

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

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## *History of the Sisters of Mercy in Grass Valley*

*The following article compiled by Mercy Sister Mary Geneva Poluka highlights the hundred year contribution made by the Mercy Sisters in Grass Valley. This was part of a series of articles published in the Catholic Herald during the 1986 Centennial Year of the establishment of the Diocese of Sacramento.*

**By Sister Mary Geneva Poluka, RSM**

On September 29, 1778, a little girl named Catherine was born to James and Eleanor McAuley at Stormanstown House in Dublin, Ireland. On December 12, 1831, Catherine made her profession as the first Sister of Mercy before God and Bishop Daniel Murray in the Convent of the Sisters of the Presentation at Georges Hall in Dublin.

### **MOTHER CATHERINE McAULEY, FOUNDRRESS OF THE MERCY SISTERS**



Catherine McAuley, through her example in ministering to the spiritual and temporal needs of the poor, sick, and youth, became the inspiration which led other young women to become Sisters of Mercy to continue her work.

After her death in 1841, her work continued to be carried on and expanded to other parts of Ireland and the world. It was to Saint Joseph's Mercy Convent in Kinsale, Ireland that Archbishop Alemany of San Francisco sent one of his priests to request nuns for his San Francisco Archdiocese. His request was granted and five sisters were selected for the mission. One of these was the newly professed sister named Sister Mary Baptist Russell.

### **MERCY SISTERS ARRIVE IN SAN FRANCISCO**

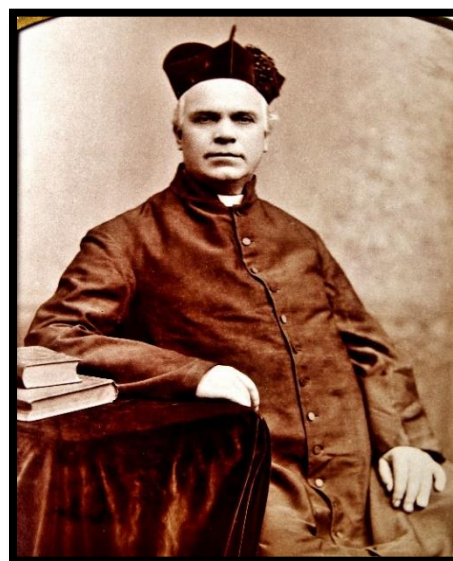
On January 2, 1855, these five sisters took up residence in a small house on Vallejo Street in San Francisco. They devoted themselves to the care of the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned. Later, when the need arose, they also took on the task of educating the young.

### **FATHER THOMAS DALTON OF GRASS VALLEY**

Meanwhile, due to the discovery of gold in northern California, thriving communities were developing around the mining camps. One such place was Grass Valley where Father Thomas Dalton was pastor.

Father Dalton had opened a school with a lay staff in 1859. But in his travels around the area, he saw the hardships of families in which the father had been killed in the mines and the mother had to become the breadwinner but needed assistance in caring for her young children.

So, in the spring of 1862, Father Dalton applied to the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco to open a branch house in Grass Valley which would help provide care for these children. After much persistence from Father Dalton and with the persuasion of Bishop Eugene O'Connell, the San Francisco community agreed to lend him some sisters to start a community in Grass Valley.



**Father Thomas Dalton**

### **MERCY SISTERS ARRIVE IN GRASS VALLEY**

On August 20, 1863, four sisters and one postulant arrived, accompanied by Mother Baptist Russell and Sister Mary Baptist Morgan. The four sisters and postulant took up residence in the Grass Valley rectory which became Sacred Heart Convent.

During the months preceding the arrival of the Sisters, Father Dalton had purchased land with a cottage on it located north of his church. He and his associate moved into the cottage. This land would be the site on which a new convent for the sisters was to be built. The cottage called the Scadden Cottage after its former owner, would become a home for orphans and later a chapel for the sisters.

