At the Crossroads
Old Saint Patrick's and the Chicago Irish

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Foreword by Richard M. Daley

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Chicago
Walking Nuns
Chicago’s Irish Sisters of Mercy
Suellen Hoy

“The Sisters were everywhere, active and indefatigable, visiting and ministering with tender solicitude to the afflicted sufferers.”
—William J. Onahan, 1908, on Chicago’s cholera epidemics

Chicagoans, like Dubliners, called them “walking nuns,” those first Sisters of Mercy who refused to remain behind convent walls. Upon arriving in Chicago in 1846, they took to heart the counsel of their Irish founder, Catherine McAuley, who encouraged them to remember the words of Saint Paul and “go into the middle of a perverse world.” She told them not to dilly dally, nor to be afraid; for the poor, the illiterate, the sick all “need help today, not next week.” These instructions were unusual—revolutionary, in fact. Prior to the 1800s, nuns were seldom, if ever, seen in Ireland’s streets or alleys. Yet several decades later, the Sisters of Mercy had high visibility in Irish towns and villages as well as in many English, Australian, and American cities.

Known by contemporaries, but lost to history—that, unfortunately, is the circumstance in which Catholic sisterhoods find themselves today. It’s curious that such a competent and compassionate group of women have so small a place in the history of the Catholic Church, Chicago, and the United States, especially if we think how inclusive American history has recently become. It has admitted minorities and women of nearly every stripe. But nuns, it seems, remain beyond the pale. Certainly, early on, they were ignored because they were women and also immigrants. But today American ethnic and women’s history are rich and full fields. Have religious communities of women been overlooked or possibly dismissed because they are Catholic? It definitely appears so. Thus, as we celebrate the 150th anniversary of Chicago’s Saint Patrick’s parish and the Sisters of Mercy who first served there, let us place these Catholic women—who were once “everywhere”—and their public service on record. Let us also remember the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul who began their century of service to Old Saint Pat’s in 1871.

Not a Moment to Spare
On September 23, 1846, five Sisters of Mercy arrived in Chicago and established themselves as the first and, for the next ten years, the only community of nuns in the city. Mother Agatha (Margaret) O’Brien, born in County Carlow in 1822, was appointed superior. She and the other four traveled to Chicago in the company of Father Walter Quarter, brother of Bishop William Quarter who had invited them, and Mother Frances Warde, the American founder who had led the Mercys to Pittsburgh from Ireland in 1843. After a brief stay, Mother Frances
returned to Pittsburgh, leaving the future of this frontier foundation in the capable hands of Mother Agatha.\(^4\)

Although she was only twenty-four years old when she came to Chicago, Mother Agatha was someone to be reckoned with. One of seventeen children, she had been educated by the Presentation nuns and entered the Sisters of Mercy in Carlow as a lay sister in 1843. It was common in Ireland at this time for working-class girls who could not provide a dowry and who were usually not well-educated to become lay rather than choir sisters. Lay sisters were responsible for “life-maintaining” tasks; they cooked, cleaned, and did whatever else needed to be done to keep a well-ordered home. But, although poor, Margaret O’Brien had abilities that distinguished her. Thus when she received the Mercy habit and her religious name in Pittsburgh in 1844, she did so as a choir nun. The Irish-born Bishop Michael O’Connor, who had invited the sisters to Pittsburgh, remembered her as a person “capable of ruling a nation”; and he refused to be deprived of her services “because her father happened to be a poor man in Ireland.” However, Chicago rather than Pittsburgh would benefit from this astute and fortuitous assessment.

When the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Chicago, it was a rude western outpost of less than twenty thousand people. The sisters took up residence in what had been the bishop’s house at Michigan and Madison. They remained at this location until November 1847, when they moved to a “commodious edifice” adjacent to the cathedral—of which Saint Xavier’s Academy was a part—at 131 Wabash Avenue.\(^6\) In this building, until fire destroyed it in 1871, the sisters would function as the church’s shock troops (Chicago’s Saint Vincent de Paul Society did not begin until 1857) and extend its public arm to a horde of desperate emigrants who escaped Ireland’s Great Famine. Despised by Anglo-Protestants for their alien religion as well as their ignorance, filth, and strange ways, most of these uninvited newcomers secured
public works jobs on railroads and canals. Living in makeshift, crowded shanties near their work, they were frequently sick and disorderly and thus regarded as health menaces.

