterford. There is an indication that Marianne might have lived with her sister's family in Waterford for some time, as the baptismal records of St. Patrick's Parish and the Cathedral Parish in that city name her as sponsor for three of the Nugent children.

In May of 1833, at the invitation of Bishop Fleming, the Nugents moved to St. John's, Newfoundland, where John Valentine opened a private school for young Catholic men. Marianne Creedon, along with John Valentine's ailing mother and his sister Maria, moved with the Nugent family. *The Public Ledger* of June 14, 1833 advertised the opening of the "Academy for young gentlemen." The same issue of the newspaper notified the public of another school opening, stating that John Valentine's wife, Ellen and his sister, Maria, would also "be ready to receive young ladies at their school at Mrs. Little's, Water Street." The newspaper noted that music would be taught in that school by Miss Nugent and Miss Creedon. In addition to teaching music, Marianne helped support the family by taking care of the Nugent children.

Bishop Fleming was a frequent visitor in the Nugent household and it is likely that his concern about the deep gaps in Catholic education and the plight of the sick poor of St. John's were recurring topics of conversation. The zealous bishop was determined to find a community of nuns to respond to these desperate needs of his people in *Talamh an Eisc*, the "Land of the Fish." Having heard of the great work being done by the newly-established Order of Mercy in Ireland and learning that they were not bound by the law of enclosure, he saw these sisters as ideally suited to meet the needs of the people of St. John's. Marianne's conversations with the bishop and the Nugents, as well as her own experience of living in St. John's, likely stirred in her a deep compassion for the people of her adopted homeland and a desire to help them in their need. Sensing in this young woman the call to serve the poor and the outcast, Bishop Fleming lost no time in making the necessary arrangements with Mother Catherine McAuley to admit Marianne to her new community in Dublin and to prepare her to establish a convent of the Order of Mercy in Newfoundland.

In the summer of 1839 Marianne left St. John's for Dublin, entering the Mercy community at Baggot Street on July 4. She received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the name, Sister Mary Francis, at her reception into the novitiate on February 27, 1840. In the novitiate with her was Bishop Fleming's niece, Sister Mary Justina, who had been received as a novice in July of 1839. Sister Mary Rose Lynch, who would later be part of the Newfoundland foundation, was also in the novitiate with Sister Mary Francis for most of 1840.

With Catherine McAuley as her superior and Sister Cecilia Marmion as her novice mistress, Sister Mary Francis learned the ideals and way of life of a Sister of Mercy at the fountainhead of Mercy. She made profession of vows on August 19, 1841, becoming the fiftieth member of the community.



From Illuminated Register of the Sisters of Mercy, Dublin, Ireland

Though the newly-professed Sister M. Francis was ready and eager to begin her mission in Newfoundland, foundation plans were delayed because Catherine McAuley had become seriously ill. However, even this delay was providential, for not only was Sister Mary Francis living at Baggot Street during Catherine's last illness, but was also present at her deathbed and was one of the sisters named in the codicil of Catherine's will. According to Catherine Killerby, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne's biographer, all the sisters named in the codicil, i.e., those belonging to the Baggot Street community or currently living in that community, were charged with the preservation of the Order's charism. Having had direct contact with Catherine McAuley and knowing her intent in founding the Order, they were given the responsibility

of carrying out the works of Mercy according to her spirit and example. This was an awesome trust, which Sister Mary Francis took to heart and which gave her a sense of purpose and direction for the rest of her life.

It would be nine months from the time of her profession of vows before Sister Mary Francis and two others from the Baggot Street community, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne and Sister Mary Rose Lynch, would leave Ireland for Newfoundland. In those months, Sister Mary Francis remained steadfast, learning the ways of Mercy and continuing the ministry of visiting the sick and poor of Dublin. In *The Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, Ch. 4), Sister Mary Austin Carroll sets forth the recollections of a sister who lived with Sister M. Francis at Baggot Street:

Her tender piety and her large-hearted friendship which was a blessing and support to those who enjoyed it, her beautiful simplicity and thorough unselfishness, caused her to be loved and revered.

Sister Mary Philomena McGuire, another of Sister M. Francis' novitiate companions who later became superior of the Convent of Mercy in Belfast, is recorded in the *Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, Ch.4) as saying the following:

She was a most exemplary religious ... full of zeal, which made me glad to visit the sick and perform other duties with her.

In chapter 4, page 21, of the same volume, Sister Carroll describes Sister Mary Francis as “gifted with rare qualities of soul and thorough unselfishness ... especially distinguished for the amiable courtesy of her manners and her mental culture.” She further states that Sister M. Francis was “deeply loved by the distinguished women who were her contemporaries in the novitiate and to whom she was deeply attached.” Such

recollections from those who lived and worked with Sister Mary Francis give glimpses of a generous, zealous, and sensitive woman, gifted with the qualities of personality and spirit that fitted her admirably for the challenge of forging the beginnings of Mercy life and ministry in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Francis Creedon and her two companions, Sister Mary Ursula Frayne and Sister Mary Rose Lynch, arrived in St. John's on The *Sir Walter Scott* on June 3, 1842 after a month at sea. Although Sister Mary Francis would have the joy of being reunited with family and friends, she also knew firsthand some of the difficulties the new community would face – the isolation and loneliness of separation from all that was familiar, the poverty and disease that would surround them, the constant fear of contagion, the rigors of the Newfoundland climate, as well as the precariousness of their financial situation. But not even she could have foreseen some of the obstacles, tensions and sufferings that would be part of the new mission and would test the very foundations of her call and of the mission of Mercy, to which she had committed her life.

Throughout 1842, visitation of the sick and the poor in St. John's brought Sister M. Francis and her companions to an ever-deepening awareness of the wretched conditions under which many had to live, conditions which all too often bred a variety of diseases and epidemics. At the time of the sisters' arrival, St. John's had a large transient population, composed mainly of fishermen from Europe, whose boats were often overcrowded and unsanitary, thus bringing into the port deadly diseases that spread quickly among the people. In a letter held in the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's, dated June 24, 1842, Bishop Fleming described the fishing huts clinging to the rocks, the stages and fish flakes of St. John's harbour, noting that

...the Sisters of Mercy who, not improbably, were filled with the thought that, amid scenes such as these, and

amongst the poor who dwelt thus in positions the very approach to which, particularly in winter, was pregnant with danger, their future destinies were cast.

In the early months of 1843, the sisters, now four in number following the entrance of Maria Nugent, were heavily involved in preparations for beginning school. Even after Our Lady of Mercy School opened its doors on May 1, 1843, Sister M. Francis and her sisters continued their visitation, bringing comfort and assistance to the poor and sick of St. John's.

Meanwhile the community situation was deteriorating, and Sister Mary Francis found herself in the middle of conflict and tension, much of which seems to have stemmed from Bishop Fleming's insistence on deferring to her, instead of to the named superior, who, according to the *Dublin Register* was Sr. Mary Ursula. The autumn months of 1843 must have been a difficult time for the struggling community, as Sisters M. Ursula and M. Rose firmed up plans for returning to Ireland. With their departure on November 18, 1843, Sisters Mary Francis and Mary Joseph were left to carry out the arduous work of a very fragile and demanding mission. The *Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, p. 22) reports that Sister Mary Francis' former novitiate companions, notably Mother Agnes O'Connor of New York, repeatedly urged her to abandon the Newfoundland mission. Even Bishop Fleming was dubious about the mission's survival, and sought advice about the possibility of Sister Mary Francis joining the now well-established Presentation Sisters. But Sister Mary Francis held fast, undaunted by what might be considered an utter failure, and with her one companion, Sr. Mary Joseph Nugent resolutely carried on the works of Mercy.

It is hard to imagine what Sister Mary Francis must have thought and felt, as she lived through and pondered on what had transpired since June of 1842. She and Sister Mary Joseph must have queried among themselves what God was doing, where God was leading

them, what was to happen to the mission, what would happen to them. The ultimate blow came in June of 1847 when Sister M. Joseph, was stricken with typhus and died within a few short days.

Sister M. Francis was now the only Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. In some of her more sombre moments, what she had prepared for, longed for, worked for must have seemed to her to have come to naught. Nevertheless, she soldiered on alone for ten long months, teaching, visiting the sick and the poor as she had done from the beginning. The experience of these months must have drawn on all the faith, courage and trust that Sister Mary Francis carried within her heart and soul. Undoubtedly she had her fears and her questions, but the urgency of the mission and her conviction of the action of God in her life impelled her onward, keeping her strong, pliable, available and hopeful.

Light broke through in April 1848 when her young niece, Agnes Nugent, asked to become a member of the community. Agnes entered the novitiate on December 8, 1848, receiving the name, Sister Mary Vincent. The Mercy community in Newfoundland again numbered two, but it was not until late 1850 that the tide began to turn. On September 8, 1850, the day that Sister Mary Vincent made profession of vows, a young woman from Limerick, Mary Catherine Bernard was accepted as a postulant. Three weeks later a young widow, Mary O'Regan Redmond, who was Irish-born but living in St. John's, joined the community at Mercy Convent.

Teaching and administering the school, attending to the poor who came for help, visiting the sick and instructing the new members kept Sister Mary Francis busy, but the presence, the talents, the enthusiasm and dedication of the younger women assuredly alleviated her burdens and gave her new hope and energy.

By 1852, despite the small numbers and few resources, Sister Mary Francis and her sisters were already planning for another ministry. She had long recognized the plight of girls who had lost parents in one or other of the many epidemics that ravaged St. John's. With funds left to the sisters by Bishop Fleming, her friend and mentor who had died in 1850, construction of a girls' orphanage at the rear of Mercy Convent began in 1852, and on December 8, 1854, Immaculate Conception Orphanage was formally opened. This was very timely, because of the cholera epidemic that swept through St. John's in the Fall of that year, claiming more than five hundred lives and leaving many children homeless and destitute.

But the opening of the orphanage was not the only reason for Sister Mary Francis to celebrate on December 8, 1854, for on that day, the Mercy community on Military Road welcomed its first Newfoundlander, a young woman by the name of Anastasia Tarahan. A new chapter of the story of Mercy in Newfoundland was opening up, one of renewed hope and the promise of new life.

By the spring of 1855, the hard work of caring for victims of the various plagues, the many demands of school, visitation and orphanage, as well as the struggles and hardships of the early years of the mission began to take their toll on Sister M. Francis. In that year, she and her sisters had undertaken yet another project, constructing an infirmary at Mercy Convent to care for the sick children from the orphanage. In the summer of 1855, Sister Mary Francis was showing the effects of her many onerous responsibilities and the hard work of a mission still in its youth. Though very ill at Anastasia Tarahan's reception ceremony on July 2, 1855, she was available to receive Anastasia into the novitiate, giving her the name, Sister Mary John Baptist. Later that same day, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Elizabeth Redmond responded to a call to visit the home of a dying person in the town. This was Sister Mary Francis' last visitation, and

after returning home, she was confined to bed, dying two weeks later on July 15. At the time of her death, Sister Mary Francis Creedon was in her forty-fourth year and had been professed as a Sister of Mercy for nearly fourteen years, thirteen of which she had given totally to her beloved Newfoundland mission.

A notation in Bishop Mullock's diary on July 15, 1855, reads as follows:

Mrs. Creedon, Superioress of the Convent of Mercy, died this morning, a victim of overwork for the poor and sick.

A few days later on July 19, 1855, this simple obituary notice appeared in *The Newfoundlander*:

Died: On Sunday A.M., the 15th, Mrs. Mary Francis, Superior of the Order of Mercy, daughter of the late John Creedon, Esq. of Mount Desert of King Street, Cork, in 44th year of her age and 16th of her religious life.

Sister Mary Francis died as she had lived – quietly, without fanfare, faithfully responding to God's calls, wherever and however they came to her. She was buried in Belvedere cemetery, which had been opened and blessed by Bishop Fleming in July of 1848. This Catholic burial ground was part of the extensive Belvedere property purchased by the Bishop in 1847.

With the death of Sister Mary Francis, four young sisters, one of them a novice, were left to carry on the mission in Newfoundland – a seemingly impossible task. But these women had learned the ways of Mercy from one who had come to understand deeply what Mercy was about – compassion, commitment, hope, courage, fidelity and a deep-rooted trust in

a provident and merciful God. Sister Mary Francis' teaching, her example and the zeal for mission she had engendered in them would inspire, guide and strengthen them in the difficult days and months ahead.

Sister Mary Francis Creedon, the steadfast woman of Mercy, had given her whole life to the Newfoundland mission, tending and keeping alive the spark of Mercy, when everything she had believed in and worked for seemed to be turning to ashes. Hers was a noble, resolute spirit who kept faith when all seemed lost. Sister Mary Francis' spirit of Mercy still lives in the congregation she founded, continually calling its members to trust in God's providential care, to renewed hope and to whole-hearted commitment to the mission of Mercy.



Gravestone in Belvedere cemetery, St. John's

In 1981, the city council of St. John's named one of its new streets in the west end of the city, Creedon Street, after Sister Mary Francis, the foundress of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Ursula Frayne

Clara Mary Frayne was the youngest child of Bridget and Robert Frayne. She was born on October 15, but there is some question as to whether it was 1816 or 1817. Her father was a prosperous businessman with premises of his own, and the family enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle in their Dublin home on the Liffey waterfront. Clara's biographer, Catherine Kovesi Killerby, relates

that she had a privileged childhood, was highly-educated and was an accomplished pianist and embroiderer. In her book *Ursula Frayne*, Killerby suggests that Clara may have been educated privately in Dublin, or like many of her contemporaries in comfortable circumstances, may have studied in one of the illustrious schools in France.

Although Clara's oldest sister, Mary, joined the Sisters of Charity in Dublin, it was the newly-founded Sisters of Mercy who attracted Clara. She entered at Baggot Street on July 2, 1834 and was received into the novitiate by Catherine McAuley on January 20, 1835 as Sister Mary Ursula. Her novice mistress throughout her two years of novitiate was Catherine McAuley. When Sister Mary Ursula made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on January 25, 1837, she became the twenty-second member of the Order.

In April of that same year, the newly-professed Sister Mary Ursula went to Carlow in southeastern Ireland as a member of its founding community. According to her biographer, Sister M. Ursula suffered from frequent and debilitating attacks of a troubling illness. After a few months in Carlow, one of these bouts of illness made it necessary for her to move to St. Patrick's Convent in Kingstown, a seaside town near Dublin, which had been opened by Catherine McAuley as a convalescent house for ailing sisters. When St. Patrick's closed because of financial problems in 1838, Sister M. Ursula was assigned to the newly-established St. Anne's Convent, Booterstown. This convalescent home for sick sisters, located on the coast quite near Dublin, operated as a branch house under Catherine McAuley's personal direction. Although Sister M. Ursula was named superior, her responsibilities were mainly concerned with the invalid sisters from other convents who came there for care and rest.

Sister M. Ursula was a versifier, and she became well-known for her ability to respond to Catherine McAuley's rhymes, depicting

day-to-day events in the community and in her travels. There are a number of examples of verses she and Catherine McAuley sent back and forth to each other. One such is the playful greeting that Sister M. Ursula sent to Catherine on her feastday, April 30, 1839:

My dear Rev. Mother on this festive day
Some words in your honour I gladly would say
But vain the endeavour, in vain do I try
My Muse is too humble for subjects so high.

In 1841 when Catherine McAuley's health was seriously deteriorating, it seemed logical that Sister M. Ursula would be called back to Baggot Street to care for her. She had managed a convalescent convent for nearly four years and had developed skills in caring for the sick. Catherine's words to Sister Mary Frances Warde in a letter dated October 4, 1841, make it evident that Sister Mary Ursula tended the ailing Catherine devotedly and efficiently:

My affectionate Sister Mary Ursula Frayne is my nurse
and never ceases thinking of something for me.

On November 9, it was Sister M. Ursula who notified the superiors of all the houses of Catherine's worsening condition, and two days later, when Catherine died, it was she who notified them of her death. She is one of the sisters named in the codicil to Catherine's will, making her, in the words of Catherine Killerby "a true spiritual heir of Catherine McAuley."

Presumably, after Catherine McAuley's death, Sister M. Ursula remained at Baggot Street until she left for Newfoundland on May 2, 1843. She was the senior sister of the three members of the founding community, and her biographer attests that the *Dublin Register* had named her as superior of the Newfoundland foundation. However the page referred to in the original *Register*,

preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy of Ireland, does not mention Newfoundland. Despite all the assertions and all the questions, the identity of the actual superior of the Military Road Convent has continued to be a puzzling question.

Upon arrival in St. John's where the needs were so many and so drastic, Sister Mary Ursula's many talents were undoubtedly appreciated. When Our Lady of Mercy School opened in May of 1843, she would have been a welcome addition to the whole school, because of her excellent educational background and proficiencies in music and the arts. However, six months after the school opened, she and Sister Mary Rose set sail for Ireland, leaving Newfoundland and a Mercy mission that was still in its infancy. Both sisters returned to the convent in Baggot Street, where they remained until each was assigned a new mission.

In volunteering to come to Newfoundland, Sister Mary Ursula's heart must have harboured a dream of making a difference in the lives of the people of this far-flung mission, of responding in mercy to the great need she saw all around her, of making this mission a success. She had already been on two foundations and experienced the excitement and the challenge of being part of a new venture. In her seventeen months in St. John's, she had visited the sick and the poor, bringing comfort and assistance; she had helped prepare for the opening of school and had been called upon to share her many gifts with her students.

Sister Mary Ursula never lost her missionary zeal, as is evident in the work she undertook after her departure from Newfoundland. In all likelihood, her Newfoundland experience would have prepared her well for the demanding mission she was soon to lead. In September 1845, Bishop John Brady came to Baggot Street, pleading for a foundation of the Sisters of Mercy for Perth in Western Australia. Sister Mary Ursula volunteered for that far-off mission, and in September of that

year, the new community of six, with Sister M. Ursula as superior, left for the long and arduous voyage to that distant land. She was not quite thirty years of age when she arrived in Perth, having already been part of several Mercy foundations spread across the world.

Sister M. Ursula was a prolific writer and her letters from Australia reveal her keen interest in people and places, her love of nature, her eye for detail, her sense of humour and her great practicality. In her many letters to Ireland from Australia, she only made three references to Newfoundland, none of which gives any idea about how she felt about the mission, the community or her departure.

There is no doubt that Sister M. Ursula was a woman of great determination, resourcefulness, courage and faith. Her work among the aboriginal people of Australia is legend, and in the field of education, she achieved marvels for the people she served. In November 1856 she and two other sisters established a foundation in Melbourne in the Australian state of Victoria, and it was there that she was to spend the rest of her life. Sister M. Ursula died in the Convent of Mercy at Melbourne on June 8, 1885 at the age of sixty-nine years. She had given nearly forty years of her life to the Mercy mission in Australia, and is remembered as an outstanding educator, a zealous missionary and a devoted woman of Mercy.

Sister Mary Rose Lynch

Catherine Lynch was the daughter of Margaret and Richard Lynch of St. Paul's Parish in Dublin. No information is available of her early years, but it can be assumed that she received a good education, since she was assigned to teach in pension schools operated by the Sisters of Mercy.

Catherine entered the Convent of Mercy at Baggot Street on July 3, 1838 and was accepted into the novitiate by Catherine McAuley on January 21, 1839 as Sister Mary Rose. She was a novice when Marianne Creedon entered the community in July of 1839, and from February to December 1840, they were in the novitiate together, with Sister Mary Cecilia Marmion as their novice mistress.

Sister Mary Rose was professed on December 15, 1840 and within a couple of weeks, was sent on the new foundation to Birr in central Ireland, where she was named assistant to the superior, Sister Mary Aloysius Scott. Deep divisions in the town of Birr between a heretical sect called the Crottyites and those who remained orthodox made it a very difficult and demanding mission, but Sister M. Rose seemed to have proved herself there.

Since Catherine was accustomed to spend a month with each new foundation, she would have been able to observe and inter-relate with Sister Mary Rose during the time she spent with her in community and in ministry. After her time in Birr, Catherine mentioned Sister Mary Rose in several of her letters. From these references, we learn of Sister Mary Rose's diminutive stature, her ready wit and her sense of humour. Perhaps it was Catherine's personal experience of Sister Mary Rose at Birr that led her to recommend her for the Newfoundland mission.

Sister Mary Rose returned to Baggot Street in February of 1842, remaining there until she, along with Sisters M. Francis and M. Ursula, boarded the *Sir Walter Scott*, bound for Newfoundland on May 2, 1842. At this time, Sister M. Rose had only been professed a year and a half and was likely totally unprepared for what awaited her in St. John's – the rigors of a harsh climate, the state of the hovels they visited, the poverty and disease encountered on a daily basis, the ever-present danger of contagion, the distances they had to walk in difficult and sometimes treacherous terrains, the total separation from all that was familiar.

As a Sister of Mercy in a mission land, Sister Mary Rose would have expected to meet poverty and its accompanying misery in any ministry to the poor. Still, walking the paths and laneways of Birr and Dublin could never compare with trudging up and down the steep hills of St. John's pelted by sleet and snow, or struggling through the huge snowdrifts that blocked the byways and doorways of the town. The loneliness of such a distant mission, removed from family, friends and homeland would likely have brought a sense of loss and isolation as well.

One strand of oral tradition suggests that Sister Mary Rose was the designated leader of the Newfoundland foundation. This is supported by the fact that her signature is found at the end of the first financial statement of the mission, covering the period from May to October 1843. This is recorded in the Mercy Convent Accounts book, which is preserved in the Archives of the congregation in St. John's.

As a member of the first teaching staff at Our Lady of Mercy School, Sister Mary Rose's talents would have been utilized to the full and her contribution valued. But six months after school opened, she and Sister M. Ursula left the mission to return to Ireland.

Sister M. Rose remained at Baggot Street in Dublin for four years after returning from Newfoundland. In 1847 she went on the foundation to Dundalk, Ireland, and in 1859 she volunteered for the mission in Geelong, Australia, but returned after two years. Her subsequent history is a sad one, and after many years of illness, isolation and moving from place to place, Sister Mary Rose died in a hospital in Toulouse, France, on August 6, 1890.

Sister Mary Joseph Nugent

Maria Nugent had the unique distinction of being the first Presentation postulant and the first Mercy postulant in Newfoundland, and consequently in North America.

Maria was born in 1799 in Waterford, a city in southeastern Ireland that had significant commercial connections with Newfoundland at that time. Little is known about her early years, except that she had received a superior education and was accomplished in French and Italian literature, as well as in the Greek and Latin classics. Her skills were such that she translated several French and Italian works, one of which was used in Catholic schools throughout Ireland. She was said to have received her musical education from her uncle, Reverend Doctor Hurley of Kinsale.

In the early 1830s Maria joined the Ursuline Sisters in Waterford, but severe sciatica forced her to return home, just as her family was preparing to emigrate to Newfoundland. Her brother, John Valentine Nugent, had been invited by Bishop Fleming to set up a Catholic academy for young gentlemen in St. John's. Maria, her invalid mother, and Marianne Creedon, sister of John Valentine's wife Ellen, joined John Valentine, Ellen and their children on the voyage to Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's in May of 1833. Maria's mother died within two weeks of their arrival, but the rest of the family settled quickly into their new life.

A notice in the *Public Ledger* of June 14, 1833 advertised the academy for young gentlemen under the direction of Mr. John Valentine Nugent, as well as a school for young ladies, under the direction of Mrs. Ellen Nugent and Miss Maria Nugent. The extensive curriculum of the school for young ladies included an amazing array of subjects – "instruction in the Italian, French and English Languages, Geography, History, Needle and Fancy

Work, Mezzo-Tinto Drawing, Oriental Tinting, Mother-of-Pearl and Setim-wood inlaying, Waxworks, etc., etc.” The notice went on to announce that music lessons would be offered by Misses Maria Nugent and Marianne Creedon. What a gift this family was to the Catholic citizens of St. John’s!

Within a short time of the family’s arrival in St. John’s, Maria had regained her health and asked to enter the Presentation Convent, which had very recently been established in St. John’s, due largely to the efforts of Bishop Fleming. She was the first to enter the Presentation Sisters in Newfoundland and was considered a promising candidate. On August 5, 1834 Maria Nugent was received into the novitiate, but her delicate health again became a problem. The Presentation Sisters, hopeful that she would become well, granted her a second novitiate, but ill health finally forced her to leave. Following her departure from the Presentation Sisters, Maria became a virtual recluse, devoting herself to the education of her brother’s children and doing her work of translation. During several of these years, Marianne Creedon was still living with the Nugents, and it is likely that she and Maria shared many confidences and many dreams. In 1839 Marianne left St. John’s for Dublin to begin her novitiate with Catholic McAuley, in preparation for beginning a Mercy foundation in Newfoundland.

In June of 1842, when Marianne, now Sister Mary Francis, and her two companions arrived in St. John’s to open a Convent of Mercy, Maria’s desire for religious life was reawakened. Sometime later in 1842, she entered the Sisters of Mercy, where according to the Annals of the Presentation Sisters, preserved in their Archives in St. John’s, she felt that “at last she had found her true home.” It seems that at her entrance, or shortly thereafter, she was given the religious habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the name, Sister Mary Joseph. Bishop Fleming considered her novitiate with the Presentation Sisters sufficient preparation for profession and she made her profession of vows

as a Sister of Mercy on March 25, 1843. For reasons unknown, Bishop Fleming conducted the profession ceremony in the Presentation Convent at Cathedral Square in St. John's.

When Our Lady of Mercy School opened in May of 1843, Sister Mary Joseph's superb educational background, her musical proficiency, fluency in languages and teaching experience were huge assets to the school and the community at large. With four well qualified teachers, and students able to pay for their education, the future looked bright, and Bishop Fleming's dream of education for middle class girls seemed to be coming to fruition. But in November of 1843, the departure of Sisters Mary Ursula and Mary Rose left only Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph to carry on the school responsibilities and the visitation of the sick. Undaunted by what might be seen as apparent failure, these two Sisters of Mercy, connected by bonds of family and love for the mission, continued the work of Mercy, to which they had pledged their lives.