On the great day of their arrival, the church bell was rung and Kate Dalton, Father Dalton's sister, had a dinner waiting for them in their new home. Bishop O'Connell appointed Sister Mary Teresa King as the first superior of that little community of sisters.

On September 3, the schools were blessed. The old church which was built on the old cemetery grounds was divided in such a way to make a school for boys called Saint Aloysius and a school for girls called Saint Joseph. The sisters took over the school which on opening day registered sixty-six girls and forty-three boys.

On November 8, 1864, Bishop O'Connell presided over the ceremony of religious clothing which was the first of many such ceremonies in Grass Valley. By the end of the year 1864, there were seven sisters residing in Grass Valley

### **CONSTRUCTION BEGINS ON A NEW CONVENT AND SCHOOL**

In March of 1865, construction began on the new convent and school. Meanwhile, Father Dalton was becoming more and more concerned about the fatherless families of his extensive parish.

He approached the Sisters about the problem. With the Bishop's approval, the sisters agreed to accept the task of caring for orphans and half-orphans.

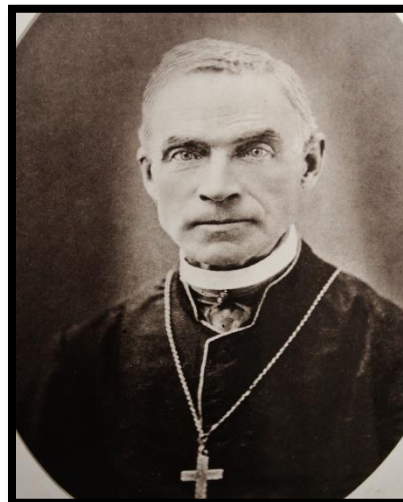
A multi-purpose building was planned which would be three stories high. The lower floor would house the kitchen, dining room, laundry, lavatory and primary school rooms. The middle floor would house more class rooms, a library, parlor and chapel. The third floor would house dormitories for the children, an infirmary, and the sisters' sleeping quarters.



**Holy Angels Orphanage in Grass Valley**

On May 2, 1865, Bishop O'Connell laid the cornerstone of a building which would serve many purposes in its lifetime. This building became known as the Orphanage of the Holy Angels. The sisters moved in on March 21, 1866, with very little furniture to meet their needs. The building cost about \$20,000 to build and Father Dalton and Bishop O'Connell collected about \$7000. The sisters assumed the rest of the debt and the furnishings. There was no tuition charged in the day school, and those families who could afford it paid up to \$15 a month for care of each child in the orphanage. The first commencement was held in July of 1867.

**Bishop Eugene O'Connell**



On April 2, 1866, the first four orphans arrived from Sierra County. In a space of two months, the sisters had thirty children to care for. Within eight months of its beginnings, the orphanage housed sixty-nine children.

The sisters found it very difficult to rely only on donations and what little child support they received from families of orphans. So, in September of 1868, the sisters opened a day and boarding school for select young ladies. This school not only helped them financially, but served a need in the area also. The school would offer English, French and German languages, as well as vocal and instrumental music.

Now there were three institutions in the charge of the sisters, a school for boys and girls, an orphanage for girls and small boys, and a boarding school for "Select Young Ladies."

In the fall of 1866, the Henry Scadden Cottage, which had served as a temporary rectory, became a home for boys up to the age of seven. In order to accommodate both older boy and girl orphans, a new building had to be added. In June of 1872, seventeen boys and two sisters occupied the new building located on Pleasant Street. The Scadden Cottage became a sisters' chapel.

In 1872, the school registered 20 students. The girls' orphanage known as Holy Angels housed sixty and the male orphanage, known as Saint Patrick's, housed forty. Saint Joseph's School had 109 pupils. Through all the years of labor in Grass Valley, finances were always a concern of the sisters. They held fairs and went on begging tours in order to provide funds for the care of the orphans.

