

The History of St. Ann's French-Canadian Orphanage of Worcester

Here is St. Ann's French Canadian Orphanage's historical timeline we were able to collect and collate from local newspaper articles and documents provided to us from different organizations including; the Worcester Public Library, the Catholic Free Press, the Community Chest Member, the Worcester Telegram, the Worcester Telegraph, the Boston Globe and the Sœurs de la Charité de Montréal «Sœurs Grises» Maison de Mère d'Youville, Sœurs Grises Archives de Montreal – Better known as The Sisters of Charity of Montreal, “Grey Nuns” house of mother d'Youville, Grey Nuns Archives of Montreal.

St. Ann's French Canadian Orphanage

Also known as:

The French-Canadian Orphanage of Worcester

St. Anne's Orphanage

St. Ann's Orphanage

Mount St. Ann

Catholic Charities Worcester County Youville House

The Grey Nuns were formally called the Sisters of Charity of Montreal

The non-sectarian home was a Golden Rule Agency teaching and guiding their charges the golden rule. (The Golden Rule - The common English phrasing is “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”)

The orphanage initially served the Franco-American community, housing as much as 250 children at one time who had no parents, or whose parents were unable to care for them, or parents who just abandoned them. In the early days, it was a place where children came to live until they became adults. As time passed the reasons also changed to include finding adoptive homes. Illness of a parent meant temporary boarding and possible return to the family. However, by the 1970's most of the children at Mount St. Ann were temporary residents who came from troubled homes where some other domestic problem meant they must be relocated. After a short time, they were returned to their homes or placed in foster homes. Eventually, the last residents were families needing shelter. Then, the Youville House provided shelter for the homeless and people with addiction. Lastly, it served as a home for single mothers with children in need of care.

Aug. 8 – 1889 - Father Brouillet, curate of Notre Dame Church, rented a house at 96 Southgate Street to serve as an orphanage and temporary school for about 25-30 boys and girls and a home for the elderly. He was concerned about the plight of children left parentless and the elderly left to fend for themselves in those poverty-ridden times. It was then called the French-Canadian Orphanage of Worcester and run by a few young ladies from the Third Order of St. Francis.

1889 - Sister Victoria Bessette, at the age of eight, was one of four sisters who were left Motherless. They became one of the first children to go to the French-Canadian Orphanage of Worcester, which was also a boarding school. She was also the first resident of St. Anne's Orphanage to become a Grey Nun.

Jan. 31, 1891 – After disagreements with the Third Order of St. Francis, Father Broulette invited the Grey Nuns of Montreal (The Sisters of Charity) to take charge of the orphanage. Reverend Mother Deschamps, Superior General, sent some sisters to take on this task. Sisters Piche, La Point and George have been mentioned in articles. They assumed the responsibility of the orphan home at 96 Southgate Street and the children left parentless in those poverty ridden times. The population of the orphans and deserted children quickly grew to 50. It was up to these sisters to take complete care of their charges. That meant feeding, clothing, caring, and teaching them. It also meant that the sisters had to find ways to raise funds for the clothing, food and fuel by going house to house to solicit funds, etc. When the sisters put the children to bed they washed the few cloths they had. The property was neither sanitary nor well-built. It was so damp after a heavy rain, they sloshed about in rubber boots. They had to scrub the floors before the children could play on them. They were utterly dependent on the goodness of others. Many a day the children would want for food.

1891 - The Society of Benefactors was organized. Within a year they would support the building of a new orphanage high on the hills of Granite Street for a cost of \$15,000.

1891 - The order of Grey Nuns of Montreal (The Sisters of Charity) purchased Ellsworth Farm, comprising about 150 acres (confirmed by Worcester Map of 1896) located at 133 Granite Street. On this farm was a house and a barn. Building of a four-story wooden structure started immediately. It was typical to the style of other institutions of that period. It contained a school and was a complete and modern entity for its day.

1891 – In addition to the three founding sisters, 10 more missionaries were later sent to help support the French-Canadian Orphanage of Worcester. Sisters Hedwidge, Lapoint, Kegel, Waters, Menard, Ursula, Damascus, McKenzie, St. Louis Gomzague and Lynch.

February 27, 1892 - An Agreement of Association was signed and notarized, incorporating the St. Ann's French-Canadian Orphanage. (In honor of the Superior, Reverend Mother Anna Piche.)

