

Chapter 6

Mandate for a Builder

Carrying the January 1891 elections “by a large majority” showed support for Gertrude Regan in completing the new motherhouse. Acceptance



of her plan for a Boulder rest home and the purchase of land for a Chicago high school encouraged her to buy the land and building of a small college offered at auction in Holden, Missouri. St. Cecilia's academy there had been overcrowded in their drafty house for several years. The bankrupt little Protestant college in Holden with its fairly new building on 10 acres she thought a real bargain at \$5,000.

Mt. St. Gertrude Academy, Boulder

Actually, her agent pledged \$7,000 as top bidder, but after dealing in tens of thousands, the difference seemed small. In February 1891, the Holden deed and the note taken out to pay for the property added another envelope to the growing stack of mortgages and notes on the shelf above Mother Clarke's desk at the old motherhouse.¹

In April a worried Gertrude responded to a plea for replacements in San Francisco by personally escorting three Sisters to the coast. She stepped off the train for her first visit barely in time for the death of Asella Nagel from tuberculosis. A few weeks earlier Magdalen McCrystal had succumbed to the same disease. The ocean climate of San Francisco had not helped them as she hoped. Concerned by two deaths on his staff, the pastor, Father John Cottle, seconded by Bishop Patrick Riordan, urged Gertrude to take another school in the country for the sake of her Sisters' health. They

suggested St. Vincent parish in Petaluma, a small town north of San Francisco whose pastor was looking for Sisters who would teach boys.

As a result, Mother Gertrude returned from California more and more convinced of the need to build the rest home in Boulder as soon as an agreement with the bishop of Denver could be reached. His stipulation that the BVMs confine themselves to students from the area and out of state seemed reasonable considering his prior commitment to promote Mt. Loretto in Denver. In addition, he suggested that the Boulder academy expand only enough to finance itself. Under these restrictions, Gertrude accompanied two of her sick Sisters to Colorado in May to accept the gift of 24 lots north of Boulder. The land had been donated by Warren Hollinsworth McLeod and was referred to as the Fulton lots. But she could not build while all money drained off to the new motherhouse.

By July, 1891, interest payments and building costs had wiped out most of Gertrude's reserve. No more money would come in from the missions until school began in August. Knowing this, the Council resolved that "all work on the motherhouse be suspended until some of the bonds are liquidated."² Even Gertrude looked at the pile of mortgages with a pucker of worry on her face. She moved to consolidate smaller loans into one large one at lower interest. However, she glimpsed a ray of hope in her San Francisco meeting with Bishop Riordan. North of The City (SF) in the wine country near the Pacific coast, St. Vincent's parish school in Petaluma offered a temporary alternative to Boulder. She accepted the school but only if the Sisters already teaching there wished to leave.

St. Vincent, Petaluma – Redempta Coleman, Damian Kenneally.

The problem in Petaluma rose from the conflict between the pastor's desire to add boys to his school and the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur's Rule



St. Vincent, Petaluma – Redempta Coleman, Damian

limiting them to the instruction of girls. Actually so did the 1885 BVM Rule limit them to girls. However, Father Ryan, canny Bishop Hennessy's second in command, had translated puellae (girls) into children. Then the bishop generously

ordered this English version printed for the Sisters to read in English—sure that no one would ever do a word for word check on the Latin original. He was right! No BVM read the Latin copy through. Several had enough Latin to do so but not enough imagination to guess at the bishop's talent in bending the facts to fit his plans. As a result, Gertrude and her Council thought themselves free to accept Petaluma and the teaching of boys there. That spring the Petaluma Notre Dames decided to withdraw and the pastor immediately arranged half-fare tickets for BVMs replacing them.

