

Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, A Miraculous Vancouver Life

1823-1902



Mother Joseph

Vancouver, Washington was home to one of our state's most beloved heroines, Mother Joseph, a nun who devoted her life to the aged, the sick, the poor, and the orphaned. Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart, was born Esther Pariseau on April 16, 1823, in Saint Elzear, Quebec, Canada. She took the name Joseph in honor of her father. She was one of the founders of the Sisters of Providence in the Pacific Northwest.

Mother Joseph gained posthumous recognition in 1980, when the U.S. Senate accepted her statue, a gift from Washington state, for inclusion in the national Statuary Hall Collection in Washington DC. The inscription reads: "She made monumental contributions to health care, education, and social work throughout the Northwest." Known as "the Builder," Mother Joseph designed and/or supervised construction of 29 schools and hospitals, one of which was Seattle's first hospital. She is recognized as one of the first architects in Washington Territory. In 1953 the American Institute of Architects declared Mother Joseph "The First Architect of the Pacific Northwest."



Bronze by Felix W. de Weldon. 1980, the Hall of Columns

In 1999, at the request of a group of 27 Vancouver sixth-grade students from the Evergreen District Excel Program, the legislature passed a bill declaring her birthday, April 16, as Mother Joseph Day in the Washington state. The class developed three different projects to honor this remarkable Sister of Providence. The first was a new bench at Saint James Cemetery in Vancouver, Washington, where Mother Joseph is buried in the Rosemere Neighborhood. The second was a plaque in her memory at Southwest Washington Medical Center, formerly St. Joseph's Hospital (1858-1967), in Vancouver, Washington. The third was the establishment of Mother Joseph Day with the help of Senator Al Bauer. The sixth graders were present when Governor Gary Locke signed the Mother Joseph Day bill into law in 1999. The sixth-graders went on to realize their other two goals for honoring Mother Joseph, which included raising more than \$650 for the new bench at her grave site. To mark the end of their exciting year, the class filled a time capsule with memorabilia from their sixth-grade civics class endeavors. The capsule will be opened on the occasion of their class reunion, which they fittingly have planned for April 16, 2005



*Governor Locke signing bill to recognize Mother Joseph
with Joan Pinkerton Tucker in habit, and Evergreen 6th grade class,
April 16, 1999*

The corporation Mother Joseph established in 1859 is acknowledged as a "Pioneer Corporation in Washington State," and the vibrant health care network she created remains largely in place today. Under the sponsorship of the Sisters of Providence in the western states—now known as Mother Joseph Province—Providence Health System, serving western Washington, Oregon, California, and Alaska, and Providence Services in eastern Washington and Montana, continue the caring traditions established by the pioneer sister and her colleagues 150 years ago

In 1856, Bishop Blanchet of the Nisqually Diocese requested help to care for the pioneers in the Washington Territory. The convent in Montreal sent five sisters led by Sister Joseph to the Pacific Northwest. On a cold December day in 1856, the sisters arrived at Fort Vancouver during a fierce winter storm. They endured an arduous 45-day, 6,000-mile journey by land and sea. They immediately set to work, converting an old Hudson's Bay storage building into a combination dormitory and church, and decorated it with evergreen boughs. They began building their new convent, a 16-by-24 foot building with four windows and a glass-paneled door. They also constructed facilities for their school and orphanage. The convent was a one-room attic in the bishop's home. By June, six small cabins surrounded by a white picket fence made up the Providence enclosure.

Within a few weeks of their arrival in Vancouver, the sisters welcomed an orphaned three-year old, Emilie Lake, into their home, then the infant James Wilks, and then a steady stream of orphans. In the following years, Mother Joseph built and furnished several houses for these abandoned children. Mother Joseph purchased a farm at the banks of the Columbia River to provide fresh produce for the children and as a place for the boys to work and learn useful skills. Her most extensive begging tours were conducted on behalf of the orphans during the bleak years when the Columbia River flooded the farm and during construction of Providence Academy. She just loved being with the children, praying with them, sharing pancake suppers and little treats, and teaching the ways of family, church and work.

