BVM Catholic schools and teachers: a nineteenth-century U.S. school system

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BVM CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND TEACHERS:
A NINETEENTH-CENTURY U.S. SCHOOL SYSTEM

by

Rachel Katherine Daack Riley

An Abstract

Of a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Interdisciplinary Studies-Ph.D. degree in Historical Geography (sponsoring department-Education) in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

May 2009

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Christine A. Ogren
ABSTRACT

From the arrival of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1843 through the death of their foundress in 1887, the BVMs created a group identity that they spread through the dispersion of their schools and that they maintained through regular written and personal contact. The identity they maintained was definitely religious in nature, but it was also equally secular. The BVMs provided a type of teaching that historians and geographers of U.S. education have not yet fully investigated, namely Catholic education. These women regularly taught and administered for lifelong careers; interactions among the women teachers and administrators were both deeply personal and pointedly professional; and these U.S. teachers actively supported and benefited from centralization. The research explores the dispersion pattern of the BVM school system, the nature of the institution through the experiences of BVM teachers and administrators, and the importance of recognizing the intertwining secular and sacred aspects of the congregation and its schools. Rather than reducing U.S. education to public education, the findings in this dissertation about BVM teachers and their schools call for a more nuanced understanding of U.S. education in general, one that includes Catholic education as a part of the whole.

Abstract Approved: _______________________________________________

Thesis Supervisor

_______________________________________________

Title and Department

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Date
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Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Christine Ogren
This is to certify that the Ph. D. thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Interdisciplinary Studies-Ph.D. degree in Historical Geography (sponsoring department-Education) at the May 2009 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

Christine Ogren, Thesis Supervisor

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Rex Honey

Scott McNabb

Paul Robbins

Malcolm Rohrbough
To James, Nathan, and Tom
all my love
The availability of source material greatly impacts the possibility of conducting research. Considering source availability in the context of U.S. education, records of home schooling or other education not formalized through a recognized institution might not be easy to find, and perhaps access to archives of private school systems has been difficult to obtain in the past. All of the changes in technology and communication that have made general archives more accessible impacted the archives of Catholic congregations, as well, however. Although not all congregations have well preserved collections, many congregations have opened up their archives to researchers. Requesting permission to use such archives, therefore, may be no more difficult than accessing any other private archive. That being said, some archives are particularly challenging to access and one needs to foster relationships and connections in order to communicate the value that the research will have for the academic community or perhaps society as a whole.

My road to the BVM archives was paved with twelve years of Catholic schooling in Dubuque, Iowa. The man who said my First Communion mass on the portable dishwasher-\textit{cum}- altar in my living room, Fr. John Dalton, learned of my desire to access the Mount Carmel Archives for scholarly purposes and introduced me to the names of women in the BVM congregation who might be helpful. Having taught adjunct courses at Clarke College, formerly Mount St. Joseph’s Academy, before I began my research, I met some Clarke faculty and administrators who also could confirm my research intentions with the archivists. The last and possibly most important part of my gaining access to the archives, however, was that I asked permission. I did not know that
congregations had restricted access in the past, and I have never heeded the warnings that I had heard in some academic circles: that Catholics were not interesting enough to research. So I simply made a telephone call in 2005 to Sr. Anita Therese Hayes, then archivist of the Mount Carmel Archives, and asked if I could make an appointment. She said yes, and I proceeded to spend several days per month at the archives. Sr. Mary Lauranne Lifka, Professor Emerita of History, Lewis College, joined the archival team as the archivist in the midst of my research and continued to offer access to the archives and support for my scholarship. To all of these people I offer my sincere gratitude.

I am grateful for the friends and colleagues who have supported me. My current colleagues at Clarke College, particularly my department chair, Regina Boarman, and the provost, Joan Lingen, BVM, have offered me the great opportunity to continue my teaching career while I completed my education. I thank Clarke’s Norm Freund for his own passion for BVM history that sparked my interest in studying the congregation. Many faculty members at the University of Iowa served as mentors to me. I thank Alan Spitzer and James McCue for entertaining my undergraduate neediness and for remembering me as I applied to graduate school several years later. Rebecca Roberts and Paul Robbins gave me great advice and provided me important opportunities as a graduate student in the department of geography. The history department graciously welcomed me into their classrooms even though I was a geographer at the time. My heartfelt appreciation goes to Chris Ogren, my dissertation director. She accepted the risk of mentoring me, an interdisciplinary student who cold called her asking if she might consider working with me. The courses she offered were extremely helpful, and she provided excellent direction and welcomed patience while I completed my
comprehensive exams and dissertation. Ann Peleo and Tom Riley read every chapter and provided much appreciated constructive feedback. I could not have worked as effectively this past summer without your due dates and careful reading. Thank you all.

My mother was (and still is) a voracious reader. My father was (and still is) a perpetual student. They modeled being engaged learners and always allowed me to follow my pursuits. Thank you both for your love and support, for the meals and grandparenting you provided, and mostly for your friendship. Those games of dominoes and evenings watching mysteries on public television were more important than you realized. Sandy and Mike, Elaine, Pat and Jen: the list of what you have done for me during these years is too long to write. Thank you.

To my best friend and our two boys, I love you very much, Tom, Nathan, and James. I would not be the person I am today without you. Thank you for believing in me and helping make this possible.
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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

It is time to cast aside the veil of reserve which has so long concealed from public view the distinguished virtue of the most remarkable women in the annals of the Church if we may judge of her merit by the magnitude of the work which she has accomplished in the interests of Catholic Education.¹

In his 1989 chapter “Who Became Teachers?” historian John Rury claims, “Ideally, a study of U.S. teachers in the nineteenth century would examine evidence from a number of communities selected to represent the nation’s various regions.”² This reminder of the basic ideas about offering generalizations based on evidence from a variety of sources suggests that if we want to accurately describe and understand U.S. teachers from the nineteenth century, then we need to base our conclusions on representative samples of all sorts of U.S. teachers from this period. Rury focuses on representations from geographic regions, and this is an important kind of representation to include. Reducing all teachers’ experiences to those of teachers in the Northeast would most likely introduce flaws into the conclusions about all teachers throughout the country. While succeeding in highlighting the importance of region, though, Rury ignores a similarly important category in his analysis by failing to recognize the problem of reducing all U.S. teachers to public school teachers. Rury uses the language “American teachers” throughout his chapter with no preliminary explanation that he is actually referring to only public school teachers. In fact, Rury does say “public school teachers” once in the article, but it comes after he has set up his argument, and it is not as

¹ S. M. Michael, Copy of Notes on History--Sisters of Charity B.V.M., 1895, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA, 28.

a point of distinction from previous instances of “American teachers.” In trying to correct the flawed regional generalizations, Rury has moved past the problematic “northeast public school teachers” to include public school teachers in all regions, which is a good step, but research about all U.S. teachers would require the inclusion of non-public school teachers as well. This will require expansion of this research field into private school teachers, as well as public school teachers. The reality of formal U.S. education and teaching cannot be reduced to either public education or private education. In order to arrive at a general understanding of U.S. education, we need to have accurate information about how these types of education fit together. I argue in the spirit of Rury’s call for geographic inclusion that including the narratives of Catholic teachers, in this case in the West, with the existing research on nineteenth-century U.S. teachers is also necessary to understand nineteenth-century U.S. teachers in general. Many children in this period learned in Catholic schools rather than public schools, and many Catholic sisters taught in those schools and are thus a part of the larger groups of U.S. teachers. It is time to dive more consciously and completely into Catholic teaching as an interdependent part of U.S. education as well as dive into the roles spatial organization and dispersion played in these teaching careers in order to understand teaching in the West more accurately.

A study of a particular group of such teachers, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM sisters), will contribute to this more accurate understanding of education and teaching in Iowa and in the West. As these particular women’s teaching experiences and school system become more clear, we can begin to see the need for integrating these and similar stories with the existing research to develop a more complex
and complete understanding of U.S. teaching and schools. In order to develop an accurate regional account of schools and teaching, there needs to be more in-depth research on less well-known education systems and their schools and teaching in the West. Using a geographic lens will allow the analysis to go beyond naming the location and towards an analysis of geographic concerns like the spatial organization of school systems, the impact of the systems on teachers and administrators, and the role of secular and sacred concerns in the maintenance of a school system.

Five Irish women moved from Dublin, Ireland, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1833 and then moved again to Dubuque, Iowa, in 1843 in order to carry out their common mission of teaching poor children, girls in particular. Catherine Byrne, Mary Frances Clarke, Eliza Kelly, Margaret Mann, and Rose O’Toole dedicated their lives to Catholicism and to education. These five women and their mentor, friend, and eventual father superior, Fr. Terrence Donaghoe, began the congregation of Catholic sisters called the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The western movement by European Americans and new Catholic immigrants rapidly increased the need for schools in the communities that subsequently developed. As immigrant Catholics migrated west, the demand for Catholic schools in the West increased. Under the leadership of Donaghoe and Clarke, who was eventually elected mother superior, the congregation opened fifty-two schools between 1843 and 1887. The schools ranged in location from central Wisconsin to Northern Missouri and from Chicago, Illinois, to western Iowa, with one school in San Francisco.

Just adding another region to the study of U.S. schools is not enough; we also need to look through a geographical lens. Questions about space and distance surround
the BVM sisters’ story as teachers, administrators, and women religious. They were a unique set of teachers who differed in many ways from women teachers on the frontier who were not Catholic sisters. Unlike their more thoroughly studied public school counterparts, these Catholic women lived in community, chose the location of their schools, administered their own widely dispersed schools, and as a corporation owned many of their schools and other tracts of land. In these widely dispersed schools, BVM teachers taught many U.S. students religious catechesis and secular subjects. The teachers themselves often taught in many cities throughout their careers, and their careers lasted for many years. The congregation’s organization and its educational and geographic characteristics differ from those of the public schools because of its particular combination of sacred and secular concerns.

After 1843, the women who wanted to become BVM sisters began their membership with the congregation at the motherhouse near Dubuque, Iowa. Becoming a BVM sister provided the women the opportunity to serve God, of course, and to become career teachers. The women’s teaching careers, however, led them away from the motherhouse to where the congregation needed staffing in its spatially dispersed schools. Unlike the majority of public school women teachers in the nineteenth century, BVM teachers taught for their entire adult lives and most moved several times during their careers. The geographic range and longevity of the teachers’ careers is noteworthy as is the structure the congregation provided in order to support the teachers professionally, socially, and economically. This research will contribute to demonstrating that a complete understanding of U.S. education comes with understanding how public and Catholic education were interdependent in terms of their dispersion patterns which were
affected by the school systems and people who worked within the systems. The work will explain the spatial organization of the BVM school system and the BVM school system’s religious and secular goals and the reciprocal impacts between the organization and the teachers. This analysis should clarify ways in which understanding Catholic education is crucial rather than optional for understanding U.S. education.

In general, the predominant view of U.S. teaching in the West in the second half of the nineteenth century goes something like this: unmarried, often Protestant, women taught for relatively short periods of time until marriage and/or to improve or maintain their economic status. They entered public schools as teachers with little supervision or peer support and often lived great distances from their families and friends. The teachers’ positions and the schools’ mission and curricula depended largely upon the whims of the communities’ leaders, who were typically male. As centralization spread, school district administrators, school boards, superintendents, and principals assumed decision making duties for schools. These administrators were, likewise, typically male and separated from the female teachers by gender norms of the time. Researchers have more thoroughly nuanced the experiences of these teachers in more recent works. For example, we have learned that some women taught for many years while married; some had lifelong careers.³ In 1872, Phebe Sudlow, for example, became the principal of Davenport High School, the first female principal of a high school in the United States. Two years later, Sudlow became the superintendent of Davenport Public Schools in Iowa.

the first female superintendent in the United States, in 1874. Researchers have also learned that some women chose to leave their families of origin with great relief, leaving behind overbearing parents, financial hardship, or grief. Others traveled between their families in the East and their teaching lives in the West during family crises. We have also learned that although many common or public schools had a Protestant foundation, Protestantism in the West was far from homogeneous. The teachers often found themselves in the middle of local social conflicts over which Protestant denomination would have the final say in terms of day school and Sunday school curricula, for example. The depth of exploration and therefore the accuracy of the description of teaching in the nineteenth-century U.S. West have improved through this more nuanced research.

Many researchers acknowledge the absence in the history of education of Catholic education and Catholic teachers, and they suggest expanding research in this direction. Some groups have begun to expand the research and subsequently our knowledge of Catholic education and Catholic teaching. Many religious congregations, for example, have completed research on their own communities and schools. That research, however,

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5 Paul Theobald, Call School: Rural Education in the Midwest to 1918 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995).

does not always mesh readily with the existing academic research. Earlier works by congregations, in particular, read more as hagiographies than history. Lambertina Doran’s 1911 *In the Early Days* is an example of this by the BVM congregation. More recent works can be more accurately categorized as scholarly history. Jane Coogan’s 1975 *The Price of Our Heritage* and even more so Ann Harrington’s 2004 *Creating Community* serve as BVM works that rely on historical standards for the basis of their investigations.

Often, however, historical works undertaken by religious communities focus on spiritual or theological matters if not overtly, then at least rhetorically. This means that sometimes historians avoid or leave out the secular or more mundane operations of the communities. Although the spiritual and theological beliefs of religious congregations are important to their history, this kind of work does not provide a comprehensive understanding of the history of Catholic teachers, for example, as legitimate members of both sacred and secular society. Some academic researchers, such as Fass, have studied Catholic education and Catholic teaching; investigations into Catholic education and teaching remain incomplete, however. Likewise, in-depth accounts of school systems of particular Catholic congregations within any particular region are nascent at best. Even combining research by religious congregations with that done by traditional academics, it remains clear that the research field of nineteenth-century U.S. Catholic teaching in the West is still wide open, and Catholic teaching is just as conspicuously absent from the geography literature, if not more so. Historical

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geography may provide a way to explore Catholic education and Catholic teachers and enhance both historic and geographic knowledge of nineteenth-century education.

**Historical Geography**

British historical geographer Alan Baker suggests that an interdisciplinary approach to historical geography—versus historical narrative that uses geography as a sort of stage or geographic research with time periods as a superficial framework—offers opportunities for both robust historical and geographic research. In particular, Baker calls for the inclusion of explicitly geographic concerns within historical narrative. His view is that geographers handle historical concerns better than historians handle geographic concerns. From Baker’s perspective the way to correct this is to use an interdisciplinary approach focusing on including a complete spectrum of geographic concerns so that research evenly includes events, people, and places.9

While an interdisciplinary approach will result in more informed research, I suggest that geographers also need to consider history more seriously. Geographers need to practice the rigor needed to identify kinds of critical social events, produce accurate narrative, and understand the complexity of time and periodization that historians consider. According to geographer Rhys Jones, the lack of a deeper historical scope limits geographic research. Because of the lack of historical rigor, “[w]e should be aware

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9 See Alan R.H. Baker, *Geography and History: Bridging the Divide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). Baker writes in order to connect history and geography but assumes some fundamental epistemological differences between the two disciplines. I am not sure that the differences are actually epistemological, but I am sympathetic to the kinds of differences Baker does observe between the disciplines at least in their stripped down versions. I don’t in fact believe that the disciplines themselves necessitate nor are they practiced with differing epistemologies. Epistemological differences may occur between a geographer and an historian as they may between any two geographers and any two historians. When such differences arise, “bridging the divide” will be a daunting and perhaps even impossible task. Baker’s simplified explanation that historians are interested in periods and geographers are interested in places can hold true while said academics share the same epistemology.
of the increasingly partial stories concerning social and spatial change that we are recounting within the subdiscipline [of cultural geography].”  

Regardless of the slant of the argument, both Jones and Baker contend that historical geography must hold to the standards of both disciplines.

Consider this simplified view of the projects of historians and of geographers. The historian beginning a research project scrutinizes the appropriate, justifiable periodization of the project. The geographer scrutinizes the appropriate, justifiable spatial scale of the project. The considerations of both researchers are much more complicated in actuality, but this stripped-down description provides a starting point for understanding how historical geography can benefit from valuable considerations from both disciplines. From the interdisciplinary perspective, the historical geographer recognizes that for each spatial scale, she must also justify the duration of time she is studying. Likewise for any particular period she studies, she must justify the spatial scale she chooses. Although it seems rather obvious that any historian is also concerned with space and any geographer with time, at least in a general way, Baker contends that most of the connections researchers typically make between history and geography tend to be weak connections.  

These weak links are not the links that ultimately make historical geography interdisciplinary. According to Baker, stronger links allow for no clear distinctions between the subject matters that each discipline might engage and require that historical geographers consciously use the methods of inquiry of history and the subjects of inquiry of geography. This conscious and appropriate treatment of subject and methods leads to

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a smooth treatment with little jumping between geography and history. The subjects broadly considered include people, places, areas and regions, distributions, environments, and landscapes. Combining the concerns of historians and geographers provides a better likelihood that the researcher will be able to understand the intersection of past events, people, and places. In 1925 geographer Berr offered this general advice, “The treatment of this complex problem needs a geographical historian, or an historical geographer, who is also more or less a sociologist.” Berr implies that there needs to be room for history, spatial questions, and explicit social science in a complete understanding of past events, people, and places.

Few geographers have studied U.S. education. Geographer David Reynolds’s work, There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa, is one notable exception. Reynolds claims that “struggle has a geography as well as a history” in his historical geography of school consolidation in Iowa. On one hand, this work offers an opportunity to recognize the kinds of concerns geographers can bring to historical discussions. There Goes the Neighborhood also provides an opportunity to understand more concretely what Baker means when he suggests that historical geography ought to provide strong links between geography and

12 Ibid., 36.


14 David R. Reynolds, There Goes the Neighborhood: Rural School Consolidation at the Grass Roots in Early Twentieth-Century Iowa (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999), 8.

history and make few distinctions between the two fields within any given work. If historical geography meant simply utilizing both the topics of geography and methods of history are both utilized in a single work, then Reynolds’s work would fit the description quite well.

Nancy Beadie’s comments on *There Goes the Neighborhood* regarding social sciences and history, however, suggest that Reynolds’s work, despite its valuable contributions to understanding school consolidation, might miss the mark in terms of being an example of Baker’s strongly linked geography and history. Beadie says, “What strikes me most when considering Reynolds’s book as a whole is what different worlds the grammar of social science and the grammar of human narrative create, and how difficult it is to find a place where the two worlds meet.”¹⁶ Her analysis seems to imply that the social sciences aim to neaten things up, to fit data into generalizing statements based on prior understandings of theory, whereas historical narrative more often results in exposing the mess of real lived lives. The two efforts seem incompatible, and Beadie suggests that some of Reynolds’s chapters read as social science and others as history. My goal is to recognize that struggle for compatibility and to aim to meet Baker’s suggestion of using geographic topics and concerns within the methods of history and thereby offer a more cohesive and strongly linked historical geography of the BVM teachers in nineteenth-century United States. One challenge is, however, deciding how to deal with legitimate geographic topics that might be unfamiliar to some readers. I will need to take time and explain the topics. This may seem unbalanced, or too geographic,

when it occurs, but I would be remiss to ignore the needs of the reader and to assume knowledge without providing appropriate explanation.

Geographic Topics in the History of Education

Among other things, geographers discuss the physical and social causes and consequences of the dispersion of people through space, which can lead to discussions of travel, land ownership, the conversion of landscapes, and the spread of knowledge. Knowledge—religious, secular, political, social, intellectual—spreads among communities via formal and informal methods. Geography is interested in both the means of knowledge dispersion and the meaning of the relationships among the groups who share knowledge. It is thus surprising that little has been published recently within geography about schools, teaching, or education. Journal such as *Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Journal of Geography, and The Professional Geographer* (not to mention articles in *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* as would be expected) from the last decade include a lot of research about the state of geography courses or geography programs within schools and universities and some research about the role of education in citizen-making and in international development. They have published little during this time on schools and education in general, however.17 The geography of nineteenth century U.S. education is a wide-open field of study because of the limited sorts of existing research.