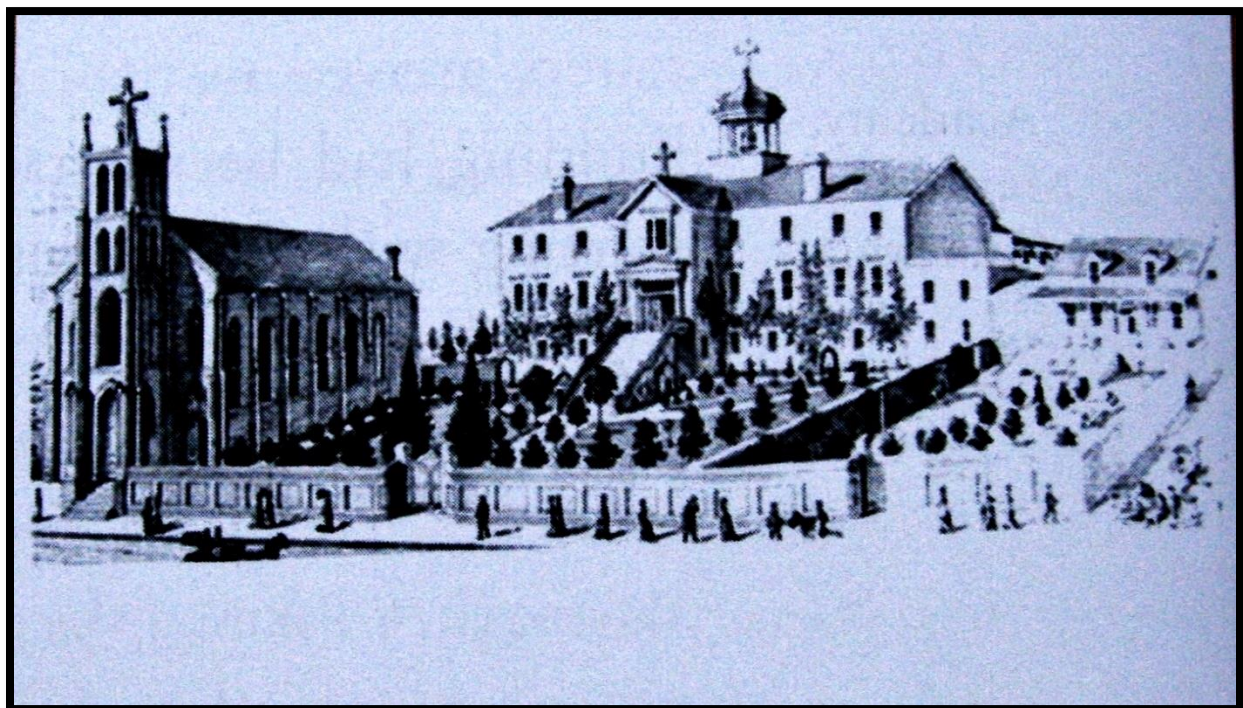


Photo from *The Story of Mount Saint Mary* (Grass Valley, n.d.)

**Lithograph of Saint Patrick Church, Orphanage & Convent in Grass Valley**

In 1875, they had grown to such an extent that they needed to add on to what was the convent building to provide classrooms and a dormitory for the select young ladies. In 1878, a new building was erected on Brighton Street which was to house the boy orphans. The girl orphans were moved into the Pleasant Street house vacated by the boys. This left the convent for the sisters and the young lady boarders.

Throughout all these years the sisters cooked, sewed, cleaned, nursed, fed, loved and cared for the orphans and boarders day and night. They lived in buildings with no heat or hot water. Wash water was drawn from a well, heated and then the washing was done. Everything was done by hand – with a true spirit of love for those for whom they cared.

### **MERCY SISTERS IN GRASS VALLEY BECOME INDEPENDENT FROM SAN FRANCISCO**

On December 8, 1878, it was determined that the Grass Valley Community of sisters was big enough and self-sustaining enough to become independent of the San Francisco community. About this same time, the Convent of the Sacred Heart received a new name – Mount Saint Mary's Academy.



