

IMMIGRANTS CALLED BY IMMIGRANTS 1853 – 1865

CHAPTER 13

A CALL HEARD IN BAVARIA

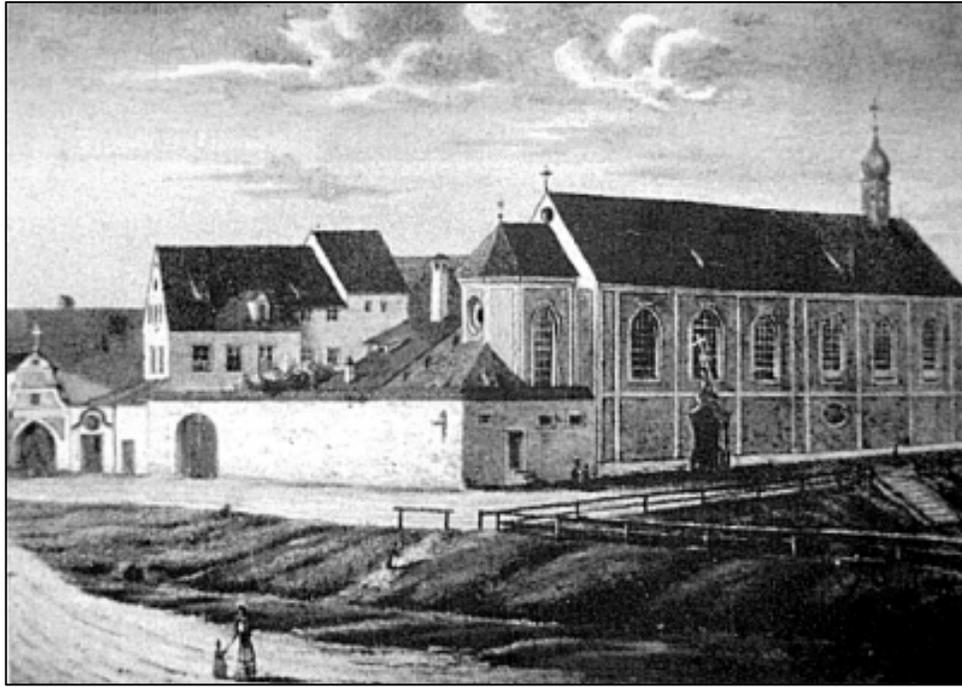
Quite clearly, the participants had got their signals mixed. Mother Benedicta Bauer of Heilig Kreuz monastery assured the bishop of Regensburg,^[1] Germany, their volunteers for an American mission would be perfectly safe because the Benedictine monk Dom Boniface Wimmer promised to provide for their spiritual welfare and assist them in their temporal affairs. On April 4, 1853, he had written that the sisters might start for America as soon as the arrangements could be made. He would receive them at St. Vincent's College in western Pennsylvania where they could study the English language. He, himself, "would attend to everything else."^[2]

With the missionaries already three days into their transatlantic journey, Dom Wimmer sounded an entirely different tune in a letter to his friend Abbot Gregory Scherr of Metten, Germany. "In the near future I shall have to go to New York again to meet Dominican Sisters that the Convent of the Holy Cross is sending me as a cross (as if I did not as yet have enough crosses)." He would have to displace his own people in order to house the nuns "until such a time that I can find a suitable place for them." Williamsburg, Brooklyn, was a possibility since it had a German pastor, Father Raffener, who was "disposed to take them." The monk wished he had never gotten mixed up in the project to begin with. He blamed Mother Benedicta, who "did not cease to beg me and so I agreed, or rather promised, to help as much as I could to find a place for them outside of our diocese."^[3]

Two letters, two well intentioned people, two very different versions of a German mission project that would eventually lead to twelve active congregations of Dominican women in the United States—"the Regensburg Tree." First, there would have to be a collision of the two plans on a dock in lower Manhattan, and once again, adjustment of a dream to the reality of where the real need existed.

Sometime in 1851, during a recruitment and fund raising trip to his homeland, Dom Boniface Wimmer, OSB, paid several visits to his Dominican cousin, Sister Elizabeth Kissel, at Holy Cross Monastery, Regensburg.^[4] The monk had left his abbey of Metten

in 1846, accompanied by a group of students and candidates for the dual purpose of founding a Benedictine community and serving German immigrant Catholics in the United States.^[5] Much more than the Irish, who spoke the prevailing language of the new nation, did German Catholics worry about American immigrants losing the faith if they could not worship and be taught in their native tongue. As one German-speaking priest explained it, "In English you must count your dollars, but in German you speak with your children, your confessor and your God."^[6]



Holy Cross Monastery, Regensburg, Bavaria

Under the slogan "Language saves faith," German missionary priests in the United States went about setting up German-speaking parishes and schools. During his visits to Holy Cross in 1851, Dom Wimmer painted a desperate picture of little German children losing their religion because there was no one to teach them catechism in the mother tongue. One of the nuns who must have listened to those talks, Sister Seraphine Staimer, wrote how the priest's descriptions fired the prioress, Mother Benedicta Bauer, with "the urgent desire to found a convent of our Order in America."^[7]

The house which gave birth to that enthusiasm was a contemplative monastery of the Dominican Second Order, in existence since 1233. During the Napoleonic wars, when most Dominican houses in Germany were dissolved, Holy Cross had survived by opening a school for girls on its premises. It was not by choice that the nuns had taken up teaching. Instead Prince Karl von Dahlberg had ordered it. He was the governing authority because the religious houses of Regensburg had been awarded him as an indemnity in 1803. The Prince decided that two of the convents—Dominicans and Poor Clares—might remain open if the sisters provided educational services to the children of the city. Much against their will, the religious of Holy Cross allowed three of their better educated nuns to become teachers

