The Vincentian Mission from Paris to the Mississippi: The American Sisters of Charity

Ellin Kelly
Even before the arrival of the Vincentians in the United States, a link existed between the Daughters of Charity, founded by Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac in 1633, and a fledgling community of American Sisters of Charity.

One hundred and seventy-five years after the founding of the Daughters of Charity in France, Mrs. Elizabeth Bayley Seton, a widow with five children and a Catholic convert, founded that fledgling community in 1809 at Emmitsburg, Maryland. A year earlier, she had left her home in New York for Baltimore to open a school for girls, under the protection of Bishop John Carroll and the guidance of the priests from the Society of Saint Sulpice, most notably Reverend William Dubourg, president of Saint Mary’s College and Seminary. On 25 March 1809, Mrs. Seton made vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience for one year before Bishop Carroll. Through the generosity of a convert and seminarian, Samuel Cooper, she and her family, together with some young women aspiring to the religious life, established themselves in Emmitsburg in the summer of 1809 and opened Saint Joseph’s Academy for girls, not far from the Sulpician operated Mount Saint Mary’s College and Seminary.1

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1Annabelle M. Melville, *Elizabeth Bayley Seton 1774-1821* (New York: 1985), 104-05, 175-77, and 204-08. All archival document quotations are exact, including grammatical and spelling errors. In citing manuscript numbers for letters and journals, I have used abbreviations for the following archives, and I have indicated the manuscript numbers where available.

SJPH Archives, St. Joseph’s Provincial House, Emmitsburg, Maryland.

MPH Archives, Marillac Provincial House, St. Louis, Missouri.

UND Archives, University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, Indiana.
Several Sulpicians had known the Daughters of Charity in France so when Reverend Benedict Flaget, bishop-elect of Bardstown, Kentucky, left for France in 1809, they asked him to obtain a copy of the rule of the Daughters of Charity and to ask for some French Sisters to come to the United States to assist the new community. Although the political situation in France prevented the French Sisters from leaving their country, Flaget did obtain a handwritten copy of the French rule.2

Reverend John Dubois, then president of Mount Saint Mary's, undertook to translate the rule and adapt it to conditions in the United States, and in June 1811 he was named the third superior of Mrs. Seton's community. Many of the French Sisters' occupations received government support, but the American Sisters needed financial stability, which they sought in their boarding academy for girls, a work not engaged in by the French community.3

In August, Dubois presented his adaptation of the French rule for Archbishop Carroll's approval. Carroll wrote Mrs. Seton, who served as mother of the fledgling community, on 11 September: "Shall I confess that I am deeply humbled at being called on to give a final sanction to a rule of conduct and plan of Religious government, by which it is intended to promote and preserve amongst many beloved spouses of Jesus Christ a spirit of solid and sublime religious perfection?"4

After Dubois incorporated changes suggested by Carroll, the archbishop and the American superior of the Sulpicians officially confirmed the rule of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's on 17 January 1812.5 The general applicability of the rule, formulated by Saint Vincent, Saint Louise, and their successors, for the American community was evident in the rather minor changes deemed essential for its adoption. Sister Rose White noted in her journal that the rule "modified to suit this country... [they] were read to the Sisters assembled for this purpose. . . . We were at liberty to adopt these or not, free to retire if we wished from the Community. All were invited to remain, notwithstanding bad health and other infirmities."6 Eighteen months later, eighteen Sisters pronounced their religious vows for one year on the feast of Saint

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1[Sister John Mary Crumlish], 1809-1959 (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1959), 8.
4[Crumlish], 1809-1959, 8.
5SJPH 7-2-1, "Sister Rose White’s Journal."
Vincent de Paul, at that time on 19 July. In the future they renewed their one year vows annually on the feast of the Annunciation, usually 25 March, as the Daughters of Charity did.\textsuperscript{7}

That handwritten copy of the French rule, now preserved in the archives at Saint Joseph's Provincial House in Emmitsburg, influenced American and Canadian communities beyond Emmitsburg. These communities are unique because local residents founded each of them, rather than members of European religious orders. The following summary illustrates the wide ranging effect of the French rule and its American adaptation.

