

# VOYAGE TO OREGON

Longueuil, Quebec, 16 September 1859–Portland, Oregon, 21 October 1859

Sisters Mary Alphonse (*Marie Louise David, 1826-1887*); Mary of Calvary (*Violet McMullen, 1835-1902*); Mary Francis Xavier (*Vitaline Provost, 1831-1911*); Mary Febronia (*Melanie Vandandaigue, 1835-1911*); Mary Agathe (*Celina Pepin, 1835-1908*); Mary Julia (*Olive Charbonneau, 1836-1921*); Mary of the Visitation (*Claire Aglae Lussier, 1826-1873*); Mary of Mercy (*Adelaide Rainault, 1831-1898*); Mary Florentine (*Alphonsine Collin, 1837-1871*); Mary Perpetua (*Martine LaChapelle, 1841-1912*); Mary Arsene (*Philomene Mesnard, 1838-1902*); Mary Margaret (*Mary O'Neil, 1833-1904*)

In early 1859 Archbishop Francis Norbert Blanchet (1795-1883) of the Oregon diocese sent a letter to Ignatius Bourget (1799-1885), Bishop of Montreal, asking for a religious teaching order to establish schools in his vast diocese. Bourget approached the Sisters of the Holy Names in Longueuil and received a favorable reply. On 22 June 1859, Blanchet arrived in Montreal to discuss preparations for the new mission. Twelve Sisters were selected for the journey and the date of departure was set for 16 September 1859.

The party set out from St. Lambert, Quebec on a train bound for Troy, New York. At Troy, they boarded the steamer *Francis Skiddy*, arriving in New York City on 17 September. A three-day rest with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart bolstered the spirits of the travelers. Three days later, the steamship *Star of the West* departed from New York City.

*Before we can realize it we are on the wide ocean, that ocean over which, as pupils, we had made imaginary voyages in our geographical class, but of whose immensity our young minds had never formed a just conception.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (PORTLAND) CHRONICLES, 20 SEPTEMBER 1859

Life on the steamship revolved around two things: concerns about the weather and recurring bouts of seasickness. Thanks to the presence of Archbishop Blanchet and other priests, Mass was said on occasion. Along with other devotions, the Sisters were able to keep some semblance of their daily routine. The ship captain, while not a Catholic, was gracious in allowing space for their rituals and in ensuring that proper solemnity be observed. The Sisters were aware that they created a novel spectacle for their fellow shipmates, among them General Winfield Scott (1786-1866), national hero of Mexican War fame. Scott was traveling to the Northwest to settle a dispute with the British over San Juan Island and would be a friend to the Sisters throughout the journey.

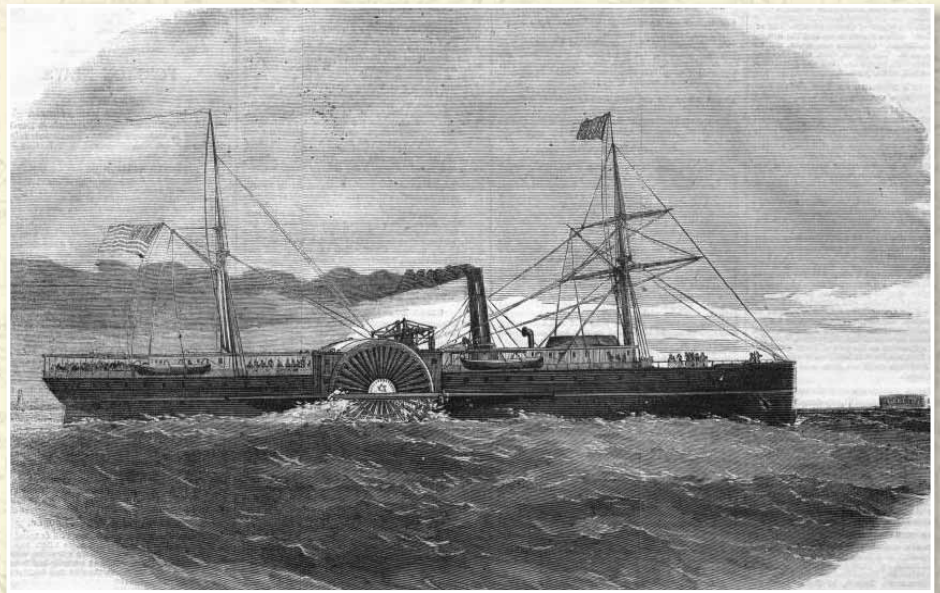


**Our Lady of Perseverance**

Oil on canvas, unknown artist, copy after Raphael (1483-1520), circa 1850

We are ... made the recipients of ... an oil painting of Our Blessed Mother, [with] the Infant Jesus. — St. Mary's Academy (Portland) Chronicles, 17 September 1859

During their stop in New York City, the Sisters stayed with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, who presented them with this painting.



**Steamship Star of the West**

Etching, Harper's Weekly, 19 January 1861

The Sisters took this steamship from New York City to Aspinwall, Panama during their journey. Built in 1852, *Star of the West* was a sidewheeler with a schooner rig. On the eve of the Civil War, the ship was commissioned by President James Buchanan to send supplies and reinforcements to Fort Sumter, South Carolina.