Holy Cross School was an immediate success. Eventually ten members, or approximately one fourth of the community, entered the active ministry. Each day they traveled from the convent to a separate school building erected across the street via an enclosed passageway which shielded them from public view. Lay or "extern" sisters escorted pupils to and from the street, supervised meals and met with parents, so that the choir nun teachers could continue to fulfill their cloister requirements. Meanwhile, the chanting of the Divine Office and other aspects of their penitential life went on as they had for the previous six hundred years.[\[8\]](#)

Surely this was the lifestyle Mother Benedicta intended to reproduce, under Dom Wimmer's direction in the hills of western Pennsylvania. But the future of the plan remained precarious; Valentine Riedel, Bishop of Regensburg wanted no part of it. For two years he refused permission for the sisters to go to America.[\[9\]](#) There is no record of how Mother Benedicta succeeded in changing his mind, but change it she did. By April of 1853, the project was moving ahead with Reidel's blessing.

That two-year hiatus may at least partially explain why Dom Wimmer was no longer anxious to sponsor a Dominican foundation of teaching nuns in Western Pennsylvania. During the interim, he recruited a group of German Benedictine women from the Convent of St. Walburg, Eichstat, Bavaria. They had found their way from New York to Latrobe in July of 1852 and began to work among the German immigrants.[\[10\]](#) Nevertheless, Wimmer's letters to Mother Benedicta early in 1853 seemed to encourage her to go ahead with the venture. In them, the Benedictine mentioned that he had consulted with the Dominican friars at the First Plenary Council of Baltimore. Nothing in Dominican records substantiates that contact. In fact, it would be almost forty years before the Brooklyn sisters made contact with any Dominican men.[\[11\]](#)

Happily oblivious to Dom Wimmer's change of heart, Mother Benedicta went about assembling the first American mission band. Only one of those four pioneers left a personal record of the discernment process she went through before volunteering. During her last illness, Mother Augustine Neuhierl gave this account:

Six years ago the holy Angels visited me, asking me do I wish to go to a new Convent. I always answered "No." Thereupon they stayed away. The Infant Jesus came also, asking me did I want to go to America, saying it would be well with me and He would help me. I said, if it is His holy will, then I will go.[\[12\]](#)

The volunteers for the American mission came forward; They included Augustine Neuhierl and Josepha Witzlhofer. At this point, Mother Benedicta had two teachers for the mission. Both prospective missionaries had come from middle class families in the Regensburg area. Teresa Witzlhofer and Marie Josephine Neuhierl entered Holy Cross a year apart, Teresa in 1838 and Marie Josephine in 1839. Both girls had already completed with distinction educational programs which prepared them to teach. Teresa brought with her a certificate signed by the Royal District Inspector attesting that she had "finished the

course of instruction required of the teachers of girls and has acquired such perfection in all the arts that she may preside in any school for girls."[\[13\]](#)

Marie Josephine's pastor at Walderbach signed a school certificate attesting that she was "gifted from God with extraordinary talents" and "especially called and adapted for the intellectual and pious education of youth."[\[14\]](#) Once she began to consider going on mission to America, her superiors "encouraged her desire, and sent her to the Institute of Englische Fraulein at Altotting [from the Autumn of 1852 until Spring of 1853] for the purpose of mastering the English language.[\[15\]](#)

Holy Cross School could not have functioned without the help of the lay sisters. For this reason Sisters Francesca Retter and Jacobina Riederer, both of whom had expressed their willingness to emigrate, were chosen.[\[16\]](#) By 1853, the American venture moved ahead at full speed. Quoting Dom Wimmer's instructions to her ordinary, Mother Benedicta asked him to issue a "Dismissory, that is, a Latin testimonial to the effect that these Sisters are sent to the missions in America to found a convent of their Order." She also transmitted the monk's assurance that "they are directed for the time being to me as their counselor and protector."[\[17\]](#)

On May 10, the four volunteers presented themselves to the bishop at the chancery offices in Regensburg where he examined them orally and then had them sign the petition to emigrate. His Dismissory, given on May 29, noted that "The Reverend Boniface desires that we send to America some Sisters from the Holy Cross Monastery . . . well qualified for educating young girls."[\[18\]](#) Riedel's permission also noted that Sister Josepha Witzlhofer had been appointed superior of the quartet and outlined the relationship that the American foundation was to have with Holy Cross:

They remain in the congregation to which they are bound by their sacred vows and under the jurisdiction of the prioress of Holy Cross until such time as their numbers increase sufficiently to erect a new monastery in America, or in case of exigency that they be allowed to return to the Holy Cross Monastery

That specification about the building of an American monastery was going to prove vitally important when, seven years later, a different bishop and prioress in Regensburg began to harass Sister Josepha for making unauthorized foundations in the United States.

With official permission secured, the nuns were ready to consider practical matters: travel arrangements and luggage—how to go and what to take. Dom Wimmer had put Mother Benedicta in touch with Father Joseph Mueller, court chaplain to King Ludwig of Bavaria and director of the Ludwig-Missionsverein.[\[19\]](#) Founded in Munich in 1838, the Verein was intended to assist German Catholic mission projects in Asia and America. Between 1844 and 1916, the society donated nearly \$900,000 to the American missions. Part of that sum helped the Holy Cross sisters to finance their first American monasteries.[\[20\]](#) Father Mueller saw to the purchase of tickets aboard the steamship *Germania* from Bremerhaven to New York and offered to accompany the little band as far as Leipzig.