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Despite the lack of research from geographers, researchers do tackle geographic concepts relevant to nineteenth-century education. Some historians of education, for example, have engaged geographic topics relevant to nineteenth-century teaching and schools. Their research may be helpful in shaping a study that more explicitly and more completely wrestles with geographic concepts. McCulloch and Lowe write about geographical issues in nineteenth-century education in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain, and their discussion calls for further historical research in the geography of education, in general.\textsuperscript{18} Institutions such as schools assisted with the structural transition from white peripheral settlements to urban centers closely linked to British urban meanings and values. The white settlements would also eventually serve as the new core to previously existing rural communities in Australia and New Zealand. McCullough and Lowe recognize the “significance of personal interactions, but also the role of cities as crossroads and meeting-places, and the emergence of a global traffic of knowledge in the early modern world.”\textsuperscript{19} Peripheral spaces in Australia became new centers and schools helped recreate the familiar structures for the white community that led to those new centers. Schools helped retain the white population and contributed to white population growth during these rapid periods of urbanization.

Schools in the U.S. West also provided familiar spaces and helped retain the white population, and they had an additional role for their European-American students. Creating a buffer of familiar sorts of institutions like schools allowed Easterners (or Irish,


Catholics, etc. depending on the home culture) to maintain a connection with the
“homeland.” As historian Polly Welts Kaufman underscores, many teachers who went
west wanted to move away but greatly missed the comforts of family and home in the
East. Familiar institutions, like schools and churches, helped to ease that transition.
Settlers who went west also sent knowledge back to the East. The letters teachers who
went west under the auspices of the National Board of Popular Education (NBPE), an
organization founded in 1846 to increase the numbers of protestant teachers in the West
as migration led to increased white population, wrote to friends and family in the East are
prime examples of the connections and knowledge dispersion between the East and West,
rather than simply from East to West. One teacher wrote of a gunfight and knifing and
another wrote to one of the NBPE faculty instructors that what she had learned about
dealing with disrespectful students was not working. She concluded that perhaps
western and eastern children differed. This would have left the recipient with some
knowledge that might have changed the ways she taught other teachers about how to deal
with children. In my reading of this case, knowledge seemed to flow both from the
center to the periphery and from the periphery to the center.

Historians of education have also tackled regional geography to some degree. In
Pillars of the Republic, historian Carl Kaestle purposefully addresses general differences
in regional geography in his chapter “Regional Differences in Common-School

20 See Ibid.: 458. They discuss using schools as connections between frontier communities in Australia and
the homeland. The schools also made possible the efforts to extend or reproduce the settlers’ culture within
the indigenous communities.

21 Polly Welts Kaufman, Women Teachers on the Frontier (New Haven and London: Yale University

22 Ibid., 201-2.
Development.” Kaestle states, “Regional differences . . . arose from differences in economics, demography, ethnic mix, and subcultures of the three areas [Northeast, South, and Midwest] . . . The similarities between the two agricultural regions [the South and Midwest] were superficial; the differences were fundamental.”

This concern for understanding cultural and political regions is a genuine geographic concern. Kaestle warns against broadly painting the Northeast, the South, and the Midwest with idealized homogeneity. Kaestle critically concludes that education in the Midwest was more closely connected to the regional characterization of the Northeast than to the agrarian South. Rury confirms this line of thinking in his “Who Became Teachers?” when he warns against reducing all research on nineteenth-century education to education in the Northeast.

There is room for critique in Kaestle’s account of regions, however. Education historian Paul Theobald’s *Call School* begins to flesh out some of the complexity involved in understanding schooling at the regional level. In his discussion of the Midwest, Theobald revisits the theme of opponents to school reform and finds that Kaestle’s idea about the similarities of two regions with very different histories of education, the Midwest and the Northeast, as well as historian James Fraser’s statements about the consistency of Protestant support of school reform, may not stand up to closer

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24 *Ibid.*, 183. Kaestle uses the term Midwest versus West. Choosing terminology is a challenge. At the time the events took place, the area to which Kaestle referred was the western frontier. Today of course, the area is considered the Midwest. I will use the term West when referring to the nineteenth-century area where the BVM congregation located its motherhouse and schools. I will use Midwest when referring to the space in more modern times.
Reynolds, Theobald, and historians Nancy Beadie and Kim Tolley all draw attention to the geographic bias in the history of education for studying urban schools rather than rural schools. Since urbanization was only beginning in the West in the second half of the nineteenth century, the lack of research on rural schools naturally marginalizes the history of western schools. Solid geographic research would equally include rural education and the interplay in both directions—the effects of urban on rural education and the effects of rural on urban education. Beadie and Tolley’s academies, Theobald’s one-room schools, and Reynolds’s consolidated schools are largely rural. The institutional differences these scholars note between urban and rural schools are not simply theoretical perceptions—a framework understood from past case research and then assumed to be true for each subsequent case. Simple theoretical applications too

often lead to claims like, all rural institutions and all urban institutions differed from one another in the same ways in all places. The differences Beadie and Tolley, Theobald, and Reynolds note are rooted in the highly complex cultural and specific societal contexts of different rural spaces. For example, Theobald’s work exposes a religiously heterogeneous rural Midwest despite the conveniently homogenizing term “Protestant” that other historians often apply to a diverse group of denominations. In order to compare rural and urban education, we need to understand both accurately. Recognizing the need to study both rural and urban experiences is a general geographic concern tied to general geographic theories about rural and urban spaces. Using narrative from specific rural areas in order to explain differences in context makes sound geographic theoretical sense and sound historical sense.

The tendency to homogenize through applying ambiguous terminology, like loosely using the term “Protestant” suggesting that all Protestants shared beliefs and practices in the discussion of rural historical-geography of schools, can affect the accuracy of cultural geographic study as well. Tendencies towards using ambiguous descriptions arise in identifying group characteristics when members of the group are dispersed across space. Glenda Riley, historian of women in the U.S. West, states that the intention of her study of women in the U.S. West is “to demonstrate not only that women did play highly significant and multifaceted roles in the development of the American West but also that their lives as settlers displayed fairly consistent patterns,

which transcended geographic sections of the frontier. Further, I maintain that these shared experiences and responses constituted a ‘female frontier.’”

Western women teachers are part of this female frontier, and the work of synthesizing the experiences of many women across space is a large undertaking to say the least. As Welts Kaufman states, “Any study of women who chose to go West must acknowledge the tremendous diversity among them and the differences in their perceptions and conditions.”

In fact, Welts Kaufman notes that one of her purposes is to discover some of the differences between those who went west to teach and stayed and those who returned east.

The women Welts Kaufman studies are not simply women who taught in the nineteenth-century U.S. West. These are women who were intentionally gathered from the educated women of northeastern America in order to be dispersed as teachers throughout the West. The women pledged to spend two years teaching in the West.

The National Board of Popular Education recruited women to teach and to travel. When completely understood, Riley’s concept of a “female frontier” will account for the diversity of women Welts Kaufman studies, sorts of teachers Welts Kaufman omits, and women who never taught. These geographic concerns within historical works suggest that historians do have interests in things geographic, but from the perspective of geography such works must intentionally and completely integrate geography into their inquiry.

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It would be foolish to suggest that any author tackle all geographic concerns in any single work. It is incumbent upon the researcher, however, to explain as clearly as possible what sorts of geographic concerns she will undertake and to submit her work to the criticisms of the discipline. My contribution to the research of nineteenth-century U.S. teaching will consciously include consideration of geographic topics and address criticisms of the discipline regarding the study of those topics.  

**Historiography**

Critiques about the completeness of the body of the history of education literature have commonly been part of the historiographic discourse surrounding it. A basic understanding of these critiques includes recognizing that the literature is incomplete when teachers, students, or particular sorts of teachers and students are missing from the research, for example. Practically speaking, it may be impossible to imagine and then identify all of the actors within U.S. education. That being said, there are plenty of actors researchers can imagine and identify who currently are largely absent from the literature. As an example of this sort of omission, historian of education Paula Fass states that, “Catholic education, like higher education, when it is studied at all, is usually set apart as a subspecialty. Yet, U.S. education in the twentieth century . . . is simply incomprehensible, or in the very least incompletely rendered without an understanding of how Catholic schools have operated within U.S. culture alongside the public schools.”  

Harold Silver suggests that historians have dabbled in Catholic education, but they have

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not gotten very far. This sentiment is repeated more recently by Tom O’Donoghue, Anthony Potts, and Michael Perko. Other historians have focused more specifically on missing women, African Americans, Native Americans, and gays and lesbians.

From my perspective the continued exclusion from, or at least absence of coverage in, the literature of recognized actors suggests that the incompleteness is somehow cultivated. The opportunity to study Catholic teachers, for instance, is less restricted by barriers to archives than it may have been in the past, yet scholars continue to remark how interesting studying Catholic teachers would be while persisting to expand the research on public school teachers instead. I gained access to the Mount Carmel Archives, the official archives of the BVM congregation, by meeting with people connected to the congregation first and then formally requesting permission to use the archives. Until we complete the sets of events and actors in U.S. education, historians have new work to do. Working towards completing that set gets us closer to a more complete understanding of the histories of education and teachers.

teachers in general and Catholic sister-teachers in particular, the history of education in the nineteenth-century U.S. West, and the history of Catholic education.

Until fairly recently, the history of education has paid little attention to teachers and the artifacts they have left in evidence of their contributions. In 1997 Rousmaniere points out the following limitations: “Within educational history, the nature of teachers’ work has been examined only within three narrow contexts: the study of the classroom pedagogy, school administration and reform, and the development of teachers’ political organizations.” This leaves out daily experiences like student-teacher or teacher-family relationships; informal, professional relationships among teachers; the experiences of teachers who did not engage in political organizations; those teachers outside of the white, urban schools; reforms instigated from the teaching periphery to the administrative core that occurred outside legitimized, or studied, channels of change; and alternate organizational histories of differing groups of U.S. teachers and schools. Numerous other aspects of teachers’ lives and teaching that are missing from the short list. Rousmaniere extends the literature on teachers’ narratives, and more recent works have addressed other holes in the literature on teachers and teaching. Anne Ruggles Gere writes about Native American teachers in Indian schools; Michael Fultz reconsiders the experience of African American teachers after Brown versus the Board of Education; and Kay Morris Matthews talks about women who taught teachers at the turn of the century. Of the recent expansion of research subjects in the history of U.S. teachers, Catholic teachers have

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36 Kate Rousmaniere, *City Teachers: Teaching and School Reform in Historical Perspective* (New York and London: Teachers College Press, 1997).

been noticeably absent. This follows the trend in the history of education to consider
U.S. education to be exclusive somehow of Catholic education (or Jewish education, etc.)
except when non-Catholic and Catholic education systems directly confront one another
such as in lawsuits.  

Excluding Catholic education from the history of education allows researchers to
similarly exclude Catholic teachers from the history of teaching. Regardless of whether
the omission is intentional or not, examining *U.S. schools* and *U.S. teachers* but only
including certain kinds of U.S. teachers and schools (namely public schools) results in
weak conclusions. The differences between, for example, conclusions about all U.S.
teachers and conclusions about public school teachers, are not simply rhetorical. The
terminology researchers use to state their questions and conclusions affects what areas of
research might be still need to be investigated.

Within the history of teachers, Catholic sister-teachers have been especially
absent. In 2000 Perko’s discussion of J. M. Vinyard suggests that Catholic sister-teachers
are one of the groups conspicuously absent from the literature:

Vinyard’s study, however, also serves to point out oversights in the
historical treatment of Catholic women religious and education. Little
methodical work, for example, has been done on the career paths of such
women. How did their lives resemble those of other Catholic women of
the period? What were the similarities and differences between them and
the Protestant women studied by scholars like Polly Welts Kaufman?
Here, the literature is still largely sporadic and anecdotal. While more
critical than in the past, a lack of detailed study, much less comparative
analysis, remains.

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38 See, for example, Fraser, *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, 50-1, 74-80.

39 See Silver, "Knowing and Not Knowing in the History of Education."

Welts Kaufman herself demands similarly that Catholic women teachers receive the same sort of investigative attentions as their non-Catholic counterparts.41

Welts Kaufman’s account of the Protestant women who learned from the National Board of Popular Education and went west to teach gives a rich view into the lives of the women as teachers. Many Catholic sisters also went west to teach. Historian of Catholic sisters Sue Ellen Hoy writes, “By the 1880s the needs of the Catholic Church, as defined by its bishops, centered on classroom instruction; and nuns were sought for that purpose.”42 Hoy’s and other similar accounts of Catholic teachers document that the Church hierarchy saw to staffing such schools, but the accounts pay sparse attention to the role the congregations, meaning the women themselves, played in matters such as staffing decisions. The bishops sought sisters to teach, and some congregations said yes to this request while others said no. James Keneally, historian of Catholicism, notes that society has been tempted to look upon these Catholic women disparagingly: “In theory the Catholic perception of the feminine role inhibited the educational development of confident, independent, and curious women and also discouraged women from being wage earners.”43 He continues, “Yet these women [the sister-teachers] were among the most liberated women in nineteenth century America.”44 Such a strong statement suggests that further research on sister-teachers has the potential to transform the historiography of both teachers and Catholic education in the nineteenth century.


Teaching went through a period of feminization in the second half of the nineteenth century as populations grew and as more men availed themselves of new professions, leaving teaching open for women. Knowledge about what this means is growing as historians move beyond recognizing that women taught into understanding women teachers’ experiences and their significance in U.S. education and society in general. Expanding the historical coverage of these teachers to include Catholic sister-teachers and exploring geographic questions that arise will improve what we understand about U.S. teaching. The geographic questions of migration and population growth, for example, lead to the understanding that nineteenth-century white migration and subsequent natural population growth in the West resulted in an increased demand for teachers. Because of the teacher shortage in the area, many western teachers were women.

The push and pull factors for Catholic women overlap somewhat with those for Protestant women. Hoy provides insight into one of the distinctions. She refers to official church documents reflecting the need for and ordering the placement of Catholic sisters in Western settlements as teachers. Protestant churches did not have the same sorts of established communities of people, like Catholic sisters and brothers, whose life purpose was to provide service under the direction of the church. Historian of the BVM congregation Coogan and many others note the contribution of Nativist push factors to Catholic congregations moving west during the early to mid 1800s. More complete research could cohesively unravel push and pull factors affecting the migration and establishment of Catholic teachers in the West.

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Historian Kim Tolley states, “Although current texts in the history of education generally give short shrift to the role played by Catholics in U.S. schooling, documentary sources are suggesting that nineteenth-century Protestant educators were acutely aware of competition from Catholic schools, particularly in urban centers in the West.” As early as the mid 1800s, Catharine Beecher surveyed the number of schools for girls and found more Catholic than Protestant academies in the West. As increasing numbers of German and Irish Catholics moved to the West, easterners felt that public education could save the West from the cultural corruption of Catholicism. Fraser notes, "As Lyman Beecher [Catharine Beecher's father] insisted, schooling was key to the civil and religious prosperity of the region." This suggests a significant role for Catholic education in Western communities and an active competition among schools based on religion. Not only did Catholic teachers migrate, that migration impacted other migration patterns and local interactions from neighboring to politics. Creating an overview of the relationship between the Catholic and Protestant education movements, Fraser describes the overwhelming predominance of certain Protestant values, whether shared by all Protestants or not, and attributes that predominance to an increase in Catholic schools.

The Catholic schools promoted a different version of U.S. and religious values. He also


48 Fraser, The School in the United States: A Documentary History, 50.
notes significant legal proceedings revolving around religion and the church.\textsuperscript{49}

Subsequent literature expands somewhat on the nuances of these interactions,\textsuperscript{50} but this literature is limited in the depth of the investigations.

The study of U.S. Catholic sisters in women’s history is growing, but much—regarding Catholic education in particular—is left to learn. Susan Armitage’s, Elizabeth Jameson’s, and Riley’s works, among others, on the history of nineteenth century U.S. women in the West include information about teachers and Catholic sisters. The authors, however, are attempting to provide a broader view of women and necessarily spend only a bit of time on teachers or on women religious.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, the general story of how nineteenth-century unmarried women joined the ranks of so many other westward travelers has not been fully explored. The more information included about the varied groups of people involved in western expansion and the varied reasons for this movement, the more complete and accurate the story of the U.S. West will be.

Some accounts focus specifically on nineteenth-century Catholic sisters. Many early authors of histories of women religious, however, wrote with women religious as the intended audience, and they thus offered more inspirational or spiritual works than historical works.\textsuperscript{52} Sr. Lambertina Doran wrote a sort of haigiography of the BVM

\textsuperscript{49}Ibid.


\textsuperscript{51}Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson, eds., \textit{The Women’s West} (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma, 1987); Elizabeth Jameson and Susan H. Armitage, “Writing the Range: Race, Class, and Culture in the Women’s West”; Riley, \textit{A Place to Grow: Women in the American West}.

congregation in 1911. It provides some fascinating reading, and it demonstrates the relationship between the writer and the orders she received from her superiors, but the work does not provide a great deal of historical evidence about the sisters’ professional or personal lives. On the other hand, Keneally and Catholic theologian Eileen Brewer among others write about U.S. women religious in general. Jane Coogan, BVM congregation historian, and others like her, provide exciting works that begin to uncover the diversity and richness of the lives of U.S. Catholic sisters by documenting the experiences of the women in their own congregations. More recently historian Ann Harrington contributes scholarship about the BVM sisters as well as documenting BVM history in order to contribute to the religious community to which she belongs. These sorts of works include some information about teaching and schools, but these works are relatively few and their focus is not necessarily on the sisters as teachers. These histories, like those of other Catholic sisters, are beginning to reveal more fully the geographic, social, political, or economic settings and motivations of the women and men involved in the histories. There is work to do, however.


56 Ann Harrington, Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel Press, 2004).
From the perspective of women’s history, researchers conclude that those women who went west were not a homogenous group. The individuals did not necessarily have the same intentions, and schools did not necessarily serve the same functions in each community. Armitage and Jameson write, “To begin to hear the past in new ways, we must think of a series of conversations, not a monologue narrating the lives of individuals or of nation-states.” Hearing the past in new ways simply for the newness is not the point. The idea is that this hearing would actually result in a more complete understanding of past events. One way to consider this series of conversations is to recognize that different conversations were happening in different places. From the cultural geographical perspective the issues of cultural diversity are worked out in space. Specific places provide unique cultural contexts. Making generalizations about large regions without looking into social interactions on a smaller scale allows room for error. Baker suggests that historical geography is charged specifically with understanding social behaviors and events and how they affect a specific place during a specific time.

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59 Of course this does not mean that there is nothing to say about the region until researchers examine every location. When place-level investigations vary from or even contradict the received regional characterization—especially when the received regional description is made in the absence of known actors or sorts of groups in the region—then it is time to consider other place-level cases and revisit and perhaps revise the regional narrative.

As previously discussed, some historians have noticed the absence of research on Catholic education as part of U.S. education in particular despite the overwhelming evidence that in U.S. cities and districts Catholic schools and public schools have continuously affected one another. Fass’s 1989 comments join Harold Silver’s 1992 critique that historians of education have not made “a serious and widespread historical commitment to bringing the parochial school, the Catholic, the Christian, the religious experience into the canon of educational history.” Researchers have either ignored Catholic education as an area of study, or their work has shown little regard for the specifics of the population. These historiographic and some related geographic critiques actually draw attention to areas of potential investigation—areas that are very interesting for my research project.

In 2004, Tom O’Donoghue and Anthony Potts highlight the absence of coverage of the geographic, political, economic, and social contributions of the institutional Church and of Catholic religious congregations that taught during the nineteenth century in Australia. For example, O’Donoghue and Potts critique the practice of lumping together Catholic religious with popular categories or familiar terms, such as “nuns”. Most Catholic women religious who were teaching in this period were Catholic sisters, not nuns. In general, nuns are cloistered and live contemplative lives of work and prayer like Catholic monks. They do not have contact with those outside of the cloister. Catholic

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61 See Tolley, ""Many Years before the Mayflower": Catholic Academies and the Development of Parish High Schools in the United States, 1727-1925," 305.