Meanwhile, shocked by two deaths among faculty at the San Francisco school, Gertrude Regan pushed construction of the Boulder academy. On March 19, 1892, Etienne Fleming, superior of Sacred Heart of Mary, (BVM city convent in Boulder) signed the building contracts.³ After that Boulder ran on the fast track. The academy building quickly rose past the foundation and contractors promised it ready for school in October. Predictably, the Boulder academy soon exceeded its cost ceiling of \$10,000 hopefully set by the Council at its December 1891 meeting. Including electricity and steam heat, the final figure came to three times that. To bridge the resulting gap, the Council pulled back on Mt. Carmel, canceling the proposed elevator.⁴

In the money crunch, the Sisters firmly believed in Mother Gertrude's financial shrewdness. Time after time she appeared at Council meetings with a lower interest rate, a better mortgage or a new way to pay current bills. She succeeded in 1892 as well. Quietly she negotiated a loan for \$30,000 by mortgaging the academies in Dubuque and Clinton, and even the motherhouse grounds.⁵

When Gertrude presented the financial picture with the most recent loan, she won consent to continue construction on the main building at Mt. Carmel “to final completion” plus approval of contracts for the stonework, brickwork, joists, window sash, and roofing. Then she and the Council drove up to the construction site and marked off the location of the laundry and steam house.⁶ It was a major victory!

It was also a close call. Gertrude had never been so short of funds as in 1892, nor superiors so reluctant to see a little figure in black climbing their front steps. They knew what questions she would certainly ask. “Thithy dear,” so gently, “have you any money in the bank?” If they said yes, she withdrew it for Boulder or the Mt. Carmel motherhouse, leaving them half

crazy trying to pay their own bills. At last they resorted to subterfuge—banking some, but hiding subsistence funds at home.⁷

A letter to a young Sister who would one day be the sixth Mother indicates Gertrude's attitude during these months—a deep trust in God's power and goodness.

[To S.M. Gervase Tuffy]

Nov. 24, 1892

My very dear Sister,

How very welcome your dear letter of greeting was to your old Sister for the 15th.[feast of St. Gertrude, November 15th). No child, I do not doubt but you and each one at dear St. Mary's [Dubuque] prayed for me that day—Will you be surprised if I ask you all to continue them until the end of Dec. It is not alone that you pray for me, but you pray for the entire community by so doing. I have much to see to till then and I want your prayers that Almighty God may have it done in a manner pleasing to Him.

Pray too that He may enable us to continue work on the new building and His blessing on it also. I trust in His infinite goodness to aid us with it—Remember all I have asked you, dear Child, in all the Masses you hear. My trust is in prayer.

As the amount of available money decreased, Gertrude Regan's trust in God increased. One story contains as much irony as truth in Gertrude's answer to a new superior who protested her appointment, "But Mother, I can't be a superior! I don't know how to make out checks!" And Gertrude's comforting response, "Never mind, Thithy dear. You don't have to worry about taking it out, just about getting it in."⁸

No one at Waverly, Iowa, was "getting it in" in June 1892, so Mother regretfully closed a school she no longer could afford to support. Cecilia Dougherty noted in CM, "The pastor is not interested in keeping up the school." Literally true! The Waverly house annals tell of parts of the ceiling crashing into the classrooms. At last the Sisters sent the children home for safety's sake.

Meanwhile, at the top of the Mississippi bluff where the money went out, things slowly took shape. Watching crews complete the main excavation, Gertrude turned to a willing Loyola Rutherford standing next to her and asked her to landscape the motherhouse grounds—as well as the Boulder academy property. (Landscape the Wild West? Good luck!) A

picture of the completed academy, taken in 1892, shows a narrow rectangular brick structure against a background of sky and mountains. In front, a horse grazes in a field of ragged grass. (See picture, p. 58)

Obediently, Loyola tried her hand on both locations. The sturdy pines which she set out in Boulder flourished. Not so the academy orchard! Though it struggled for years, it never seemed at home in the high altitude and was finally plowed under.

