

# A training ground for teachers: Our Lady of Angels Presentation Convent, Placentia, NL



Heritage NL

info@heritagenl.ca – PO Box 5171, St. John's, NL, Canada, A1C 5V5

By Michael Philpott

## Introduction

Our Lady of Angels Presentation Convent was opened on August 4th, 1864, by Bishop J. T. Mullock and Sister M. de Sales Condren of St. John's. It was among the first ten foundations outside the capital, but was the first to offer teacher training. In this capacity it grew to become a centre for the propagation of qualified Catholic educators for much of the south and west coasts of the island of Newfoundland.

The Presentation Sisters were active in Placentia for more than 130 years until the last of the order left the convent in 1989. The building was subsequently granted to the Placentia Area Historical Society in 1990, designated a Registered Heritage Structure by the Heritage Foundation of Newfoundland and Labrador (Heritage NL) in 1991, and assigned to the Town of Placentia in 1992. While it has been incorporated into several development plans and evaluated on a number of occasions, the convent has remained vacant since its closure.

Hope remains that the community will find a use for the building that will enable its long-term conservation and use as a heritage asset. As Tom O'Keefe of the Placentia and Area Historical Society recently stated, "history is the greatest asset that we have, because Placentia has a tremendous history" (Mercer 2021).

## The Convent in Context

Despite being the project of a largely Irish church, Our Lady of Angels also belongs to the long and tumultuous history of French Catholicism in Placentia, lending it two distinct contexts.

### French Catholicism

The first Catholic clergyman arrived in *Plaisance* (Placentia) in October 1662 when Nicolas Gargot, the first *comte* or governor of Placentia, arrived with an unnamed priest aboard *l'Aigle d'Ore* (the Golden Eagle). Over the winter a garrison mutinied and overran the French fort. The priest fled but was forced to return, for lack of food and shelter, where he was violently killed. Subsequent priests were recorded in 1668, 1671, and 1681, and a Catholic church and garrison chapel was recorded by 1687.

On June 21st, 1689, Jean Saint-Vallier, second bishop of Quebec, arrived with two friars and a lay-brother of the Recollets (a Franciscan order) to whom he entrusted the new parish of Our Lady of Angels. Joseph Denis, Xiste Le Tac, and Didache Pelletier replaced previous pastors and set about establishing a convent. The Franciscans raised 1,200 and purchased the property, adjacent the church, of Sr. Jean George Jougla, however their tenure would be short-lived. The Brothers each departed over the next three years and the property was sold again in 1692. Subsequent Franciscans established a more substantial complex including a church, house, garden, graveyard, and courtyard in the 1690s (Taylor-Hood, 1999). Following the Treaty of Utrecht much of French Placentia relocated to *Île-Royale* in present-day Cape Breton. Their

monastery is believed to have been used as an English garrison church (Burrows and Bruce 1988, 7). It was located on or adjacent to the site of the deconsecrated St. Luke's Anglican Church, the cemetery of which contains several Catholic graves of the period.

While there does not appear to be a direct connection between the monastery and convent, 140 years apart, they notably share a dedication to "Our Lady of Angels" which one anonymous writer believed to be God's inspiration (fig. 1).

for the Presentation nuns. When the late Dr. Mullock, who had brought the sisters there, was opening the door for the first time to them, he turned to the Rev. Mother and asked, "To whom they would dedicate the convent?" She answered:—"to Our Lady of Angels." Now, did not this seem like the direct work of Almighty God! The lady who made this answer had been only a few years out from Dublin; and had never heard of Placentia, much less that there had been a monastery there, until the day on which she had been chosen for the mission. And

*Fig. 1. A writer under the pen name Avalonia believed the dedication of Our Lady of Angels to be divine coincidence. Source: The Daily Colonist, September 8, 1887.*

## Irish Catholicism and the Presentation Sisters

While the Church of England was the state-supported denomination under English rule, Catholicism remained the popular sect in Placentia. Irish Catholics had inhabited the community alongside the French and remained with the English. Despite restrictions on worship, the Catholic population of Placentia grew from twice that of the Anglicans in the early 1700s to three times their number by the 1800s. An early Catholic chapel was begun in 1784 and a church was built in 1830.