Photo from Diocesan Archives

**Saint Patrick Church, Grass Valley, built by Father Dalton**

In 1884, the girls' housing was changed. A new building was erected and called Saint Vincent's. The building known as Holy Angels was given to Bishop Manogue who turned it into a retreat center for priests, which was used until the 1930s.

Throughout these early years of caring for the orphans and laboring to provide for them, there was a steady response from young women who sought to join the sisters in their endeavors. Shortly after the sisters arrived, young ladies from the surrounding area, as well as from Ireland, arrived in response to God's call to care for His orphans.

In 1891, the deaths of two beloved friends of the sisters occurred. Both Bishop O'Connell and Father Dalton died. These men had supported the works of the sisters from the first moment of their arrival.

In 1894, Mother Francis Murphy began the task of erecting the large chapel on Church and Dalton Streets which still stands today, though it is no longer the sisters' chapel. This building was lined with tin pressed into artistic designs and painted.

### **FINANCIAL PRESSURE CONTINUES**

By 1897, there were 20 sisters, 175 pupils in the school, 90 boy orphans and 100 girl orphans. But by the early 1900s the sisters were still heavily burdened with finances of the institutions which they operated.

In 1916, Sister Mary LaSalette Happ was received into the convent in Grass Valley and in 1918 Sister Mary James Jackson arrived from the San Francisco community. These two nuns became the chief source of support for the convent and the orphans for many years to come.

In order to meet the needs of the youth in the area and help with the financial burden, it was found necessary to open a business school which conducted a two-year junior college program devoted to typing, shorthand, business math and bookkeeping. The school was placed in the hands of Sister Mary LaSalette and Sister Mary James Jackson was to take charge of the music department. The income from these two departments helped the sisters in their desperate need to keep the institutions in their care going.

### **THE SISTERS DECIDE TO ADD A NEW BRICK BUILDING**

In 1926, Sister Mary Stanislaus Maroney saw the need for renewal. The present structures were very old and in need of extensive repairs. The original convent building and the addition housed the boarders, the elementary school, the high school and the business school. It was not big enough for all these activities. The sisters made a decision to build a whole new brick building. The new building was to house a basement with a furnace and recreation rooms, the main floor would have classrooms with the business school occupying a special portion on the south end. The second floor would have dormitories for the girls and living quarters for the sisters.

Ground was broken for this building on June 11, 1927, and was dedicated in October by Bishop Keane. On May 28, 1928, Mother Mary Elizabeth Fuhrman became the last Reverend Mother for the Grass Valley community.

### **GRASS VALLEY MERCY SISTERS JOIN MERCY SISTERS OF THE UNION IN OMAHA**

Realizing that a lack of vocations would spell death to this little community, the sisters gathered together in August of 1929 to decide their future. The decision was made in accordance with a desire expressed by Pope Pius XI that small communities should consolidate, to amalgamate with the Sisters of Mercy of the Union in Omaha, Nebraska. From that time to the present, vocations to the order were trained in Iowa and Nebraska and the Grass Valley community was no longer independent, but under the governance of the Sisters of Mercy of the Union of the Province of Omaha.

### **ORPHANAGE MOVES TO SACRAMENTO**

Another change was to come that would change the work of the sisters. Since the sisters lacked the finances to build a new orphanage, and it was up to the bishop to raise the money and build the home, the decision was made to move the orphanage to Sacramento. Also, a large number of the needy children being cared for were from the Sacramento area, which posed transportation problems for visiting family members. There were also few job opportunities in Grass Valley when the boys left the orphanage.

