

# Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 5: PORTRAIT OF THE FIVE FOUNDRESSES

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The Archives of the Sisters of Providence contain many documents and objects associated with the beginnings of the Sisters' mission in the Pacific Northwest. Especially treasured are the items related to Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, the first superior of the community. This remarkable woman is honored as one of two representatives of Washington State in the Capitol Building in Washington, DC (The other is Dr. Marcus Whitman). Mother Joseph was, like so many of the Sisters, a nurse, a teacher, and an exceptional artisan in needlework and embroidery. But she was also a gifted carpenter, designer, and architect, skills which would—quite literally!—help to build the Church in the Pacific Northwest.

On November 2, 1856, Mother Joseph and her four companions left Montreal with Bishop Blanchet and Father Louis Rossi for the five-week journey to Vancouver. Mother Joseph put on a brave front, but in a letter home she admitted: “the idea of being responsible for leading the others, for running a house, training the young sisters, my lack of experience, my disagreeable nature, my ignorance—everything seemed to overwhelm me... and yet I had to maintain my composure for the sake of the others.” Fortunately she was soon too busy to dwell on her fears. The Sisters were leaving behind the safety of Catholic French Canada for the United States, where the Know-Nothings—a vehemently anti-Catholic movement in American politics—were at their height. Fearful of possible violence, the Sisters dressed in secular clothing so as not to attract notice. Their notions of secular clothing were, however, so odd and outdated that they were pointed out in the streets of New York as “Quaker ladies.” They were very grateful when a local priest reassured them that it would be perfectly safe to wear their habits.

The voyage from New York to Panama was difficult, to say the least. In the words of Sister Blandine, “we began to throw up heartily, one after the other, without exception.” Sister Praxedes, being the least seasick, cared for the others throughout the four-day journey in the hot and crowded cabin, filled with the smells of the kitchen next door.

The group reached Panama City on November 18, traveled across the Panama isthmus by train, and then sailed for San Francisco where they boarded the steamship *Columbia* for the final leg of their journey to Vancouver. It was December 4. The first few days on board were quiet—Sister Blandine devoted the time to practicing on the accordion which the Sisters of Mercy in San Francisco had given her. Everyone looked forward to the end of the long journey.



A composite portrait of the Sisters of Providence who established the community in the Pacific Northwest. Bottom, L-R: Sister Praxedes, Mother Joseph, Sister Mary of the Precious Blood. Top, L-R: Sister Vincent de Paul, Sister Blandine. *Courtesy of Providence Archives, Seattle.*

But on the night of December 7, a storm broke out. The crew, running from one end of the ship to the other, convinced Father Rossi that they were going to sink—he could only lie in his bunk praying, “Oh Holy Virgin, would you allow me to perish in sight of the mission that I have undertaken such a long voyage to reach?” The scene was much the same in the Sisters' cabin, where Sister Praxedes, overcome with fear, kept asking: “Sister Blandine, are you scared?” The terrified Sister Blandine replied lightly, “no, I am afraid of nothing,” joking that if they were all thrown into the sea at least they would arrive “all that much cleaner to celebrate the Immaculate Conception in heaven.” At the same time, she later wrote, she was

praying, over and over: “do what you did for St. Peter—stop the storm, Lord.”

By 8:00am the worst was over, and the ship safely entered the mouth of the Columbia. Going up on deck, grateful to be alive, they beheld their new land for the first time. It was December 8—the solemnity of Mary's Immaculate Conception. The Sisters sang the “Stabat Mater” to the accompaniment of Sister Blandine's accordion.

Father Rossi, meanwhile, filled with missionary fervor, eagerly scanned the landscape for his first glimpse of Vancouver. He later wrote: “When we arrived in sight of Fort Vancouver I turned towards my bishop and asked him where the town was. ‘There,’ said he to me, pointing towards the northern bank of the river. I looked towards where he was pointing and, seeing nothing, climbed on some trunks, stuck out my neck, strained my eyes almost out of their sockets, still hoping to find something. But there was nothing within sight. I had imagined that I was going to arrive in a place, not, perhaps, quite like the big cities I'd seen and visited, but at least something that had the look of a town or a big village.... I came back to my bishop and again asked him where the town was. ‘There, there... Do you see that house, and the other one over there? Take a good look, that's the town,’ he replied. I confess that a spontaneous and quite involuntary gesture betrayed my disappointment. Burying my head in my hands, I exclaimed, ‘My God! What have I gotten myself into!’”

Mother Joseph, meanwhile, took in the scene with quite different sentiments. “How can I tell you what a joy it was for me?” she wrote. Soon, she and her Sisters “would have the happiness to begin, in this new country, to exercise the ministry of charity.”

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