Not surprisingly, when a cholera epidemic struck during the summer of 1849 and spread along the Illinois and Michigan Canal, a large number of Irish died. Although the Sisters of Mercy were already operating three schools, teaching Sunday School at Saint Patrick’s, running an employment bureau for Irish working women, volunteering at a free dispensary opened by Rush Medical College, and holding night classes for illiterate adults, they began nursing cholera victims. It was a part of their tradition—Mother Catherine McAuley and her companions, along with the Irish Sisters of Charity, had enhanced their public image through the devoted care of strangers during Dublin’s 1832 epidemic. When the Chicago outbreak subsided and the sisters’ nursing assignments let up, they agreed to take charge of the city’s first Catholic orphanage, “a haven for children who had lost their parents to the epidemic.” Two years later, with an uneasy calm, Mother Agatha accepted control of what became Mercy Hospital.7

In Mother Agatha’s letters of 1850–51, there is a continuing refrain. She wrote repeatedly that she had “not one moment to spare,” that “time is real precious here,” that “we are very busy,” that “my hands are full.” Besides the sisters’ heavy teaching obligations and their diverse program of social services, they had also opened a branch house in Galena in 1848, and Mother Agatha occasionally visited to advise and encourage her community and to prepare the young sisters for profession.

The Mercy Sisters had “not a moment to spare” because so many “(destitute Irish laborers,” who regularly arrived in Chicago during the 1850s, had such pressing needs. (Courtesy, Chicago Historical Society)
Although two nuns (both from the first band of five) died in Galena, this active community grew quickly. In 1851 Mother Agatha told her brother that there were forty-four Mercy sisters in the Chicago diocese: “Irish, American, German and French ... a mixture of many nations, but all one with respect to religion.” Yet, according to data from the federal census, a large majority were Irish.9

Because so many young women chose to enter religious life, Mother Agatha could begin new ministries. In late 1850 the Sisters of Mercy had begun nursing at the Illinois General Hospital of the Lake. Despite winter winds and clogged streets, they walked every day from their convent on Wabash to the hospital at Michigan and Rush. Because they were sometimes forced to wait “an hour at a time” to cross the Lake Street Bridge, which was “only a collection of planks chained together,” they continually searched for better ways to reach their destination. When the Lake hospital was transferred to them in February 1851, Sister Vincent McGirr (whose brother, Dr. John McGirr, was a member of the hospital’s staff) and three others moved there; the number of patients in their care averaged from sixteen to twenty. In June 1852 the Sisters of Mercy received a new charter in their name, creating an early version of today’s landmark institution, Mercy Hospital.10

In 1852 Mother Agatha agreed to open another school. It was for the girls of Saint Patrick’s parish and was located on Adams Street, near where the new church would stand (and still stands). Although it is not known exactly when the Mercy Sisters began teaching Sunday school in Father Patrick J. McAughlin’s old church at Randolph and Desplaines, they probably did so shortly after their arrival in 1846. Saint Patrick’s was, after all, an 1846 offshoot of Saint Mary’s, where the sisters lived. Therefore, when classes commenced on Adams Street, these “walking nuns” trudged the distance from Madison and Wabash to Adams and Desplaines, crossing the troublesome Madison Street Bridge each day and in every kind of weather.11 By the 1850s Chicago’s Sisters of Mercy appear to have been “everywhere” and without a moment to call their own. Recognized on the street by Protestants and Catholics alike, they were certainly respected for their good intentions and quite possibly for their good works as well.

Without doubt, these pioneering sisters had Protestant students, friends, and supporters. Writing to a Mercy sister in Pittsburgh, Mother Agatha remarked that she had “so much to do with Protestants.” She pointed out that “almost all the children in the select school [St. Xavier’s Academy]” were Protestant, that Protestants visited them “constantly,” and that they had “some very warm friends among them.”12 Thus, despite strong nativist sentiments regularly expressed in the press against Irish Catholics during the 1850s, no Chicago newspapers publicly criticized these Irish nuns. Perhaps by 1852 most Protestants realized the “vast and incalculable ... good” that they had accomplished during their first six years.13 In 1855 this goodwill was tested when an academy student, Mary Parker, who falsely claimed to have been held against her will, sued the sisters. The incident was reported only in the Democratic Press, and it supported the Mercys, correctly suggesting that the young woman, who had a lover, “fell into a very common error of thinking that her liberties were abridged.” When given an opportunity to leave school, Mary Parker chose to stay and the case was dismissed.14

By comparison, the cholera epidemic of 1854 proved far more devastating. Still the only nuns in Chicago, the sisters were deeply involved during the early 1850s in plans to expand the Mercy network. Because Mother Agatha had quarreled with Bishop James Van de Velde over
property rights (and won) in 1849, she was determined to avoid future disagreements over deeds. Thus, in 1852 and in 1853, she purchased two pieces of land: fifty acres in a suburb south of Chicago (Forty-Seventh and Cottage Grove) and a strip of prairie on the outskirts of Chicago (Twenty-Sixth and Calumet). On this slice of country property adjacent to the city, Mother Agatha intended to open a second academy and a resthouse for the community.\textsuperscript{16}