In June of 1847 when a typhus epidemic raged through St. John's, Sister Mary Francis and Sister Mary Joseph were very much in evidence. They closed school and devoted all their time and energies to the sick, visiting and caring for them in their homes and in St. John's Hospital at Riverhead, located in the area of present-day Victoria Park. After spending a lengthy time with a young seaman who was dying from the disease and in grave spiritual anguish, Sister M. Joseph caught the dreaded fever and suffered its torments for two weeks. Despite the loving care she received from Sister M. Francis and the medical services of physicians, she died on June 17. Although her life as a Sister of Mercy was short, it was rich and full, and her untimely death was mourned as a public calamity.

At the time of her death, Sister Mary Joseph was forty-eight years of age and in the fourth year of her religious profession. She is buried with the other plague victims on land which Paul

O'Neill in *A Seaport Legacy* said is now occupied by the Kirk and extends to Queens Road and west to Long's Hill.

The Newfoundlander of June 24, 1847 wrote poignantly about this outstanding humanitarian and dedicated religious:

It has seldom occurred to us in the circle of our own community, to record an event which is at the same time so painfully bitter to her nearest and dearest connections, so sincerely regretted and fraught with such interest to the Catholic inhabitants of St. John's ... for in the whole community it would be difficult to point to a life of more importance to the spiritual and temporal interests of the juvenile portion of our Catholic population while to the more matured as well as to the sick and infirm of both sexes, her devotedness in administering to the comforts of the diseased whether of mind or body could only be surpassed by the untiring assiduity in which her heart and soul were engaged.

Sister Mary Vincent Nugent

Agnes Mary Joseph Nugent was the daughter of John Valentine Nugent and Ellen Creedon Nugent and the niece of both Sister M. Francis Creedon and Sister M. Joseph Nugent. She was born in Waterford, Ireland on January 17, 1828 according to the records of the Sisters of Mercy, but her gravestone gives 1830 as her year of birth. Agnes was only a young child when her family emigrated to Newfoundland. Her grandmother, Mrs. Mary Nugent, died within two weeks of the family's arrival in St. John's.

The number of Agnes' siblings is uncertain, but it seems that she had two sisters and at least two brothers. According to the death notice of Mrs. Ellen Nugent in *The Newfoundlander* of

October 27, 1862, one of Agnes' brothers became a priest. The records of Holy Trinity Parish in Torbay note that a Father Joseph Nugent served briefly in that parish in 1872, and it is possible that he was one of Agnes' brothers. However no other information about him or any other of her siblings is available. Agnes' parents were both classically trained teachers and they saw to it that she received a good education, which implied that she was fluent in several languages and was knowledgeable in the classics.

Since Marianne Creedon and Maria Nugent both lived with the Nugent family for years, Agnes had a close relationship with the two women and was inspired by their ideals and example. Her aunt Maria was her instructress for some time, and under her wise and capable direction, Agnes learned not only the standard subjects of the school curriculum, but the beauty of music, literature and the arts.

Agnes was twelve years old when her aunt Marianne, now Sister Mary Francis, returned to Newfoundland from Ireland to establish a Convent of Mercy, and when her aunt Maria joined the new community. She witnessed the great work being done by the Sisters of Mercy with the most abandoned of St. John's society, and she likely attended Our Lady of Mercy School, where both aunts were teachers.

Sister Mary Joseph's untimely death from typhus in 1847 brought deep suffering, not only to Sister Mary Francis and the community served by the Sisters, but also to seventeen-year old Agnes and her family. They had lost a cherished member of their family, and Agnes had lost a beloved teacher and mentor.

On April 25, 1848, Agnes requested admission to the Convent of Mercy. Her interest in joining the Mercy Sisters was likely a matter of real concern for her family, because of the risks involved in the kind of work the Sisters of Mercy were doing and

also because at that time the total Mercy community in St. John's numbered only one member. Despite reservations, they acceded to her repeated pleas and gave her permission to follow her heart, as both of her aunts had done.

Agnes was received into the novitiate in the "old Chapel" on Henry Street by an ailing Bishop Fleming on December 8, 1848, and given the name, Sister Mary Vincent de Paul. This was the last public act of the bishop, who had been a dear family friend of the Nugents for many years. The following item in the December 14, 1848 issue of *The Newfoundlander* describes this special event in the life of the St. John's community, as a daughter of one of its most prominent citizens donned the religious habit:

One of the most touching ceremonies that has ever been conducted before the public in this country was witnessed at the Catholic chapel in this Town on last Friday morning, when the congregation was particularly edified by the performance of the first public reception of a nun that has taken place in our community ... Shortly after seven o'clock, the Rt. Rev. Dr. Fleming ascended the high altar, and immediately afterwards 25 of the children of the school, in white dresses, walked from the sacristy through the sanctuary, two by two... the Rev. Superior and the postulant following and kneeling within the choir and the door of the sanctuary...

In September of 1850, Sisters Mary Francis and Mary Vincent welcomed a young woman from Limerick, Catherine Bernard, into the little community and a few weeks later, a young widow, Mary O'Regan Redmond, requested admission. Agnes learned the ways of Mercy from Sister Mary Francis in the company of these two zealous companions, who were undeterred by the seeming lack of success of the mission, to which they were ready

to commit their lives. Indeed, the autumn of 1850 was full of promise for the young community that refused to die.

On December 8, 1850, Sister Mary Vincent made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy in the chapel at Mercy Convent. As a professed sister, she continued her ministry in the school and with the sick and the poor in their homes. When Sister Mary Francis died in 1855, Sister Mary Vincent lost not only her superior, novice mistress and faithful Mercy companion, but a dear aunt with whom she had lived for most of her life. It was Sister Mary Vincent who, on behalf of the young missionary community, wrote the superior of the Baggot Street Convent on July 22, 1855, informing her of the death of Sister Mary Francis, setting forth their plight and pleading with her to send help to a Mercy foundation struggling to survive.

Sister Mary Williamina Hogan states on page 50 of *Pathways of Mercy* that when Immaculate Conception Orphanage opened at Mercy Convent in 1854, Sister M. Francis Creedon had entrusted its overall management to Sister Mary Vincent. However, in 1859, when the orphanage was transferred to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, Sister M. Vincent remained at Mercy Convent. It was not until 1861 that she was assigned to St. Michael's, replacing Sister Mary Liguori Carmody as superior. Well-educated herself and an experienced and capable educator, Sister Mary Vincent made every effort to ensure that the young girls entrusted to her care at St. Michael's would receive the same quality of education as the children in other schools in St. John's.

In October of 1862, Sister Mary Vincent's mother, Ellen Creedon Nugent, died at the age of sixty-one. The October 27, 1862 issue of *The Newfoundlander* wrote of her as follows:

It was impossible to have known her without being impressed by the rare sweetness and benignity of her

disposition ... She had the happiness long before her death of seeing two of her children especially devoted to the service of the Almighty, one an esteemed priest, the other a Superioress of the Order of Mercy.

The three women who had influenced Sister Mary Agnes' life so profoundly were now gone from her, leaving with her the lofty ideals they had inspired, as well as the comfort and joy of many precious memories. Sister Mary Vincent's father, John Valentine Nugent, died in June of 1874 at the age of seventy-eight years. He had been a prominent reform politician in Newfoundland, serving in the House of Assembly and as High Sheriff of the central region of the colony, as well as having been involved in Catholic education for more than forty years. In 1844, he had the distinction of being named Newfoundland's first inspector of schools.

In 1865, after serving only one term as superior of St. Michael's, Sister Mary Vincent resigned, desiring to devote her time and energy to teaching the children and to visitation of the sick. Almost immediately after her resignation, however, she was appointed mistress of novices, a position for which she was singularly equipped, because of her many gifts of character and personality, and her wide experience in the life of the mission.



Sisters, postulants and children at Belvedere – 1885

Sister M. Vincent remained at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere for the rest of her life. Her compassionate ministry to the children and her interest in every aspect of their lives earned her the title "mother of the orphans." Her obituary notice in the March 6, 1884 issue of *The Evening Telegram* notes that her love and care for the children of Belvedere was "the ruling passion of her life."

Indeed it was not only upon the children and sisters of Belvedere that Sister Mary Vincent showered the love and devotion of her kindly presence and her compassionate ministry. She was known throughout the town for her tireless efforts to improve the lot of the poor and disadvantaged. During the epidemics of 1854 and 1856, Sister Mary Vincent was one of the four sisters who, according to *The Newfoundlander* of March 7, 1884, "from early morning until 10 or 11 o'clock at night, tended the sick and ministered to the dying." The example of her parents and her two aunts had not been lost on Sister Mary Vincent, for from them she learned attitudes and behaviours towards those less fortunate that enabled her to reach out in the most miserable of circumstances. Sister Mary Vincent also seemed to have inherited many of the best qualities of both her parents – her mother's generosity, kindness and concern for the poor and the outcast, and her father's passion, assertiveness and determination.

Sister Mary Vincent died on March 4, 1884, at the age of fifty-four. She had lived thirty-six years as a Sister of Mercy, twenty-three of them at her beloved St. Michael's Convent. On the day of her death, *The Evening Telegram* printed a beautiful tribute to this dedicated Sister of Mercy, who had grown up as one of their own in St. John's:

When her death was announced, a chord of sympathy was struck that vibrated in the hearts of a wide circle of people not only in the city of St. John's, but

throughout the island; for it may be well said that there is not a cove or harbour on our vast coast in which her name was unknown as a synonym for kindness and charity ... To her came all classes for consolation, advice and assistance: the stalwart fisherman with his bruised and festering wounds to have them dressed ... the young man, repenting at last of his waywardness, and coming in simplicity to receive correction, advice and encouragement ... To this ever active and zealous charity was added an intellect of wide mental calibre, cultivated by an education of a much higher order than generally falls to the lot of young ladies.

Sister Mary Francis Xavier Bernard

Mary Catherine Teresa Bernard was born in Limerick on December 15, 1827, the second daughter of Christopher and Helena (French) Bernard. According to notes compiled by Sister Mary Basil McCormack in 1955 and held in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, she was a friend of Bishop Mullock, who was also a native of Limerick. Volume 9 of the online *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* states that Father John Mullock, while serving as pastor of several Irish parishes in the 1830s and 40s, had also functioned as a recruiter for the colonial bishops. It seems that it was at his invitation that Catherine Bernard came to the Mercy Sisters in Newfoundland.

Practically nothing is known about Catherine's Bernard's early days. In *The Leaves of the Annals* (Vol. 3, p. 30), Sister Mary Austin Carroll stated that Catherine lost her parents at an early age and that she received part of her education from the religious community, the Faithful Companions of Jesus, in Limerick. What is known about Catherine Bernard is that when she came to Newfoundland, she was a well-educated, capable,

talented and energetic young woman, who would take the Newfoundland Mercy mission to her heart and essentially become the mission's second foundress.

Catherine Bernard's arrival in St. John's in September of 1850 marked the turning point for the Newfoundland foundation. She was, in fact, the first of many young women from Ireland to come to Newfoundland to join the Sisters of Mercy. Having spent a few months as a postulant, Catherine was admitted to the novitiate on December 8, 1850 and given the religious name, Sister Mary Francis Xavier, in honour of the great apostle of the missions. Over time, she became known as Sister Mary Xavier or simply, Mother Xavier. In the novitiate with her was another young woman, a widow, Mary O'Regan Redmond, who had joined the community in October, so that by the end of 1850, the Mercy Sisters in Newfoundland numbered four – two professed, one novice and one postulant.

After Sister Mary Francis Xavier made profession of vows on April 30, 1853, she involved herself heart and soul in the works of mercy, teaching in the school and visiting the sick in their homes. From the beginning, she seemed to have a special predilection for the poor and the sick, and her life as a Sister of Mercy provided her with a myriad of opportunities to comfort them and ease their suffering.

By late summer of 1854, just as things were beginning to look up for the mission, St. John's was in the throes of another epidemic, the dreaded cholera. The sisters closed the school until January of 1855 and devoted all their energies to those afflicted with the disease and to their families. In this situation, as in the time of Sister M. Joseph Nugent, the Mercy sisters, still only four in number, were very much in the forefront, visiting the sick, washing and feeding them, bringing physical and spiritual comfort to the stricken under the most wretched circumstances imaginable. Hundred of citizens died from the

epidemic and many children were left homeless. To respond to this need, Immaculate Conception Orphanage was opened at Mercy Convent on December 8, 1854. This new ministry called upon all the resources of the small community, as they cared for the physical needs of their young charges and tried to comfort them in their many and terrible losses.

The entrance of Anastasia Tarahan, the first Newfoundland-born postulant, in December 1854 must have injected new hope into the hearts of Sisters Mary Francis Creedon, Mary Francis Xavier Bernard, Mary Vincent Nugent and Mary Elizabeth Redmond, and given them another reason to trust in the providential care of a loving God. With five vibrant, enthusiastic and capable women dedicated wholeheartedly to the mission, anything seemed possible. However, by the spring of 1855, it became obvious to all that Sister M. Francis Creedon was wearing out from all her labours, and her death on July 15, 1855 brought great sorrow and consternation to the sisters she left behind.

On July 20, 1855, the sisters, still in shock after the untimely death of their superior and mentor, gathered in Chapter at Mercy Convent. Bishop John T. Mullock, who presided at the Chapter, appointed Sister M. Francis Xavier as the new superior. The first entry in the *Acts of Chapter* of Mercy Convent, dated July 20, 1855, and signed by the bishop, reads as follows:

There not being a sufficient number of professed religious in the community to elect by vote of Chapter, the Right Reverend Doctor Mullock nominated to the office of Superioress, Sister Mary Francis Xavier Bernard.

Two days after Sister Mary Xavier was named superior, a very poignant letter went from the four young sisters left in community to Sister Mary Xavier McGuire, the superior of the Convent of Mercy on Baggot Street, Dublin. Besides informing

her of the death of their beloved foundress, the little community pleaded with her for help. In this letter, preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in Ireland, the desolation and grief of the little community is almost palpable, and their request for assistance is very clear: "... to prevent a Convent which promises to give such glory to God from failing, for want of a few nuns capable of governing it."

At the time of her nomination as superior, Sister Mary Xavier was twenty-seven years of age and had been professed for only two years. Though she was the oldest of the four sisters left at Mercy Convent, the prospect of leading the fragile community and being responsible for the school and the orphanage must have been daunting. Despite the fact that the help they sought and were desperately hoping for from Ireland never materialized, Sister Mary Xavier and her sisters forged ahead, relying on God's providence and on one another.

One of the first projects that Sister Mary Xavier coordinated in her role as superior was the construction of a new convent and school to replace the dilapidated wooden structure that had been in use since 1842. She and her sisters toiled to make Our Lady of Mercy School a center of excellence, but the deteriorating condition of the physical structure made this plan virtually impossible. The increasing number of students and sisters also necessitated a larger and more secure space. To bring her dream to reality, Sister Mary Xavier sought and received the patronage of the Catholic citizenry of St. John's. To the delight of the whole town, the cornerstone for the new stone building was laid on July 22, 1856.

The Newfoundlander of July 28, 1856 reported that the sun shone brightly that morning as the cathedral bells rang out, cannons were fired and a brilliant display of fireworks took place in front of the cathedral. This was indeed an occasion of celebration for the Catholic community of St. John's, and they

visibly expressed their delight and satisfaction that their sisters would be comfortably and safely housed and that their children would have a school befitting the kind of education they were receiving. The classroom section of the building was completed by July of 1857, but the sisters were not able to occupy the convent section until October. They must have breathed a sigh of relief, after residing fifteen months in the cramped space of the orphanage infirmary.

In 1859, Sister Mary Xavier and her sisters took another giant leap of faith, as they planned and prepared for their first foundation from Mercy Convent. The convergence of a number of circumstances facilitated their planning, not the least of which was the fact that there were now eighteen sisters living in the Military Road community. Further to this, the Immaculate Conception Orphanage at Mercy Convent was becoming overcrowded and entirely inadequate for accommodating the numbers of children needing admission. At the same time, Bishop Fleming's property at Belvedere, which he had bequeathed to the Sisters of Mercy to support a girls' orphanage, was becoming available to the sisters.

There must have been great excitement, as well as some sadness on the morning of November 16, 1859, when four sisters and thirty orphan girls left Mercy Convent to take up residence at St. Michael's Convent, named for Bishop Fleming, their dear friend and benefactor. Sister Mary Xavier appointed the newly professed Sister Mary Liguori Carmody from her home area of Limerick to be the leader of this first foundation from the Motherhouse, which she maintained as a branch house under her authority and direction. In initiating this Mercy venture, Sister Mary Xavier and the sisters remaining at Mercy Convent, as well as the new St. Michael's community, were being called again to place their trust in God's Providence, a stance that was very familiar to the Sisters of Mercy in these early days of the mission.

Sister M. Xavier was superior of Mercy Convent, and consequently the head of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland from 1855 to 1880, with the exception of the years from 1866 to 1871. During her time of office, more than forty women joined the Mercy community in Newfoundland. In 1858 the sisters welcomed eight young women, seven of whom were Irish coming from Limerick, Cork and Waterford. An entry in the Account Book at Mercy Convent in January 1858 notes: "Travel and other expenses for postulants from Ireland." It can be deduced from this that Sister M. Xavier was in contact with these women before they left Ireland and that she supported them financially on their journey to the Newfoundland mission. What a joy it must have been for her to welcome so many Irish women to the mission she loved, especially those from her home area of Limerick, which sent ten young women to the Newfoundland Mercy community between 1850 and 1860.

These were undoubtedly years of growth and expansion for the still youthful foundation. They were also times of great challenge, as the sisters began to move beyond the familiar environment of Mercy Convent to new places of ministry, and as they experienced the death of some of their friends in community.

Meanwhile, the Sisters of Mercy were becoming increasingly well known and loved in their adopted community of St. John's. Sometimes they requested help from the community for one of their projects and received a generous response; at other times, help came voluntarily and even unexpectedly. A thank-you note from the Sisters of Mercy in *The Newfoundlander* of March 1, 1858 gives an example of how the people looked after their sisters. One fine day in late February of that year, a large number of the citizens of St. John's – fishermen, merchants, tradesmen – had, without any solicitation, cut and hauled a load of wood to help the sisters through the winter. Sister Mary Xavier was quick to acknowledge publicly the gratitude of the sisters for this

grand gesture of care, loyalty and appreciation. *The Patriot and The Terra Nova Herald* of March 23, 1868 reported that a citizen of St. John's had donated nine pounds to Bishop Mullock for "the relief of the poor of his flock." The notice added that the bishop handed this charitable donation to the Sisters of Mercy for the relief of the sick and suffering poor whom they regularly visited. The Sisters of Mercy, from their very beginnings were known to be for the poor, the lost and the suffering, and to this mission of Mercy, they gave their all.

Sister Mary Xavier's energy and enthusiasm for mission seemed boundless. When the orphan children transferred to Belvedere in 1859, Sister M. Xavier saw that the vacated space at Mercy Convent was ideal for use as a boarding school for girls from the outports, whose opportunities for education were limited. She lost no time in bringing this about, for by June of 1861, *The Patriot and The Terra Nova Herald* was advertising the opening of St. Clair's Boarding School, setting forth its fairly comprehensive syllabus. In 1863, under Sister M. Xavier's leadership, the sisters opened St. Bridget's, an elementary school for poor girls in the east end of St. John's. Situated on Hunt's Lane just west of Temperance Street, St. Bridget's had an enrolment of more than three hundred girls by 1878. During its years of operation (1863 to 1881), the sisters who taught at St. Bridget's walked from and back to Mercy Convent every day in sunshine, rain, sleet or drifting snow, becoming familiar sights in the roadways of old St. John's.

A woman of great vision and great zeal, Sister Mary Xavier was constantly reaching out to situations of need and seeing new opportunities for expanding the mission of Mercy. During her tenure of office, she always accompanied her sisters to these new communities, helping them to navigate their beginnings in new environments.

While all these new ventures were happening, Our Lady of Mercy School continued to flourish, gaining a reputation for excellence of programs and proficiency of teaching. Music, song, drama, art and needlework complemented the wide range of academic subjects to give a well-rounded education to the students.

Although new foundations undoubtedly gave vitality, vibrancy and promise to the mission, the Mercy Convent community was becoming depleted and the workload of the sisters left behind was greatly increased. Besides teaching in the schools at Mercy Convent and St. Bridget's, the sisters at Mercy Convent supervised the girls at St. Clair's Boarding School after school hours, and continued with their visitation of the poor and sick around the city. There was so much to do and so few to do it. In all of this, Sister M. Xavier, like Catherine McAuley and Francis Creedon before her, trusted in God's providential care and continued to respond to needs whenever and wherever they arose, not sparing herself in the process. Lack of human or material resources, sickness or even death did not deter her from the mission, which she firmly believed had been entrusted to her by her God.

In September 1880, Sister Mary Xavier was stricken with a paralysis from which she never recovered. She died on February 26, 1882 at the age of fifty-four years, having lived thirty-two of these in Newfoundland. She had been a faithful and zealous Sister of Mercy and a strong, wise and capable leader in her community. Sister Mary Xavier was also loved and revered by the larger community, as her obituary in the February 28 and March 3, 1882 issues of *The Newfoundlander* attests:

We suppose no member of that order was better known outside the Convent precincts than Mother Xavier. She had been so long in our midst, a ministering angel of charity in countless necessities,

spiritual and temporal, that her sweet presence, always radiant with benignity, was familiar to us all. To her pupils she was the zealous yet indulgent instructress, ever winning their affection while she directed their mental culture. But to the poor, the sick and the sorrow-laden, her heart went out in all its tenderness and bounty.

The Newfoundlander of March 3, 1882 went on to say that on the day of Sister Mary Xavier's burial, the citizens of St. John's, "a dense throng composed of all classes and denominations," gave another testimonial to their depth of love for this woman of Mercy. When huge snow banks made it impossible for the funeral procession to access the cemetery at Belvedere, the people of the town arrived en masse, shovels in hand, and made a level pathway through the mountains of snow to bring their dearly loved Mother Xavier to her final resting place.

Sister Mary Xavier Bernard is buried at Belvedere, but her legacy of love and commitment lives on in the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Elizabeth (O'Regan) Redmond

Mary O'Regan, daughter of Anne and Cornelius O'Regan, was born in Ireland in December of 1824. The exact place of her birth is not known. The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy indicate that she was born in Donegal, but a note affixed to her picture in the Heritage Room of the Sisters of



Mercy names Waterford as her place of birth. Still another source claims she was born in Youghal, County Cork. Neither is there any record of the time of her arrival in Newfoundland, but it had to be prior to 1843, because the *Marriage Register* in the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's documents her marriage to Peter Redmond of Enniscorthy, County Wexford in the Old Chapel on Henry Street in St. John's on November 20, 1843.

Mary's husband died a few years after their marriage, and nothing further about the young widow is known until she asked to join the Sisters of Mercy in 1850. Perhaps she saw the sisters going around the town doing their works of Mercy and was impressed by their way of life and their commitment to the people of St. John's. Perhaps she knew of the Sisters of Mercy in her native Ireland before coming to Newfoundland. Whatever the connection, she came to the Mercy community on Military Road in October of 1850, joining Sister M. Francis Creedon, Sister M. Vincent Nugent, a novice, and Catherine Bernard, the postulant from Limerick who had arrived in Newfoundland in September.

Mary was received into the novitiate and given the religious name, Sister Mary Elizabeth, on July 14, 1851. *The Patriot and The Terra Nova Herald* of July 26, 1851 notes that the assistant to Bishop Mullock at her reception ceremony was Father Thomas Waldron, the same priest who had witnessed her marriage to Peter Redmond in 1843. On page 31 of *Weavers of the Tapestry*, Sister Kathrine Bellamy states that, at the time of Sister Mary Elizabeth's reception, Father Waldron was parish priest of King's Cove, and was likely in St. John's attending the reception ceremony of his niece, Sister M. Augustine Clare Waldron, at Presentation Convent, which was to take place the following day.

Sister M. Elizabeth was present at the death of Sister M. Francis Creedon, laboured with the other sisters during the many

epidemics that afflicted St. John's, and very likely looked after the needs of the girls at Immaculate Conception Orphanage, after it opened in 1854. She had a long novitiate, four years in duration and was professed as a lay sister on September 24, 1855 by Bishop McKinnon of Arichat, Nova Scotia. At this time Sister Mary Xavier Bernard was Superior of Mercy Convent. They had been in the novitiate together and undoubtedly shared many experiences and memories from their early years.

The fact that Sister Mary Xavier asked Sister Mary Elizabeth to be a founding member of the new community being established at Belvedere indicates the high regard in which she held her. On November 16, 1859, Sister Mary Elizabeth joined Sister Mary Liguori Carmody, Sister Mary Clare Tarahan and Sister Mary Bonaventure Cussen, then a novice, on the first foundation from Mercy Convent, to be known as St. Michael's, Belvedere. She must have been delighted when her dear novitiate companion, Sister M. Vincent Nugent, was appointed superior of St. Michael's in January of 1861. The two had spent nearly a decade together at Mercy Convent during some of the most difficult days of the mission.

Sister Mary Elizabeth's ministry as a Sister of Mercy was one of quiet dedicated service to the community and the children. Her faithfulness and diligence in attending to her daily tasks around the convent both at Mercy Convent and at St. Michael's, Belvedere enabled the other sisters to carry out their ministry of education and other external works of Mercy. Her birth sister entered the Mercy community at St. Michael's at some later date, and was known in the congregation as Sister Mary Catherine.

Sister Mary Elizabeth died at St. Michael's Convent on January 9, 1893, at the age of sixty-nine years. She had lived as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland for more than forty years. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere next to her sister, Sister Mary Catherine O'Regan.

Sister Mary Liguori Carmody

Mary Theresa Carmody, the only daughter of Mary and Terence Carmody, was born in Limerick. The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy state that she was born in 1828, but her gravestone indicates that her year of birth was 1830.

The Carmodys were close friends of Bishop John T. Mullock, and it seems that it was he who influenced Mary Theresa's decision to leave Ireland in the spring of 1857 for the Newfoundland Mercy mission. She and a companion, Bridget Guinane, also from Limerick, arrived in St. John's on the warship, *Cheronesi*, on April 17, 1857, and the two were warmly welcomed by Bishop Mullock and the small Mercy community on Military Road, which at that time numbered six sisters.

At her reception into the novitiate on September 24 of that same year, Mary Theresa received the religious name, Sister Mary Liguori Michael. She was professed at Mercy Convent, along with Sister Mary Joseph Guinane, on April 25, 1859.