So, in August of 1932, the orphanage and the sisters who had been caring for them headed for Sacramento. This ended a long history of caring for the orphans in Grass Valley. The remaining sisters would devote themselves to the boarding school for young ladies, the day school, the high school for girls, and the commercial school.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

**The New Saint Patrick Orphanage in Sacramento, 1932**

### **MOUNT SAINT MARY SCHOOL IN GRASS VALLEY CONTINUES**

As the years passed and times changed, it was necessary for more changes to be made. Boys were eventually taken into the high school. In May of 1965 the boarding school was closed, since the need was no longer there, and the space was needed for the high school and the elementary school. There was also no need for the business school with the opening of the junior college in Rocklin.

In 1965, the elementary and high schools occupied the newer brick building of 1927 and were completely moved out of the original structure. The beautiful chapel was closed because of the expense of heating it for so few people. A room in the old convent was prepared as a chapel for the sisters.

### **THE HIGH SCHOOL DISCONTINUED**

Around 1968, another major and sad event took place. Due to the changes and conditions of the times, the sisters decided they could no longer operate the high school. There was a lack of finances, a shortage of students, and a lack of facilities to offer a quality high school education.

Since then, the sisters have struggled to provide a quality education, both religious and academic, for the elementary children of the area. Again, the sisters kept abreast of the needs of the time. Saint Cecilia's Hall, which once served as the music studio, was now vacant, and it was turned into a pre-school.

### **DAY CARE ADDED**

With the advent of so many working mothers and one-parent families, the sisters became aware once again that there were young people in need of care. So, in 1984, a day-care was added to the pre-school. This facility cares for about thirty-six children a day at the present time, but future plans hope to expand the facility to care for more children.

But sad to say, as the years continued to pass, once again a vocation crisis came upon this community. No longer did the sisters have enough personnel to continue operating the facility as they had in the past. In 1977, they called upon the community they served for help. But this time it was for the day to day operations of the school. A board of advisors was organized and later it became an operations board and then a governing board.

With the advent of the 1980s, the sisters realized that a day would come when they would not have the personnel to staff the school and would be faced with trying to operate a school from Omaha, Nebraska. The governing board was asked to help the sisters to arrive at a decision about the school. After much study and discussion, the board decided the sisters should do what they could to ensure the future of the school. The best decision seemed to be to approach the Diocese of Sacramento and see if the diocese would purchase the facilities and keep it going as a school.

### **SAINT PATRICK PARISH PURCHASES THE SCHOOL**

The diocese, with the cooperation of Father Nicholas Phelan and Saint Patrick Parish, agreed to take on the responsibility of the school and to purchase the facilities. So, on June 10, 1986, a long chapter in the lives of the Sisters of Mercy was closed with the handing over of the facilities of Mount Saint Mary's Academy to the Diocese of Sacramento under the care of Saint Patrick Parish

in Grass Valley. It was a painful decision for the sisters to make and with sadness in their hearts, they relinquished their responsibility for the facilities. Now the school begun in 1859 by Father Thomas Dalton was once again a parish school.



Photo by John E Boll

### **Mount Saint Mary Academy, Grass Valley**

#### **THE SPIRIT OF THE MERCY SISTERS LIVES ON**

But the story of Mercy in Grass Valley does not end here. The tradition of the sisters lives on in the history of the area and in the lives of all who were touched by Mercy. The original convent structure stands as a reminder of the work of the sisters and is a national monument. At the present time it houses a museum, a thrift store, and a center for the fine arts. The roots of Mercy are so firmly rooted in the area that the Spirit that guided the works of the sisters for such a long time will continue to inspire others to continue those same works.



**The Original Convent and Academy**



**Saint Patrick Church in 2019**

Photo by Cathy Joyce



### **Historical Marker**

**Dedication of the Sacred Heart Convent and Holy Angels Orphanage  
Grass Valley, California  
May 2, 1865**

**Honoring Father Thomas J Dalton, Pastor and Builder  
Sisters of Mercy of Omaha, Teachers and Administrators of Holy Angels Orphanage**

*In gratitude to the Sisters of Mercy  
For their dedicated ministry for a century!*