

# Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (Cowlitz, Washington) records

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## *Collection Finding Aid*

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## OVERVIEW OF RECORDS

**Repository:** Providence Archives, Mother Joseph Province, Seattle, Washington

**Creator:** Sisters of Providence, Mother Joseph Province

**Record Group Name:** Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, Cowlitz, Washington

**Record Group Number:** 55

**Dates:** 1876-1978

**Scope and Content:** The Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School collection comprises chronicles, financial files, statistical reports, and brief histories of the mission complex and settlement of the Cowlitz Prairie. Materials in the collection date from 1876 to 1978, with the bulk from 1876 to 1897. There are no student records, although a few families are mentioned by name in the chronicles and receipts ledger.

**Extent:** Approximately 0.5 linear feet

## HISTORICAL NOTE

In 1876, the Sisters of Providence founded Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School on the Cowlitz Prairie, near present-day Toledo, Washington. The school did not flourish, but the sisters served the community in other ways, preparing children for the sacraments, visiting families in their homes, and providing food to people in need. Despite isolation and poverty, the sisters remained in Cowlitz for twenty-two years.

In 1866, at the request of the Reverend Charles Richard, OMI, the Sisters of Providence agreed to open a school for girls on the historic Cowlitz Prairie. Home to the Cowlitz tribe, the prairie was also the site of the Hudson Bay Company's farm, one of the earliest white settlements in Washington Territory, and the territory's first Catholic mission and church, named St. Francis Xavier.

Father Richard arranged for construction of a school and convent next to the church, but when the sisters' arrival was delayed, the project was abandoned. Almost ten years later, the Reverend Peter Hylebos, who had replaced Father Richard at St. Francis Xavier Mission, renewed the request for sisters. The religious community had withdrawn from its school in nearby Steilacoom in June 1875, for lack of students and financial support, so several sisters were available to begin the new school on the prairie.

The Most Reverend A.M.A. Blanchet, Bishop of the Diocese of Nesqually, deeded a portion of the original mission land grant to the sisters, and Father Hylebos supervised the completion of the two-story convent and school with magnificent views of Mount St. Helens and Mount Rainier. The foundation was dedicated to Notre Dame de Sacre Coeur, Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. It was the eighth school founded by the Sisters of Providence in the twenty years since their arrival in the west.

The first two sisters arrived on September 13, 1876, traveling from Vancouver, Washington, by boat, train, and wagon. Sisters Mary of the Rosary, Superior, and Mary Hyacinth were joined later by Miss Honorah O'Brien, a former novice in the religious community, who had volunteered to take the boys' class for one year, and a third sister to teach the girls. (Although the chronicles indicate that this third sister was Sister Louis de Gonzague, other records indicate it was Sister Mary Aloysius.) School opened November 13, 1876, following completion of the building.

The majority of the students were French Canadian Catholics, many the metis descendents of Cowlitz women and early white settlers. In April 1877, the sisters accepted a three-year contract with the local school district for \$40 per month. The chronicles note that nearly sixty students were admitted at that time, but statistical reports indicate only about half this number remained through the term of the contract.

Throughout the school's history, enrollment fluctuated widely and attendance was sporadic, in the fall because of the harvest in the nearby hop fields and in the winter due to illness and bad weather. Many children stayed only long enough to prepare for their First Communion and then returned to their families.

Income also fluctuated, and after the district contract expired, the school brought in little from tuition. The sisters and their orphan charges subsisted on alms and income from a variety of boarders: students, the pastor, occasional visitors, and a few elderly lodgers. Private music lessons brought a little additional income, as did the annual bazaar. The sisters also kept a farm and raised poultry, hogs, and cattle, providing food for the mission and selling the surplus.

Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School was on the verge of closure when enrollment improved in the late 1880s. A wing was added to the building in 1892, and the sisters embraced the expanded academic curriculum implemented throughout Providence schools in the west in 1894. This revival was short-lived, however, and the school on the prairie became increasingly impoverished, both financially and spiritually. As Catholic churches were established in nearby towns, the resident priest became less available to say Mass at the mission, while the opening of a public high school and the lingering effects of the 1893 depression added to the sisters' financial concerns.