For their part, the community at Holy Cross put together a purse of 4,000 guildens (\$1,500) and filled twenty chests with articles to furnish the new chapel and convent.[\[21\]](#) Otherwise the pioneers traveled light. In the custom of the day for cloistered religious, each woman folded her habit and veil into a carpet bag along with personal articles, office book and constitutions, then put on dark secular clothes for the duration of the trip.

With Father Mueller accompanying them, the band of missionaries left Regensburg by stage the evening of July 25, 1853. After thirty-three hours of travel, the group reached Leipzig on July 27. Describing the journey for the community at Holy Cross, Father Mueller recorded:

[We] had ourselves carried to the hotel Stadt Breslau and rested for a few hours. At 6 a.m. I set out to find the Catholic Church ... drove back to the hotel to get the Sisters and then read Mass for a safe voyage. Then we took breakfast and prepared for the journey. I hurriedly wrote several letters of recommendation . . . and at 11 a.m. accompanied them to the railway station, for there was a good deal of baggage.[\[22\]](#)

At the time, supervising the "good deal of baggage" must have seemed the most needed piece of assistance on the part of the priest. However, it was one of the "hurried letters of recommendation" that turned out to be most vital to the success of the mission once the women reached New York.

On his return from the station, the Verein director wrote Mother Benedicta that her "good children" would arrive in Bremen at ten the next morning and wait for the departure hour. From that point until they landed in Manhattan almost a month later, the only record is an entry in the Annals of the Propagation of the Faith in Munich. "On August 1, four Dominican sisters from Regensburg sailed from Bremerhaven on the steamer *Germania* for North America, to establish a convent in Carrolltown, Diocese of Pittsburgh."[\[23\]](#)

After almost a month at sea, the *Germania* made port in lower Manhattan on the morning of August 26. The four German sisters waited until noon for Dom Wimmer to arrive and finally conceded that he would never appear. It was at that point that one of Father Mueller's letters saved the day. Sister Josepha was carrying a note addressed to another Father Mueller, Redemptorist pastor of the Most Holy Redeemer parish on East Third Street.[\[24\]](#) Sister Augustine's six-month course in English was immediately put to use.

After arranging to store the chests temporarily on the pier, the sisters hired a carriage to take them the two miles to Holy Redeemer rectory. There they were welcomed by Father Kleineidam and Brother Nicholas. Refreshment was provided and the Redemptorists set about finding temporary lodging for the travelers until contact could be made with Dom Wimmer. By late afternoon, part of the mystery had been solved. Then a partial explanation was made concerning the harrowing experience of the morning.

Father Nicholas Balleis,[\[25\]](#) the Benedictine pastor of St. Mary's, Newark arrived at the parish. He apologized for misreading the steamship schedule and explained that Dom Wimmer had delegated him to meet the sisters.

Together, Redemptorists and Benedictines arranged for the two choir nuns to stay in Manhattan with a family named Zeigler while the lay sisters would return to Newark with Father Balleis and be quartered with his parishioners, the Blaggis. Pointedly absent was any mention of travel to Pennsylvania. But at least the German quartet had been welcomed, lodged and fed by the end of that first day. But what had gone wrong with the plans for a convent in Carrolltown?[\[26\]](#)

In the week that followed, Father John Stephen Raffener, stationed at the German parish of Holy Trinity in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, visited them. Was this a coincidence? Apparently Dom Wimmer had been in contact with Raffener and thought that the priest "would take them if the archbishop permits it."[\[27\]](#) The Brooklyn pastor came each week to the Redemptorists for confession; on his visit during the last week of August, he met the two choir nuns from Holy Cross and ascertained that they would be available to teach. Writing to Mother Benedicta in mid-September, Dom Wimmer confirmed the arrangement:

It was only on the fifth day after their arrival that I found it possible to see and care for them. Since I knew of no place in the land at this time where they might locate, I came to an agreement with the reverend Raffener, Vicar General of New York, that he would receive them at his parish church. In Williamsburg, a suburb of New York.[\[28\]](#)

As far as the nuns were concerned the Redemptorists played a bigger role in their establishment than Dom Wimmer was willing to admit. They had their own way of acknowledging the fact. That first Brooklyn school they dedicated not to Saint Boniface or Saint Benedict, but to Saint Alphonsus, patron of the Redemptorist order.[\[29\]](#)

Sisters Josepha and Augustine began teaching in September. One hundred forty girls filled the basement of Holy Trinity Church. From the beginning, the enterprise was an unmitigated success. The convent situation was not so fortunate. Dom Wimmer gave the Holy Cross prioress an account of the living conditions. They were clearly inadequate even by Wimmer's analysis:

Since there is no convent there, they had to be domiciled for the time being in the rectory which is attached to the old church. Don't be alarmed at that. The pastor, the above-mentioned Rev. Vicar, is an old gentleman, a good priest, and has only one

Dominican Convent, Williamsburg, 1854



assistant. The rectory is roomy. I remained there four days in order to arrange everything so that by the end of the week the four Sisters had complete enclosure not only on the outside from the people, but also on the inside from the priests. They are rather confined, but it will do. They have a kitchen, a study, and a dormitory sufficiently large for all four. ... I gained an uninterrupted connection with the church and a large room under the church which the Sisters may use for their wash, a storeroom, or they could even sleep there if they wished.[\[30\]](#)

What is missing from this description is the fact that the part of the rectory assigned to the sisters was a dirt-floored basement. Before the winter was over, they did indeed sleep in "the large room under the church," but it was unheated and constantly damp. All four contracted heavy colds. Sister Francesca's illness progressed into tuberculosis. She would die of it the following year.

