The Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary have been active in education and health care in South Dakota since the last decade of the nineteenth century. Their strong service as parochial school teachers and hospital builders, however, followed an initial period of uncertainty that lasted for nearly sixteen years. When the small group of sisters first arrived in Dakota Territory in 1880, they could not help but compare their new home with the one they had recently left. The primitive two-story stone and sod structure, to which water had to be hauled in barrels from the Missouri River at a cost of twenty-five cents per cask, was located at Wheeler, between Fort Randall and the Yankton Indian Reservation, more than ninety miles northwest of the nearest railroad station. The building contained few pieces of furniture. On the first floor, where school was to be conducted, some log benches, a small table, and a long board on sticks resting against a wall to serve as students’ desks completed the inventory. The sisters’ living quarters on the second floor consisted of five small sleeping and meditation cubicles, called cells, and three larger meeting rooms, all nearly empty of furnishings. The win-

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Presentation Sisters

Pews were poorly fitted, and the heat for the entire building radiated from an old stove in a corner of the sisters’ residence. This new environment was vastly different from the sturdy stone structure in which the nuns had resided in Ireland. The Irish convent had been surrounded with gardens of blooming shrubbery, and it must surely have seemed like paradise in comparison to this rugged complex silhouetted against the limitless sky of the northern prairie.¹

The sisters’ arrival in the spring of 1880 occurred because of the efforts of Martin Marty, O.S.B., newly appointed Vicar Apostolic of Dakota Territory. After President Ulysses S. Grant’s peace policy of the 1870s had ensured that two reservations in the territory would be assigned to the Catholics (Standing Rock Reservation and Devils Lake Reservation), the Bureau of Catholic Missions sent an appeal in 1876 to the Benedictine Abbey at Saint Meinrad, Indiana, requesting two missionaries to be assigned to the Standing Rock Agency. In August, Marty, a native of Switzerland and the first abbot of Saint Meinrad’s, undertook missionary work among the Sioux of Dakota Territory.²

Marty arrived in Sioux country shortly after the Battle of the Little Big Horn, in which the tribes had played such a prominent role. He labored to encourage the growth of Catholicism among the Indians and traveled throughout the southern part of Dakota, meeting with Native American parishioners and making plans to establish churches, convents, and schools. In 1877, he negotiated with a group at Wheeler, the seat of Charles Mix County, located near the Missouri River about one hundred miles above the territorial capital of Yankton. After receiving a donation of ten acres of land on which to build a church, Marty chose Father Jean Malo, a French veteran of mission activity among the Indians of Oregon, to direct the project and supervise the new parish.³

The two clergymen began building a church and looking for teachers to operate the school. Father Malo relied heavily upon

his parishioners to provide material support. He asked Bruno Cournoyer, a Sioux-French trader who had donated the land for the mission, to help collect funds from other families in the area and to supervise construction of a chapel with an attached kitchen and a fence to enclose a garden. Though Marty tried unsuccessfully to secure a community of sisters to staff the school, the priests decided to go ahead with building in the hope that some nuns could be persuaded to accept an assignment in the near future.⁴

4. Ibid.
They did not have long to wait, for while on a journey to Europe, Marty learned that he had been named Bishop of Dakota Territory. He received the news while he was visiting his brother, a chaplain of the Swiss Guards at the Vatican. The appointment began 22 September 1879. During his return to the United States, he remembered the need for religious communities to help educate the tribes in Dakota, and the new bishop stopped in Dublin, Ireland, where he talked with the Presentation Sisters at George’s Hill. Mother John Hughes responded to Marty’s request for sisters to staff the school at Wheeler, and she persuaded her natural sister Mother Agnes Hughes of the Presentation Convent at Doneralle, County Cork, and Sister Teresa Challoner of Manchester, England, to join her on the journey to Dakota Territory. She also recruited three young novices for the new foundation and planned to leave Ireland in the spring of 1880. The sisters would endure several years of uncertainty as they moved from place to place in the territory, and their original intention of working with the Sioux would be diverted in another direction before they would finally establish a permanent foundation in South Dakota.5

The nuns began their journey in March with a nineteen-day sea voyage to New York, where they were met by Father Malo and Father Arthur Donnelly, whom the bishop had sent to direct them to Dakota. After receiving advice on teaching in American schools from a group of Presentation Sisters at Saint Michael’s Convent in New York City (established by Father Donnelly six years previously), the missionaries traveled by train to Chicago, then Omaha, Sioux City, and finally Yankton. There they boarded the sternwheeler Josephine and began passage up the Missouri River to Wheeler. The steamboat encountered shifting sand bars and a spring storm that made the journey hazardous, and the nuns noticed the flat treeless prairies beyond the high banks of the river. They saw no fences or tilled fields in the barren wilderness.6

