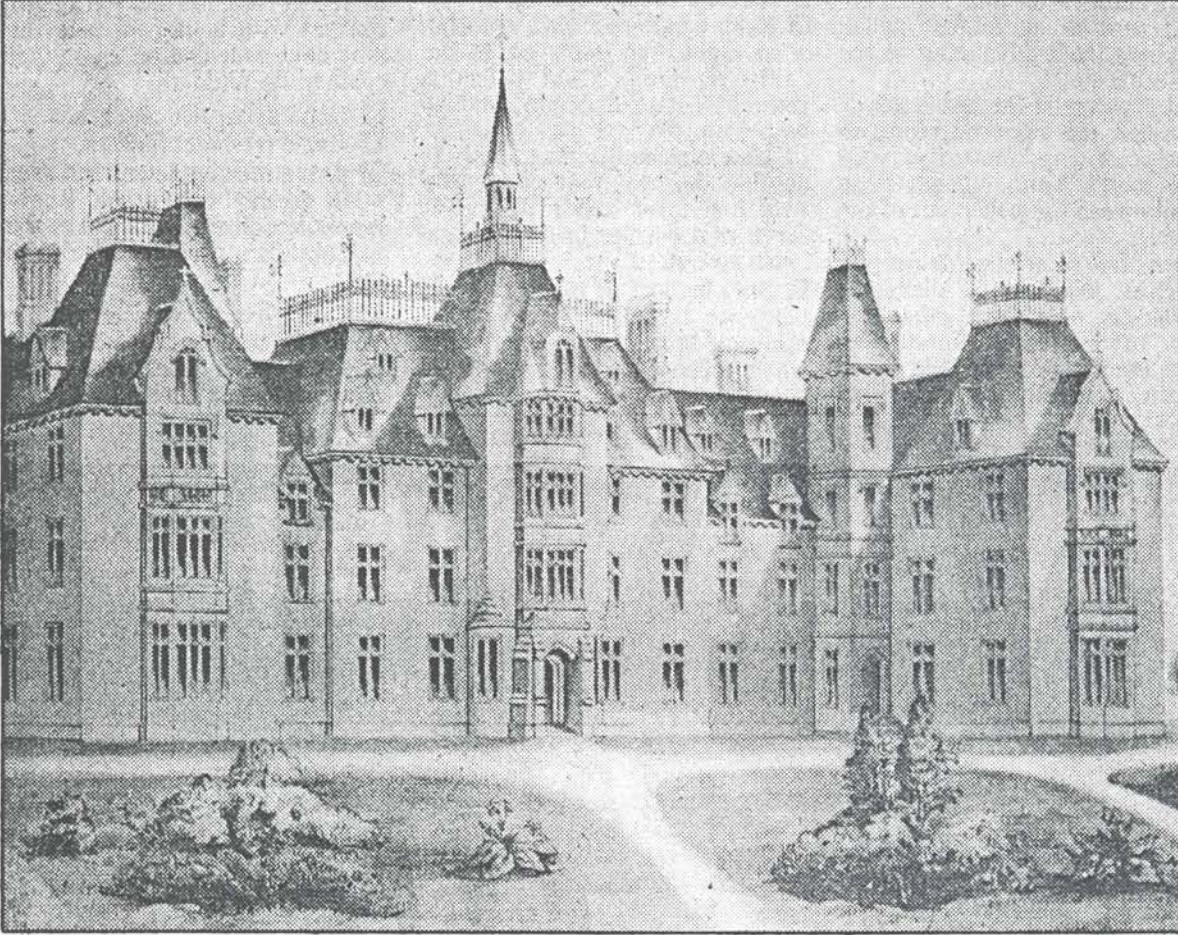


(Sisters of St. Joseph)

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House of Providence: Built in 1855 with funds raised for Marie Antoinette Fontbonne, a member of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the

Roman Catholic charitable house on Power St. was completed after her death. It is shown in a lithotint by Courtois, Paris, 1855.

Sister Delphine gave refuge to the orphans of Toronto

In 1851, a remarkable young Frenchwoman named Marie Antoinette Fontbonne came to live in Toronto. Within weeks of her arrival, thousands of people throughout the city had launched one of the most famous fundraising drives in the early history of Toronto. Judges, doctors, and lawyers volunteered to act as ushers and salesmen at a gigantic bazaar, and the city donated rooms in city hall as a setting.

Later that year, when Jenny Lind, "the Swedish Nightingale" sang at St. Lawrence Hall, she insisted that part of the box office receipts be given to Marie Fontbonne.

In 1855, when more money had been raised to support her work, construction began on one of the most magnificent landmarks of 19th-century Toronto. It was built in the east end of the city, on Power St., near the corner of Queen and Parliament Sts. It was called the House of Providence and was one of the largest charitable buildings ever seen in this providence.

Small boat

But Fontbonne never lived to see it finished. She died tragically in Toronto in 1857 at the age of 42. Though her name is largely forgotten, the work she began in this city is now part of the story of Canada.

For the small band of women who accompanied her here in 1851 were the Sisters of St. Joseph and the young Marie Fontbonne was the founder of this Community of Sisters in Canada.

It was these Sisters who would later found both St. Joseph's and St. Michael's hospitals in Toron-



DONALD JONES

Historical Toronto

landed at New Orleans, they hid their black habits and dressed as widows to avoid being attacked by the anti-Catholic mobs of the American South.

She served for many years in the mid-west and, in 1851, when she was 38, she was the Superior in charge of an orphanage and novitiate in Philadelphia when she received an urgent request from the new Roman Catholic bishop of Toronto, to come to Canada.

