

# THE DEDICATION OF A HISTORICAL MARKER: RECOGNIZING THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE SISTERS OF CHARITY OF SETON HILL

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Women religious in America are rarely given credit for the vital role they have played in founding and sustaining major institutions. These were women who built schools, hospitals, parishes, and nonprofits from the ground up. These were women pursuing educational opportunities and equal rights before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment. These were women of the Catholic Church in America and they have had an incredible influence in our nation's history.

It's clear that the impact of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill reaches far beyond western Pennsylvania and the individual women who comprise the community have made significant contributions to local, state, and national history. The missions and individuals highlighted now represent only a portion of the great works of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill.

Founded in August of 1870, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill initially settled in Altoona at the foothills of the Allegheny Mountains in western Pennsylvania. The Catholic Church in the region was young and ripe for expansion as Irish, German, and Eastern European immigrants flocked to burgeoning new cities. King Coal, Queen Coke, and Princess Steel were about to ascend the throne in Pittsburgh and its suburbs. As populations boomed and Catholic priests envisioned flourishing church communities and parish schools, women religious went to work — as they always do.

When Mother Aloysia Lowe and her six companions arrived in Altoona, the parishioners of St. John's welcomed them with great fanfare. The sisters brought their expertise in education and their love of God to the people of the city. More and more young women became attracted to religious life.

*Editor's Note:* This article is an abridged version of the speech delivered by Archivist Casey Bowser at the August 21, 2021 dedication ceremony for the installation of a Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission historical marker in recognition of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill's place in history.

Missions expanded to Blairsville and Pittsburgh. Mother Aloysia, recognizing the rapid growth of the region and of the community, began searching for a new, permanent home for the sisters. In 1882, she purchased the old Jennings Farm on a scenic hilltop view in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. Positioned near the Pennsylvania Railroad, the farmland

property benefited from the hustle and bustle of a growing Greensburg and provided convenient transportation for the increasing missionary work.

St. Mary's School for Boys and St. Joseph Academy for young women were established as the sisters' independent flagship schools in Greensburg. As the schools flourished, Mother Aloysia dedicated her remaining days to the building of a new motherhouse at Seton Hill. She hired and fired contractors. She measured door frames and assessed window glass. Mother Aloysia's keen business acumen and attention to detail served the community well. St. Joseph's Motherhouse and Academy became the crowning jewel of Greensburg.

By the time Mother Aloysia died in 1889, the community included 156 sisters and 16 different missions. Her protégé, Sister Anne Regina Ennis, succeeded Aloysia as Mother Superior. The congregation's great work continued. Mother Anne Regina witnessed the expansion into healthcare in 1891 with the establishment of Roselia Foundling and Maternity Hospital. It was the first hospital in Pittsburgh to openly welcome unmarried mothers for convalescence and birth. More than 27,000 babies and children were cared for



**Mother Aloysia Lowe,  
Foundress of the Sisters of Charity  
of Seton Hill, c. 1880**

Source: Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill Archives

by the sisters over the hospital's 80-year history.

Pittsburgh Hospital would follow in 1897. In addition to providing quality medical care, the sisters graduated more than 2,000 men and women from Pittsburgh Hospital School of Nursing.

Mother Josephine Doran brought the community into the 20th century. In 1908, the Sisters of Charity established two important missions, DePaul Institute, a school for deaf and hard-of-hearing children and Providence Hospital in Beaver Falls, the sisters' third hospital facility. DePaul Institute was the first Catholic school for the deaf in Pennsylvania and the first to teach the deaf to speak in the state. DePaul is still open today.

The educational missions, particularly in neighborhoods of Pittsburgh, continued with steady growth into the 1920s. In a pioneering move, the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill volunteered to teach black Sisters of the Holy Family in segregated and racially-charged New Orleans, Louisiana in 1921. This secret school continued for more than 30 years and the sisters' devotion to racial equality, and their friendship with the Sisters of the Holy Family, continues today.

St. Joseph Academy, which had forged an exemplary reputation for cultivating young women since 1883, offered Junior College courses in 1914. By 1918, Sister Francesca

Brownlee, directress, earned the charter for an institution for higher education, Seton Hill College. The now university is a leading Catholic coeducational liberal arts institution with a yearly enrollment of over 2,000 students.

The Great Depression forced economic hardships on both the sisters and the missions in which they worked. The Mother Superiors accepted only one new mission between 1926 and 1940 and it was a providential one. Mother M. Eveline Fisher made the fateful decision to send the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill to the American Southwest in 1933. It was the first real missionary work of the sisters. They had charge for 12 schools in the West and they continued their catechetical, social, and pastoral work in the community.

The 1940s and 50s exhibited the growth of the Catholic Church in America as schools were founded from new and growing parishes. After the Great Depression and war years, the sisters developed social service programs to meet the needs of individual communities. The sisters also witnessed an influx of applicants to the novitiate of the community. For many Catholics, it was a great honor to have a "sister" in the family.

