The Grey Nuns of The Cross

The First Religious Order of Women in Ottawa

The Beginning February 20th, 1845

A Lower town street named Bolton, was named in memory of Major Daniel Bolton, of the Royal Engineers, who assisted Col. By in the building of the Rideau Canal and thus helped found the rugged little settlement in the wilderness that later became the city of Ottawa and the capital of all of Canada. Major Bolton also had another street named after him to, in addition to the one that exists today. [Ottawa Citizen, January 18th, 1984]

It was also in Lower Town, just two blocks from the present one. But in 1880 its name was changed to Water Street. In 1945, its name was changed again, to Bruyere Street, to honor the courageous Sister Elizabeth Bruyere, mother superior of one of the earliest hospitals here, the Nun’s Hospital, which later became Ottawa General Hospital.

One hundred years and seventy years ago, February 20th, 1845 to be exact, a strange little cavalcade arrived in Bytown by old Montreal Road. At the request of His Lordship Bishop Phelan, Bishop of Carrha, of Kingston, to whom the Oblate Fathers had made known the
necessity for a religious community the Grey Nuns of Montreal consented to found a house of their order in Bytown.

There were only four nuns, Sister Marie Elizabeth Bruyere, Sisters Thibodeau, Rodriguez and Charlebois were elected; being worthy daughters of Mother d'Youville, humbly accepted.
Mother Bruyere, 27 years old, had six years’ experience of religious life and of works of charity. Before entering the Novitiate, Mother Bruyere was already known as a capable educator. She was a cultured lady, of dignified presence, very pious and remarkably learned, said the clergy of those days. Sister Thibodeau, her assistant tall and stately, expert pharmacist, had remedies for all physical ills and the secret for comforting all who seek her charitable aid; she is the mother of the poor and afflicted. Sisters Rodriguez (Howard) and Charlebois were a little older than their superior – they were accompanied by a young postulant, and a young girl, who wish to devote themselves to the Bytown mission.

Reverend Father Telmon, O. M. I., Superior and Parish Priest, therefore much interested in the prosperity of his parish, was named by the Bishop to take charge of the little Community.
The 18th of February, 1845, finds the Reverend Father in Montreal, which meant that on the morrow the Grey Nuns would be on the road to Bytown, there to continue the good works of their foundress, the Venerable Mother d'Youville. After evening prayers, all eyes filled with tears, as with sore hearts, the adieux known to be final, for the Bishops have decided that the young Community should be detached from its Motherhouse. At dawn on the 19th, after holy mass and a last farewell, the travelers start on their long drive to Bytown. By evening they were in Petite Nation, where they were most hospitably entertained by the Papineau family. The next day, February 20th, when about three miles from the town, the Sisters noticed quite a procession coming to meet them. There were eighty cutters and carriages on the ice. On arriving at their destination, they were welcomed by the whole population, notwithstanding the inclemency of the weather.
After a short prayer in the church and the singing Te Deum, the Sisters were conducted to the Rectory which the Reverend Fathers had kindly given up to the Sisters, to be their home until the Convent was ready to receive them. Everyone wished to approach the Sisters and make their acquaintance. Two hundred persons were presented.

The Grey Nuns came to the town, with none of the goods of the world. The Bishop and Parish Priest were to supply their wants, until their motherhouse was built. The parishioners being aware of this generously came forward, one gentlemen presented the Superior with a beautiful ornamental iron cross, for the Convent Bell Tower; another, a shoemaker, offered to keep the nuns in shoes for a year; a third, a merchant, kindly informed the Sisters that he is their neighbor and at their service and promises to furnish their meals for three months. The Sisters were very favorably impressed by so much kindness and moreover they must consent to have their supper served by the First Ladies of the Town.

The joy and enthusiasm manifested at the arrival of these five religious nuns was because the occurrence was the fruit of heroic charity and was expected to have much influence on social and religious future of the region, as there was but one conducted by religious since 1841, that of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Kingston. The first evening was spent in the practice of charity preparing the wearing apparel of the Missionaries who were to leave for the shanties.

The next day the Sisters visited the two small adjoining cottages, their future home, at No.’s 163 & 165 on the north side of St. Patrick’s Street and 167 used as a hospital. The school was an outhouse 18 x 20 feet to which a story had been added.
On the 3rd of March 120 pupils stood in the spacious yard. At a given signal, all were in rank and on the way to church followed by their parents. On their return Mother Bruyere confided the English speaking pupils to Sister Rodriguez (Howard) and she herself took charge of the French group. The school bell joyously rang while the much impressed crowd retraced its steps homewards, feeling that something unusual had occurred.