63 Silver, "Knowing and Not Knowing in the History of Education," 103.

sisters, on the other hand, interact with the larger society. By definition and intention, they extend into society in order to do needed work and in order to demonstrate active Catholicism. The differences are important socially and geographically. O’Donoghue and Potts argue that this confusion or casualness about terminology allows the researcher, reader, or layperson to make unfounded assumptions about specific congregations and about specific individuals within the congregations. In essence, the researcher gets the people wrong. If, as I hold, having a more complete understanding of history requires getting the people, the place, and the events correct, then more accurately portraying the actors in any given location will result in strong historical geography.

McCullouch and Lowe’s focus on center and periphery has great potential for expanding the research on the history of education. Their research models how getting the people, place, and events correct leads to a better understanding of history. They see the Catholic teachers in Australia as critical actors in transitioning the peripheral colony into the new core. These people interacted locally and at great distances and ultimately affected both locations. The social exchanges and the teachers’ local behaviors contributed to transitioning a peripheral location to a core.65

McCullouch and Lowe and Potts and O’Donoghue demonstrate the possible geographic investigations that could be included in the study of frontier teaching through their focuses on accurately understanding culture groups and on the relationships between the core and periphery. Having recognized that Catholic sister-teachers and Catholic education are missing from the research on U.S. teaching and education, I can follow some of the leads that these more recent historians have suggested.

The history of nineteenth-century education in the West is limited because it has to date failed to account for certain agents and include certain evidence. For the most part the history of U.S. education has meant the history of the common school or public education. Somehow entire systems, like Catholic schools, have been glossed over. Within the history of teachers, Catholic teachers have likewise been absent from the narratives. The serious histories of Catholic sisters rarely include complete accounts of the sisters’ teaching careers. For this reason the historical narratives are incomplete in an important way. Geographers have not fully considered how Catholic institutions, like religious congregations and private schools, have affected landscapes or have been an integral part of community development, whether rural or urban. Similarly, geographers have ignored U.S. schools and teachers in their studies of knowledge dispersion, and they pay little attention to education relative to regionalism. These critiques of history and geography do not suggest that all past histories and geographies have somehow been purposeless or devoid of truth. The critiques identify potential areas where the studies can be expanded. Connections across these historical and geographic studies may result in a more complete understanding of teaching and education in the nineteenth-century West.

The Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary

Because of the relative absence of women from the nineteenth-century public sphere, one might assume that the kinds of sources most likely to reveal what women and Catholic teachers actually did are letters, journals, and diaries—those artifacts more
likely arise from the private sphere occupied by women. Welts Kaufman provides a wonderful example of history based on these sorts of sources in her book *Women Teachers on the Frontier*. Catholic congregations, however, sometimes discouraged Catholic sister-teachers from keeping such personal accounts and, like Protestant teachers, many would not have been able to find the time to preserve such accounts. Mary Frances Clarke tried to limit such personal communications. She wrote from the Prairie to Olympia Sullivan on 21 February 1882:

> I feel it is time to put an end to the too frequent letter-writing which you must have felt was out of place and a loss of time, as SM. Cecelia is no longer in charge of that mission. You know, Sister, there can be no restriction in you or the Sisters in writing to me, this is the duty of all, especially of yourself as having the charge – but when Sisters write necessary letters to others, which you must carefully look over, see that they avoid all flattering, meaningless expressions which common sense and religion forbid. Never let any letters be written to priests without my permission and whenever this becomes necessary, they must be very circumspect in their expressions. I would like to hear from you.

When such accounts were kept, even those with “flattering, meaningless expressions”, many of the Catholic teaching congregations would archive the documents. The Mount Carmel archives, for example, include official records, meeting proceedings, some personal letters, congregational circulars, and editorialized (by the official congregation secretaries) notes or diaries of BVM congregational life. These documents cover the span of the schools’ existence, not just the tenure of any particular teacher, and they serve

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as the basis of my research. Of course, fires, moves, and untrained archivists may have affected the completeness of the collection. The collection is impressive, though.

Evidence arising from the lives of women could reveal that it might be difficult to conduct as complete a comparison between Protestant and Catholic teachers as Perko requests since the sorts of artifacts the two groups of teachers left may differ. There may not be enough common types of sources to fully understand the complex and critical differences between those groups. Some of the difficulty is due to the unavailability of evidence, some to the reliance upon standard archival source material as a result of particular archivists’ actions or of historians’ actions, and some to the potential lack of parallel sorts of evidence. Understanding the history of U.S. education and the history of U.S. teachers requires us to consider who the actors actually were and to get to know them through the evidence they left for us. That the kinds of records left by the Catholic and Protestant or public school teachers might differ may in and of itself demonstrate some of the critical ways that the teaching or the schools differed. The collection of all of the evidence regardless of its particular form and whether it originated with public or private schools will create the more complete record of U.S. teachers. The BVM archives can serve as a starting point for understanding the sort of information that other congregations may also hold in their archives, the additional sorts of evidence that are part of the record of U.S. teachers.

Studying this group of women will reveal new details or a fresh view of details about nineteenth century teaching, education, and Catholic religious life. BVM teachers taught many children in the communities where their schools were located, and schools met approximately ten months of the year. Despite the regulations and societal practices
restricting the women’s access to formal advanced education, the sister-teachers received continuing education throughout their teaching careers through tutoring sessions with educated clergy friends and eventually through summer institutes. Once the BVM congregation incorporated, it held approximately 2000 acres of land including the sites of its academies. These kinds of details can motivate additional research on BVM teachers and other groups of less well understood nineteenth century teachers. Recovering this information can also bridge existing studies on these general topics with a specific group of westerners who are not always represented as major players in geographic or historical literature of nineteenth-century America.

**Nuns and Sisters**

Catholic women religious are a diverse group, as individuals and as institutions. In order to fully appreciate how the structure of the BVM school system differed from what we currently understand about the public school structures of the time, it is critical to understand some of the fundamental characteristics of categories of Catholic women religious, specifically the distinction between a Catholic sister and a Catholic nun and the specific canonical status of the BVM sisters. By organizing as a group of sisters, rather than nuns, and by securing pontifical status, the BVM sisters ensured that they had more freedom of movement, more independence, and a greater ability to fulfill their mission of opening schools for girls in the U.S. West.

There were many types of Catholic women religious when the BVM congregation formed. For example, nuns, diocesan congregations of sisters, and pontifical congregations of sisters were all present in the United States during this period. I will refer to the members of both diocesan and pontifical congregations as sisters rather than
nuns.\textsuperscript{68} All three kinds of communities gained official recognition from the Vatican through a process called approbation. Approbation required the communities to apply to the Vatican with documentation of having met certain requirements. The process could take many years. The three categories of women religious differ from one another in significant ways although the term “nun” has become a generic term for all Catholic women religious. Understanding the specific meaning of the term “nun” through examining the institutional regulations surrounding nuns and sisters set down by the Vatican allows us to begin to recognize that, among other differences, different women religious had different spatial constraints.

Unlike other sorts of women religious, nuns took solemn vows. Nuns under solemn vows were cloistered; they lived on a completely enclosed campus, similar to the more familiar monks. The monasteries had strict specifications regarding position and orientation of buildings, windows, and the wall that enclosed the community. The nuns could not leave the campus, and they could not receive visitors from outside the convent without special permission. Until the seventeenth century all monastic convents consisted of choir nuns and lay sisters. A dowry separated one from the other at the time of their entrance into the order. Nuns typically brought with them a much more substantial dowry than sisters did. In order to become a nun, one needed to be able to afford to become one. Once recognized groups of Catholic women religious, or orders, differentiated between nuns and lay sisters, the orders maintained the differences partially

\textsuperscript{68} Although I make the distinction in order to demonstrate the active differences between the two groups, it is possible that the terminology is a much more complicated issue. Nuns had at least some economic status prestige over lay sisters. It is possible that the terms themselves represent hierarchy and division rather than simple difference. I will continue to use the term sisters throughout in order to maintain consistency and to emphasize the differences in spatial constraints between sisters and nuns.
through differing access to space. The two groups sat in different places in chapel, with
the nuns sitting behind a screen, each group used a separate entrance, and sisters
performed the duties outside the cloister walls necessary to maintain the property and
livelihood of the convent.

In most cases, nuns were contemplative rather than active, followed a regimented
life, and had no or very limited contact with the outside world. The Rule—a document
describing sanctioned activities, vows, official clothing, etc.— was extremely strict and
circumscribed every aspect of the women’s day from what time to rise, when and how
often to pray, when and what to eat, when to work, whether one could speak or not, to
what time to go to sleep. The limitations on contact with the outside world extended to
where the order might locate new houses within the outside world. The nuns could not
internally determine locations of new houses or extensions of their order. Male
superiors—who were obviously not nuns themselves—made these decisions. The
superior of the convent was an abbess, but she was under direct control of a bishop,
prelate, or the pope and was mainly responsible for enforcing the Rule within the order.

The definition of “nun” and the restrictions placed on the group of women have
changed through time. Nuns in France and Belgium took only simple vows after 1835
and 1836 respectively. After 1864, nuns in the United States took only simple vows, not
solemn vows.69 These exceptions or changes allowed even those more properly called
nuns greater access to the outside. Although nuns gained greater mobility with simple
vows, there were still significant distinctions between nuns and sisters from the time the
BVM congregation arrived in Philadelphia in 1833 until they began the approbation

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process. The women who started the BVM congregation did not choose full enclosure or even the newer simple vows of nuns.

Orders of nuns and congregations of sisters differed in many ways; of particular interest is the difference in their spatial constraints and mobility. Most groups of Catholic women religious established in the nineteenth century in the United States were either diocesan or pontifical sisters. All sisters were subject to partial enclosure rules that dictated, for example, times they could be away from their residence and how and with whom they could travel, but these limitations were less restrictive than those for nuns who could not travel at all. Historian Kathleen Brosnan explains, “The papal bull of 1749, *Quamvis Iusto*, sanctioned the right to seek papal approbation for unenclosed institutes whose members took simple vows.”

Sisters could seek approval as a pontifical congregation or as a diocesan congregation. Each diocesan congregation of sisters recognized its diocese’s bishop as its immediate superior. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, although the Diocesan sisters were able to do works of charity and to interact with outsiders, the bishop in their local diocese had final say over whether and where the sisters would extend their missions. The bishop confirmed or denied election results within the congregation and could dismiss a superior. Diocesan sisters also established missions, such as schools, in their home diocese.

Whereas diocesan congregations maintained subordinance to their bishops, Pontifical congregations fell under the direct authority of the pope—who lived at the Vatican, in Italy. As a result, pontifical congregations retained a degree of control locally

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within the congregation itself. Bishops did have a role in these congregations, and they often exercised the powers of this role in instances similar to those for the diocesan congregations, granting permission for opening missions, collecting election results, etc.

A bishop’s role, however, was more limited than in diocesan congregations. For example, pontifical congregations could establish missions from wherever they received invitations. The location of their missions could by definition of being a pontifical congregation extend beyond their home diocese. During Clarke’s tenure as mother superior of the BVM congregation—until her death in 1887—the sister-teachers fulfilled their teaching mission partially through dispersion, through purposefully sending sisters to distant locations in order to teach catechism and secular academic subjects.\(^71\)

According to historian Ann Harrington, the BVM sisters

> were doing what they came to the United States to do; gaining approbation from Rome would free them to respond to the needs wherever they arose, not just in the diocese of Dubuque. Without such approval they would not be able as women to run a Catholic school nor would they have the support of the local bishop to minister outside the diocese of Dubuque. So in essence they had no choice if they desired to follow the call that brought them to the United States and motivated them to become a religious community.\(^72\)

The congregation needed the ability to locate schools away from the motherhouse and the ability to function publicly without a great deal of oversight from the diocese. Thus, the last basic differences between pontifical and diocesan congregations relate closely to the spatial proximity of those persons in control—bishops versus the pope. The pope’s direct involvement with the congregation after officially acknowledging the community

\(^71\) Women religious regularly lived in community and lived as sisters prior to receiving approbation. In fact, one of the terms of approbation was that the community had successfully performed the works and community life they laid out in their rules and constitution.

revolved only around grave issues such as excommunication. The BVM sisters ultimately became a pontifical congregation. In 1900, many years after the practice of distinguishing sisters as diocesan or pontifical had begun, the distinctions between diocesan and pontifical congregations—along with many other distinctions—were codified in the document *Conditae a Christo* issued by Pope Leo XIII.

Still, there is an important difference between the Vatican’s documents about how congregations were supposed to operate and how they actually operated. The BVM congregation under Clarke, as I will explain later, often operated independently of, or contrary to, the local bishop’s directions. The combined evidence a) of the request of and compliance with bishops’ directions and b) of the absence of bishops’ involvement or of the congregation’s lack of compliance with the bishops’ directions demonstrate that the members of the congregation and the bishop negotiated circumstances and rules depending on the context. The actual nature of the sisters’ dependency on the approval of the bishop depended on many intersecting factors, such as the personal relationships between the bishop at any particular time and the members of the congregation, whether the bishop was physically present or out somewhere in the expansive diocese, or whether the congregation was seeking loans from the bishop or the bishop was seeking teachers from the congregation. The BVM sisters also received counsel and support from other priests. In the process of creating and submitting their Rules to the Vatican, for example, the BVM sisters relied heavily upon priest colleagues and friends who had connections in Rome and who supported the mission of the sisters. These relationships developed before the approbation process started and continued after approbation was granted.
Additionally, BVM schools were located in many parishes and in other dioceses. This meant the sisters had professional relationships with many priests.

The total number of priests in the region was small relative to the size of the area and to the growing Catholic population. There simply were fewer Catholic religious men than Catholic religious women who ventured west. The bishop was surely concerned about maintaining the presence of priests in the region with the growing number of Catholics migrating from the East. Priests were quite valuable to the mission of expanding Catholicism to the migrants repopulating the West. The bishop would have known of the BVMs’ professional relationships and friendships with many of these priests and would have had to take his relationships with the population of priests in the region into account as he negotiated his relationship with the BVM sisters.

As an example of the relationships the BVMs formed with other clergy, Fr. Trevis, SJ in Keokuk, Iowa wrote to Fr. Philip Laruent, SJ in Muscatine, Iowa, in 1867:

Card. [sic] Franchi, hearing how many children the Sisters were instructing, told me that Bp. Hennessy should be delighted to have such a help in his Diocese, and since the property of the Community was sufficiently secure before the law, he did not see why Bp. H. should wish to hold the title to it, to which I replied that the principal reason for him to express such pretensions should be only his intentions of manipulating the Sisters as he would like. 73

John Hennessy was the bishop of Dubuque when the BVM sisters applied for approbation from Rome. The relationship between this particular bishop and the BVM sisters hinted at in the preceding excerpt was quite confrontational. Despite the bishop’s position within the church hierarchy and his nominal power, the positive relationships the BVM sisters maintained with many other clergy and the power of the congregation through their successful establishment of schools both mitigated the potential for the

73 Andrew Trevis to Philip Laurent, Keokuk, Iowa, 28 June 1867, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
bishop to actually dominate the actions of the BVM sisters. Receiving pontifical approbation contributed to the BVM congregation’s ability to operate within the recognition of the Catholic hierarchy and avoid some of the constraints that would have come with diocesan status. Pontifical status afforded the congregation more options for fulfilling their mission of opening schools, and it allowed them to structure their congregation more effectively for this purpose.

**Conclusion: Research and Summary of Chapters**

My research relies on the primary evidence contained in the Mount Carmel archives for this study of BVM school systems and teachers. The BVM archives contain letters, rules, meeting notes, secretaries’ notes, and circulars, among other sorts of communication, that form the foundation of my resources. The content of the communications informs us today about the energy and effort placed on the maintenance of these Catholic places as geographers Catherine Brace, Adrian R. Bailey, and David C. Harvey and Lily Kong highlight. The maintenance activities themselves contribute to the identity of the group and thus to the meaning of the places.

There are barriers to accessing the archives of many Catholic congregations. Often the barriers have to do with space and current or past staffing constraints. One fulltime archivist and others who volunteer or work part time care for the collection at Mount Carmel, however. It is an active and fully functioning office located at the BVM motherhouse. I began researching in the archives in the fall of 2005. I spent the first months combing through the boxes and files for each individual school. As my project

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solidified, I switched my research focus from the schools to the women who served as administrators and teachers in the schools. This led to my accessing records of the women stored in electronic databases. Although the database allowed me to search in a very organized way, the entries were not always coded accurately or completely. I spent many hours cross-checking the database results with physical files. That preliminary research identified individual women I could study even further. Finally, I delved into the personal folders of each of the women I identified, 178 women initially. The contents of their folders varied greatly since the items contained in the personal folders existed only because someone thought to submit the materials. Some women’s extended families or friends thought to send their papers and belongings to the archives and others did not. Of course, position within the congregation also affected the size and completeness of the files. Those who sent and received formal correspondence on behalf of the congregation or the leadership had larger files than those who did not. I also learned greatly from the official documents, like drafts of the Constitution and Rules and official diaries of the congregation kept by the secretaries, purposefully housed in the archives. I gained access to these records, to the archives in general, because I asked and because I was able to demonstrate my intent to produce a thoroughly researched dissertation about spatial, organizational, and secular and sacred aspects of the BVM teachers and schools in the nineteenth century.

The following chapters will demonstrate that the BVM congregation created a group identity spread through dispersion and maintained through regular written and personal contact. The identity they maintained was definitely religious in nature, but it was also equally secular. Understanding the secular aspects of the congregation related
to teaching allows us to include in the history of education a type of U.S. teaching that the literature has not yet fully investigated. If the research I have conducted is true not only for the BVM teachers but also for other religious school systems, then the following are true for a significant portion of nineteenth-century U.S. teachers:

1. women regularly taught and administered for lifelong careers;
2. the interactions among the women teachers and administrators were both deeply personal and pointedly professional;
3. teachers actively supported and benefited from centralization.

These central arguments and my other findings in this dissertation expand the description of nineteenth century teachers and thus can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of U.S. teaching in general. This more nuanced, more accurate understanding may allow us to ask more pertinent questions of the past and the present in order to consider what is possible in U.S. teaching partially based on what has been true in the past. When we fail to understand the truth of the past, it is quite likely that we will limit our current ability to imagine what is possible.

In Chapter 2, I will explore the movement and location of the BVM teachers as they established schools in the West. I will focus on the dispersion of the schools in terms of core–periphery relationships in order to analyze how the BVM’s specific dispersion patterns differed from what is understood about public school dispersion. BVM teachers dispersed from an official center just outside of Dubuque, Iowa, and opened schools dotting a relatively large area roughly covering Iowa to Chicago whereas public schools began as individual and discrete sites that eventually merged together to create school districts. The intentions and actions of decision makers in public and
private schools impacted one another and the dispersion patterns of the schools in the
systems. In Chapter 3, I will discuss more specifically the relationship between the core–
periphery organization and the operation of the BVM religious community and their
schools.\textsuperscript{75} This will lead to a discussion of the impact of such an organization on the
professional, spiritual, and social lives of the BVM teachers and administrators. The
experiences of BVM teachers reveal to us that some U.S. women teachers experienced
teaching as a lifelong and rich endeavor, not as an exception, but as regular occurrence in
their communities. Chapter 4 explores the intermingling of the sacred and the secular in
the BVM schools, within their institution, and in the lives of the teachers themselves.
Both a strong religious identity and effective secular practices impacted the persistence of
the BVM schools as sacred spaces. Finally, Chapter 5 presents a summary, an epilogue,
and suggestions for further research. In all of these chapters, I intend to recover accounts
from the sisters that provide information about how space and distance affected the
experiences of these Catholic U.S. teachers.