January 3, 1893 - The Grey Nuns, led by Mother Anna Piche, Superior, moved into the new simple four-story wooden structure. Fourteen acres of the massive site were utilized for farming. They were still very poor and everyone worked the farm, tended the animals, made cloths, etc. to make ends meet. Yet, no one was turned away. St. Anne's Orphanage eventually prospered and grew. The farm was worked by the children, Grey Nuns and hired hands. It produced vegetables, poultry, dairy products and pigs to feed the children, whose numbers would later grow to more than 250.

1904 - Mrs. Bowman Wood, a local widower, was so moved by the work of the children and the Grey Nuns that she gifted her home to them with the stipulation it be used for religious purposes only. The house was moved and attached to the 4-story wooden structure. A picture from 1893 shows the new 4-story white building standing alone and a 1904 picture shows the combined house and 4-story white building. Confirming this action was a 1963 newspaper article that stated "The house was then added to the main building and served as a dormitory for the sisters." The Grey nuns also build their own chapel in the newly attached building.

1920 - The barn burned down, causing a loss of \$16,500 and stored documents. The barn was quickly rebuilt since it was an integral part of the farm. It meant more house to house solicitations to keep up with the high costs.

1922 – The Orphans Friend Society, known in French as "Ami de l'Orphelin" was established. Five Catholic parishes in Worcester wholly or partly composed of French people were represented in this society, the membership of which included men and women.

1923 – The Board of Public Safety declared the top floor of the 4-story wooden structure unsafe as a residence in which to house the children. \$160,000 was borrowed from a local bank and a large four story brick dormitory that conformed to fire regulations was built behind the older wooden buildings with accommodations for up to 250 children. A bridge corridor connected the new and older buildings. The older buildings continued to be used as a school, chapel, kitchen and dining room. The orphanage became a member of the Community Chest and started receiving funds through the annual Golden Rule Drive and Red Feather drive. If it were not for these benefactors St. Anne's Orphanage might have had to close their doors to all those children in need.

August 30, 1936 - Sister Clara Bourgon described St. Anne's Orphanage in an article. "After 45 years St. Anne's has taken charge of nearly 7,000 children. There are about 170 children residing here. St. Anne's offers its children an unusual and excellent combination of home, school and church under its ample roof."

"We do everything which can be done for a child. When they are sick, we care for them: when they are babies we dress and feed them. As they grow older, we instruct them in school and religion. We make many of their clothes. We have warm showers for them in the basement, that they may be always clean. During the summer we have picnics, outdoor roasts. The knights of Columbus and the Elk Lodges take the children on annual picnics, and often treat the entire group to motion pictures. Occasionally friends or relatives take them, individually, for excursions. We try not only to make them good children, and healthier children, but to make them happy."

"Our youngest children now are about two years old. They call the little ones of nursery age "Rose Babies". Pink dresses with white collars are made for the girls, and trim play-suits for the little boys. The Rose Babies sleep in pink beds, in big, airy rooms, with pink curtains at the windows."

"For older girls, the beds are tinted a soft blue, still older girls find themselves in quarters slightly more mature. The children are grouped according to age, and to sex, and sleep in large rooms which accommodate about 60. The beds are set row by row across the wide area, and a protecting sister sleeps at the head of the room. Off each sleeping room is the "Infirmary," a little room where a sick or feverish child may be tended."

"There are playrooms for the tiny tots, made gay with dolls and tiny tea tables and bright colored games. Each room is given an atmosphere of home with plants growing in the rooms. There are sewing rooms next to each dormitory where the Sisters older girls make clothes for the younger ones. The girls also work on the beautiful embroideries for which St. Anne's is known. These appear in window curtains, pillow cases and piano scarfs. Pianos also play an important part there. Music instruction is not compulsory, but if a boy or girl shows a desire to learn the piano, or exhibits some real ability, both piano and singing are taught."

"There are screened-in porches on each floor and these serve as outdoor playrooms. There is also a play yard with swings and see-saws and rolling fields in which to romp. During the summer, many children so invited are permitted to visit relatives."

"The Sisters of St. Anne's are proud of their modern kitchen and of their wide, bright dining-room."