The second true pioneering effort of the Sisters of Charity began in 1960 when Mother Claudia Glenn made the fate-



**St. Joseph Academy/Seton Hill College, c. 1920**

Source: Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill Archives



**Sister Bridgetta Fitzpatrick and two children use microphones and hearing-assisted devices to recite the Pledge of Allegiance at DePaul Institute in the 1940s,**

Source: Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill Archives

ful decision to send four missionaries to Korea. Providence from God must have been at work because the Korean community now boasts over 200 sisters ministering to the lowest and yet, greatest, among us.

As society and the Catholic Church changed, so too have the sisters. The implications of Vatican II became real in the 1960s through the 1970s and beyond. The sisters, traditionally in black habit and cap, modified their dress. The liturgy was transformed. Community life redefined. For some sisters, change was due. To others, it was a shock.

Nevertheless, the sisters persisted and continued the more traditional work in education and healthcare while also beginning to attend to other underserved communities. These diversified ministries offered nontraditional education to children in poor neighborhoods, opportunities to serve immigrants and refugees, the ability to help prisoners and those with devastating disease, and a means to express creativity or develop a professional career in an unconventional field.

The sisters' work and missions continue today and these are just a few sister's stories:

**Mother Aloysia Lowe**, the foundress of the Seton Hill community, was an orphan left to the care of the

Sisters of Charity in Cincinnati. She entered religious life at 15 and by the age of 33 was the foundress of her own community! Mother Aloysia solidified a strong foundation for the Seton Hill community.

**Sister Ireaneus Joyce**, a visionary healthcare administrator, initiated a hospital-based prepayment plan to assure hospital care in the Beaver Falls area during the Great Depression. She charged 50 cents per month and enrolled several thousand individu-

als. This was a health insurance prototype before Blue Cross!

**Sister Rosalie O'Hara**, a pioneer in educational broadcasting, founded the first radio-television school for teenagers in the world. She was a charter member of the American Film Institute, produced an award-winning documentary on Elizabeth Ann Seton, and testified before the U.S. Senate in support of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. Along the way she befriended Charlton Heston.

**Sister Cyril Aaron** abandoned academia and her post as Dean of Seton Hill College to dedicate her life to the black community in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in the 1940s. She was an early advocate of racial and social equality.

**Sister Florence Marie Scott** was a scientist and professor at Seton Hill College. She was among the first women to study at and become a trustee of the Marine Biological Laboratory at Woods Hole, Massachusetts. Sister Florence Marie would hike up her habit to collect specimens at Woods Hole. As a teacher, she began every class with the following prayer: "Lord, help me to understand the truth, and when I grasp

the truth, fire me with the courage to use it...” Sister Florence Marie was considered one of the foremost Catholic women of science.

**Sister Mary Agnes Carey** fulfilled her lifelong dream of becoming a missionary when she went to Korea as the Sister Servant in 1960. For decades, she led the spiritual and temporal cultivation of the Korean Sisters of Charity. She is Korea’s Mother Aloysia Lowe!

**Sister Thomas Joseph Gaines**, who died in 2014, spent her first decade of religious life as a teacher. Like many of our sisters, she transitioned into new ministries. Trained as a skilled EMT, Sister TJ served the people of Wilkinsburg and was named Citizen of the Year there in 1981. Then she served as Chaplain at the Kane Regional Medical Center in McKeesport. Utilizing her experience as an EMT and Chaplain, Sister TJ served in the field after several of our nation’s natural disasters — including Hurricane Charley in Florida in 2004, Hurricane Katrina in 2005, and after a devastating tornado in Mississippi in 2011. She was honored posthumously by the American Red Cross with the Lifetime Commitment Award.

**Sister Mary Janet Ryan**, a school teacher and professor at the college, imbued the love of history into thousands of students! Effervescent, engaging, and energetic are but three words to describe her. Sister Mary Janet was an advocate for social and racial equality and loved to dress up as a 1920s Flapper!

lives to service and God. More than 100 schools. An untold number of parishes and healthcare and social service institutions. 12 states. Several countries. The Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill have offered to the world more than 50,000 years of combined religious life. All of this history — of service — of achievement — of religious life — accomplished by incredible women. Of the 45 historical markers dedicated in Westmoreland County, only four, including this new addition, have been dedicated solely to the contributions of women.

These were, and are, women living the motto “Caritas Christi Urget Nos,” meaning “The Charity of Christ Urges Us.” From the classroom to the hospital bed, from the child’s first Communion to the adult’s need for spiritual guidance, from the prison cell to the refugee camp, from Pittsburgh to Korea, the sisters exhibit charity, humility, simplicity, and God’s presence in daily life.



**Bishop Larry Kulick of the Diocese of Greensburg joins the Provincial and General Councils of the Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill, including Sister Jane Ann Cherubin, Sister Mary Jo Mutschler, Sister Mary Norbert Long, Sister Carole Blazina, Sister Donna Marie Leiden, Sister Kwang-Shim Oh, and President Mary Finger of Seton Hill University at the dedication of the state historical marker on August 28, 2021.**

Source: Sisters of Charity of Seton Hill

More than 1,200 women have dedicated their