After arriving in Wheeler and making themselves as comfortable as possible in their living quarters, the sisters prepared the school. They were disappointed that fewer than twenty children enrolled, mostly from the mixed-blood French and Indian families in the area. The large enrollment that Bishop Marty had envisioned never materialized because many tribesmen had moved

further west or had fled to Canada with Sitting Bull after the Sioux War of 1876-77. The small number of students was the chief reason that the little mission school at Wheeler, called Saint Ann’s, failed to become a permanent institution. At one point there were only five pupils for the nuns to instruct, and the classroom, which served as the chapel as well, was never crowded with students.⁷

Teaching the children, ranging in age from seven to seventeen, was a slow process. Problems of communication with those students who did not speak English contributed to the difficulty as did the inadequacy of instructional materials. Bruno Cournoyer’s daughter Emily, who had studied at a Catholic school in Kansas, provided some help as an interpreter for the Indian children, and the sisters used French, which they had learned in Ireland, to converse with the mixed-blood students. Thus, it was possible to communicate, but the nuns made limited progress. Paper was scarce, so the pupils used slates in daily exercises. Discipline was strict, and the curriculum consisted of basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. There was also some instruction in domestic courses for the few Indian girls who boarded at the school and earned their keep by helping with cooking, laundry, and cleaning.⁸

Though teaching proved difficult and the small enrollment was discouraging, the sisters adjusted to their new situation until the disastrous blizzards of 1880-1881 hit the prairies. From mid-October until April, storm followed storm and temperatures fell below zero. The nuns lacked sufficient clothing for such harsh weather, and they suffered additionally due to the school’s faulty heating system. Because travel—never easy even in the best of weather—was impossible, they faced food shortages, but neighbors occasionally shared newly butchered meat with them. (One advantage of all the snow was that water no longer had to be purchased by the barrel, for it could be had easily by melting snow.) When spring arrived, problems did not abate, for as the thaws began, the Missouri River flooded the surrounding area, and the sisters feared the destruction of their home. The building had already been damaged by the melting snow and spring rains, and one wall began to crumble, finally collapsing in June. The nuns had to seek refuge in huts vacated by earlier settlers.⁹

⁷ Menahan to Butler; “Presentation Annals.”
After Bishop Marty learned of conditions at Wheeler, he decided to abandon the school and look for a new home for the sisters. He had no funds for rebuilding, and the small enrollment hardly justified construction even if money could be found. He had hoped to provide a school for 200 students when he invited the Irish community to send missionaries to Wheeler. Not wanting to lose the services of the nuns, he suggested that they establish a school at Deadwood in the Black Hills. This mining center was still booming due to the gold rush of the late 1870s, and the Catholic priest there, Father Rosen, had written to the bishop requesting permission for a school and sisters to staff it. Marty encouraged Father Rosen to invite the Presentation Sisters at Wheeler to his parish. He believed that the nuns could be of immediate help to Deadwood’s white population and that in due time they could receive Indian children from the reservation south of the Black Hills.¹⁰

Though Mother John quickly accepted Father Rosen’s offer, the sisters were apprehensive about their journey to the bawdy

¹⁰ “Presentation Annals.”
mining town where they hoped to begin school by September. They prepared to leave on the first boat up the Missouri River, but they were delayed three weeks until the steamboat finally appeared. The sisters gathered blankets and food, said good-byes to their Indian neighbors, who wished them a safe journey, and then left Wheeler. The three-day trip upriver to Fort Pierre proved slower than expected because the water level was low. From the fort, they traveled by train and stagecoach across the plains. At journey’s end, one sister wrote of her relief at finally leaving the coach after being jolted from side to side for such a long time.11

Deadwood, however, presented anything but a favorable impression to the Irish sisters. Built on the side of a hill, the town contained scattered buildings, and a large amount of the hillside soil had been washed into the streets by heavy rains. Father Rosen cordially welcomed the nuns and took them to a private home for a rest. The next day, he led them to a three-story brick building that he said would serve as their home and school. He explained that he could offer Mass there every day except Sunday, on which day the sisters would have to attend Mass at the parish church a mile away. As the Presentation Sisters followed the rule of enclosure, by which they did not move about in public, they were greatly disappointed that they could not have Sunday Mass at their convent. The nuns were also appalled at the behavior of most of Deadwood’s citizens. One sister commented that “conditions were against community life—in fact life at all.”12

As a result of both the inability to maintain the cloistered way of life and the less than pious environment, Mother John refused to remain in Deadwood. In fact, she and her small group began the return journey to Saint Ann’s by the next stage. They took shelter in Pierre, at a hotel owned by a Catholic, and boarded a steamboat for the trip downriver. Upon arrival at Wheeler, they slept in the ruined convent and the next day moved to a hut offered by an Indian neighbor. The priest soon settled them in an abandoned three-room log cabin, which they inhabited for two months.13