"In their own school, they are drilled in the old standbys of "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic," with geography, history and penmanship as other subjects. The Sisters serve as teachers, with the exception of one grade presided over by a Normal School graduate who besides teaching regular subjects, affords the children practice in spoken and written English. Though the Sisters speak English their native French tongue comes more easily to them, especially for writing, and while the children are taught French, they want them to be well schooled in English."

“St. Anne’s is the only agency among all those supported through the Community Chest’s annual Golden Rule Fund, which sponsors its own school. This corresponds to a grammar school and carries the pupils up to the sixth grade. For the seventh and eighth grade they go outside to one of the parochial schools and for high school they attend Ascension.”

“Though the proper name of the orphanage is St. Anne’s French Canadian Orphanage might suggest that only French children would be admitted, almost any nationality is welcome. There are Irish, Polish and Italian children in the nursery play room and in the school rooms. All children are, at this moment, in good health. They are examined every year by Dr. William E. Langlois or the department of public health and checked every week by the school nurse, Miss. Eva Harpin. Their teeth are kept in 100 per cent perfect condition by regular attendance at the dental clinic of the Providence Street Junior High School.”

December 27, 1939 – A fire started in the first floor rubbish shoot and quickly spread up the shaft to the roof and mushroomed out onto the fourth floor. Fortunately, this being holiday time, most of the 200 children were visiting with family or friends. The 60 or so children still at the orphanage were in the dormitories in the brick build behind the old wooden structure. It has been reported that historical documents may have been lost during this fire but there are no supporting documents to this claim.

1941 - The orphanage observed its 50th anniversary. This is well documented in photos and local newspapers. The founder of the orphanage, Reverend Mother Anna Piche, attended celebrations, which coincided with her 80th birthday. Bishop Thomas M. O’Leary celebrated a thanksgiving mass for the nuns at St. Joseph’s Church in Worcester.

1941 - L’Ami des Orphelins Society (The Friends of Orphans Society) gifted land and the “**Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes and St. Bernadette**” to St. Anne’s Orphanage. It is still located across from 133 Granite Street facing the orphanage. The grotto was once reputed to be one of the most beautiful Lourdes’ shrines in New England and was a popular devotional center for Worcester Catholics.

March 29, 1942 - A circular pool with a diameter of 75 feet was built by funds raised by the Harmony Club. The pool was set on a plot 350 by 200 feet. The land was graded and shrubbery aligned the walkway. It cost more than \$6,000. At the deepest point, the pool was four feet. A cement walkway, eight feet wide surrounded the pool, on which children would roller skate when there is no bathing.

March 29, 1942 – “There will always be orphans-in war and in peace-and we must take care of them.” There are 224 children, many of them orphaned, at St. Anne’s. The number of children has increased materially during the last few months. At present the house is filled to capacity. To feed those youngsters requires 816 loaves of bread each week. Fifty gallons of milk are required for one day. Sixteen pounds of butter are consumed each day. As yet, sugar is still plentiful and though the children use it carefully, they eat 300 pounds each week, which will be about their allotment when rationing begins. St. Anne’s is health conscious and nutrition is the rule. Cod liver oil is used by the barrel. The smallest children take it readily and about three gallons are licked down each week. These items are in addition to fruit, cereals, and all the other supplies necessary for well-rounded and varied meals. “Some mothers feel burdened when they must care for three or four children.” There are 224 children, many of them orphaned, at St. Anne’s. The staff, sisters and older children must work together to prepare and serve meals, make or make over clothes for children, buy shoes, see that the children get to school, that they have their daily naps when they are small, and plenty of sleep for all, as well as play time and snack times.

1947 - L’Ami des Orphelins Society (The Friends of Orphans Society) celebrated their 25th Anniversary with a banquet at St. Anne’s Orphanage.

Early 1951 - The provincial administration headquarters of the Grey Nuns (The Sisters of Charity) in the U.S, moved to St. Anne’s Orphanage, Worcester.

1951 – The resident population at St. Anne’s Orphanage was about 185: Boys ages 4-12 and Girls ages 4-16. Schooling up to the sixth grade. Then they attended either St. Joseph’s Parochial School or Ascension High School. Since the establishment of the orphanage many girls entered the order.

