



At the Mouth of the Wisconsin

St. Mary's Academy Murals

About 1910, Sister Mary Gertrude, a School Sister of Notre Dame, painted several murals. These murals adorned the walls of rooms within the buildings that were part of St. Mary's Academy (1872-1968). Two of these murals depicted the natural beauty of the upper Mississippi River valley. The other murals presented a tableau of important events that occurred along the Mississippi River.

St. Mary's Institute opened in 1872. John Lawler had given the School Sisters of Notre Dame part of the land on which the barracks of the second Fort Crawford had stood, and built for the Sisters a three-story brick building. The school opened in the fall of 1872 offering a secondary education for young women. The Sisters taught the classes.

Over the years, the facility greatly expanded, adding more structures and an expanded curriculum. An auditorium was erected in 1878, followed by a separate chapel. In 1883, a dormitory was built, connected to the 1872 structure.

1910 was a year of great expansion. Another three-story building was added to the campus, east of the 1883 structure. This provided more space for classrooms, with a dormitory on the third floor. Wishing to instill devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom the school was dedicated, a Grotto replicating the grotto at Lourdes, France was planned for the west grounds. A long tree-covered walkway would connect it to the Main Building and from there a covered pavilion connected the Main building to the Auditorium. To focus on the expansion and hopes for the future, the entrance to the school was relocated to the north side of the property. A circular drive was planned, and the drive chosen to connect the school's education to the early Catholic heritage of the area. Fridolin J. Heer, a Dubuque architect, had designed the new building and the Lourdes Grotto. He was now called upon to create a statue of Father Jacques Marquette to be placed at the new entrance, greeting all as they arrived. On June 17, the anniversary of Marquette and Joliet's entry into the Mississippi River, the statue was dedicated.

In 1898, Sister Gertrude had come to Prairie du Chien. Born in Mankato, Minnesota in 1870, at the age of 26 Ida Klein had entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame. Taking the name Sister Mary Gertrude, she was trained in music and art, and as a novice was sent to St. Mary's as the art teacher.



LaSalle at the Mouth of the Mississippi River 1682



Discovery of the Mississippi by Father Marquette 1673



Old Fort Crawford

Ida Klein/Sister Gertrude left Prairie du Chien and spent over two years in Europe, studying in Germany and Switzerland. While in Munich, she pronounced her final vows. She then returned to Prairie du Chien and remained at St. Mary's for seven years. It was at this time she painted the murals.

The same year that the addition was made to the academic compound and the grounds were landscaped with the Lourdes Grotto and the statue of Father Jacques Marquette, Sister Gertrude was an artist in residence at the Academy and began painting the murals. The murals Sister Gertrude created brought into the buildings the long connection that Prairie du Chien has had to the Mississippi River and its history.

Sister Gertrude gave a title to each mural. The two river scenes are *Maiden Rock* and *At the Mouth of the Wisconsin*. They were located in the 1872 building and were removed several years ago. They are now part of the collection of the Prairie du Chien Historical Society.

In addition to these two river scenes, Sister Gertrude painted several murals that portrayed important events in the history of the Mississippi River and Prairie du Chien. This tableau she located in a first floor room at the east end of the new building. The scenes in the tableau placed in the 1910 building are: *LaSalle at the Mouth of the Mississippi 1682*, *Discovery of the Mississippi by Father Marquette 1673*, *Father Hennepin at the Falls of St. Anthony 1680*, *Burial of De Soto 1542*, *The Surrender of Red Bird to Major Whistler 1827*, and *Old Fort Crawford*.

When Wyalusing Academy closed, Clinicare, Inc. offered these murals to the Prairie du Chien Historical Society. In 2014, David Spangler, painting conservator, removed the murals Sister Gertrude painted that constitute the tableau. The removal was funded by a donation from Mark and Kati Forsythe. In 2015, through the generosity of Mark and Kati Forsythe, Sally Kaber White, Bernard Mayer, the Daughters of Frank and Mary Antoine, several alumnae, and Alliant Energy, funds were donated for the conservation of the murals that were part of the tableau depicting events in the history of the Mississippi River.

In 2016, Steve and Lynda Welter, Sally Kaber White, and Bernard Mayer donated to the conservation of *Maiden Rock* and *At the Mouth of the Wisconsin*, with work being done by Barry Bauman, conservator.

Maiden Rock is on exhibit at the Fort Crawford Museum. The other murals can be viewed at Peoples State Bank, 301 E. Blackhawk Avenue, Prairie du Chien.

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