Both lay sisters had an additional burden which consisted in having to cook for the two priests. Their mentor admitted it was "disturbing and annoying." Nevertheless, he "was not able to make any other arrangements." Apparently Father Raffener had received the sisters "especially that he might be provided with a cook and also economize."[\[31\]](#) To save the sisters, a widow was finally engaged to do the other housekeeping chores for the two men, but the nuns were told to pay her wages. Dom Wimmer reported the financial situation as "2,500 gulden in their possession, which will soon be spent, because they have to buy cupboards, etc. The school money will provide for the necessaries of life."[\[32\]](#)

Tuition amounted to twenty-five cents a week per student, enough only for the "necessaries" for the sisters. As Dom Wimmer put it, "At present there can be no thought of building a convent." For this reason he encouraged Sister Josepha to accept "any good candidates that present themselves." Besides, it was necessary to train teachers who were "well versed in English." He promised to be responsible for such decisions, reminding the German prioress that "I am in a better position to know American needs than you in far off Holy Cross."

The only hint as to the missionaries' state of mind appeared in the last paragraph of the monk's account. "At first they were rather disheartened and diffident, but before I left, they were full of courage and confidence." This observation was the only evidence that the chaotic arrival had dampened the high spirits with which they set out. As for Dom Wimmer himself, there is some question as to how he felt about the whole episode when he wrote: "If I managed this affair well or not, I do not know. My intention was good; of that I am sure." Whatever doubts he may have had disappeared at the end. "Everything has turned out so well that one must believe it to be the will of God that matters culminated in this manner."[\[33\]](#)

The Benedictine founder told the Dominican prioress that he could not go to Williamsburg very often as it was a 400-mile journey. He did keep up with the progress of the new foundation. Early in December, Wimmer returned to New York to help the nuns acquire a lot on the corner of Graham and Montrose Avenues, a purchase that

consumed the last of their funds. On Christmas Eve, he sent his friend Abbot Gregory Scherr of Metten an account of the school. "Before the arrival of the Sisters, two men teachers never had more than 150-170 boys and girls together and now the Sisters alone have 225 girls in their classes and are expecting more."[\[34\]](#) In February, he boasted, "The good ladies have now 243 in their school, the half of which number came from Protestant schools or did not attend any."[\[35\]](#)

That December visit seems to have been the last time the "protector" acted directly on their behalf. However, during the course of the winter, the German sisters found a new clerical champion. Shortly after their arrival, Catholics on Long Island were detached from the diocese of New York and became the diocese of Brooklyn. A young Irishman, John Loughlin, was appointed bishop and Father Raffener served as his vicar general. The new bishop could converse in German and must have met the Regensburg nuns when he visited Holy Trinity. By early spring he offered them a loan of \$4,000 to purchase a small house. It stood between the church and the lot on which they planned to build.[\[36\]](#) On May 16, 1854, the sisters moved into their first real convent. At this point they had what they would call a weather-tight home.

Now the nuns were to encounter the first complications related to their canonical status as enclosed nuns. Their basement quarters at Holy Trinity had been linked with both church and school in such a way that cloister was not violated when they moved from one to the other. Teachers could move from convent to school through a closed passageway making the classroom wing technically a part of the monastery. But once Sister Josepha and Sister Augustine began to walk from the little house down the block to St. Alphonsus school, cloister was broken. If they had a dispensation, it seems to have been one from Father Raffener or Bishop Loughlin that went unrecorded.

According to The Catholic Almanac for 1855, St. Alphonsus' enrollment skyrocketed to 300. This meant that each nun taught a class of 150! Although there is no extant correspondence between Sister Josepha and Mother Benedicta that year, the American superior must have asked for help. Once more Father Mueller guided a group of Holy Cross women across Germany, giving them a sizeable donation from the Ludwig Missionsverein towards the construction of a convent on the Brooklyn lot.[\[37\]](#)

Three choir nuns, Sisters Seraphine Staimer, Aemilia Barth and Michaela Braun, left Regensburg April 13, 1855, and landed in America May 9, 1855. Their physical presence as teachers for the understaffed school was cause enough for rejoicing, but the financial help they brought made the expedition a double blessing. Besides the initial gift, the Missionsverein promised the Brooklyn community an annual donation of 1500 gulden (\$600) for the next five or six years to help them become self supporting. According to Mother Seraphine, the sisters first paid their debt to the bishop and then began to make plans for "a real convent" on the corner of Graham and Montrose.

