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## MERCY SISTERS: HOW IT ALL STARTED

### Sacramento Flood of 1861

By Sister Mary Loyola, RSM, printed March 11, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

The night of April 20, 1857, two dark-robed Sisters of Mercy huddled against the cold on the outside deck of a crowded stern wheeler steaming upriver from San Francisco to Sacramento. For Mother Baptist Russell and Mother de Sales Reddan it was the final lap of a missionary journey they and six companions had begun three years earlier in Kinsale, Ireland. The history of how it all started is detailed by Sister Mary Evangelist in her book "The Sisters of Mercy."

In July 1854, the Reverend Hugh Gallagher, at the request of Archbishop Joseph Alemany of San Francisco, had invited the Sisters of Mercy of the Kinsale community to aid in the Church's work among the people of the vast San Francisco archdiocese. Sisters were needed for both San Francisco and Sacramento, but the community could spare only eight for San Francisco. Mother Baptist Russell was appointed superior of this first band of pioneers bound for the West Coast. In three years' time, they had established St Mary's Hospital, and the archbishop repeated his plea for sisters for the northern part of his diocese. In March, Mother Baptist Russell agreed to go to Sacramento to consider the possibility of a foundation. When she saw the great need of the immigrants who had followed the lure of gold to the river city, she agreed that the Sisters of Mercy would return in the fall. Mother Baptist Russell herself headed the band of six who arrived in Sacramento on October 2, 1857.

The only shelter the sisters could obtain was a small building in the rear of St Rose Church on the corner of 7<sup>th</sup> and K Streets. They lost no time: three days later, October 5, the Sisters of Mercy opened the first convent school in Sacramento with 65 pupils. The school welcomed both Catholic and Protestant, those who could pay the nominal tuition and those who could not. By June 115 were enrolled, and the need for a larger building was obvious.

Aided by the citizens of Sacramento, the Sisters of Mercy purchased a half block on 12<sup>th</sup> and M Streets, a growing residential district, intended to build a convent and school by the fall term of 1858. However, sufficient funds could not be raised to erect a school and in 1860 the property was relinquished to the State of California for the site of the State Capitol. Another block was purchased at 9<sup>th</sup> and G Streets. The sisters used the residence for a convent while the buildings for the future St Joseph Academy were erected. In the fall of 1861, 272 students were enrolled. And then the floods came.

The streets of Sacramento became canals; thousands were homeless. Convent and school were inundated, but the sisters moved what they could to the upper floors and the attic and carried on from there. A Chinese priest rowed to the upper room each morning for Holy Mass. Each

morning the sisters pushed off in small boats and headed for the Pavilion, a large building at 6<sup>th</sup> and M Streets, open to the flood victims. Here they ministered to the sick, as they had during epidemics before the floods, and provided food for as many as possible. At that time Sacramento was called a “collecting point of health tragedy,” and after the floods, disease was rampant. The sisters became the first visiting nurses in Sacramento.



**Mother Mary Baptist Russell**  
**Superior of the First Band of Mercy Sisters in Sacramento in 1857**

Midsummer had come before the waters finally receded. The sisters made room for orphans and other destitute children, a first step toward the orphanage they had been eager to establish since their coming to the city. Other children followed the victims of the flood until 1865, 65 boys and girls formed the Catholic Orphanage of Sacramento, a work which continued until 1879 or 1880. That year the orphanage was moved to Grass Valley and conducted by the Sisters of Mercy there.

The mission of the early Sisters of Mercy reached beyond the classroom into the needs of the community. The sisters visited prisoners condemned to death confined in the county jail, in many cases helping them to make their peace with God. Early in the morning Sisters of Mercy could be seen making their way through unpaved streets to the homes of the poor with baskets

of food and medicine. Their experience in cholera epidemics in Ireland stood them in good stead as they did service in pest houses during similar epidemics in Sacramento. In 1878 a Normal School was added to the Academy, preparing over the years many of the city's public school teachers. The Sisters of Mercy moved out into new parishes as they were established or traveled to outlying areas to teach catechetical classes. These included the Cathedral, St Francis, Immaculate Conception, St Mary, St Elizabeth, St Joseph, Sacred Heart, Holy Spirit and All Hallows Parishes.

The work with homeless children took a new turn when in 1900 Bishop Grace asked the Sisters of Mercy to take over the management of Stanford Home for Girls, recently given to the diocese and endowed by Mrs. Leland Stanford. The home opened May 26 with eight little girls as the first to be cared for. Five sisters from St Joseph Convent took up residence in the home, escorting the children down 8<sup>th</sup> Street to school each day. As the years passed, the original endowments ceased, but the sisters gave music lessons and endeavored in other ways to keep the 40 or more children happy and busy in the Home. Their work was to continue for 36 years until the Sisters of Social Service took over Stanford Home in 1936.



Photo by John E Boll 2012

**The Sacramento Home of Leland Stanford, Governor of California**  
**Given to the Diocese of Sacramento for use as an Orphanage in 1900**  
**Operated by the Sisters of Mercy 1900 – 1936**  
**And the Sisters of Social Service 1936 - 2000**