Her plans were realized, but Mother Agatha lived only to see the beginnings of them. During the scorchingly hot summer of 1854, cholera returned to Chicago with terrific force. By the end of June more than two hundred people had died. Families who could afford to escape fled to Milwaukee, but even some of them did not get out in time. Cholera was a terrifying disease, largely because of the speed with which it killed—individuals who seemed healthy one day could be dead the next. Nevertheless, the indefatigable Sisters of Mercy went everywhere, walking to where they were needed and “ministering with tender solicitude.” They set aside all their other duties to nurse the sick and dying. Overwhelmed by the crisis, they also organized bands of laywomen to assist them with their rounds of mercy.\textsuperscript{16}

Following a full day of nursing on July 7, Mother Agatha became ill and died the next day. She was thirty-two years old. By July 11, three more nuns—all born in Ireland—had also become cholera victims. Later in the month, on July 31, Father McLaughlin, pastor of Saint Patrick’s, died. He and the sisters were among the better known of the 1,424 people who succumbed that summer to a killer disease that was not very well understood. Shocked Chicagoans began to realize, however, that “cleanliness is conducive to health, and that filth is productive of disease.” As a direct result of this tragedy and repeated appeals for preventive sanitary measures, the city council authorized construction of an underground sewer system and required homeowners to install drains.\textsuperscript{17}

When the Sisters of Mercy opened their second Chicago academy in December 1854, it bore the name of Saint Agatha. In this way, they paid public tribute to their leading spirit, the young woman from County Carlow who had “succeeded by her zeal and wisdom” in laying a firm foundation for so many charitable and educational enterprises (both private and public) that would follow. By responding generously to the distressed and by trusting in Providence, she had unknowingly turned the convent on Wabash Avenue into something of a social settlement—the kind that so many of us have come to identify with Chicago in the late nineteenth century. Yet Mother Agatha O’Brien had completed her life’s work before either Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr, the founders of Hull-House, were born.\textsuperscript{18}

Setting the Pace

The McAuley-O’Brien legacy went a long way in directing the Irish women who led Chicago’s Mercy Sisters during the late 1850s and Civil War years. The flexible, “can do” activism of Mothers Catherine McAuley and Agatha O’Brien worked well in a “can do” city bent on progress. Their energy and efforts to lift up their own contributed in no small way to the influence that Irish Catholics would have in Chicago—an influence that from the beginning was “all out of proportion to their numbers.” Irish Catholics not only grew up with the city but their institutions became an essential part of its lifeblood.\textsuperscript{13} In 1905 an observer of Chicago’s cultural and social events commented that the Catholic Church was “unexcelled in charities.”\textsuperscript{19} No small part of this achievement can be attributed to women religious, particularly those pioneer Mercys who set the pace.
SAINT ANGELA'S

FEMALE ACADEMY,

CONDUCTED BY THE
SISTERS OF MERCY,

Corner of Desplaines & Adams Streets, East Chicago.

In the various branches of a refined and solid education suitable to young ladies; in matters of propriety and elegance of deportment, the pupils of this Institution will receive the constant care and attention of the Sisters.

The branches taught are: Orthography, Reading, Writing, Grammar, Arithmetic, Sacred and Profane History, Ancient and Modern Chronology, Mythology, Rhetoric and Poetry, Geography, Astronomy, and the use of the Globes, the elements of Natural Philosophy, Chemistry, Botany, and Mental Philosophy; French and German Languages; Music—Piano, Guitar and Melodeon.


FIRST TERM COMMENCES AUGUST 17, 1857,

And ends November 5th. Second Term commences November 6th, and ends January 30th, 1858. Third Term commences January 31st, and ends April 24th, 1858. Fourth Term commences April 25th, and ends July 17th, 1858.

TERMS, PAYABLE IN ADVANCE.

1st Class, for a term of twelve weeks, 5.00
2d Class, do 4.00
3d Class, do 3.00

French, per quarter, 4.00
Piano, with use of Instrument, 9.00
Guitar, " " " 6.00
Melodeon, " " " 8.00
Painting, 5.00
Drawing, 5.00

Attendance from 9 1-2 A.M. until 11 1-2, and from 2 until 4 1-2 P.M.

Times Press, 61 La Salle Street.