\textsuperscript{75} See the questions regarding the relationship between school management and skilled teachers in Richard
M. Ingersoll, "The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools," \textit{Educational
Researcher} 28 (1999): 29. The connections may seem tangential, but there are possibly strong correlations
with the local and regional management of the BVM schools, the career focus of the teachers, and the
consistency of education in the BVM schools. Ingersoll highlights, in particular, the importance of teacher
input in the professionalization of teaching in general.
CHAPTER 2 CORE AND PERIPHERAL EXPERIENCES OF BVM TEACHERS

Traditionally, geographers have used core-periphery models to explain the spatial and economic relationships between resources and those who use resources, to explain the uneven pattern of urbanization in larger geographic areas, or to explain the spatial dispersion of populations. At the global level, the models consider those countries with the greatest wealth and ability to process and distribute resources to be part of the core. Those with the least wealth and ability to process and distribute resources are part of the periphery. Whether at the global level or at much smaller levels, the core constitutes the dominant or more developed area, and the periphery is the subordinate area. Core–periphery models are by definition an ideal type of spatial and economic relationships. When studying a geographic area, one can compare the characteristics of the area with the model in order to identify whether or not it is an area with a core and periphery.

The typical model defines the core as powerful, determining the goals of the whole (the core and the periphery), such as making profits through manufacturing. The core is the site of the decision makers and those facilities that require direct oversight by the decision makers, and geographers refer to both the site and the decision makers as the core. Consider a hypothetical aluminum manufacturer in the United States called Sodacans. The CEO, the board, research and development, and marketing and sales offices are located in Metroville, Illinois, U.S., the core. Of course, to make the aluminum, Sodacans needs bauxite. Most bauxite is strip mined in tropical or subtropical regions of the world, not in the United States. So, Sodacans opens facilities in two or three suitable tropical locations and proceeds to extract the bauxite. The cost of labor is extremely low in these areas, so instead of hiring and transporting U.S. workers to the
mines, Sodacans hires locals to do the mining. The core decides what products to manufacture, aluminum; what resources to use, bauxite; how to compensate workers, with low wages; and how to reinvest the profits, further strip mining in these peripheral locations. The periphery exists to meet the needs of the core that the core cannot meet itself. The periphery provides material and labor resources that are necessary for manufacturing, bauxite for example, or it can offer resources that are available in the core but result in lower manufacturing costs and higher profits for the core if they are acquired in the periphery, like low-wage labor. Spatially, the core may be contiguous to the periphery, or the periphery may be more remote. The most fundamental ideas associated with the core and the periphery boil down to the core naming the group’s goals and requiring the periphery to contribute through carrying out the plans created by the core (Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1  Traditional core–periphery model suggests a uni-directional flow.
The basic model itself suggests a sort of determinism: if there are core and peripheral entities, then they will have specific power and resource relationships. However, it is possible for there to be core and peripheral entities with a range of power and resource relationships. As this chapter will demonstrate, the actual nature of the core–periphery relationships within the nineteenth-century school system created by the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVMs) veers from a simplistic theoretical version adopted from traditional political or economic core–periphery models. The standard core–periphery models help us to consider spatial and social categories, but according to some geographers, the use of the models ought to go further and help us understand actual spatially dispersed institutions.¹ This chapter will attempt to take this additional step.

The traditional core–periphery model is convenient because it offers a simplified image of sorts of relationships—those between the model and those social organizations that we understand to contain a core and periphery. The model is supposed to help us recognize those kinds of relationships, not to offer an exhaustive listing of properties that define every core–periphery relationship.² Although the model is useful for recognizing certain social–spatial relationships, the core–periphery model is not the greatest tool for explaining actual social–spatial relationships because its role is to simplify an extremely complex set of interactions. The first communication back to the core from the periphery, for example, affects the core in some way; thus, the relationships between the

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core and the periphery cannot be unidirectional (Figure 1). Keeping the terms *core* and *periphery* intact, though, allows the observer to understand something like the order of events in terms of the origins of the groups’ locations and perhaps the recognized control center versus the rest of the whole. There are also some valid distinctions one can make between any specific core and its periphery, but one cannot state the exact distinctions before observing their occurrences. In this case, although the Catholic Church in the 1880s had a definite hierarchical and spatial organization, it is inappropriate to assume that every interaction between core and peripheral locations or between persons occupying particular roles (like bishops and the BVM sisters) always reflected strict, one-way dominance. Core–periphery categorization can still be helpful as the description of the relationship becomes more complicated because it can allow the observer to think clearly about the roles of change and multidirectional influences through space and time.

Looking through a historical lens suggests that we must clarify the roles of time *and* space in the actual relationship between the core and the periphery and to acknowledge that the categories themselves are still useful as an ideal type even if they are not applied in a deterministic way. If one views a snapshot of a spatially dispersed institution at any particular time, the direction of the relationship between the core and the periphery may seem quite simple to understand. When seen in full temporal motion, however, one understands, perhaps, the lack of discreetness of the roles of the two kinds of locations and of the direction of the interactions of the groups within the locations. This more complete recognition of variability and time within the institution also allows for a more ready acceptance of the reality that many peripheral locations eventually emerge as new cores. Unfortunately, researchers sometimes search for the snapshots that
best fit the sort of relationship they wish to explain, such as simple and clear authority between bishops and the diocese and Catholic sisters and their convents and schools. The stereotypical understanding of nuns and sisters being simply subject to the patriarchal establishment of the Catholic Church exemplifies this. There are certainly patriarchal relationships within the Catholic Church, but these are not the only relationships that exist. This selectivity can come at the cost of complete understanding of how authority may exist within a much more complicated set of relationships that constitute the whole moving picture.

Geographers are critical of simplistic applications of these traditional models to real world instances because while the models are useful for illustrating ideal economic or political situations, they can fail to capture the complexities of actual economic or political spatial organization. The critique does not call for a new model; it requires caution in applying the existing model. The problem is not that the model gets things wrong, but that the application can be done carelessly. Geographer Gary Dymski explains that the original use of the core model for economics requires “methodological individualism, full information, utility-maximizing individuals and profit-maximizing firms, and an exclusive focus on socially disembedded relationships of exchange.”


Geographer Allen Scott comments on this explanation with particular emphasis on the importance of social embeddedness, saying that core–periphery models can be useful and effective for understanding sorts of spatial, economic relationships, but they need to help us understand some actual geographically dispersed institution rather than simply serve as theoretical models of an ideal or of some possible world out there. Scott’s argument as
applied to economics requires any researcher using an economic core–periphery model to consider contributing micro-economies, social context, and other regional variables that affect the actual workings of an economic system. At the same time, Scott argues for the consideration of culture as a critical component of the economic system, which Dymski suggests is inherently not a part of the traditional use of the core–periphery model. Using core and periphery concepts well means having an accurate account of inputs, including culture.

The BVM school system has many hallmarks of a core–periphery arrangement. Initiation and congregational-level administrative activities took place at a central motherhouse, while individual schools, or missions, and sometimes clusters of schools operated in peripheral locations. Rather than considering traditional economic or political relationships like many scholars who use this model, I will apply the core–periphery model to professional and social relationships within the BVM school system. This chapter will explore some of the features of the BVM school system’s core–periphery organization that relate to and veer from the ideal core–periphery model in order to illuminate the nature of the spatial experiences of BVM teachers in Iowa and surrounding areas. The findings about the BVM schools’ dispersion characteristics will suggest that complex interactions between public and Catholic schools shaped the overall emergence of the pattern of U.S. school dispersion in the nineteenth-century, meaning the order of the schools opening and the processes resulting in districts or school systems.

Understanding Catholic school dispersion and the interaction between Catholic and

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4 Scott (2004) warns against academic conversations about the culture of economic academics as if those were conversations about core–periphery economics or culture themselves.
public school dispersion will lead to a more real and complex perspective on U.S. education in general.

Of particular concern for this chapter are the nature of the dispersion of BVM schools and the ways that public and private school dispersion impacted one another in order to create a mutually affective relationship that resulted in U.S. school dispersion. In subsequent chapters, I will expand on my consideration of the social structure of the congregation (Chapter 3) and of the connections between the sacred and the secular aspects of BVM teaching (Chapter 4). My purposes in this chapter are specifically to investigate 1) the nature of actual exchanges among teachers and administrators of the BVM congregation and 2) latent and manifest connections between BVM schools and teaching and public education in order to reach a more complex level of understanding of the core and the periphery of the BVM congregation and school system and to suggest an interdependence between public and private schools that helped to shape the pattern of dispersion of U.S. schools.

Viewed in light of core and periphery models of how a spatially discontiguous institution operates, the archival evidence suggests that the BVM system, and to a certain extent public schools on the frontier as well, included interdependent core and peripheral locations, rather than the one-way dependence suggested by traditional core–periphery models (Figure 2.2). The interdependence encouraged and was encouraged by important personal and professional relationships throughout the dispersed institution, and it resulted in strongly linked peripheral locations. These peripheral locations made up the BVM school system. The relative independence of the peripheral locations and the links between them did not impinge upon the core administration’s ability to make decisions
and oversee activities at the peripheral schools. The core administrators played important roles and were responsible for the larger community, but the strong relationships among individuals at all locations contributed significantly to the effectiveness of the BVM school system.

The Core and Periphery in Education Literature

In the 2003 issue of History of Education, Gary McCullouch and Rob Lowe open with “Introduction: Centre and Periphery—Networks, Space and Geography in the History of Education.” The authors extend an explicit invitation to integrate geography and the history of education. They are particularly interested in the concepts of the core and the periphery as they pertain to creating education systems during the British colonization of Australia. The authors argue that education served to bridge the distances between core culture groups and their peripheral offshoots and that all too often this link, education, is missing from the historical and geographic dialog regarding core and periphery. The labels core and periphery here refer to the spatial organization of the more general social structure of a society. As previously explained, a simplistic
understanding states that the core “gives meaning” and determines what is valuable to a culture group. The core transfers those meanings and values to peripheral locations and takes from the periphery the resources (products, people, and knowledge) that will help the core maintain control over meanings and values and will help expand the diffusion of such ideas through space. McCullouch and Lowe explain that schools served to bridge the distances between core culture groups and their peripheral offshoots in nineteenth century colonial Great Britain.5

Familiar institutions, like schools and churches, helped to ease the transition when populations migrated. McCulloch and Lowe’s argument goes something like this: establishing institutions and practices from home in the new location created a more familiar social environment for the new settlers, which may have encouraged the newcomers to stay and thereby contributed to the stability of the new settlement.

McCulloch and Lowe write about core–periphery issues in nineteenth-century education in Australia, New Zealand, and Great Britain. Their discussion explains some of the features of Australian education during this period, and it calls for further historical research in the geography of education, in general.6 British settlers came from the British core, arrived in Australia and New Zealand, and then established formal social institutions such as schools in the new colonies. These institutions and the settlements that they supported assisted with the structural transition of white, British peripheral settlements into urban centers heavily imbued with British meanings and values. The

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white settlements also eventually served as the new core to previously existing and newly created rural communities in Australia and New Zealand. McCullough and Lowe recognize the “significance of personal interactions, but also the role of cities as crossroads and meeting-places, and the emergence of a global traffic of knowledge in the early modern world.”7 Peripheral spaces in Australia became new centers, and schools helped recreate the familiar structures for the white community that led to those new centers. Schools helped retain the white population and contributed to white population growth during these periods of rapid urbanization. They also provided a structured, fairly organized means of transferring core British values and practices. There was definitely a flow of cultural knowledge from the British homeland core to the white Australasian settlements and even to the native settlements.8

Although historians of U.S. education do not all utilize explicit geographical methods, some of their works suggest that schools in the U.S. West fulfilled a similar role for their European-American students. Creating a cushion of familiar sorts of institutions, like schools and places of worship, allowed Easterners (or Irish or Catholics or Jews, depending on the home culture) to maintain a connection with the “homeland.”9 As historian Polly Welts Kaufman underscores, many teachers who went west wanted to move away from home but greatly missed the comforts of family and home culture in the


8 I will not be exploring the impact of colonization on native populations. Although an interesting and meaningful area of study, this study focuses on how sorts of institutions operated and flourished in peripheral locations, for good or ill.

9 See McCulloch and Lowe, "Introduction: Centre and Periphery--Networks, Space and Geography in the History of Education," 458. McCulloch and Lowe discuss using schools as connections between frontier communities in Australia and the homeland. The schools also made possible the efforts to extend or reproduce the settlers culture within the indigenous communities.
Institutions like schools and churches that were similar to those from back home eased the teachers’ transitions.

The peripheral locations played another critical role apart from being places where newcomers could reestablish old customs. Settlers who went west also sent knowledge back to the East. Welts Kaufman’s study of the letters from the National Board of Popular Education (NBPE) teachers (1846–1856) to friends and family in the East are prime examples of the connections and knowledge dispersion between the East and West. The correspondence reminded the settlers of home and of their home values and beliefs. It also allowed the settlers to explain what it was like to teach in the West, what travel conditions were like, what the landscape offered, and what Westerners were like. The core–periphery relationship suggested by these exchanges was a two-way flow of information. As McCulloch and Lowe state, one must take “sufficient account of flows of knowledge from periphery to centre as well as in the opposite direction.”

Whereas McCulloch and Lowe and Welts Kaufman indicate that the Australian and NBPE teachers communicated chiefly between core and peripheral locations, BVM teachers engaged in core-periphery communication and additionally shared information between peripheral locations. Their communication focused on both personal and professional concerns. It is possible that McCulloch and Lowe’s and Welts Kaufman’s works simply emphasize communication between the core and the periphery and overlook evidence of communication from peripheral location to peripheral location, or

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perhaps there was little documented evidence of communication between peripheral locations, which does not mean the relationships did not exist. BVM teachers left evidence of such relationships, and understanding their core–periphery organization accurately requires accounting for communication between peripheral locations as well as between the core and the periphery. This examination will add to the limited picture that we now have of U.S. education in the West in the nineteenth-century.

**Catharine Beecher’s Public School Dispersion Efforts**

Catharine Beecher played a notable role in nineteenth-century U.S. education as an advocate for women’s professionalism and for school reform. Beecher was aware of the role that Catholic education played in the West, and the success of Catholic schools influenced her own works in the U.S. West. The American Woman’s Educational Association, with Catharine Beecher at its helm, recorded anti-Catholic sentiments in its writings.\(^{12}\) The following excerpts from the 1853 annual report of the American Woman’s Educational Association indicate a real fear and loathing of the progress that Catholic teachers were making in the West:

> [A]nd what is there which to a patriot, or philanthropist, offers stronger claims than this enterprise [endowed, Protestant-based education for women]? The battle with stolid ignorance, with Catholic superstition, or with infidel licentiousness must be, not chiefly with the sword, or even, with the pulpit and the press. It must be a battle of *schools for the children*. Whoever *educates* the great West, gains possession of the helm of the nation and controls the destinies of the world!\(^{13}\)

> . . . Rome is in earnest. Her teaching force is relatively much greater at the West than at the East. Romanists mean to be in advance of Protestants. Nine tenths of their schools are for females, showing that they mean to make the *mothers*, who

\(^{12}\) For reference to the Protestant, anti-Catholic content of *McGuffey Readers*, see Fraser, *The School in the United States: A Documentary History*, 89-94.

will make the nation. Their teachers are in our midst, and borne on upon the outmost wave of emigration, they are, from capital to frontier, sowing the seeds of their system upon the soil of American childhood.\textsuperscript{14}

These Protestants loathed Catholics and Catholic schools. The Association clearly refers to religious concerns, but the ultimate fear seems to be that Catholic teachers are winning the U.S. children, and ultimately those who controlled the nation were in danger of losing “possession of the helm” because of the success of Catholic education in the West.

According to historian Joan Burstyn, “the school [Beecher] founded in 1823, Hartford Female Seminary, is acknowledged to have been one of the finest of its time; and her later work arranging for women from the East to teach in frontier communities, and founding the first normal schools in the West for women teachers is applauded.”\textsuperscript{15} Beecher’s analyses of U.S. culture and of the role of women in society influenced many U.S. citizens of the time. She spoke publicly on her views of womanhood, professional life, and education. She opened schools and extolled the virtues of women as natural and expert inhabitants of private life, or natural experts to the extent that if they followed the advice found in Beecher’s writings, speeches, and schools.

The soundness of her position is of less concern here, however, than is her position within the literature of the history of education. Beecher’s public persona meant that she left behind documentation of both her views and her activities. Beecher was a force to be reckoned with and she left evidence to prove it. Among other accomplishments, Beecher opened the Hartford Female Seminary in Hartford, Connecticut; the Western Female Institute in Cincinnati; the Milwaukee Normal Institute;

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 20.

schools in Quincy, Illinois and Burlington, Iowa; and the Dubuque Female Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa in 1853 (known as Dubuque Female College from 1854 to 1859). The Hartford, Cincinnati, and Dubuque schools closed not because of a lack of community or student interest in general, but because Beecher could not attract consistent and adequate funding. Speaking of the academy Beecher opened in Cincinnati, she stated:

no other suitable building could be found to hire, the hard times came on, and funds could not be raised to build or purchase one; some of the teachers were called to more favorable locations, and finally, after five years of labor, the whole effort failed, the school ended, and a Catholic female institution took its place, for which more than $20,000 have been paid. And not long after, the Catholic nunnery and school were established, at an outlay of more than $30,000.  

In this address to Protestant clergy, Beecher contended that the Catholic schools were flourishing in the West because the Catholic hierarchy saw women as valuable professionals and were willing to invest in and promote the schools that women led.

When Beecher’s schools in Cincinnati and Dubuque closed, Catholic sisters moved into the buildings and conducted schools. Ironically, the spread of Catholics and Catholic education were top reasons for Beecher’s decision to open schools in the West. Catholic education incited her building new schools in the West, and Catholic schools took over her buildings when her schools did not succeed. In Beecher’s own words, educators needed to focus on the West because of the increasing migrant population, "thousands of degraded foreigners and their ignorant families, are pouring into this nation at every avenue." As in this statement, Beecher regularly and openly revealed her animosity, if not outright racism, towards Catholic immigrants of her day. The following


excerpt from the 1853 annual report of the American Woman’s Educational Association, of which Catharine Beecher was a board member, indicates a real fear and loathing of the progress that Catholic teachers were making in the West:

[A]nd what is there which to a patriot, or philanthropist, offers stronger claims than this enterprise [endowed, Protestant-based education for women]? The battle with stolid ignorance, with Catholic superstition, or with infidel licentiousness must be, not chiefly with the sword, or even, with the pulpit and the press. It must be a battle of schools for the children. Whoever educates the great West, gains possession of the helm of the nation and controls the destinies of the world.18

Rome is in earnest. Her teaching force is relatively much greater at the West than at the East. Romanists mean to be in advance of Protestants. Nine tenths of their schools are for females, showing that they mean to make the mothers, who will make the nation. Their teachers are in our midst, and borne on upon the outmost wave of emigration, they are, from capital to frontier, sowing the seeds of their system upon the soil of American childhood.19

Beecher and her colleagues openly wrestled with how to appropriately criticize the Catholicicity of the thriving institutions for girls and account for their success at the same time. They acknowledged the financial backing the Catholic Church afforded Catholic schools for girls and the general institutional support the schools received from the Catholic Church, but they never approved of the celibate, acts-based religious life practiced by Catholic sisters or of Catholicism in general.

As she criticized Catholicism, though, Beecher struggled to keep her own schools running. Beecher opened the Dubuque Female College in 1853. One 1861 author claimed the school was built to accommodate 500 students, but it never did reach its potential.20 In fact, the BVM sisters opened St. Joseph’s Academy in Dubuque in 1859,
the same year that Beecher’s college closed. The closing further supported Beecher’s own argument that families did want more education for girls and that well-supported institutions, like Catholic academies, could provide education best since poorly supported schools simply closed. The desire of Catholics to provide education for all of their parishioners or for all poor children confronted Protestant-based school movements like Beecher’s efforts, which seemed strongly inspired by the desire to stop the spread of Catholicism. The confrontation was ideological and sometimes legal. It was also spatial as the interactions resulted in the dispersion of both public and Catholic schools.

