

## **“A NEW BEGINNING”**

### **WELCOME TO ST. MARY’S SEWANEE**

The 77<sup>th</sup> annual conference of the Episcopal Churchmen of Tennessee will be held July 21-23, 2023, at St. Mary’s Sewanee. St. Mary’s has had a presence since 1888 at Sewanee, high atop the Cumberland Plateau on what is known as Monteagle Mountain or Sewanee Mountain and which I refer to as the “Tennessee Holy Land.”

The first monastic vows in modern times, by women, in the Church of England were taken in 1841. In 1845, the first vows were taken in America in New York City at the Church of the Holy Communion, but the Sisterhood of the Holy Communion was not formally organized until 1852 and disbanded in 1858. One of the Sisters, Harriet Starr Cannon, was a lifelong friend of Charles Todd Quintard, both having grown up in Connecticut. Dr. Quintard received his medical degree in Connecticut in 1847, practiced briefly in Athens, Georgia and in 1851 became a professor at the Memphis Medical College. Under the influence of James Hervy Otey, Tennessee’s first Bishop, Dr. Quintard was ordained Deacon in 1855 and Priest in 1856. Bishop Otey died in 1863 and following service in the Confederate Army as both a Chaplain and a Surgeon, the Rev. Dr. Quintard was consecrated second Bishop of Tennessee in 1865 and opened the junior department, in 1868, at what was to become the University of the South at Sewanee and he is credited with getting the University open and functioning as a great school. The Sisterhood of St. Mary was formally organized in New York in 1865, with Sister Harriet as a founder and first elected “Mother Superior,” and is the oldest continuing Anglican order in America.

The Sisters of St. Mary functioned primarily in New York with the Mother House at Peekskill, but Bishop Quintard contacted Mother Harriet in 1867 about his plans to establish a home in Memphis for children orphaned by the War and sent a Memphis debutante, who became Sister Martha, to her for training. Bishop Quintard elevated St. Mary’s Church in Memphis to the status of Cathedral in 1871 and soon reorganized the former St. Mary’s School for Girls under the authority of his friend Mother Superior Harriet in New York. The school began in the Bishop’s former residence west of the Cathedral when he moved to a healthier climate at Sewanee in 1872. The legitimate successor of this school is St. Mary’s Episcopal School in Memphis, however, the Sisters ceased their involvement in 1910 and withdrew to Sewanee.

Mother Superior Harriet sent four nuns to Memphis, Sister Constance, as Superior, and Sisters Martha, Thecla and Huggetta, a sister of Colonel R.B. Snowden of Memphis and benefactor of St. Mary's School for many years. The school was open in the fall of 1873, but a yellow fever epidemic reached Memphis and the Sisters shifted from teaching to nursing. The epidemic was rather mild and the school prospered for five years until the severe epidemic of 1878. Three additional nuns were sent from New York to Memphis and four of the seven nuns died, Constance, Thecla, Frances and Ruth. Sister Superior Constance and her three companions became known as the "Martyrs of Memphis." Cool weather killed the mosquitoes and the epidemic ended and the school reopened.

Mother Harriet visited Bishop Quintard at Sewanee in 1887 and a school for local mountain people and a summer retreat for the Sisters in Memphis were discussed. A 100 acre farm with the Hayes homestead, just east of the present St. Mary's, was leased from the University and the first Sisters arrived in 1888, with the formal dedication of St. Mary's-on-the-Mountain on August 6<sup>th</sup>. The 100 acres were the first of three distinct campuses of St. Mary's. Soon a whistle stop on the railroad from Cowan, complete with a Victorian platform known as "Summer House," appeared. Several Sisters lived at St. Mary's permanently and others from Memphis and New York would spend the summers. A chapel was constructed in the Hayes home and a small private cemetery was laid out and fenced, where several Sisters are buried.

From these humble beginnings on the Mountain in 1888, but with rich heritages of service and sacrifice in New York and Memphis, the Sisters of St. Mary's opened a school for mountain girls in 1896. Shortly thereafter, literacy classes for interested men, women and older children began. In 1909, the Hayes house burned and the Sisters started developing a new campus with stone structures on 200 acres purchased west of and off of the University domain. This was the second of the three campuses. The Sisters arrived from Memphis in 1910 and more development occurred including St. Elizabeth's convent, a large stone home, now privately owned and known as "The Cloister".

St Mary's greatest accomplishment since 1888 was the operation of a fully accredited preparatory school for girls from 1940 through 1967, with most of the students being boarding students from throughout Tennessee and the South. The administration and most teachers were Sisters with a few paid teachers and support staff. This school was an academic compliment to the boys' schools at Sewanee Military Academy and St. Andrew's. Most of the University

professors' daughters went to St. Mary's and the girls provided the boys at these two schools and at the University with dates to the many social events on all four campuses. The Mother Superior General in New York abruptly closed the school at the time of graduation in 1967. The University was able to operate the school for 1967-1968. This was on the third of the three campuses, which is the present St. Mary's Sewanee..

St. Andrew's used St. Gabriel's, the large two story building erected in 1965, for a dormitory for a few years. A local physician proposed to lease it and the one-story classroom building, St. Joseph's, to establish a senior citizens' residence and a nursing home, respectively and modified St. Gabriel's by installing the long interior ramps. Unfortunately, the physician died in an accident in 1971 ending these plans. The Sisters sold St. Elizabeth's and moved to St. Gabriel's and opened a small retreat center. The other lovely stone buildings were vacant, deteriorating, virtually uninsurable and did not fit into the Sisters' plans for the retreat center. The buildings were offered for sale, but there was no interest and they were eventually demolished except for the sacristy of the chapel, which became a guest hermitage just east of St. Gabriel's, and the school barn south of the public road.

The Sisters had second thoughts about their retreat center ministry in the 1980's, desiring to return to a life centered on contemplation and prayer and offered to sell most of the property, in order to construct a new, more private convent nearby. The Diocese of Tennessee was approached but was not interested. Dr. Robert M. Ayers, Vice Chancellor of the University, proposed that an independent corporation be organized to buy the property which was done in 1987. Today, the property is operated as St. Mary's Sewanee with the subtitle of The Ayers Center for Spiritual Development. The large two-story Anna House has been built adding several rooms with baths for retreat attendees.

The Sisters retained 43 acres and used the proceeds of the sale to construct a chapel consecrated on August 6, 1988, the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original dedication of St. Mary's-on-the-Mountain and a convent and accessory building, which were dedicated a few months later. The 43-acres face due South and looks off the bluff at miles of uninhabited forest in contrast to the view of the Cowan and Winchester valley from the other side of the bluff near St. Gabriel's which the Sisters called New Hope. The chapel functions as an Episcopal Church and all services, conducted according to the Book of Common Prayer, are open to visitors. Currently, there are four Sisters at the convent.

Much of the material in this short history is from the book, “Saint Mary’s - The Sewanee Sisters and Their School,” published in 2018 by Dr. Waring McCrady, a retired Professor of French at the University of the South, to whom credit is hereby given for his scholarly research and creative writing. This book is available for purchase in the lobby of St. Gabriel’s.

Allen Nohsey  
St. James, Union City

Attendee since 1981  
Past President, 2009

Good Friday, 2023