Sept. 16, 1951 – At a large ceremony four new play fields were dedicated by the Harmony Club of Worcester. The playgrounds are located to the side and rear of the orphanage. Two play areas in back of the building are for the younger children. They are equipped with swings and game devices. Two larger playgrounds to the side of St. Anne’s are for the older children. One contains a tennis and volleyball court and the other a softball and baseball diamond. The play areas were given by the Harmony Club of Worcester in honor of Mr. & Mrs. Archibald R. LeMieux, 53 Elm Street.

1950’s – The type of children began to change. The true ‘orphan’ turned to single parent boarders, then to plain unwanted and rejected children. The farm could no longer maintain itself with pigs and chickens. To keep up with the costs St. Anne’s gladly took in these boarders for a fee. The sisters felt their care would be preferable to the home situation

1957 – Many discussions were held about institutions like St. Anne's. From, "The institution is a panacea." To, "The institution is a monster." To the middle-ground, "It is useful in certain circumstances." A survey of agencies in Worcester recommended that the administration "must move to transform St. Ann's into an institution in which both charity and sound concepts of child care are present."

1959 – The Director of Catholic Charities, the Reverend Timothy J. Harrington, directed a change in the emphasis of the orphanage. New Concepts and approaches in child care were implemented. This meant changing from a non-selective policy to a selective policy. As a result, the number of children was sharply reduced. This was a milestone in that it re-focused the total program of St. Anne's Orphanage. The sisters were educated in the institutional child-care approach.

May 28, 1963 – A picture caption in a Worcester newspaper on Tuesday, May 28, 1963 - Page 27 stated that the "Unsafe and unhealthy conditions will force the wrecking soon of St. Anne's Orphanage's main building, outlined in the picture. The barns, included in the outline, are already being torn down." (See posted Clippings). The main building presently houses the kitchen and dining areas, a temporary chapel, and the administration operation of St. Anne's.

The out buildings were demolished at that time, but the main building remained for another 5 years as it would be needed a bit longer.

1963 - With the advent of foster home care replacing the orphanage, its old walls had seen a large decrease in youngsters who rapidly came and went. Rev. Msgr. Timothy J. Harrington, director of Catholic Charities, said the building would be torn down because age had brought with it unsafe and unhealthy conditions. In effect, the building had been condemned. The land was to be landscaped. Living quarters for the children, who were at St. Anne's then and afterward, was set up in the masonry building hidden from view by the wooden structure that bordered the street. The brick building, in the past, contained classrooms and a large dormitory. This building was completely renovated so that the children would have a homelike atmosphere in which to live. It accommodated approximately 52 children. A wing was added to this building for a new boiler and janitorial services.

Once a place where children came to live until they became adults, unless they were fortunate enough to be adopted the orphanage, became a temporary shelter for children coming from their own homes or hospitals and going into foster homes while adoptive parents waited eagerly to take them home.

During the 1960's the orphanage served not only this purpose but as emergency quarters for children who needed shelter. The shelter of the orphanage was extended to 10 Cuban children who had been sent to this country for safety by their parents who remained in Cuba. The Cuban children eventually found temporary homes in the Worcester community.

The orphanage introduced a new teen program. Bishop Flanagan told the Orphanage Lay Advisory Board that the program was one of a few in the New England area and unique in that it was a separate, self-contained unit at the home.

December 21, 1963 - A steam pipe located above the boiler and too close to the ceiling created a fire in the furnace room of the brick building. The fire soon spread to a first floor room in the rear of the building destroying Christmas Gifts for the 37 children presently living there.

May 16, 1966 - The name **St. Anne's Orphanage** was changed to **Mount St. Ann** to eliminate the "orphanage" tag. The institution is no longer an "orphanage" but a temporary residence for children from troubled homes. Even the children resented the term 'orphanage' resulting in behavior problems. Classes were no longer held in the building and the sisters and youngsters no longer conversed in French.

Dec. 31, 1966 - Sister Marie Doucette, S.G.M., Superior, told the board in her report that **as of Dec. 31, 1966, 10,727 children and infants had been cared for**, operated by the Grey Nuns - the Sisters of Charity of Montreal. Plans were made to tear down the old orphanage buildings that had been added over the years, and parts dating to its founding 75 years ago. Stating, "These changes keep in line with the services now provided by the home which gives mainly temporary care to children on their way to foster homes or other placements. Mount St. Ann is a non-sectarian agency and receives support of Community Services, in addition to private benefactors and the Catholic diocese."