\textbf{The Sisters of Charity of Nazareth}

Reverend John David, who had served as the second superior of the American Sisters and had accompanied Bishop Flaget to Bardstown, requested a copy of the French rule in 1812 to use for a religious community he wished to found at Nazareth, Kentucky. Dubois had Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté make a copy; this handwritten copy is preserved in the archives of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth. The rules governing the Emmitsburg and Nazareth communities were almost identical, except for ecclesiastical authority, the appointment and duties of the superior, and the use of "Mother" rather than "Sister Servant" for sisters who were local superiors.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{The Sisters of Our Lady of Mercy}

Bishop John England of Charleston, South Carolina, founded a religious community of women in 1829, "to instruct the black girls, as also the poor white girls, and moreover, to take care of the sick and to practice other works of charity." Although Bishop England never completed a rule for his sisters, his successor, Bishop Ignatius Reynolds, wrote the formal rule for the community, basing it on Bishop England's suggestions and the rule of the American Sisters of Charity. Reynolds was uniquely qualified to complete England's plan because he had served as chaplain and second superior of the Sisters of Charity of Nazareth from 1833 until 1835.\textsuperscript{9}

\textsuperscript{7}[Crumlish], 1809-1959, 8.
\textsuperscript{9}NCE, 3:478a.
The Sisters of Charity of Providence

Unable to obtain French Daughters of Charity for the Montreal diocese, Bishop Ignace Bourget formed a small community on 25 March 1843. When Madame Emelie Gamelin sought admission, Bourget sent her to the United States to visit establishments of Mother Seton’s community in New York and Baltimore. She reported to Bourget, “The Sisters of Charity have received me with open arms. They counsel me to visit their Motherhouse. . . . The hope is held out that by going there I may obtain a copy of the Rules of Saint Vincent DePaul.” During her visit to Emmitsburg, Father Louis Régis Deluol then the superior of the community, allowed her to take the original copy of the French rule back to Canada, where it was copied into a notebook. After the original was returned to Emmitsburg, that notebook became the proving ground for the Canadian community’s rule: words and paragraphs were crossed out, sentences written between the lines, and marginal notes added to adapt the French rule to life in Canada.\(^\text{10}\)

The Sisters of Charity of New York

When the council at Emmitsburg decided to withdraw from the care of male orphans in 1846, about thirty sisters of the sixty members of the Emmitsburg community then in the New York institutions asked to be released from their vows to form a separate community under the protection of Bishop John Hughes of New York. The rule for this new community was almost identical to that the sisters had observed as members of the Emmitsburg community except that the care of boys was added to the original.\(^\text{11}\)

The American Daughters of Charity

The withdrawal of the New York sisters and an order from France that the Sulpicians, who had served as superiors of the Emmitsburg community from its foundation, must return to their principal work,

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\(^{10}\text{NCE, 13:263a and History of the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity Servants of the Poor (Montreal: 1979).}\)

conducting seminaries, prompted Reverend Louis Régis Deluol and the council at Saint Joseph’s to begin negotiations for uniting the Emmitsburg sisters with the Daughters of Charity. When the union was approved, the American sisters who approved the union agreed to observe the original French rule of Saint Vincent, to adopt the French habit with its distinctive white cornette, and to have a Vincentian priest as their spiritual director. The sisters used the French vow formula for the first time on 25 March 1850; the changeover to the French habit took longer but was completed in 1852.12

The Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati

In February 1852, five sisters in Cincinnati, who rejected the union with France, placed themselves under the protection of Archbishop John Baptist Purcell to form a diocesan community. Two young novices from Cincinnati came from Emmitsburg to join them. Seven sisters from Cincinnati, who approved the union, returned to Emmitsburg or were missioned elsewhere. The sisters who remained in Cincinnati made their vows to Archbishop Purcell on 25 March 1852. They retained the American rule but included the care of orphan boys in the text.13