The prospectus of Saint Angela's Female Academy, conducted by the Sisters of Mercy at the "Corner of Desplaines & Adams Streets, West Chicago," highlights the essentials of "a refined and solid education suitable to young Ladies" in 1857–58. (Courtesy, Sisters of Mercy Archives, Province Center, Chicago)
Mother Vincent McGirr, who came from Pittsburgh with Mother Agatha in 1846 and headed Mercy Hospital in 1851, opened Saint Angela's Academy on Desplaines Street, north of Saint Patrick's Church (facing east), in August 1857. Like the sisters' free school for girls, the academy was intended primarily for the young women of Saint Patrick's. Although no one knows why the school was named for Saint Angela Merici (founder of the Ursuline Sisters in sixteenth-century Italy), it is clear that Catherine McAuley was inspired by her nontraditional work among the poor, sick, and uneducated, particularly women and children.

Saint Angela's Academy offered "a refined and solid education" as well as "the constant care and attention of the Sisters." Although religion and theology were not officially listed among the course offerings, they formed "the core of the curriculum." All students received instruction in the "Christian principles of solid virtue and strict morality" that was a part of a Mercy education. Unlike Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Agatha academies, Saint Angela's was not a boarding school, but the tuition earned in these three institutions helped support the nuns' free schools and charities. Sister Angela Martin, the Canadian-born principal of Saint Angela's, and her teachers continued to live on Wabash Avenue and commuted across town on foot or by carriage until the Mercys left Saint Patrick's parish in 1869.

For reasons that are not completely clear, Mother Francis Monholland (another Irish-born superior) refused Father Denis Dunne's request that the sisters who taught at Saint Patrick's reside there. It seems that she did not want "to place a branch so near the motherhouse." Father Dunne's suggestion may also have come at a bad time. After opening Saint Angela's Academy in 1857, the Sisters of Mercy had again spread themselves dangerously thin in an attempt to serve a desperately poor immigrant population. In 1858, at the urging of

Father John McMullen, the nuns began the city's first Magdalen Asylum in a rented house not far from Saint Patrick's Church. They staffed the asylum until the following year, when four Irish Sisters of the Good Shepherd arrived from St. Louis and began their long history of service to Chicagoans. Relieved of this responsibility, Mother Francis then sent a group of five sisters to Ottawa, Illinois, to establish a foundation. Finally, and most importantly, in September 1861 she led her "soldiers
of mercy" (all Irish) to nurse the sick and wounded in the Civil War. Colonel James A. Mulligan, leader of Chicago's Irish Brigade and a future war hero, secured the sister-nurses on behalf of his largely Catholic regiment.  

The Mercys were the first but not the only Chicago-based nuns to go to the front. The Daughters of Charity, who had begun teaching at Holy Name in September 1861 (and ten years later would transfer to Saint Patrick's), dramatically closed school early in June 1862 to answer "a call for more help for the sick." Sister Anne Regina Jordon, born in Donegal in 1821, then took Chicago's Daughters of Charity east, most likely to Satterlee Hospital in Philadelphia, where a large group of nuns from Emmitsburg, Maryland, began nursing in June 1862. The Sisters of Mercy, for their part, spent six months working in a field hospital in Jefferson City, Missouri, and then continued their labors on board the Empress, a hospital ship of the United States Sanitary Commission.  

The Mercys' wartime nursing did not end with their return to Chicago in May 1862. About two years later, they began visiting sick and wounded prisoners at Camp Douglas located on the city's South Side, within view from the roof of Saint Agatha's Academy. Built as a training center for Union recruits, it was converted into a prison camp for Confederate soldiers early in 1862. Colonel Benjamin Sweet, who became camp commander in May 1864, placed his daughter at Saint Xavier's Academy on Wabash. When he at first refused permission for the nuns to enter the camp, he was prevailed upon by Chicago's mayor—and perhaps by his bright, persistent daughter—to allow them to do so. Years later Ada C. Sweet recalled her own visits to Camp Douglas on weekends; the sisters, she said, often gave her "a great iced cake to carry to the Fifteenth Veteran Reserve Band." In return, on trips downtown, the band serenaded the nuns and their pupils.  

Long before the war's end, these "soldiers of mercy" had been transformed into "angels of mercy." Their "religious training and personal discipline, along with their practiced ability to treat soldiers with a compassion that remained devoid of sexual energy, won the respect of most people." Thus, in April 1862, when Chicago's Protestant Female Nurse Association issued a call for nurses, it described the kind of women needed in familiar terms:  

They must be women of the most unimpeachable integrity, religious in spirit, thoroughly kind and gentle-hearted, possessed of the rare gift of common sense, equal to the emergencies that constantly arise in the army hospitals . . . self-reliant, entirely subordinate and obedient to the surgeon . . . . They must be women of cheerful and active temperament, industrious and energetic — in short, model women.  