M. Emilia Barth, second prioress of the Dominican Sisters of Williamsburg

In addition to the windfall from Europe, the sisters themselves managed to save five to six hundred dollars from their annual income. In addition, the nuns began a cottage industry that utilized the artistic training they had developed in Germany. Just one drawing for articles painted and embroidered by the sisters realized \$800. It was to set the stage for the many raffles and bazaars in years to come. "In this way," wrote Mother Seraphine, "about \$2000 was saved in two years."[\[38\]](#)



Just two weeks after the arrival of the newcomers, Sister Francesca Retter died from the tuberculosis she had contracted during that first winter in the basement. It must have been a terrifying initiation for the newcomers, perhaps an experience which Sister Michaela was unable to get over. Mother Seraphine recorded that Michaela was "unable to accustom herself to conditions in Williamsburg and returned to Ratisbon after two years."[\[39\]](#)

The school continued to flourish. From the very beginning, Dom Wimmer had reported that parents and children were "delighted. . . when they heard that the Sisters were to come and when they saw them."[\[40\]](#) One tangible evidence that the nuns lived up to expectations was the rising enrollment. Another appeared in the form of a letter sent to the Katholische kirchen-Zeitung in May of 1856 by a parishioner who signed himself "Philos." Describing a First Communion ceremony at Holy Trinity, he said:

The children sang a very beautiful Communion hymn especially adapted for such occasions. It was composed by Rev. Sister Augustine OSD, the well qualified teacher in the second class of the Girls School here. I must at once observe on this occasion that the Sisters of St. Dominic in the three years of their stay here, have already acquired great merits in the education and training of youth.[\[41\]](#)

Still no American candidates had presented themselves for entrance. Shortly before ground was broken for the new convent in June 1857, Sister Josepha sent a plea for aid to the motherhouse: "We have four hundred children taught in only three divisions; send us, therefore, more Sisters."[\[42\]](#) This brief petition went out just after the coming of Margaret Bosslet, the first American postulant, who entered as a lay sister.

Before any further help arrived, the American contingent celebrated a major triumph. Bishop Loughlin dedicated their new convent at the corner of Graham and Montrose on November 9, 1857.[\[43\]](#) Since the original dismissory from Bishop Riedel had specified

that the mission group was subject to the motherhouse "until such time as their numbers increase sufficiently to erect a new monastery in America,"^[44] later authorities decided that this was the point at which the five German sisters and their precious American postulant^[45] became an independent entity.

Rather than celebrating a new status which they may not have known they possessed, the community which moved into Holy Cross Convent on Graham Avenue that November was focused on finding new members. Early in the next year, Father Ambrose Buchmeier of St. Nicholas parish in Manhattan, asked for sisters to teach in the girls' division of his school. Dom Wimmer had once told Mother Benedicta Bauer that "Father Ambrose scolded me sternly because I did not tell him about the Dominican Nuns because he would have taken them."^[46] Five years later, the Manhattan pastor was making another try. At the time, Sister Josepha had to say "no" for they could barely cope with the numbers in St. Alphonsus.

However, unknown to the American foundation, Mother Benedicta was in the process of leaving her office as prioress at Holy Cross and planning to go on mission to America. The former superior, accompanied by choir nuns Thomasina Ginker and Cunigunda Schell and a prospective postulant, Crescentia Traubinger, arrived at Williamsburg on October 22, 1858. Margaret Bosslet, who had been received as Sister Rosa the previous April, now had a companion in the novitiate. Crescentia became a postulant on her first day in America, spending almost two years as a candidate until she in her turn received the habit and the name "Dominica." The two young choir nuns settled happily into the school. Mother Benedicta began to work in her specialty area giving music instruction.

Some years later, Sister Seraphine would write, "Mother Benedicta did not like it in Williamsburg."^[47] She did not elaborate, but whatever her objections, she made them known to their mentor in Germany, Father Joseph Mueller, who discouraged the idea of leaving to make a new foundation and counseled patience: "You know that in America you would not find the Convent of the Holy Cross. America is a mission country which demands much self-abnegation."^[48]

As it turned out, one of Mother's traveling companions left the Williamsburg house before she did, and that too was a source of tension. Mother Josepha had decided that the Brooklyn community was now large enough to spare teachers for Father Buchmeier's school in lower Manhattan. To St. Nicholas parish on East Second Street she sent Sisters Augustine Neuhierl, Cunigunda Schell and Rosa Bosslet.^[49] Their friend Father Ambrose had furnished a narrow Manhattan brownstone house next to the church as a convent for his long awaited German Dominicans. They still had to break cloister in order to reach the school, but there was no harrowing winter in a drafty basement for the new foundation, which was eventually dedicated to the Holy Rosary.

From Mother Benedicta's point of view, the problem lay in the fact that Sister Cunigunda had been destined to accompany her in founding a convent that would properly duplicate their Regensburg home elsewhere in America. Instead, the various chroniclers of the Williamsburg community agreed that both Cunigunda and Dominica

found the New York foundation so much to their liking that they did not want to leave.^[50] Regensburg's version of the touchy situation described that choice as "a new and bitter trial" for "poor Mother Benedicta" and blamed "The Sisters at Williamsburg [who] had advised these Sisters to stay at the convent where they had the assurance of a permanent place, whereas there would be much uncertainty in a new foundation."^[51]

As a member of the founding trio for Second Street, Manhattan, Sister Cunigunda, like her two companions, met with no uncertainties. Father Ambrose saw to it that they were comfortably provided for. During the earliest days when there was no chapel in the narrow brownstone, he allowed them to say the Divine Office in the sacristy of St. Nicholas Church.^[52] When the fledgling community expanded, they were able to acquire the adjacent brownstones and interconnect them so that the Dominican community of the Most Holy Rosary had a ready-made headquarters consisting of several adjoining houses on East Second Street.

Historians may question as to the time when the Manhattan house began to move toward independent status, but as members of the Dominican Second Order, there was never any doubt that they would one day become a separate community. In the European monastic tradition, as soon as a new foundation possessed sufficient income and the requisite numbers to live a regular religious life, it could become an independent community. In the early 1860s, it was not a matter of whether Holy Rosary would separate from its parent in Williamsburg; the question was when.