Bishop Charbonnel had been a close friend of the Fontbonne family in France and when he learned of the work of Marie Fontbonne, who had taken the name of Sister Delphine, he begged the bishop of Philadelphia to release her so that she, with two or three other Sisters, could come to Toronto to found a desperately needed orphanage.

On Oct. 7, 1851, she arrived as Mother Delphine and the head of a cosmopolitan and very young party of Sisters that included a German girl, Martha Bunning; an American girl, Alphonsus Margerum; and an Irish girl, Bernard Dinan.

The bishop had not exaggerated his need of them. Ships arriving in Toronto, crowded with Irish immigrants, had brought an epidemic of typhus to the city. Thousands were dying in sheds along the waterfront and children were being left with no

Work had scarcely begun on this new House of Providence when the city was shocked by the sound of a gigantic explosion. A group of anti-Catholics had organized a "Gunpowder Plot" in an attempt to stop all work on the building. The bishop's answer was to request that two of the Sisters move onto the site in defiance of the plotters.

The Sisters readily volunteered and remained on the site day and night. There were no other incidents.

The "Gunpowder Plot" became the most notorious of the problems the Sisters had to face; far less known was their desperate struggle to survive as a community.

The story of those years and the best documented account of the life of Mother Delphine Fontbonne has recently been written by Sister Mary Bernita Young of the Congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph. Entitled, "The Dawn of a New Day," it has been published in a limited edition but copies can be found in such major libraries as St. Michael's, Metro Toronto Library, and in the Archives of Toronto at City Hall.

Poor immigrants

Although there was enough money to begin building the House of Providence in 1855, there was frequently never enough money to buy food for the patients or for the Sisters. The Catholics in Toronto in the mid-19th century were almost entirely poor Irish immigrants and, in the winters, the Sisters would often be seen walking far into the countryside in search of

1851 were the Sisters of St. Joseph and the young Marie Fontbonne was the founder of this Community of Sisters in Canada.

It was these Sisters who would later found both St. Joseph's and St. Michael's hospitals in Toronto; and during the past 100 years they also built schools and served as teachers in hundreds of towns and cities. Today they are devoting a large portion of their lives to working within parishes in almost every part of Canada.

In Toronto, their House of Providence stood for more than a century until it was demolished after World War II. In January 1962, they moved from that original house into a new Providence Villa and Hospital at 3276 St. Clair Ave. East which now stands as a memorial to their founder, one of the best loved figures in Toronto's past.

Fontbonne came from a family of women who had been Sisters of St. Joseph for generations. The Community of St. Joseph had been founded in France in 1648. During the French Revolution in the late 18th century, when all religious orders in France were banned, a number of Fontbonne's family came close to dying on the guillotine.

Urgent need

When the "terror" was over, a daughter was born on Dec. 27, 1813. She was christened with the name of the French queen who had been guillotined during the revolution, Marie Antoinette.

As a young girl, she chose to follow the life of many of her aunts and, at the age of 18, she entered the Community of the Sisters of St. Joseph. In 1835, word reached the community that French-speaking Sisters were urgently needed in the United States.

A large number of French-Canadian families had settled in the new American west around St. Louis and Marie was chosen to join the first band of Sisters to carry the work of the community to the New World.

She was warned of the dangers she would encounter and when she and the other Sisters

ed his need of them. Ships arriving in Toronto, crowded with Irish immigrants, had brought an epidemic of typhus to the city. Thousands were dying in sheds along the waterfront and children were being left with no one to care for them.

As soon as Mother Delphine arrived, she opened what was probably the first orphanage in the city in a house at 100 Jarvis St.

Enormous bazaar

As soon as the work of the Sisters became known, Catholics and Protestants throughout the city joined together to raise money to help them expand their work not only in Toronto but in cities throughout the province.

One of the most famous events of those years was an enormous bazaar held at city hall. For months, hundreds of women sewed and decorated items for sale and, on the day of the bazaar, judges and lawyers served as ushers and cheerfully badgered everyone who entered the halls until every item had been sold.

Picnics were held to raise more money.

In 1855, the bishop sent out an impassioned appeal for funds to build a large charitable centre where the Sisters could properly care for the sick and the destitute.



Sister Delphine: Founded Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada.

the patients or for the Sisters. The Catholics in Toronto in the mid-19th century were almost entirely poor Irish immigrants and, in the winters, the Sisters would often be seen walking far into the countryside in search of wood to heat the House.

On Saturdays, they were always in the market hoping that farmers would donate their unsold produce.

There is a legend, remembered to this day by the Sisters, that whenever their needs grew critical, a stranger would always appear at the main door of the House of Providence and leave money; to the Sisters, there was never any doubt that the man, never seen at any other time, was their patron saint, St. Joseph, the husband of Mary.

The work of the Sisters would eventually prosper and expand far beyond the role even foreseen by Mother Delphine. Large hospitals and schools would be established, but Delphine would never live to see them. She had been the guiding spirit and the inspiration of all the Sisters but, on Feb. 7, 1857, at the age of only 43, she was dead.

Brief year

A new outbreak of typhus had swept through the city. Two of the Sisters were killed and when Mother Delphine insisted on staying all night with a woman dying of the plague, she caught the illness herself and died within days, "a martyr to her charity."

In those last, brief years of her life in Toronto, she had helped establish a novitiate, an orphanage and the great House of Providence and had successfully founded the congregation of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Canada. Today, the body of Mother Delphine lies in a grave in the western end of St. Michael's Cemetery, surrounded by the graves of the Sisters of one of those admired Congregations of women who bear many different holy names but who have been called "the unknown saints" and "the ministering angels" of hospitals and orphanages throughout the world.