Less than seven months later, on November 16, 1859, Sister Mary Liguori and three companions, Sisters M. Elizabeth Redmond, M. Clare Tarahan and M. Bonaventure Cussen, a novice, opened St. Michael's Convent and Orphanage on the Belvedere property. Sister M. Liguori had been appointed superior of this first foundation from Mercy Convent, which operated for a while as a branch house. This meant that Sister Mary Liguori took care of the day-to-day events at St. Michael's, but all major decisions were reserved to the superior of Mercy Convent, who at that time was Sister M. Xavier Bernard.

When St. Michael's opened in 1859, thirty orphan girls from Immaculate Conception Orphanage at Mercy Convent went with the sisters to their new home and school. As the number of children increased, the responsibilities of the orphanage and

convent placed great stress on Sister Mary Liguori, who was timid and retiring by nature. When Sister Vincent Nugent was appointed to replace her in January 1861, she was happy to return to Mercy Convent.

In 1863, Sister Mary Liguori was again asked to lead a new foundation, this time to Burin. Sister Mary Charles McKenna, a newly professed sister, Sister Mary Xavier Tarahan, the second Tarahan to enter the Sisters of Mercy, who was still a novice, and Mary McAuliffe, a postulant, were her companions on that mission. On July 11, 1863 the founding sisters, along with Sister Mary Xavier Bernard and Sister Mary Gertrude Moore from the motherhouse and Bishop Mullock, boarded the *Ariel*, bound for Burin. An account of their arrival is found in the July 13, 1863 issue of *The Newfoundlander*, part of which follows...

On the debarcation of His Lordship and the nuns, salvos of artillery rent the air, accompanied by loud shouts of joyful welcome from the assembled multitudes, and bonfires illuminated the surrounding hills.

St. Anne's Convent had been prepared beforehand by the people of Burin for the new community, and the one-room school, which was attended by both boys and girls, was situated quite near the convent. The summer months gave the sisters time to meet the people, visit the sick and prepare for the opening of school in September. It can be assumed that the curriculum was similar to that used at Mercy Convent, at St. Michael's and at St. Joseph's in Brigus, which had been founded two years earlier. The convent school in Burin, like the other sisters' schools, quickly established its reputation for excellence and began to attract students from all around the area.

St. Anne's, however, was a long distance from any other convent, and it is quite likely that the sisters must have felt lonely and

isolated at times, even though they were kept busy with their ministry in the school and in the community. Sister Mary Liguori remained in Burin until 1871, when she returned to Mercy Convent. This was not the usual practice, as sisters generally stayed for life on the mission to which they had been appointed. However, the *Acts of Chapter* of Mercy Convent, dated August 28, 1871, allowed for a change in policy for special cases, specifically mentioning Sister Mary Liguori.

The Chapter of 1875 appointed Sister Mary Liguori assistant to Sister Mary Xavier, the superior of Mercy Convent, and in the early 1880s she was appointed mistress of novices. When Mother Bernard Clune died in October of 1894, Sister Mary Liguori was appointed superior of Mercy Convent. During her time of office, a Business Education program was added to the curriculum at Our Lady of Mercy School under the direction of the gifted Sister Mary Joseph Fox. It was Sister Mary Liguori who arranged for trees to be planted in the garden at Mercy Convent and who had the garden enclosed by an iron railing.

In telling the story of Sister Mary Liguori's life and ministry as a Sister of Mercy, it seems that the "reluctant superior," as she is named by Sister Kathrine Bellamy in *Weavers of the Tapestry*, spent many years of her life going against herself. In all, she spent fifteen years as leader of convents and schools and though she seemed to have had little confidence in her abilities as leader, she carried out this ministry with diligence and faithfulness, and perhaps to her own surprise, with a great deal of success.

Sister Mary Liguori Carmody died at Mercy Convent on May 7, 1915, having lived as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland for fifty-eight years. Her obituary tells a little of the kind of person she was:

She had devoted her rare talents to the various forms of charity which falls within the sphere of a Sister of

Mercy. Being possessed of a broad mind which she developed much by reading, her company was always deeply interesting, while her natural kindness of heart brought sunshine to those who had the good fortune of knowing her, but especially to her particular friends, the poor.

Sister Mary Liguori is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

Sister Mary Joseph Guinane

Bridget Guinane, daughter of Mary and Denis Guinane, was born in Limerick in 1841. At the age of sixteen, she and Mary Theresa Carmody, also from Limerick, crossed the Atlantic on the warship *Cheronesi* to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. When the two arrived in St. John's on April 17, 1857, Bishop John T. Mullock and the small community at Mercy Convent welcomed them with open arms. The two prospective postulants were delighted to discover that they would have another companion in their beginning days, a young woman from Colliers, Susanna Cole, who had entered the community on Military Road a few weeks earlier.

All three were received into the novitiate on September 24, 1857 and joined Sister Mary Clare Tarahan, sister of Sister Mary Baptist, who was in her second year of novitiate. *The Newfoundlander* of September 27, 1857 records the "beautiful and impressive ceremony" of their reception, noting that after the ceremony, "a large number of visitors were entertained by the Bishop, the Rev. Superioress and the ladies of the convent at an elegant *dejeuner*."

Bridget's religious name, given at entrance into novitiate, was Sister Mary Joseph Stanislaus. She was professed on April 25, 1859, a year before her younger sister, Honora, came to Newfoundland to enter the Sisters of Mercy.

Notes compiled by Sister Mary Philippa Hanley and held in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's state that Sister Mary Joseph was transferred from Mercy Convent to St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus in 1865. The same notes state that in November of 1878 she went from the motherhouse on Military Road to Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour. There is no indication of her length of stay in either of these convents.

The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy do not have any further information about Sister Mary Joseph. It is likely that she spent much of her life at Mercy Convent, teaching in the school, visiting the sick and attending to the various ministries that were part of the life of a Sister of Mercy.

Sister Mary Joseph was sixty-nine years of age when she died on November 18, 1909. She and her sister, known in religion as Sister Mary Ignatius Guinane, are buried next to one another at Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary of the Angels Banks

Ellen Mary Catherine Banks was born in Limerick in 1837. Her parents were Mary and Michael Banks. At the age of twenty-one, Ellen left family and homeland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's on May 6, 1858. She entered the novitiate in October of 1858, receiving the religious name of Sister Mary of the Angels. Four other young Irish women were received into the novitiate with her, one other from Limerick and three from Cork.

Sister Mary of the Angels made profession of vows on October 24, 1860, and less than a year later was selected by Sister Mary Xavier as superior of the new foundation that was opening in Brigus. On September 11, 1861, she and three companions, Sister Mary de Chantal O'Keefe, Sister Mary Gonzaga Coady and Mary Barron, an eighteen year old Irish girl who had just been

accepted as a postulant on September 10, boarded the *Ellen Gisborne* for their voyage to the north side of Conception Bay. Accompanying them on their journey were Bishop John T. Mullock, Sister M. Xavier, superior of Mercy Convent and her assistant, Sister M. Baptist Tarahan.

The arrival of the sisters in Brigus was a red letter day for the bustling community, according to a report in *The Newfoundlander* of September 23, 1861. There was an air of general excitement in the community, flags were flying from Tara Hill and from the newly-built convent, cannons volleyed forth, crowds cheered and the whole town had taken on a festive appearance. *The Newfoundlander* notes that the convent bell sounded as the steamer approached the harbour, after which “the population moved en masse to the wharf to demonstrate their reverence, as well as their glad feelings, for the blessing conferred upon them in the landing of the clergy and the nuns.”

A joyful and noisy procession accompanied the sisters and the bishop to the steps of the convent, where the bishop thanked the people for their warm welcome and imparted the episcopal blessing. What a wonderful beginning for the first Mercy foundation outside St. John’s!

Shortly after their arrival, the sisters began visitation of the sick and the poor in the town, and within a few days opened the convent school, teaching both boys and girls. It did not take long for St. Joseph’s Convent School in Brigus to develop the same reputation for excellence as the schools established by the sisters in St. John’s, where academic studies were supplemented by music, singing, art and drama.

All four of the founding sisters, including the superior, Sister Mary of the Angels, were under the age of 26, but, young and inexperienced as they were, they set a solid educational foundation in the community of Brigus that was to last for many years into the future.

In 1867, Sister Mary of the Angels welcomed her sister as a member of St. Joseph's community. Annie Banks, later known as Sister Mary Agnes, entered at Brigus, made her novitiate and was professed there, and remained in community with her sister until her transfer to Conception Harbour in 1881.

Sister Mary of the Angels remained in Brigus until her death on November 16, 1884 at the age of forty-seven. She is one of the five Sisters of Mercy buried in Brigus.

Sister Mary Bonaventure Cussen

Ann Mary Joseph Emily Cussen was born in Limerick in March of 1839. Her parents were Emily and William Cussen.

On April 12, 1858, Emily left Ireland in the company of four other young women bound for the Newfoundland mission of the Sisters of Mercy. The five arrived in St. John's and entered the Mercy community on Military Road on May 6, 1858. Emily was received into the novitiate with her four companions on October 28, 1858, taking the religious name Sister Mary Bonaventure Gabriel. Their reception ceremony was the first of its kind to be held in the newly-consecrated Cathedral of St. John the Baptist.

While still a novice, Sister M. Bonaventure was chosen for the new St. Michael's foundation which opened at Belvedere in November of 1859.

Sister Mary Bonaventure made profession of vows at St. Michael's, Belvedere on October 24, 1860, and in 1865 was appointed superior of that convent. On December 8, 1864 the sisters had begun a new ministry on that site, a House of Mercy for unemployed young women. Her many gifts would certainly have been called upon in this new endeavour on behalf of the poor.

Sister M. Bonaventure returned to Mercy Convent in 1871, but was recalled to St. Michael's as superior in January of 1873, replacing Sister M. Vincent Nugent. She resigned as superior in April 1875, but accepted the office of bursar, which she held until 1885.

Sister M. Bonaventure was said to have had a great love for the children at Belvedere. She herself had been left an orphan at an early age and consequently had a deep sensitivity to the losses with which orphan children have to cope. She spent twenty-four of the twenty-eight years of her religious life at St. Michael's. During the last couple of years of her life, Sister M. Bonaventure was unwell, and she succumbed to her illness on February 2, 1886. She was in her forty-seventh year. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.



Gravestone – Belvedere Cemetery, St. John's

The Evening Telegram of February 5, 1886 describes the scene in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist on the morning of her funeral:

In the center of the Church stood a plain but tasteful catafalque, and around it knelt some sixty or seventy orphan children from St. Michael's, Belvedere, weeping and praying betimes for the good, kind and faithful Sister Bonaventure, who for more than twenty years had been an Angel of charity and a Mother of mercy to the homeless orphan girls of Belvedere.

Another article appearing in *The Evening Telegram* of Friday, February 6, 1886, recalls some of Sister M. Bonaventure's many virtues and states that she was one of the sisters

...chosen and honoured by Bishop Mullock to take charge of his loved and charitable enterprise. The Bishop did not fail to see in her, young as she was, an aptitude for this special work of mercy.

Sister Mary de Chantal O'Keeffe

Mary Ellen Joseph O'Keeffe was the second daughter born to Johanna and Daniel O'Keeffe of Cork. Her birth date was November 16, 1838.

On April 12, 1858, when Mary Ellen was only nineteen years of age, she and four other young Irish women, two from Limerick and another from her own home area of Cork, left Ireland, bound for St. John's, Newfoundland. The five arrived on the sixth of May and entered the Sisters of Mercy that same day. Their reception ceremony, performed by Bishop John T. Mullock on October 28, 1858, was historically significant, in that it was the first event of its kind to be held in the newly consecrated Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. Mary Ellen received the religious name of Sister Mary Jane Francis de Chantal, but she was generally called Sister Mary de Chantal. Her name would become known far and wide throughout Newfoundland.

Sister Mary de Chantal professed her vows as a Sister of Mercy on October 24, 1860. Less than a year later, she and three others went on the foundation to Brigus. *The Patriot and The Terra Nova Herald* of February 27, 1860 refers to a pastoral letter written by Bishop Mullock, in which he stated that the Catholics of Brigus had collected nearly 900 pounds for the erection of the new St. Joseph's Convent in preparation for the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy. The founding community arrived in Brigus on September 11, 1861 to a warm and enthusiastic welcome by the people, who escorted them in procession to their new home. The sisters immediately began visitation of the sick and the poor, and within a few days, opened the first convent school in Brigus. There had been a Catholic school in Brigus since 1805.

In 1864, when St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere was in need of help, Sister Mary de Chantal was transferred back to St. John's. After only two years at Belvedere, she was appointed superior of Mercy Convent, replacing Sister Mary Xavier Bernard, who had led the community since the death of Sister Mary Francis Creedon. Sister Mary de Chantal moved again in 1871, this time to Burin as superior of St. Anne's Convent. In 1875 she returned to the motherhouse on Military Road, where she served a term as bursar and a term as assistant to the superior.

During her term of office as superior of Mercy Convent (1866 – 1871), two new foundations were established, Conception Harbour and Petty Harbour, the latter being a branch house administered by Sister M. de Chantal from Mercy Convent. In each case, she, like Sister Mary Xavier before her, accompanied the founding sisters to their new communities.

Sister Mary de Chantal returned to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere in 1883, this time as superior. She remained there for the next forty-four years, holding the office of superior or assistant for most of those years. During her long life as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland, four bishops occupied the Episcopacy – Bishop John T. Mullock, Bishop Thomas Power,

Archbishop Michael Howley and Archbishop E.P. Roche – and she worked closely with each of them, though not always agreeing with their policies or practice.



New St. Michael's Orphanage, built in 1885

As superior of St. Michael's, Sister Mary de Chantal oversaw the construction of the modern brick orphanage, which was dedicated by Bishop Power on September 29, 1885, the anniversary of Catherine McAuley's birth. Such a huge project resulted in a heavy debt, which became a source of constant worry and stress for Sister Mary de Chantal and her sisters. The death of Belvedere's great supporter, Bishop Mullock, and the 1892 Fire which devastated St. John's, made it impossible to get much in the way of financial help from the citizens. An unexpected gift towards the cause came from Judge Joseph Little, who donated the insurance money he received from his house and property, which had been destroyed by the fire. Welcome as this was, it did not solve all their financial problems and the sisters were forced to look to other possible sources of assistance. Sister M. de Chantal and Sister M. Ignatius Guinane,

resourceful and fearless women that they were, made a decision to go to the United States, to seek the necessary financial aid. Their appeal met a generous response in the dioceses of Brooklyn, Philadelphia and Boston, where they already had some connections. *The Daily News* of April 22, 1927 records that the two returned to Belvedere, delighted with the success of their endeavor and “carrying golden dollars in exchange for the golden impressions they left behind.”

Sister Mary de Chantal was superior of St. Michael’s Convent when plans were in progress for the amalgamation of all the Mercy Convents in Newfoundland. Indeed, she was one of the signatories on the correspondence sent to Rome prior to 1916, requesting this amalgamation.

The superior of St. Michael’s Convent was ultimately in charge of the orphanage and of the children’s education. In 1916, in her role as superior, Sister Mary de Chantal arranged for interested students from St. Michael’s to enroll in Sister Mary Joseph Fox’s commercial class at Our Lady of Mercy Academy. The Report of the Superintendent of Education for Roman Catholic Schools for the year ending December 31, 1918, records that eight students at Belvedere were given special training in typing, shorthand and bookkeeping. Sister Mary de Chantal was determined that the girls under her care at St. Michael’s would have all the advantages afforded other students in the town.

Sister Mary de Chantal celebrated both her golden jubilee and her diamond jubilee at St. Michael’s, Belvedere, a place that was very dear to her. Looking back at her long and productive life as a Sister of Mercy, it is obvious that she was a natural leader, competent, innovative, self-assured, and decisive. The May 1927 issue of *Inter Nos*, the newsletter of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, notes that Sister Mary de Chantal “was endowed with a fine physique and a commanding personality” and that she was esteemed and respected by all with whom she came in contact.

The same issue of *Inter Nos* quotes from her obituary as follows:

The limited confines of her Convent walls could not narrow her broad mind, while her large, generous Irish heart but grew and expanded with her years, and in it she seemed to find a place for everybody. Her generosity was proverbial and sisters of any community, whether they belonged to the Mercy Order or not, always found in Belvedere a warm welcome ... with increasing years, she seemed to grow more forgetful of self and more concerned for the happiness and comfort of those around her.

Sister Mary de Chantal died at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere after a short illness on April 5, 1927. At the time of her death, she was eighty-eight years of age and the oldest sister in the Congregation. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary of the Cross Reardon

Anne Mary Magdalen Reardon was the daughter of Catherine and Michael Reardon of Cork. She was born on July 19, 1837 and was one of five young women who left Ireland in April of 1858 to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.

The five arrived in St. John's on May 6, 1858 and entered the community on Military Road that same day. On October 28, 1858, Anne Mary was received into the novitiate, taking the religious name, Sister Mary of the Cross. She was professed on October 24, 1860 and was one of the four sisters chosen to go on the Burin foundation in 1863. However, in February of 1865 she was back at the motherhouse in St. John's, where she was appointed to the offices of assistant and mistress of novices. For some unknown reason, not recorded in the *Annals* of Mercy Convent, she was removed from both of these positions less than a year later.

Sister Mary of the Cross returned to Burin, probably in 1871, according to a notation in the *Annals* of Mercy Convent on August 28, 1871. She remained there for the rest of her life sharing her many gifts with the people. It is said that she distinguished herself in both school and community in Burin, where she was remembered as a great woman of Mercy.

Sister Mary of the Cross Reardon died at Burin on March 2, 1885, at the age of 48 years. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery in that community.

Sister Josephine Mary Merchant

Mary Ann Merchant was born in 1824 in Waterford. Her parents were Mary Anne and James Merchant.

On May 8, 1858, at the age of 34 years, Mary Ann entered the Convent of Mercy in St. John's as a lay sister. In that year, eight Irish women made the journey across the Atlantic to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, five in April, one in August, one in November and Mary Ann herself in May. When she was received into the novitiate in March of 1859, Mary Ann was given the name Sister Josephine Mary.

Sister Josephine Mary made profession of vows on December 3, 1861 and lived as a Sister of Mercy for 44 years. Nothing further is known about her, but it is likely that she devoted her life to the care of her sisters and the boarding students at Mercy Convent. As a lay sister, she would not have been involved in teaching in the school, but would have been responsible for housekeeping duties around the convent, for attending to the poor who came for assistance and for visiting the sick. She is one of those forgotten sisters, who by their constancy and dedicated ministry behind the scenes, made it possible for others to carry out the works of mercy in the larger community.

Sister Josephine Mary died at Mercy Convent on June 1, 1902 at the age of 78 years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Philomena O'Donovan

Honora Mary Bernard O'Donovan was born in the parish of Monkstown in County Cork on May 6, 1837. She was the daughter of Julia and John O'Donovan.



Honora was one of the five young women who left Ireland in April 1858 to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She arrived in St. John's on her twenty-first birthday, May 6, 1858, and entered the community at Mercy Convent that same day.

With her four companions, Honora entered the novitiate on October 28, 1858, receiving the religious name of Sister Mary Philomena Raphael. On September 25, 1860, while she was still a novice, Sister Mary Philomena joined the community at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere. She made profession of vows at St. Michael's on January 23, 1861 and continued her ministry in the school and orphanage.

With her arrival in the community, the sisters at St. Michael's made the decision to begin another ministry, a House of Mercy, where unemployed young women could be safely and comfortably housed and at the same time, be educated and trained for various employments. *The Newfoundlander* of December 12, 1864 records the opening of this "house of refuge for females of good character, out of employment" on December 8, 1864 on the Belvedere property, and notes that it was under guardianship of the Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Mary Philomena, however, was not to minister at the House of Mercy, for sometime in 1864 she was assigned to St. Anne's Convent, Burin, which had been founded the year before. She remained on mission there until 1886, when she returned to St. Michael's, Belvedere. However, in August of 1891 she was again bound for Burin, where from 1893 to 1896 she served as superior of St. Anne's Convent. When her term of office was completed in 1896, she returned to St. John's, becoming superior of St. Michael's Convent from 1910 to 1912. She remained at St. Michael's for the rest of her life.

Sister M. Philomena died at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere on February 2, 1917 at the age of eighty years. She had been in Newfoundland for nearly sixty of these years. She is buried at Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Bernard Clune

Anne Mary Bridget Clune was born on May 24, 1837, the daughter of Bridget and John Clune of Limerick. In 1837, no one could have guessed the impact that this newborn Irish girl would have on the people of a land across the ocean.



Anne was twenty-one years old when she left Ireland for the Mercy mission in Newfoundland. She arrived in St. John's on November 24, 1858, the seventh Irish woman to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland in that year. She entered the novitiate on April 25, 1859, receiving the religious name of Sister Mary Bernard Xavier and made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on January 23, 1861. Throughout her life she was known simply as Sister Mary Bernard or Mother Bernard.

After her profession, Sister Mary Bernard was assigned to Mercy Convent on Military Road. The young sister showed great promise from her earliest years and her natural talents and abilities were enhanced by education, culture and her lifelong interest in reading and learning.

During her years at Mercy Convent, Sister Mary Bernard fulfilled a number of offices. In January 1866 she was appointed bursar, with responsibility for managing the financial affairs of Mercy Convent, Our Lady of Mercy School, St. Clair's Boarding School, St. Bridget's School in the east end of the city, and the Petty Harbour foundation. At the same time, she taught full-time at Our Lady of Mercy School.

In 1875, Sister Mary Bernard was elected mistress of novices at Mercy Convent, and, in 1881 she was elected superior of that community. This election happened under very difficult circumstances, which had necessitated the calling of a special Chapter. This troublesome situation however, did not dampen her zeal, and she gave herself wholeheartedly to her ministry of leadership at Mercy Convent for the next fourteen years.

Early in her tenure as superior of Mercy Convent, Sister M. Bernard saw that St. John's was sadly lacking in educational opportunities for young children from ages three to eight years. She sought to remedy this situation by refitting space vacated by St. Clair's Boarding School which had closed earlier that year, to accommodate the needs of little ones. By September of 1881, Angels' Guardian School at Mercy Convent was ready to open its doors, and the parents of thirty-four little girls and boys were delighted to have their children avail of this wonderful opportunity. On the occasion of the centennial year of the arrival of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, John FitzHenry, a former student of Angels' Guardian School wrote the superior general, naming some of the sisters who had taught him. In that letter, date July 29, 1942, which is preserved in the Archives of

the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, he singles out "the gracious, kindly Reverend Mother Bernard, who always carried herself with a regal air which inspired respect and esteem."

Sister Mary Bernard won the respect and devotion of teachers and students alike, as she always seemed to be in touch with the needs of the time and ready to venture into the unknown. Talented and innovative, yet practical, she was tireless in her efforts to provide Newfoundland children of all ages with the benefits of a solid education that would fit them for life.

For many of her years in religious life, Sister M. Bernard lived and worked with Sister Mary Xavier. Both had come from Limerick, and although there was a ten-year age difference, they were devoted friends. Because of the positions Sister Mary Bernard held over the years, she likely found in Sister Mary Xavier a mentor as well as a friend. Perhaps she shared with Sister M. Xavier her dream of establishing in the St. John's area an academic center that would enable young women from all over Newfoundland to access the best possible educational and cultural opportunities. Sister M. Bernard had long recognized that the small St. Clair's Boarding School at Mercy Convent, which had been in existence since 1861, was no longer adequate, and she felt that the time was ripe for the Sisters of Mercy to launch out into new and broader fields of education.

In 1883, at her initiative and with the support of Bishop Thomas Power, the Sisters of Mercy purchased the Little estate, a five-acre property in the Waterford Valley. Sister M. Bernard saw this property as an ideal location for what she had in mind, and immediately set about adapting it for that purpose. She arranged for two additions to the original building – a wooden classroom on its eastern side and a small dormitory at the rear. However, Sister Mary Bernard was not only interested in having a good physical environment; she wanted the best in educational advantages for students and teachers in this new

establishment. To ensure that the sisters would be well prepared for the new venture, she and Sister M. Teresa O'Halleran went to Halifax to look at boarding schools and to acquaint themselves with new educational practices and techniques.



St. Bride's Boarding School, Littledale, circa 1884

The Evening Telegram of August 14, 1884 carried an advertisement for the opening of St. Bride's Boarding School for Young Ladies, noting some of the courses being offered, along with the fee structure. The notice declared the Sisters' intent to "spare no expense and leave nothing undone on their part to make St. Bride's a first-class educational institution." On August 20, 1884, St. Bride's, Littledale was formally established as a convent and a boarding school. Four boarding students were registered for classes, which began the following day.

The founding sisters of St. Bride's were Sister M. Ita Glynn, Sister M. Teresa O'Halloran, Sister M. Mercedes Lyons, a novice, and Mary O'Farrell, a postulant. All four were highly gifted women, well able for the task ahead of them. Sister Mary Bernard also hired the best lay teachers available. Music, singing, drawing, painting, dance and needlework rounded out the academic program, and from the beginning St. Bride's became known for the excellence of its programs and the competency and initiative of its teachers. Sister Mary Bernard was not only the inspiration and driving force behind the establishment of Littledale, but she kept close contact with the boarding school in its early years. Indeed St. Bride's was a branch house, under the authority and direction of the motherhouse until 1895.

Sister Mary Bernard was an exceptional woman, a woman ahead of her time, a woman of great strength of character. Her strong personality sometimes led to misunderstandings and even conflict, but her zeal, her trust in God's Providence, her commitment to the mission of Mercy and her practical wisdom earned her the love and respect of her sisters, her students, the bishops she worked with and the people she served. She is said to have been a gifted teacher and a wise and competent administrator. She was fluent in several languages and a soloist of note, who for many years was part of the choir at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist. The 1931 booklet commemorating the centenary of the Order's foundation in Ireland, which is preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, gives a glowing commendation of the work of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. In this tribute, Sister Mary Bernard was singled out and acclaimed as follows:

Many still living will recollect with pleasure her glorious voice when she sang in the cathedral. She seemed divinely gifted for the service of song and served as soloist until the close of her long career. As a teacher, she was superbly equipped for the work of

instruction and possessed to a high degree the gift of imparting knowledge to her pupils.

