

Celebration of the Sesquicentennial (1858 – 2008)  
**The Sisters of Mercy and the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor**

*Relive the Journey. Inspire the Future.*

Cincinnati was the first major city in "The West", or what is today known as the Midwest. Its 1850 population of 115,435 ranked sixth in the United States, far ahead of St. Louis (77,860) and Chicago (29,963). The city continued to flourish, experiencing a 150 percent population growth in less than 20 years. What fueled this phenomenal growth? Much of it was due to an influx of Irish and German immigrants.

Many of the immigrants arriving in Cincinnati were poor and sick with diseases such as typhus and cholera. Bear in mind what it meant to be poor and sick in 1858. This was a world that was pre-Medicare and pre-Medicaid. There was no such thing as Social Security, disability benefits or food stamps. Help, when it was available, was often provided by religious organizations. In the mid-1850s, five religious communities of sisters were working in Cincinnati: two were American, two were French and one was Swiss. All five were primarily focused on teaching.

Recognizing the important services Irish and German sisters could provide local immigrants, a wealthy convert named Sarah Peter asked Archbishop Purcell if she could petition Irish and German congregations in his name to start foundations in Cincinnati. He agreed.

In 1857, Mrs. Peter traveled to Europe. She convinced the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale, Ireland to send 11 sisters to Cincinnati. She then headed for Aachen, Germany, and made the same request of the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor. Frances Schervier, who founded the order, agreed to send six sisters. They left Germany on August 19 – just one day after the Sisters of Mercy arrived in Cincinnati.

The two congregations arrived in Cincinnati in 1858 – before many of the city's most well-known icons had surfaced.

- The original Cincinnati Red Stockings began in 1863, first as an amateur club, then fully professional in 1869
- One of Proctor & Gamble's oldest, most well-known products, Ivory soap, was introduced in 1879.
- Bernard Henry Kroger opened his first grocery store in 1883.
- Cincinnati Bell (originally known as The City and Suburban Telegraph Company) was officially incorporated in 1873 and became the first company in the city to provide direct communication between the city's homes and businesses – before the telephone would be invented.
- The Roebling Suspension Bridge, which served as a model for the Brooklyn Bridge, would not be completed until 1866, opening first to pedestrian traffic.

The Sisters arrived with little more than their incredible, deep-seated faith and a heart-felt belief that their faith called them to serve the poor. And yet, they flourished.

Shortly after their arrival, the Sisters of Mercy moved to a convent and established the House of Mercy, which cared for soldiers during the Civil War and was later converted into a Cholera Hospital. In 1892, they opened Mercy Hospital in Hamilton, Ohio.

By the turn of the century the Sisters of Mercy were an essential component in the region's healthcare system. When the influenza epidemic of 1918 hit, the hospital in Hamilton served so many victims it became known as Tent City. When the epidemic struck a mining community in Kentucky, the sisters rushed to the scene. Their commitment was so unwavering that one of the sisters, Sister Mary Raphael, contracted influenza and died nursing the miners.

As if the hospital work wasn't enough to keep them busy, the sisters responded to a need in education as well. For much of their history in Cincinnati, the sisters staffed local parochial schools including St. Patrick's, St. Edward's, St. Cecilia's and St. Teresa's. They founded three Catholic high schools to serve young women in the area: Our Lady of Mercy on Freeman Avenue, Mother of Mercy in Westwood, and McAuley High School in College Hill. They established a teacher training program and founded Edgecliff College, which was later sold to Xavier University.

Upon their arrival in 1858, the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor were turned away by Archbishop Purcell because the archdiocese couldn't afford to support them. Undaunted, the sisters went out into the streets to beg. Although none of them spoke English, they were committed to establishing a hospital in Cincinnati. Within four days they'd convinced the Catholic Orphan Society to give them a run-down building on Fourth Street so they could establish a temporary hospital and convent. A local philanthropist, Reuben Springer, donated linens and 10 beds, and on September 21 – just 11 days after they arrived in Cincinnati – they accepted their first patient.

By Christmas day of the following year, they had opened the new and larger St. Mary Hospital in Over-the-Rhine, which would later be replaced by what is now Mercy Hospital Mt. Airy. Barely two years after that, they founded St. Elizabeth Hospital in Covington. Soon they were nursing soldiers wounded in the Civil War, staffing the Marine Hospital, and tending orphans at St. Elizabeth's. Locally they established St. Francis Hospital in 1888. St. Francis would later be replaced by St. Francis-St. George and would ultimately become Mercy Hospital Western Hills. They established numerous social service agencies and retirement communities including those we know today as Mercy Franciscan at St. John, Mercy Franciscan at St. Raphael, Mercy Franciscan at Schroder and Mercy Franciscan Terrace.

While the ministries of the Sisters of Mercy and the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor have evolved over time, their commitment to serving the people of Greater Cincinnati remains as unwavering today as it was 150 years ago. In 1999, the two congregations joined their health care ministries to sponsor our health system as we know it today, Mercy Health Partners. With five acute care hospitals, six senior health and housing facilities, and numerous other services and facilities, Mercy Health Partners is one of the area's largest health systems. In 2007, the system provided approximately \$40 million worth of charity care and unreimbursed services to more than 385,000 people of Greater Cincinnati. Beyond healthcare, both the Sisters of Mercy and the Franciscan Sisters of the Poor continue to find innovative ways to meet the evolving spiritual and social service needs of the Greater Cincinnati community.