

Past *Forward*

PROVIDENCE ARCHIVES NEWSLETTER

Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province • Providence Health & Services

Statue Made by Mother Joseph Comes Home

Loretta Greene

What would be your reaction if I said that Mother Joseph made concrete statues? Dubious? That was the Archives staff's first response when we were told that a concrete St. Joseph statue made by Mother Joseph was in storage in Portland, Oregon. After twists and turns of research that uncertainty was turned into a kernel of truth and finally the realization of fact.

In November 2012, Sister Andrea Nenzel, CSJP, from PeaceHealth, the new sponsors of the former St. Joseph Hospital, Vancouver, founded by the Sisters of Providence in 1858, contacted me regarding a concrete St. Joseph statue in

storage. Sister Andrea offered us the piece; otherwise it would be disposed of. She provided a newspaper article from 1970 showing the statue, attributed to Mother Joseph, at the groundbreaking of the new community hospital. From chronicles we knew that a statue of St. Joseph was created in relation to a flood of the Columbia River. Could this be it? The archives staff began research in earnest.

Providence Academy chronicles were the first source. In flowing French script the annalist provided a detailed account of the June 6, 1894 flood and its aftermath, Mother Joseph's creative solution to raise money, and dedication of a concrete statue with 'St. Joseph

of the Flood' engraved on the base. (Read chronicles on the following pages.)

The chronicles were silent about the statue until 1934 when the sisters at St. Joseph Hospital record its return. Some years after 1895, it was given to a local woman and after her death the statue was eventually returned to the sisters who recognized its historic nature because of the engraving on the base. After repairing the statue they placed it in the garden of the nurses' home. With these clues of year and place Peter Schmid, visual resources archivist, found a photograph of a statue on a pedestal nestled under a tree in the garden. Now

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St. Joseph Statue

Picturing Providence

50 Years Ago...

The Great Flood of 1894

The "Great Flood of 1894" is the highest flood ever recorded along the Columbia River. On June 7, the official flood level at Vancouver was 34.4 feet. For



This photo, showing the aftermath of the Great Flood on the bank of the Columbia River, belonged to Charles Williams. The steamer Undine is shown here along with several houses and other buildings flooded to the first floor. Photo courtesy of Clark County Historical Museum, cchm04127.

perspective, the measured peak water flow at The Dalles, Oregon, which is 72 miles upriver from Vancouver, was enough to cover a football field with water 1,500 feet deep in 1 minute. Towns along the Columbia were wiped out; bridges, roads and railroad track were washed away; public utilities were downed.

At this time, the Sisters of Providence had two major ministries in Vancouver: Providence Academy and St. Joseph Hospital. The sisters also managed a small farm which over the years increased to 197 acres of riverfront property. It was named "St. Joseph Farm."

Every year, due to spring rain and melting winter snow it

was not unusual for the waters of the Willamette and Columbia rivers to rise and potentially flood. During the winter of 1893-1894 the snowfall was particularly heavy and the spring rain intense.

Charles Williams, one of Mother Joseph's 8-year-old orphan boys, later recalled, "The Columbia River began to rise until it overflowed its banks and our farm began to disappear under the water. Mother had everyone pray for relief but it continued to rise until we had to remove most of the stock and equipment from the farm." The Providence Academy chronicles later in this issue describe the devastation the farm encountered. ♦

Picturing Providence: St. Joseph of the Flood Through Time

Peter F. Schmid

A column highlighting archival materials that provide visual documentation of the Sisters of Providence.

Rare photograph of a barn on the sisters' farm in Vancouver, circa 1920s. Image #22.E12.1.



1941

1920

Nursing students relax on the edge of a pond, with St. Joseph of the Flood at its center, 1950. In addition to the new pond, a birdbath and more elaborate pedestal have been added. From School of Nursing yearbook, "The White Cap."



1966

1950



This first known image of St. Joseph of the Flood shows the statue on a simple pedestal in the garden outside the St. Joseph Hospital School of Nursing in the 1940s. The three-story building at right was opened on May 25, 1941; at left is the original School of Nursing building. Image #23.A5.3.



First color image of the statue, after removal of the pond, 1966. Image #23.A4.011.