The French-speaking Mother Joseph had to rely on the translation abilities of the two bilingual sisters in her group until she learned enough English to communicate. She sent the "prettiest" nun, Sister Mary Norton, an Irish woman, to collect donations from servicemen on paydays at the Vancouver barracks.

Her first building, a boarding school named Providence Academy in Vancouver, built in 1873, still stands today. "Schools are needed first of all," Mother Joseph reported to the sisters in Montreal. "Americans do not count the cost where education is concerned [and] their generosity will help us to maintain our establishments for the poor."



A 1900 class at the Providence Academy

She responded also to the citizens' request for a hospital, converting a small building that she had planned to use as a laundry and bakery. This hospital was one small room with four beds, benches, and tables carved by Mother Joseph. In exchange, the women of the town promised to support the care of poor patients, and on June 7, 1858, the sisters opened St. Joseph Hospital, the first permanent hospital in the Northwest. Mother Joseph received many requests from clergy and civic leaders to bring the works of the Sisters of Providence to towns throughout the West. In 1874, when more space was needed, Mother Joseph designed a three-story brick building — a combination hospital, residence and academy — that became the sisters' headquarters at Fort Vancouver. This building is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places.



St. Joseph Hospital in the 1960's

Mother Joseph and her sisters built 29 hospitals, schools, and homes for orphans and the elderly in Washington, Oregon, Idaho, Montana, and southern British Columbia, including eleven hospitals, seven academies, five Indian schools, and two orphanages. Mother Joseph was responsible for designing the buildings, supervising their construction, and fund raising. Mother Joseph often inspected rafters and bounced on planks to insure their support, climbed to inspect roofs, and knocked down a poorly-made chimney late at night and forced the workmen to rebuild it correctly the following day. One minute Mother Joseph was seen doing delicate embroidery work, the next she was working with hammer, saw and carpenter's level. Mother Joseph's companions honored her for specific talents for which she had become known: seamstress, carpenter, painter, sculptor, blacksmith, farmer, watchmaker, locksmith, architect and mechanic. But the description they thought fit her best was "builder of services," for she spent her life seeing to it that the poor were cared for, the homeless sheltered, the sick tended, and the hungry fed.

Each of her "begging tours" into mining camps lasted several months and raised between \$2,000 and \$5,000 toward the realization of her goals. She and her companions took lengthy, dangerous trips by horseback and river boat to the mines in Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and the Caribou Country in British Columbia, begging for the precious gold dust and nuggets essential to the support of their works of

charity. They spent weeks on horseback and camping outdoors. They appealed to lucky prospectors for donations. Their records tell of outwitting stagecoach robbers, of surviving severe storms, and of brushes with fire, wolves, and even a grizzly bear.

Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart died of a brain tumor on January 19, 1902, at the age of 79 in her room at her headquarters in Vancouver. Her last words are recorded in her chronicles: "My dear sisters, allow me to recommend to you the care of the poor in our houses, as well as those without. Take good care of them; have no fear of them; assist them and receive them. Then, you will have no regrets. Do not say: ah! this does not concern me, let others see to them. My sisters, whatever concerns the poor is always our affair."

Mother Joseph is buried at the historic St. James Acres Cemetery in the Rosemere Neighborhood. St. James Acres is located just off I-5, along Fourth Plain Boulevard, beside a Military Post Cemetery. The Sisters of Providence section is located on the west side of the cemetery, where a sidewalk flanked by roses leads to a small memorial garden. Mother Joseph's grave is just south of the sidewalk, close to the cross. Many pioneer families and clergy are buried in St. James Acres, which was founded in 1871 as a cemetery for the Catholic Diocese of Nesqually. In 1989, as part of the Washington State Centennial, an historical marker was dedicated at the cemetery. It reads: "Historic Cemetery - St. James Acres - Consecrated May 20, 1882 by Bishop A. Junger, Diocese of Nisqually - Final resting place of Mother Joseph, Sister of Providence, 1826[sic]-1902, Washington Representative to Statuary Hall, Washington, D.C." The marker stands in the southeast corner of the cemetery, at the old entrance from Fourth Plain Boulevard.



Mother Joseph Grave, St. James Cemetery, Rosemere