Taking a cue from Superintendent of Nurses Dorothea Dix (whose anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant sentiments were well-known), the Chicago association also required that "every nurse shall be at least thirty years of age." Many sister-nurses were younger.  

At the war's end, the Sisters of Mercy had been in Chicago for nearly twenty years. Their nursing, teaching, and charitable activities had won for them an enviable place. There is little doubt that, as fearless and relentless caregivers on the fields of battle as well as on the streets of Chicago, they had won for Irish Catholics and their church an increased tolerance and a new
respectability. Moreover, they had caused earnest Protestant women to take serious notice. The remarkable Mary Livermore, who with Jane Hoge organized Chicago’s highly successful Great Northwestern Sanitary Fair in 1863, became acquainted with the Mercys and other nursing nuns during the Civil War. Decades later, she still held them in high regard. In a series of lectures on *What Shall We Tell Our Daughters* (1883), she suggested that new communities of women “established on the basis of the Protestant religion . . . might be made very helpful to modern society.” Livermore clearly recognized too how such organizations “would furnish occupation and give position to large numbers of unmarried women, whose hearts go out to the world in charitable intent.”

**Daughters Called to Service**

Mary Livermore was hardly the first, and certainly not the last, among prominent Protes-
tant women to see Catholic sisterhoods as an effective and attractive force for good in American society. Earlier in the nineteenth century, Catharine Beecher had cast a jealous eye on the achievements of pioneer nuns on the western frontier. And at the century’s end, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr consciously or unconsciously chose a successful ecclesiastical form on which to model their social settlement.

To live as neighbors among poor immigrants and work selflessly on their behalf would hardly have been considered new to Chicagoans who had witnessed or benefited from the labors of the Sisters of Mercy or other communities. By 1889, when Hull-House opened on Halsted Street, hundreds of Catholic women religious—the majority from Irish families—had already shown how single women could live useful and gutsy lives.30

Strange as it may seem today, religious life—especially in active communities, like the Sisters of Mercy—offered Catholic women an appealing alternative to the life choices available to most American women at that time: motherhood or spinsterhood. We should also remember that nineteenth-century society was far less secular than our own. Americans of every kind were generally churchgoers; both the schooled and unschooled found their faith, morality, and identity rooted in or shaped by religion. And for women, especially Catholic sisters and Protestant evangelicals, religion often stimulated “a life of Christian usefulness” that replaced stylish idleness or aimless busywork with purposeful activities.31

The best hope for benevolent daughters of Protestants was to become the wives of ministers or missionaries. As such, they could lead “lives devoted to soul-winning” and assume “a public, assertive form of usefulness.” In choosing husbands, therefore, these young women also selected careers or challenging ways to lead lives of service. Before the Civil War, Emily Judson wrote to a friend about her decision to marry a missionary: “Did you ever feel as though all the things you were engaged in were so trivial, so aimless, that you fairly sickened of them, and longed to do something more worthy of your origin and destiny?” She wanted to spend her “short life in the way which would make [her] most happy—in doing real, permanent good.” Despite these intentions, however, children and home duties made it difficult for women like Emily Judson “to function in the capacity of assistant missionary.”32

Such was not case for the daughters of Catholics who became nuns. During the nineteenth century, when opportunities to save souls and do good were limitless, the restrictions on women religious were comparatively few. Until 1908 the Catholic Church officially recognized the United States as “mission territory,” and the many Irish women who emigrated as nuns saw themselves as missionaries in their own right. Settling in faraway places, they remained flexible, responding as best they could to local needs and crises. The heavy influx of Famine refugees to American cities after 1847 forced the first wave of Irish sisters to emphasize the public dimension of their vows. Thus, it was only natural that the Mercy convent on Wabash Avenue became the center of so much social action.33

The hectic pace and the singular competence with which these determined nuns built respected urban institutions—ones largely free of male management—fueled the aspirations and idealism of young Chicago women who wanted to do something important in life. Most of them were the daughters of immigrants and working class. No doubt some saw religious life as an escape or possibly an adventure, but many entered convents because they “expanded the narrow range of what was possible for women who were coming of age” 150 years ago. By accepting a
religious vocation, these first- and second-generation daughters of Erin were not only choosing what their families and friends considered “the better part” (rather than getting married or staying single) but also enlarging their sphere and infusing it with tough challenges.34

