

# ONTARIO, CANADA

Troy, New York, 17 October 1864–Windsor, Ontario, 20 October 1864

Sisters Mary Alphonse (*Marie Louise David, 1826-1887*); Mary Mathilde (*Aurelie Demers, 1844-1927*); Mary Thomas (*Marie Desroches, 1838-1917*); Mary John Baptist (*Josephine Lagasse, 1832-1905*)

In 1861 Pierre Adolphe Pinsonneault, Bishop of Sandwich, Ontario, Canada, found his diocese in need of a teaching order. Communications were opened in April 1862 with Mother Theresa of Jesus (1823-1890), Superior General.

Windsor, settled in the mid-eighteenth century, was an isolated and sleepy little farming village across the Detroit River from Detroit, Michigan. In the mid-1830s, it began to flourish, attracting French-speaking settlers from Quebec and Americans, among them African American slaves who escaped to Canada via the Underground Railroad.



Convent  
Windsor, Ontario, 1864  
Drawing by Sister Annette Stewart, SNJM

*Windsor is a small prosperous town... It owes its rapid growth to the Civil War between the Northern and Southern United States. Its proximity to the American frontier offers a refuge for negroes and southerners fleeing before the Republican army.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (WINDSOR) CHRONICLES, FALL 1864

The completion of the Great Western Railway in 1854 connected Windsor with the east and developed its position as a chief population center. French-speaking families were anxious to attract the Sisters and pledged to offer the missionaries the existing female common school; a residence, rent-free; a salary of at least \$300 per year; and the opportunity to open a private academy.

In spite of an encouraging response from Mother Theresa in April 1862, negotiations stalled for two years. Finally, on 25 August 1864 an agreement was reached and Pinsonneault began preparations in anticipation of the Sisters' arrival.

Concurrently, Mother Theresa was negotiating with the pastor of St. Mary's parish in Troy, New York on the establishment of a mission there. Two Sisters arrived in Troy on 24 August; they were joined by two others on 1 September.

Unfortunately, the new administrator of the Albany diocese withdrew permission (granted by his predecessor) to receive the Sisters in St. Mary's parish. The four Sisters were forced to turn away prospective students while anxiously awaiting a resolution from the Archbishop of New York.

Sister Mary Alphonse wrote Mother Theresa on 6 September:

*There's not much else we can do... We miss working; not being accustomed to an exclusively contemplative life, we find it difficult to become statues all of a sudden.*

The situation at Troy seemed impossible and Mother Theresa determined to send the four Sisters to Windsor at once. She telegraphed Bishop Pinsonneault that the Sisters would arrive at the Windsor train station on 20 October.

Boarding the train on 17 October, the Sisters had a tiring journey. Train travel was in its infancy and gaps in the tracks made for a jostling ride. First class passengers enjoyed cushioned seats while second class travelers made do with wooden benches. Because neither food nor sleeping facilities existed on the train, stops were made for meals and overnight lodging. Upon the Sisters' arrival in Windsor, a welcoming parishioner opened her home to them until their residence, a two-story brick building on Goyeau and London Streets, was ready in November.

Only four days after arriving, the Sisters opened the girls' parochial school, known as the Catholic Department of the Windsor Public School. Two other Sisters arrived from Quebec to assist with the teaching, enabling them to open their "Select School for Girls" on Goyeau Street on 28 November. Known as St. Mary's Academy, this school welcomed seven students. The first boarders arrived in February 1865.



Map of historic Detroit, Michigan and Windsor, Ontario, separated by the Detroit River  
Drawing by Sister Annette Stewart, SNJM



St. Mary's Academy  
Windsor, Ontario, circa 1867

The Sisters' private school for girls quickly outgrew the original convent. A new, much larger facility was begun in 1865 and completed in 1867.

*The citizens of Windsor have neither convent nor college. Consequently they sent their daughters to the Academy of the Religious of the Sacred Heart in Detroit. However, distance makes it impossible for a large number to attend... Everyone, Catholic and Protestant alike, rejoices in the unexpected and Providential arrival of our Sisters.*

— ST. MARY'S ACADEMY (WINDSOR) CHRONICLES, FALL 1864

St. Mary's Academy in Windsor educated young women for more than a hundred years before closing in 1971. Of its four foundresses, two were fluent in English when they arrived. This was vital as the student body included both French and English speakers. In no time the school flourished with art, music, language and religion classes. While three of the four Sisters left Windsor for other foundations within a year, Sister Mary Thomas remained at Windsor for the rest of her life, a beloved fixture in the St. Mary's community.



Sister Mary Thomas  
Circa 1900

With the Sisters' establishment in Windsor, other foundations in the area followed shortly: Amherstburg (1865); Decatur, Illinois (1865); Sarnia (1867); Detroit, Michigan (1886 and 1888); and Lake Linden, Michigan (1893).