On Sunday, March 9th, all of Bytown was astir to assist at the imposing ceremony of the blessing of the Convent, the School and two Bells, the larger weighing 30 lbs., was hung in the bell tower and sent afar its joyous sounds during the remainder of the ceremony.

On the 10th of March, in the early hours of the morning, the Sisters entered their home, Mass was offered for the first time and our Eucharist Lord took up his abode in the modest tabernacle, there to abide, near his chosen ones, their treasure, their faithful friend and comforter. Notwithstanding the conditions of the roads, we can imagine what it must have been in those days, visits to the poor and the sick were organized. The number of these increasing daily, a small hospital was opened, and the Sisters, too few for the work, sacrificed their night’s rest in order to accomplish their self-imposed tasks.

But a greater trial awaited the Sisters when in June, 1847; numerous Irish emigrants arrived, bringing with them the germs of the dread disease, Typhus Fever. The Sisters received 6, 7, even 10 patients a day, and the place being too small to admit more, the Government furnished military tents. The schools were closed and the Sisters devoted themselves to the care of the sick. One of the Sisters was taken ill, and then they were abandoned by the public, too much afraid of the disease to approach them. Nevertheless the Sisters continued to care for the unfortunates who lay there without home, without money, without friends. Each of the Sisters was stricken in turn.

Mother Bruyere was at death’s door, but God had pity on his daughters and heard their prayers. She was restored to health. With the coming of autumn the epidemic ceased and the
Sisters reopened their schools, happy to have devoted themselves for Him who has said “Whatsoever ye do to the least of mine you do to myself.”

In 1849, notwithstanding the small means at their disposal, Mother Bruyere began the building of the Convent on Water Street. Providence came to her aid and all the works undertaken progressed as the following statistics show.

The hospital, opened in 1845, transferred to a larger one in 1850, is at present the modern up-to-date General Hospital on Water Street. 4,063 patients were received during the past year (as of 1926 when this article was written). A competent medical staff composed of Specialists’, Pathologists, Anesthetists, Radiologists, etc., etc., are in attendance. The splendid operating rooms contain all the necessary surgical instruments. The X Rays Department gives entire satisfaction as well as the Specialists Department and the Dispensary of the poor, which is marvellously equipped and where 2,180 poor patients were treated during the year. A system of luminous jets replaces the electric bells in the patients’ rooms, a central telephone system, etc., etc.
MIKAN 3299423, **View from Victoria Tower, Parliament Hill**
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**Water Street Hospital, March, 1899. Ottawa, Ont.**
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Ottawa General Hospital, Water Street CA022688
1937 after Annex was added

Miss Kathleen Delaney's class of 1912 graduation photo from the Ottawa General Hospital.

MIKAN no. 3604064

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The boarding school, inspired by Bishop Guigues, was begun in 1849 in the first convent. The space was so limited that the Sisters gave up their rooms and took refuge in a nearby, cold, damp house. In 1860 the boarders moved to Water Street, although the building was unfinished, and thence to Rideau Street in 1869, where it grew rapidly, especially after Bytown became Ottawa, Capital of Canada. Both English and French were taught, the courses being parallel. The school is affiliated to the Ottawa University, and already several pupils are preparing their B.S.’s. (Remember this was written in August 1926) The pupils number 400. In June 1926, the total number of pupils taught by the Grey Nuns of the Cross in their different schools amounted to 20,000, of whom over 5,000 are in the City of Ottawa.
Rideau Street Convent Chapel.

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Old R. C. College of Ottawa. On Wilbrod, between Cumberland and Waller.
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Couvent de Notre-Dame, 34 - 38 Gloucester Street, Ottawa. - Apr. 1886

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St. Joseph’s Orphanage, after being moved from one house to another, as to the number of orphans increased, on the 8th of September, 1869, the Magnificat was sung and in the fine building erected on Mount St. Antoine, to which an annex was added and is today (1926) the home of over 250 orphans.
Mother Bruyere had given up three rooms of the old house for use of the poor orphans whose parents had died during the epidemic of 1847. In 1866 a house was rented and the English speaking children were brought there, which was the beginning of St. Patrick’s Home. The benefactors formed a committee and the Sister’s took charge.
In 1872, the beautiful building on Maria and Kent Streets was erected; since the committee has made many improvements, and the Home is a credit to them and the city. St. Charles Home for the aged was founded in 1871. In 1886 a wing was added, in 1895, a stone building, four stories high, containing a chapel, seemed a suitable home. God’s blessing is on
the work, which has known poverty, contagious disease, and trials of all kinds. Today one can see an imposing building adjoining the old one. Unfortunately the lack of means makes it an arduous task for the Sisters who count on Providence to inspire charitable souls to come to their assistance. There are 250 old people of both sexes in the Home, who daily pray for their benefactors.

