



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

A School in the Making

Somehow, the four young Sisters from Quebec managed to accommodate both day students and boarders in their log cabin school. Mattresses were laid on the floor at night and rolled up during the day. Cooking proceeded on one side of the chimney while school was conducted on the other, with the children perched on rough boards placed over packing boxes. An early boarding school student, Elizabeth Eddy, who came north from San Francisco with her parents for the Gold Rush of 1858, recalled some fifty years later:

I look back and see how hard those four Sisters worked; they sawed the logs with a cross-cut saw, and we children sat on the logs to keep them steady. It was fun for us, but hard work for them.

A year later, two more Sisters arrived from Quebec. They were Sister Mary Bon Secours, a music teacher, and English-speaking Sister Mary Providence, who at the age of 22 was already well qualified to assume the duties of Provincial Superior. Under her leadership, the Sisters' pioneer school expanded, flourished, and earned itself an enviable reputation.

One early student discovered this for herself. Dolly Helmcken, the daughter of Victoria's well-known doctor, completed eight years of classes at St. Ann's and left at age 17, planning to go to England for further studies. However, Dr. Helmcken thought it prudent that first she should spend a year being "finished" in Ottawa, to compensate for any gaps left by her pioneer school education in Victoria. But the Ottawa plan was dropped when, after half the year, Dolly took top honours and wrote to her father that she was wasting her



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

time!

In 1871, construction began on what was to become the centre section of the Academy as we know it today. In his ceremonial address at the laying of the building's corner-stone, Father C. Seghers paid tribute to the Sisters' mission in the west:

The building...[will be]...devoted to a two-fold object — charity and education. It is destined to be a school for the education of young ladies.... There will [also] be in this institution an asylum for fatherless children, for needy orphans. One shudders when thinking of the woeful lot that threatened many a forsaken child in this country had not the good Sisters of Saint Ann taken them under their fostering care and maternal protection.

Last Updated: 2004-06-28



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

School Days

In all, nearly 36,000 pupils attended St. Ann's during its 115 years of operation. Some were day scholars; some were boarders; some were there solely to study art, music, or commercial subjects. Though the majority were Canadians, students also came from the United States, Central and South America, Mexico, and Hong Kong.

Between 1858 and 1904, academic studies at St. Ann's followed a curriculum formulated by the Sisters of St. Ann for their students in Quebec and based on Ontario's educational system. In 1904, the British Columbia programme of studies was adopted and students at St. Ann's Academy wrote annual provincial examinations until shortly before the school closed in 1973.

Beginning in 1892, a progressive commercial school developed under the direction of the dynamic Sister Mary Matthew. It attracted pupils from throughout the area and helped them find positions on completion of the course. This was not difficult, as they were much in demand.

Here is how some of the many who shared in the life of St. Ann's Academy recall those golden days:

What I remember is the feeling of being loved by someone that really, really cared about you. They gave us a good, good place to start to grow from.



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

Because we wore uniforms...nobody stood out, there weren't any little cliques. You never felt somebody was better than you, because we didn't know.

Sister Mary Gladys was Sister Superior, and in my last year I had a lot of trouble with math....She would take me after school and on Saturdays and help me with geometry. It was the only reason I passed. And she was running that whole school!

I had ten really great years there. Three-quarters of the people in my classes stayed the same, so I went through school with the same people; we really grew up together.

A Sister arranged that my sister and I would go to St. Ann's for boarding school...And as we didn't have the money to pay for it, we could go there on a minimum fee and we could work in setting up the tables and washing dishes after meals, doing a little bit extra so they wouldn't have to hire anyone. So really, it was charity. The Sisters took us in as an opportunity to give some rural girls a Catholic education.

Our Girls

Members of the Faculty will pray that God's gifts to you provide:

Enough happiness to keep you sweet

Enough trials to keep you strong

Enough sorrow to keep you human

Enough hope to keep you happy

Enough failure to keep you humble

Enough success to keep you eager

Enough faith and courage in yourself

Enough wealth to meet your needs

May each year find you...One step nearer to

God.

(from St. Ann's school yearbook, The Aquinian, 1947)

Last Updated: 2004-06-28





St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

"Sic Itur Ad Astra" ("Such is the Way to the Stars")

The rapid progress of St. Ann's is a tribute to the guiding hand of Mother Mary Providence. Sister Mary Theodore, the Sisters' historian, provides a glimpse of her Superior's many talents in this passage:

Sister [sic] Mary Providence's dealings with the business world...were all transacted in the convent parlour. Purchases - dry goods, groceries - were ordered from this enclosure; yes, even footwear. When sisters needed shoes, which they frequently did, a clerk would come to the convent with a certain number and the sisters would be accommodated. But big consignments, such as blankets, sheeting, serge, veiling, dress goods, text books, etc. came from England around the Horn. In this way, though she belonged to an active Order, she fostered the cloistral spirit.