Other Sisters of Charity

Four other foundations have links to the American version of the French rule. Six Sisters of Charity of Nazareth withdrew from that community in 1851 to form a new community in Nashville, Tennessee, under Bishop Pius Miles, O.P. During their stay in Nashville, Reverend Ivo Schacht obtained a copy of the rule of the American Sisters of Charity for them from Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati. Later the community of eleven Sisters found a new home as the Sisters of Charity of Leavenworth with Bishop John B. Miege, S.J., the vicar apostolic of Indian Territory in Kansas, on 11 November 1858. They made the move after Bishop Miege agreed to their following the rule of Saint Vincent de Paul.14

12[Crumlish], 1809-1959, 63-64.
14NCE, 3:472b.
The Sisters of Charity of Halifax, Nova Scotia, were established by Bishop William Walsh in 1855 with the assistance of sisters from the New York community, who supplied the officers of this new community. The Halifax community based its original rule on that of the New York community, but with adaptations appropriate for Canada and the archdiocese of Halifax.\(^\text{15}\)

When the New York Sisters of Charity were unable to supply more sisters to Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, the half-nephew of Saint Elizabeth Seton, for his diocese of Newark, New Jersey, he arranged with Archbishop Purcell to have five postulants from New Jersey trained in the novitiate of the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. When these novices returned to Newark on 29 September 1859, the New York Sisters of Charity agreed to supply two officers for the new community, the New Jersey Sisters of Charity.\(^\text{16}\)

"The youngest of Mother Seton's communities," the Sisters of Charity of Greensburg, were founded in August 1870. Bishop Michael Domenec, C.M. had asked Archbishop Purcell's assistance in establishing a community of Sisters of Charity in his diocese of Altoona, Pennsylvania. When the young women he sent to the Cincinnati novitiate for training were ready to return, the Cincinnati sisters agreed to send four sisters to assist the new community; two remained with the Seton Hill community throughout their lives.\(^\text{17}\)

The American Sisters Come to the Mississippi

The Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg observed the American rule from 1812 until 1850, when they officially united with the Daughters of Charity in France. But many years before that union, the sisters had established themselves in the Mississippi Valley, in response to urgent requests from Bishop Joseph Rosati, C.M. When Mother Seton died on 4 January 1821, her sisters were found only in Maryland, Pennsylvania, and New York. But seven years later, the sisters made their first inroad into the Mississippi Valley at Saint Louis, Missouri.


\(^{16}\)Sister Mary Agnes Sharkey, *The New Jersey Sisters of Charity* (New York: 1933), 55-72.

Saint Louis, Missouri

When the diocese of New Orleans was divided, Bishop Rosati was named for the new diocese of Saint Louis but continued to govern both dioceses until a bishop was appointed for New Orleans. In June 1828, he wrote Reverend Simon Gabriel Bruté, who had welcomed the Vincentians when they arrived in Baltimore in 1816, to ask his help in obtaining three Sisters of Charity for a hospital in Saint Louis. He explained that Mr. Mullanphy, the benefactor, “will not leave it in the hands of mercenaries; if we do not have the Sisters of Emmitsburg, this establishment will fail. . . . Do the Daughters of Saint Vincent have the courage to deprive the poor of this city and environs of an establishment which is so necessary and which cannot be established if they refuse to come?”18 The superior and council responded favorably to his request. When he wrote Bruté in late August, “We are well pleased at receiving four instead of three,” he predicted, “It is probable that the establishment of the Sisters in Saint Louis will produce others elsewhere.”19

On 15 October 1828, four sisters left Emmitsburg about five in the morning for Saint Louis. Sister Francis Xavier Love, who had entered the community one month before Mother Seton’s death, was appointed the local superior or sister servant. Her companions were Sisters Rebecca Delone, Martina Butcher, and Francis Regis Barry. Sister Francis Xavier kept a record of their journey and reported to Mother Augustine DeCount. At Frederick, Maryland, the sisters took the stagecoach. The next morning they were in Cumberland, Maryland. The sisters continued their journey by stagecoach to Pittsburgh where they took a boat down the Ohio River. Sister Francis Xavier indicated the boat ran aground several times and also struck a rock, delaying them for hours. They probably disembarked at Evansville, Indiana, and traveled by stagecoach to Vincennes, arriving on 1 November. After spending part of the day there with four Sisters of Charity of Nazareth, Kentucky, at their school, they began the final leg of their journey by stagecoach. Sister Francis Xavier reported: “Crossing the Wabash and another small stream we were in . . . Illinois and were much consoled to hear that the rest of the journey to Saint Louis was over excellent roads.” However, even that last part of their journey proved difficult.