Fire Insurance Map for St. Patrick’s Asylum, 1900

Fire Insurance Map for St. Patrick’s Asylum, 1912
St. Patrick’s Asylum October 1874
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St. Patrick’s Asylum October 1874 Ottawa
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Aerial 1940 by the Government
Realizing that only a small number of incurables could be admitted to St. Charles Home, our worthy Archbishop, Right Rev. Bishop Emard, conceived the idea of a special home for these unfortunate patients. Accordingly a large dwelling house, former residence of Senator Parent, was purchased and the Sisters requested by the Archbishop to take charge. This institution appeals to all and is under the patronage of St. Vincent. Already the need for a
more spacious building is felt, for many applicants are sorrowfully refused admittance on account of the limited space at the disposal of the Sisters.

Much more could be written about these works of mercy, but for the present we must refrain for want of space and time.

Transcribed by Taylor Kennedy, from Ottawa Citizen, August 14, 1926 written by A FORMER PUPIL

No name was given
Prologue

Mother Bruyere passed on April 5th, 1876 in which the aforementioned story narrates her accomplishments and it didn’t end there.

MIKAN no. 3434563

Date(s) May 1876  – should be April 5th, 1876 – Mother Elizabeth Bruyere

Place Ottawa, Ont.

Good chance Sister Thibodeau is on the left

Credit: Topley Studio / Library and Archives Canada
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My interest in the History of Ottawa relates to a hobby in genealogy and my early life there but the Grey Nuns are on a personal note to me, as my Aunt Rita has devoted her entire life unselfishly to assisting the needy, working in Nursing, educated in Ottawa and Washington, D.C., then residing in Sudbury as Director of St. Joseph’s Hospital, with the Grey Nuns of the Immaculate Conception. She resides presently in Pembroke, under the watchful eyes of her religious Sisters, at a prime age of 95 years this May, still very alert and willing to give.
Behind 73 Critchen St. Ottawa, Ontario about 1935

February 2015, Pembroke, Ont.
The growth of the Community that arrived in 1845 has simply amazed me to what was accomplished with sacrifices of the Nuns and assistance from the Parish and Towns People. An urgent and rapid growth of aid, housing, education, medical and guidance has changed the appearances of Ottawa and the World throughout. However the enrollment from years ago through to now has dwindled severely, making me wonder what the future holds for this Religious Community and for us the recipients of this kindness.

In this research, I became aware this week about how the Water Street Hospital aided my Great Great Grandfather, Charles Dubois, in his dying hours. It was a story handed down by family but strictly by accident I came upon the short story in the Ottawa Citizen, dated June 4th, 1902 and reads as follows;

**BEAR’S VICTIM DEAD.**

**The Aged Gatineau Trapper Expires in the Water Street Hospital.**

Charles Dubois, the unfortunate trapper who was mangled by a bear which he had trapped back of Wakefield, Que., died at 5 o’clock yesterday at the Water Street hospital. He was 76 years old and leaves a large family. A granddaughter is employed at Dr. Argue’s in this city. The body was taken to Wakefield for burial.

The case was one of the worst that has ever come to the Water Street hospital. The trapper was mangled and lacerated beyond the power of words to describe. The fingers of the left hand were crushed to a pulp by the bear’s teeth and several of the ribs were broken. The poor old fellow was unconscious nearly all the time he was in the hospital, and it is a matter of surprise to the hospital officials that he survived so long. This is partly accounted for by the fact that he had led an out-door life since youth and was a very strong man.
The Water Street Hospital did experience a fire on January 10th, 1918, that resulted in renovations and having an Annex constructed, as seen in the 1937 picture previously shown. Today the Hospital connects to the Motherhouse on Sussex and connects to the Nurses residences on the East consuming Parent Lane once called Barrette Street.

Many of the buildings shown in this story have disappeared forever, but I wanted to keep them alive through this paper and especially in your memory.

Taylor Kennedy – February 20th, 2015 – 170 years after their arrival.