In 1903, St. Ann's celebrated the Golden Jubilee of Mother Mary Providence, who had taken her religious vows in Quebec 50 years before. Sister Mary Theodore, who was an eye-witness, describes the scene:

The reception hall was transformed into a veritable fairyland. Sailors canopied the ceiling, and draped doors and windows with flags furnished by Admiral Bickford. The ladies enhanced the walls with soft white material, over which trailed ivy mingled with golden glow. On one side they erected a platform bearing a throne, above which gleamed a golden Cross. To this, Mother Mary Providence was lovingly led on entering the room at three o'clock...



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

Five years later, a three-day Golden Jubilee marked the 50 years since the arrival of the four pioneer Sisters in 1858. Again, our eye-witness reports:

...flags floated everywhere. The men from the British man-of-war, "Shearwater"... spent a week hanging the avenue with row upon row of the flags of all nations... The doors were thrown wide open and...the public came and went with cordiality and an "at home" feeling, which proved the friendly relations existing between the Sisters of St. Ann and the people of Victoria.

Asked to speak during celebrations, 82 year-old pioneer Sister Mary Conception said humbly, "I fear there is very little merit in what I have done, for I have had so much pleasure in doing it. Who would have thought that four nuns of very ordinary standard could have carried on an undertaking to the result now before us. God grant His blessing on our nothingness."

St. Ann's continued its expansion with major additions in 1886 (the "east block" and Chapel) and 1910 (the "west wing" and auditorium). In 1892, this former Convent School was designated as an Academy, a signal honour which prompted a celebratory two and a half-hour graduation ceremony. Among the 20 items on the programme were "Wallenhaupt's March: Three Pianos"; "Medley: Four Pianos, Six Guitars, Two Mandolins, and Harp", and "French Dialogue; 'Le Conseil des Fleurs.' "

Last Updated: 2004-06-28



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

Special Spaces

The Auditorium

Completion of the auditorium in 1910 added immeasurably to the ambience of the school. With its proscenium arch, stained glass windows, heavy velvet stage hangings, footlights, and seating for 300, the auditorium was a magical place. Plays, concerts, recitals, graduations, ceremonies involving the student body - all took place there. When a particular dignitary visited St. Ann's, from Cardinal Tisserant from Rome to movie actor Pat O'Brien, the girls would be assembled in pairs in the schoolyard, painstakingly ranked according to height by the supervising Sisters, and exhorted not to move a muscle for the duration of the ceremony to come. Once they were satisfactorily seated in the auditorium, a hush would fall and the platform party would appear on stage. Mutual greetings, speeches, and music the ensued, followed by what for many was the main event: the gracious bestowal of a holiday for the afternoon! No wonder the auditorium was one of everyone's favourite places.

The Parlours

The Academy's two parlours, situated on the second floor on either side of the main entrance, were grandly in keeping with its imposing facade. As a former student describes them:

The formal parlours were truly quite lovely. The furniture was old but it was good, and then you had the oil paintings. Terrifying, though, for your fathers who came to visit and had to sit on those stiff chairs. They were not homey, let's put it that way, but they were lovely.

The Museum



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

When the west or "Hooper" wing of the Academy was added in 1910, a large room on the third floor was set aside for a Museum, with Sister Mary Theodore as its curator. Under her diligent direction, the Museum's collections flourished and multiplied. Among them were indigenous art and artefacts from the Northwest Coast and South Pacific, nearly 300 varieties of sea shells, a host of photographs, and significant items from the early history of the province.

The Infirmary

On the third floor of the central section of St. Ann's, between classrooms to the right and the Novitiate area to the left, was the Infirmary. Its opening into the balcony above the Chapel enabled elderly and ailing Sisters to follow the Mass, and there was no question of hearing the mighty pipe organ, which was an exceedingly close neighbor! The Infirmary played an essential role in the lives of the Sisters, as one of them explains:

St. Ann's Academy in Victoria was the nucleus... [W]hen you were out in places like Kamloops or Vancouver, you came to Victoria for the summer holiday and for a retreat, so it was like coming home to come to Victoria; we always regarded it as our home. The Sisters began their training at St. Ann's and until recent years they died at St. Ann's, because it was the infirmary of the Sisters of St. Ann. So it was the beginning and the end of the Sister' life.

Last Updated: 2004-06-28



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

Art at St. Ann's

Though there were many examples of art and artistry in the design, construction and decoration of the Academy, the paintings of Sister Mary Osithe, which also graced it, were especially outstanding. Sister Mary Osithe studied art with William Raphael in Montreal and with Sister Mary Helen of the Cross in Lachine. In 1897 she was assigned to the west, where she took over an already well-established art department at St. Ann's. She also produced many fine paintings, a selection of which is included below (you may also click the painting above).

The following verses are excerpted from a poem written in tribute to Sister Mary Osithe after her death by one of her pupils, Sister Mary Rosalinda:

...The saints and the angels all know you,

You have drawn them o'er and o'er;

You can thrill now to their perfection;

Are they posing for you once more?

Ah, the death of an artist is joyous,

For to whom can Heaven mean more

Than to one whose whole life is beauty

Your death means an opened door.