Living among and serving the poor, sick, and uneducated “demanded extraordinary stamina and dedication to the cause of religion.” During the antebellum period, in particular, nuns lived and worked in convents and schools that were unattractive and often unhealthy. For Chicago’s walking nuns, bitter cold or excessive heat heightened their discomfort and made their daily routine more difficult; bad weather also contributed to the terrible mortality among them. Large numbers of sisters died, as we have seen, during epidemics; but many more, especially among the Irish, were lost to tuberculosis, the result of poor living conditions and long hours of hard work. Sister Callista (Mary Ellen) Mangan, who was baptized in Old Saint Patrick’s Church in November 1855 and subsequently became a Sister of Mercy, died of consumption twenty-eight years later. She was simply one of many.35

These hardships and early deaths did not lessen the attraction of the convent. Called to service by the growing number of Catholic poor and the threat of Protestant proselytism (especially among children), young women also saw that religious life offered them a way to do important work and be somebody. Nuns, who defined themselves in terms other than that of their husbands and children, most certainly challenged the “cult of true womanhood.” As one historian has accurately observed: “their voluntary submergence of individual identity to a larger corporate identity within the convent gave them reason and opportunity to act in the world to a greater degree than was permitted to most women or was pursued by most men.” The Sisters of Mercy were not only free to walk the streets of Chicago without male escorts, they were also educated and self-supporting, held top administrative posts, and owned substantial amounts of property.36

Mother Agatha O’Brien, an Irish immigrant in her late twenties, must have offered a stunning example of how religious life could transform a bright, young woman into an able person of status and authority. In the 1849 property dispute with Chicago’s Bishop Van de Velde, for example, the twenty-six-year-old Mother Agatha stood firm and refused to return a deed that she believed belonged to the sisters. Three years later, through the act that incorporated Mercy Hospital, she and the nuns elected to the board of trustees received sole corporate responsibility for the institution. Mother Agatha, who no longer needed the bishop’s permission, could use the real estate as collateral to secure loans and mortgages to purchase more properties. Thus, she stands in stark contrast to Mary Livermore and Jane Hoge who realized after their successful sanitary fair that, although they had money in the bank, “our earnings were not ours, but belonged to our husbands.”37

Unlike so many articulate Protestant women reformers who emerged in the post-Civil War years, however, the Sisters of Mercy and their successors claimed no public voice. They were, after all, products of their times and training — very much members of a patriarchal Irish church. Like other daughters of Erin, they “behaved aggressively and valued their economic prowess,” but, despite “the web of support” they created for so many women of varied circumstances, they and their students generally “turned a cold shoulder to the organized women’s rights movement.” Its leaders were, of course, Protestant women of Anglo-Saxon stock whose religion permitted divorce and more sexual freedom than did the Catholic Church.38

Perhaps it is for this reason, most of all, that the Sisters of Mercy and other women religious, who provided the model and set the pace for
social reform in the nineteenth century, remain absent from American history. It would be a mistake to dismiss them too readily, simply because they sought little public recognition and held a subservient place in the Catholic Church. Respect for and cooperation with bishops and priests did not always signify submission. As Mother Agatha O’Brien proved, sisters frequently resisted “patriarchy” with as much resolve as a suffragist or feminist. For those of us who value their indomitable spirit and know their rich legacy, we must insist that they not be ignored or forgotten.
Chicago Record-Herald, November 1, 2, 1885.

31. William Lill received 3,557 votes and was awarded a gold-headed cane inscribed to “the most popular brewer in Chicago, as decided by ballot, at a Fair held for the benefit of Saint Patrick’s Church, September 4, 1869.” See news clippings on Saint Patrick’s parish in the West Side Community Collection, box 9, folder 5, Chicago Public Library Special Collections.

32. I owe a special debt to Charles Fanning for introducing me to the genius of Finley Peter Dunne in his 1972 doctoral dissertation from the University of Pennsylvania, published as Finley Peter Dunne and Mr. Dooley: The Chicago Years (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1978).


35. Ibid.

36. Alexander Burke and his wife, Margaret Moore, were the parents of eleven children, including Judge Richard Burke, chief justice of the superior court, and Dr. Alexander Burke. When he died in 1914, The New World noted that Alexander Burke’s “home was his club, and his family, his society.” Special thanks to Reverend James P. Burke, O.P., for providing crucial details of his grandfather’s life in Ireland and Chicago. Members of the Burke family generously restored the Saint Finbar window in Old Saint Patrick’s as part of the recent Renaissance campaign.

37. The decline in the fashionable residential district along Jackson Boulevard presented a unique opportunity for the Daughters of Charity. With the assistance of prominent Chicagoans, in 1914 they established a social center at 308 S. Sangamon Street that included a day nursery for the children of working mothers. When the sisters relocated the center three miles west on Jackson Boulevard in 1947, they renamed it Marillac House.