The decision to close the school at the end of the 1897-1898 term is not documented in the chronicles or other extant records. The sisters were simply reassigned to other missions. Perhaps the community hoped to return when financial conditions improved, but it was not until 1911 that the school reopened, under the sponsorship of the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Charity, of Stella Niagara, New York. Renamed St. Mary's Academy and completely rebuilt over the years, the school continued to serve the people of the Cowlitz Prairie into the 1970s.

## ARRANGEMENT

The record group is divided into X series: *list individual series*. Also mention if the series have been further divided into sub-series.

## ADMINISTRATIVE INFORMATION

**Restrictions:** Providence Archives is a private repository. Access to some records is at the discretion of the archivist.

**Preferred Citation:** [Title of cited item]. [Series Name]. Providence Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School, Cowlitz, Washington. Record Group 55. Providence Archives, Seattle, Washington.

**Acquisition Information:** These records were transferred to the Archives from the Sisters of Providence Provincial Administration, Sacred Heart Province.

**Related Record Groups and Other Collections:** A series of letters from the Reverend Peter Hylebos, 1875-1879, primarily regarding donation of land and construction of the school, is found in the personal papers of Sister Praxedes of Providence, Vicar of the Vicariate of Nesqually, Vancouver, Washington.

A property survey drawn in September 1919 by Sister Anatolie is found in the oversize ledger entitled *Inventaires des Immeubles de la Province du Sacre-Coeur* (Inventory of Buildings of Sacred Heart Province).

A detailed description of the curriculum adopted by the province in 1894 for all of its schools is found in the records of the education apostolate of Sacred Heart Province.

In addition to the paper records, Providence Archives holds a photograph collection and artifact collection.

**Processing Information:** Records arranged and described by Terri Mitchell, Assistant Archivist in 2001. A small number of photographs are housed and catalogued separately. A clipping from an unidentified newspaper, in which "M.C.R." exhorts local families to "Send the Girls to School" at Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart (November 24, 1884) is found in Sacred Heart Province scrapbook, c.1876-1912, p. 2.

## BOX AND FOLDER LIST

### History

This series includes two sets of chronicles detailing the activities of the sisters and the school. Set 1 covers the sisters' entire tenure at the school, 1876 to 1898, while Set 2 begins with the 1881-1882 term. The chronicles are brief, usually 2-4 pages per year, and hand-written in French. They provide interesting information and comments on daily life at the school as well as special events, visitors, religious celebrations, etc. Only a few students are mentioned by name.

"The Way it Was in Cowlitz Prairie," is a chapter from the book entitled *The Way it Was in Providence Schools*, by Sister Dorothy Lentz, published in 1978. It provides a narrative history of the school, drawn primarily from the chronicles. Some of the details conflict with other sources and appear to be errors in translation.

Box	Folder	Title
1	1	Chronicles, 1877-1898 (set 1)
1	2	Chronicles, 1881-1898 (set 2)
1	3	Chronicles, Correspondence, 1893
1	4	"The Way it Was in Cowlitz Prairie," Sister Dorothy Lentz, 1978

### Financial

Financial records, spanning 1877-1906, include deeds, correspondence related to acquisition and sale of property, and receipts for taxes and improvements to the property. Also found here are two ledgers in which are recorded the monthly receipts and expenses of the school and convent. The receipt ledger includes the names of some boarding students.

Box	Folder	Title
1	5	Deeds and Correspondence, 1877-1923
1	6	Receipts, Taxes and Improvements, 1893-1906
1	v1	Receipts, 1876-1898
1	v2	Expenses, 1876-1898

### Reports

The combined Personnel and Works/Annual Financial Reports, compiled for the religious community, provide valuable statistical and financial data for each year from 1876 to 1897.

Box	Folder	Title
1	7	Personnel and Works/Annual Financial Report, 1876-1897

### Subject Series

This series contains selected articles on the early Cowlitz Prairie settlers, St. Francis Xavier Mission, and St. Mary Academy, which was established by the Sisters of St. Francis in 1911. The two issues of "Prairie Lite" (1936, 1938), published by the students at St. Mary Academy, feature the history of the area and Providence of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart School. The St. Francis Xavier Mission folder includes information on the mission's centennial pageant (1939), in which the Sisters of Providence participated.

Box	Folder	Title
1	8	Cowlitz Prairie Settlement
1	9	St. Francis Xavier Mission

- 1     10     St. Mary Academy, History
- 1     11     St. Mary Academy, Publications, "Prairie Lite," 1936, 1938