Dubuque air and soil presented no such problem. In a prodigal spirit, Loyola ordered 10 truckloads of trees for the Mt. Carmel motherhouse grounds, including the pines bordering the Pine Walk and more of the same around an apple orchard to the west of the main building. She finished with



Pine Walk, Mount Carmel

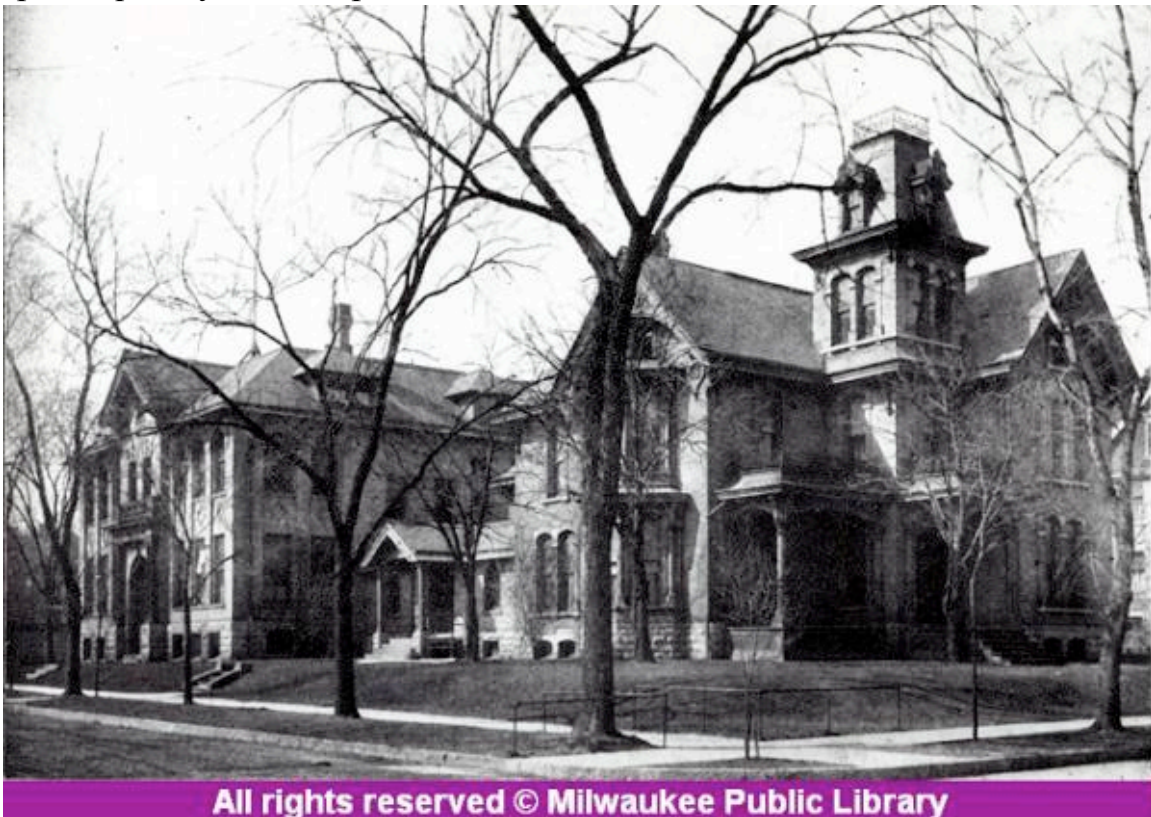
the ginkgo tree in front of the Lourdes grotto south of the chapel wing. Not only did Loyola consult a landscaper, but during the next five years she put in seedling pines and added apple and pear orchards on acreage just west of the motherhouse.

However, the little mulberry tree at the head of the Pine Walk was Mother Gertrude's personal choice—the first shovel of dirt her contribution to its life. In her last seven years of lively retirement, this little tree with its full house of birds delighted her. And it resembled her in its diminutive shape and in the energy that filled it.⁹

Trees and shrubbery were not the only growing things, nor “Our mansion on Grandview”—as the Sisters jokingly nicknamed their new motherhouse—the only place that drew Gertrude Regan's attention in the spring of 1892. Besides setting up finances so that Mt. Carmel could continue to rise, beginning Boulder, and checking conditions for schools in Petaluma (CA), Cedar Rapids, Cedar Falls and Marcus (IA), Mother investigated an interesting proposal from Milwaukee.