Chapter 3. Walking Nuns: Chicago’s Irish Sisters of Mercy

I extend special thanks to Sister Patricia Illing, R.S.M., archivist, for her generosity and hospitality; Ellen Sherrett, editor of this volume, for her insights and enthusiasm; and Walter Nugent, Andrew V. Tackes Professor of American History at the University of Notre Dame, for his unflagging support and avid interest.

1. William J. Onahan, A Little History of Old Saint Mary’s Church, Chicago (Chicago: Privately published, 1908), 24. For the term walking nuns, see M. Angela Bolster, R.S.M., Catherine McAuley: Venerable for Mercy (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1990), 55.


3. The Daughters of Charity came to Saint Patrick’s School on September 11, 1871. Sister Cornelia Markay served as first principal; her companions were Sisters Leopoldine Judge and Euphemia Tuttle, who remained only a month. Following the Chicago fire in October 1871, the Daughters of Charity from Holy Name (whose school was destroyed) moved to Saint
Patrick’s. Since many of their former pupils followed them, the Daughters of Charity from Holy Name replaced the first group of sisters (they received new assignments). The second principal was Sister Mary McCarthy; her companions were Sisters Cephas Byrne, Ellen Connaughton, Anastasia Ryan, Elizabeth Newman, Mary Owings, and Ann Tobin (three of them were born in Ireland). From 1871 to 1967, the Daughters of Charity conducted the grade school; their high school remained open until 1970. See Sister Bernice Brennan, D.C., “History and Activities of Three Schools, Elementary and Secondary, of the Daughters of Charity in Chicago” (master’s thesis, De Paul University, 1953). I am also grateful to Lois Martin for biographical data from the Daughters of Charity Archives, Mater Dei Provincialate, Evansville, Indiana.

4. It is important to name these pioneers: Mother Agatha (Margaret) O’Brien, Sister Gertrude (Catherine) McGuire, Sister Vincent (Mary Ann) McGeirr, Sister Josephine (Elizabeth) Corbett, and Sister Veronica (Eva) Schmidt. All were either born in Ireland or were the children of Irish immigrants. Biographical data can be found in the Sisters of Mercy Archives, Province Center, Chicago.


7. William K. Beatty, “When Cholera Scourged Chicago,” *Chicago History* XL (spring 1982): 5–8 (quote); Sister Mary Fidelis Convey, R.S.M., “Mother Agatha O’Brien and the Pioneers” (master’s thesis, Loyola University, 1929), 126; Roland Burke Savage, *Catherine McAuley: The First Sister of Mercy* (Dublin: M. H. Gill and Son, 1950), 147–53; and Joy Clough, R.S.M., *In Service to Chicago: The History of Mercy Hospital* (Chicago: Mercy Hospital 1979), 18. Mother Agatha realized the risks in taking control of the hospital. They did not, however, prevent her from doing so. She remarked in a letter: “I am fearful & uneasy because an Hospital is such an arduous undertaking, but if Heaven aids us all will be right.” Mother Agatha O’Brien to Sister Scholastica Drum, February 7, 1851, Sisters of Mercy Archives.

8. These quotations are taken from four letters written by Mother Agatha O’Brien on November 12, 1850; February 7, 1851; September 4, 1851; and November 12, 1851, Sisters of Mercy Archives.


10. Clough, *In Service to Chicago*, 18–19 (quotes). On the average number of patients in 1852, see “General Hospital of
the Lake," *Western Tablet*, February 23, 1852. The total number admitted between February 20, 1851 to February 20, 1852 was 220.


Academy for Young Ladies” Prospectus, n.d., Sisters of Mercy Archives (for quote on Christian principles and morality).

23. A Member of the Order, Life of Mary Mon- holland: One of the Pioneer Sisters of the Order of Mercy in the West (Chicago: J. S. Hyland and Company, 1894), 130–31. On use of a carriage, see Doyle, “Saint Angela’s First.” Although Julia Marie Doyle’s mother remembers the Mercy sisters leaving Saint Patrick’s in 1862, it appears that they left in 1863. See Carroll, Leaves, 273. The Sisters of Loretto, under the direction of Sister Ferdinand Sweeney, did not come to Saint Patrick’s until 1864. They had been a part of the Sisters of Loretto of Nerinx, Kentucky; however, Sister Ferdinand and three other sisters left this community in 1864 to form a “new reformed Society of Loretto.” Bishop James Duggan, who knew the family of one of the sisters, invited them to Saint Patrick’s, where the need for sisters was great. They remained until 1871, when they were replaced by the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul. See Anna C. Minogue, Loretto Annals of the Century (New York: American Press, 1912), 181–84. I am grateful to Sister Florence Wolff, Loretto Archives, Nerinx, Kentucky, for this information.