Breaking ground for the new St. Joseph Hospital, Vancouver, Wash., June 22, 1970, with the statue at right. From left, Mayor Lloyd Stromgren, Mrs. Samuel Osborn (partially hidden), and Mrs. James Woolery. The caption notes that "Statue was made by Mother Joseph and was moved from the present St. Joseph Hospital." Clipping from the "Columbian" newspaper, June 22, 1970.



1972

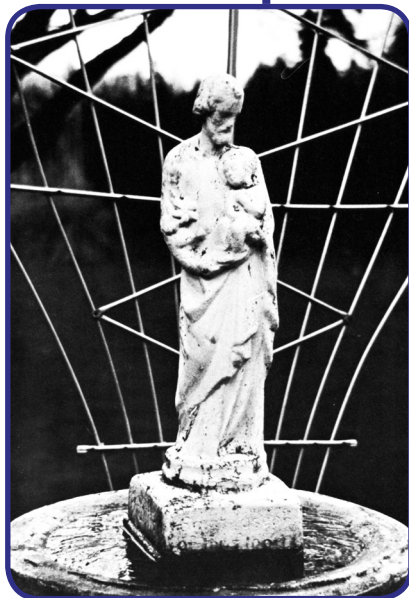
1970

The statue was crated and placed in storage in Portland, Ore., until it was returned to the religious community by way of Providence Archives.



2014

1974-2013



St. Joseph of the Flood, showing significant wear, as captured by photographer Chuck Palmer in his 1972 photo essay, "St. Joseph Community Hospital."



Sister Judith Desmarais, Provincial Superior of Mother Joseph Province, blesses the newly-restored statue on March 19, the Feast of St. Joseph, at Saint Joseph Residence, Seattle. Photo by Sister Felma Cerezo.

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that we knew what to look for he and Emily Dominick, associate archivist, found more images of the statue throughout the years.

Since we still had not seen the crated figure, I went to the warehouse in Portland. Although the crate covered the base so the engraved dedication was not visible, the statue was the same as the one in the historic images. Were there any sisters who remembered the statue? Though all the sisters who served at the hospital are deceased, two graduates from the school of nursing, Sister Germaine Chabot and Sister Maryann Bochsler, as well as a few other sisters, fondly remembered the statue in the nurses' garden and the story that Mother Joseph created it. They also recalled the sisters giving the statue to the new community hospital for good luck and were excited at the prospect of its return.

Armed with this documentary evidence we were convinced that the statue was authentic. But why was it in storage? A possible answer is in a 1974 newspaper article describing a local petition that the hospital remove the statue as well as disavow Catholic affiliation. We believe at this point the piece was removed from the hospital grounds.

To acquire the statue we were fortunate to have the generous help of Dave Smith, Scott Moisant and Doug Spencer, engineers at Providence Portland Medical Center. The piece was transported to their work area and being extremely careful not to damage the statue, they separated it from the pillar using a Sawzall. Providentially, this was June 5, 2013, one day prior to the anniversary of the flood crest on June 6. The next week Peter transported the statue from Portland to the Archives. Upon examination the statue was weather worn and needed conservation work. (See related article.)

Because of its historic importance and spiritual meaning to the Sisters of Providence it was important to display the statue in a public area. Sister Jacqueline Fernandes, administrator, and Sister Kaye Belcher, assistant administrator, Saint Joseph Residence, agreed to place the restored statue in the Residence lobby. On March 19, 2014, the feast of St. Joseph, the statue was rededicated and blessed by Sister Judith Desmarais, provincial superior, in a ceremony attended by sisters and friends in the Residence chapel. You are most welcome to see the statue in the lobby on your next visit to Saint Joseph Residence.

It is exciting to know that with all the documentation discovered, this statue, St. Joseph of the Flood of June 1894, has some of the best information to directly relate it to Mother Joseph. In addition, it proves that we never know what other hidden gems of Providence history are waiting to be discovered. ♦

The Flood, Providence Academy Chronicles, 1894

We end our chronicles with a sad tale of the flood.

Never, it is said, has the country recorded such a big disaster caused by water. Everyone expected a flood but no one thought that the water would rise to such a degree. The rivers began to overflow May 26 and the water continued to rise.... The Columbia was like a sea in the middle of covered houses and tree tops. At Vancouver, the water rose 34 feet, 2 inches. Many families were forced to abandon their homes. The harvest was totally buried under the water. Bridges and boats were swept away by the fury of the water. It is impossible to describe all the disaster caused by the overflow of the water, not only at Vancouver but in all the country.