The BVM Core and Periphery

The BVM core included the motherhouse and to some extent the city of Dubuque, eight miles distant. The congregation’s administrators lived and worked at the motherhouse. All women who entered the congregation began there as postulants then remained for some time as novices. The motherhouse also housed the infirmary, a farm, and a day and boarding school. Creating the periphery entailed establishing new schools at a considerable distance from the motherhouse. This required establishing an economic structure to support a geographically dispersed community. The congregation also developed a fairly interdependent management system to oversee the schools and the mobile population of teachers and other sisters who ran the peripheral mission schools.

The Core

During Mary Frances Clarke’s leadership of the congregation in Iowa (1843–1887), the BVM core was about eight miles southwest of Dubuque. The BVM congregation moved to St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, or the Prairie as it is commonly called, in 1846. By 1848 the congregation had purchased 724.96 acres of land surrounding the
Prairie and other land not connected to the Prairie. Because the congregation did not incorporate until September 1869, Reverend Terence James Donagho, father superior of the BVM congregation from its arrival in Philadelphia in 1833 until his death in 1869, purchased the land under the names of individual sisters. When the congregation incorporated after Donagho’s death in January of 1869, the corporation retained the titles to the land, meaning that the sisters owned the land as a group. All BVM teachers resided at the Prairie for a period of time before going to a teaching location. It was where women became BVM sisters and teachers (Figure 2.3).
Catholic sisters are not the only teachers who had an experience like this. The teachers who participated in the NBPE, founded by Catharine Beecher in 1844 under the name Central Committee for Promoting National Education, likewise gathered first at a common location for spiritual and professional training and then dispersed to western and southern communities to open new schools or staff existing schools. But, whereas NBPE teachers neither returned to the location of their training nor had much official guidance from the core after they left, the BVM core location, the Prairie, continued to significantly affect the professional and personal lives of the BVM teachers even after they dispersed. Many BVM teachers returned to the motherhouse for professional and religious gatherings regularly throughout their careers, and teachers often returned from distant school locations to the Prairie to die (Figure 2.4). Those who returned to the motherhouse for meetings faced the traveling limitations of the period. In 1869, the BVM sisters began attending annual retreats at the motherhouse when possible. Even for those sisters who lived fairly close to Dubuque, getting to the Prairie was no easy task. Ascension Lilly described waiting an extra day for a late boat to take her and others from Elkader, Iowa, to Dubuque for a retreat. The modern road distance between the cities is approximately sixty miles. When the women reached Dubuque, they were supposed to walk the eight miles to the Prairie and were chastised for having taken a carriage part of the way. Even though they were late, taking a carriage was seen as frivolous by the superior in Dubuque.21

In letters to superiors and teachers, Clarke often referred to the motherhouse at the Prairie as home. In a letter to Basil Healy regarding one of the teachers under Healy’s

21 Lambertina Doran, “Fragmentary Notes of Sister Mary Lambertina,” (Dubuque, Iowa: 1912), 1.
supervision in 1881, Clarke stated, “I expect her home . . .”\textsuperscript{22} A letter from Clarke to teacher Purification McDonnell in 1884 begins, “Do come home . . .”\textsuperscript{23} Perhaps the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{locations_bvm_schools_1843-1887.png}
\caption{Locations of BVM Schools, 1843–1887. Created by Dale Easley.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{22} Mary F. Clarke to Mary Basil Healy, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 11 September 1881, \textit{My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM}, ed. Laura Smith-Noggle (Dubuque: Mount Carmel Press, 1987), 58.

\textsuperscript{23} Mary F. Clarke to Mary Purification McDonnell, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 1 September 1884, \textit{My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM}, 88.
sentiment of the motherhouse as home related directly to Clarke’s own feelings since it was her place of residence. The nature and tone of the letters with these references, however, indicate that the motherhouse was a cultural, even familial center for the teachers, not simply a central administrative location. If the definition of core implies a place where the members share cultural similarities, then the BVM motherhouse as an administrative, religious, and familial center fits the definition.

The Prairie was the specific location of the BVM core; this was a spiritually meaningful place, an administrative center, and a physical location. But the core also had a relative location that extended its operational boundaries to certain activities in Dubuque. The BVM motherhouse served as the core of the BVM congregation. Depending on whether Donaghoe or Clarke was superior and who was bishop, the bishop played a more or less significant role in impacting where peripheral missions located. Dubuque was the location of the diocesan center and where the bishop lived. Dubuque was historically the first center of the congregation after the women came west, and this held some significance. The BVMs first located in Dubuque and opened their first school west of the Mississippi there. Their connections to that parish, St. Mary’s, and to the Dubuque community remained important to the core’s operation for many years after the community relocated to the Prairie. Others outside of the congregation who were significant to the running of the congregation also lived and operated from Dubuque. W. J. Knight lived in Dubuque and served as the congregation’s legal representative. He provided extensive assistance with property acquisition and property management in particular. Knight conducted his work in Dubuque for the congregation. Dubuque itself was the business and transportation hub of the area. In the 1850 census, Dubuque had a
population of 3108 and had five Catholic churches. At the time, the only city in Iowa with a larger population was Burlington, another important river port. Chicago had a much larger population (29,963), but had only seven Catholic churches. The core’s relationship to Dubuque was important enough that Dubuque effectively functioned as part of the core; shortly after Clarke’s death, the BVM community purchased land in Dubuque and there built its current motherhouse, Mount Carmel.

Creating the BVM Periphery

In 1852 thirty-five bishops and six archbishops met for the First Plenary Council of Baltimore. This meeting resulted in decrees outlining the priorities and purposes of the U.S. Catholic Church. The members of the conference decreed, “Bishops are exhorted to have a Catholic school in every parish and the teachers should be paid from the parochial funds.” By the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1884, the exhortation became a demand: “We must multiply them [schools], till every child in the land shall have the means of education within its reach. . . . No parish is complete till it has schools adequate to the needs of its children, and the pastor and people of such a parish should feel that they have not accomplished their entire duty until the want is supplied.” The bishops demanded the dispersion of Catholicism through the creation of schools throughout the U.S. West.


In her 1953 dissertation, Sister Mary Innocenta Montay, CSSF (Congregation of the Sisters of St. Felix Cantalice), explained the following about the Committee on Schools that met during the Third Plenary Council:

It is interesting to note the geographical representation of the committee. All were from the Middle West, the section of the country which was most attached to the idea of the parochial school . . . . Bishops, priests, and laity were to provide Catholic schools which would be comparable to the best public schools.27 Montay’s observation points out that during this period the Church leaders, in the Middle West and elsewhere, were interested in opening competitive, high quality schools. They were also providing the only viable schooling options for some children. Anti-Catholic sentiments made it impossible in some locations for Catholic children to attend public schools and have their values either represented or respected. The McGuffey readers and other texts commonly used in public schools during this period articulated clear anti-Catholic sentiments.28 Nativists in the East physically attacked Catholic schools, like the BVM’s school in Philadelphia, creating not only a hostile but dangerous situation for children and teachers. Historical traditions that linked Catholic churches and education, the growth in the Catholic population in the United States, and the unwelcoming environment for Catholics in the public schools all resulted in the bishops requiring a concentrated effort to open a school for every parish. As the Catholic schools opened, members of Protestant churches in the same communities in the West often argued over which denomination of Protestantism would be presented in any one community’s public education.


school. It could have been this diversity and lack of cohesion that hindered Beecher’s attempts to attract enough support to more successfully challenge the dispersion of Catholic schools in the West, but is clear that Protestants did not invite Catholics into the discussion.

The BVM congregation espoused the goal of dispersing Catholic schools well before 1852. Even before locating in the United States, the original members of the BVM congregation worked together to provide education for poor girls in Dublin. When they moved to Philadelphia in 1833, they continued with the mission of providing schooling for poor girls. The women relocated to Dubuque in 1843 again with the explicit intention of providing education for poor children. Within the archival materials of the congregation, it is evident that educating children, especially girls, was the main intention of the early years of the BVM congregation. In the 1845 Rules of the congregation, Mary Frances Clarke wrote in Article 1:

A secondary but not less important motive [than honoring the Holy Family] of this community is to honor the sacred childhood of Jesus Christ, in the young persons of their own sex, whose hearts they are called to form to the love of God, in the practice of every Virtue & the knowledge of Religion; whilst at the same time; they sow the seed of useful knowledge & prepare them to be good members of Society.  

The personnel-poor Catholic bishops and priests in the West were under a great deal of pressure to realize the rapid establishment of Catholic schools, and they readily welcomed teachers from congregations like the BVMs to complete the work that the Council of Baltimore had assigned to the bishops.

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Establishing pioneer schools, as the congregation called new peripheral schools, was no easy task. The travel itself could be dangerous. In 1865 five BVM teachers traveled to Des Moines, Iowa, to open St. Ambrose parish school. They took a train from Dubuque as close to Des Moines as they could get, Boone, Iowa, about fifty miles away. Close to Boone, the train derailed in a snowstorm and the teachers’ coach slid down a hill into a pond. Two passengers died in the accident, three were severely injured, and one of the BVM teachers saved a little girl from drowning in the pond. The teachers spent that night in Boone in a rather rough hotel and then continued traveling by stagecoach on a snow-blocked road the next day. They only convinced their driver to keep going through the snow to Des Moines by upping their payment for travel.31

Even when the traveling was less eventful, often the circumstances when they arrived were less than ideal. In 1906 Mary Loyola Rutherford recalled her arrival in Cascade, Iowa, in 1869. Pulcheria McGuire documented Rutherford’s recollection. The teachers traveled from the Prairie to Cascade to open the school in May, but the convent was not built until six months after the teachers’ arrival. During those six months, the teachers taught school in temporary classrooms as did many nineteenth-century teachers. “[T]he basement of the old German Church was cleared of rubbish, thoroughly renovated, and fairly comfortable classrooms were prepared in which the Sisters opened school a few days after their arrival.”32 Rutherford remembered sleeping on a mattress on the floor. Because there were no doors on the building, she looked out into the night sky as she fell asleep.


The decision to teach as members of a Catholic religious congregation meant that BVM teachers would have particular kinds of core–periphery experiences. Teachers learned the values, beliefs, and professional and religious expectations of the BVM congregation during their formation at the motherhouse. Formation consisted of formal periods of prayer and contemplation, structured learning about the spiritual life of a BVM sister, work for the congregation, stages of profession of desire to continue with the congregation, and typically acceptance by the congregation. The congregation’s administration then dispersed the teachers to various mission sites. At these peripheral locations, the teachers received information from and returned information to the core of the congregation at the motherhouse. Mary Frances Clarke, BVM mother superior, with input from Terrence Donagho, father superior, and other administrators, decided who would go to which mission, and those in the peripheral missions informed Clarke of the needs of the communities where they taught. The overlapping religious and professional experiences that the teachers shared also resulted in their continued contact at personal and professional levels, so there were exchanges of information and resources from peripheral location to peripheral location. Josephine Clarke wrote to one of her friends in 1879. The letter does not include the name of the recipient, but the Mount Carmel archivists believe that the recipient was Prudentia Reilly. Clarke, who was at St. Joseph’s Academy, which was located in Dubuque but was not part of the functioning core, informed Reilly of the changes in superior appointments at different missions including Clarke’s knowledge of the new superior at Reilly’s school. Clarke hoped that the new superior would be better for Reilly than the previous superior had been, implying that Reilly had shared her feelings and knowledge about the previous superior. In addition to
the information about changing personnel, Clarke sent Reilly a book “full of good solid thought.”33 This could have been a personal or professional gift. Regardless, the support and information traveled from teacher to teacher at peripheral locations, not solely from the core to the periphery.

Another example of periphery to periphery communication is a letter which includes a longstanding teaching question about how to complete a particular math problem. Mary Baptist Seely wrote a letter demonstrating that the relationships the BVMs maintained through time and among peripheral locations were personal, faith-based, and professional. The letter explains the solution to a typical sort of dilemma for nineteenth century teachers. Children brought their own texts to school, and the teachers taught each student based on the texts he or she brought, without the conveniences of today’s Instructor’s Manuals or Test Banks. Teachers would sometimes “borrow” the texts of their boarding students while they slept on order to prepare the lessons in advance. This letter tells of the collaboration among at least three sisters, Seely, Mary Caecilia (most likely Cecilia Dougherty), and the unnamed recipient of the letter. Seely and the recipient clearly had talked through an algebra problem that neither could solve; in fact, there had been enough previous collaboration on the problem that very little explanation was needed in this letter to set up why Seely would be writing. That collaboration could have taken place when the teachers taught together in the past, at annual retreats, and through correspondence. The teachers were now separated by some distance requiring written correspondence, and they corresponded until they solved this math problem. Seely wrote from Davenport, Iowa, in 1864:

33 Josephine Clarke to Prudentia Reilly, Dubuque, Iowa, 1879, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
Dear Sister

You may remember that when I was putting down the fractions in your little book I called your attention to one particular example which I had never succeeded in working. Perhaps you have. And I am just going to tell you how I happen to know it now. The Sisters here had not seen the new edition till one of the young ladies brought it this summer. Of course she was using it during the day and we could not get a peep at it till the children went to bed. So one evening while we were on retreat, Sister Mary Caecilia came to me and says, “Sis I have an example in the algebra that I can’t do and Miss Kieth is just up to it and I could not go near her tomorrow if I haven’t it.” When I looked at it I found it was my old customer & told her I did not think I could do it but I would try; so I tried till I was convinced I could not & went to bed. But Caecilia did not give up so easily. She went into the oratory and said the Memorare & told the Blessed Virgin she might do it or let it alone; whichever she pleased but if she would do it she would say the Salve nine days in thanksgiving. She took the slate and worked it correctly without the least difficulty. When she told me she had it I opened my eyes in astonishment and asked her how in the world she did it. She says I didn’t do it, the Blessed Virgin did it for me. I thought it showed such a kind & sweet solicitude in our dear Mother to give such prompt relief in such little things that it would do you as much good to hear it as it did myself. I think there is room for it in the little book in its proper place so you’d better set it down Ex 9th page 202 . . [mathematical formula follows]
I hope you will be able to make out this scratch. Love to all and pray for your own sister
Mary Baptist

34 Mary Baptist Seely to Unnamed Sister, Davenport, IA, 1864, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.

These three teachers collaborated from their distant locations. The tone of the letter communicates the ease with which this professional interaction occurred. They were colleagues and friends who worked to solve important professional problems. They also integrated prayer and humor—simultaneously—into their professional life and their correspondence. Being a teacher in a BVM peripheral school afforded each the opportunity to build relationships and to share information from peripheral location to peripheral location without needing to appeal to the core to help solve these fairly mundane but important teaching problems. The shared domestic, professional, and spiritual lives of the teachers undoubtedly contributed significantly to this form of
collaboration and integration. This communal and professional life was readily available to nineteenth-century teachers who were part of Catholic religious communities.

The peripheral extensions of the BVM motherhouse were almost exclusively teaching missions. The superiors of the mission schools worked with the administration at the motherhouse, but they also worked relatively independently. Important developments occurred in these locations among the sisters running each school and between the sisters at different peripheral locations. Agatha Hurley and Felicitas Carr, leaders in peripheral locations, contributed a great deal to the congregation’s application to become a pontifical congregation. Sister visitors, whose role was to observe and assess teaching and learning at various schools in a region, much like a public-school superintendent, and school superiors like Hurley and Carr maintained relationships between each other and forged relationships with others outside of the congregation, as well. The relationships with outsiders often began with professional interactions. As one might expect, mentoring or friendship relationships sometimes grew from these professional relationships. The relationships between individual BVM administrators and outsiders led to gaining critical information or services from these friends of the congregation, from providing advanced instruction for teachers at a time when Catholic colleges prohibited women from attending, to being key actors in providing the means for the congregation to receive official recognition from the Vatican.

Carr and Hurley both corresponded with Jesuit priests they had met when teaching in Iowa. After Hurley moved to Chicago in 1867 and while Carr was first a

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35 The BVM sisters did open a hospital one time during this period. The hospital closed quite quickly after it opened so the diocese could open a boys’ academy in the building. The bishop demanded the deed for the land and building. The superior of the hospital relinquished the deed only after a great ordeal. Mount Carmel Archives.
teacher (1862–1868) and then superior in Muscatine, Iowa (1868–1887), these Jesuit colleagues and friends became invaluable to the congregation’s pontifical approbation process, the process necessary to receive official recognition as a congregation from the pope. Carr and Hurley, eventually both superiors at peripheral locations, coordinated correspondence between Clarke and their Jesuit friends during the approbation process. One of the Jesuits, Philip Laurent, reviewed the Rule written by the congregation that needed to be presented at the Vatican as part of the approbation process, and he helped clarify the requirements of the approbation process. Laurent also wrote to Hurley in Chicago in 1875 listing names of people who might be able to help secure an audience with pope.\(^{36}\) Hurley also communicated directly with F. P. Garesché, the Jesuit who translated the Rule from English to Latin, as well. Garesché wrote to Hurley about his progress on his translation, the difficulty of the work, and the need for prayer. The correspondence was professional, religious, and friendly. Responding to some comment from Hurley about the pen Garesché used to write the translation, he wrote, “And pray what did you mean by the pen, shall I consecrate it to this work and then lend it back for preservation as ‘the pen etc.’”\(^{37}\) Andrew Trevis, SJ (Society of Jesus, or Jesuit priest) represented the congregation and delivered their application materials at the Vatican. Through their peripheral connections to the BVMs Trevis, Garesché, and Laurent definitely contributed to the success of the BVM application for canonical status as a pontifical congregation.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{36}\) Fr. Laurent to Agatha Hurley, St. Louis, MO, 17 June 1885, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.

\(^{37}\) F. P. Garesché to Agatha Hurley, 8 November 1877, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA

\(^{38}\) See Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions*, 84-6. See also Chapter 2 in Coogan, *The Price of Our Heritage*. The Mount Carmel archives also contain original letters documenting this process. Many of these letters are found in folders for Agatha Hurley, Mary Frances Clarke, and Terence Donaghoe.
Despite the coordination and the importance those involved at both core and periphery placed on the approbation process, it did not go without a hitch. Because of distance and the resulting time lags in receiving correspondence, Hurley nearly boggled the process by veering from the original plan. Instead of sending the requisite documents to Laurent, as Clarke had agreed, Hurley sent the documents to a priest in Rome who had not been involved in the planning until that time. She knew of the importance of the project, and one can only speculate that she thought she was making a good decision. Meanwhile, Trevis waited to receive the documents from Laurent and could not proceed with his work in Rome until he had the documents. All persons involved, however, remedied the situation relatively quickly by sending some hastily written telegrams and letters of explanation. Historian Ann Harrington remarks that Hurley’s actions, although potentially disastrous to the process, and the agreed upon solution both reflect the fact that these BVM superiors away from Dubuque had the right to act without consulting Clarke; Clarke did not respond with anger, nor is there any evidence that Clarke punished or reprimanded Hurley in any way.39 Hurley strayed from the plan and made an error, but there is no record of her having acted out of turn. Competent members of the congregation, whether located in the core or periphery, acted as they saw fit. When one made a mistake, she solved the problem and proceeded with the process. Independent, respected leaders at the core and peripheral locations and their relationships with those outside the congregation greatly impacted the congregation as a whole.