According to an item in *The Daily Colonist* of July 16, 1887, Sister Mary Bernard had become seriously ill and had to go to Halifax for treatment. For the next seven years, she struggled with health problems, although she remained interested and actively involved in whatever was happening in the lives of her sisters and students. She was at Mercy Convent when the community celebrated its golden jubilee in June of 1892 and saw the dedication of the Oratory of Our Lady of Good Counsel, which was built to honor that special occasion.

Sister M. Bernard's death on October 6, 1894 at the age of fifty-seven was a severe blow to the sisters at Mercy Convent and Littledale, and to many other Sisters of Mercy who had known her throughout the years. This visionary woman of Mercy left behind her a legacy of learning and culture that enabled many young women from all over Newfoundland to reap the benefits of a quality education that was wholistic, practical, and accessible.

Sister Mary Bernard is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

Sister Mary Stanislaus Taylor

Ann Mary Catherine Taylor, daughter of Bridget and William Taylor, was born in Limerick in 1837. At the age of nineteen, she left Ireland on the sailing vessel *Adelaide* to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's on June 7, 1859. With her on the voyage was another young Irish woman, Margaret Moore from Kilkenny, who was also entering the Convent of Mercy, as well as two prospective postulants for the Presentation Convent.

At her entrance into the novitiate on September 29, 1859, Ann Taylor received the religious name of Sister Mary Stanislaus Michael. She made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy at Mercy Convent on September 8, 1861.

After spending the first ten years of her life as a professed Sister of Mercy at the motherhouse, Sister M. Stanislaus was appointed to St. Anne's Convent, Burin in August of 1871. However less than a month later, on September 21, 1871, she was named as a member of the founding community in St. Lawrence. With her on that foundation were Sister Rose Murphy, superior, Sister M. Xavier Tarahan and Mary Burfitt, a postulant from the neighbouring community of Burin.

When the sisters arrived in St. Lawrence they discovered that the only space available for use as a classroom was a fish stage. Practical and resourceful, they managed to adapt it for their purposes and within a short while, they were teaching ninety-five students. Since there was no convent, the sisters lived in the priest's residence for their first five years in St. Lawrence, while he resided with one of the families in the parish.

By the time the Sisters moved to the new convent, Sister M. Stanislaus had been transferred to Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour. Here in 1874, she succeeded her novitiate companion, Sister M. Gertrude Moore, as superior. It seems that when her term of office as superior of Immaculate Conception Convent was completed, Sister M. Stanislaus returned to St. Lawrence. She must have had a real missionary spirit because this time she knew well the situation to which she was returning. Records show that the St. Lawrence foundation suffered great privation and hardship in its early years. This was especially so, after the sisters moved to the new but still uncompleted convent, where the lifestyle was frugal, the comforts were few, and where the cold Atlantic winds blew through the unfinished walls. But Sister M. Stanislaus endured, as did her dedicated and courageous companions.

In June 1885, Sister M. Stanislaus went back to the motherhouse on Military Road, likely teaching at Our Lady of Mercy School and carrying out the other works of Mercy that are part of the life of a Sister of Mercy. In July of 1890, she was elected mistress of novices.

This dedicated and faithful woman of Mercy died at Mercy Convent on May 27, 1895 at the age of fifty-seven years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Gertrude Moore

Margaret Maria Moore was the first daughter born to Mary and John Moore of Kilkenny, Ireland. Her birth date was November 15, 1840.

On June 7, 1859, Margaret arrived in St. John's on the sailing vessel, *Adelaide*, to enter the Sisters of Mercy. She travelled from Ireland in the company of two young women destined for the Presentation Convent and another young woman who was also planning to become a Sister of Mercy, Ann Taylor of Limerick.



Margaret and Ann were both admitted to the novitiate on September 29, 1859. At that ceremony of reception, Margaret received the religious name of Sister Mary Gertrude Michael. After profession on September 8, 1861 she remained part of the community at Mercy Convent. She was Sister M. Xavier Bernard's travelling companion in July of 1863 when the sisters left St. John's to begin the Burin foundation.

Sister Mary Gertrude was transferred to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere in 1866, and in May of 1869 was appointed superior of the new foundation in Conception Harbour. She was then twenty-nine years of age and had been professed for eight years. Her two companions on the new mission were Sister Mary Teresa Slattery and Sister M. De Sales Meehan, both of whom were from Limerick and both junior to her in age and profession.

In the 1850s, Conception Harbour was a busy little outport and a mission of the parish of Harbour Main. The convent, a replica of the Brigus Convent, had been built in preparation for the sisters' coming. However, unlike the situations in Brigus and Burin where colorful accounts of the sisters' arrival are preserved, there is no description of the actual arrival of the sisters in Conception Harbour. What is known is that, from the beginning, the sisters played a significant role in the life of Conception Harbour, perhaps in part because there was no resident priest.

Sister Mary Gertrude remained in Conception Harbour for the rest of her life, teaching in the school, visiting the poor and the sick, attending to the needs of the parish and being a consistent Mercy presence for the people. She died on June 20, 1891 at the age of fifty-one years. She is one of the five Sisters of Mercy buried in the sisters' cemetery in Conception Harbour.



Sisters and children Conception Harbour, circa 1904

Sister Mary Ignatius Guinane

Honora Mary Theresa Guinane, the second daughter of Mary and Denis Guinane of Limerick, was born in April of 1844. At the age of sixteen, she left family and homeland for St. John's with two other young women from Limerick, Mary Ellen Slattery and Mary Agnes McKenna, both fifteen years of age. Honora's older sister, Bridget, had come to Newfoundland to join the Sisters of Mercy three years earlier.

Honora, along with her two travelling companions, entered the community at Mercy Convent on July 31, 1860 and was admitted to the novitiate on January 23, 1861. At her ceremony of reception, Honora received the religious name of Sister Mary Ignatius Loyola.

After profession of vows on December 18, 1862, Sister Mary Ignatius remained at Mercy Convent for a few years. With her in community was her sister Bridget, now known as Sister Mary Joseph, who had been professed a couple of years earlier, in April of 1859.

In 1865, Sister Mary Ignatius was transferred to St. Joseph's Convent in Brigus, where she remained until 1871. She then returned to St. John's, this time to St. Michael's Convent in Belvedere, where she was to live and minister for nearly forty years. For much of that time she served the community as superior or assistant. At Belvedere she dedicated her energies and her many talents to teaching and caring for the children. She was said to have been of a very happy disposition, a quality that endeared her to both the sisters and the children.

In 1892, Sister M. Ignatius accompanied Sister M. de Chantal O'Keefe, the superior of St. Michael's, on a trip to the United States to appeal for funds to defray the heavy debt incurred by the construction of the new St. Michael's Orphanage. The

newsletter of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, *Inter Nos*, in its June 1924 issue, noted that the bishops of Brooklyn and Philadelphia greatly facilitated the task of the two sisters and that Newfoundlanders living in Boston gave most generously to the appeal from “the dear homeland.” After their busy sojourn, Sisters Mary de Chantal and Mary Ignatius returned home, apparently delighted with the cordial reception given them, with the generous response to their efforts and with the benefits that consequently accrued to their beloved orphanage.

When Sister Mary Ignatius died at St. Michael’s on January 24, 1910, there was deep sadness in the community and in the orphanage, as she had been such a vital part of life and ministry there for forty years. Her love, gentleness and caring had left a lasting impression on all who knew her. In a letter to the sisters at St. Michael’s, written shortly after her death and preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John’s, a former student referred to Sister Mary Ignatius as “my most esteemed friend and dear mother.” The writer of that letter gave a chalice to St. Michael’s Convent as a memorial to her beloved teacher and friend, stating that “it would be a source of great happiness to me to give something in her memory, as I would like to have both the children as well as the community to always keep her in memory.”

Sister Mary Ignatius’ sister, Sister Mary Joseph, pre-deceased her by a couple of months. The two sisters are buried, side by side, in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Charles McKenna

Mary Agnes McKenna, daughter of Mary and Michael McKenna, was born in Limerick in 1845.

In the summer of 1860 at the age of fifteen years, Mary Agnes left Ireland for St. John’s, Newfoundland in the company of two

other young women from Limerick, sixteen year-old Honora Guinane and fifteen year-old Ellen Mary Slattery.

Upon arrival on July 31, 1860 the young women entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road. All three were received into the novitiate on January 31, 1861. At her reception ceremony, Mary Agnes was given the religious name, Sister Mary Charles Borromeo Borgia.

Sister Mary Charles made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on December 18, 1862. Less than a year later, she was named a member of the founding community of St. Anne's Convent, Burin. Sister M. Liguori, also from Limerick, was superior of that new foundation. The two other community members were Sister M. Xavier Tarahan, a novice, and Mary McAuliffe, a postulant. The four missionaries were accompanied to their new home by the superior of Mercy Convent, Sister M. Xavier Bernard, and her companion, Sister M. Gertrude Moore.

Bishop John T. Mullock was also part of the group that disembarked from the steamer *Ariel*, when it docked at the government wharf in Burin on the evening of July 11, 1863. *The Newfoundlander* of July 20, 1863 recorded that a triumphal arch had been erected on the wharf for this noteworthy occasion and that crowds of cheering people had gathered to welcome the sisters to their new home. As they made their way, a procession of little girls dressed in white accompanied them, strewing their path with flowers. Their first stop was the church, where the bishop imparted his blessing on the new venture and encouraged the people to cooperate with the sisters in ensuring that their children availed of the educational opportunities now within their reach. It seems that the pastor of Burin, Father Michael Berney, had been largely instrumental in bringing the sisters to his parish, and the people were jubilant that the education of their children was now assured. Unfortunately, Father Berney had become ill a short time before, and it was his

assistant and successor, Father John Cullen, who introduced the sisters to the parish.

The sisters' arrival in summer gave them time to settle into the parish before taking on the responsibilities of the school. Almost immediately, the four sisters began visitation of the sick and the poor, and this work of mercy, central to the life of a Sister of Mercy, continued throughout the school year. In their first school year in Burin, the sisters were involved in preparing children for Confirmation. In late June of 1864, Bishop Mullock presided at a Confirmation ceremony in the Burin parish, and a few days later he presided at a reception ceremony for Mary McAuliffe, who had spent the year as a postulant at St. Anne's Convent. *The Newfoundlander* of July 21, 1864 notes this event and goes on to praise the efforts of the sisters of the Convent of Mercy

...which has recently been established at Burin, and which, owing to the provident care and zealous Christian labours of the Sisters, is already exercising its holy influence in the instruction of the young, and in carrying consolation and relief to the sick and the poor.

Sister M. Charles was one of those zealous, dedicated and caring sisters who put the Burin foundation on a firm footing and left a lasting impression on the people of the parish. She remained in Burin for eight years, teaching in the school and carrying out the many other responsibilities required of sisters in small, outport communities.

A notation in the *Annals* of Mercy Convent, dated August 28, 1871, indicates that Sister Mary Charles returned to the motherhouse on Military Road that year. Nothing further is known about her, but it is likely that she lived there and taught at Our Lady of Mercy School for the next thirty years of her life. She died on June 6, 1901 at the age of fifty-six. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Teresa Slattery

Ellen Mary Theresa Slattery was born in Limerick on October 15, 1844. She was the daughter of Ellen and William Slattery.

In 1860 when she was in her sixteenth year, Ellen Mary left family and friends in Ireland to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Her companions on the voyage across the Atlantic were Honora Guinane and Mary Agnes McKenna, both from her home area of Limerick.

The three young women arrived in St. John's on July 31, 1860 and were admitted to the novitiate at Mercy Convent on Military Road on January 23, 1861. At her reception Ellen Mary received the religious name, Sister Mary Teresa Camillus.

From the time of her profession of vows on December 18, 1862 until 1869, Sister Mary Teresa lived at Mercy Convent. In 1864 her younger sister, Catherine, arrived from Limerick to join the Sisters of Mercy, and for a few years, the two lived and ministered together at Mercy Convent.

In May of 1869 when Sister M. Teresa was twenty-five years of age, she was appointed a member of the founding community at Conception Harbour. She remained there for much of her life, ministering in the school, convent and community at large. In 1911, she became superior of St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus, but with the amalgamation of the nine Convents of Mercy in Newfoundland in 1916, was asked to return to Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour, where she was named superior.

In 1919 Sister M. Teresa returned to St. John's as part of the community and staff at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, and she remained there for the next twelve years until her death. She died on July 12, 1931 during her annual retreat. She was in

her eighty-seventh year and had lived for more than seventy of those years as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Teresa is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Benedict Clifford

Theresa Mary Clifford, only daughter of Mary and William Clifford, was born on October 15, 1838 in Limerick.

Theresa was twenty-two years old when she left her native Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She entered the community at Mercy Convent on April 29, 1861 and was received into the novitiate on December 3, 1861, along with another young Irish postulant, Catherine Tobin from Tipperary. At her reception, Theresa was given the religious name, Sister Mary Benedict Joseph Labre.

After her profession on June 6, 1863, Sister Mary Benedict remained at Mercy Convent until October of 1865, when she was transferred to St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus. In less than two years she was compelled to return to St. John's because of a painful illness which necessitated a less strenuous ministry. She went to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, where she assisted in the care of the children.

Sister Mary Benedict died on October 8, 1868, just a week before her thirtieth birthday, having been a Sister of Mercy for only seven short years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery. Her obituary in *The Patriot and The Terra Nova Herald* of October 17, 1868 records that she



Gravestone, Belvedere cemetery, St. John's

...was mourned by her Sisterhood and pupils with profound sorrow, for she was ever loved by them all, as she well deserved to be, with tenderest and most heartfelt affection.

Sister Mary Alexius Tobin

Catherine Tobin, born on March 4, 1843, was the third daughter born to Mary and David Tobin. She was one of five girls, all of whom entered religious life. The Tobins lived in the parish of Ballyhooly in County Tipperary.

Catherine arrived in St. John's on May 31, 1861 to enter the Sisters of Mercy. She was eighteen years of age. At her reception into the novitiate on December 3, 1861 she was given the religious name of Sister Mary Alexius Xavier. Her novitiate companion was another young Irish woman, Sister Mary Benedict Clifford from Limerick.

Sister Mary Alexius was professed as a Sister of Mercy on May 2, 1864. Three years later on January 14, 1867, she was transferred to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, where she was to spend the next sixty-eight years of her life. Early in her time at St. Michael's, Sister Mary Alexius was assigned to the House of Mercy, a home for working girls which operated in connection with the orphanage. But her love for the poor led her beyond Belvedere to the lanes and alleyways of St. John's to visit the homeless, the neglected and the sick. The December 1945 issue of *The Monitor* featured an article entitled "A Social Worker for more than Sixty Years," paying tribute to Sister Mary Alexius for her work with the poor of St. John's. That this article was written thirteen years after her death is indicative of the wonderful legacy of tender mercy she left behind. Referring to her ministry at Belvedere, the article recalls that every Sunday afternoon Sister Mary Alexius was "at home" to welcome relatives and friends of the children who lived at Belvedere and to answer

questions regarding their health, well-being and progress. The article concludes with the following words:

Her crowning will be that she was a mother and a sister in the noblest sense of the word to the Catholic homeless orphan girls of Newfoundland for more than sixty years.

The works of Mercy also took Sister Mary Alexius to the Poor House/Assylum, situated on a piece of land behind St. John's Hospital, in the area now known as Victoria Park. This building housed the elderly and destitute of St. John's who had no one to care for them. During her visits there, she brightened the lives of many of the people, as she brought them the comfort of a listening ear and a compassionate heart, as well as an occasional treat of cookies or reading material.

When Sister Mary Alexius' age and infirmity prevented her from direct care of the children at St. Michael's, she found other forms of ministry. Reminiscences about her indicate that she could be found every day in the sewing room, making new clothes for her children and mending their old ones.

Sister Mary Alexius died at St. Michael's Convent on November 10, 1932 at the age of eighty-nine years. At the time of her death, two of her sisters were still living in the United States. Sister Mary Aquin was a Sister of Mercy in Providence, Rhode Island, and Sister Mary Placide was a Sister of the Visitation in Frederic, Maryland.

Sister Mary Alexius is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Joseph Barron

Mary Barron was born in Wexford in 1842. The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy do not give her parentage, but, according to Sister Kathrine Bellamy on page 120 of *Weavers of the Tapestry*, she came to St. John's to live with her brother when she was about fourteen years of age.

On September 10, 1861 at the age of nineteen years, Mary entered the Sisters of Mercy on Military Road. The very next day the new postulant was on board the steamer *Ellen Gisborne* on her way to Brigus as a member of the first Mercy foundation outside St. John's. Because Mary had lived in St. John's for at least five years, it is likely that she was familiar with the Sisters of



Mercy and their works and that they saw in her the potential to be a Sister of Mercy. Beginning in 1851, the account book at Mercy Convent, which is preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, records fees paid for regular tuition and extra fees for music for a Miss Barron. This may have been Mary Barron, but there is no real certainty.

Mary was the youngest of the sisters who went on the Brigus foundation, but all four members of the new St. Joseph's Convent community were under twenty-six years of age. Although the task facing them was monumental, their youth, talents, determination and missionary zeal undoubtedly spurred on these women of Mercy, enabling them to do much more than they ever thought possible. The sense of being trusted by their superiors for the work of this foundation must have also given them courage and strength in their beginning days in Brigus.

Mary was admitted into the novitiate at Brigus in the spring of 1862 and was given the religious name, Sister Mary Joseph Theresa. Her reception ceremony was the first of its kind in the area and the first in a series of reception and profession ceremonies that were to take place in Conception Bay in subsequent years. She made her profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy in Brigus on May 26, 1864.

Sister Mary Joseph carried out her ministry in the sisters' school and in the community of Brigus for nearly fifty years. It was there that she celebrated both her silver and her golden jubilees among the people she knew and loved so well.

At some point in the early 1900s, Sister Mary Joseph went to Conception Harbour, where she was remembered by the people as a gentle and kind sister who loved children. During her years in Conception Bay, Sister M. Joseph served as superior of both Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour and St. Joseph's Convent in Brigus. Around 1915 Sister M. Joseph returned to St. John's, presumably because of poor health, and in the last two years of her life she was confined to bed. She died on March 3, 1927. A diamond jubilarian, Sister M. Joseph was eighty-five years of age at the time of her death. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

An item in the May 1927 issue of *Inter Nos*, the newsletter of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, says the following about this woman of Mercy:

Gentle, unobtrusive and humble, she spent her life in assiduous work for God's poor.

Sister Mary Rose Murphy

Johanna Agnes Murphy was born on January 6, 1841. She was the second daughter born to Margaret and William Murphy of Youghal, County Cork.

On August 28, 1862 at the age of twenty-one years, Agnes joined the Sisters of Mercy at the Motherhouse on Military Road, and in January of 1863 she was received into the novitiate. At her reception ceremony, she was given the religious name, Sister Mary Rose. Sister Mary Rose made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on March 25, 1865, and that same year was transferred to St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere. She returned to Mercy Convent in 1866 and remained there for the next five years, teaching at Our Lady of Mercy School.

In August of 1871, Sister Mary Rose was appointed to St. Anne's Convent in Burin, but a month later she was chosen by Sister Mary Xavier to be superior of the new foundation in St. Lawrence. She and two companions, Sister Mary Stanislaus Taylor and Sister Mary Xavier Tarahan, arrived in St. Lawrence on September 21, 1871, and were joined shortly thereafter by Mary Burfitt, an eighteen-year old young woman from Burin. Upon their arrival in St. Lawrence the sisters were faced with many problems. Their school was a fish shed, and their home for their first five years was the priest's residence. The new convent, blessed and opened by Bishop Thomas Power in November of 1876, was far from finished when they moved in, and the next few years were lean ones for the sisters, as they dealt with inconvenience and hardship of every kind. Still they persevered and carried out their ministry of teaching and visitation of the sick and the poor with devotion and fidelity.

The year after the sisters moved to the new Sacred Heart Convent, Sister M. Xavier Tarahan succeeded Sister Mary Rose as superior. It is not known how long Sister Mary Rose remained

in St. Lawrence, but the fact that she led the community during those most difficult six years is a testimony to her spirit of mercy, her courage, and her faithfulness to the mission entrusted to her and her sisters.

Sister Mary Rose eventually returned to Burin, where she died on October 5, 1904 at the age of sixty-three. She is buried in the sisters' plot in Burin cemetery.

Sister Mary Francis Slattery

Catherine Mary Slattery was born in Limerick on April 27, 1846, the daughter of Ellen and William Slattery.

In the spring of 1864 at the age of eighteen, Catherine left her family and friends in Ireland to follow in the footsteps of her older sister, Ellen Mary, who had entered the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland four years earlier.

Catherine and a companion, Mary Gertrude Meehan, arrived in St. John's on May 25, 1864 and entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road. At her reception into the novitiate on September 8, 1864, Catherine received the religious name, Sister Mary Francis Assisi.

Sister Mary Francis was professed as a Sister of Mercy on Easter Monday, April 22, 1867. She was undoubtedly pleased to be assigned to Mercy Convent where for the next two years she enjoyed sharing life and ministry with her sister, Sister Mary Teresa. In 1869, Sister M. Teresa went on the foundation to Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour, where she remained for most of her life.

Sister Mary Francis spent all of her religious life at Mercy Convent. She taught for some years at Angels' Guardian School, which operated at Mercy Convent from 1881 to 1896. A letter

in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's written by John FitzHenry, a former student of Guardian Angels' School on the occasion of the centenary of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, describes Sister Mary Francis as "vivacious and competent." Sister Mary Francis was appointed mistress of novices at Mercy Convent in 1902, a position she held for the next four years.

Sister Mary Francis died at Mercy Convent on September 28, 1905 and is buried in Belvedere cemetery. She was fifty-nine years of age at the time of her death.

Sister Mary de Sales Meehan

Mary Gertrude Meehan was the daughter of Anne and William Meehan of Limerick. She was born in March of 1843, and at the age of twenty-one years, left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. With her on her journey across the Atlantic was another young woman from Limerick, Catherine Slattery.

Mary and Catherine entered at Mercy Convent on May 25, 1864, and were admitted to the novitiate in September of that same year. At her reception, Mary received the religious name, Sister Mary de Sales.

After her profession of vows on April 22, 1867, Sister Mary de Sales remained at Mercy Convent for two years. In May of 1869, during the superiorship of Sister Mary de Chantal O'Keefe, she was chosen, along with Sister M. Gertrude Moore and Sister M. Teresa Slattery, to begin the new Mercy foundation in Conception Harbour. All three founding sisters were Irish-born, and all were in their twenties.

The new Mercy community was welcomed enthusiastically by the people of Conception Harbour. At the time of their arrival and for some years after, Conception Harbour was a mission of

Harbour Main, and a priest would visit on a weekly basis. Undoubtedly, in addition to their teaching duties, sacramental preparation and visitation of the sick, the sisters responded to many calls from the community in times of sickness, sorrow, need, or misfortune.

Sister Mary de Sales remained in Conception Harbour for the rest of her life and was a member of the convent community when Conception Harbour became a parish in 1884. During her time at Immaculate Conception Convent, she shared life and ministry with many other Sisters of Mercy, most of whom were Irish-born, including the first four superiors of the foundation. She was in community with her younger sister, Sister Mary Berchmans, from 1874 until her death on April 26, 1885.

Sister Mary de Sales was forty-two years old when she died. She is buried in Conception Harbour, a place that had been home to her since she arrived in Newfoundland, twenty-one years before.

Sister Mary Vincent O'Donoghue

Alice Mary Joseph O'Donoghue was the fourth daughter born to Ellen and Daniel O'Donoghue of Clogheen, County Tipperary. Her birth date was July 19, 1845.

At the age of nineteen years, Alice Mary left Ireland for the Newfoundland Mercy mission, arriving in St. John's on November 28, 1864. She entered at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere and was received into the novitiate on June 28, 1865. At her reception she received the religious name, Sister Mary Vincent Catherine.

Sister Mary Vincent made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy at St. Michael's Convent on April 22, 1867 and continued her ministry of teaching and caring for the children at Belvedere for the next four years. In November of 1871, she was transferred

to St. Anne's Convent, Burin, where for nine years, she devoted herself to teaching at St. Anne's School and to the other works of mercy. In 1880 she returned to St. Michael's, but, in 1888, was again transferred – this time to Sacred Heart Convent in St. Lawrence, where she ministered for three years.

Sister Mary Vincent returned to her beloved St. Michael's in 1891 and gave herself to the care of the children for the next twenty-nine years. In all, she spent nearly forty years of her life at Belvedere, and it was there that she celebrated both her silver and golden jubilees. Her obituary notice records that, at her golden jubilee, "friends and pupils from far and near joined in the chorus of greeting with the members of her own community."

Sister Mary Vincent died on January 27, 1920, after being stricken with paralysis just one week before. She was seventy-five years of age at the time of her death. She is buried at Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Agnes Banks

Annie Banks was born in Limerick in 1845. Her parents were Mary and Michael Banks.

In the autumn of 1864, Agnes left family and friends in Limerick to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Up to this time, more than a dozen young women from Limerick had crossed the Atlantic to become Sisters of Mercy. Her sister Ellen, later known as Sister Mary of the Angels, had entered at the motherhouse on Military Road in 1858, and was the superior of St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus when Annie left Ireland for Newfoundland.

Annie arrived in St. John's on November 28, 1864 and entered the community at St. Michael's, Belvedere that same day. Shortly

thereafter, she was transferred to St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus, where her sister, Sister Mary of the Angels, was still superior. At her reception into the novitiate on June 28, 1865, Annie received the religious name, Sister M. Agnes. She was professed on November 18, 1867 in the parish church in Brigus by Bishop John T. Mullock.

Following her profession, Sister Mary Agnes remained at St. Joseph's Convent, Brigus, teaching in the school, visiting the sick and responding to the various needs of parish and community. In 1871 she was appointed superior of St. Joseph's, succeeding her sister, Sister Mary of the Angels. The two sisters lived and ministered together in Brigus for fourteen years.

In December of 1881, Sister Mary Agnes was transferred to Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour, and in 1891 she became superior of that convent.

Sister Mary Agnes died on April 18, 1893, while she was still serving as superior of Immaculate Conception Convent. She was in her forty-eighth year at the time of her death and had lived as a Sister of Mercy for twenty-nine of those years. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery in Conception Harbour.