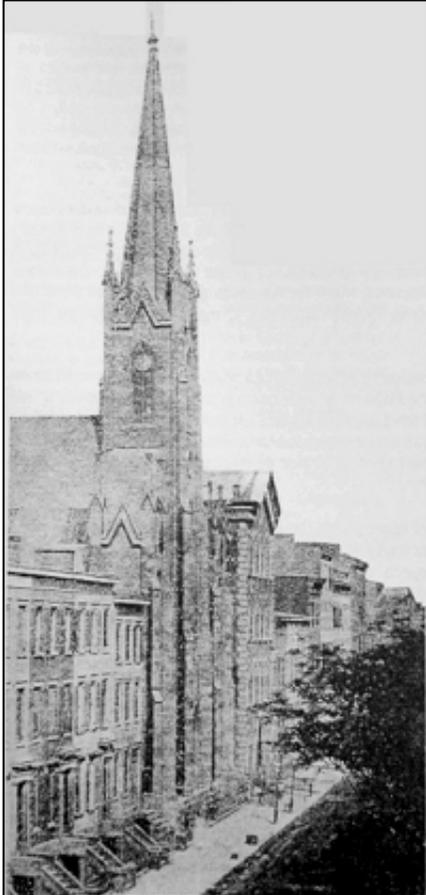
By the time she had been ten years in Brooklyn, Mother Josepha Witzlhofer was overtaken by the tuberculosis scourge that would kill so many religious in the late nineteenth century. At some point, Sister Augustine asked for more personnel to be assigned to the Manhattan house and was told to "admit [her] own candidates."^[53] Opening a separate novitiate in Manhattan would be a definitive step towards independence, one that the Holy Rosary superior was at first reluctant to take. She continued to rely on the Williamsburg house during Mother Josepha's lifetime.

After Josepha died on April 9, 1864, Bishop Loughlin appointed Sister Seraphine in her place. At the end of the next school year, matters came to a head. Father Augustine Dantner from the German parish of St. John on Manhattan's 30th Street came looking for teachers. The contact was apparently made through Sister Augustine who then asked Mother Seraphine, and received a promise of sisters for the new school. However, as September approached, Williamsburg had no one to send. To avoid the embarrassment of going back on a promise, Sister Augustine halved her faculty at St. Nicholas. To St. John's went Sisters Cunigunda, Ambrosia, Theresia and Magdalena, leaving the Second Street school understaffed.

The following spring, Sister Augustine took the step she had been avoiding for the previous several years and admitted the first postulants to Holy Rosary, Sisters Alberta Krein and Catherine Muth. Candidates continued to come, and Second Street was on its way to independent status, an event which took place legally in 1869. Within the next

two decades, the Brooklyn and Manhattan communities made decisions which placed them farther apart geographically.

**Dominican Convent and School at St.
Nicholas Church on Second Street, Manhattan**



Before relations between the Brooklyn and Manhattan convents became strained, a decision by Mother Benedicta Bauer led to a third Regensburg foundation in America. During the spring of 1860, two unhappy religious decided to leave Brooklyn; one opting to return to Holy Cross, the other to move still further away to the interior of the new country. After seven years of trial, Sister Jacobina Riederer received permission to return to Regensburg.

The "quit claim" which marked Jacobina's leaving the convent on Graham Avenue was signed by five professed religious of the community: Sisters Josepha, Augustine, Serephine, Aemilia and Cunigunda.^[54] Absent were the signatures of Benedicta Bauer and Thomasina Ginker, indicating that they were considered guests rather than permanent members. While Sister Jacobina was recrossing the Atlantic in the month of April, Mother Benedicta was corresponding with her Regensburg successor, Mother Agnes Loehner.

If there was some strain between Benedicta and the Williamsburg community, Mother Agnes' reply to her request for permission to go elsewhere could not have helped the situation. There was a new bishop in Regensburg, and the Holy Cross prioress had consulted with him. First, she relayed his instructions. "Those in America must become independent. But before taking that step they must declare if it be their intention to stay in America or return to the Motherhouse."^[55] Mother Agnes went on to say that she had already sent several letters to Williamsburg suggesting that the American house separate from the motherhouse. She had received a panic-stricken refusal to her first communication and no answer to subsequent letters.

Mother Agnes did not say when the refusal had been sent. It may have dated from the era before the last consignment of missionaries from the Motherhouse arrived, when the new Holy Cross was still in need of both personnel and financial assistance from Europe. Technically, they were independent as of November 1857, when the "new convent in America"^[56] was dedicated. Bishop Synestry's Dismissory for Mother Benedicta and her companions specified that they were "under the jurisdiction of the prioress of Holy Cross convent . . . till the time when a new convent erected in America will be approved by legitimate authority"^[57] Surely John Loughlin, Bishop of Brooklyn, had approved the

erection of the convent on Graham Avenue before he dedicated it. The problem lay in the fact that as a busy missionary the bishop seldom put things in writing.^[58] If he had, the prioress of the new Holy Cross might have been spared much grief.

That Sister Josepha was indeed a prioress in 1858 was attested to by Bishop Synestry himself when he wrote that "the prioress of the sisters who have already gone to the missions" had consented to accept the quartet coming from Regensburg.^[59] However, the European prelate was unwilling to cede her the full power of that position. This became all too apparent when the American superior received an official decree from Regensburg dated October 26, 1860, charging her with having made invalid foundations.