18SJPH 7-10-5:1.
19SJPH 7-3-1:87
On November fourth happy in the expectation of good roads, we had gone scarcely two miles when on descending a hill, the stage overturned. I had but a faint recollection of what happened after; at first, they thought I was dead, but coming to myself, I looked eagerly around for the Sisters; oh! how happy I felt to find all safe. The horses took flight and there was no habitation within a mile of us. We heard the howling of wolves. With help I hobbled along hoping to find a house. Presently a man came towards us... he led us to his humble cabin where I rested until the stage was ready to start again.

The little band of sisters finally arrived in Saint Louis on 5 November, but the hospital was not ready so the sisters stayed for a time with the Ladies of the Sacred Heart. On 26 November, the first Catholic hospital in the United States opened its doors in a two-room cabin near the center of Saint Louis, which had a population of 6,000.20

Bishop Rosati wrote Mother Augustine the next day:

The hospital is on the footing of all the institutions of our state. It is but an embryo. I have no doubt it will grow into perfection... I have discovered with pleasure that the Daughters of Saint Vincent in America have perfectly succeeded in acquiring the same virtues which he transmitted as a precious inheritance to his daughters of France... In the beginning Sisters will experience many of the inconveniences of a new establishment in a new country. The buildings are poor, the furniture is not brilliant, everything bespeaks the poverty of a new country."21

The Annals of the Sisters of Charity indicate some of these inconveniences: "The snow and rain found easy access, and oftentimes the small kitchen, where they ate their humble meal was so full of water, that they had to climb on benches to take their food on an old chest, that served for a table."22

In November 1831, Bishop Rosati asked for sisters for a boys' asylum and school in the village of Vide Poche, five miles from Saint Louis; he insisted that it would benefit the health of the hospital sisters as well as the Catholics of that area. On 11 February 1832, the sisters opened the orphanage and in June 1833, the school.23

About the same time, the new hospital building was completed, and the sisters moved from the cabin to a two-story brick building,

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20[Sister Josephine Craven], *Mother Augustine and Mother Xavier* (Emmitsburg, Maryland: 1938), 52-56.
21SJPH 7-10-5:2.
22SJPH 7-8-2:253-54.
23SJPH 7-10-5:11 and [Crumlish], 1809-1959, 19.
Mullanphy Hospital. The move came just in time because the cholera epidemic of 1832 arrived in Saint Louis soon after. The sisters offered the hospital, their services, and even their own living areas to cholera patients. Sister Francis Xavier described the havoc caused by the epidemic in a letter to Mother Augustine:

[October 26] was a communion day for us. . . . I went with the sacred host in my mouth and was soon followed by my beloved Sisters. From that time until the 30th and the 31st, we heard nothing in both the hospitals but the feeble groans of the dying and the louder cries of the newly attacked, who were brought to us from the streets, from their houses, and from their workshops. We saw large, strong-bodied men suddenly struck and expire in a few hours, and before we could remove one corpse, a second, a third, and a fourth were ready. This happened to us the two worst days. It was indeed a moving sight to behold those who still lived looking sorrowfully on the dead. . . . Our worthy priests [were] all the time busy in hearing the confessions of the Catholics, comforting and instructing as far as they could. . . . baptizing the unbaptized. Only nine cholera patients today so you see we begin to breathe a little. Our Sisters here are true Daughters of Saint Vincent DePaul; they have nursed day and night, never taking the least rest until exhausted nature forced them to do so. . . . Everyone who had health ran away from us; the washer-women went off, leaving the tubs full of wet clothes, nor could we prevail upon them to wash even the Sisters’ clothing in their own houses. . . . Only one person stood his ground like a true soldier of the Cross. . . . a brother of the order of Saint Vincent; he brought the sick to both hospitals on his back and remained with us day and night to help in nursing them. It is he who removes the dead bodies from us; when the corpse is not too heavy, he takes it in his arms and carries it out of our way, and when it is too weighty, two or three Sisters assist him.