Of course, BVM leaders impacted the running of the congregation and the dispersion of the schools. It is possible that the personalities or positions of the leaders

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39 Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions*, 85.
played a role in how effective they were in opening schools outside the diocese. Certain personalities might have encouraged dispersion and creating new peripheral locations more than others. Donaghoe, whose permanent residence was at the Prairie, had wanted to locate schools outside the Dubuque diocese. The diocese was a very large geographic area including all of Iowa and what is now Minnesota from 1837–1850. From 150–1881, the diocese shrank to the boundaries of the state of Iowa. In 1881, the state was split in half. The northern half was the Dubuque diocese, and the southern half was the Davenport diocese. In an 1867 letter to Hurley, he stated that establishing schools in Chicago “will satisfy for me my ardent desire to cross the Father of the Waters [the Mississippi River].” Clarke, though, was more successful at establishing peripheral schools outside of the diocese than Donaghoe was. This could have been because of a difference in motivation, and it could have been because of changes in the rate of population growth in the West. Communities may have been reaching critical population mass after Donaghoe died in 1867, for example, which warranted opening new schools. There is also a more acute sense of purpose, however, in Clarke’s letters and other writings about opening schools beyond the diocese. Laurent recognized this passion when he responded in 1875 to Clarke’s first draft of the congregation’s Rule:

I could not in friendship to your order think of soliciting Rome’s approbation on clauses that bind your sisters’ hands and feet and make them slaves in their own houses. You are forbidden making new foundations without the consent of the Bishop of Dubuque, and in the diocese of Dubuque itself you are forbidden to open schools as you and the respective pastors think proper and necessary. Does this not mean that you are expected to die out and the sooner the better?  

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40 Terrence Donaghoe to Agatha Hurley, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 12 August 1867, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.

41 Philip Laurent to Mary Frances Clarke, Muscatine, Iowa, 4 July 1875, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
In context, Laurent feared that the Rule would bind the congregation to the diocese and the bishop. He knew Clarke and the congregation well enough to know that fulfilling their purposes would mean going beyond these restrictive borders. Clarke wanted to open schools where they were needed, when the *congregation* found the time ripe. The congregation ultimately changed the text of the Rule, and the final version that was presented to the Vatican did not include the limitations written in the draft Laurent critiqued in this 1875 letter.

The tone and content of Laurent’s letter about the congregation’s intentions correspond with their deeds. They had been opening schools at a rapid rate and the rate increased in the later decades of the nineteenth-century. One explanation of this increase might be that Donaghoe’s death in 1867 marks a practical change and perhaps a relationship change between the congregation and the bishop. The original group of women who came with Donaghoe to Dubuque in 1843 came because of an invitation that Bishop Loras of Dubuque sent to Donaghoe. All but two of the schools that the women staffed until 1867 were in the Dubuque diocese. Under Donaghoe’s supervision, the BVM congregation actually withdrew from its school in Potosi, Wisconsin when Wisconsin became a separate diocese. This behavior aligns more consistently with a diocesan congregation than a pontifical congregation. Donaghoe either formally or informally created a relationship with the bishops of the diocese that resulted in the congregation not opening schools outside the Dubuque diocese. This agreement or understanding limited where the congregation opened schools.

Donaghoe and the BVM teachers did receive at least one invitation from the bishop of Chicago to open a school in 1856, but Bishop Smyth, then bishop of Dubuque,
denied the request, and Donaghoe obeyed the bishop’s decision. The congregation did finally open two schools in Chicago in 1867. There is some speculation among recent BVM historians that Bishop John Hennessy of Dubuque granted permission for the congregation to open these schools because he wanted to lessen its presence in the Dubuque Diocese and to bring other congregations to Dubuque. Hennessy’s relationship with the BVM congregation was strained. Alternatively, the congregation suggests that Hennessy knew that Clarke wanted to expand beyond the diocese and so he reluctantly approved the move.⁴²

Although the move required Hennessy’s approval, opening the Chicago schools accelerated an expansion trend for which Clarke and her four original companions had planted the seeds thirty-four years earlier when they arrived in Philadelphia. From Laurent’s perspective, as explained in his above letter to Clarke, confining the BVM congregation to the Dubuque Diocese was as good as shackling them as prisoners. Laurent’s response indicated that, free to act on their own, Clarke and the BVMs would have opened schools wherever they saw a match in need and purpose regardless of the location. In a 1923 history of the Chicago parish where the BVM schools first opened, *Holy Family Parish, Chicago: Priests and People*, author Brother Thomas M. Mukerins, S.J., wrote, “Sister Mary Agatha co-operated with Father Damen and Father Andrew O’Neill, in their great scheme of Catholic Education. It was she with her able assistants, successors, [and others] that made the Holy Family Schools the Banner Catholic Schools of the United States or perhaps the world.”⁴³ Although it is likely that Mukerins’s

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⁴² Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions*, 74-6.

assessment was a bit biased, this acclaim suggests that Clarke’s ability to expand to Chicago and to place Hurley in charge of that peripheral location was recognized as important not only within the BVM community; Mukerins recognized their contributions decades later. Through this recognition, the entire BVM congregation, including the core, received recognition for its school system. This is true because of the critical links between the core and the peripheral locations. By 1867, Chicago was quite large (109,260) and still in need of more church schools. Mary Frances Clarke succeeded in persuading the bishop in Dubuque to allow BVM schools to become part of that school system. The connections women in the congregation made in Chicago and the successes of their schools eventually led to their opening Mundelein College, “the first self-contained skyscraper college for women in the world.”

After Donaghoe’s death, the BVM sisters legally incorporated and therefore held property rights over their holdings. This is also when they began preparing to request pontifical approbation. Two years after Donaghoe’s death, the congregation opened another school outside of the Dubuque Diocese, Annunciation School in Chicago. These acts of establishing a more independent legal and religious identity and pushing the restrictions of diocesan borders indicate that the practical or the relational reasons for opening schools only in the Dubuque Diocese began to change. It could be reasoned that the desire for seeking pontifical status was partially in order to alleviate the strained nature of the BVM congregation’s relationship with Bishop Hennessy and perhaps to lessen their dependence on any bishop in general.


Being released from the strict ties to the diocese allowed the congregation to locate outside the diocese beyond the direct control of the bishop and to look towards those potential peripheral locations whose needs met the BVM mission. Because the new missions were farther away, the core would have had more difficulty monitoring or overseeing the affairs there. Therefore, it would have been critical for the new peripheral locations to have had a certain amount of independence.

Before and after approbation, the BVM congregation opened schools based on invitation and only after a good deal of contemplation by the Mother General and her consultors. Clarke often received invitations from priests who wanted to open parish schools. Based on the congregation’s resources—teacher availability and otherwise—and how well the school’s needs matched the BVM philosophy and purpose, the administration located at the core typically would have final say in deciding whether to accept the invitation or not. Clarke wrote the following letter to Bishop Mathias Loras about an opportunity to open a school in Keokuk, Iowa:

St. Joseph’s Mar. 4th, 1851
Rt. Rev. Father in Christ
Sister Mary Margaret has delivered your message to me, respecting the Sisters going to Keokuk. I am very much pleased at the prospects of a mission there. I hope God will be served by it.

Agreeable to Father’s [Terence Donaghoe’s] directions the Sisters have been studying all winter. I dispensed some of them from every other duty. As Father will be home in May, and the sisters could not go much sooner, I wish very much that you would wait his arrival, as I prefer that he would make the selection, for the purpose of making it a permanent mission. In the meantime, I will be making preparations and will hold the Sisters in readiness.

Your Obedient and very Humble
Mary F. Clarke

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46 Mary F. Clarke to Mathias Loras, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 4 March 1851, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 4.
The Bishop informed the congregation of his approval of the invitation, and Clarke confirmed her pleasure in the invitation and her seriousness in preparing the teachers appropriately to meet the task. Clarke also suggested that the proper procedure during this period when Donaghoe was still the leader of the congregation was to allow him to make staffing decisions. It was her practice and that of the congregation to respect and follow Donaghoe’s directions. Nevertheless, before the bishop informed the congregation of his decision, Clarke had already accepted the invitation to staff the school. Also, although Donaghoe made the final selections, he would choose the teachers to staff the school from those that Clarke and others had already chosen to begin their preparations for such a position.

Invitations from parish priests typically included lodging and buildings for the school. Fr. Arnold Damen wrote a request to Hurley, who was serving as superior in Chicago, in 1887 offering an opportunity to open a school in the St. Louis area. Damen had been instrumental in the growth of Catholic schools in Chicago when Hurley arrived there. His interest in St. Louis would have derived from the Jesuit order to also have priests and parishes in St. Louis. Included in the offer were a two-story house, an old church, eight lots, coal, the right to hold two festivals a year, and income from all tuition payments and twenty to thirty boarders. Damen stated, “Many Protestants are anxious to get the sisters on the place, and I have urged the pastor to secure sisters.”

Although this might seem surprising in light of sentiment like Catharine Beecher’s, some Protestants specifically regarded Catholic schooling very highly in some parts of the West, at least following the Civil War, because of its high quality and the academic opportunities.

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47 Arnold Damen to Agatha Hurley, St. Louis, MO, 1887, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
offered to girls. Many Catholic sisters, including BVM sisters, had also worked as nurses during the Civil War when few others performed such dangerous and challenging work. These efforts had the latent effect of shifting some Protestant families’ previous prejudices against Catholic sisters. Catholic schools were competing for and attracting Protestant students in their peripheral locations even if this was not the main intention for opening Catholic schools.

This history of opening peripheral missions suggests that even decisions on their locations were not only the decision of the core. Invitations and outside permission from the bishop played roles in establishing these missions. An invitation on its own, even with permission, however, was not always enough. Clarke only opened schools if she had enough staff to do so. Just a year before Damen’s request, in an 1886 letter to George Sheehan, Clarke stated,

Gladly would we accept your kind offer and go to Mitchell without delay if we had members enough, but we cannot meet the demands for help from our missions already opened, without any more new ones.

Trusting God will bless your efforts for Sisters and schools, and sincerely regretting that we cannot avail ourselves of so fine an opportunity of doing good.

In this letter Clarke explained her inability to accept an invitation because she did not have the necessary personnel. This sort of practical constraint would have impacted decision-making even if the administration thought the new school would match the philosophy and mission of the congregation and if the bishop and Donaghoe had given permission.

48 Mary F. Clarke to George Sheehan, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 4 April 1886, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 110.
Other pragmatic concerns occasionally also overshadowed Clarke’s personality and her determination to disperse schools. Desire and intent were not the only driving factors. For example, in 1887 Bishop J. J. Hogan invited the BVM teachers to build a school in Kansas City. Despite the opportunity to geographically expand the influence of BVM education, Clarke had to acknowledge the limitations of the congregation’s ability to open such a school. In her letter she restated a message that she had apparently expressed at an earlier time: that the congregation could supply some teachers, but it could not afford to build a school, which the pastor insisted was part of the agreement.49

In maintaining that a new peripheral location could only come into being if the parish inviting the BVM teachers could provide the material means, Clarke allowed pragmatism to factor into her ideal desire to open new schools. These kinds of considerations may have caused the core to override the influence of the periphery. (Of course, that the periphery had a say does not imply that its say was always considered as equal to the concerns of the core. This does not mean that the periphery’s input was impotent, however.) Pragmatic considerations certainly caused the core to reject invitations from male clergy.

Developments in transportation were another practical issue that impacted where and when the congregation opened new schools. Harrington notes a marked drop in the price of travel by 1887 according to Clarke’s account books. One-way travel costs for two sisters fell from $50 in years previous to $9 by 1887. This is a drop of 75 percent or

49 Mary F. Clarke to Bishop J. J. Hogan, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 3 May 1887, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM.
more. The price changes most likely corresponded to the development of better infrastructure and more people traveling. Twenty-two, or forty percent, of the schools the BVM congregation opened between 1843 and 1887 opened in the 1880s. It opened thirteen schools in the last four years of Clarke’s life, from 1883 to 1887. The last peripheral location staffed during Clarke’s lifetime was in San Francisco. In fact, Clarke’s death shortly preceded the planned departure day, so the teachers delayed their travel to California in order to be present for her funeral services. Travel costs and all that impacted the cost of travel surely affected the dispersion of schools in the periphery.

Sometimes opening peripheral locations involved little well-explained planning or no planning at all. BVM teachers occasionally needed to relocate with little warning because of seemingly hasty instructions given by Clarke or because of decisions made by the bishop or by the pastor of the schools where they taught. In 1871 Fr. T. O’Reilly approached the staff of St. Mary’s, Dubuque’s parish school that the BVM teachers first staffed in 1843 when they arrived from Philadelphia. It was one week after the school year began in September. He told them to leave the school, that the Visitation sisters would conduct the parish school from then on. According to Mary Valeria Owens, a teacher at the school during this time, O’Reilly’s directions came from Bishop Hennessy. This was a blow to the teachers and to the congregation because they had already begun the school year. Clarke responded immediately to the situation and created a new opportunity out of the ordeal. She sent some of the teachers from St. Mary’s to

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50 Harrington, Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions, 107. Harrington does not offer a date for the $50 rate. She simply suggests that it was within the decade and was previous to 1887.

51 Mary Valeria Owens, Memoirs Recorded by Lambertina Doran, #17, 1932, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
Lyons, Iowa (now Clinton) to open Our Lady of Angels Academy that same year. The teachers did not simply change schools, but instead opened a brand new school. Furthermore, while the parish school had taught only beginning and primary students, the new school also included academy-level instruction. These women went from having a curriculum, a plan, and a relationship with students and families, to a new city and a new level of curriculum and student all within one school year. This quick transition from Dubuque to Lyons indicated both mobility and adaptability at the peripheral level and an amazing amount of coordination at the core administrative level.

Sometimes the BVM teachers moved because of decisions made by those who were completely outside the Catholic Church, and thus outside the BVM core or periphery. Nativist acts against Catholics and anti-Catholic sentiments in popular readers discouraged Catholics from attending public schools. The resulting segregation and social distancing left immigrant Catholics in isolated neighborhoods in the East and pushed many Catholics to migrate west. Whether intentional or not, these actions and sentiments also contributed to the establishment of strong Catholic school systems in the United States. The exhortation to open schools at every parish by the Catholic bishops’ First Plenary Council in 1852 encouraged invitations from parishes to congregations like the BVMs. It thus provided support to the BVM mission although the members of the congregation had devoted themselves to this purpose well before the bishops made this decision. This encouraging environment within the Catholic hierarchy, the desire of the BVM leaders to disperse and open schools, and the willingness of the local hierarchy to allow dispersion (the creation of new peripheral locations) and reciprocal influence combined with more practical mitigating forces like personnel and funding to shape
where the BVM congregation located its schools. Creating peripheral locations was not a simple task. The BVM congregation successfully navigated the obstacles and took advantage of the opportunities that led to their opening fifty-four schools and in the process creating a strong, reciprocal relationship between the core and peripheral locations between 1843 and 1887.

**Financing the Core and the Periphery**

Prior to Terence Donaghoe’s death, the congregation met the costs of running the motherhouse with income from land rental and activities like washing and sewing—some of the sisters at the motherhouse took in washing or did sewing for community members for pay—as well as with income from the peripheral schools. After Donaghoe’s death, the number of peripheral schools increased from the twenty that had opened between 1843 and 1868, to fifty-four after thirty-four additional schools opened between 1869 and 1887. As a result of having more schools, money earned through the schools’ activities financed a greater portion of the costs of running the motherhouse and supporting the ever growing number of BVM sisters after Donaghoe’s death. The increase in income from these activities coincided with a dramatic decrease in money earned from washing and sewing as the main economic activity shifted to running schools. The congregation also continued to receive rent payments from land it owned after Donaghoe’s death.

The financial setup of the congregation is one of the best illustrations of the independence of procedures at each peripheral location. The congregation’s core administration supported a method for financing the schools and the motherhouse that was different from other congregations’ methods. In line with the desire to have a

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democratically organized congregation, BVM policies and practices gave the superiors of each peripheral house the responsibility to raise funds to meet the operational costs of that particular location. Any overage went to the motherhouse to pay for its operational expenses and the care of the novices, the ill, and the permanent residents of the motherhouse. Clarke explained the financial organization of the congregation quite clearly to Fr. Brazill of Des Moines in 1870:

The Sisters should have a house for their dwelling, and schools furnished. So that if they leave they have nothing to take but their trunks. They should be paid by the people according to the advancement of the classes, and their means. If there are children who cannot pay, it could not be expected that the poor Sisters should substitute the teaching of the public schools, at the expense of their own labor, a provision should be made [by the parish] to pay one or two Sisters a given sum, monthly, or quarterly for teaching them.

After the support and clothing of the Sisters. Whatever they have to spare, should be sent home to St. Joseph’s for the support of the noviceship and those returning from the missions, the sick, and the old.53

What makes this model unique is the order in which it met various needs. Many similar organizations sent all funds earned at peripheral locations to the motherhouse. The administration would then reallocate the money back to the peripheral houses as the core deemed necessary; financing the motherhouse would be the priority. This model fits the idealized core–periphery arrangement explained earlier, yet it does not apply to the BVM financial organization. The model the BVM congregation used allowed the superiors in peripheral locations more direct responsibility and say in determining how the schools would be financed. The model also required the administrators to ask for financial assistance from peripheral houses when core finances were tight, which in turn meant that the core administration needed to communicate its financial needs at least to those in the

53 Mary F. Clarke to Fr. Brazil, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 24 October 1870, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Note of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 13-4.
periphery from whom it sought assistance. In the following letter, Clarke sought such
assistance from the academy in Clinton.

April 10th/84
My dear S.M. Olympia,
I received what you sent by M. Gertrude you have ever been thoughtful and
considerate to me may God bless you for it. I am in great need at present of $2000
and if you could on your own responsibility borrow in the Clinton Bank $1000 for
8 months it would relieve me much. I will with God’s help try to meet it in time.
This is confidential between you and me, don’t tell even Father McLaughlin about
it. Wishing you all a happy Easter, and give to each dear sister my love I will
expect to hear from you soon.
Your Affectionate
M. F. Clarke

In addition to acknowledging the need for additional funding, Clarke was also asking
Olympia Sullivan (Clinton, Iowa) to keep this secret from the parish priest to whom she
reported. The core asked for, rather than structurally required, support. The periphery
was a source of financial support for the core, but a specific exchange was not a matter of
official policy. According to this example, the periphery schools were potential places of
trust for the administrative center, and this trust was part of the core–periphery resource
exchange.

This being said, the peripheral school superiors could not make financial
decisions completely at will. Clarke provided input and direct instructions on how and
when to pay bills and what tuition to charge. To Basil Healy, Clarke wrote, “I do think it
should be well for you to pay part of the coal bill this month as it will be so high [with]
this constant cold weather.” It is not clear if Healy sought this advice, but this letter

54 Mary F. Clarke to Olympia Sullivan, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 10 April 1884, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 82.

55 Mary F. Clarke to Basil Healy, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 24 January 1881, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 55.
and others confirm that Clarke gave such input from time to time. The phrase “I do think it should do well for you” also evokes a sense of suggestion, even if from a superior, rather than a demand or some sort of final say. Sometimes the responses from Clarke about finances seem to indicate support for the ideas of the recipient, suggesting that the schools had independence, and they relied on and looked for support from the core. For example, Clarke wrote to Mary Acension Lilly, “You do well not to take music pupils lower than your own terms you will have as much money at the end and less labor.”

Although Clarke supplied the rationale, the idea to stick to a particular fee for music lessons seems to have come from Lilly herself. The core and the periphery cooperated to meet their financial needs. Both contributed to the decision-making and much of the responsibility and control lay with the superiors at the peripheral locations.

**Mobility of BVM Teachers and Managing the Periphery**

Overall, mobility and continued communication among teachers at the peripheral locations contributed to the connectedness and maintenance of the congregation and the school system. BVM teachers moved often during their careers. In order for all of the traveling and shuffling to occur in a somewhat orderly fashion and to maintain stable local institutions, someone had to decide who would move and who would stay. As noted previously, Clarke communicated regularly with those at the dispersed missions, and many of her letters discussed coordinating moves. This mobility was necessary to create new peripheral locations and to reorganize and maintain existing ones.

