

The Dominican Sisters

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The Congregation of the Most Holy Rosary of the Order of Preachers, also known as the Sisters of St. Dominic of Sinsinawa played an important role in the history of the Cathedral of St. John. Founded in 1847 by Father Samuel Mazzuchelli, OP, and wisely led by Mother Emily Power this congregation established itself in southwestern Wisconsin on “the Mound.” Its motherhouse, central headquarters, and retirement center are still there. It is a lovely place to visit even today. This congregation grew rapidly reaching a peak of nearly 2,000 sisters.

This community served schools all over the country and had the beautiful Rosary College in Chicago (today Dominican University). Since many of the sisters were of Irish heritage, they tended to go to parishes where English was the main language. They served in Milwaukee in a number of parishes and until recently at Dominican High School. They came to the cathedral school to teach boys and later assumed total responsibility for the school.

The sisters lived in a home they purchased on the corner of Van Buren and Wells for 18 years. By the late 1920s, the property was become dilapidated and likely Mother General, Samuel Coughlin noted this to the cathedral pastors in her visitations of the sisters. Naturally, there was always a concern about money.

When Father James F. Ryan became cathedral rector in August 1925, the need to “do something” for the sisters was pressing. Ryan, a native of Whitewater and a former cathedral assistant took the proverbial bull by the horns. He immediately reached out to the sisters and inspected the convent. He took along several of his board of consultors (an early parish council) who assessed the quality of the house. They concluded it was not worth saving. If the parish put a priority on the school, then the teachers needed a better place to live. Ryan secured permission from the archdiocese to purchase the house, tear it down, and build a new convent on the site. A two story house was envisioned, with the basement for laundry and storage, a first floor with music rooms (the sisters supplemented their salaries with music lessons and tutoring) as well as a kitchen and dining room. Upstairs were sister’s living quarters and a chapel.

As his predecessors and successors, Ryan began to plead with the parish for funds—donating the \$1,000 of his annual salary to the project. Three other benefactor, Elizabeth Marshall, Louis Nunnemacher and a Mrs. Conan gave equivalent sums. Many contributed to the adornment of the convent chapel (stations, sacred vessels, pews, etc.) The sisters took their residence in September 1927.