Sister Mary Patrick O'Farrell

Margaret O'Farrell, only daughter of Mary and Patrick O'Farrell of County Tipperary, was born in November of 1841.

Margaret, like many other young Irish women before her, also experienced the call to the Newfoundland Mercy mission. She was twenty-four years of age when she left Ireland in the winter of 1865, arriving in St. John's on March 17. She entered the community on Military Road that same day.

Margaret was accepted into the novitiate at Mercy Convent on August 2, 1865, receiving the religious name, Sister Mary Patrick Liguori. The August 3, 1865 issue of *The Newfoundlander*, in

reporting on her reception ceremony, indicates that a couple of Margaret's brothers, "our respected townsmen, the Messrs. Farrell," had emigrated to Newfoundland and were well established in the St. John's business community by the time she came to this land. The newspaper went on to say that a large number of fashionable ladies and gentlemen were present at the ceremony, after which they were "entertained at a sumptuous dejeuner at which the good nuns seemed to have exhausted their good taste and hospitality."

After her profession as a Sister of Mercy on October 24, 1867, Sister Mary Patrick remained at Mercy Convent and spent most of her religious life teaching the poor children of St. John's at St. Bridget's School in the east end of the city and at St. Peter's School on Queen Street. The Sisters at Mercy Convent were responsible for these two schools, and Sister Mary Patrick is closely associated with both. She walked daily from Military Road through the roadways of St. John's in the mud and in the snow to bring the benefits of her kind, compassionate personality and her teaching abilities to the children under her care.

After only twenty years of religious life, Sister Mary Patrick died at Mercy Convent on May 10, 1885. At the time of her death, she was in her forty-fifth year. Less than a year before her death, in August of 1884, her niece, Mary O'Farrell, later known as Sister Mary Genevieve, had come from Ireland to enter the Sisters of Mercy and, while still a postulant, had been selected as a member of the founding community of St. Bride's Convent, Littledale. She had little opportunity to become acquainted with her aunt, who had left Ireland before she was born.

Sister Mary Patrick's obituary notice in the May 18, 1885 issue of *The Evening Telegram* refers to her teaching ministry and to her involvement in the larger community...

She ministered consolation to many a poor sick and death-stricken family, as well as imparted the gift of a religious education to the destitute and poor.

Sister Mary Patrick is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Agatha O'Neill

Anne Josephine O'Neill was the fourth daughter born to Kate and Felix Cunningham O'Neill of Dublin. She was born on St. Patrick's Day, 1850.

Josephine (Nonnie) O'Neill arrived in St. John's on March 31, 1871 and entered the Sisters of Mercy at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere that same day. She received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious name, Sister Mary Agatha Joseph, on October 2, 1871. Her profession of vows took place in the Chapel of St. Michael's Convent on its patronal feast, September 29, 1873, and on that occasion, the sermon was preached by a distinguished guest, Reverend Doctor Crane, Provincial of the Augustinians of Dublin. According to the October 3, 1873 issue of *The Newfoundlander*, Nonnie O'Neil belonged to the "royal race of (Ogan) O'Neil of Dublin."

Sister Mary Agatha spent her twenty-five years of religious life as a professed Sister of Mercy at St. Michael's, teaching and caring for the children.

Sister Mary Agatha was in her forty-eighth year when she died on March 12, 1898. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Ita Glynn

Ellen Mary Glynn was born on September 29, 1856. She was the daughter of Bridget and Thomas Glynn of Limerick.

Ellen arrived in St. John's on May 14, 1873, and on that very day she entered the Sisters of Mercy on Military Road. She was accepted into the novitiate on November 9, 1873, receiving the religious name, Sister Mary Ita Alphonsus.

Sister Mary Ita made profession of vows at Mercy Convent on February 1, 1876 and remained there for the next eight years. Shortly after her profession, her younger sister, Margaret arrived in St. John's and entered the community at Mercy Convent. In August of 1884, Sister Mary Ita was appointed "senior sister" of the new foundation at St. Bride's Convent, Littledale. For the first eleven years of its foundation, St. Bride's was a branch house under the authority and direction of the superior of Mercy Convent. Despite this, a lot of responsibility fell to Sister Mary Ita, and after a year at St. Bride's, she returned to Mercy Convent, where after some time, she was appointed mistress of novices.

In 1890 or 1891, Sister Mary Ita was transferred to St. Anne's Convent, Burin, where her sister, now known as Sister Mary Columba, was a member of the community. The superior of that community, Sister Mary Angela Kitchen, had resigned after one term of office, and the position was vacant. Bishop Power took advantage of the situation and appointed Sister Mary Ita superior of St. Anne's. After one term of three years, she went to Sacred Heart Convent in St. Lawrence and, in 1896, was recalled to St. John's, where she became superior of the Motherhouse on Military Road. Except for a brief interval, she held this position until 1915. As superior of Mercy Convent in these years immediately preceding the amalgamation of the nine Mercy Convents into one congregation, Sister Mary Ita was one of the signatories of the formal request for this amalgamation.

During her time at Mercy Convent, lack of space again became an issue both in the convent and school. The resourceful Sister Mary Ita and her competent bursar, Sister Mary Teresa O'Halleran, looked at every possibility to raise the funds necessary for repairs and extension. Early in 1913, having explored all possible options, they came to the conclusion that their only recourse was to seek outside help. A committee was formed consisting of former students and friends of the sisters, and chaired by Monsignor John Scott, administrator of the cathedral and a dear friend of the Sisters of Mercy. Part of the committee's plan of action was to send a letter of appeal to the Catholic population, explaining the urgency of the situation and requesting them to consider financial assistance to this important cause. This letter is preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's.

The committee's plea found a most generous response from the citizens of St. John's. Of course, the fact that Lady Isabelle Morris, wife of the Sir Edward Morris, the Prime Minister of Newfoundland, was an influential member of the committee could have helped the situation! With the funds raised, the sisters were able to renovate Mercy Convent and accommodate eighty more students in the school. This scenario speaks to both the astuteness and the practicality of Sister Mary Ita and her companions, who used every means available to further and facilitate the mission entrusted to them. It speaks as well to the esteem with which the sisters were held in the St. John's community. Up to 1915, Our Lady of Mercy School was a private institution, with no assistance from government. When it came under the scope of the Newfoundland Education Act in 1915, it began to receive public funding and became known as Our Lady of Mercy Academy.

As soon as she completed her term of office as superior of Mercy Convent in 1915, Sister Mary Ita was appointed superior of St. Bride's Convent, Littledale, replacing Sister Mary Joseph Kelly

who had held that position since 1901. When Amalgamation took place in August of 1916, Sister Mary Ita was again named superior of St. Bride's. St. Clare's Working Home for Girls on LeMarchant Road had been opened by the Sisters of Mercy in September of 1913. In 1919 Sister Mary Ita replaced Sister Mary Pius Mulcahy as superior of the Home, and she remained there until it closed in 1922.

Ill health then brought Sister Mary Ita back to Mercy Convent, where she remained for the next fourteen years of her life. Her sister, Sister Mary Columba, was in community with her for several of those last years. In 1926, Sister Mary Ita celebrated her golden jubilee at Mercy Convent and, for that auspicious occasion, the pupils of Our Lady of Mercy Academy prepared an afternoon of entertainment featuring orchestral and vocal selections which the school newspaper, *Inter Nos* in its June 1926 issue, described as "a feast of Irish music rendered faultlessly and with a vim worthy of the occasion."

An article in the same issue of *Inter Nos* says that Sister Mary Ita's favorite work of Mercy was visitation of the sick, and, "in all kinds of weathers might she be seen wending her way to the haunts of the poor, the suffering, to the hospital or the jail."

Sister Mary Ita died at the age of eighty on February 15, 1936. She had been a Sister of Mercy for sixty years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Ita was obviously a very versatile, energetic, competent and generous woman of Mercy. The *Inter Nos* of June 1937 spoke of her thus:

In all those years of fruitful activity, her consummate tact and resourcefulness were often called into play, but her gracious personality and sparkling Irish wit won her hosts of friends among rich and poor with whom she came into contact.

Sister Mary Berchmans Meehan

Sister Mary Berchmans Meehan was born in Limerick on February 7, 1853. Her parents were Ann and William Meehan. Her baptismal name is not given in any of the congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy. Artistic by nature, Miss Meehan went to England as a young woman to study at the Kensington School of Art.

In the spring of 1874 at the age of twenty-one, this talented young woman left family and friends in Ireland to become a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. Her older sister, Mary Gertrude, had joined the Mercy Sisters in John's ten years earlier, and in 1869 had become a member of the founding community at Conception Harbour.

Upon arrival in St. John's, Miss Meehan was sent to Conception Harbour where she entered the community on May 28, 1874, receiving the religious name of Sister Mary Berchmans. The Rt. Reverend Carfagnini, Bishop of Harbour Grace at the time, presided over both her reception and profession ceremonies in the parish church in Conception Harbour. Harbour Grace had been canonically erected as a diocese in 1856.

Sister Mary Berchmans professed her vows as a Sister of Mercy on September 14, 1876, and remained in Conception Harbour for the next fifteen years, teaching art in the school, visiting the sick and serving the community as superior. Her sister, now known as Sister Mary de Sales, was with her in community until the latter died in April of 1885.

In 1891, Sister Mary Berchmans was transferred to Brigus, where her artistic talents found a much wider scope. Not only did she teach art in the school, but she held classes after hours for adults who wanted to further their skills in drawing and painting. Indeed, her reputation as a gifted artist drew people not just

from Brigus itself, but also from nearby communities. Sister Mary Berchmans was also skilled in embroidery and other types of needlework, and these skills she shared with her pupils and friends.

In addition to teaching in Brigus, Sister Mary Berchmans served as superior of St. Joseph's Convent for a number of years. She is remembered as a generous and gifted woman, a person of great wit, and an artist of the highest calibre who made a huge contribution to the quality of life of her sisters and her students in both Conception Harbour and Brigus.

Sister Mary Berchmans died in Brigus on September 18, 1937, having spent the last few years of her life as an invalid. At the time of her death, she was eighty-four years of age and had spent sixty-three of these years in Conception Bay. She is one of the five Sisters of Mercy buried in Brigus. Her gravesite is on the hillside overlooking the church and the community.

Sister Mary Columba Glynn

Margaret Glynn, third daughter of Bridget and Thomas Glynn of Limerick, was born on September 6, 1859.

At the age of sixteen, Margaret left home and family to become a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland, arriving in St. John's on July 19, 1876. Her sister Ellen, later known as Sister Mary Ita, had left home for the Newfoundland Mercy mission in 1873 and, at the time of Margaret's entrance was a member of the community at Mercy Convent.

Margaret was admitted into the novitiate at Mercy Convent on January 21, 1877 and was given the religious name, Sister Mary Columba Agnes. She and Sister Margaret Mary Lynch made profession of vows on January 21, 1879.

After profession, Sister Mary Columba taught for many years at St. Bridget's School in the east end of St. John's and at St. Peter's School on Queen Street. This teaching assignment meant daily treks to and from Mercy Convent in all kinds of winds and weathers. She is reputed to have had a special gift for teaching younger children, and one of her responsibilities in the schools was preparing children for First Communion.

In the mid 1880s, St. Anne's Convent in Burin was going through a very difficult time, with the death of three sisters in three years. This placed a heavy burden on the community, both emotionally and physically. To alleviate the situation, the motherhouse sent two sisters to Burin, one of whom was Sister Mary Columba. During her time in that community, a severe outbreak of diphtheria occurred, and Sister M. Columba and the other sisters spent many long hours attending to the needs of the sick and their families. She was one of the sisters who contracted the disease, but she and her companions recovered. Others in the area succumbed to the terrible disease, including Father John Walsh, the parish priest of St. Lawrence who had come to minister in Burin.

After one year in St. Lawrence, 1886-87, Sister Mary Columba returned to the motherhouse in St. John's, where she was to spend the rest of her life. Her main responsibility, even in her most elderly years, seems to have been teaching religious education to the kindergarten and first grade children of Our Lady of Mercy School. Sister Mary Columba prepared Sister Helen Caule for her first Communion when she was a first grader at Mercy Convent. Sister Helen recalls Sister Mary Columba gathering a little group around her every day, giving them simple instructions as they prepared for this important event in their young lives.

In July of 1915, Sister Mary Columba was elected assistant to the superior of Mercy Convent, who at that time was Sister Mary

Bridget O'Connor. Sister Mary Columba lived to celebrate both her golden and diamond jubilees. Her golden jubilee, held on January 21, 1929, was a unique event, in that two Sisters of Mercy from the same Irish family had lived to celebrate fifty years of Mercy life and ministry in Newfoundland. Sister Mary Ita had had her golden jubilee at St. Michael's three years earlier in 1926. The festivities for Sister Mary Columba's golden jubilee included a special program of music and song by the children of Our Lady of Mercy Academy. The cello player on that momentous occasion was none other than a young girl, Madeline Veitch, who later entered the Sisters of Mercy and became known as Sister Mary Celine.

Sister Mary Columba died of a stroke on August 25, 1941, at the age of eighty-two years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery. Her obituary in *The Daily News* of August 25, 1941, paid tribute to a woman who had faithfully and generously lived the charism of Mercy for sixty-five years in her adopted homeland:

The sick and poor of St. John's, throughout the years of her active life had every reason to bless her name, for her visits to them did much to soothe them in their trials and her consoling words made easy for the dying the passage from time to eternity. She knew how to rejoice with the joyful, grieve with the grief-stricken, play with the play-loving children, and even God's irrational creatures came in for a share of her all-embracing charity, for Sister Mary Columba feeding the little sparrows was a familiar figure to all pupils of the Academy of Our Lady of Mercy.

Sister Margaret Mary Lynch

Elizabeth (Eliza) Lynch was born in County Clare on December 6, 1846. She was the daughter of Susan and Michael Lynch.

Elizabeth left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland in May of 1876, arriving in St. John's on June 10. She entered at Mercy Convent on Military Road that same day and was admitted to the novitiate in November of 1876. Her religious name, given at her reception into the novitiate, was Sister Margaret Mary.

Sister Margaret Mary made her profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on January 21, 1879. Professed with her was Sister Mary Columba Glynn, who had arrived from Ireland the same year as she did.

The Acts of Chapter of Mercy Convent show that Sister Margaret Mary was elected mistress of novices in 1894 at the same time that Sister Mary Liguori Carmody was elected superior of Mercy Convent. She was re-elected to that position in 1899 and again in 1906. She was a member of the Mercy Convent community when the amalgamation of all the Mercy convents in Newfoundland occurred in 1916. The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy do not give any further information about this woman who lived as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland for forty-two years.

Sister Margaret Mary died on June 14, 1918 at the age of seventy-two years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery. Her obituary notice in *The Daily News* of June 15, 1918 recounts that Sister Margaret Mary was "a great favourite with the crowds of little children who were blessed by her tuition and who always found her kind ..."

Sister Mary Philomena Leamy

Sister Mary Philomena Leamy was born in 1855 in Cahir, County Tipperary. She was the daughter of Michael Leamy. Her baptismal name was Alice.

Alice Leamy left Ireland in 1873 at the age of eighteen years to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She was the third daughter of the Leamy family to enter religion, her oldest sister Hannah having joined the Presentation Sisters in Newfoundland in 1865. After her arrival in St. John's in May, 1873 Alice was sent to Conception Harbour and was accepted into Immaculate Conception Convent community as a postulant. She was admitted to the novitiate in the spring of 1874, taking the name Sister Mary Philomena.

A letter in *The Patriot and Catholic Herald* on April 18, 1874 describes Sister Mary Philomena's ceremony of reception into the novitiate through the eyes of an individual who called himself "The Traveller" and who happened to be in Conception Harbour on the day of the celebration. He apparently followed the crowds to the Convent and witnessed the ceremony first-hand. His letter noted that the young woman, "fair and beautiful," was the niece of Reverend Jeremiah O'Donnell, parish priest of St. Mary's, and that this ceremony which he called an "event" was the first of its kind in Conception Harbour. The convent had opened five year earlier, in May of 1869.

Sister Mary Philomena was professed as a Sister of Mercy in 1876, and it seems that she spent all of her religious life in Conception Harbour, carrying out the works of Mercy with compassion and faithfulness. She served as superior of that community for a number of years.

Sister Mary Philomena died on December 14, 1893 at the young age of thirty-eight years. She is one of the five Sisters of Mercy buried in Conception Harbour.

Her obituary, printed in *The Evening Telegram* in December 1893, indicates that “our beloved Mother Philomena” was survived by her two sisters, one of whom was Sister Mary Augustine, who was at that time superior of the Presentation Convent in Witless Bay. The obituary notice gives some idea of Sister Mary Philomena’s contribution to the life and well-being of the people of Conception Harbour:

Her loss will be keenly felt by all, especially the children, in whom she took a lively interest... By nature she was energetic and whenever she had duties to perform, she threw her whole soul into the work. As a sister, she was tireless in her efforts to uplift the spiritual condition of the young. Her prudent counsel, her kind and motherly demeanor and her sterling honesty of purpose were always admired and appreciated by the community.

Sister Mary Teresa O’Halleran

Margaret O’Halleran, born on March 15, 1856, was the daughter of Mary and William O’Halleran of Ballyheige, County Kerry.

Margaret was twenty-five years old when she left Ireland for the Mercy mission in Newfoundland. She entered at Mercy Convent on September 7, 1881 and was admitted to the novitiate on March 11, 1882 by Monsignor Thomas Sears. Her religious name, given at her reception, was Sister Mary Teresa Xavier. With her in the novitiate was another young Irish woman, Sister Mary Joseph Fox from Fermanagh. Sister Mary



Xavier Bernard, the superior of Mercy Convent following the death of Sister Mary Francis Creedon, died when the two young women were postulants and the new superior, Sister Mary Bernard Clune, would figure largely in the life and ministry of Sister Mary Teresa.

Shortly after her profession of vows, which took place on May 15, 1884, Sister Mary Teresa was chosen to be a member of the founding community of St. Bride's Convent, Littledale. From her earliest days in religious life, Sister Mary Teresa showed a special aptitude for business, a gift that Sister Mary Bernard Clune quickly recognized and called forth. Even before St. Bride's opened its doors, Sister Mary Bernard requested her help in preparing for the new venture. Part of this preparation involved accompanying Sister Mary Bernard to Halifax to look at boarding schools in the area and to become familiar with new programs and teaching techniques.

Sister Mary Teresa spent twelve years at Littledale, much of this time as bursar. Her practical nature and her astute business acumen fitted her admirably for this work. As bursar, she was responsible for the finances of the convent and boarding school, for the supervision of staff and for overseeing the farm and its workers. She was at St. Bride's in 1895 when the convent became independent of the motherhouse, after being a branch house since its foundation. In that same year, St. Bride's was elevated to the status of a teacher-training institute. These two significant events in one year must have brought great joy and satisfaction to all the sisters, especially to those who had been involved in the Littledale story from the beginning.

Throughout her years as superior of Mercy Convent, Sister Mary Bernard depended greatly upon Sister Mary Teresa's practical knowledge and business expertise. Because of this, Sister Mary Teresa became involved in planning a variety of projects for the improvement and extension of a number of convents and

schools. One of the major projects she was responsible for was the chapel at Mercy Convent, which was erected in 1892 as a memorial of the golden jubilee of the coming of the Sisters of Mercy to Newfoundland.

In 1896, Sister Mary Teresa replaced Sister Mary Philomena O'Donovan as superior of St. Anne's Convent in Burin, a position she held for two terms. Here again she became involved in improving the environment in which the sisters lived and worked. She had the convent enlarged and added a beautiful oratory. She was said to have been an excellent teacher and administrator and her work in the school in Burin was noteworthy. Reports from Mr. Vincent Burke, the Superintendent of Education during her years in Burin, speak of the convent school in glowing terms, noting that it had "an atmosphere of refinement and culture." (December 1899, 1900, 1901)

When Sister Mary Teresa returned to St. John's in 1902, she was appointed bursar of Mercy Convent. In 1913 when there were problems related to lack of space in the convent and the school, she and Sister Mary Ita, who was superior of the motherhouse at this time, came up with a possible solution to the dilemma. Calling upon the good graces of Monsignor John Scott, administrator of the cathedral and a friend of the community, and upon the reputation of Lady Morris, wife of Sir Edward Morris, Prime Minister of Newfoundland, the decision was made to form a committee which would engage ex-pupils and friends in a fund-raising effort. The results of this appeal were overwhelming, and the necessary renovations and additions were made possible in both the convent and the school. Sister Mary Teresa played a major role in planning and executing this work.

In 1915, Sister Mary Teresa was transferred back to Litledale, where she was again appointed bursar. In 1919, the General

Chapter of the newly-formed Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland elected her treasurer-general. She carried out this office, along with her work as bursar of Littledale, until illness overtook her in 1934.

Although Sister Mary Teresa loved Newfoundland and its people, she continued to miss her family and her native land. She wrote many letters to her niece, Peggy Halleran, who lived in Rhode Island. These were preserved and later copied by her relatives and presented to the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's. These letters portray a woman of great strength, generosity and faith, a woman who loved deeply, a woman who was convinced that this was the place where she was called to do God's work. In a letter dated December 15, 1930, where she seemed to be reflecting on her Newfoundland experience, she wrote to her niece:

I am happy and never regretted coming to Newfoundland and I felt it was the place God destined for me. I love the work He has given me to do. I love the school, then keeping accounts, but I do not like debts, and in a big establishment like Littledale, debts will have to come, but I trust in God and He helps me.

These lines give a sense that, although Sister Mary Teresa was a wise and competent manager, she worried about finances. This is certainly understandable, for as bursar, she was largely responsible for managing payment of the large debt on Littledale. Besides family references and memories of Ireland, Sister Mary Teresa wrote of ordinary happenings at Littledale – conditions on the farm, putting up preserves for the year, the loss of the gooseberry crop, going to town on the horse and cart, Trinity College music examinations, sisters' retreats, illnesses that befell sisters and boarders, the kindness of sisters like Sister Mary Bernard Gladney and the young novice, Sister Mary Xaverius Kenny, who nursed her when she was ill. In a letter to

Peggy written on December 15, 1929 letter, she refers to the earthquake that shook Newfoundland in the previous month, and the devastation that followed on the Burin Peninsula with the resulting tidal wave.

In 1934, Sister Mary Teresa was afflicted by an illness from which she never really recovered. Though her body was frail, her mind remained clear and she maintained a deep interest in the affairs of Litledale and the congregation. She died at St. Bride's Convent on February 4, 1937 at the age of eighty-one years. She had lived fifty-six of those years as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. Sister Mary Teresa had seen many changes in her lifetime, a major one being the amalgamation of all the convents of Mercy in Newfoundland into one congregation in 1916. She was also personally responsible for bringing about many changes through her work as bursar in three convents, as superior and confidante, as teacher and administrator, as planner and builder, and as a wise, capable and responsible steward of the resources of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Joseph Fox

Jane Fox was the eldest daughter of Rosanna and John Fox of Fermanagh. She was born on October 15, 1856 and received her education from the Sisters of Mercy in the Convent School in Sligo. From her youth, Jane showed great artistic talent, even winning a prize from the famed Kensington School of Art for her depiction of the "Mater Dolorosa" in wood.

Jane celebrated her twenty-fifth birthday on the voyage across the Atlantic to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Upon arrival in St. John's on October 21, 1881, she entered the community on Military Road, joining another young Irish woman, Margaret O'Halleran, who had entered the previous month.

On March 11, 1882, Jane and Margaret were admitted to the novitiate, where they came under the capable direction of Sister Mary Liguori Carmody. At her reception, Jane was given the religious name, Sister Mary Joseph Xavier. The presider at her reception ceremony was Monsignor Thomas Sears.

Sister Mary Joseph made profession of vows on April 15, 1884. Sometime in 1884 or 1885 she was assigned to St. Bride's Convent, Littledale as a staff member of St. Bride's, but most of her religious life was spent at Mercy Convent, teaching at Angels' Guardian School and at Our Lady of Mercy School.

Sister Mary Joseph's teaching career spanned nearly fifty years, and much of the energy of those years was directed towards making it possible for educated women in St. John's to enter the world of business on an equal footing with their male counterparts. In 1898, with a single typewriter and five students, Sister Mary Joseph opened Newfoundland's first commercial school at Mercy Convent. Many felt that her daring move was ill-advised and doomed to failure, but Sister Mary Joseph was convinced that the time was right for such a venture.

Sister Mary Joseph's business acumen, her reputation as a teacher of excellence and her connections with the local business community made it possible for her to place many graduates in positions that were both challenging and fulfilling. Some of her students entered international competitions and won top awards for their business proficiencies in the Sloan-Duployan method of shorthand, which had come to be recognized as a useful office tool. In a relatively short time, the business community in St. John's sought out the graduates of Mercy Convent's commercial department, and women were no longer an anomaly in the banks, offices and other business establishments in St. John's and elsewhere.

Using flowers and art, Sister Mary Joseph made her classroom a most attractive work space for her students. She was said to

have been meticulous in her teaching and demanded much of her students in her thirty years of teaching business education. Sister Mary Joseph also had a rare artistic skill in etching, engrossing and illuminating parchments and documents of all sorts. She was often called upon to produce or adorn addresses to be presented to dignitaries at public functions around the town. These she executed with delicate artistry and finesse. She was a woman of many talents, who gave of herself freely and generously to her students, her sisters and to the people of St. John's.

Sister Mary Joseph died unexpectedly at Mercy Convent on September 1, 1930. At the time of her death, she was still directing the commercial department of Our Lady of Mercy Academy. She was seventy-four years of age and had devoted herself to the education of children and young adults in Newfoundland for nearly half a century. Thousands had benefited from her exemplary training. Following her death, many tributes came from all sectors of the population, extolling the work of this influential educator, who had helped so many women find gainful and fulfilling employment. The newspapers of the day eulogized her many gifts and accomplishments, and their glowing commendations gave clear evidence of the great esteem with which she was held as a religious woman, an educator and as a citizen of St. John's.

The editorial of *The Daily News* of September 4, 1930 spoke of her thus:

The passing of Sister Mary Joseph Fox removes an educationalist of more than usual note from our midst, one to whom the commercial life of the city owes a great deal ... Although the worthy sisters do good by stealth and never court publicity, we feel that we echo the gratitude of very many women of Newfoundland in emphasizing her work as a teacher.