In late July 1892, Rosina Harrigan, who had written patiently and often about the advantages of an academy in Milwaukee, relayed the news

that the School Sisters of Notre Dame were giving up the parish school at Gesu and the Jesuits wanted the BVMS to take it. So did many Milwaukee friends who evidently only waited for a sign to help the BVMS establish an academy near the Jesuits at Marquette University. In conjunction with the Gesu offer, some people had already scouted the neighborhood, and now proposed that the nearby Senn residence (picture below) might easily be fitted for an academy for grade and high school. Finally convinced, Mother Gertrude contacted Agatha Hurley in Chicago. If Agatha reported favorably on Milwaukee, she would accept. When Agatha responded with enthusiasm, plans quickly took shape.



Within a month the Council voted to buy the Senn residence and mortgage other land in Milwaukee. While waiting for Agatha's report, Mother Gertrude arranged through Mr. Robert Johnston for a loan of \$30,000.¹⁰ Agatha had replied with enthusiasm. Then Gertrude dispatched letters assigning Sisters to the two new schools. Holy Angels academy and Gesu parish school would open in the Fall.

By the end of the first year, Gertrude received several letters about the success of the two new Milwaukee schools, including a description of the overflow of academy classes in the Senn residence to the stairs, the

windowsills and even to the barn. At that rate, Holy Angels would have to build within the next five years. For the time being, Mother advised the Sisters to raise tuition, restrict registration to girls, and, as a last resort, limit the academy to high school.¹¹

At the same time she negotiated for Holy Angels, Gertrude sold off 160 acres at the prairie for \$40 an acre. She needed ready money for current expenses and trainfare for Sisters sent out in August. During the summer of 1892, she traveled to Marcus, Iowa, to inspect the combined convent/school building at Marcus, suggesting to the pastor that he change the convent kitchen from the second to the ground floor, placing two classrooms on each floor. This simple change would save the Sisters from hauling wood, water, and supplies upstairs. She repeated the same request in Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls.

Selection of teachers for the three small Iowa schools took place without ceremony one hot August day. Mother Gertrude appeared with twelve Sisters at the Dubuque train station and bought 12 tickets. She separated the 12 into three sets of four, told each set its destination, gave them their tickets, and put them on the train going west.¹² In each of the three schools, two Sisters would teach, one give music lessons¹³ and the fourth, cook and keep house. Each set of four included at least one novice.

According to their house annals, the Marcus quartet landed at six the next evening in a dusty little midwest station to be met by a boy sitting on the platform because he liked trains. They possessed a meditation book, a community prayer book, one trunk each, and ten cents. The little boy, smiling and bright-eyed, led them to the rectory where they found the pastor rocking comfortably on his porch.¹⁴

Surprised to see four Sisters on his doorstep, the pastor explained that their convent was not ready. The alterations requested by Reverend Mother had caused some delay. He had sent a letter about it. Hadn't they received it? Would they mind living in the priest's house until things were ready? Briefly they consulted. Ten cents left them little choice.

After a week of close quarters in the rectory, the four resolutely marched down the street to the unfinished convent. From there, two went to the store to charge supplies and finally walked home to bake a huge cake in a dishpan to celebrate their freedom.

The Sisters at Marcus continued to suffer small annoyances, more because of the pastor's zeal than his opposition. In early November (1892), the superior, Mary Alexander Powers, was so distressed by his ultimatum that the Sisters accept boys as boarders or "pack up for Dubuque" that she caught the next eastbound train to lay the matter before Mother Gertrude.

Mother's answer was brief. Sisters were too scarce to waste where they were not wanted. If Father insisted on boys as boarders, the four BVMs could leave immediately. Girls as boarders—perhaps. Boys? No! The pastor, dismayed at having his hand called and angry that the superior had gone to Dubuque without his permission, backed down. They did board five or six girls from distant farms on the convent side, adding more work to the Sisters' already heavy schedules.¹⁵

Rugged even by 19th century standards, life in Marcus was impossible by modern ones! Before they opened school, the Sisters sanded down a wall in each classroom and painted it black to use as a chalkboard. The "conveniences" (outhouse) had been set outside at a good distance from the house—a sensory blessing in summer, a hardship in winter. Sisters and students hauled firewood from the woodshed and water from a pump in the yard. Everyone rose at three on washday to heat the wash water, scrub the clothes and hang them on an outside line or in the attic until the evening ironing.

