

Founding of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie

On November 6, 1936, 120 Sisters of St. Joseph of Peterborough and one Sister of St. Joseph of Pembroke who were ministering in the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie became founding members of a new congregation: Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie established by decree November 5, 1936.

They had earlier responded to the invitation of Bishop R.H. Dignan, newly appointed as the second Bishop of the diocese in 1935, to separate from Peterborough and form a new Canadian Congregation of Sisters of St. Joseph. "Following the example of twenty-seven American and six Canadian Bishops" (his letter November 5, 1936 to Reverend Mother Bernardine of Peterborough), Bishop Dignan had personally obtained permission from the Congregation of Religious in Rome to form the new congregation to meet the rapidly expanding education and health care needs of his growing diocese and to establish a religious novitiate within the diocese.

It was a wrenching experience for both congregations, but one the 121 Sisters embarked upon in faith, hope and love to continue to plant the CSJ charism of healing and reconciliation to the Diocese of Sault Ste. Marie as it opened up to immigrants arriving to work in the mining, lumbering and transportation sectors of this Northern Ontario Diocese.

Brief Summary of Convents and Ministries Assumed from Peterborough

- **Cities of Port Arthur - Fort William (Amalgamated in 1970 as the City of Thunder Bay)**

St. Joseph's Convent, Port Arthur (1881 -1967) which included pastoral outreach to Moose Hill, Kakabeka Falls and Marathon. The convent was home to school teachers and music teachers.

St. Joseph's Hospital (1884 – 1997 when the acute care hospital expanded into St. Joseph's Care Group). St. Joseph's Care Group includes mental health, addictions and rehabilitative services, and Long-Term Care homes with special emphasis on marginalized groups and Indigenous people located throughout North Western Ontario.

St. Joseph's Home/Orphanage/Boarding School (1870/85 – 1970) first at Fort William Indian Reserve on Kaministiquia River. Later relocated to the nearby town of Fort William after the mission was forced to move when their land was confiscated by Grand Trunk Pacific Railway in 1905. The orphanage-boarding school was incorporated under the Charitable Institutions Act by the Ontario Department of Public Welfare and cared for Indigenous and Non-Indigenous Children.

St. Stanislaus School/St. Joseph's Convent, Fort William (1902 – 1999) The convent was relocated across the street from the school in 1906 and closed in 1965. It was home to elementary and high school teachers as well as music teachers.

St. Joseph's Training School of Nursing (1904 – 1973) was attached to St. Joseph's Hospital, Thunder Bay.

St. Joseph's Convent, Fort William (1906 – 1965) Assumed by Sault Ste. Marie Congregation in 1948. It was home to elementary and secondary school teachers and music teachers

St. Agnes Convent (1924 – 1994) Assumed in 1945. It was home to elementary school and music school teachers.

St. Patrick's High School (1928, (assumed in 1948) – 1972) The high school was owned by St. Patrick's Parish and until 1972, staff included Sisters of St. Joseph.

- **Sault Ste. Marie**

Sacred Heart Convent (1902 – 2009) later included pastoral outreach ministry to Batchewana, Goulais River, Searchmont, Hayden, Echo Bay, St. Joseph's Island, Desbarats, Mississauga Reserve. The convent was home to elementary school and music teachers.

- **North Bay**

St. Mary's Convent (1906 – 1920) included pastoral outreach to Callendar, Garden Village and was home to elementary school and music teachers.

St. Joseph's Academy/St. Mary's Academy (1920 - 1982) St. Joseph's Academy served as the congregation's the first Motherhouse until 1939. It began as an elementary and high school day and boarding school for girls. Renamed St. Mary's Academy in 1944, it later became a Commercial



Academy and convent home for elementary-high school teachers and music teachers.

St. Joseph's Hospital/Convent (1931-1995). This health care institution was also a residence for hospital Sisters.

St. Joseph School of Nursing (1931- 1972) was under the administration of St. Joseph's Hospital.

(Image: St. Joseph's College and Motherhouse, North Bay, ca. 1945, SSM Archives)

- **Sudbury**

St. Joseph's Convent (1924 – 1957) later included outreach to Creighton Mine, Coniston, Naughton, Wahnapiatae Val Caron, Hanmer and Whitefish Falls. The convent was home to elementary school and music teachers.

Beginnings and Expansion

Bishop Dignan appointed Mother St. Philip (Margaret Catherine McGrath), Superior of St. Joseph's Hospital, North Bay as the first General Superior until elections could be held. The Superiors of each of the six assumed convents formed her council. On September 18, 1937 Mother Madeleine (Catherine Mahoney), Superior at St. Joseph's Academy was elected General Superior.

The fledgling congregation grew rapidly and Sisters were sent to open Hospitals in Blind River (1940), Little Current (1944), Sudbury (1950) and Elliot Lake (1959). Villas for the elderly were opened in Port Arthur (1939) and Blind River (1942). Secondary schools for girls were opened in North Bay (St. Joseph's College for boarding and day students, 1939); Marymount College in Sudbury (1956) and Mount St. Joseph in Sault St. Marie (1960). St. Joseph's Manor for seniors was opened in Port Arthur (1939). Elementary school teachers were assigned to Blind River, Schreiber, Terrace Bay, Killarney, Sturgeon Falls, Wawa, Hawk Junction, Elliot Lake, White River, Manitouwadge, Nipigon and Red Rock. Foreign missions opened in the Bahamas (1959), Guatemala (1962) and Bolivia (1989). Sisters were sent to minister in Igoolik, Nunavut, Yellowknife, NWT and at Southdown Institute in Bradford. Beyond Canada, Sisters ministered in Zaire, Kenya, India, Honduras and the USA. Retreat Centres were opened in Thunder Bay (1967) Sudbury (1970), Sault St. Marie (1970), North Bay (1997), and Sisters worked in other retreat centres; in Ontario: Arnprior and Pickering; in Alberta at Edmonton and in British Columbia at Victoria. They administered parishes in Red Rock, Ontario, St. Augustine, Quebec, Cobalt, Ontario and in the Bahamas. Sisters also initiated social services, such as soup kitchens, crisis centres, and L'Arche homes for persons with intellectual disabilities. In 1967, the congregation, including Sisters in Formation, numbered 410 members in community.

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Sault Ste. Marie followed the new settlements opening up in Northern Ontario. Indeed, they seemed to follow the railway tracks, which in turn, connected the expanding northern mining and lumbering centres. From 1959 onwards, they also responded to unmet needs of the *dear neighbour* in many other parts of the world.