



Key:

Blue Arrows reflect events directly related to the American Mission

Green Arrows represent events related to the Civil War

Black Arrows reflect general events in the Society's history

Abbreviations:

CC = Cornelia Connelly

DoL = Duchess of Leeds

416 STATE STREET TOWANDA, PA

THE FIRST AMERICAN CONVENT OF THE SOCIETY OF THE HOLY CHILD JESUS

When Cornelia Connelly founded the Society in Derby, England in 1846 she may have remembered the words of Pope Gregory XVI, “from England let your efforts reach to America”. In 1862 a culmination of events and players allowed for six sisters to achieve Cornelia’s desire to found a Convent and School in Cornelia’s ‘own dear country.’

WHO SUPPORTED THE AMERICAN MISSION?

Louisa Catherine Caton, the Duchess of Leeds, wanted to see Catholic schools established in America. She gave Cornelia and the Society a few properties in the USA. Towanda, Pennsylvania was the most viable place for a new community. Mr. C.L. Ward, her land agent, lived in the town and helped the sisters once they were there. Bishop Grant, of Southwark was hesitant, but agreed, with the understanding that the support of Bishop Wood of Philadelphia was necessary to found a religious congregation in his diocese. Bishop Grant also required that each sister sign a certificate that she went willingly to the United States. Father Carter, Vicar General for Bishop Wood in Philadelphia, agreed to help guide the sisters to their new convent.

WHAT DID THE SISTERS HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH?

Cornelia desired to “meet the wants of the age.” She was under the impression that there were “a thousand of Catholic families and a hundred poor children in need.” The sisters were instructed to start a Parish school and an Academy for boarders. Cornelia also hoped that postulants would be drawn to the Society and she desired that the community welcome new sisters at this location.

WHOM DID CORNELIA SEND?

Six sisters, Mother Mary Xavier Noble, Sister Lucy Ignatia Newsham, Sister Mary Cornelia McKay, Sister Aloysia Walker, Sister Josephine Kearns, and Sister Agatha Deacy were selected as the first group.

M. M. Xavier was appointed as “Superioress” of the new community.

WHERE IS TOWANDA?

Towanda is a small town located in Bradford County, northern Pennsylvania about 180 miles from Philadelphia and about 190 miles from New York City. The town is located along the Susquehanna River. In 1860, Towanda’s recorded population was 1,622.

HOW DID THE SISTERS TRAVEL THERE?

The Sisters traveled on the Scotia from Liverpool to New York on a three week journey, then took an indirect route of about 260 miles by train from Philadelphia to Harrisburg, to Williamsport, to Troy, with a final carriage trip to Towanda. Sr. Lucy Ignatia and M. M. Xavier went ahead to prepare the house while the others remained in Philadelphia. Father Carter came to know the Society better through extended conversations with these sisters.

WHAT HAPPENED ONCE THE SISTERS WERE IN TOWANDA?

The house was not what the sisters had expected. Financially and physically the sisters were not prepared for the harsh realities of being pioneers. The Civil War impacted the price of food and required rationing. The sisters omitted items from their own table so they could provide for the children in the boarding school. However, the sisters remained focused on their priority of educating children and others in the way the Society taught in England. Saints Peter and Paul Parochial School opened and brought almost 80 girls and boys, but when no students showed for the opening of the Holy Child Academy, Sr. Lucy Ignatia and Sr. Agatha traversed the surrounding area seeking students. They offered a night school, too, for girls who were employed as domestics during the day.

HOW DID THE SOCIETY IMPACT TOWANDA?

The sisters managed to maintain the schools, but suffered greatly themselves. Their method of teaching was impressive to the town and as student Maria Parsons Decker said, "...superior to an American education. The English text books they used were new to us and more interesting. Reading aloud, dictation, explanation, and recitation were pleasant ways of imparting knowledge. History and English literature were favorite studies. Little ventures in Dramatic Art were encouraged for entertainment, and some beautiful little plays were creditably acted. Music was an inspiring feature." The sisters offered a liberal arts education that was uncommon for such a small community at that time.

THE HOUSE AT 416 STATE STREET

The house must be described just as it presented itself to them on that day – a wooden building consisting of a ground floor, and one story with an attic, of course, the drawing room of the rats and spiders that had held possession for many years and which were now about to be disturbed, as it would have to be turned into a dormitory for the sisters. On the ground floor, was a parlor – behind that a large room which had been used as a kitchen by the former inhabitants. Then a small room which was to be the refectory for the present. A long passage led to an outhouse and a stable. Upstairs – and here must be remarked – about 14 steps took one to the first floor where there was a little room in which were two trestle beds with a straw matting on each – this was to be M.M. Xavier's and M.L. Ignatia's cell prepared by them the day before we came to be ready for us to see. Then a room for a chapel, a passage room and a large dormitory. This is called large because it is the only room to hold five beds, the largest room upstairs. In this room were two large bedsteads, having on each a tick filled with straw, and quite round, so that if one turned at night, she might find herself rolling on the slate of bedsteads. There was also a kind of sofa on which Sr. M. Cornelia slept, but she could not change position without rolling on the floor. Behind this room was a little one afterwards used as a community room, and another small one – a dormitory for the children when we had boarders. Up the steps the attic, but stoop or you will break your head, except in the center. This was the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Towanda!

-from the Annals of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, American Province 1862-1882

A LASTING IMPACT

Four women eventually entered the Society inspired, in part, by the Sisters' influence during their short time in the town. They were later known as Sr. Joseph Thall, M. St. Michael Dunn, Sr. Hilda Lynch, and M. M. Magdalen Weston. Many others built life long relationships with the sisters as a result of their time in Towanda. Mr. Peter Brady was sent by Bishop Wood to financially advise the sisters. Later in life Mr. Brady married and sent his four daughters to Sharon Academy for their education. Two, Mary and Nellie, became Holy Child sisters, M. M. Catherine Brady and M. M. Dolores Brady.

While the sisters were in Towanda for just two short years, the legacy of the Society took root there on American soil. The experience, wisdom and spirit of apostolic zeal forged at Towanda became part of the spiritual and practical foundation of the Society in the United States. From these memories, the sisters drew inspiration and strength as they moved into new fields of apostolic endeavor at Our Lady of the Assumption Parish in Philadelphia and Sharon Hill in Delaware County, Pennsylvania.