

FLORIDA

Montreal, Quebec, 15 October 1868—Key West, Florida, 24 October 1868

Sisters Mary Euphrasie (*Léocadie Bernard, 1829-1891*); Mary Octavie (*Eulalie Archambault, 1843-1875*); Mary Angelique (*Emily Gaudrie, 1844-1869*); Mary Pierre (*Julie Laberge, 1847-1873*); Mary Monique (*Éléonore Favreau, 1841-1896*)

Sisters traveling by steamship from Quebec to the west coast of the United States invariably stopped briefly in Key West, the last island in the chain of Florida Keys. Less than one hundred miles from Cuba, Key West was a mixture of cultures, races and languages. Among the diverse population were Native Americans, Blacks, Cubans, and descendants of the British Loyalists who had populated the Bahamas since before the American Revolution. Incorporated in 1828, Key West remained small until the 1840s when its population jumped to 2,000. By 1870 there were 5,000 residents and Key West was the largest and wealthiest town in Florida, primarily due to the lucrative shipwreck salvage market made possible by the treacherous Florida reefs.



Convent of Mary Immaculate
Key West, Florida, circa 1868

This deserted Civil War army barracks became the Sisters' first home and school when they arrived in Key West.

In 1867 Reverend John B. Allard was assigned to the Mary, Star of the Sea parish in Key West. An old friend of the Sisters from Quebec, he thought of them once he saw the poor educational system in the parish. In early 1868, the Sisters accepted his request for a Florida mission.

In February 1868 Augustin Verot (1804-1876), Bishop of Savannah, wrote that a house and land had been purchased for the Sisters. The only thing left was to set an arrival date. Dreading the Sisters' introduction to their first Florida summer, Verot suggested a fall arrival.

It is true that if the Sisters came now they would find themselves soon in the extreme heat of summer—which, without preparation, might have had results. It would be better, then, to wait until next October.

—BISHOP VEROT TO IGNATIUS BOURGET, BISHOP OF MONTREAL, 27 FEBRUARY 1868,
QUOTED IN CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE (KEY WEST) CHRONICLES,
INTRODUCTORY EPOCH

On 15 October 1868 six Sisters, headed by Mary Euphrasie, took the train from Quebec to New York City. There they boarded the steamboat *Sedwidge*. During the voyage, a terrible storm struck, destroying the ship's masts and leaving it at the sea's mercy. The Sisters prayed fervently for protection and in time the wind abated and the clouds passed. The Sisters were grateful to finally glimpse their new home on the morning of 24 October—although they were not overly impressed by the town itself.

One can see no important buildings, and the private residence rarely more than one story in height, are all built of wood.

—CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE (KEY WEST) CHRONICLES,
INTRODUCTORY EPOCH

The Sisters were met at the pier by Reverend Allard and a curious crowd of onlookers. They stayed with local families until they could prepare their new residence. The Key West foundation house was an abandoned Union barracks outside the town limits. It had been used to house goats until purchased for the Sisters.

It is a detached building, two stories high and contains nine rooms. On the ground floor we placed the chapel, a parlor, a music room, a drawing room, and a refectory. The second story was divided into two classrooms, a community room and a dormitory for the children. The gallery surrounds the house on both stories.

—CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE (KEY WEST) CHRONICLES, 24 OCTOBER 1868

To make more space, the Sisters boarded up the gallery and turned it into small rooms. Once the building was furnished the Sisters moved in.

A simple mattress made of moss on an iron bedstead formed our bed of rest. Since exercise and fatigue had made us sleepy, we slept well enough that first night.

—CONVENT OF MARY IMMACULATE CHRONICLES (KEY WEST),
28 OCTOBER 1868

On 9 November, classes began with twenty-six girls. The school year ended in July and the Sisters happily anticipated some rest. It was short-lived, for an epidemic of yellow fever was sweeping the island. Three priests succumbed to the disease within weeks, leaving the island without anyone to say Mass or anoint the dying. One of the Sisters' own fell ill: Sister Mary Angelique died on 2 September after suffering from yellow fever for a month.

Nevertheless, the mission continued. With heavy hearts the Sisters opened the school year on 13 September, welcoming sixty-nine day students and six boarders. Within a few years, their school grew and the Sisters taught in several other schools in the parish, including St. Francis Xavier, which they opened in 1872 specifically to teach the Black children of the island, and a school for Cuban girls which operated from 1873 to 1878. A new, much larger convent was begun in 1874. In addition, foundations were opened in other parts of the state: Tallahassee (1872) and Tampa (1880). In 1983, the Sisters left Key West after 115 years of dedicated service.



Convent of Mary Immaculate
Key West, Florida, circa 1878

Construction of the second convent began in 1874, under the direction of Mother Theresa of Jesus, who had been appointed Superior of Key West in 1873. The convent was converted into a hospital for wounded soldiers during the Spanish-American War in 1898.