24. Carroll, Leaves, 273 (quote), 277. On bad timing, see Member of the Order, Life of Mary Monholland, 132; the author remarked: “During the rebellion it was not easy for Mother Francis to meet emergencies. She had but lately returned from the seat of war, herself, and filled as she could the vacancies formerly held by her absent children [sisters].” See also Suellen Hoy, “Caring for Chicago’s Women and Girls: The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, 1859–1911,” Journal of Urban History 23 (March 1997); and Ellen Ryan Jolly, “Sisters of Mercy, Chicago, Illinois,” in Nuns of the Battlefield (Providence, R.I.: Providence Visitor Press, 1927), 223–39. According to Jolly, ten Irish-born Mercys nursed during the war (p. 239). Colonel James Mulligan’s wife, Marian Nugent, had been a student at Saint Xavier’s Academy.


ter-nurses.

30. In 1851, for example, Catharine Beecher pointed with envy to the Catholic Church, which had "posts of competence, usefulness and honor . . . for women of every rank and of every description of talents." Catharine Beecher, The True Remedy for the Wrongs of Women (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, and Company, 1851), 51. In James Hurt's introduction to a recent edition of Twenty Years at Hull-House, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr are described as "fashionable young ladies" who moved to "a dilapidated mansion in the heart of Chicago's slums determined to be 'good neighbors.' " Jane Addams, Twenty Years at Hull-House: With Biographical Notes (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990), ix. See also Donald L. Miller, City of the Century: The Epic of Chicago and the Making of America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 417–20. In an interview on National Public Radio (May 1996), Miller called Jane Addams a "gutsy" woman for living and working among Chicago's poor.

It should be known that Ellen Gates Starr (who spent her last years in a Benedictine convent) was the niece of Eliza Allen Starr, one of Chicago's foremost Catholic converts. She had "the greatest childhood influence on Ellen" and always considered the Sisters of Mercy her "old and true friends." See Allen F. Davis, "Ellen Gates Starr," in James et. al., eds., Notable American Women, 3, 351 (quote)–53; and Reverend James J. McGovern, The Life and Letters of Eliza Allen Starr (Chicago: Lakeside Press, 1905), 169 (quote).


35. Danyewycz, Taking the Veil, 85 (quote)–87; Hoy, "The Journey Out," 68. In the baptismal registry at Saint Patrick's Church, Sister Callista's name appears as "Mary Ellen Mangin." She was born on November 19 and baptized on November 21, 1855. She died of consumption on October 9, 1883, Sisters of Mercy Register, Sisters of Mercy Archives.


37. Convey, "Mother Agatha O'Brien and the Pioneers," 190–91; 212–14; and Mary Liv-
ermore, My Story of the War: A Woman's Narrative of Her Personal Experience as Nurse in the Union Army (Hartford, Conn.: A. D. Worthington and Company, 1887), 436 (quote). Historian Lori D. Ginzberg notes that, although middle-class Protestant women rarely discussed incorporating, their very interest in doing so (and some did) "challenges their insistence on a protected female sphere." Catholic sisters, who made incorporation an essential business tool, escape her notice. Lori D. Ginzberg, Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990), 48.

38. See the fine discussion of the nineteenth-century "worldview" of Irish men and women in Hasia R. Diner, Erin's Daughters in America (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 139–53, especially pages 139–40 (quotes) and 145–46.

Chapter 4. Preserving the Union, Shaping a New Image: Chicago's Irish Catholics and the Civil War

1. Chicago Tribune, February 26, 1855.

2. Information on Mulligan's wake and funeral is taken from the Chicago Tribune, July 30, 31, August 2, 1864; Chicago Times, August 2, 3, 1864; and Chicago Evening Journal, July 29, August 2, 1864. In September 1861 Lincoln offered Mulligan the rank of brigadier general. He turned it down to stay with his men, expecting that his regiment would expand into a large Western Irish Brigade. Later, Mulligan unsuccessfully lobbied for a star on his shoulder, blaming his failure to achieve it on anti-Irish bigotry in Washington. Immediately after his death, the government breveted him brigadier general. Twenty years later a grant from the Illinois state legislature and local donations financed an impressive monument crowned with a Celtic cross close to the western entrance of Calvary Cemetery in Evanston, next to Mulligan's final resting place. It was formally dedicated on May 30, 1885. In 1899 Chicago began construction of the James A. Mulligan School at 1800 N. Sheffield Avenue in what is now the Lincoln Park neighborhood. It is no longer in use.