The sisters once again set up a school, but they had fewer pupils than before (sometimes only five children attended), an even more primitive dwelling, and scanty food supplies. Mother John wrote to Bishop Marty suggesting that it might be best if

11. Menahan to Butler.
12. Ibid.; Collection of Personal Interviews, n.d., PHA.
13. Menahan to Butler; “Presentation Annals.”
they returned to Ireland, and he replied that he would forward their passages and money for other travel expenses. The sisters then had a change of heart and decided to remain in Dakota a while longer, hoping that a place might be made for them. Meanwhile, they moved to Yankton where the Sisters of Mercy conducted a boarding school. The Presentation Sisters remained there until 1882, and during their stay, the bishop remunerated the community at Yankton.  

The sisters' next move was to Fargo in northern Dakota Territory. Father Joseph Stephan, the parish priest at Fargo, had requested that Bishop Marty secure a group of nuns to open a school, and the bishop forwarded an invitation to Mother John, encouraging her to accept the responsibility of maintaining the school there with her small community of sisters. The nuns immediately took the train to Fargo and stayed in the parish rectory until their living quarters could be completed. Temporary arrangements did not prevent them from beginning lessons. They enrolled their first pupils in July and held catechism classes several hours a day, using the church as a classroom. In the fall, they started regular academic instruction in what was the first school for non-Indian children in North Dakota.  

Because the church was crowded, the parish needed a new building to serve as a school and convent. Parishioners held a fair to raise money, and the sisters sold tickets at one dollar each. They traveled as far west as Mandan, but met with what one nun called "indifferent success" in their sales. She commented with some chagrin that the errand to sell tickets to the fair was little more than a begging tour and that she felt ashamed of the need to ask for charity.  

By the summer of 1883, the small Presentation community in Fargo needed new members. The novices had returned to Ireland to make their final vows, and only three sisters remained to conduct the school. Mother John requested help from the Presentation Sisters in San Francisco until she could secure more missionaries from Ireland. Four nuns from the convent in California served at the Fargo school until 1885, when they were replaced by four new Irish recruits: Sister Mary Clare Brown, Sister Mary

14. Ibid.
16. Menhan to Butler.
Aloysius Criswell, Miss Nora Tanner, and Miss Mary Ellen Butler. With the school and convent firmly established, Father Stephan now gave the deed to the convent property to Mother John. The Presentation Sisters, after five years of difficulty, had finally established a permanent community in Dakota Territory.¹⁷

In 1880, the same year that the Presentation Sisters had arrived at Wheeler, the town of Aberdeen was surveyed as a stop on the Milwaukee Railroad line through central Dakota Territory. The area had already been settled by a small colony of Michigan Catholics led by Father Robert Haire. The priest, after offering his services to Bishop Marty, had received a parish that encompassed the area from the Minnesota line to the Missouri River and from Huron in central South Dakota to Jamestown, North Dakota. With completion of the railroad, settlers moved rapidly into the area around Aberdeen, and because many of them were Catholic, Father Haire decided that a church and school should be built at Aberdeen. After Sacred Heart Church was completed, he turned his attention to establishing a school in the parish. His request to Bishop Marty for teachers to run the school led to the Presentation Sisters' final journey.¹⁸

In October 1886, three nuns from the Fargo convent moved to Aberdeen to begin a school in Sacred Heart Parish. They were Mother John, Sister Aloysius, and Mary Ellen Butler. Classes began in the church that same month with an enrollment of fifty pupils, Catholic as well as non-Catholic. In addition to religion, the sisters taught English, history, reading, spelling, arithmetic, geography, music, and art. A shortage of equipment, facilities, and classroom space was a handicap, and the teachers had to rely on repetition and memorization as instructional techniques. Father Haire helped the parishioners raise funds for a convent/school. They held a fair and borrowed money to purchase land, and volunteers completed most of the construction work. By November of 1888, the new structure was ready for the sisters and their students, who by now numbered ninety. The sisters had expanded the curriculum to include teachers' training courses for the young nuns they hoped would join them. They named their

school the Presentation Academy of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. In a letter to the local newspaper, Father Haire thanked the people of Aberdeen for their support of the school, making special mention of the non-Catholic enrollment: “Difference of religious belief is no bar to the attendance of non-Catholic pupils inasmuch as such pupils are protected in their own civil rights, and their religion is not interfered with. Among our most diligent and successful pupils are found the non-Catholics.”