The June 1931 edition of *Inter Nos* carried an article on Sister Mary Joseph, written by Lady Isabel Morris, wife of Prime Minister Edward Morris. Among her words of praise and appreciation, the following lines vibrate with a special poignancy:

During the many years that the late Sister M. Joseph adorned the teaching profession of St. John's, she won the esteem of thousands of its citizens and gained the love and confidence of her many scholars. In her passing a Master hand has laid aside its implement and a noble soul has entered into rest. Indeed, Sister Mary Joseph is remembered as one of the most remarkable educators in the history of Mercy in Newfoundland. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Several years after Sister Mary Joseph's death, a group of her former students presented the sisters at Mercy Convent with a stained glass window of St. Joseph in grateful memory of their teacher and mentor. This window can be seen in the chapel of Our Lady of Mercy Convent on Military Road.

Sister Mary Mercedes Lyons (Lyne)

Catherine Mary (Katie) Lyons was born on June 24, 1864. Her parents were Mary and Cornelius Lyons of Keelnare, County Kerry. She received her early education from the Sisters of Mercy in Tralee.

Katie was in her nineteenth year when she left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She arrived in St. John's on June 28, 1883 and, immediately upon arrival, entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road. Katie was admitted to the novitiate on December 8, 1883 and given the religious name of Sister Mary Mercedes. Her novitiate companion was another young Kerry woman, Mary O'Connor, who was given the

religious name, Sister Mary Bridget. During their novitiate the two came under the capable direction and influence of Sister Mary Liguori Carmody, who had already been on two Mercy foundations, and who was described by Sister Kathrine Bellamy in *Weavers of the Tapestry* as “an unassuming and saintly woman.” The superior of Mercy Convent at the time of her entrance was Sister Mary Bernard Clune, a towering figure in the story of Mercy life and ministry in Newfoundland. From their earliest years in religious life, these two young sisters benefited from the example and wise counsel of these two zealous, dedicated women of Mercy, who undoubtedly made a significant impact upon their formation and upon their futures as women of Mercy.

In July of 1884, while Sister Mary Mercedes was in the novitiate, her younger sister Hannah joined the community on Military Road. In August of that same year, Sister Mary Mercedes, while still a novice, was chosen by Sister Mary Bernard to be a member of the founding community of St. Brides’s Convent, Littledale. She remained at Littledale only a few months, returning to Mercy Convent to complete her novitiate. She and Sister Mary Bridget made profession of vows at Mercy Convent on December 28, 1885. The two, who had begun their Mercy journey together, remained close friends all through life, even though Sister Mary Mercedes seemed inclined to stay in the background, while Sister Mary Bridget was usually front and center of any activity or event.

Sister Mary Mercedes spent most of her religious life at Mercy Convent. Her teaching assignment after profession was St. Peter’s School, and she and her sister companions walked from Mercy Convent to Queen Street and back every day in all kinds of weather. Sister Mary Mercedes did this for sixteen years.

The school situation itself was difficult as the children were extremely poor, insufficiently-fed, ill-clad and lacking in the

necessary books and supplies. The 1887 Report of the Superintendent of Schools documents these conditions and praises the zeal and perseverance of the sisters in the face of these difficulties. Undoubtedly, it was here that Sister Mary Mercedes' innate compassion and concern for the poor was honed and deepened. When St. Peter's School closed in 1903, the children were transferred to St. Vincent's School on Harvey Road, and Sister Mary Mercedes followed them to their new accommodations.

While she taught at St. Peter's and St. Vincent's, Sister M. Mercedes maintained ties with Our Lady of Mercy School. In 1892 she had been given responsibility for managing its lending library, a very pleasant task for one who loved reading and who had an avid thirst for knowledge. In June of 1900, Bishop Michael Francis Howley appointed Sister Mary Mercedes the first director of the Sodality of the Children of Mary that he had established at Mercy Convent. She remained in that position for twenty-five years.

It seems that in April of 1907, two Sisters from Mercy Convent began teaching at Hoylestown in the east end of St. John's and that Sister Mary Mercedes was one of the two. How long she continued that ministry is not known. In 1913 she was elected mistress of novices at Mercy Convent and was re-elected to this position in 1915. Sister Mary Mercedes was obviously a woman who could juggle many responsibilities and who did so quietly and without fanfare. She was known to have had a special love for visiting the sick, and was faithful to her weekly visitation of the General Hospital in the city's east end.

When all the Convents of Mercy in Newfoundland were amalgamated in 1916, Archbishop Roche appointed Sister Mary Mercedes a member of the first General Council of the new congregation. When the first General Chapter met in 1919, she was elected councillor, a position she held for fifteen years.

Sister Mary Mercedes had problems with her sight for a number of years. In the late 1800s, she went to New York for medical treatment, accompanied by her sister, Sister Mary Aloysius. Her condition improved for a while, but by 1919, her sight had seriously deteriorated to the extent that nothing could be done for her in St. John's. Consequently, she went to St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, where she was again treated for her condition. Her novitiate companion and lifelong friend, Sister Mary Bridget, who was now the superior general of the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, accompanied her on this trip. In the archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's there is a letter written by Archbishop E.P. Roche on December 2, 1919 to the superior of St. Vincent's Hospital in New York, recommending Sister Mary Mercedes and her companion to their care. The bishop added that his personal experience assured him that they will be "received with the greatest kindness at St. Vincent's Hospital."

Upon her return to St. John's, Sister Mary Mercedes continued teaching at Our Lady of Mercy Academy for many years, and resumed her work as a member of the congregation's General Council. On December 28, 1935, she and Sister Mary Bridget celebrated the golden jubilee of their profession.

This gentle, refined woman of Mercy died at Mercy Convent on December 9, 1951, after being confined to bed for several years. At the time of her death, Sister Mary Mercedes was eighty-seven years of age and had lived as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland for sixty-eight of those years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

The Monitor of June 1952 says of her:

Mother Mercedes was gifted with unusual intellectual ability. Her wide reading, her knowledge of current events, her many years, her great experience, her

wonderful store of memories made her a pleasant and brilliant conversationalist and an interesting companion to young and old.

Sister Mary Mercedes' sister, Sister Mary Aloysius Lyons, pre-deceased her, as did all the members of her immediate family. The two Lyons sisters are buried side by side in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor

On November 3, 1862, a second daughter, who would be named Mary, was born to Mary and William O'Connor of Kilmainham, County Kerry. Mary received her early education from the Sisters of Mercy in Abbeyfeale, County Kerry.



At the age of twenty-one, Mary volunteered for the Newfoundland mission of the Sisters of Mercy. Upon arrival in St. John's on September 6, 1883, she entered the community on Military Road and was admitted to the novitiate in December of that same year, along with another young Kerry woman, Katie Lyons. At the time of their entrance, another Irish woman who was to play a significant role in Mercy life and ministry in Newfoundland, Sister M. Teresa O'Halloran, was in the second year of her novitiate.

At her reception into novitiate, Mary O'Connor was given the religious name of Sister Mary Bridget. *The Evening Telegram* of January 23, 1945 tells the story of how she received her religious name:

The property of Littledale had been acquired in the year she landed in St. John's and when Mother Bernard Clune was asked what name she would call the new convent, she replied that with St. Patrick's on one side and Kilbride on the other, she could do no better than to call it St. Bride's, and the Bishop asked that in commemoration of this, the junior of the two new sisters be called Sister Bridget.

Sister Mary Bridget and her novitiate companion, now named Sister Mary Mercedes, made profession of vows at Mercy Convent on December 28, 1885. The following year, at the age of twenty-four, Sister Mary Bridget was appointed headmistress of St. Bride's Academy, which was then in its infancy.

In her early years at Littledale, Sister Mary Bridget was mentored by the wise and visionary Sister Mary Bernard Clune, who as superior of Mercy Convent, guided the progress of the branch house. Under Sister Mary Bridget's dynamic and innovative leadership, Littledale flourished and began to claim its place in the history of education in Newfoundland.

Her spirited personality, her diversity of talents, her keen mind and her strong will made Sister Mary Bridget a force to be reckoned with, even in her younger years. Whatever she did, she did wholeheartedly and well, and wherever she went, she left a legacy of learning and culture.

With the formation of the Council for Higher Education in 1893, a common syllabus and uniform examinations for the higher grades were introduced in all Newfoundland schools. From the beginning, Sister Mary Bridget was a staunch supporter of this initiative, which was spearheaded by Brother J.L. Slattery, the principal of St. Bonaventure's College. She entered eleven of her students in the first CHE exams, held in 1894, and all eleven excelled, winning first place in many of the subject areas. The

successes of these first years set a standard that Littledale pupils worked hard to maintain throughout succeeding years.

Littledale's attainment of independent status in 1895 greatly expanded Sister Mary Bridget's roster of duties. At the same time, she was named assistant to the new superior, Sister Mary Xaverius Dowsley, and for several of her years at Littledale she also served as mistress of novices. Even with these added duties, Sister Mary Bridget always remained attuned to the activities, projects and needs of the boarding school. In 1895 Littledale was elevated to the status of a teacher-training institute. Although this was a great honour, it brought many new challenges and responsibilities for Sister Mary Bridget, who met them with her usual efficiency and diplomacy. Her innovative approach to teaching, her management style and her eagerness to explore new ideas and directions made her a very influential administrator and put Littledale in the vanguard of educational life in the island. Littledale's reputation as a center of learning and culture, which was the dream of its founder, Sister Mary Bernard Clune, was becoming a reality, and students were flocking to Littledale to avail of its opportunities.

By the end of the century, Littledale had more than fifty boarding students, in addition to ten teachers-in-training, and it was clear to Sister Mary Bridget and her staff that more space was needed to accommodate its numbers and its programs. In 1902 the two-story Talbot wing was added to the property, bringing a beautiful chapel, music rooms, a recreation hall, additional classroom space and an improved sanitation system, enhancing both the services and the overall ambience of the school.

In 1903, to the dismay of teachers and students at St. Bride's, Sister Mary Bridget was transferred to St. Anne's Convent, Burin, where her good friend, Sister Mary Pius Mulcahy, had been appointed superior a year earlier. She brought to her teaching

ministry in Burin the same competence, enthusiasm, creativity and dedication that had characterized her ministry at St. Bride's.

With the arrival of these two brilliant educators in these beginning years of the twentieth century, the convent school in Burin bubbled with vitality. Building on the work of their Mercy predecessors, Sisters Mary Bridget and Mary Pius injected a new energy into students and teachers alike. Visits of the Superintendent of Schools brought glowing commendations. In his report for the year ending December 31, 1908, Vincent Burke wrote thus about the convent school in Burin:

The work done in it is much above the average.

I have no better school within my superintendence.

Not long after her arrival in Burin, Sister Mary Bridget introduced her students to the CHE curriculum, and in 1908 she presented them for the CHE examinations, with excellent results.

In 1908 Sister Mary Bridget succeeded Sister Mary Pius as superior of St. Anne's Convent, but this added responsibility did not detract from her work in the school. In addition to her regular school day, Sister Mary Bridget taught evening classes to both Catholic and non-Catholic girls who had left school. The diversity of the classes – french, painting, drawing, needlework, typing, shorthand – gives some indication of the talents and skills of this gifted woman. The only known piece of her art that has survived is a slate painting of Burin, which she likely did during her years in that community. That painting is preserved in the Heritage Room of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's.

At the end of the 1914-15 school year, Sister Mary Bridget was recalled to Mercy Convent to replace Sister Mary Ita Glynn as superior. Around the same time, Father Edward Patrick Roche was consecrated archbishop of St. John's. His dream of bringing together all the convents into one congregation was shared by

Sister Mary Bridget, and she became an ally with the archbishop in planning and executing this momentous task. On August 4, 1916, when Pope Benedict XV promulgated the *Decree of Amalgamation*, bringing the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland into being, it was no surprise that Sister Mary Bridget was appointed its first superior general, the unanimous choice of the three Newfoundland bishops. Her novitiate companion and lifelong friend, Sister Mary Mercedes Lyons, was appointed first councillor.

Very soon after her appointment as superior general, Sister Mary Bridget began what she considered one of her most important responsibilities – visitation of all her sisters in the nine Convents of Mercy scattered throughout the three dioceses in the island. Following her visitation with the seventy-nine sisters in the new congregation, she gave testimony of the success of Amalgamation in these words from the minutes of Council meetings for 1916, which are preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's:

There was not one member dissatisfied either with the Generalate itself or with the wishes of the bishops regarding the appointment of the officials for the term of three years.

When the first General Chapter was held in 1919, Sister Mary Bridget was unanimously elected superior general by the sisters and she remained in this position until 1925, when Sister Mary Philippa Hanley was elected. In 1937 the General Chapter of the congregation again elected Sister Mary Bridget as superior general for another six-year term.

These years of Sister Mary Bridget's leadership were times of growth and expansion for the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. During her tenure, five convents were established: St. Mary's on the Humber, Curling (1917); St. Edward's, Bell Island (1917); St.

Patrick's, Bay Bulls (1921); St. Joseph's, Hoylestown (1922); St. Clare's, St. John's (1922). She was intimately involved in the planning and preparations for all these foundations, and she accompanied the founding communities to their new homes and places of ministry.

Sister Mary Bridget was part of the decision-making regarding the closing of the St. Clare's Home for Working Girls and of the opening of St. Clare's Mercy Hospital in 1922. In 1939, when Sister Mary Bridget was again superior general, the new St. Clare's Mercy Hospital was opened, and the St. Clare's School of Nursing came into being. Funding for the new hospital came from collections from all the parishes in the Archdiocese of St. John's, from private and corporate donations, from the mortgaging of the Littledale property and from the emergency savings of the Sisters of Mercy. Sister Mary Bridget and her council worked assiduously with Archbishop E.P Roche and with Sister Mary Aloysius Rawlins, the administrator of St. Clare's, to negotiate all the necessary financial arrangements for this huge venture.

During her several terms as superior general, Sister Mary Bridget made a practice of an annual visit to all the schools where the sisters taught. The *Inter Nos* of June, 1944 indicated that she always found time to spend with the primary children at Our Lady of Mercy Academy, "where her wide teaching experience and her great knowledge of child psychology were of incalculable value to teachers and pupils."

Sister Mary Bridget was superior general when the Knights of Columbus Memorial wing was added to Our Lady of Mercy Academy. When the Knights were unable to follow through with their pledged funding, Sister Mary Bridget and her council had to assume responsibility for the debt. In time, and with prudent management, conscientious sacrificing by the sisters, creative fundraising and unfailing trust in God's Providence, the sisters

paid off the debt. Teachers and students were delighted with the improved facilities provided by the new wing, and perhaps because of the struggle with finances, appreciated even more the amenities and conveniences of a modern school.

An artist herself, Sister Mary Bridget was a strong supporter of the arts, and she constantly encouraged her sisters and pupils to develop whatever talents they had received. She was quick to spot potential in people and then followed through by providing opportunities for that potential to develop. Recognizing the exceptional musical ability of Sister Mary Baptist McDermott, Sister Mary Bridget made arrangements for her to study at the Boston Conservatory and, later, in other parts of the United States. Sister Mary Baptist became one of the founders of modern music education in Newfoundland. Sister Mary Bridget also arranged for educational leave for the scholarly Sister Mary Perpetua O'Callaghan to complete her doctorate at Fordham University in New York. In 1923, when Sister Mary Loretta McIsaac was transferred from her teaching position at Belvedere to the new St. Clare's, it was Sister Mary Bridget's perceptive observation that led her to consider a career in nursing. Sister Mary Loretta studied anaesthesia and brought her knowledge and skills to ministry at St. Clare's for many years. In these and in other situations, Sister M. Bridget drew forth from people capabilities of which they themselves were sometimes unaware.

When Sister Mary Bridget celebrated her golden jubilee in 1935, she was teaching Grade One at Our Lady of Mercy School, and reports indicated that she brought the same enthusiasm and progressive ideas into the primary classroom as she did in teacher-training classes or her ministry of leadership in the congregation. Sister Helen Caule considers herself fortunate to have had Sister Mary Bridget teaching her phonics in Grade One. She remembers her as a soft-spoken, pleasant woman who made phonics fun!

A special edition of the *St. Bride's College Annual* of June, 1947, dedicated to Archbishop E.P. Roche on the occasion of his golden jubilee, records the archbishop's address at the opening of St. Augustine's Hall. At the dedication ceremony, held on the feast of St. Bridget, 1944, Archbishop Roche praised the work of the Sisters of Mercy, paying special tribute to Sister Mary Bridget, as follows:

Among the few pioneer sisters who came here more than half a century ago in the infancy of the institution and who carefully nursed Litledale through the early days of its delicate childhood and adolescence, she it was who as the principal teacher, more than any other, was responsible for the creation, in the very beginning of those high cultural education traditions, which have always been associated with the name of Litledale.

Sister Mary Bridget was obviously a woman of many talents, and she used them generously to advance the mission of the Sisters of Mercy. After sixty years of dedicated service to the congregation and to the church in Newfoundland, Mother Bridget, as she came to be known, died at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital on January 17, 1945. She was uniquely blessed with great faith and trust in God's Providence, with zeal and courage, with vision and practical wisdom, all of which fitted her admirably for the ministry of leadership she so faithfully carried out in the congregation and in the country over so many years. She holds a prominent place in the *Annals* of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy and in the history of Newfoundland. Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor, a remarkable woman of Mercy, is buried in the sisters' cemetery in Belvedere.

After Sister Mary Bridget's death, a tribute in *The Daily News* of January 22, 1945 spoke of her thus:

Nature had marked her out as a woman of exceptional genius, for she possessed a mind crystal clear and profound, great breadth of vision united to an indomitable will and magnificent courage. To this forceful personality were added in abundant measure the softer traits of womanhood So widely diversified were her talents that she was equally at home in all departments of learning, and her practice was as thorough as her theory was sound.... In the schools it was refreshing to see her with the little ones who thronged around her, never annoying or worrying her with their chatter. She was so broad, so sympathetic, so modern and up-to-date that they never regarded her as being too old to understand their views... Her visible monuments are all around us and the greatest, perhaps, are those based on the reverence and affection of all the Mercy Sisters.

Sister Mary Stanislaus Fitzgerald

On December 14, 1860 Catherine and William Fitzgerald of Ardfert, County Kerry welcomed a new daughter into their family. Her baptismal name was Mary.

Leaving family and country to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland, Mary Fitzgerald and three other young woman Irish women, Hannah Lyons, Mary O'Farrell and Bridget Walsh, arrived in St. John's on July 8, 1884. The four entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road that same day and were admitted to the novitiate together in January of 1885. At her reception, Mary was given the religious name of Sister Mary Stanislaus.

Sister M. Stanislaus, along with two of her companions, Sisters M. Genevieve O'Farrell and M. Aloysius Lyons made profession of vows as Sisters of Mercy on January 4, 1887.

Sister M. Stanislaus was a member of the motherhouse community and a teacher at Our Lady of Mercy School for all of her religious life. The superior at Mercy Convent for most of these years was Sister Mary Bernard Clune. Sister Mary Stanislaus was said to have been an excellent teacher, with rare powers of communicating knowledge and a gentle, encouraging approach with her pupils.

Sister M. Stanislaus had health problems for a number of years. She was only thirty-nine years of age when she died on July 20, 1899. She had been professed for twelve years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Aloysius Lyons

Hannah Lyons was the second daughter born to Mary and Cornelius Lyons of Keelnare, County Kerry. She was born on September 20, 1866. At the young age of eighteen years, Hannah left home for the Newfoundland mission of the Sisters of Mercy. Her sister Katie had entered that community in far-off Newfoundland two years before. A brother of the Lyons sisters ministered as a Jesuit priest in Belgium.

Hannah arrived in St. John's on July 8, 1884 in the company of three others, Mary Fitzgerald from her home county of Kerry, Mary O'Farrell from Tipperary and Bridget Walsh from Sligo. All four young women entered the motherhouse community on Military Road that same day, and were admitted to the novitiate together in January of 1885. Hannah's religious name, given at her reception, was Sister Mary Aloysius.

On January 4, 1887 Sister Mary Aloysius made profession of vows in the chapel of St. Bride's Convent. This was the first of a number of such ceremonies to be held in Littledale.

Sister Mary Aloysius was assigned to teach at St. Bride's Academy and sometime later, was placed in charge of the Waterford Bridge School, later known as St. Joseph's. Archbishop Howley had built this school in 1896 to serve the growing population of Topsail and Bay Bulls Roads. Its close proximity to St. Bride's made it an ideal place for student teachers to gain practical experience in teaching and in classroom management under the direction of more experienced teachers and mentors.

Sister Mary Aloysius was said to have been a favourite with pupils of all ages and from all backgrounds, because of her sparkling wit, her natural kindness, and her light-hearted disposition.

In late 1899 or early 1900, Sister Mary Aloysius accompanied her sister, Sister Mary Mercedes, to New York for eye surgery. On her return trip Sister Mary Aloysius became seriously ill and had to be taken to the Infirmary of the Sisters of Charity in Halifax until she was well enough to travel home. She died at the age of thirty-three years on March 10, 1900. She had been the first sister professed at Litledale, and she was the first sister to die there. Her sister, Sister Mary Mercedes, lived as a member of the congregation for another fifty-one years.

Sister Mary Aloysius and her sister, Sister Mary Mercedes, are buried next to each other in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Agnes Walsh

Bridget Walsh was the daughter of Margaret and Thomas Walsh of Sligo. She was born on April 17, 1865.

Bridget arrived in St. John's on July 8, 1884, and with three other young women from Ireland, Hannah Lyons, Mary O'Farrell and Mary Fitzgerald, entered the Sisters of Mercy at the motherhouse community on Military Road. The four young

women were received into the novitiate in January, 1885. Bridget's religious name, given at her reception, was Sister Mary Agnes.

Sister Mary Agnes' three companions were professed in January of 1887, but her novitiate was extended and she made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on December 27, 1888. At some point, Sister M. Agnes became a member of the community at St. Anne's Convent in Burin, where she faithfully carried out her ministries of teaching and visitation of the sick.

Sister Mary Agnes was in her thirty-seventh year when she died on January 22, 1902. She is one of the six Sisters of Mercy buried in Burin.

Sister Mary Genevieve O'Farrell

On August 15, 1867, Mary and Patrick O'Farrell became the parents of a second daughter, whom they named Mary. The O'Farrell family lived in Knocklofty in the parish of Grange in County Tipperary.

Mary went to the local school in Knocklofty until she was eight years old. Her parents then enrolled her in Sacred Heart Convent, a boarding school operated by the Sisters of Mercy in Rosecrea. Mary remained there until she finished school at the age of sixteen years.

Mary's aunt, Sister Mary Patrick O'Farrell, had left Ireland for the Newfoundland mission of the Sisters of Mercy in 1865. Perhaps Mary was influenced by her aunt, for in her seventeenth year she left home and family to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. When she arrived in St. John's on August 7, 1884, she learned that her postulancy was to be spent, not at Mercy Convent, where her aunt was living, but at the new St.

Bride's Convent, which was due to officially open in a matter of weeks. Mary was to be a member of the new community, along with two professed sisters, Mary Ita Glynn and M. Teresa O'Halleran, and a novice, Sister Mary Mercedes Lyons. Sister Kathrine Bellamy suggested on page 193 of *Weavers of the Tapestry* that part of the reason why Mary may have been appointed to Littledale after her arrival in St. John's was because her dowry was needed to defray some of the debt on the new St. Bride's Convent. Letters in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy seem to support this theory. The purchase of the Little estate and the renovations made to adapt it for use as a convent and boarding school had indeed placed a huge financial burden on the Littledale community, which was responsible for meeting the regular payments.

After five months of postulancy, Mary was received into the novitiate at Littledale in January of 1885 and was given the religious name of Sister Mary Genevieve. Very shortly after she began her novitiate, her aunt, Sister Mary Patrick, died at Mercy Convent. The loss of her only relative in this new country must have been difficult for the young novice, but she continued her novitiate and made her profession of vows on January 4, 1887. Bishop Thomas Power presided at her both her reception and profession ceremonies, which took place at Littledale.

Sister Mary Genevieve spent many years at Littledale, teaching at St. Bride's Academy, but was at Mercy Convent when the amalgamation of the nine convents of Mercy in Newfoundland occurred in 1916. At that time, she was appointed secretary general of the new congregation. She was elected secretary general at the congregation's first General Chapter in 1919, and was re-elected in the Chapters of 1925 and 1931. Obviously, her competencies were recognized and appreciated by her sisters.

When Sister Mary Genevieve was a novice, Sister Mary Bernard Clune ensured that all her educational requirements were up to standard, and she provided opportunities for the young sister to

take music lessons. Later in her life when she was living at Mercy Convent, Sister Mary Genevieve taught music to the children of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, in addition to carrying out her duties as secretary general.

In early May of 1935, Sister Mary Genevieve became ill with pneumonia, and she died on May 19, 1935. She was sixty-eight years of age at the time of her death. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

An account of her death in the *Inter Nos* of June 1935 stated that Sister Mary Genevieve was known for her gentleness, her unselfish nature and her love for children and the poor. She was said to have been an outstanding teacher and a competent and diligent administrator. She was a wonderful steward of the records of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy, especially in the years following Amalgamation.

A large picture of Sister Mary Genevieve hangs in the Heritage Room of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's.

Sister Mary Evangelist MacDermott

On March 15, 1865, Mary Anne and John MacDermott of Roscommon, Ireland, welcomed a daughter into their family. Her baptismal name was Mary Catherine, but to family and friends, she was known as Katie.

In her nineteenth year, Katie left her family and homeland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Her travelling companion on the voyage across the Atlantic was Bedelia O'Connor, also a native of Roscommon.

Katie and Bedelia arrived in St. John's on October 15, 1884 and entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road that same day. They were both admitted to the novitiate in March of 1885. At

her reception ceremony, Katie was given the religious name of Sister Mary Evangelist.

Sister Mary Evangelist was professed as a Sister of Mercy on April 12, 1887. Her novitiate companion, now known as Sister Mary Xavier O'Connor, had her novitiate time extended until December of 1887.

Records from St. Bride's Convent, Littledale show that Sister Mary Evangelist was a member of that community from 1885 until her death.