Saint Louis was only one of several cities in which the Sisters of Charity heroically cared for cholera patients when others shunned those stricken. One sister from the hospital died of cholera in September 1833.

According to The Catholic Almanac of 1834, ten Sisters of Charity were assigned to the Saint Louis diocese.

On 8 January 1835, Bishop Rosati informed Mother Rose White, “Our boys’ asylum will be built early next spring . . . we expect the house will be ready to be occupied some time next fall. The orphans being

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24SJPH 7-10-5:8.
26Charles E. Rosenberg, The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866 (Chicago: 1962), 64.
removed to it, two more Sisters will be required to take care of them."
When the asylum was completed, the sisters withdrew from the school
in Vide Poche.27 On 29 December 1836, Rosati petitioned Mother Rose
for more sisters, "We have only eight Sisters for the hospital, including
Sister Xavier, who on account of her bad state of health often times
cannot leave the dormitory, although she is not only useful but abso­
lutely necessary to conduct the house. None else could do it so well, so
efficiently as she does. At the asylum we have only five Sisters and there
should be a good teacher."28

On 1 December 1837, Sister Francis Xavier reported to Mother Rose:

Our house cannot hold the number that are ready to expire on our shores.
We refuse with aching hearts everyday, the homeless strangers, sick and
miserable, and by refusing them we pass on [them] the terrible sentence—
die in the street—for well we know that [they] will not find in Missouri the
Good Samaritan. Often we are obliged to close the door in faces... if they
can thrust themselves in and drop on the floor, we cannot drag them out.
...Oh, if you could see them, instead of taking one Sister from us, you
would send three more.29

When Bishop Rosati wrote on 3 January 1838, he wanted more
sisters because the five sisters at the boys’ asylum had forty-six orphans
and almost that many day pupils. He also suggested a new project. "We
are seriously thinking of an orphan asylum for girls; it will be opposite
the front of our church and near the male asylum. You must begin to
prepare some Sisters for us.”30 In his letter of 18 May, the bishop wanted
sisters for a girls’ school in Cape Girardeau and for a hospital in Peru,
Illinois. To forward his request, he reminded Mother Rose White, "We
must not sleep; now is the time to establish our holy religion.... Do not
forget, dear and respected Mother, that the Sisters of Charity are
destined by Providence to be missionaries of America, the auxiliaries of
the clergy, and instruments of Providence for the salvation of millions."31
But when the community was unable to fulfill his requests, he com­
plained to Mother Rose in November because Reverend John Timon,
C.M. had engaged the Sisters of Loretto for the school in Cape Girardeau,
Missouri.32

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27SJPH 7-10-5:15 and [Crumlish], 1809-1959, 19.
28SJPH 7-10-5:16.
29SJPH 7-10-5:19.
30SJPH 7-10-5:17.
31"SJPH 7-10-5:22.
32SJPH 7-10-5:23.
On 12 December 1840, Sister Francis Xavier Love died in Saint Louis. The last sister to enter the Emmitsburg community in Mother Seton's lifetime, she had spent twelve years as Sister Servant at Mullanphy Hospital.33

Bishop Rosati's hopes for a girls' asylum in Saint Louis remained dormant until 1843. While Bishop Rosati was abroad, his coadjutor, Bishop Peter Kenrick, wrote to Father Deluol, the superior of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's on 23 February, "Mrs. Biddle is about to supply . . . an asylum for female orphans. . . . She has told me that she will immediately give another lot, and lose no time in having a suitable building erected. In the meantime she has determined to rent a house which may be occupied by the orphans until the asylum is ready. . . . Her only anxiety is to know if she can calculate on having some Sisters of Charity, say, three or four to commence the good work at once."34

Three sisters arrived in Saint Louis on 22 April 1843, and on 12 May they opened Saint Mary's Girls' Orphan Asylum. Prior to its opening, the sisters at Mullanphy Hospital had sheltered some orphan girls.35

On 3 May 1843, three sisters opened Saint Vincent's Free School, which fulfilled the Christmas petition of Reverend George Carrell, S.J. to Mother Xavier Clark: "Could you not make an effort and send us three Sisters to take charge of a free school for girls? It will be strictly a poor school and therefore will come within the sphere of the Sisters of Charity. . . . I feel sad and melancholy because, at the twenty-seven masses celebrated in our church today [Christmas], I did not see a dozen little girls."36 Eighty children registered the first day.