I will not pass over in silence certain details concerning our own losses. Although we lost all the produce of our farm, our only resources for our orphans, we did not become discouraged; we know that we have a Father in heaven who watches over his children. What appears to be a real misfortune for our house, is perhaps a great benefit of his goodness because is not God richness himself?

Now if you desire to know the state we found our farm after the disaster, here are some details: A beautiful large cultivated farm all seeded with wheat, barley, oat, potatoes, corn; an immense garden filled with abundant vegetables and fruit trees; a green field for grazing our animals - here is what perished. Our two houses, our barns and all the other outbuildings were shaken; four of these buildings were swept away and most of the fences and 24 fruit trees. The field itself is unrecognizable; it is only holes, a mass of debris of all kinds brought by the water. For six weeks our animals roamed here and there where we could find them a little pasture. Some of our pigs have been stolen, no doubt by people who had need.

How much Mother Joseph of the Sacred Heart expended to prevent greater losses. She moved all which could be moved; attaching the houses to trees with cables; transporting the animals in time, seeing that all the machinery was safe. It is without doubt the excess fatigue that made her so sick for two weeks to the point that we were worried.

Protecting the Statue for the Future: Cleaning and Conservation

Shortly after acquiring St. Joseph of the Flood, we contacted fine art conservator Linda Roundhill. She determined that the object had been painted at least four times in various hues of white and cream, and that several well-meaning restorations had been done as well, obscuring original details. Surface cracks and gouges from constant weather exposure provided space for algae and moss to grow, particularly at bottom where the birdbath had been.

Linda first cleaned the statue and removed buckled paint by hand using a small rotary tool. She estimated that a pound of material was removed! Accretions of paint, resin and plaster were reduced, and the piece re-surfaced with a stable spackle compound which further smoothed the surface. An acrylic emulsion paint completed the restoration to the much more attractive statue now on display. ♦



BEFORE CONSERVATION



AFTER CONSERVATION

Blessing of the Statue, Providence Academy Chronicles, 1895

For the honor and glory of St. Joseph, we cannot omit here the special protection that we received from him during the disaster caused by last spring's flood, the effects which were visible for several months. To be assisted in our present need, to find a way to repair all that had been destroyed on the farm, and to make it capable to farm again, it was necessary to make expenditures exceeding our budget. This was impossible to consider! But the tireless Mother Joseph, in her ardor, found a successful strategy: she molded statues of St. Joseph and sent one to each of our houses, advising them that when it reached its destination to send back a small donation to rebuild fences and repair other farm damage.

St. Joseph did not fail as our sisters graciously answered his call for a generous gift.

In memory of this benefit, on March 19, feast of our good father St. Joseph, there was installed a statue of 4 feet, made in concrete by Mother Joseph and placed at the top of the farm house. On the base of this statue are written the words, "St. Joseph of the Flood, pray for us!"

This title, a little original, was given by our Mother General on Mother Joseph's request when she wrote of her anxieties. The afternoon of the 19th, Mr. G.V. Schram, and two other priests went to the farm where they proceeded to the blessing of the house, of the statue, the animals and the farm. Our sisters present at this reunion said that it was a truly imposing ceremony. May the good St. Joseph continue his powerful protection.

50 Years Ago...The Good Friday Earthquake

The 8.2 magnitude earthquake which struck Chile on April 1, 2014, was a grim reminder of an earthquake in Alaska 50 years ago on March 27, 1964. The 9.2 Good Friday Earthquake, which lasted four minutes and 38 seconds, was the second most powerful in recorded history. The quake caused liquefaction, ground fissures, and collapsed buildings throughout south-central Alaska, particularly in the population center of Anchorage. Fifteen people died as a direct result of the quake; 124 people died in tsunamis caused by the temblor.

The new campus of Providence Hospital at Goose Lake had just been completed in 1962, and suffered relatively minor damage. The hospital was able to provide emergency care and shelter to hundreds in the area; Chronicles record that "Our hospital seemed like a beacon in the darkened city."

For more images, search "earthquakes" on our digital collections database at <http://providencearchives.contentdm.oclc.org/>. ♦



A Sister of Providence surveys damage on the day following the Good Friday Earthquake in Anchorage, March 28, 1964. Image #160.F21.2.

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