Funds for the academy had come from several sources. Loans and sale of bonds provided the bulk of the money, but parish fairs, private donations, and tuition ($3.50 a week per pupil for board and fees) brought in additional revenue. The sisters also traveled widely to ask for alms after receiving a temporary dispensation from Bishop Marty to break their rule of enclosure. Father Haire published a statement of income and expenditure for the

Mother John Hughes, top left, was the original founder of the various foundations of the Presentation Sisters in Dakota Territory: Saint Ann's Mission near Wheeler, 1880; Sacred Heart Foundation in Fargo, 1882; and the Aberdeen Foundation in Aberdeen, 1886.

Father Robert W. Haire, right, invited the Presentation Sisters to Aberdeen in 1886 and helped them build their school there in 1888.

Mother Joseph Butler, left, became reverend mother of the Presentation Sisters at Aberdeen in 1894 and served in that position for twenty-one years.
academy in the *Aberdeen Daily News*, listing the total cost of the building as $7,546.60, with an additional $1,062.54 for furniture and supplies. Operating expenses from October 1888 to 31 December 1889 were $715.00, and the sisters' household expenses were $844.56. Sources of income brought in $10,168.69, and this amount included the total spent on expenses (after Father Haire donated more than one thousand dollars from his own pocket in order to balance the books).  

Thus, in 1889, when Dakota Territory entered the Union as the states of North and South Dakota, the Presentation Sisters had established themselves in both states. With the division of the territory into two states, however, the Vicariate Apostolic of Dakota was also divided into two distinct dioceses—putting Fargo and Aberdeen in different Episcopal jurisdictions. This separation was one reason for the eventual division between the Presentation houses in Aberdeen and Fargo, but an internal problem contributed to the final split between the two communities as well. According to the Presentation Sisters' Constitution, elections for reverend mother were to take place every six years. When Mother John's term at Aberdeen expired in 1892, an election was to be held, which did not exclude her from reelection, but before the date set for the election arrived, Mother John left for Fargo, taking two other sisters with her. Only Mother Aloysius and Sister Joseph remained, and Bishop Marty appointed Mother Aloysius to serve as reverend mother. Evidence of personality conflicts between Mother John and the sisters who stayed in Aberdeen is not clear, but members of the community believe that such pressure contributed to the weakened connection between the two houses. The vicariate's division into two distinct dioceses following statehood, plus tension due to internal problems, led the sisters to decide that the two communities should sever their six-year relationship. The group at Aberdeen received clear title to its real estate and other property upon payment of $2,600 (financed by a mortgage) to the Fargo membership.

The decade of the 1890s brought drought and depression to the entire country, and the farming communities of the northern plains suffered a great deal. The newly independent sisters at Aberdeen were not exempt from difficulty. Enrollment at the

academy declined, for people believed that education was still a luxury to be dispensed with when money became scarce. A shortage of recruits for the community also became a problem in the early 1890s. Only five members lived at the Aberdeen convent, and in order to increase the numbers, Mother Aloysius asked for suitable novices from Presentation convents in Ireland. In 1894, she received four Irish women and the community's first American candidate, Annie McBride of Iowa. Thus, the total membership more than doubled. Mother Aloysius served only two years as reverend mother because she died of pneumonia in 1894. Her successor, Mother Joseph Butler (previously Mary Ellen Butler), immediately assumed the office, one that she was to hold for more than twenty years.\(^{23}\)

With the succession of Mother Joseph to the leadership of the Presentation Sisters at Aberdeen, the uncertain years of their history in Dakota came to an end. They had arrived more than fifteen years before to serve as missionaries to the Indians, but after several moves, they had found themselves, instead, teaching the children of European and American settlers in the farming country of northeastern South Dakota. They had endured hardship and confusion, but with independence from the community in Fargo and the strong guidance of Mother Joseph, the small foundation of nuns could now look forward to a bright future as the sisters participated in the settlement of other areas of the state. Bishop Thomas O'Gorman, who replaced Bishop Marty in 1896, saw the need for sisters in other new parishes. Therefore, he permanently dispensed the nuns from their rule of enclosure because they lived in a region where missionaries were needed to reach the scattered Catholic population. His action would have a far-reaching impact, extending the scope of the Presentation Order in South Dakota. By the mid-1890s, then, the sisters had a permanent home and an expanding future in South Dakota. Though the Aberdeen convent still could not compare in beauty with their motherhouse in Ireland, the nuns had gained security and a strong sense of the value in their mission to educate the children of Catholic settlers in South Dakota.\(^{24}\)


24. _Diamond Jubilee Book_, p. 29; Walsh, _Nano Nagle_, p. 279; Dunphy, "Summary Data"; Interview of Sister Eucharia Kelly, 12 Aug. 1976, SDOHC. Pope Pious XII gave final approval of Bishop O'Gorman's dispensation in September 1947 when he accepted the revised constitution of the Aberdeen Congregation of the Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
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