The decision of the council at Saint Joseph's on 20 October 1845 to withdraw sisters from the care of boys was in keeping with the American rule of the Sisters of Charity. The first article included the following statement added by Dubois: "A secondary [end] but not less important one is to honor the Sacred Infancy of Jesus in the young persons of their sex whose hearts they are called upon to form to the love of God, the practice of every virtue, and the knowledge of religion, whilst they sow in their minds the seeds of useful knowledge."37 However, this withdrawal had a direct effect on Saint Louis. Bishop Kenrick responded to

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33SJPH 7-8-2:297.
34SJPH 7-10-2:25.
35SJPH 7-8-2:305 and [CrumlishL 1809-1959, 16.
36SJPH 7-8-2:304 and 7-10-2:121.
37Kelly, Numerous Choirs, 1:243.
Mother Étienne Hall on 1 November: “The future fate of the Boys’ Asylum is very uncertain. I am afraid that I shall have many experiments to make before I am able to supply even imperfectly the wants which the withdrawal of the Sisters will occasion.” In 1845, the sisters at the Boys’ Asylum had established Saint Philomena’s School, and on 25 August 1846, the school moved to a separate building. The Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondolet took over management of the boys’ orphanage during that year.

The cholera epidemic of 1848-1850 had even wider reaching effects than the epidemic of 1832. The first cases arrived in New York on 2 December 1848. Vessels arriving on 6 and 8 December brought the first cases to New Orleans. From the ocean ports the contagion made its way up the waterways and across the continent along the trails to the gold fields of California. By spring cholera had spread throughout the Mississippi Valley. This epidemic claimed its victims everywhere—villages, farms, and all along the overland route to California. Since Saint Louis was a starting point for many seeking the gold fields of California, the sisters at Mullanphy Hospital again devoted themselves to the care of cholera victims, and some sisters nursed at the City Hospital.

The Sisters were obliged to close their schools and nurse the cholera cases, also as many Sisters from the asylum as could be spared. Around the asylum, one might daily…almost hourly see dead bodies carried out, and coffins standing at the doors of others. The authorities requested the Sisters to attend the cholera cases in a temporary hospital about two miles from the asylum. . . . With the approbation of the Archbishop and the Superiors, the Sisters took charge of the hospital.

The death toll in Saint Louis increased each month: in January, thirty-eight deaths; in February, twenty; in March, sixty-eight; in April, 131; and in May, 517. Cities with the largest immigrant populations suffered more severely. Saint Louis lost a tenth of its population; at the height of the epidemic, about 80 percent of the dead were Catholics, including one Sister of Charity.

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38Kenrick to Hall, 1 November 1845, MPH.
39[Crumlish], 1809-1959, 19 and 40.
40SJPH 7-8-2:307a; [Crumlish], 1809-1959, 44, 45.
41Rosenberg, The Cholera Years, 115 and 145.
New Orleans, Louisiana

Even before Reverend Leo de Neckere, C.M. was named bishop of New Orleans, Bishop Rosati had petitioned Emmitsburg for Sisters for New Orleans. Responding to his request, the council appointed Sisters Regina Smith and Magdalen Council for a school already established to educate "young girls of color." The sisters sailed from Baltimore on 29 December 1829, and after a month-long journey, which included a seven-hour pursuit by pirates, the sisters arrived in New Orleans on 30 January 1830. When problems arose at that school, the sisters withdrew, and later with the approval of Bishop de Neckere, they began teaching at Poydras Asylum. Bishop Rosati had described this institution in 1829 as "a female orphan asylum incorporated and under the direction of some of the most respectable ladies of this city, most of whom are very pious and zealous Catholics. . . . This house is provided with sufficient revenue from house rents and has commonly about 100 orphans, of whom two-thirds are Catholic. Saint Vincent in his lifetime would not have abandoned them. His daughters must prove themselves worthy of such a father, showing the same spirit of charity." In June 1831, the council named three more sisters for Poydras Asylum.