If she took this decree seriously, Mother Josepha would have had to recall the sisters from Manhattan and the Midwest. She did no such thing, thereby suggesting that either Bishop Loughlin or Father Raffener advised her to ignore the instructions from Europe. Nothing came of von Synestry's complaint to Rome; rather, the silence of the years which followed seemed to indicate tacit permission for the American foundations to go their own way.^[60]

Apart from the Bishop of Regensburg's threatening decree, both Williamsburg and its daughter community in lower Manhattan reached the midpoint of the 1860s peacefully with good prospects for steady growth. Mother Benedicta and Sister Thomasina had left for the Midwest in June of 1860. After an odyssey that took them from Ohio to Tennessee to Wisconsin, they found a permanent home in the city of Racine on the western shore of Lake Michigan.

By the end of the Civil War in 1865, Holy Cross had established three branches in the United States: Brooklyn, Manhattan and Racine. Over the next seventy years there were destined to be nine more branches ranging from California, Washington and Kansas to New Jersey, Ohio and Michigan. They would usually begin as responses to the call of a German pastor seeking teachers for his parochial school and broaden out into multiethnic communities answering a variety of needs. In all of them flourished the spirit of those four women standing on a Manhattan dock with plans gone awry, who then picked up the pieces and started off in a new direction.

NOTES

1. Nineteenth and early twentieth century accounts refer to the city and the diocese as "Ratisbon" which was its Celtic name meaning "settlement on the waters." Contemporary usage has gone over to the German title of "Regensburg," derived from the fact that the city is located just below the point where the river Regen flows into the Danube.
2. Holy Cross Chronicle, ms., Regensburg, Excerpt III, 3-6. Copy in Racine Dominican Archives (RDA). Cited by S. Mary Hortense Kohler, O.P., in **Life and Work of Mother Benedicta Bauer** (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing, 1937) 43-44.
3. Dom Wimmer to Abbot Gregory, July 29;1853. This letter was found in the Archives of St. Vincent's Archabbey, Latrobe, PA, by Felix Fellner, OSB, who sent it, along with two others, to Rev. Eugene Crawford when the latter was writing the history of the Amityville Dominicans. Cited in **Daughters of**

- Dominic on Long Island**, (New York: Benziger, 1938) 1: 42. Primary sources assembled by Father Crawford are contained in the Crawford File, Amityville Dominican archives (AMF).
4. When writing to the Bishop of Regensburg in April of 1853, Mother Benedicta Bauer states that Dom Wimmer had "called at the convent several times" two years earlier. M. Benedicta Bauer to V. Von Riedel, April 4, 1853.
 5. From an account of the founding of the Dominican Congregation of the Holy Cross, Brooklyn, NY, written by Sister Maud Bonten, O.P., using information supplied by Mother Ignatia of Holy Cross, Regensburg in 1928. Copy in the AMP.
 6. Quoted in **The Church of St. Joseph of Yorkville** (New York: 1932) n. pag. Cited by Jay P Dolan in **The American Catholic Experience** (New York: Doubleday, 1985) 169.
 7. Mother Seraphine Staimer, Diary, 1. Begun in 1865 and kept until shortly before her death in 1889. Mother Seraphine began her account by describing the visits of Dom Wimmer to Holy Cross and the journeys of the missionaries to America.
 8. **750 Jahre Dominikanerinnenkloster Heilig Kreuz**, trans. Sister Teresa Margaret Hoessbacher, O.P., (Munchen: Verlag Schnell & Steiner, 1983) 20-22, AME
 9. Staimer, Diary, 1.
 10. Sister Mary Regina Baska, OSB, The **Benedictine Congregation of Saint Scholastica**, 10-12. Cited by Eugene Crawford in **Daughters of Dominic on Long Island**, 1:61. Oral comparisons of tradition between Regensburg Dominicans and Eichstat Benedictines usually produce exclamations of "You too?" in the matter of Dom Wimmer's recruitment techniques and failure to carry through on promises of travel assistance to western Pennsylvania. Crawford characterizes the monk as a man with "too many irons in the fire."
 11. Mother Benedicta to Bishop von Reidel, May 1853, Copy in Racine Dominican Archives(RDA). Cited by Kohler 94-95 and Crawford 43-44. Amityville's oral tradition tells of two sisters in Manhattan on business during the 1880s ringing the doorbell of St. Vincent Ferrer's rectory and asking to talk to a Dominican priest as they had never met one.
 12. Sister Eugenia Glaab, O.P., Notebooks and History Chronicle, ms., Early Foundation History files, Hope Dominican Archives(HPEA). Sister Eugenia recorded this account several times. In the margin of the Chronicle, she appended "I Sister M. Eugenia was present and heard these words from the lips of Mother M. Augustine."
 13. Crawford, **Daughters**, 1: 215. School certificates for the sisters who came from Germany were brought across the ocean with them and are on file in the various motherhouse archives.
 14. Chronik, Foundation History, Book 7, HPEA.
 15. Sister Maria Monica, prioress of Holy Cross convent, Regensburg to Mother Prioress [Hyacinth Scheininger], June 17, 1889. Trans. By Sister Eugenia Glaab. Mother Augustine Neuhierl File 4, Box 35, HPEA. The dates for Mother Augustine's stay at Altotting were supplied by Mother Amanda Kluge of Holy Cross in her letter to the Newburgh Vicaress General Sister Mary Ruth Tole, Aug. 5, 1954,
 16. Holy Cross Chronicle, Excerpt 3, 1, RDA.
 17. Mother Benedicta to Bishop Riedel, May 1853.
 18. Bauer to Riedel, May 1853.
 19. Mother Benedicta to Bishop Riedel, May 1853.
 20. Theodore Roemer, **The Ludwig Missionsverein and the Church in the United States** (1859-1918) (New York: Joseph Wagner, 1933) 1, 138. Cited by Sister Hortense Kohler in **Life and Work of Mother Benedicta Bauer**, 90. In addition to the Brooklyn foundation, Mother Benedicta's community at Racine also received Verein funds.
 21. Schrems, **Kurze Geschichte des Dominikanerinnen-Klosters vom Heiligen Kreuz in Regensburg and Seiner Filialen**, Manuscript V, 35; Account Book and Notebook, 1: 13. RDA. Cited by Kohler in Mother Benedicta Bauer, 105-06.
 22. Joseph Mueller to Mother Prioress [Benedicta Bauer], Leipzig, July 27, 1853, Newburg Dominican Archives(NDA) Box 1, Folder 4.
 23. Annalen der Verbreitung des Glaubens, Munich, 1853. 21: 382, Copy in AMF, Crawford File.
 24. New York City's German community began petitioning for a German language parish in 1808 and received the first of several with the establishment of St. Nicholas on East Second Street in 1833. The Redemptorists were given charge of the new Most Holy Redeemer Church in 1844. See Jay P Dolan, **The Immigrant Church** (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1975).

