

THE EPISCOPAL COMMUNITY OF ST. JOHN BAPTIST

The Origins in England

The Episcopal Community of St. John Baptist in Mendham traces its origins to England in the late 1840's. Mariquita Tennant, the Spanish-born widow of an English clergyman who was living in the village of Clewer, near Windsor, heard about a young woman in the village who was in an abusive relationship with her stepfather, to whom she had borne four children. Mrs. Tennant took in the young woman, which led to her taking in other "fallen women," including prostitutes, victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse, and alcoholics. As a result of Tennant's efforts, the Clewer House of Mercy was born, originally a secular endeavor.

By the 1850's, Tennant had given up her work in Clewer and moved to Windsor. The rector of the Clewer church, Rev. Thomas Thellusson Carter, was desirous of continuing Tennant's important work, although he believed those efforts would best be undertaken by women who had made religious vows and would be able to fit the often difficult work into the context of the religious life.

Carter was fully committed to the Oxford Movement in England, whose adherents, beginning in the 1830's, reasserted the pre-Reformation apostolic and catholic heritage of Anglicanism. Although the Oxford Movement was socially conservative, it included many who were increasingly concerned about helping the poor. To carry out that work, some, including Fr. Carter, began to consider re-establishing religious sisterhoods, which had been dormant since the reign of Henry VIII.

Fortuitously, Harriet O'Brien Monsell, a daughter of an Irish baronet and the young widow of an Anglican priest who had been a supporter of the Oxford Movement, arrived in Clewer. Intending a life of religious service, Harriet in 1852 took vows and became the first Mother Superior of the new Community of St. John Baptist, a name she chose. Before long, Monsell and other members of the growing Community were running orphanages, schools, convalescent hospitals, soup kitchens, homes for working girls, and a church needlework business. From the start, Fr. Carter and Sr. Harriet envisioned the Community to be a blend of the active and contemplative life, which it remains to this day.

The Community in America

What is today the Community of St. John Baptist was established in America in 1874 as the Sisterhood of St. John the Baptist. Helen Stuyvesant Folsom, who was born in 1843 into a wealthy and prominent American family, by her early twenties was becoming drawn to the religious life. After visiting Clewer in 1866 and meeting Sr. Harriet, Helen's plans for an American outpost of the Community began to take shape.

In 1874, having completed her novitiate, the newly minted Sr. Helen Margaret (Folsom) took vows and returned to New York. As with her own family, personal wealth, family fortunes, and important social connections continued to play crucial roles in financing the Community and supporting its many programs in the United States over the years. For example, important Somerset Hills connections to the Community included Sr. Mary Angela, who later served as the Community's third Mother Superior. She was a member of the prominent Stevens family from Hoboken who had established country estates nearby in Bernardsville. Another member of the Stevens family was the wife of Fr. Thomas Anderson Conover, the long-time rector of St. Bernards (Episcopal) Church in Bernardsville who founded or supported what became known as the "Conover churches." These included, in addition to St. Bernards, St. Luke's in Peapack-Gladstone, St. John on the Mountain in Bernardsville, St. Mark's in Basking Ridge, and All Saints in Millington, as well as St. Bernards School in Gladstone, now part of Gill-St. Bernards School.

Sr. Helen Margaret's Folsom family gave land at 233 East 17th Street in the fashionable Stuyvesant Square area of Manhattan on which the Community's first convent, St. John Baptist House and novitiate, was built in 1877. The extant brick building, now an apartment house, was designed by church architect Emlen Trenchard Littell. St. John Baptist House was the first building constructed as an Anglican convent in the United States. In 1883-84 the architecturally complementary St. John Baptist School was built next door, designed by Charles Coolidge Haight.

By 1892, in addition to the St. John Baptist School in New York and an embroidery school that had been established in the convent, the Community had already undertaken a staggering amount of work, primarily for the support of immigrant communities and abused women. The Community's ministries included, among other endeavors, St. Hilda's School, a trade school the Community had established in Morristown in 1890; St. Andrew's Hospital for Convalescent Women on East 17th Street in New York; the Mission of the Holy Cross for German immigrants on East 5th Street and a girls' day school in connection with it; St. Anna's Cottage, a summer home on Long Island for women and children; the Midnight Mission on Greene Street in New York where the Sisters created a "refuge for fallen women"; and the Christ Church Home for children in South Amboy, New Jersey.

The Community in Mendham

St. Anna's Cottage, at Farmingdale on Long Island, continued to operate until 1898 when it closed due to an outbreak of typhoid fever. In part as a result of that, the Community, beginning in 1899, began the search for a new site with open space and characteristics that would promote good health. The search soon focused on New Jersey, in part because the Community was familiar with the Morristown area due to its work at St. Hilda's School, and in part because the Somerset Hills had become an area of large country estates built by the wealthy, many of whom were Episcopalians who were likely to support the Community's work.

After several years of renting properties in Basking Ridge, Mendham, and Rockaway, in 1902 George Folsom, the brother of Sr. Helen Margaret, conveyed some 33 acres he had acquired

along West Main Street in Mendham to the St. John Baptist Foundation (later, additional land would be acquired). Initially, the Community occupied an existing large nineteenth century house on the property called St. Anna's Cottage, named after the summer retreat house the Community had previously operated on Long Island.

In 1908 St. Marguerite's Home was built on the property to serve as an orphanage. Designed in the Tudor / Jacobean Revival-style by the New York architectural firm of Mills & Greenleaf, the building is the earliest surviving building on the property. The orphanage operated until 1946. Now known as St. Marguerite's Retreat, it is rented out for retreats, meetings, and the like.

By 1913, plans were being developed by architects William Wade Cordingley (later a mayor of the Borough of Mendham) and Durr Freedley (born Jesse Jacob Friedley) to construct a convent for the Community across from St. Marguerite's Home. Although the grandiose initial plans for the convent and church were never fully realized, the extant large French Eclectic-style convent was built between 1913 and 1915. Behind the convent is a partially walled garden (circa 1915) and nearby is the Community's cemetery, which was consecrated in 1918.

In 1920, Cordingley's design for what became the St. John Baptist School, located to the northeast of the convent, was published in the *New York Sun*, although the building was not completed until the late 1920's.

W. Barry Thomson
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