The South did not escape the cholera epidemic of 1832, but suffered from it through 1833 and 1834. Cholera claimed 5000 lives in New Orleans, and a yellow fever epidemic at the same time took almost as many lives.

On 12 January 1833, Sister Regina Smith reported to Mother Augustine about Poydras Asylum.

We have 112 in the house, next week six or seven more will be added. We have four dear little infants in the arms, besides a great many almost as helpless as infants and far more troublesome for they get into all kinds of mischief. We have thirteen in the nursery; very few of our children are able to be of any service to us. Since the cholera, we find it impossible to procure domestics so we do the best we can. The doctors, managers, and visitors are much pleased with the internal management of the house. . . . The Sisters seem very happy.

On 6 May 1833, the board of administrators of Charity Hospital in New Orleans petitioned the council at Saint Joseph's for sisters "to
manage the internal economy” of that institution. The board asked for ten sisters, offered the same financial arrangements the sisters had at Poydras Asylum, and wanted them to manage the household concerns at the hospital.47 On 13 November 1833, ten sisters left Saint Joseph’s for New Orleans, and on 6 January 1834, Sister Regina Smith and nine sisters took up duties at Charity Hospital. Established almost 100 years earlier in 1736, the hospital had existed under both the French and Spanish governments, but its main building was new, built in 1832. The hospital had 180 patients, many insane, when the sisters took complete charge of the nursing and housekeeping departments.48

According to The Catholic Almanac of 1834, Poydras Asylum had seven sisters and Charity Hospital had ten in the New Orleans diocese. However, cholera and yellow fever claimed the lives of four sisters during their first year at Charity Hospital.49 It is not surprising that the council book at Saint Joseph’s regularly records that sisters were requested and sent to New Orleans, especially for Charity Hospital.

Due to problems between the lady managers and the sisters at Poydras Asylum, Reverend Jeanjean, the vicar general of New Orleans, notified the asylum on 23 October 1836, that the sisters would withdraw in two weeks. His notice complied with conditions required in the sisters’ agreement with the asylum. Two weeks later, the sisters established themselves in “Weather’s House,” which a Catholic benefactor had lent them. By nightfall, the sisters had seven orphans under their care because some Catholics withdrew their children when the sisters left.50

The distance between Saint Joseph’s Motherhouse and Louisiana prompted Bishop Anthony Blanc to ask Archbishop Samuel Eccleston of Baltimore in 1838 to approve establishing a novitiate in Louisiana. But Eccleston wrote Mother Rose White: “I regret to say that . . . I cannot second his proposal. . . . A second noviceship, depending on the venerable old Motherhouse, would under the circumstances embarrass and not console you.”51

47SJPH Council Book 1829-1852, 49.
48"Cornettes Remind All New Orleans of Heroic Nurses," Catholic Action of the South, October 1950, and SJPH 7-8-2:266.
50SJPH 7-8-2:271a.
51SJPH 18-4-2-5:25.
On 20 October 1840, Bishop Blanc blessed and dedicated the new Saint Patrick’s Orphan Asylum in New Orleans. The sisters had over one hundred girls in their care. On 5 April 1843, Saint Patrick’s Orphan Asylum was incorporated as the New Orleans Female Orphan Asylum because of difficulties between the parishioners of Saint Patrick’s and Saint Teresa’s Churches.32

Father Deluol brought up establishing a novitiate in Louisiana with Mother Xavier Clark on 3 January 1844. He planned to ask Sister Regina Smith to check out the suggested location for the novitiate. In November the council at Emmitsburg named Sister Loretta O’Reilly and five other sisters for Donaldsonville, Louisiana, to establish a school, an asylum, and a novitiate. The sisters arrived in Donaldsonville on 1 January 1845.53

In 1845 four sisters took charge of Doctor Warren Stone’s Infirmary in New Orleans, which was later known as Maison de Santé. In 1859 a larger building was occupied, and the establishment was renamed Hôtel Dieu.54