Sister Mary Evangelist only lived for four years after her profession. She died on June 17, 1891 at the young age of twenty-six years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary Xavier O'Connor

Bedelia O'Connor was a Christmas baby, born on December 25, 1864, to Bridget and James O'Connor. The records of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland do not give her birthplace in Ireland, but the Newfoundland Census of 1921 states that she was born in Roscommon. The June 29, 1937 *Inter Nos*, the newsletter of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, notes that she was educated by the Sisters of Mercy in Roscommon.

Bedelia was nearly twenty years old when she arrived in St. John's from Ireland in the Fall of 1884. She travelled across the Atlantic in the company of Katie MacDermott, also from Roscommon. Both young women entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road on October 15, 1884.

Soon after she began her postulancy, Bedelia was assigned to the newly-opened St. Bride's Convent. There she replaced Sister M. Mercedes Lyons, who was returning to Mercy Convent to complete her novitiate. Bedelia was a gifted artist and her talents

were greatly appreciated at St. Bride's, where she became the Academy's first formal instructor in the visual arts. From the beginning, drawing and painting had been part of the curriculum at St. Bride's, but Bedelia O'Connor was to bring an entirely new dimension to the teaching of the various forms of art.

Bedelia was admitted to the novitiate in March of 1885, and given the name of Sister Mary Xavier. For some reason her novitiate was extended until December 27, 1887, when she made profession of vows, eight months after her companion, Sister Mary Evangelist, was professed.

Sister Mary Xavier spent most of her early years of religious life at St. Bride's. In 1903, she was transferred to the Convent of Mercy on Military Road. Here, as at Littledale, she exhibited great competence and creativity as a teacher. Invariably, her students had wonderful success in their examinations, many of them winning scholarships and awards.

Throughout her life, Sister Mary Xavier was known and admired as an artist of the highest calibre. She was skilled in several branches of art, and excelled in the illumination of addresses. She was often called upon to do this very delicate work for special occasions in the schools and convents and in the community at large. One of her illuminated works is displayed in the Heritage Room of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's. It is a beautifully designed scroll presented by the students of St. Bride's, Littledale, to Monsignor John Scott, administrator of the cathedral, upon his return from Rome in March of 1898.

In October of 1918 when preparations were being made for the opening of St. Edward's Convent on Bell Island, Sister Mary Xavier was one of the sisters who travelled to the island to assist the community with the children's concert and with the reception of the guests.

Sister Mary Xavier died on April 15, 1936 at the age of seventy-two years. She had been a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland for fifty-two years. She is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary de Sales Galvin

On November 13, 1866, a daughter was born to Mary and James Galvin of Charleville, County Cork. Her baptismal name was Hannah. Her early school years were spent as a boarding student with the Presentation Sisters at their academy in Crosshaven. Three of the Galvin girls entered religious life, two of them becoming Presentation Sisters.

Hannah was in her nineteenth year when she left Cork to become a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. She was the first young woman from Cork to join the mission in twenty-seven years. Back in 1858, Mercy Convent had welcomed three young Cork women – Sisters M. de Chantal O’Keefe, M. of the Cross Reardon and M. Philomena O’Donovan. When Hannah arrived in St. John’s on June 17, 1885, she was sent to Conception Harbour, where she was accepted as a postulant and later as a novice. At her reception in November of 1885, she was given the religious name of Sister Mary de Sales.

Sister M. de Sales professed vows as a Sister of Mercy in the parish church in Conception Harbour on December 27, 1887. She later returned to Mercy Convent on Military Road.

Sister Mary de Sales died on October 10, 1913 at the age of forty-seven years and is buried in Belvedere cemetery.

Sister Mary de Sales’ two sisters in the Presentation Order survived her – Sister Mary Columba of Crosshaven, County Cork in Ireland, and Sister Margaret Mary of St. Patrick’s Convent, St. John’s. The latter died in August of 1942 at St. Patrick’s, where she had spent all of her religious life.

Sister Mary Patrick Flynn

On St. Patrick's Day, 1866, Catherine and Timothy Flynn were blessed with their fourth daughter, whom they named Catherine Francis. The Flynns lived in Roscommon, where Catherine was educated by the Sisters of Mercy.

Catherine was nineteen years old when she left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She and Bedelia Hanley, also from Roscommon, were on the same Atlantic crossing, arriving in St. John's on August 15, 1885. The two young women had been classmates and good friends from childhood. They were both accepted as postulants at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, and both were received into the novitiate at St. Michael's on March 8, 1886 by Bishop Thomas Power. At her reception into the novitiate, Catherine received the religious name of Sister Mary Patrick Joseph and Bedelia received the name of Sister Mary Philippa Joseph. During their novitiate at St. Michael's, both Sister Mary Patrick and Sister Mary Philippa would have cared for the children and taken responsibility for the various tasks around the convent and the orphanage.

On December 28, 1887 Sisters Mary Patrick and Mary Philippa made profession of vows at St. Michael's, Belvedere. This was the first profession ceremony held in the Oratory of the Sacred Heart, which Sister M. de Chantal had recently set up in the convent.

Early in her religious life, Sister Mary Patrick showed signs of remarkable business ability, and it is not surprising that she was appointed bursar at St. Michael's, an office she held until 1925. When Sister Mary Philippa was elected superior general in 1925, she appointed Sister Mary Patrick to succeed her as superior of St. Michael's Convent.

Sister Mary Patrick was said to have been very devoted to the children at Belvedere and a generous, kind and considerate

leader and community member of St. Michael's Convent. Sister Mary Thomasine McHugh corroborated this view in personal remembrances of living with her in community at St. Michael's.

In December of 1937 Sister Mary Patrick, Sister Mary Philippa Hanley, and Sister Mary Benedicta Fitzgibbon celebrated their golden jubilees at St. Michael's, a festive event that was enjoyed by both sisters and children. In the January 1938 issue of *The Monitor*, the concert which the children staged for the occasion was extolled as "entertainment for which grace and finish could not easily be excelled by school children." In speaking of Sister Mary Patrick, *The Monitor* went on to say:

Her chief office, the one which her great heart would never let her relinquish, was providing for the happiness and comfort of the little girls confided to the care of the sisters. Her amiable, affectionate disposition created an influence which made itself felt, even after the children had grown to womanhood and had taken their places in the world outside.

Sister Mary Patrick Flynn died on June 15, 1945 at the age of seventy-nine years. She had lived at Belvedere for the sixty years of her religious life. She is buried next to her faithful friend and companion, Sister Mary Philippa Hanley, in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

Sister Mary Philippa Hanley

Bedelia Josephine Hanley was the daughter of Catherine and Thomas Hanley. She was born on January 12, 1866 in Roscommon, Ireland.

Bedelia and her childhood friend, Catherine Flynn, left Ireland in the summer of 1885 to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. They arrived in St. John's on August 15 and

began their postulancy at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere. After spending nearly seven months as postulants, the two young women were admitted to the novitiate on March 8, 1886. At their ceremony of reception, Bedelia was given the religious name of Sister Mary Philippa Joseph and Catherine received the name, Sister Mary Patrick Joseph. Sister Mary Philippa and Sister Mary Patrick were



professed by Bishop Thomas Power at St. Michael's Convent on December 28, 1887, the first novices to be professed in the Sacred Heart Oratory at Belvedere.

Having spent her early years of religious life at Belvedere, Sister Mary Philippa was transferred in 1904 to St. Bride's Academy, teaching the student teachers and the senior students. In addition to her school duties, Sister Mary Philippa took on the responsibility of novice mistress, a position left vacant by Sister M. Bridget O'Connor's transfer to Burin. In 1908, the students at Litledale were said to have been deeply grieved when Sister M. Philippa was assigned to Sacred Heart Convent in St. Lawrence. There, as in her other places of ministry, she devoted herself to both school and community and won the love and gratitude of children and parents alike.

In 1910, Sister M. Philippa was delighted to return to her beloved Belvedere, where she was reunited with her children and the sisters, especially her dear friend Sister Mary Patrick. She remained at St. Michael's Convent for the next fifteen years, serving the community as superior and novice mistress. When the amalgamation of all the Convents of Mercy took place in 1916, Sister Mary Philippa was appointed by Archbishop P. J.

Roche as a member of the first General Council of the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland. In 1919 she was elected to that position by the congregation's first General Chapter. It seems that from 1919 to 1925, while a member of the General Council, she also served as superior of St. Michael's Convent.

Having served two terms as superior general, Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor was ineligible for re-election in the Chapter of 1925. The congregation unanimously elected Sister Mary Philippa as its new leader, re-electing her to the same position in the Chapter of 1931.

As superior general, Sister Mary Philippa continued in the tradition of Sister Mary Bridget. One of the first tasks facing her Council was the formal petitioning of the Holy See for the new Rule and Constitutions of the Sisters of Mercy. While Archbishop Roche took the lead in the actual negotiations with Rome, Sister Mary Philippa and Sister Mary Bridget did the tedious preliminary work of researching and collating the necessary documents. Their labours proved successful, as the formal approbation from Rome came in 1930.

During Sister Mary Philippa's tenure as superior general, two new foundations were begun – Holy Name of Mary Convent in Marystown and Immaculate Conception Convent on Bell Island. In the tradition of Catherine McAuley, Sister M. Xavier Bernard and other superiors before her, Sister M. Philippa accompanied the new communities to their missions. She was known to be conscientious in carrying out regular visitation of the convents, recognizing the right of each sister to have access to their superior general. While she was in office, requests came from sisters for replacement of the deteriorating convent buildings in St. Lawrence and Conception Harbour, and she was quick to see that new convents were built or that necessary renovations made for the sisters in these places of ministry.

Sister Mary Thomasine McHugh entered the Sisters of Mercy in 1934 during Sister Mary Philippa's second term as superior general. Later, after living with Sister Mary Philippa in community at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, Sister Mary Thomasine described her as a "beautiful woman, kind, compassionate and understanding, and a most interesting conversationalist."

In 1937 after Sister M. Philippa had completed two six-year terms as superior general, she was again asked by her sisters to continue in leadership, this time as assistant to Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor. With a little more free time, she began a project that had long been on her mind – writing the history of the congregation in preparation for the 1942 centennial year. Illness prevented her from completing this task which had been so dear to her heart, although in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, there are notations compiled by her on all the foundations from 1842 to 1922. At the top of this text, Sister Mary Philippa penned the words, "For the benefit of our future historian."

In the very year she completed her ministry of congregational leadership, Sister Mary Philippa and her lifelong friend, Sister Mary Patrick Flynn, celebrated their golden jubilees at St. Michael's Convent, an occasion of great celebration and joy for the community and for the children.

Sister Mary Philippa Hanley was a learned and cultured woman, whose influence was deeply felt throughout the congregation. Keenly aware of the importance of ongoing education, in 1939 she engaged the Sisters of Charity from Mount St. Vincent in Halifax to conduct summer schools at Mercy Convent for both Mercy and Presentation sisters. Like the Mercy leaders before her, she also encouraged sisters to continue to pursue graduate studies in Canada and the United States. Her zeal was such that she seemed to attend to every aspect of the life of the

congregation, and she dedicated herself wholeheartedly to its growth and development. This refined, gentle and generous woman of Mercy is remembered for her kindness, natural amiability, literary talent, administrative abilities and dedicated service to the congregation. Several of Sister Mary Philippa's letters are preserved in the congregational archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's.

Sister Mary Philippa died at Belvedere on November 4, 1941, just seven months before the beginning of the centennial year, to which she had so long looked forward. She was seventy-five years of age and was, at the time of her death, assistant to Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor.

The November 1941 issue of *The Monitor* wrote thus of her:

In literary talent, in artistic skill, in mastery of the needle, brush, pen and voice, she has left to Newfoundland a tradition and a heritage of old world culture at its very best Her passing deprives the congregation of one of its most distinguished members and of one whose years in the religious life were intimately connected with the history and island-wide development of the Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.

Sister Mary Philippa is buried in Bevedere cemetery. Next to her gravesite is that of her lifelong friend and co-worker, Sister Mary Patrick Flynn.

Sister Mary Patrick Doyle

On February 5, 1870, Lydia and Thomas Doyle of Dublin welcomed a third daughter into their family. They named her Mary Bridget.

By the time of Mary Bridget's birth, the Sisters of Mercy had already celebrated the silver jubilee of their foundation in Dublin and were well-known throughout Ireland. Though it is unclear whether or not Mary Bridget knew the sisters in her home city, it is certain the call of the Mercy mission found an echo in her heart. In her nineteenth year, she left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland.

Travelling with her across the Atlantic was the newly-ordained Father J.J. McGrath, who was to spend many years on Bell Island and become a dear friend of the Sisters of Mercy. The sailing vessel carrying the two arrived in St. John's on August 14, 1889, and Mary Bridget entered the Convent of Mercy on Military Road that same day.

At her reception into the novitiate on February 2, 1890, Mary Bridget received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious name, Sister Mary Patrick. She made profession of vows on December 27, 1892.

Sister Mary Patrick's first teaching assignment was at St. Peter's School on Queen Street, where she remained until it closed in 1903. When the children moved from there to St. Vincent's School on Harvey Road, she went with them. At the closure of St. Vincent's she went to Our Lady of Mercy Academy, where she spent the last years of her life teaching the primary classes.

Sister Mary Patrick became ill in November of 1928, and died on February 18, 1929. At the time of her death, she was fifty-nine years of age. On the day of her burial at Belvedere cemetery, the graveside prayers were recited by Father J. J. McGrath, the Irish

priest who had been her companion on her journey to Newfoundland in 1889.

Sister Mary Aquin Gormley

Mary Theresa Gormley was born in Roscommon, Ireland on August 27, 1873. Her parents were Margaret and Edward Gormley. She was educated by the Sisters of Mercy in her hometown of Roscommon.

Mary Theresa was only twelve years old when two young women from her home area, Bedelia Hanley and Catherine Flynn, left Ireland to become part of the Mercy mission in Newfoundland. Six years later, perhaps inspired by their missionary zeal, Mary Theresa left family and county to follow the same dream.

Arriving in St. John's on October 24, 1891, the eighteen-year old Mary Theresa entered the Sisters of Mercy at the motherhouse on Military Road. At her reception into the novitiate on April 4, 1892, she received the religious name, Sister Mary Aquin. Sister Mary Aquin made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on December 27, 1894, along with Sister Mary Consilio Kenny, also from Roscommon, who had entered in May of 1892.

After her profession, Sister Mary Aquin spent some time in Burin as superior of St. Anne's Convent, completing her term of office there in 1916. She was a signatory on the application for Amalgamation, representing St. Anne's Convent. When the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland came into being in August of 1916, she was appointed superior of St. Michael's Convent in St. George's. This was likely an awkward situation for Sister Mary Aquin, as Sister Mary Antonio, the founding superior of St. Michael's, remained in the community. In July of 1917, however, Sister Mary Antonio was appointed to the General Council and moved to St. John's, following the death of councillor Sister Mary Joseph Kelly.

In all the missions in which she served, Sister Mary Aquin carried out her duties efficiently and responsibly. In a letter to Bishop Michael F. Power of St. Georges, written on March 4, 1918, and preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor, the superior general of the new Mercy congregation, commended Sister Mary Aquin for the management skills she had displayed in steering St. Michael's Academy through the difficult economic times of the war years.

At the end of World War 1, soldiers returning to Newfoundland's west coast brought with them an unwelcome visitor, the Spanish influenza. The Sisters of Mercy of St. Michael's Convent in St. George's were very much in the forefront as this crisis unfolded. Sister Mary Aquin, the superior of St. Michael's at the time, and the other seven sisters in community tended the sick and the dying in the whole St. George's area, in addition to their work in school and boarding school. Sister Mary Xavier Wadden, a community member of St. Michael's at this time, wrote an account of this experience in the life of the people of St. Georges and of the sisters who ministered there. The following is a brief excerpt from Sister Mary Xavier's remembrances:

The Sisters took turns in the hospital during the day and in the early morning. We also visited the sick in their homes bringing hot soup, clothing, etc. Every day we washed and dressed the children – their families were very poor.

This record of events is held in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's. The hospital referred to was the court house at St. Georges, which Bishop Michael Power had converted into a temporary hospital in the face of this epidemic.

In 1922, Sister Mary Aquin was appointed superior of the convent in Conception Harbour. At the expiration of her term of office in 1925, she returned to the motherhouse in St. John's,

where she remained for the rest of her life. When Sister Mary Joseph Fox died in 1930, Sister Mary Aquin assumed responsibility for the commercial department of Our Lady of Mercy Academy.

Sister Mary Aquin was well regarded as a kind and generous superior, a wise and efficient administrator and a competent and understanding teacher. In Mercy Convent's commercial department, she is said to have helped the girls to see the importance of order and discipline in their lives, so that they would become proficient and successful in the business circles for which they were being prepared.

Sister Mary Aquin died at Mercy Convent on February 13, 1942, just four months after the death of Sister Mary Philippa, who hailed from her hometown of Roscommon and who had become a great friend. She was sixty-nine years of age, and had given fifty-one years of dedicated service as a Sister of Mercy in Newfoundland. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

Sister Mary Consilio Kenny

Agnes Mary Kenny was the youngest of eleven children born to Margaret Mary and John Kenny of Castlerea, County Roscommon. Her date of birth was February 20, 1869.

Agnes was twenty-three years of age when she left Ireland for the Newfoundland Mercy mission. Arriving in St. John's on May 5, 1892, she entered the Sisters of Mercy at Mercy Convent on Military Road. Another young woman from Roscommon, Sister Mary Aquin, had been received as a novice three weeks earlier. Agnes was admitted to the novitiate in August of 1892, taking the religious name, Sister Mary Consilio.

Sister Mary Consilio and Sister Mary Aquin were both professed at Mercy Convent on December 27, 1894 by the vicar general of the diocese, Monsignor Scott, as Bishop Thomas Power had died the previous year. Following her profession, Sister Mary Consilio taught the senior classes at Our Lady of Mercy School until September of 1917, when she was named superior of St. Edward's Convent, a new foundation on Bell Island. With her on that venture were Sisters Mary Cecily O'Reilly, Mary Alphonsus McNamara and Mary Aloysius Rawlins. The pastor of Bell Island at that time was Father J.J. McGrath, an Irishman who had come to Newfoundland the same time as Sister Mary Patrick Doyle.

Because the convent was not ready for occupancy, the sisters first lived in a temporary residence. The new St. Edward's Convent was formally opened and blessed by Archbishop E. P. Roche on October 12, 1918, and the sisters crowned the celebration with a concert by their students. An account of this event appeared in *The Daily News* of October 16, 1918, as follows:

The largest crowd that ever gathered in any building on the island attended the Musicale and entertainment given by the pupils of St. Edward's Convent on the evening of October 12 ... the children excelled themselves in the Programme, Vocal selections, Recitations, Pianoforte selections and Drills, all of which showed the excellent training that is being given.

It is clear that on Bell Island, as in all their other foundations, the Sisters encouraged and promoted appreciation of the arts. Sister Mary Consilio's great organizational abilities, her love of learning and culture and her interest in developing the gifts and talents of her students played no small part in putting St. Edward's on a solid educational foundation. After six years at St. Edward's, Sister Mary Consilio returned to Mercy Convent for a

short while, before being appointed assistant and bursar at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere.

In May of 1922 St. Clare's Mercy Hospital opened its doors, but the following year, its director, Sister Mary Bernard Gladney, contracted tuberculosis. A very small staff and lack of qualified people made it necessary to close the hospital for a while. As part of a plan to secure qualified personnel, Sister Mary Bridget O'Connor sent Sister Mary Consilio to Philadelphia to see if the Sisters of Mercy could release a nurse until Newfoundland sisters could be trained as nurses.

When Philadelphia could not spare a sister, the resourceful Sister Mary Consilio met with the Archbishop of Baltimore, explained the Newfoundland situation and pleaded his help. Sympathetic to her plight, he encouraged her to approach the sisters at Baltimore Mercy Hospital. There, Sister Mary Consilio's wise and diplomatic negotiations met a positive response, and before long, two Sisters of Mercy from Baltimore came to St. John's. With their generous and efficient help, St. Clare's was able to continue its ministry.

The General Chapter of 1937 elected Sister Mary Consilio treasurer general of the congregation, a position that had recently been left vacant by the death of Sister M. Teresa O'Halloran. Sister Mary Consilio remained in this congregational ministry until a month before she died, although her health had been failing for about a year.

Sister Mary Consilio died at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital on November 2, 1945 at the age of seventy-six. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery in Belvedere. Her obituary describes her as:

a woman of exceptional intellectual attainments,
whose genuine Irish wit gave a verve and sparkle to
her conversations and whose soundness of judgment

and wide range of knowledge lent weight to her opinions.

Sister Mary Celine Veitch, a former pupil of Sister Mary Consilio at Our Lady of Mercy Academy, remembers her as a kind sister, who carried treats in her huge pockets as rewards for deserving students. Sister Helen Caule, a pupil of Sister Mary Consilio in third grade, remembers her as an excellent teacher and a wonderful storyteller, whose classroom was an interesting and exciting place for children to learn. Sister Helen recalled that Sister Mary Consilio was “big on maps,” teaching her students about various places in Newfoundland, Ireland and the world. Through constant use of the *Expositor*, a small dictionary, she encouraged her students to enlarge their vocabulary by learning five new words every day, discovering their meaning and using them in context. These memories paint a picture of a warm, creative and energetic woman of Mercy, dedicated to preparing her students for a richer, fuller life.

Sister Mary Berchmans Quinn

Elizabeth and Henry Quinn’s daughter, Janie, was born on May 14, 1871. The Quinns were a large family who lived in County Wicklow, Ireland. Four of the Quinn children entered religious life.



After graduating from St. Bride’s College in Callan, Janie left Ireland to join the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. She was twenty-two years of age when she arrived in St. John’s on July 11, 1893. She was accepted as a postulant at the Motherhouse community on Military Road and on April 22, 1894 was admitted to the novitiate. At her reception ceremony, she received the

habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious name of Sister Mary Berchmans.

Sister Mary Berchmans made profession of vows on October 24, 1896 at Mercy Convent. She remained there for the first ten years of her religious life, teaching at St. Peter's School on Queen Street. In 1913, she was appointed to the new St. Clare's Home for Working Girls on LeMarchant Road. With her on that foundation were Sister Mary Bernard Gladney and the superior, Sister Mary Pius Mulcahy.

Sister Mary Berchmans ministered on the Burin peninsula from 1916 to 1924. She was first named superior of Sacred Heart Convent in St. Lawrence, then superior of St. Anne's Convent in Burin, replacing Sister Mary Brigid Hoey. After another short period of a few months in St. Lawrence in 1928, she returned to Mercy Convent, where she remained a member of the teaching staff of Our Lady of Mercy Academy for the next eighteen years. She also taught in Conception Harbour and at St. Joseph's, Hoylestown.

In 1946, Sister Mary Berchmans celebrated her golden jubilee as a Sister of Mercy. Two years later, she went back to Ireland for her first and only visit home since coming to Newfoundland fifty-three years before.

Sister Mary Berchmans died at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital on August 29, 1953 at the age of eighty-two years, and was buried in Belvedere cemetery. One of her sisters, Sister Mary Brigid, a Good Shepherd sister in Bangalore, India, had pre-deceased her. Two others, Sister Mary Xavier and Sister Mary Kieran, were still living in Australia at the time of her death.

Sister Mary Brigid Hoey

Mary Hoey was born in November of 1874, the oldest of twelve children. Her parents were Margaret and Owen Hoey of Carrick McCross, County Monaghan.

Mary was educated by the Sisters of St. Louis in her hometown. Sometime during her senior school years, she met Agatha Kennedy from Conception Harbour, who had been sent to Ireland by her parents to continue her studies. The two girls formed a close bond of friendship that was to span their lifetimes. At the end of her studies, Agatha Kennedy returned home to Conception Harbour, where she entered the Sisters of Mercy in August of 1892.



Two years later, in June of 1894, Mary Hoey left family and homeland for the Newfoundland Mercy mission. Undoubtedly, her friendship with Agatha Kennedy played some part in this venture, as the two must have shared stories and dreams during their time at school and later by correspondence. Mary was accepted as a postulant by the community of Immaculate Conception Convent in Conception Harbour on June 21, 1894. She was received into the novitiate as Sister Mary Brigid on November 21, 1894 on the same day that her friend, now known as Sister Mary Gertrude, made her profession of vows. The November 24, 1894 issue of *The Evening Telegram* records this twofold religious ceremony and describes the procession of children from the convent school accompanying the sisters into the church, singing *O Gloriosa Virginum*.

Sister Mary Brigid made profession of vows on December 10, 1896 in another double ceremony, in which a young postulant, Bride Joy of Holyrood, was received into the novitiate as Sister Mary Cecilia. In describing this special event in Conception Harbour, *The Daily News* of December 15, 1896 depicted the beautiful convent chapel blazing with candlelight and went on to say that, “nothing was lacking to make the occasion a strikingly beautiful one.”

Sister Mary Brigid spent twenty-two years in Conception Harbour, teaching in the school and visiting the sick and poor in the parish, as well as serving as superior of the community for a number of years. In 1916, she was appointed to the General Council of the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, and, in 1917, was named superior of the founding community of St. Mary’s on the Humber in Petries, on Newfoundland’s west coast. The other community members were Sister Mary Francis Hickey, Sister Mary Agnes Baker and Sister Mary Agnes Doyle. In 1918, while Sister Mary Brigid was still a member of the Petries community, she represented Sister Mary Bridget O’Connor, the superior general of the new Congregation of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland, at the golden jubilee celebrations of Sister Mary Corsini Dempsey in St. George’s.

At the expiration of her term of office at St. Mary’s on the Humber in 1919, Sister Mary Brigid was appointed superior of St. Anne’s Convent in Burin. There, according to Sister Mary Williamina Hogan in *Pathways of Mercy*, she made a lasting impression, not only by her Irish wit, but as well by her ability to develop the potential talent of those under her care.