*Fig. 2. The cornerstone of the Presentation Mother House was laid in 1950. It opened in 1853. Source: Encyclopedia of Newfoundland, 448.*

The Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary was a teaching order of nuns founded in 1776 by Nano Nagle of Cork, Ireland. In response to inadequate Catholic girls' education in Newfoundland, Bishop Fleming of St. John's booked transatlantic passage in 1833 and implored at the Galway Presentation convent for assistance. He returned to Newfoundland with four sisters to found a convent in St. John's, the first foundation outside Ireland or England. Sisters M. Bernard Kirwin, M. Magdalen O'Shaughnessy, M. Xaverius Lynch, and M. Xavier Maloney opened their first school at the "Inn of the Rising Sun" within a month of arriving (Curtis 1985). By 1836 enrolment grew from 450 to 900 pupils. In July 1851 the Sisters opened their first convent and school in Harbour Grace, followed by foundations in Carbonear (1852), Harbour Main and Fermeuse (1854), Riverhead (1856), Ferryland (1858), St. Mary's (1859), and Witless Bay (1860). The Mother House was opened in St. John's in 1853 (fig. 2).

## Presentation in Placentia

Our Lady of Angels Presentation Convent was built beginning in 1858 under the direction of Bishop John Thomas Mullock and local pastor Rev. Edward Condon. A Catholic school inspector reported in 1860 that a stone convent was being erected in the community, however a series of poor fishing seasons and illnesses delayed construction (McCarthy 1973, 102). The convent was first opened on August 4th, 1864, by

Superioress Sister M. de Sales Condren, of the St. John's convent, accompanied by Sisters M. Regis Halpin, M. Frances Kinsella, M. Xavier Grey, and M. Catherine Kinnally.

The Sisters soon opened their first school, most likely in the surviving one-room annex. By 1883 the "Convent School" had five teachers and ninety registered students with capacity exceeding 100 (McCarthy 1973, 105). Expanding significantly over the years, the Sisters opened a primary school on June 21st, 1899, a girls' weaving school in April 1937, St. Edward's high school on September 3rd, 1946, and Laval Regional High School in September 1968. From their arrival the Sisters were innovative educators and were among the first to import typewriters and sewing machines to the colony.

While the Sisters found great success as public educators, the local Catholic school system remained dependent on foreign-trained teachers to populate a growing number of schools. A need therefore existed for local training. Sister M. Joseph O'Dowd, who arrived at the Placentia convent on September 13th, 1872, established there the first teacher training school outside St. John's. Through O'Dowd's efforts Placentia became "a training ground for teachers and from it [...] went forth young women filled with enthusiasm and zeal in the interest of Catholic education" (Flynn 1988 18-19). Upon her death Archbishop Edward P. Roche remarked that "in the days of her youthful vigour [O'Dowd] established a reputation for the Convent School of Placentia as one of the leading educational institutions on the island" and that "under her capable direction [Our Lady of Angels] was the training school for teachers for practically the whole of the south and west coasts of the island" (Roche 1922).

Argentia, deacon; Father Reardon officiated as sub-deacon, Rev. Mother Joseph presided at the organ, and her singing of Bateman's Mass, accompanied by a well-trained choir, was so perfect that several musical connoisseurs from the metropolis did not think it any exaggeration to declare that no other choir could produce a more excellent rendering of this beautiful Mass. The announcement that

**Fig. 3. Mother Joseph O'Dowd was an accomplished musician and music teacher. Source: Evening Telegram, August 24, 1898.**

In addition to their role as educators, the Sisters of Our Lady of Angels, and the convent itself, played an important social role in Placentia. The Sisters held receptions following holy days and to welcome visitors from the capital and abroad. Their "Fancy Fair" was a successful fundraiser and social event, and many events were enlivened by the musical prowess of the Sisters and their students (fig. 3). The convent also inducted several local women into the Presentation order. On April 9th, 1885, Sister Magdalen (nee Mary Mansfield) became the first to take vows in Placentia (*Evening Telegram* 1885). On August 22nd, 1900, Bride O'Reilly, daughter of late magistrate Thomas O'Reilly, also took up conventual life (*Evening Telegram* 1900).

The Presentation Sisters continued to educate in Newfoundland and Labrador into the late 1900s, but their role in training teachers ended following the introduction of government regulation in the 1950s. Following the Second Vatican Council in 1966 the Sisters went through a process of reassessment during which many were encouraged to pursue other ministries. The population of the Placentia convent contracted rapidly beginning in the 1970s. While there were eight resident Sisters in 1976, the last of the order left in August 1989 (O'Keefe).