Even before the cholera epidemic of 1848-1850 took its toll in Louisiana, yellow fever and typhoid or ship fever claimed the lives of Sisters of Charity in Louisiana. On 10 October 1847, Bishop Blanc wrote to console Mother Étienne on four deaths from yellow fever: two sisters from Charity Hospital, a candidate at Donaldsonville, and a sister at Baton Rouge.55 Writing to Bishop John Purcell of Cincinnati on 1 April 1848, Sister Regina Smith asked prayers for the sisters who had recently died, “seven in the hospital since the seventeenth of last July…. We are only sixteen; in the beginning of the year we were 21.” She reported that there were “628 patients in the main building and 128 in the lunatic asylum.” The sisters at the orphan asylum had 200 in their care.56

In the mild New Orleans December, the cholera epidemic spread rapidly, especially among immigrants. Like Saint Louis, New Orleans’ large immigrant population suffered the heavy losses.57

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33SJPH 7-10-5:40 and [Crumlish], 1809-1959, 35.
34“Cornettes Remind All New Orleans of Heroic Nurses.”
35SJPH 7-10-6:31.
36McCann, The History of Mother Seton’s Daughters, 2:49-50.
37Rosenberg, The Cholera Years, 135.
Natchez, Mississippi

On 11 January 1847, six sisters left Baltimore for New Orleans: three to open an asylum and school in Natchez, Mississippi, at the request of Bishop John Joseph Chanche, S.S.; two for an establishment in New Iberia, Louisiana; and one for the girls' asylum in New Orleans. Saint Mary's Asylum and School opened in Natchez on 31 January. On 24 February, Bishop Chanche informed Bishop Blanc, "I have got the Sisters underway in a comfortable house. They have thirty scholars. The people are kind to them, and I have no doubt they will get along. It will be a great blessing for the children of the town." However, some difficulties arose at New Iberia as Bishop Chanche indicated in his letter to Bishop Blanc on 11 February 1847: "You must have been mortified at the disappointment which you experienced in relation to New Iberia. It is strange how people even with good intentions will sometimes act." As a result, the sisters had taken a school in Baton Rouge, and Chanche noted, "Baton Rouge will profit by the disappointment, and I dare say it needs this sort of assistance very much. Heaven arranges all things for the best." 

The Emmitsburg sisters did not sponsor any new institutions in the dioceses of Saint Louis, New Orleans, or Natchez between 1848 and 1850. Not only was the council negotiating with the superior of the Congregation of the Mission in Paris for the union of the Emmitsburg sisters with the Daughters of Charity, but it also was unable to meet the demands made for sisters as Mother Étienne Hall explained to Bishop Blanc in her letter of 11 May 1848: "We are sadly pressed for subjects. The Novices must have their full time in the Noviciate-[sic]-and our dear Sisters are dying so fast, particularly in the South—that we find it impossible to meet the many calls for Sisters—At a great sacrifice—we have given Sisters to Bishops Timon and McCloskey for Buffalo and Troy—Many of our Sisters at home and abroad are failing—and at home here we are compelled to hire women to do the work of the house."

Conclusion

Even before the Emmitsburg sisters united with the Daughters of Charity in France, the Sisters of Charity from Emmitsburg followed in
the path laid out for them by both Saint Vincent de Paul and Saint Louise de Marillac. Even before the union with France, the council at Emmitsburg had determined to accept only institutions that would serve the poor. At the time of the union, the Emmitsburg sisters served in eight institutions in Missouri, Louisiana, and Mississippi. From their inception, these establishments in the Mississippi Valley served the poor, the orphans, and the sick. Several continued to do so to the present century, and in some cases even to the present day. All the American and Canadian communities that had adopted or adapted the rule of Saint Vincent for their localities adhered to its first rule in their institutions by honoring “Jesus Christ . . . as the source and model of all Charity by rendering to Him every temporal and spiritual service in their power in the persons of the poor, either sick, invalid, children, prisoners, even the insane or others who through shame would conceal their necessities in some instance.”61 The distance from Europe to North America was monumental in the nineteenth century, but these American and Canadian communities of religious women established an enduring link with Paris through the rule of Saint Vincent de Paul.

61SJPH 3-1-1.