1967 - Worcester Sunday Telegram March 26, 1967 page 22A

Picture Caption - Mount St. Ann, the former St. Anne's Orphanage on Granite Street, which is scheduled to be razed.

Note: Age brought with it unsafe and unhealthy conditions. In effect, the buildings had been condemned.

Note: The picture shown in the newspaper article was the building originally scheduled to be razed in 1963. It lasted for another 5 years as needs dictated. The old wooden main buildings along Granite Street, the large four story brick dormitory that was located to the rear of the main buildings and the entire grounds were leveled in 1968 so that the new Cottages of Mount St. Ann could be built.

April 8, 1967 - Before Mount St. Ann is razed there was a Final Reunion of 200-300 former residents of St. Anne's Orphanage 133 Granite Street. Worcester's biggest family whose members were separated by thousands of miles and three generations returned to Mount St. Ann (formally St. Anne's Orphanage) on April 8 to visit the home of their memories before it was razed after 75 years of bringing "love and charity". A banquet and dance was held that evening at the Driftwood Restaurant in Shrewsbury, Mass.

August 1968 - The 25 children living at the home were moved to the former Newman House of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester at 201 Salisbury Street. Most of the home's staff was moved to a smaller diocese owned building on Ward Street. The Ward Street building had served as headquarters for the local St. Vincent de Paul Society.

1968 - Demolition of the 1923 built, outmoded brick dormitory building was completed in the summer. Shortly afterwards the remaining buildings were torn down in preparation for five cottages (which could accommodate a total of 40 children) and an administration building, a one-story brick structure all costing \$900,000.

Oct. 16, 1968 - Groundbreaking ceremony for the new Mount St. Ann administration building and five cottages. Two cottages were for boys ages 5-12, two for girls ages 5-12, and the last for girls ages 13-16. The administration building housed a chapel, kitchen facilities, auditorium, social worker offices, administration offices and quarters for the Sisters of Charity

April 13, 1970 - The Grey Nuns and their charges moved into the new Mount St. Ann cottages. The official dedication was held on May 1, 1970

February, 1979 - The Calkins Report on the Mount St. Ann Child Care Center stated; since 1970, nearly eight years, the nuns have had no additions or replacements and none are foreseen. Being stretched in all capacities, they feel they can no longer maintain a long term presence here.

April 3, 1979 - The Diocese of Worcester assumed ownership and took over operation.

Jan. 15, 1983 - Diocese Closes Mount St. Ann was closed for good. After serving 92 years as a refuge for orphans, underprivileged, neglected or abused children, the Granite Street home was ordered by its board of directors to shut down because of "underutilization," according to the Rev. Edmond T. Tinsley, director of Catholic Charities. Father Edmond said the home had recently provided emergency child care through the state Department of Social Services. Two of the cottages were housing residents in Catholic Charities' half-way program for alcoholics who formerly lived in Crosier House on Chrome Street. Another cottage housed a large Asian refugee family and yet another was occupied by a mother and her seven children. Also on the site was the office of the Diocesan Coalition for Peace and Justice.

1983 - Mount St. Ann becomes the Christian Charities of Worcester Youville House

The founder of the Grey Nuns of Montreal, Mother d'Youville was born on Oct. 15, 1701 in the Province of Quebec, Canada. In 1959 Marguerite d'Youville was beatified (the first step to sainthood) by Pope John XIII who called her the "Mother of Universal Charity". She was canonized in 1990 by Pope John Paul II. Her name is now prominent at the 133 Granite street site.

1987 - The Grey Nuns cleaned out their possessions from their rented three-decker apartment on Chrome Street and bid good-bye to Worcester.

2015-2019 – As we visit the site at 133 Granite Street, we get a feeling of sadness and loss for the place we used to call home. We may have lived there for a week, a month, a year or two, or even until we passed on to adulthood. It was our home. Now the playground and pool area belongs to a private child care pre-school facility. The buildings of Mount St. Ann (Youville House) are falling prey to the weather and neglect and are scheduled to be demolished. The Grotto across the street hasn't seen kindness in many a year. It appears that as we grow older and lose the beauty of our youth, so does the home of our youth. At least we can share our memories.