## The Convent Building



**Fig 4. View of the convent and annex from the west. Source: Heritage NL.**

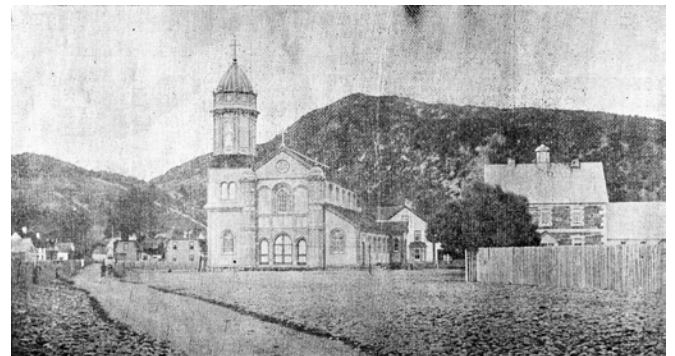
The core of the Presentation Convent is a symmetrical, two-and-a-half storey stone structure with a steep gable roof and porch. It measures about 13.6m by 9.3m on the exterior. This core was expanded several times and connected to neighbouring buildings by a series of additions. The earliest surviving add-on is an annex to the south which exhibits stone construction similar to the convent. The annex has its own, more recent addition to the east and was once connected to a school. The convent was connected to the chapel a few meters to the northeast. These passages and the school were subsequently demolished. Both convent and church are located facing something of a town square within the town of Placentia.

### Construction

Both the convent and annex exhibit rubble-filled, double-wythe masonry wall construction with a wall-thickness of approximately 0.79m. The façade of the convent is elevated architecturally by the use of grey pecked ashlar with light-coloured natural limestone (freestone) details, while other walls are built up of local slate rubble with brick window surrounds (Jokinen 2009). Freestone details on the façade include rustic quoins at the corners and window jambs, window headers with keystones, and string courses at foundation, second floor, and eave. While French architectural influence has been

hypothesized, similar quoin and keystone details can be found at the contemporary St. Bonaventure's College (Mullock Hall), built in St. John's in 1857.

The decorative stone of the convent and annex room is variously believed to have come from other Catholic institutions in Quebec or quarries in Ireland, England, or France (Caen stone). Slate and conglomerate stone is thought to have been sourced locally from the former Fort Frederick redoubt and a nearby quarry. The south and west exterior walls of the Convent are parged and inscribed with lines mimicking square ashlar. Historic photos indicate parging has been in place for more than a century.



**Fig. 4. View of the Catholic church and convent circa 1900, prior to construction of the chapel. Source: Christmas Annual 1916.**

The gable roof of the convent is currently clad with asphalt shingles in bands of red and black. This pattern may be an attempt to recreate earlier slate roofing which often employed multiple tones. The roof of the annex is corrugated steel with wood shingles visible beneath. One photo from the early 20th century appears to depict a corrugated metal roof (fig. 4), though the original roof was likely slate or wood.



**Fig. 5. View of the Convent from the west.. Source: Placenta and Area Historical Society.**

The convent has interior dimensions of about 12.0m by 7.7m with a centre-hall plan and four large rooms on each floor. It has two, symmetrically placed brick ridge chimneys of four flues each and exhibits a central cupola which is referenced in one early account as a sanctuary light. The annex is a single large space accessed through one of the convent's ground-floor parlours. The annex has a single chimney at the end wall. The central, gable-roofed porch is of wood construction.

### Change Over Time



**Fig 6. View of the Catholic complex from the south. The porch was rebuilt since the previous photo. Source: Placenta and Area Historical Society.**

The exterior of Our Lady of Angels appears to remain substantially unaltered after more than a century, though any alterations of the late 1800s remain unknown. The annex was likely added quite early given its similarity in construction and detail to the convent, and may be contemporaneous. Several additions and modifications over the years are known.

In 1906-07 a scullery, pantry, and lavatory were added to the convent. On September 9th, 1907, the foundation was laid for a new chapel. The chapel was finished on November 12th, 1909, by carpenter J. Bonia of St. John's, and stands today connected to the church but disconnected from the convent. The convent was renovated circa 1952 when many of the interior finishes were modernized. Work by Ayre and Sons included the installation of "rubber tiled floors" in much of the building. As of 2009, evidence of earlier details remained in one room and included plaster surfaces, cornices, and a medallion, as well as an early mantel. In the summer and fall of 1965 the Saunders and Howell building firm of Carbonear completed extensive masonry repairs to the exterior of the building (Annals of 2007). Portions of the north side of the building appear to have been rebuilt, though it is unclear if this was part of the Saunders and Howell project.

Other projects can be gleaned by comparing historic photos from different periods. The wood porch of the convent has been rebuilt several times with varying details. The earliest photo depicts a masonry porch with two decorative wood windows with coloured glass, while later iterations are built of wood with different numbers and arrangements of windows. A wood porch once on the annex no longer exists save for a ghost mark. Further evidence of additions and passages exists on the rear of the convent and southwest corner of the annex (fig. 7).



**Fig. 7. Ghost marks on the rear of the convent indicate a number of former additions of various sizes and roof shapes. Source: Heritage NL.**

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The convent's early, 6/6 wood sash windows are currently covered or removed while the annex has retained early, if not original, 1/1 wood windows.

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