Many women traveled far to join the congregation and most relocated fairly often during their careers. From 1843 to 1887, most of the women in the BVM congregation

56 ———, 2 November 1881.
were not born in the Dubuque area. Of the 144 BVM teachers studied, only eleven percent (16) of the teachers were born in Dubuque County.\textsuperscript{57} Forty percent (58) of the teachers studied were born in Iowa. Nearly as many (38\% or 55), however, immigrated to the United States. Most of these teachers (29\% or 42) were born in Ireland. Twenty-six percent (37) of the teachers were born in states other than Iowa. Outside of Dubuque, the American city with the highest representation as birthplace of BVM teachers was Chicago with ten percent (14) of teachers studied having been born there. By birthplace, this was a diverse group of women.

This diverse group of teachers, like others who traveled west in order to teach, was highly mobile despite transportation limitations of the time. The teachers moved among locations via wagon, coach, boat, and train depending on the transportation infrastructure available. The BVM teachers studied taught at an average of five locations during their careers. At the high end of the continuum, Leobina Moore moved thirteen times throughout her career. She taught at six different schools in Iowa, three different schools in Illinois (one at two different points in her career), two different schools in Wisconsin, and one school in Missouri. On the other end of the continuum, several teachers taught at only one school. Some taught for a long period at one place and others died early in their careers. There were also women in the system with the title of sister visitor whose role was to observe and assess teaching and learning at various schools in a region, much like a superintendent. Although these visitors were housed in one location, they regularly traveled among the schools in their area and also communicated regularly with the administration at the motherhouse.

\textsuperscript{57} I identified 178 teachers, but not all teachers had records in the archives, or I could not confirm their teaching status.
In addition to teaching at five locations on average, the women taught a mean of thirty years and a median of thirty-three years (Figure 2.5). Those who taught significantly less than the average either died early in their careers or they changed careers within the congregation. (Mary) Thomas Burke died at the age of 39, for example, and Leocritia Hallinin died fairly young following complications associated with an appendectomy. DeChantal LaCroix died during her first year of teaching of a “throat ailment” thought to have been tuberculosis. Apart from a few instances when teachers changed career roles in the congregation, it seems to be true that the overwhelming majority of these teachers taught from shortly after they entered the congregation until they succumbed to age-related infirmity or death.

During these lifelong careers, BVM teachers traveled to attend meetings, to receive continuing education in the summer, and to participate in religious retreats.
Sisters from the peripheral locations needed to maintain stability and order at their convent houses during these large group gatherings, though, so not everyone could participate in every travelling opportunity. One teacher’s experience suggests that travel was not always required and that the individuals’ desires sometimes mattered when the peripheral superiors or administrators from the core decided whom to send away for schooling or meetings. Euphrosina Hennessy’s story is important in that it allows us to see that there was variation among the women, and they did have some choices regarding their mobility even when they resided in peripheral locations. It also demonstrates that the congregation provided the stability and resources necessary to the periphery for those who wished to actively improve their teaching through professional development.

Hennessy taught from 1884 to 1913 in Cresco, Iowa, and then in Petaluma and San Francisco, California. The length of her teaching career, however, is not necessarily indicative of her own evaluation of her professional strengths. According to Hennessy’s obituary, she really was a fine teacher but was more known for her housework and fairly curt personality. Hennessy found her niche fulfilling many of the domestic chores within her house. Hennessy also modeled how personal choice and community life could intertwine very successfully: She took care of the chores so that the other members of the congregation whom she viewed as better teachers could devote their energy to the classroom. As a general practice, the congregation sent teachers to summer school or provided them other advanced education whenever possible. According to her obituary and other records, Hennessy turned down opportunities to further her education. She elected to stay behind and take care of the domestic needs of her house instead. These duties would have been critical for maintaining both a home and schoolrooms for the
teachers. Community living would not have worked if no one had been willing to do the more mundane chores. Hennessy’s obituary stated that her view was, “Give educational advantages to those who have the talent and the will to profit by them; the contribution of the stay-at-homes was no less important, albeit less spectacular.” In fact, it was because there were “stay-at-homes” that other teachers were more able to actively pursue their careers as teachers. Mobility was necessary for successful teaching careers, and so was the stable maintenance of peripheral locations.

This opportunity for self-fulfillment with an eye on what others needed was part of the success of the BVM core-periphery system. Hennessy’s willingness to focus on the domestic needs of her house provided the opportunity for other women to pursue their teaching career goals more rigorously. Hennessy claimed that her choice to work at home was important to running the congregation, but unlike women of her time who were not Catholic sisters, as a sister Hennessy could choose this role. Those sisters who did not choose the stay-at-home role benefited from the service of the sisters like Hennessy who did. Women who were not Catholic sisters only had the option to have others do domestic work for them if they could afford to hire servants or if they owned slaves. Hennessy made the choice to be a “stay-at-home,” and this allowed her colleagues to move further into the professional field of teaching.

The women brought their own expertise and knowledge with them when they entered the congregation. Because most BVM teachers moved regularly and lived at least some of the time in unfamiliar settings, they needed to learn to adapt to new settings. When particular settings matched individual women’s home or other previous

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experiences, however, they became resources for their colleagues who were new to these settings. In peripheral locations teachers exchanged knowledge and experience about living in community, living in that particular community, teaching, and teaching those particular children. Some BVM teachers moved far from home— they made great changes in their lives in terms of the environment in which they lived. The original members and many who joined later traveled to the United States from Ireland and most of those came from Dublin. Moving from Dublin to Philadelphia would have taken a great deal of adjustment, but being from Dublin and then moving to the Prairie in Dubuque meant transitioning from an urban to a rural life in addition to transitioning from Irish to American culture. Because the women lived communally, they needed to learn to shift their communal economic base and domestic organization, as well, when they moved from an urban center to the country. When they were in Philadelphia and Dublin, they would have acquired food differently than was necessary on the Prairie. On the Prairie the group raised much of its own food and cut its own fuel. Domestic chores were not simple in the nineteenth century whether one lived in urban or rural America, but they were somewhat different depending on where one lived.

The adaptability of the urban BVMs to their new rural lives was of key importance to the maintenance and to the actual sustenance of the congregation, and the teachers and the schools. Because the women who joined the congregation brought with them the knowledge of their prior home lives, the congregation had a wealth of different experiences to from which to draw. Rural American women who joined the BVMs brought their rural life expertise with them. The urban women, including those from Dublin, did the same, which might have come in handy when opening schools in urban
locations such as Chicago. Moving teachers between rural and urban settings would not have worked without a great deal of adaptability on the part of the teachers and without fairly complex coordination at the congregation level. The BVM congregation met these varied, locally determined needs through communication with their friends and colleagues at other peripheral locations and at the core.

Being adaptable was necessary, but it was not necessarily easy especially when opening a new school. Maintaining meaningful connections with one another allowed the teachers to persevere when adapting became difficult. For example, Xavier O’Reilly wrote to the novice mistress Margaret Mann (Dubuque, Iowa) in 1872. The novice mistress was the title of the sister in charge of the postulants and novices and their general formation before leaving for teaching missions. The day O’Reilly and four other teachers arrived in Council Bluffs to open St. Francis parish school after having traveled by train from Dubuque, she told Mann of train delays, which may have been somewhat common. She also told how well the pastor and parishioners had prepared for their arrival: “Our bedclothes were all ready each bed had two nice comfortables [sic] and a nice warm new blanket new sheets pillowcases and pillows. . . . Father Mc told us not to go to Mass, as we so much needed rest.”

Despite arriving to hospitable, even warm and friendly, conditions, O’Reilly was still nervous about her new position and told Mann that she was disappointed that she did not know more about teaching and schools. She wanted to be able to run to Mann “to ask you everything they ask me.” This statement and her elaboration, “I need not send you my love you have it all,” speak to strength of the relationship between O’Reilly and Mann. O’Reilly, the head of a new mission, relied

59 Mary Xavier O’Reilly to Margaret Mann, Council Bluffs, Iowa, 1872, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
on her friend and mentor at the motherhouse. The two women certainly had a professional relationship, and one could argue that O’Reilly was calling on the center for support. The center in this instance, however, was not simply administrative or authoritarian. O’Reilly wrote to Mann as a friend and a mentor. O’Reilly had already followed protocol when she sent a telegram to Mann that same day announcing the arrival of the sisters to Council Bluffs. The letter suggests that O’Reilly and Mann would have corresponded regardless of Mann’s position as novice mistress.

Immediate communication with the motherhouse upon arrival at a new mission was probably common practice when it was possible. The distress of arriving at a new place may have also been a common experience as the teachers adjusted to new landscapes, cultures, and expectations. Even formal communication with the motherhouse could have fulfilled more than informational purposes. But the immediate and, especially, the continued communication home allowed the teachers to retain their sense of belonging with the larger congregation and an avenue to practice the behaviors and beliefs that were consistent with the BVM community. This reflects more closely the idealized relationship between the core and the periphery. Since the motherhouse served as the core of this community, continued and regular communication with the members who stayed there allowed those in the peripheral missions to maintain their sense of belonging.

O’Reilly’s letter and telegram to Mann demonstrate that communication between the sisters in the peripheral mission sites and the administrators at the core was both formal and personal. There were practical, organizational reasons for informing the administrators that the teachers had arrived at their new location. The fact that this letter
communicated so much more than arrival information, however, suggests that the women were not simply following procedure by contacting the center about their arrival. The letter indicates that the women had left important relationships and sought to maintain those relationships both through procedures and through personal communication. As I will discuss further in Chapter 4, these efforts to maintain professional and personal relationships contributed to the meaning of the spaces themselves. Each peripheral location was a school and a sacred space.

Conclusion

Accurate accounts of the characteristics of spatially dispersed schools from the past can demonstrate interdependence between public school dispersion efforts and BVM dispersion efforts. Public and Catholic school dispersion patterns affected each other and were affected by other general demographic and social trends. The findings about the BVM schools’ dispersion patterns suggest that complex interactions resulted in a picture of U.S. school dispersion that goes beyond a public pattern plus a separate private pattern. The two systems impacted each other.

The core–periphery model draws attention to these two interconnected spatial categories; there is no core without a periphery and vice versa. That the BVM congregation had core and peripheral locations is easy to see. The researcher’s responsibility is to demonstrate the actual nature of the relationship between the two categories. The BVM’s spatial organization included the core and peripheral locations spread across a fairly large region of the West, and the relationships among the locations were complex and interdependent. The BVM organizational decisions that created new schools and allowed for relative economic independence at the level of the school
combined with teachers’ personal efforts to establish and maintain personal and professional relationships. BVM peripheral locations required teachers to be mobile. This mobility, however, was not completely non-negotiable, for it was necessary to accommodate the regular shifting of personnel within a stable framework made up of the core and the women who took care of the schools, convents, and the teachers living in the peripheral convents. The nature of the BVM’s particular core–periphery organization contributed to the creation of stable peripheral schools that were strongly connected to one another and to the motherhouse. Chapter 3 examines the organization of the BVM school system compared to public school systems and the nature of the relationships of the teachers and administrators within the BVM system, and Chapter 4 explores experiences of these mobile and spatially dispersed teachers and how those experiences maintained the sacred and professional places occupied by the BVM sisters.
CHAPTER 3 THE BVM SCHOOL SYSTEM

Public school systems and the BVM school system were two parts of U.S. education in the nineteenth century. ¹ The systems differed in the form of their spatial dispersion patterns as discussed in Chapter 2. Understanding specific qualities of the BVM congregation, schools, and teachers—particularly their shared administrative structure, what membership and leadership entailed, and the nature of teachers’ relationships within the institution—will allow for a comparison between this institution and U.S. public school systems and teachers during the same period. These comparisons will demonstrate that the understanding of U.S. schools could be enriched and made more accurate by exploring other non-Protestant, religious school systems of the period and the relationship between the institutions and the individuals within them.

In order to understand public or Catholic schools well, we need to consider individual and institutional contributions. Historians David Tyack and Elizabeth Hansot define institutions as “agencies that constitute distinctive arrangements organizing society.”² In their explanation, they veer away from social determinism—which might lead one to conclude that the patriarchal social structure of the Catholic Church determined the nature of the BVM school system and the experiences of the teachers in the system—and towards a view that considers both institutions and the individuals within the institutions as real, potent contributors to social reality. Individuals within the institution affect the institution; their behaviors create variations among similar

¹ I am using the term school system liberally, as BVM sisters are generally not inclined to think of the BVM schools as a school system. Still, they find the term useful and a meaningful idea to consider in terms of the history of BVM schools and teaching. I learned of these sentiments when I presented a portion of my research during the BVM Heritage Society meeting in June 2007.

institutions. As one considers the roles of individuals, it is still important to consider the structure of the institutions themselves. Focusing on individuals and failing to account for structural variation within one sort of institution, like school systems, can just as easily lead to false or partial conclusions as ignoring individuals can. In short, assuming two systems are “similar enough” without supporting that claim by examining the institutions and the individuals within them, can lead to false conclusions. On the other hand, assumptions about their differences can be equally damaging to true understanding. Consider that although aspects of patriarchy were clearly at work in nineteenth-century Catholicism, the stereotype does not explain all workings of every Catholic institution.

This chapter examines what sort of institution the BVM congregation created and what the teachers’ experiences were like within this system. Partially through the structure of the systems and partially through the personalities of the women, the BVMs created a distinct and viable alternative to public schools. First, I will provide some background on public school centralization as a major factor in the organization of public schools in the nineteenth century, followed brief descriptions of certain characteristics of this nineteenth-century school system. Namely, I will consider requirements for becoming teachers, the system’s class and gender characteristics, and requirements for and duties of administrators. Historians of education have delved into these kinds of questions more completely regarding public schools, so I will focus in this section on the overview provided by some prominent historians. After providing a brief look at these characteristics of the public schools, I will explain more completely the BVM school system and its characteristics. The comparison and explanation will allow the reader to understand that neither conceptualizing all U.S. school systems as public school systems
nor reducing Catholic schools to some incomplete notion of nineteenth-century Catholicism provides an accurate understanding of the place of Catholic education in U.S. education in the nineteenth century. A more accurate understanding of Catholic school systems will provide more complete understanding of U.S. school systems as a whole.

**Centralizing Public Schools**

When the BVM sisters moved from Philadelphia to Dubuque in 1843, the U.S. common schools were in the midst of reform. While community–based schools had educated large numbers of American children for decades, supporters of the reform movement wanted compulsory, uniform, and free, yet well-funded schooling for all children. Efforts to achieve these goals included standardizing curricula and centralizing administrative control. This geographic shift in control made some people outside of the reform movement nervous. Carl Kaestle in his 1983 *Pillars of the Republic* outlines this transition of control from individual schools or local communities to the school board or the state. Kaestle notes, "More decisions were made farther away from neighborhoods, often by strangers—town committeemen, state superintendents, or legislators."  

David Tyack attributes some of the bureaucratization to the pragmatic needs stemming from urbanization. As communities grew, so did reliance on “specialized and impersonal agencies.”  

This represented a general geographic shift in the scale of bureaucratic control of education in the United States, but school reform did not happen in the same

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timeframe everywhere. Urban public schools adopted graded classrooms and centralization earlier than rural schools did, and the majority of one-room, rural public schools did not consolidate “until well into the twentieth century.”

The shift to centralization was an effort to establish order through common administration, budgets, professional roles, and teaching standards. What is commonly understood as a school district today developed over the past 150 years rather than emerging at a particular point in history. When public school systems began developing in the mid-nineteenth century, the interest in order was high, but the process of creating order was much more complicated. Tyack writes,

Because there was fairly broad consensus on [certain] issues in the dominant Victorian culture, there was also broad agreement on the qualities of character required for the job of superintendent. Indeed, agreement on these broad social values—as represented, for example, in the 120,000,000 copies of the McGuffey Readers that were sold-may have provided coherence to public education at a time when superintendents were struggling to standardize highly heterogeneous systems of control, non-symmetrical structures, and hodge-podge curricula. In other words, one might argue that laymen of the nineteenth century were mostly agreed on what schools were supposed to do but not on how they were to do it . . .

The initial work of superintendents, then, was to take a group of spatially and organizationally distinct institutions, bring them together under the umbrella of a single institution, and thereby encourage the individuals within the separate schools to adhere to common standards and methods of education. According to Tyack, very broad cultural values of U.S. Calvinism gave the gathered schools common purpose and desired qualities but not a surefire method for accomplishing this purpose.


Promoters of the new public school systems backed their efforts with Calvinist values. Tyack and historian Larry Cuban explain, “A Protestant-republican ideology of making the United States literally God’s country inspired the promoters of the public school movement of the nineteenth century.”7 Urban charity schools and Sunday schools, which had clear links to this Protestant ideology and played a large role in U.S. education before the reform movement, served as precursors to the reformed public schools that in part aimed at assisting poor children through education. Kaestle clarifies, though, “More important to the patrons of charity schools, the children were exposed to the Protestant Bible and the discipline of the schoolroom.”8 Catholics supported the idea of creating “God’s country” through education and school discipline as well, but they opposed the exclusive use of the Protestant Bible and other restrictions imposed by the public schools explicitly aimed at silencing or censoring Catholicism in the schools.

Whereas Catholics disagreed with the content of the public school systems’ anti-Catholic curricula, others disagreed with consolidating schools or creating district superstructures in general. Kaestle documents that the residents of pioneer states in particular resisted school reform. These residents tended to be dispersed across large areas. Consolidating schools meant that children might attend schools farther from home and that the families lost local control over the schools to strangers from some relatively distant location. However, there were benefits to reform in general. In rural areas, reformed schools were often still small country schools but offered increased length of school year, regular schooling for the students, and a more reliable career for teachers as


the longer school year meant that teaching could be a fulltime occupation. Spatial
disconnection, in terms of control if not school location, was a large hurdle to mount,
though, and these benefits were not enough to easily sway the dispersed rural families of
the West to readily relinquish local control over their children’s education.9 From time to
time, the resistance to publicly funded, or centrally-controlled schools led to schools
closing and teachers losing their jobs.10 It was amidst this resistance by Catholics and
others that public school centralization developed in the West in particular. Thus, public
and Catholic schools systems were different in terms of the structure of their school
systems, the relationships between central administrators and teachers, and the gender of
those at the highest level of control. The following explanation of the nature of some
characteristics of the public school system will provide the opportunity to compare these
characteristics with the BVM school system to determine how both context and
characteristics differed.

**Characteristics of Public School Systems**

**Centralized Schools**

In the public school system, centralization followed the establishment of
independent schools. Tyack explains centralization in the public schools as follows.

In attempting to systematize urban schools, the superintendents of the latter half
of the nineteenth century sought to transform structures and decision-making
processes in education. From classroom to central office they tried to create new
controls over pupils, teachers, principals, and other subordinate members of the
school hierarchy. . . [D]irectives flowed from the top down, reports emanated

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Press, 1984), 27.
from the bottom, and each step of the educational process was carefully prescribed by professional educators.\textsuperscript{11}

Professional educators imposed centralization upon public schools. This forced assemblage of separate schools into unified districts resulted in a new group identity. Individuals and schools had to assimilate to this new group identity to some degree. The process, however, focused on an abrupt change in individual membership based on the implementation of rules and procedures established by the district. Where once there had been principal teachers, or lead teachers, and less advanced teachers in the schools, the new system required the new position of principal—the first professional school administrator as he reported from within the schools to the districts, and it required new procedures and status for the teachers, as well. The principal teachers’ roles changed during the course of the reform movement from being heads of particular school buildings and their staffs to additionally being representatives for the school districts. The fairly abrupt change in rules and standards and in group and individual status resulting from public school centralization left all of the individuals and school-level communities to figure out their sense of membership. They had already been members of the locally-controlled schools. Now they needed to adjust to maintain their individual membership in the new school systems. This was neither a voluntary nor a gradual process, at least in terms of ideology. Particularly for urban teachers and principals in the public schools during the switch to centralization, the shift was abrupt. Rural teachers may have experienced a less dramatic shift in practice, but the process of the dominant imposing change upon the subordinate was still the thrust of the experience.

