



History

The history of St. Mary's Medical Center, the oldest continuously operating hospital in the city, is an inspiring testimony to the tireless efforts of the Sisters of Mercy, outstanding physicians, and the many other dedicated individuals who have committed their talents and resources to serving the community of San Francisco, including the poor and marginalized.

The story actually begins in 1831, when Irish heiress Catherine McAuley used her fortune to establish the Sisters of Mercy at the Convent of Mercy in Dublin, Ireland. A teaching-nursing-social services congregation that has become the second largest order of religious women in the world, the Sisters of Mercy sponsor and co-sponsor many organizations and ministries, including St. Mary's Medical Center and Dignity Health. Six Sisters from the order's Burlingame Region, which covers California, Phoenix, Arizona, and Peru, continue to serve vital roles at St. Mary's today.

San Francisco Calling

In 1854, Rev. Hugh Gallagher, at the request of San Francisco's first Archbishop Joseph Alemany, solicited the Sisters for service in San Francisco. Almost all of the twenty-nine Sisters volunteered. Eight Sisters were chosen to make the journey, headed by 25-year-old Sister Mary Baptist Russell (nee Katherine Russell), who had joined the order at the age of 19 and nursed victims through Ireland's horrible cholera epidemic of 1849—an experience that later would prove valuable in San Francisco.

The Sisters faced a harrowing, three-month journey. Mother Russell booked passage on the Arctic, scheduled to leave Dublin on September 13. In a twist of fate, the ship was overbooked, so the Sisters sailed from Liverpool on the Canada a few days later. The Arctic collided with another vessel in a dense fog, and everyone on board died. After crossing the Atlantic, the Sisters faced an exhausting crossing of the Isthmus of Nicaragua by river boat and mule train before boarding the Pacific steamer, Cortes, for the last leg of their journey, sharing the voyage with a motley crowd of gold prospectors. The valiant Irish nuns disembarked to a chilly gray dawn in San Francisco on Friday, December 8, 1854.

A City In Crisis

After a few weeks of sharing accommodations with the Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Mercy rented a six-room cottage on Vallejo Street, across from the only hospital in the city of 35,000, the State Marine Hospital. Within months, the Sisters were called to aid a city in crisis when the S.S. Uncle Sam arrived September 5, 1855, carrying the deadly Asiatic cholera that ravaged the city for six weeks.

In the interval, the California Legislature had withdrawn its responsibility for the indigent sick, ruling that each county must care for its own. The San Francisco Board of Supervisors petitioned the Sisters to organize and operate the first County Hospital, using their own borrowed funds to purchase the old Stockton Street Hospital.

New Beginnings

By 1857, it was evident the Board of Supervisors would not honor their obligations to reimburse the Sister for their expenses in caring for the indigent. The Sisters reluctantly had to terminate the Mercy management of the County Hospital. On July 19, the County patients were moved, and on July 27, the Sisters opened the Stockton Street building as St. Mary's Hospital, the first Catholic Hospital in San Francisco, beginning a new chapter in their ongoing story of providing health care and community services to the city of San Francisco.



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