In the worst winter weather, not only must someone melt ice for water, but thaw the bread before breakfast. Subsistence living and hard work! Too hard for one of the Sisters. In March the upper grade and high school teacher added singing classes to her schedule. The music teacher had tuberculosis. Though Gertrude moved her to the infirmary, she could not replace her.¹⁶

The four Sisters deposited in Cedar Rapids fared a bit better. Gertrude had visited the pastor in time to change the living arrangement and they settled comfortably in Old St. Patrick church—a long building bisected lengthwise into two sections and converted into a two storey school/convent. The pastor in nearby Cedar Falls also finished his double use building in time and the four sent to staff the school moved in without incident. Trouble at Cedar Falls developed toward the end of the year, not the beginning. In June, Mother Gertrude hurried out to calm the pastor and change both the

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superior and the music teacher who had somehow failed to please him.¹⁷ She stayed on to do him the honor of appearing at the graduation.

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Notes to Ch. 6

1. CM January 1891.
 2. CM July 1891.
 3. Letter from Etienne Fleming to Mother Gertrude, April 18, 1892. Beginnings at Boulder, Coogan2 230-232.
 4. CM May 1892.
 5. Ibid.
 6. Ibid.
 7. Sisters at the motherhouse during summer 1967.
 8. Story told by BVM superior Eileen Curran. Interview Doris Walsh, summer 1967.
 9. Orders and bills in the treasurer's files during 1892. BVM Archives. Roseanna, who told the story, had charge of the motherhouse farm for over 30 years.
 10. Mr. Robert Johnston was the father of the Rev. Robert Johnston, SJ. The grandniece of Father Johnston is BVM Janet Desmond. See CM 1892 and Annals Holy Angels, Milwaukee Archives.
 11. In the [beginning the first grade class waco-educational](#), [Hugo Best](#), [Walter Johnston](#), [Florian Flanner](#) and [Alvin Tighe being among the pupils](#), but from 1893 on [only girls have studied there](#). Milwaukee Journal 1967-6-10;
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12. Gertrude Regan's Letters —1892-93 Archives
 13. The music teacher was an important part of every group's survival pack. She not only supplemented income by giving lessons, but put on school entertainments to provide money for care of the sick and the old at the motherhouse. If she fell ill, those needed funds were lost. The music teacher also conducted graduation exercises which usually meant a mini concert.
 14. Marcus, Cedar Rapids and Cedar Falls accounts in BVM Archives.

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15. Pastors at the time considered themselves in charge of Sisters. BVM superiors usually challenged unreasonable demands. It was not a good tactic to threaten to send all the BVMS home to Dubuque. Consider Gertrude's reply. A BVM mother general did not threaten idly. Schools were plentiful; BVMS scarce.

16. Often during those winters in the 1890s when flu and TB took such a high toll, Gertrude Regan brought Sister after Sister home to the motherhouse hoping for recovery. Cures were few. In one five-year period in the 1890s, a quick survey of the Mt. Carmel gravestones indicates that 55 Sisters died—30 under the age of 30. At least four out of five of the 30 died of TB. Some failed too rapidly to send to the new house in Boulder. Others worked too hard once they reached “The Brown House,” relying on climate alone to work a miracle of healing. But to a few, the clear air and mild winters restored health. One of these was Realmo Sullivan who became treasurer general of the congregation during the time of Mother Josita in the 1940s.

17. The register of superiors shows full terms for Cedar Falls after Gertrude's June 1893 change of staff. The town housed the Iowa State Teachers' College and the pastor was anxious that his school should have a good reputation. Since the graduation exercises were public and contained a good deal of music, he may have objected to the youth and/or lack of experience of his music teacher. After this, Gertrude combined the roles of music teacher and superior, reducing the number of Sisters accountable for money, especially in smaller schools. She stayed over for the graduation exercises to be sure her substitute music teacher performed to Father's satisfaction. Of course, she chose a musician who wouldn't fail.

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