25. Nicholas Balleis, OSB, came to America from a monastery in Austria in 1836, the first of his Order to arrive in the United States. He worked as a missionary in the New York area and was pastor of St. Mary's, Newark (presently a Benedictine parish), in 1853. Alexius Hoffman, OSB to Sister Jane Marie Murray, OR, of Grand Rapids, n.d., John Byrne, CSSR, to Rev. Eugene Crawford at Amityville, Dec. 14, 1936.
26. Chronik, Foundation History, Book 7, 5-6, HPEA. See also Holy Cross Chronicle, copy in RDA.
27. Wimmer to Scherr, July 29, 1853.
28. Dom Wimmer to Mother Benedicta Bauer, Latrobe, PA, Sept. 18, 1853, Copy in RDA.
29. **The Catholic Almanac**, 1855 (Baltimore: Lucas Brothers) 190. Cited by Crawford in Daughters of Dominic, 1: 69.
30. Wimmer to Bauer, Sept. 18, 1853.
31. Wimmer to Bauer, Sept. 18, 1853.
32. Wimmer to Bauer, Sept. 18, 1853.
33. Wimmer to Bauer, Sept. 18, 1853.
34. Dom Wimmer to Abbot Gregory Scherr, St. Mary's, Elk Co., Christmas Eve, 1853.
35. Wimmer to Scheer, February 24, 1853. Copy in the Amityville Archives, Crawford file.
36. Staimer, Diary, 4, MD.
37. Staimer, Diary, 5, AMF. Mother Seraphine writes that Sister Josepha had petitioned the motherhouse for more sisters. She puts the donation at 6000 gulden (\$2400) "to build a Dominican Convent" and attributes it directly to King Ludwig, calling him "one of our greatest benefactors."
38. Staimer, Diary, 6.
39. Staimer, Diary, 5.
40. Wimmer to Bauer, Sept. 18, 1853.
41. Philos, Katholische Kirchen Zeitung, New York, Thursday, May 22, 1856, 359. Copy in the Crawford file, AMF.
42. Sister Josepha Witzlhofer to Mother Benedicta Bauer, Williamsburg, Apr. 3, 1857. Copy in the AMP
43. Staimer, Diary, 6.
44. Riedel, Dismissory, May 29, 1853.
45. At this point, the community consisted of Sisters Josepha Witzlhofer, Augustine Neuhierl, Jacobina Riederer, Seraphine Staimer, Emilia Barth and postulant Margaret Bosslet.
46. Wimmer to Bauer, Latrobe, Sept. 18, 1853. Copy in RDA.
47. Staimer, Diary, 6.
48. Joseph Mueller to Mother Benedicta Bauer, Munich, July 12, 1859, RDA.
49. Chronik, 10, HPEA.
50. See Kohler, 161; Crawford, 84.
51. Holy Cross Chronicle, Excerpt V, 3. Cited by Kohler, 161.
52. Glaab, Notebooks, HPEA.
53. Sister Augustine Neuhierl to Mother Hyacintha Oberbrunner, Dec. 1, 1866, RDA. Mother Hyacintha was successor to Mother Benedicta Bauer, and Mother Thomasina Ginker of the Wisconsin community, who had died within a year of each other. In the course of a request to borrow teachers from Racine, Sister Augustine reviewed her personnel difficulties with the Williamsburg house.
54. Property deeds, AMP
55. Mother Agnes Loehner to Mother Benedicta Bauer, Ratisbon, May 12, 1860, RDA. Cited by Crawford, 1: 8587.
56. This was the condition for independence laid down by Bishop Riedel in Dismissory of 1853.1.,i.L.,2 a new convent in America could be built, then the missionaries would no longer be subject to the Motherhouse.
57. Dismissory issued by Bishop Ignatius von Synestry of Ratisbon on Aug. 15, 1858.
58. The Brooklyn diocesan archives file on Bishop Loughlin for this period contains only a few letters and a rather sketchy diary.
59. Synestry, Dismissory, Aug 15, 1858, RDA.
60. By the time the Regensburg decree arrived in Brooklyn, Mother Benedicta and Sister Thomasina were already in Nashville helping the Somerset sisters to establish the Academy of St. Cecilia. Contrary to Von Synestry's charge, Mother Benedicta had received permission from Mother Agnes at Holy Cross to begin her western venture.