*It is said that the coast of Florida is a dangerous one. We passed seven light-houses during the night... At 4 o'clock we anchored at Key West... The inhabitants enjoy their island home, but they are deprived of the consolations of our holy religion; visits of priests are of rare occurrence.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (PORTLAND) CHRONICLES, 26 SEPTEMBER 1859

On 27 September the vessel entered the Gulf of Mexico and passed Cuba. On 2 October, the town of Aspinwall on the Isthmus of Panama was announced.

The party spent one more night aboard ship, waiting for the morning train that would transport them overland to Panama City, located on the Pacific Ocean. Arising early, the Sisters learned the train would be delayed several hours.

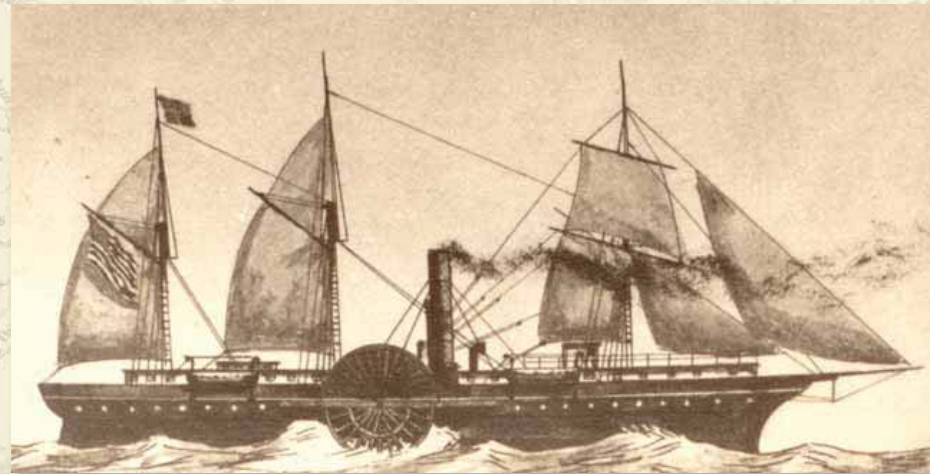


**Sister Mary of Calvary**

Circa 1859

At six o'clock supper is announced but our appetites are none the best, and we reluctantly take the places assigned us only to leave them in a few minutes, the victims of sea-sickness. Sister Mary Calvary, the only one able to remain up, acts as infirmarian.

— St. Mary's Academy (Portland) Chronicles, 20 September 1859



(Adjacent panel) Map of the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the West India Islands with a Portion of Venezuela & New Granada; Showing the routes overland and by the Isthmus to California and Oregon

J. M. Atwood, 1851  
 Courtesy Cartography Associates

Steamship Northern  
 Etching, 1847-1860

Constructed in New York in 1847, this sidewheeler was just over 200 feet long. From 1850 to 1857, the ship was used for the Panama to San Francisco route. By 1859 the Northern was used for the Columbia River and Puget Sound run. The ship was lost in January 1860, three months after the Sisters' arrival in Portland.

*We would have been obliged to wait on the road-side had not [Major] Thomas and Mr. Fox, the American consul, offered us the hospitality of the latter's home... Through the kindness of these gentlemen we were treated to ice water and cocoa; to appreciate such refreshments at so early an hour, one must have experienced the effects of tropical heat that is almost intolerable even at 5 o'clock in the morning.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (PORTLAND) CHRONICLES, 2 OCTOBER 1859

At Panama, the party quickly settled into small vessels for the transfer to the steamship *The Golden Age*. Missing the transfer vessels, which could only operate at high tide, meant being carried to the boat on a man's shoulders—an embarrassing situation that the Sisters wished to avoid.

After several days at sea, the ship docked briefly at Acapulco, Mexico before continuing on to San Francisco.

*At seven o'clock we arrive at Acapulco, a small town of Mexico and a military fort. The inhabitants are Catholics. The bay is covered with a great number of small boats. The surrounding mountains rise so high above the bay that scarcely a breeze is felt. We purchase a basket of coral, beautiful on account of the variety of colors.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (PORTLAND) CHRONICLES, 9 OCTOBER 1859

The morning of 16 October, *The Golden Age* arrived at San Francisco. The Sisters spent two days ashore with the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy and the Presentation Sisters. This sojourn revived them for the last leg of the journey, aboard the steamer *Northerner*.

In addition to the usual seasickness and rough seas, the *Northerner* took fire on the night of 20 October. After a harrowing trip, the ship arrived safely at Fort Vancouver early the next morning. The Sisters were greeted by old friends from Quebec, the Sisters of Providence, who had recently established their presence in the vast diocese.

After breakfast, the party returned to the *Northerner*. Four hours later, the Sisters arrived at Portland.

*The cannon of the "Northern" [sic] announced the return of our venerable Archbishop to his flock, the visit of General Scott, Major Thomas and other members of his staff, and our arrival. A few minutes later our feet touch, for the first time, our new field of labor.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (PORTLAND) CHRONICLES, 21 OCTOBER 1859

The journey to Oregon complete, the Sisters were poised to begin the first foreign mission of the Sisters of the Holy Names. As a result of their success, other missions were established throughout the United States and Canada.



Street scene  
 Portland, Oregon, 1850

In this view, taken at the corner of Oak and Front streets looking south, ship masts are visible on the river. The muddy streets are strewn with debris.