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New Jersey Catholic Historical Commission

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Doctor, ambulance driver, and assistant pose with the new motorized ambulance of St. Mary's Hospital, Hoboken, in early years of this century. The photograph is among the memorabilia of archdiocesan institutions recently accessioned at Seton Hall University.
Guest Archivist

August 9, 1925 - I begin to hear crickets under my window after dark. I love their chirping. There was one in this room of mine, in a corner, last year and the woman who "does" my room cleaned him out — confounded her for it.

The excerpt is a personal glimpse from the diary of Archbishop Robert Seton, written during his retirement years (1922-1927) at the Convent of Saint Elizabeth in Convent Station, New Jersey. "This room of mine" is now the office of the Dean of Studies of the College of Saint Elizabeth, and "my window" still overlooks the terraced campus where the lonely grandson of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton spent the last six years of his life.

August 28, 1925 - My 88th Birthday. I have very much to thank God for although it is a lonely old age.

The diary is among the many items treasured in the Archives of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth—items which link this congregation with its early American roots. Especially treasured is the collection of original letters which Mother Seton wrote to her children and other family members and friends, and those which came to her during the historic years at Emmitsburg, Maryland:

(From her son William) Leghorn, Italy, December, 1815—My dear Mamma,... Mr. Dubourg when he was here asked me how I like Leghorn. I answered so so—not so well. He said he supposed not so well as the city of Emmitsburg. I answered No—and indeed it is really the case. Emmitsburg has now more charms for me than any part of the United States. It seems the more I see of Europe the more I love America. It is very natural that one should love his country — But I am proud of mine.

Not until thirty-eight years after the death of Elizabeth Bayley Seton did the New Jersey Sisters of Charity exist as an autonomous congregation. The records of the first Newark year, 1859, preserve the struggle of Sister Mary Xavier Mehegan, upon the urging of Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, to establish a community distinct from the New York congregation, of which she was a member. We read in correspondence and council minutes of the move one year later from Newark to a new Motherhouse in Madison (now Convent) and the founding there of the Academy of Saint Elizabeth in the same year.

New buildings and new works followed rapidly. By 1880 the present Administration Building was built and ready for occupancy. The need to preserve the accounts of beginnings was fully understood by the founding sisters. Eventually, a room in the basement of the Administration Building was fitted with heavy steel doors and a lock with secret combination. As time passed, this vault housed the growing volume of community records, formerly held in locked desks and file cabinets.

By the 1970's the need for advanced organization and preservation resulted in the appointment of Sister Mary Ellen Gleason as full-time Archivist. Sister Mary Ellen began to move simultaneously in two directions: to learn all she could about accession and preservation and to extend the physical facilities of the Archives. In late 1979 came renovation and extension. Masonry work and the installation of additional steel doors now provide more fireproofing and security. In addition to the original one room (now a stack area) and walk-in vault, there is now a work room, a reading and research room (with partitioned area for listening to and viewing audio-visual material of the past and present), and a private office for the Archivist.

The advanced preservation process has already begun with the transfer of annals and other records to acid-free paper, folders, and storage boxes. The encapsulation of hundreds of maps and blueprints and their storage in a steel map case have halted the aging process and made the materials more available and safe for handling. Carefully monitored climate control in all areas assists in the preservation process.

Each year historical reports come into the Archives from each of the congregation's institutions and from each of its members: records of the works of education on all levels; of health services provided by Sister physicians, nurses, therapists, pharmacists, instructors in midwifery, social workers, etc.; of spiritual services as chaplains and counsellors in hospitals, nursing homes, and private dwellings, and as ministers in diocesan and parish programs; of service to inmates in prisons, shelters for women and troubled youth. Invaluable are the records in the form of letters, tapes, and tape transcriptions of the missions established outside the Continental United States. Carefully accessioned, this material provides instant data for those with a desire, a need, and a right to learn details.

An excellent example of oral history is a tape made by Sister Teresa Miriam Beschel, a China missionary for fourteen of the twenty-seven years (1924-1951) that the Sisters of Charity served there. She relates with a touch of humor her journey from Yuanling to Quanlin in October 1941, the first leg of her trip back to the States for a temporary stay. First in a Post Office truck, later in a Red Cross ambulance, the journal was begun:

We rolled along as happy as could be in the early morning. We had been out over an hour, when on turning a curve we saw two buses ahead, one on each side of the road. Both buses had been going in the same direction as our ambulance. Bags and supplies were strewn across the road. A hold-up! And we had to be leaving China to be a party of one! There were about fifteen men, all armed with long-barreled steel automatic revolvers. Some came up to our conveyance, pointed their revolvers, and said "Get out!" We moved quickly. The explanations were of no avail. "Hand
over your watches" was the next request, but they were already pulling them off us. There was a lull and we went back into the ambulance, but another group of bandits appeared and again shouted "Get out!" They searched our pockets and extracted what money they found. They made a good haul, for we had to carry money for the trip before us. Had they known that they overlooked about five times as much as they found, it would have been too bad for us. When they were after my money, I called to Father Ronald saying, "Father, they want my money," and the answer came back, "Give it to them, Sister; they'd put a bullet through you in a minute."... The bandits put all our baggage including the cake which Sister Patricia Rose had made for us out on the road and looted it, even breaking apart the cake. My whole bag was being carried off as they could not open it. Then I produced the key. We were heart sick when we saw our few articles of clothing being divided among them. We managed to salvage a habit each, we were relieved of sweaters, shawls, shoes, stockings, underwear, towels, and the like. At a given signal we were allowed back in the ambulance with our baggage much lighter. I noted something white hanging out of Father Ronald's briefcase. I said, "Father, I think there is something of mine in your briefcase." His answer was, "Sister, please take it at once!" The garment was my nightgown!