In 1924 Sister Mary Brigid went to St. Joseph’s Convent in the east end of St. John’s, in the area generally known as Hoylestown. The convent had been established in December of 1922, although the sisters had already taught in that area for

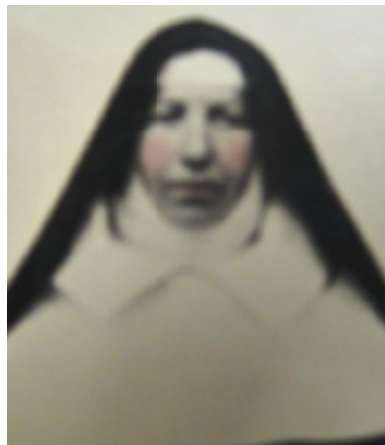
some time. Sister Mary Brigid remained at St. Joseph's for the next thirty-three years. When she was no longer able to continue teaching, she gave herself to the visitation of the sick in their homes and at the General Hospital, becoming a very familiar figure in the roads and lanes of Hoylestown.

For the last few months of her life, Sister Mary Brigid suffered from a painful type of cancer. The sisters at St. Joseph's cared for her until her condition required hospitalization. She died at St. Clare's Mercy Hospital on August 23, 1957 in her eighty-third year. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

In her sixty-three years of religious life as a Sister of Mercy, Sister Mary Brigid had ministered in all three dioceses of the island and had served the whole congregation as a member of the General Council. She was known for her quick wit, her love for her students and for her ability to bring forth the talents of those in her care.

Sister Mary Catherine O'Regan

The Irish girl who would later become known as Sister Mary Catherine was born in Ireland in the year 1830. She was the daughter of Anne and Cornelius O'Regan and the younger sister of Sister Mary Elizabeth O'Regan Redmond, who was one of the first to enter the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Sister Mary Catherine's birthplace is in question, as is that of her sister



— one source names it as Donegal, another as County Waterford.

Sister Mary Catherine entered the Mercy community at St. Michael's Convent, Belvedere, but nothing further is known about her - neither about her early life nor about her life as a Sister of Mercy. She died on November 8, 1902 at the age of seventy-two years. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere, next to her sister, Sister Mary Elizabeth.

Photographs of both the O'Regan sisters can be found in the Heritage Room of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's.

Sister Mary Perpetua O'Callaghan



Sarah O'Callaghan was born on May 22, 1877, one of eleven children. The congregational records of the Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland state that she was born in Liverpool of Irish parents. However, Sister Kathrine Bellamy in *Weavers of the Tapestry* records her place of birth as South Down in the north of Ireland. It seems that when Sarah had completed her education in the local school, she went to Liverpool, where some of her brothers operated a chain of

grocery stores. There she continued her studies with the Sisters of Notre Dame, and later attended St. Andrew's University in Edinburgh, Scotland. Her studies also included art classes at the Kensington Royal College in England.

Sarah O'Callaghan's introduction to Newfoundland came through her brother Daniel, who wrote to Bishop Michael Francis Howley on February 9th, 1903, telling him of his desire to enter the priesthood and to serve in his diocese. In his letter,

which is preserved in the Archives of the Archdiocese of St. John's, Daniel mentioned his sister Sarah, who was intent on entering the Presentation Convent at Cathedral Square in St. John's:

My sister is an accomplished scholar, having gained a very high place in the "first class" Government examination for teachers ...

She was indeed an accomplished scholar, having studied in centers of excellence and acquired first class certificates in elementary school education.

Although Bishop Howley did not initially encourage Daniel in his dream for priesthood in Newfoundland, he was quick to welcome Sarah as a promising candidate for the furtherance of his educational plans for the diocese of St. John's. Aware of her impressive educational and cultural background, and fully apprised of the need for well qualified teachers at Littledale, he readily accepted her, not for the Presentation Convent, as had been her intent, but for the Sisters of Mercy. Sarah's brother, Daniel was eventually accepted for the diocese of St. John's and was ordained at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in 1907. He was appointed the first parish priest of the newly-established Parish of St. Francis of Assisi to serve the communities of Logy Bay, Middle Cove and Outer Cove. He served well and faithfully in this parish and in other parishes in and around St. John's until his death in May of 1948.

When Sarah arrived in St. John's in the Fall of 1903, she was twenty-six years of age. On September 22, 1903, she was accepted as a postulant at St. Bride's Convent and was received into the novitiate on February 28, 1904 as Sister Mary Perpetua. While she was still a novice, Sister Mary Perpetua was named headmistress of Littledale, a position she held for the next seventeen years. She made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on the feast of St. Bridget, February 1, 1906.

Under Sister Mary Perpetua's wise and competent leadership, enrollment increased at St. Bride's, as did the academic proficiency of the students, who continued to win awards and scholarships in different areas of study. Although the Talbot wing had been erected in 1902, the need for more space at St. Bride's was becoming urgent, and in 1911, plans were underway for another addition to the building at a cost of \$60,000. The west wing, a five-story concrete structure, was ready for occupancy by 1912, by which time the debt on the new addition was practically paid. Sister Mary Perpetua had solicited the aid of her brother, Father Dan, who, through garden parties at Littledale, concerts, and support from friends, raised \$12, 000 to defray the cost of the new wing. The *Littledale Leaves* of June, 1913, preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, indicate that the St. Bride's community itself was able to contribute \$11,000, likely in large part because of the prudent management of the bursar, Sister Mary Teresa O'Halleran. Bishop Howley, a great friend and supporter of Littledale, arranged for the payment of \$20, 000 to the cause.

During Sister Mary Perpetua's tenure, a Domestic Science course was begun, the Littledale Literary Club was established and the school newspaper, *Littledale Leaves* came into being, the latter becoming *The St. Bride's Annual* in 1919.

In 1917, while Sister Mary Perpetua was still headmistress, Littledale was raised to the status of a college. This meant an expanded curriculum, new departments, more specialty teachers and a need for more space. In 1918, a department of Business Education was opened at Littledale, offering the full range of studies required to prepare students for careers in business. In 1919, another major building project began. The old residence of Philip Little was demolished and a new center block connecting the college's two existing buildings was designed to provide the additional space needed to accommodate eighty boarders and twenty sisters.



St. Bride's College and Corpus Christi Church, circa 1930

After seventeen years of intense involvement in the growth and development of Littledale, Sister Mary Perpetua was suffering from overwork and fatigue. She knew she needed a change, but was not prepared to be idle. Sister M. Bridget, the superior general of the congregation, ever mindful of the need to provide opportunities for continuing education for her sisters, released Sister Mary Perpetua for study leave. She went to Fordham University in New York to complete the requirements for her Bachelor's and Master's degrees. With further studies at Fordham, she was awarded the degree of doctor of philosophy in 1923, the first Sister of Mercy of Newfoundland to attain this distinction. Before returning to Newfoundland, Sister Mary Perpetua obtained a diploma as Supervisor of Normal Schools from Columbia University.

Upon returning to St. John's in 1925, Sister Mary Perpetua was appointed to the staff of Our Lady of Mercy Academy, remaining there until 1929. She then returned to Littledale as mistress of novices for the general novitiate. In addition to these responsibilities, she taught religious education to the senior classes and directed the studies of the younger sisters.

In 1929 Sister Mary Perpetua contracted an illness from which she never fully recovered. She died at St. Bride's Convent on August 22, 1933 at the age of fifty-six. Her brother, Father Dan O'Callaghan was at her bedside in her last illness. Sister Mary Perpetua is buried in the sisters' cemetery at Belvedere.

The *Inter Nos* of June 1934 wrote thus of her:

Sister Mary Perpetua was endowed with talents of a superior order, that she had every facility of cultivating in the various schools and universities she attended, and from each of which she bore off its honours and laurels.

Though an educationalist of renown, she made her chief task the religious training of all confided to her care. Her instructions and the high ideals she inculcated are bearing fruit throughout our island home.

Sister Mary Perpetua O' Callaghan was a woman of rare talent, an eminently successful educator, a tireless advocate for the cause of education, and a zealous and dedicated Sister of Mercy.

In the Heritage Room of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, there is a bookcase, that was given to Sister Mary Perpetua by her brother, Father Dan O'Callaghan. A photograph of both siblings stands atop the bookcase. A picture of St. Joseph, drawn by Sister Mary Perpetua for the Feast of St. Joseph in 1905 when she was a member of the community at Littledale, also can be found in the Heritage Room.

Sister Mary Dolorosa Kinney

Ellen Kinney was born on March 22, 1886 in Newry, County Down, Northern Ireland. She was the youngest of eleven children, seven sons and three daughters, born to Margaret and Peter Kinney. Her father died the day she was born. Ellen received her early education from the Dominican Sisters in Belfast and continued her studies in Leeds, Yorkshire with the Sisters of Notre Dame. Completion of an educational certificate at King's College eminently qualified her as a teacher.



The last of the Irish born Sisters of Mercy
in Newfoundland, 1886-1979

On September 24, 1907, Ellen left home and family for Newfoundland in the company of another young Irish woman, Mary O'Sullivan of Cork, also destined for the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland. Upon arrival in St. John's, Ellen was accepted as a postulant by the sisters at St. Bride's Convent, Litledale and began her novitiate on March 19, 1908. Archbishop Michael Howley presided at the reception ceremony, in which she received the habit of the Sisters of Mercy and the religious name, Sister Mary Dolorosa. Her companion, Mary, was given the religious name of Sister Mary Beatrice. The organist at St. Bride's on this occasion was the accomplished musician from the Presentation Convent at Cathedral Square, Sister Mary Josephine O'Sullivan, who was Sister Mary Beatrice's sister. According to notes written by Sister Mary Bernard Gladney and preserved in the Archives of the Sisters of Mercy in St. John's, Sister Mary Beatrice O' Sullivan left the Sisters of Mercy when she was a novice, and later joined the Dominican Sisters in England.

Sister Mary Dolorosa made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on April 18, 1911, and after profession she continued to teach at St. Bride's. In 1915, she was assigned to Mercy Convent, where she spent most of her religious life. She taught the senior classes at Our Lady of Mercy Academy, her specialty areas being literature, history and french. Sister Mary Dolorosa spoke and wrote french fluently, and kept up her skills in that language by attending periodic french courses in Montreal and St. Pierre. Her pupils remember her as a brilliant teacher, who taught British history with a slight bias towards the Irish! Sister Helen Caule, a former pupil, speaks of Sister Mary Dolorosa as a fair, accepting, down-to-earth teacher, who loved her students and who was loved by them in return. She remembers her as keenly interested in the activities of her students, even after they had left school. Many of them continued to visit her in their adult years, and always felt warmly welcomed.

Besides being a classroom teacher and administrator at Our Lady of Mercy Academy, Sister Mary Dolorosa was a guiding force and mentor in the publication of the school magazine *Inter Nos*, and for many years was directress of the Sodality of the Children of Mary at the school. Sister Mary Dolorosa served as superior of Mercy Convent from 1931 to 1937. In the Congregation's General Chapter, held in August of 1949, she was elected to the General Council, along with Sister Mary Imelda Smith, who was elected superior general, Sister Mary Philomena Walker and Sister Mary Chrysostom McCarthy.

Sister Mary Dolorosa died at Mercy Convent on February 16, 1979. She was ninety-three years of age and had lived in Newfoundland for seventy-two years. She was the last of the Irish-born Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland. She is buried in the sisters' cemetery in Belvedere.

In her obituary notice in the April 1979 issue of *The Monitor*, Sister Mary Dolorosa is described as "an educationalist par

excellence” whose learning and unique personality enhanced every subject she taught, thus making her classes interesting and stimulating for all her students.

Another Chapter in the Newfoundland Mercy Story

The last three Irish women whose stories are recounted here did not cross the Atlantic Ocean to enter the Mercy mission in St. John's. All three lived and ministered in St. George's on the west coast of Newfoundland and are very much a part of the Newfoundland-Ireland connections of the Sisters of Mercy.

Sister Mary Corsini Dempsey

Sister Mary Corsini was one of the four founding members of the Sandy Point foundation that was established in Bay St. George on Newfoundland's west coast on July 28, 1893.

Kate Dempsey was born in Ireland sometime in the 1830s. Her family lived in St. John's for some years before emigrating to the United States. Kate entered the Sisters of Mercy at St. Xavier's Convent in Providence, Rhode Island on August 19, 1865, and was received into the novitiate as Sister Mary Corsini on April 2, 1866. She made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on May 2, 1868.



Over the years, Sister M. Corsini maintained contact with her Newfoundland friends, and it was through them that she learned of the dire educational and spiritual needs of Bishop Michael Howley's struggling vicariate on Newfoundland's west coast. As a member of the St. Xavier's community in Providence,

Rhode Island, Sister Mary Corsini had also become acquainted with the very wealthy American woman, Mrs. Henrietta Brownell, who had developed close friendships with several sisters at St. Xavier's

When Sister M. Corsini heard that Mrs. Brownell planned to use part of her extensive wealth to establish a convent in some missionary country, she approached her to see if she would consider financing a convent of the Sisters of Mercy in the mission territory of western Newfoundland. Having received a positive response from Mrs. Brownell and permission from her religious superiors, Sister M. Corsini wrote Bishop Howley, setting forth her proposal for a Convent of Mercy in his vicariate. The bishop saw Sister M. Corsini's letter as an answer to prayer and lost no time in travelling to the United States to firm up plans for the new venture.

Meanwhile, Sister M. Corsini was talking to the sisters at St. Xavier's about the possibility of a mission in far-off western Newfoundland, and soon three other sisters offered themselves as volunteers – Sister Mary Antonio Egan, who was a good friend of Mrs. Brownell, Sister Mary Veronica Payne and Sister Mary Sylvester Carver. In early February of 1893, Bishop Howley met with Mrs. Brownell, Sister M. Antonio and Sister M. Corsini in Boston to sign the agreement about the new foundation to Sandy Point and to finalize financial arrangements. The sisters meanwhile had taken the necessary steps to be dispensed from their obligations to their Mercy superiors and to the bishop of Providence. Sister M. Corsini's initiative had paved the way for a second Mercy mission in Newfoundland.

On Friday, July 28, 1893, Bishop Howley and the pioneer band of sisters arrived at their new home in Sandy Point to a rousing welcome by the people. This was Sister M. Corsini's second time in Newfoundland, but this was a vastly different situation, one that would, before long, call her to question herself and her decision to leave Providence for this demanding mission.

Life on Sandy Point in the late nineteenth century was difficult, as the area was largely undeveloped and lacking in amenities. Despite all the hardships and obstacles, the sisters began their work of visiting the sick and the poor and teaching the children. About fifty children presented themselves at the opening of school in September, and it soon became evident that both sisters and students had much to learn about and from one another. Besides the regular school subjects, great attention was paid to music, art and needlework.

Although Sandy Point provided plenty of scope for the gifts and energies of the new community of sisters, in less than a year, Sister M. Corsini was writing back to Providence, asking for re-admission to that community. The return to the United States in December of 1893 of Sister Mary Sylvester Carver, one of her community members, probably added to her difficulty in adjusting to mission life.

The next several years were unsettling ones for both Sister M. Corsini and for the little community at Sandy Point, as she struggled with the decision to join the Newfoundland mission she had made back in the spring of 1893. She went back to the United States, visiting family, dropping in on various convents, attempting various projects, and it was not until the end of 1897 that she finally returned to Sandy Point. After all the uncertainty and indecision of these years, once she returned to Sandy Point, she settled back into the community and devoted the rest of her life in dedicated service to her students, to the people of the area and to her religious community.

Sister M. Corsini was in Sandy Point for the move to St. George's and was one of the "zealous and energetic ladies" of St. Michael's School that Vincent Burke, Superintendant of Roman Catholic Schools, referred to in his report for the year ending December 31, 1899. An artist in every sense of the word, she was a genius with both needle and brush, and she spared no

effort in developing the creative abilities of her students. A number of her students won prizes for their entries in special art exhibitions held in St. John's each year.

Sister Mary Corsini was part of the St. Michael's community in St. George's when the amalgamation of the nine Mercy convents in Newfoundland occurred in the summer of 1916. At the time, Sister Mary Aquin Gormley was the superior of St. Michael's and Sister Mary Antonio was still a member of the community. Upon the death of councillor Sister Joseph Kelly in 1917, Sister M. Antonio was appointed to the General Council of the new congregation and took up residence at St. Bride's Convent in St. John's.

When Sister M.Corsini celebrated her golden jubilee at St. Michael's Convent in St. George's in April of 1918, Sister Mary Brigid Hoey, the superior of St. Mary's on the Humber, travelled to the celebration as a representative of the Mother General. *The Western Star* of May 8, 1918 recorded this significant event in the life of St. Georges and in the life of Sister Mary Corsini under the heading *A Venerable Educationalist Honored*, giving her the following tribute:

Not one among this brave and intrepid band worked harder than Sister Mary Corsini. Her pupils, now scattered far and wide, have risen to prominent positions in life, and in this, her jubilee, whilst reminiscences will crowd her memory – many indeed of difficulties and trials – they will be overshadowed by the compensations so evidently descending from her noble work it was indeed a jubilee worth recording, the applause of a grateful people and her affectionate associates in the Convent.

The same issue of *The Western Star* gives a sense of how highly regarded Sister Mary Corsini was by the people of the west coast community she had come to call her own:

Thursday last St. George's was en fete, bunting was profusely displayed, the school children had a holiday, the old folk looked happy, the sisters were smiling, many of the diocesan priests were in town – all because it was a jubilee celebration for the venerable and aged lady known in religion as Mother Mary Corsini.... After the jubilee Mass, Bishop Power and clergy were entertained at luncheon and in the evening a drama "Mary Queen of Scots" was given by the pupils. It was magnificently presented.

Sister Mary Corsini Dempsey died on December 12, 1919 and is buried in St. George's, where she had lived and ministered for over a quarter of a century. In its December 17, 1919 issue, *The Western Star* paid her the following tribute:

Death came on Friday evening and left the Diocese of St. George's poorer for the loss of a great teacher, who... without band or blow quietly did the Master's work among the children of the people. She had at the time of her demise reached the ripe old age of eighty-two years – years which were full of good works and benediction. The funeral service was largely attended, some of her old pupils coming a long distance to be present.

Sister Mary Veronica Payne

Sister Mary Veronica came to Newfoundland in July of 1893 as a founding member of the first Mercy mission at Sandy Point on Newfoundland's west coast.

She was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, and received the baptismal name of Margaret. At some point in her life, she moved to the United States, presumably with her family. Margaret Payne entered the



Sisters of Mercy at St. Xavier's Convent in Providence, Rhode Island on August 3, 1868 and was accepted into the novitiate as Sister Mary Veronica on May 27, 1869. She made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on August 15, 1871.

Sister Mary Veronica was professed for more than twenty years when the opportunity came for her to be part of the missionary foundation to far-off Newfoundland. In the summer of 1893, she and her novitiate companion, Sister Mary Antonio Egan, along with two others from St. Xavier's Convent in Providence, Rhode Island joined Bishop Michael Howley, Vicar Apostolic of St. George's, Newfoundland, for the voyage to Sandy Point in Bay St. George on the west coast of Newfoundland. They arrived on July 28 and were heartily welcomed by the people of that community. *The Evening Telegram* of August 12, 1893 gave a wonderful description of their arrival:

The beautiful and picturesque settlement of Sandy Point was all en fete on Friday, July 28 in preparation for the reception of the Right Reverend Bishop Howley with the first installment of the Sisters of Mercy As

the steamer neared the wharf, a great crowd gathered and salvos of guns were heard on every side. The line of procession from the wharf to the Bishop's residence (where the nuns are to be temporarily located) was spanned by several arches of evergreens ... and decorated with wreaths, mottoes and flags.

The first few years of the mission to which Sister Mary Veronica had dedicated her life were difficult ones, as the sisters struggled to become acclimatized to their new life in a poor, struggling community. They had left a spacious, well-equipped school building in Providence, and now found themselves in a crude structure which served as both school and community hall. Nevertheless, they began their teaching in September 1893 with great enthusiasm and vigor, determined to give the children of Sandy Point the benefits of an all-round education. From the beginning, visitation of the sick and poor was an essential part of their Mercy presence and ministry.

In addition to the physical hardships, the founding community had its own internal difficulties. By the end of their first year in Sandy Point, Sister Mary Sylvester had returned to the United States and Sister Mary Corsini was experiencing personal dissatisfaction in her mission experience. During these difficult times, Sister Mary Veronica was a source of strength and stability in the struggling community, and she became a beacon of hope in the larger community as well. Her students and the people of Sandy Point came to her for advice, guidance, and encouragement in their various needs, and her charity became well-known throughout the area.

Sister M. Veronica was present for all the changes that took place in the first fifteen years of the mission's life – the departure of Sisters M. Sylvester and M. Corsini, the sudden death of the community's dear friend and supporter, Mrs. Henrietta Brownell in October 1897, the arrival of the first four postulants, the move from Sandy Point to St. George's, the opening of the new St.

Michael's Convent and boarding school, the transfer of their beloved Bishop Howley to St. John's, the elevation of the vicariate of St. George's to the status of a diocese. It can truly be said that she carried in her person the early history of the Mercy foundation on Newfoundland's west coast.

In 1906, Sister M. Veronica replaced Sister M. Antonio as superior of St. Michael's Convent and in that position, she proved herself an astute, capable and benevolent leader. She had a special gift for recognizing and drawing out the potential in people and for encouraging them in the development of their talents. During her term as superior of St. Michael's Convent, Sister Mary Veronica not only recognized the musical abilities of the newly-professed Sister Mary Xavier Wadden, but quickly made arrangements for her to study at the Conservatory of Music in Montreal. In such instances she not only encouraged her sisters to develop their gifts, but made sure that the children of her beloved adopted home of St. George's would enjoy the benefits of a first class education.

Shortly after the completion of her term of office as superior in 1909, Sister Mary Veronica became seriously ill. She died on Good Friday, April 9, 1909 and was buried in the sisters' cemetery in St. George's. The following editorial in *The Western Star* on April 14, 1909 gives some idea of the esteem in which this dedicated Sister of Mercy was held:

One of the sincerest and most lovable women in Newfoundland passed away at St. George's after a life of unselfish devotion to the cause of religion and humanity. Reverend Mother Veronica ... brought to the West Coast a zeal for teaching combined with some of the noblest of feminine traits which has borne fruit in the present splendid condition of Catholic education at St. George's. Mother Veronica was loved by all classes. All creeds and denominations respected

her for a good and true woman whose life had been devoted to the task of making the world a better place to live in and the prospect of eternal happiness more alluring to frail humanity.

Sister Mary Veronica Payne had spent sixteen years in Newfoundland, and her death was an occasion of deep mourning by the people she had come to know and love. When she died, there were six Sisters of Mercy living and ministering at St. Michael's Convent, St. George's – Sisters M. Antonio Egan, M. Corsini Dempsey, M. Teresa de Bourke, M. Agnes Doyle, M. Xavier Wadden and M. Francis Holden. The latter three of the six were native Newfoundlanders.

Sister Mary Cecilia Sears

Brigid Sears was the first postulant to enter the new Mercy community at Sandy Point in Bay St. George on Newfoundland's west coast.

In 1896, with only Sister Mary Antonio and Sister Mary Veronica left at Sandy Point, the little community joyfully welcomed its first postulant. Brigid Sears was a talented and energetic young woman from Kerry who had come to Newfoundland sometime in 1895 or 1896 to visit her brother, Father Andrew Sears. He had been in Newfoundland since 1890 and was then parish priest in the Bay of Islands, just north of Bay St. George.

Brigid had two other brothers who served in the Newfoundland mission, Fathers Martin and Patrick Sears. Their uncle was the dedicated and respected missionary pioneer, Monsignor Thomas Sears, who had been named the first Prefect Apostolic of the west coast of Newfoundland in 1870. As early as 1873, in a report to the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith*, Monsignor Sears had expressed his dream of a community of nuns who would educate the young women of his extensive parish. Little

did he know that his niece would be the first to enter the community of Mercy in the mission territory in which he had toiled for so many years, and for which he had such great hopes and dreams.

Brigid was highly educated, having studied in Paris for some time, and was a skilled artist and musician. Coming from a missionary family, she was interested in helping others, especially the very poor. She was impressed by what she heard about the work of the Sisters of Mercy in Newfoundland and asked to be admitted to Mercy Convent on Military Road. However, for some unknown reason, Bishop Howley, who had just been transferred from St. George's to the See of St. John's, would not accept her. She then approached the sisters at Sandy Point, who welcomed her with open arms. Her arrival must have been a red-letter day for the little community, which at that time was struggling with the loss of two of its members.

Brigid entered the Mercy community at Sandy Point in 1896 and was received into the novitiate as Sister Mary Cecilia in 1897. Jane de Bourke, a woman from Nova Scotia who had been Bishop McNeil's housekeeper, joined her in 1898, later becoming known as Sister Mary Teresa. Sister Mary Cecilia made profession of vows as a Sister of Mercy on May 9, 1899. By this time the sisters had moved to the new St. Michael's Convent in St. George's.

The profession of this refined, well educated, mission-minded woman gave great hope to the school and community of St. Michael's in St. George's. However, Sister Mary Cecilia's life as a Sister of Mercy was very short. She died on May 9, 1904 on the fifth anniversary of her profession. She was thirty-two years of age. She was buried in the sisters' cemetery in St. George's.

Sister Mary Cecilia's brother, Father Andrew Sears, named the site of his new rectory at Petries, Mount Cecilia, in memory of Sister Mary Cecilia.

Conclusion

Our early Irish-born sisters were certainly gifts to the Newfoundland mission, keeping the fire of Mercy burning brightly in times of vitality and growth, and fanning the flames in times of intense struggle and hardship. Learning and appropriating the stories of their lives will help all of us, the inheritors of their legacy, to live the mission of Mercy more fully and more authentically in our day. In doing this, we echo and take to heart the words of the poet, Maya Angelou, who said so wisely “We need to haunt the house of history and listen anew to the ancestors’ wisdom.”

May these stories help all of us to listen to, learn from and draw on the wealth of wisdom, courage, compassion and zeal which is our heritage as Sisters of Mercy of Newfoundland. May we embrace all the richness of that heritage, and may we have the grace of seeing our lives and our ministries as continuing to enrich the tremendous legacy that is ours.

We have had the privilege of standing on the shoulders of strong, visionary and faithful women. Because of them, Catherine McAuley’s vision of a world permeated with God’s mercy still pulses with vibrancy and hope. It is now our turn, our responsibility, to offer our shoulders to those who will carry the charism and mission of Mercy into the future.

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