You who have lived for beauty



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

Devine Beauty ever your goal,

Come unto me, your pupil,

And paint Him upon my soul.

Please click the following images for a larger view. You may also click the painting at the top of this page, which depicts St. Ann and St. Joachim with their daughter, Mary, as copied by Sister Mary Osithe from an original work by Lucca Giordano (1632-1705).



Last Updated: 2004-06-28



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

A School in The Making

Way to the Stars

Special Spaces

Art at St. Ann's

The Chapel

The Novitiate

School Days

The Chapel

The Chapel of St. Ann's, rightly described as a "little gem of Christian art," was originally built in 1858 to be Victoria's first Roman Catholic Cathedral. Outgrown and donated to the Sisters in 1886, it is now, together with the Academy and its grounds, a Provincial Heritage site.

The Chapel is the centre, the calm and peaceful core, of the building. Complementing the intrinsic beauty of its simple architecture are hand-carved ornamentations, stained glass windows, and three large oils painted in Lachine by Sister Mary Helen of the Cross. In the central scene, St. Ann and St. Joachim are depicted teaching their daughter, Mary. Beside it are paintings of Mary with the Angel Gabriel and Jesus with the elders in the Temple.

The following reflections offer but a small glimpse of the Chapel's profound significance in the life of St. Ann's:

The chapel was so beautiful. I remember the high gleam of the polished floors, and the altar was exquisite; it was an honour to go in there.

There was a girl from Hong Kong, quite a lovely girl and very headstrong. Very conscientious and striving. But about March or April she wanted to move out so she could get an apartment and study, morning, night and noon....Finally I said to her, "OK, if God's talking to you, He's also talking to me, so let's go to the chapel and get this thing ironed



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

out."

So we went to the chapel and knelt down together and then I said, "God, I don't know what to do. You seem to be giving us two very different messages, and You're going to have to let one of us know what You really want. Because her life and her future are at stake here. And I can't believe that You give conflicting messages to confuse her and to confuse me. I'm trying to be her mother in this situation."

So we waited. And all of a sudden she started heaving with sobs. I gave her a big hug and gave her some hot tea and sent her to bed and that was the end of it. And on her graduation night, we were at the party and she was in her white graduation gown with her roses and everything, and she called me and we went up to the chapel. She had a beautiful singing voice, and we stood in that place where we had knelt and she sang, "I may never pass this way again." Then she thanked me for doing that for her and I've never heard from her again.

Last Updated: 2004-06-28



St. Ann's Academy



Disclaimer	Contact	Help	Search	Home
Visiting Us	Restoration	Grounds	School	Private Rental

- A School in The Making
- Way to the Stars
- Special Spaces
- Art at St. Ann's
- The Chapel
- The Novitiate
- School Days

The Novitiate

In 1889, a Papal Decree authorized the establishment of a Novitiate in the west. Until then, Sisters had expanded their ministry throughout the province and into Alaska by relying on recruits from the Motherhouse in Lachine to carry on "the great work." In all, 523 women made their Novitiate at St. Ann's in Victoria. Here is how a few of them describe the experience:

Right from the earliest days, I always wanted to be a Sister. I had a great devotion to prayer and going to church. Religion meant more to me than anything else, and as I got older, it stayed there. So there's a kind of a call, a religious call....We wouldn't be able to do it if we weren't doing it for God, if He weren't holding us up. If we pray, we get the help we need and there's no problem. It's really a spiritual thing you continue to see. And the person has to be as faithful as they would in the promise of marriage. It's a lifetime commitment, to be faithful to what you promise....When we were first entering, we were on trial, you might say, and the person in charge was supposed to see if you were suitable....You came in as a postulant for six months, and wore a little frilled hat and you were called "Sister Smith" [your surname]. After that, you wrote a letter and said whether you cared to continue. When that letter was written, you were given permission to be here as a novice for a year. And you got a white veil and a "holy habit" then, so you felt as if you were making some progress. And then for a whole year you had to study the rules. Because we were going to take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Therefore, you had to know what they meant, how to



PROVINCIAL
CAPITAL
COMMISSION



VIRTUAL MUSEUM CANADA

interpret them.

Everything was changing in the world in the 60s. Prior to that time, leaving [the Order] was almost a bit of a disgrace; it was done very quietly because it was seen as a failure. But by the 60s...you didn't necessarily need to be in an institution for salvation or for holiness. And just as it became natural for me to enter, it became natural for me to leave.

Because I'd been in boarding school, it wasn't hard....All I did was shift to the other side of the house, pretty well. I liked what was happening there, it just kept on giving me the chance to develop and grow and be who I was. I never felt constrained.

My strongest memory is the spirit among the Sisters. There was a very lovely spirit of friendship and acceptance and cooperation one with the other. When I joined the Novitiate there were 18 of us who came in together. We were all high school graduates and so we had a lot in common. Altogether, with the novices that had entered the previous year, there were 45 of us. There was a splendid spirit among the group.

Last Updated: 2004-06-28