The same indomitable spirit is reflected in letters and tapes from Bolivia (1963 to the present), and most recently in letters from Cambodia, where Sister Dianne Moore spent a few months nursing the afflicted.

Included in the archival collection are documents associated with the Cause of Servant of God Sister Miriam Teresa Demjanovich.

An adjunct to the Archives is the Heritage Room on the second floor of the Administration Building. Here are displayed artifacts relating to Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton, Archbishop Robert Seton, Mother Mary Xavier, and others.

Early in their novitiate year, novices of the Sisters of Charity spend several days in an orientation experience with the Archivist, learning at firsthand, background of the congregation's history as well as archival contents and procedures for using them.

The Sisters of Charity Archives are available to qualified researchers from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. on weekdays by appointment with Sister Mary Ellen Gleason. Copying facilities are available.

The above article was written by Sister Francis Maria Cassidy who assists in the archives of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Elizabeth.

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Conference Success

Nearly two hundred parishioners, archivists, librarians, and local recordkeepers from New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania attended the Commission's March 21 "Capturing the Usable Past" conference.

Newark Archbishop Peter Leo Gerety opened the symposium by urging registrants to "alert ourselves to the importance of keeping our records, making sure they're properly preserved, and then think about writing histories," and expressing his pleasure with the enthusiasm and attendance. Keynote speaker Jay P. Dolan of Notre Dame University explored the wide range of potentially useful and available parish and church records. He cautioned local historians against writing narrow institutional histories in a vacuum, and stressed the importance of exploring the larger social and cultural milieu.

Msgr. William Noé Field opened the luncheon with a presentation on Seton Hall's growing archival program. Bernard Shanley then elaborated on his experiences in the Eisenhower administration, and discussed his reasons for donating his personal papers to Seton Hall and making them available to the scholarly community.

The afternoon session featured two panels addressing basic archival "nuts and bolts" issues. The opening panel, featuring Kenneth Rowe from Drew University, Russell Gasero of the Dutch Reformed Archives at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary, and Peter J. Wosh of Seton Hall discussed the mechanics of collecting, arranging, and preserving records. The second panel offered a presentation on "The Place of Oral History" by Alice Kendrick of the Lutheran Council, Seton Hall's George Browne, and Howard Green from the New Jersey Historical Commission. Both panels generated considerable audience discussion and participation.

Larry Greene, Seton Hall's history department chairman, moderated the day-long seminar, which was supported in part by a grant from the New Jersey Committee for the Humanities, a division of NEH.

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Meet the Commission

Bernard Bush was born in New York City on July 14, 1929. He received a B.A. in history from New York University in 1950, an M.L.S. from the School of Library Service, Columbia University, in 1956, and an M.A. in history from the Graduate Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University, in 1961.

He was a library intern and later a specialist in work with young people at the New York Public Library, 1954-56. He then served as a librarian in the Zionist Archives and Library of the Jewish Agency for Israel, 1957-58, and as assistant librarian of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1958-61.

In 1961 he was appointed librarian of the New Jersey Historical Society. The following year he became historical editor in the Bureau of Archives and History of the State Library. In 1969 he became the first executive director of the newly established New Jersey Historical Commission, a position he still holds.

He is the compiler of a documentary work, Laws of the Royal Colony of New Jersey, 1703-1775, in four volumes, two of which were published by the Bureau of Archives and History of the State Library in 1977 and 1980. He also chaired the group of librarians who compiled New Jersey and the Negro: A Bibliography, 1715-1966, published in 1967 by the New Jersey Library Association.

Among his other assignments in New Jersey history, he assisted the late Julian P. Boyd in research for The Fundamental Laws and Constitutions of New Jersey, published by D. Van Nostrand for the New Jersey Tercentenary Commission in 1964. He also helped organize the Tercentenary Historymobile exhibitions which toured the state from 1961 to 1964, and he wrote the Tercentenary Commission's final report, published in 1966.


In 1968 he led in the organization of the History and Bibliography Section of the New Jersey Library Association. He has been a member of the Jerseymen Advisory Council (now the Education Committee) of the New Jersey Historical Society since it was created in 1963 to help guide the Society's student historians' program. He is also a member of the New Jersey Historical Records Advisory Board and the Advisory Committee on New Jersey Studies of the State Department of Education, and represents the Commissioner of Education on the New Jersey Historic Trust. He has served on the boards of the Trenton Historical Society and the Jewish Historical Society of Trenton.

He was a founding member of the Bicentennial Council of the Thirteen Original States in 1971. He served the American Association for State and Local History as New Jersey membership secretary, 1967-68, and national membership chairman, 1973-74.

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Afflicted by inflation like everyone else, the Commission finds that the rising costs of the Newsletter require that the publication now become a subscription item. We regret that this is the last issue we can supply gratis and hope that the minimal subscription cost of $2.00 a year will not seriously inconvenience any of our readers and friends. A subscription form is printed elsewhere in this issue.