Teachers

The shift to centralization was one sort of transition public school teachers faced. Simply beginning a new career also called for transition. Not all public school teachers had the same experiences transitioning to their new career, though. Prior to teacher preparation standards that eventually came with centralization, some public school teachers had no formal training and may have simply completed the course of studies offered at their local schools before becoming the teachers of the same schools. Some teachers transitioned to their new roles as teachers in their own schools or communities, and other teachers transitioned to an entirely new social context because they taught in communities distant from their homes. Sometimes when they moved to new communities, the transition required boarding with their students’ families.

As individual teachers adapted to their new careers or new communities, the composition of the teaching force was undergoing change, too. Historian John L. Rury’s “Who Became Teachers?” offers a view of the gender and class characteristics of U.S. teachers over time. As public schools were going through centralization, the profession of teaching was undergoing feminization. Colonial teachers were young, middle class men with fairly good educations.\(^{12}\) By 1850, though, 82 percent of public school teachers in the West were women.\(^{13}\) Many factors may have contributed to this gender shift. As populations grew and concentrated, new career opportunities developed that offered regular, year-round employment for men. Prior to reform, small town and rural


\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, 17.
teaching positions were only available in the months opposite critical farming seasons like planting and harvesting. Men began to leave the profession when they could find more consistent work, and this left openings for women. General rapid population growth resulted in an equally rapidly increasing need for teachers, and there were plenty of women with no other career options. Hiring women also allowed the schools to save money by paying women lower salaries than those paid to men. The women who taught were generally from lower middle class families. Their families owned shops, farmed, or occupied other important and perhaps skilled jobs, but they were typically not from the wealthy or poor classes.\textsuperscript{14} Lower middle class women were filling the public school teaching ranks.

Historian of teachers Polly Welts Kaufman describes how, in contrast to their less well-prepared public school colleagues, the public school teachers trained by the National Board of Popular Education (NBPE) between 1846 and 1856 transitioned from their training to their teaching appointments. By the late 1800s, public school teachers had begun receiving teachers training in private and public normal schools and through other educational endeavors.\textsuperscript{15} Earlier in the 1800s, future teachers sometimes received training in academies and through summer institutes. Their training did not require faith statements, however, or commitment to teach as members of their training institutions after their graduation. In the program founded by Catharine Beecher as the Central Committee for Promoting National Education in 1844, the teachers’ experiences may have been more like Catholic sister–teachers’ experiences than typical public school

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Ibid.}, 11.

\textsuperscript{15} For more on normal schools, see Christine A. Ogren, \textit{The American State Normal School} (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).
teachers. The Protestant NBPE teachers made faith statements and trained together, somewhat similarly to the BVM teachers. They also pledged to teach for two years in the West. The teachers began their careers with the NBPE in a communal setting. Their relationships with one another, however, changed dramatically when they went to their respective schools. The women traveled to their teaching destinations and taught alone. They might have remained in contact with their former instructors or with friends they made during their training, but they were not consistently in community with these women and men, nor did NBPE organizers maintain control over the schools where the women taught. If that had been the case, it would have given the teachers a continued connection with those who trained them. The schools belonged to the communities where they were located, not to the NBPE. The teachers’ roles included assimilating on their own to the culture and standards of the local communities even if those standards differed radically from those learned and agreed upon during NBPE training.\textsuperscript{16} Rural schools underwent centralization more gradually, so local officials and townspeople in general had more impact on teachers’ lives when NBPE teachers went West than centralized, geographically removed, officials would have had. For example, one NBPE teacher who was the only teacher at her school recorded her experience of appeasing both the Methodists and the Baptists in order to keep her job.\textsuperscript{17} The church members argued with one another about what religious interpretations would be taught during day school and during Sunday school, and she got caught in the middle. She did not indicate that she learned how to negotiate this sort of challenge in her training, and she clearly

\textsuperscript{16} Welts Kaufman, \textit{Women Teachers on the Frontier.}

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 33.
communicated how professionally and personally distressing these disputes were for her. This experience of being the only teacher in a school, or one of only a few, was more common for all public school teachers in the West until populations increased and urbanization led to centralization.

**Administrators**

In her 2007 article “Go to the Principal’s Office,” education historian Kate Rousmaniere describes the general development of the office of the principal in public schools in North America. Referring to the expansion of the business bureaucracy throughout U.S. society, Rousmaniere likens the eventual role of principals to that of role of middle managers. In theory, anyone who met the requirements of the position could become a principal. Principals became distinguishable from both ends of the system, belonging with neither the teachers nor the district administrators, and found themselves in a sort of social and professional limbo. They fit with neither the superintendent-level administrators nor the teachers. The order of events leading from the conception of the principal as head teacher to more modern conceptions of the principal as middle management developed as the one-room school grew to accommodate more students. As the schools grew and required more than one teacher, one of those teachers assumed or was assigned coordination and management duties. This head or principal teacher managed the physical plant and personnel in the school in addition to teaching. As school districts developed, the principal’s role shifted from focusing solely on the needs of his specific school to acting as a sort of liaison between the district and the school or even as a sort of watchdog for the district, and he no longer taught. Principals were based in schools, but their concerns shifted from only local issues to also enforcing district or
state policies in their schools. The principals, however, did not create the policies they enforced. The superintendents’ offices and school boards developed the policies.\textsuperscript{18}

As a result of school reform, public school administrators, including principals, and teachers were separate from one another in at least one fundamental way. In public schools, those assigned to the roles of principal and superintendent were not social peers of the teachers. As Rousmaniere describes, once the office of principal developed, that person was not a peer in terms of career status, and he typically did not share the gender of most of the teachers he supervised. In fact, according to Kaestle, as the position of principal teachers developed in graded schools, “an enduring gender-oriented hierarchy” formed within U.S. public schools.\textsuperscript{19} Teachers were women and administrators were men. Kaestle explains that hiring women teachers at lower wages than men would have been paid allowed the districts to meet other goals that required financial support, like extending the school year.

Historians present this experience of a gendered hierarchy and of imposing a central structure on already existing, independent schools as a general truth about U.S. schools. The importance of these characteristics in understanding U.S. public education notwithstanding, I argue that at least some U.S. school systems had dramatically different characteristics, as the following explanation of the BVM school system indicates. Clearly articulating the organization of U.S. schools in the nineteenth century and the roles of their teachers and administrators can only happen if that articulation includes an understanding of private schools, too.

\textsuperscript{18} Kate Rousmaniere, "Go to the Principal's Office: Toward a Social History of the School Principal in North America," \textit{History of Education Quarterly} 47, no. 1 (2007).

\textsuperscript{19} Kaestle, \textit{Pillars of the Republic: Common Schools in American Society}, 1780-1860, 220.
BVM Catholic Schools

Rather than simply resisting public school centralization, Catholic schools were viable alternatives to the growing public school system in these rural pioneer areas and in new urban centers. In certain areas of the United States, they were very competitive schools. They had healthy enrollments and received acknowledgement for the quality of their curricula. Historians estimate that there were approximately 405,234 Catholic school students in the United States by 1880.20 There were 9,868,000 public school students in kindergarten through high schools in the same year, but again Catholic schools succeeded in the regions or specific locations where they were located despite the national dominance of the public school system.21 In 1896, BVM teachers in Chicago taught more than 4,000 students.22 When public school districts began to develop in the United States in the nineteenth century, however, Catholic schools did not develop systems in the same way. It is not that there were no institutional structures among groups of Catholic schools. The structures simply existed prior to and independent from the development of the schools. The structure of most Catholic school systems was based on a congregation’s mission, spiritual foundation, and structural organization as a religious congregation. The preexisting structure connected the members of the


congregation as they dispersed to open schools. For Catholic congregations that opened schools, their preexisting religious structures became the skeleton of the school system.\textsuperscript{23}

The BVM congregation’s first school west of the Mississippi opened in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1843. By the 1870s, that BVM school system (the predecessor to the current Holy Family Catholic School) had spread across the state of Iowa and beyond its borders. By Mary F. Clarke’s death in 1887, the BVM congregation had opened thirty-eight schools in Iowa, sixteen in Illinois, four in Missouri, three in Wisconsin, and one each in Pennsylvania, Kansas, and California.

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The general structure of Dubuque’s pioneer Catholic school system, the BVM school system, enabled the teachers to establish lifelong professional and personal relationships with one another regardless of where the teachers moved. Teachers in public school districts may have developed some similar professional and personal relationships with some of their colleagues, but the public school teachers would have

\textsuperscript{23} Although the development of Catholic schools systems in the nineteenth century differed from public systems, they did eventually go through similar consolidation and centralization movements. By the twentieth century, Catholic churches at the city-level began to centralize to some extent in order to manage the growing populations and to coordinate efforts of distinct congregations and parishes. More complete centralization followed in many communities later in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. For example, all Dubuque Catholic schools had operated independently, although they were connected by a city-level Catholic school board, until shortly after their official consolidation in 2001. Just before the consolidation, Dubuque had a population of 57,686 (U.S. Census Bureau 2000. http://www.census.gov/ retrieved 21 June 2008.).\textsuperscript{23} Having had an extremely large Catholic population historically and hosting the motherhouses of three teaching congregations, there were still nine Catholic K–8 schools just prior to consolidation. The Dubuque Catholic schools currently exist as a formal, united school system called Holy Family Catholic Schools. The consolidation resulted in closing five elementary schools and opening a middle school. Holy Family’s website states, “At the beginning of the 2007-08 school year, our system will consist of 7 early childhood centers, 4 elementary, 1 middle and 1 high school and will employ approximately 500 employees” ("Holy Family Catholic Schools: History," Holy Family Catholic Schools, http://www.holyfamilydbq.org/history.html. retrieved 21 May 2008).\textsuperscript{23} Closing five K–8 schools resulted in an enormous controversy despite the fairly rational arguments behind the fact that the schools should consolidate. The pressing concerns resemble consolidation concerns of the past. Who gets to decide which schools stay open? Will areas with poor students face more closings than areas with wealthier students? How with the funding be distributed? Will there be adequate representation of the Catholic population on the new school board?
more likely first met because they shared work space than because they shared a professed common belief system as the BVM teachers did. In order to understand the BVM school system and what was unique about the relationships among the teachers, we need to recall what it meant to be a Catholic sister in the nineteenth-century United States since the organization of the BVM congregation gave structure to the BVM school system. The institution of pontifical congregations as opposed to diocesan sisters or nuns, in particular, provided a context more suited to the early BVM sisters’ purpose of dispersing and opening schools. Pontifical congregations faced rules that by today’s standards appear extremely restrictive, yet pontifical congregations had far more freedoms than cloistered nuns and even more freedom than diocesan sisters who were more closely tied to their bishop. Having the pope named as the head of the congregation allowed pontifical congregations more say over their own dispersion. The religious formation process of the sisters and the specific administrative organization of the BVM congregation, particularly following its incorporation in 1869, contributed to the shape of a school system that differed in significant ways from nineteenth-century public school systems. Learning how individual BVM professionals interacted within this system opens a new avenue for exploring how U.S. education systems and the individuals within them impacted one another.

**Becoming Teachers**

BVM Catholic schools developed from a previously existing, centralized community. Thus, in name and location, the BVM congregation had a central identity and from there came the teachers and the structure needed to support a system of schools. Individual teachers and superiors entered the schools after first becoming members of the
religious congregation. The teachers created local spiritual and professional communities at the schools they established away from the motherhouse, but they also continued to have full membership in the larger BVM community after completing their training and beginning teaching.

**BVM Formation**

The BVM teachers entered the congregation knowing, to a point, what would be expected of them. The formation process was ritualized and gradual and left opportunities for the women to decline membership if they did not wish to participate in the supportive yet demanding group. All teachers went through similar formation, or spiritual and social preparation, for entrance into the community, and once the BVM sisters moved to Iowa, this occurred at the motherhouse at St. Joseph’s on the Prairie. A BVM sister occupied the very important role of novice mistress. She was responsible for the formation and training of every novice entering the congregation to help guide the formation of the women joining the congregation. Mary F. Clarke actively participated in the formation of the sisters, too. Despite Clarke’s role as mother superior and her many official duties, the novices, those women who entered the process of becoming a BVM sister, saw Clarke often during the year or two they spent in the novitiate. In December of 1921, Scholastica McLaughlin wrote her reminiscences of being a BVM. McLaughlin wrote that as a novice (1866–1867) she saw Clarke regularly working in the garden or in the laundry with the professed sisters assigned to those duties. Apparently Clarke regularly did laundry. McLaughlin took Clarke’s place at the wash tub for a while during the Monday and Tuesday washing. In her account, McLaughlin described the physicality of the work. The machine that she used required two people to run it, and
using the machine was “. . . severe labor as it required all my strength to work.”24 Clarke’s presence doing the mundane chores of the congregation must have been a great support to the novices and professed sisters. Her participation legitimated their work, and they could imagine themselves as full members since their days seemed to match closely with the mother superior’s. Of course, Clarke’s presence in the daily lives of the sisters also allowed her to monitor members’ compliance with the rules of the congregation. At another point in her notebook, McLaughlin recalled Clarke leading a novice by the hand into the dining room to ask forgiveness from all who were there for breaking the vow of silence. That McLaughlin had not heard any other novice speak during her thirteen months in the novitiate shows that there was strong compliance with the rule of silence, yet Clarke was able to learn about and guide the one sister who failed to comply during this period. McLaughlin wrote that Sister Mary Angela Quigley had told her there were “guardians of silence” who monitored the novices to make sure they complied with the rule of silence. Apparently this is how Clarke learned about the novice’s lapse.25 The teachers had personal, professional, and religious relationships with the same group of women because of their religious formation and their resulting membership in a communal group.

In addition to the shared experiences resulting from formation and the rules of living in community, the BVM sisters had all taken vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience and professed shared fundamental beliefs and values about religion, the origin of the world and all that is in it, the importance of charity between humans, the

24 Mary Scholastica McLaughlin, Notes, 1921, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa, 6.
25 Ibid., 3.
subordinate relationship of humans to the divine, and other basic worldview-related beliefs and values. BVM teachers shared formation experiences, community living, and fundamental beliefs and values with their teaching colleagues. Additionally, they shared these kinds of experiences and beliefs with all of the teachers at all BVM schools. This stands in clear contrast to the descriptions of teachers’ experiences at public schools, yet both groups constitute part of the whole of U.S. teachers. Again, this points out that reducing our knowledge of U.S. teachers to our knowledge of U.S. public school teachers ensures that there will be some holes in our understanding. Also, the shared experiences of the BVM teachers may have provided a more stable and supportive environment within which to practice teaching as a lifelong career.

**Class and Status**

The BVM congregation, unlike many European-based congregations, did not discriminate among members according to social class. This was not the case in all U.S. congregations. Many congregations adopted or carried over European traditions and had lay and choir sisters whose status designation depended upon educational attainment and, thus, the class of the women’s families. Lay sisters were poorer and less educated women who performed the domestic duties of the congregation, and choir sisters were wealthier and more educated, and carried out the teaching or nursing missions of the communities they entered. BVM sisters did contribute financially to the congregation when they entered if they were able, but there were no official distinctions between the

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26 This does not mean that there was no variation in beliefs and values among the large group of women within the BVM congregation. There is plenty of evidence that they disagreed with one another at personal levels, for example. It makes sense that there may have also been disagreements at the level of beliefs from time to time. In general, however, their shared professed beliefs made up the core of the congregation’s purpose.
status of the members related to the amount of money they were able to contribute or their education prior to entering the congregation. Any sister who could not contribute financially was equally welcomed and could become a teacher, novice mistress, or mother superior. A third-hand account within the BVM community indicates that when the congregation incorporated in 1869, the members discussed whether to organize the sisters as lay and choir sisters. Clarke reportedly told the community that if they voted to distinguish between two levels of membership, then she would be the first to sign up as a lay sister.\textsuperscript{27} According to the account, that sealed the decision and the congregation never again spoke of distinguishing between themselves by class.

Although there was no specific requirement for entry based on the class of the public school teachers, John Rury’s study indicates that the majority of public school teachers were from the lower middle class. BVM teachers more regularly came from lower class origins although other Catholic congregations may have had higher numbers of middle class women entering their communities. Some Catholic communities would restrict the status of the women entering the congregation if they could not contribute financially to the congregation. Those who could not contribute became lay sisters and those who could provide a dowery became choir sisters. Class would not keep a BVM sister from becoming a full member with all the opportunities of choir sisters in other congregations including becoming a teacher. Her class would be a non-issue if she could demonstrate competence through her own performance as a student and as a novice. Of course, those who had better schooling prior to entering the congregation might have received more encouragement to teach and would have certainly been more prepared.

Many girls entered the congregation through BVM schools, however, and the curriculum for the pay and free students was the same. Because any member of the BVM congregation could become a teacher, she had access to the status earned by being a teacher in the BVM school system. Whereas public school teachers held relatively low status in society, BVM teachers could earn a great deal of respect from one another, from the parish priests at their schools, and from the families of their students. The congregation even compensated teachers by excusing them from all housekeeping and other mundane duties when staffing allowed. They received as much “higher education” as was feasible in their respective locations, and the congregation ensured that they had access to professional journals and other materials to keep their teaching and subject knowledge current.

**Becoming Administrators**

In theory, any teacher who met requirements could be a candidate for an administrative position in both the BVM and the public school systems. Understanding differences in the administrative structures of the systems, though, reveals the explicit importance of general shared understandings and beliefs in the successful operation of the BVM system. For example, unlike in the public schools, BVM requirements for administrators meant that female administrators were the rule rather than the exception. All teachers within the BVM system met the understood gender qualification for being an administrator whereas most teachers in the public school system during the same period did not meet the understood gender qualification. It would not be possible to create a “them and us” mentality about teachers and administrators simply based on gender in the BVM system. Religion, which proved to be a hurdle for some NBPE teachers, was a
unifying factor within the BVM system. Because the BVM teachers and administrators were Catholic sisters, they openly shared beliefs, and they held similar beliefs about religion, domestic life, and career life. BVM teachers were open about their personal and spiritual beliefs at work and at home, and they lived in a community that openly accepted women’s leadership potential. The focus on shared beliefs in the BVM system may have also led to more agreeable faculty-administration relationships, at least at the institutional level if not always at the interpersonal level.

All BVM superiors, who performed the same duties as principals in public schools, were female, and apart from Reverend Terrence Donaghoe’s tenure as father superior until 1869, women held every position within the congregation. There were criteria for administrative positions that helped define the necessary qualities of administrators, but being a woman did not keep anyone from holding a position. Being a woman qualified the teachers for consideration rather than disqualifying them. Thus, unlike the public schools, the BVM system did not have an internal “gender hierarchy.” In fact, contrary to stereotypes about the extent of the reach of the male hierarchy within Catholic institutions, the BVM sisters regularly confronted those men who attempted to exercise illegitimate authority over BVM teachers. Clarke’s 1870 letter from the Prairie to Fr. Brazill, the pastor of the parish school in Des Moines, reflects Clarke’s willingness to confront men in the school and church hierarchy:

Octr. 24, 1870
Very Rev Father,
I received your letter of the 9th inst. I will simply state the following. Our Rev. Father Donaghoe did not wish that his Sisters should ever be a burden to any priest. His motto was, That the laborer was worthy of his hire. And to pay, and be paid. He did not wish the Sisters to have any thing to do with the choir, Altar or Church. Neither make, mend, or scrub for it. The priest has a right to direct what he wants with regard to the schools.
Very Rev. Father you wish to examine the Sister’s accounts. It is the first time that any Gentleman Not even our Right Rev Bishops required that. Therefore you will excuse me for positively and finally declining. There are altar societies now, at the Cathedral, and other churches. It would be well that, there was one in Des moines. Then fewer Sisters would be required.

I am with respect
Your Humble
Mary F. Clarke28

Clarke, and Donaghoe before her, insisted that the purpose of the BVM sisters was to teach. They needed to meet the teaching expectations of the parish and the priest in charge, but they were not to perform any duties the priest wanted, particularly not cleaning the church or washing alter linens. They ran their schools professionally and kept their own books. According to Clarke, Fr. Brazill needed to commit to her understanding of the duties of the BVM’s at his parish school, or he needed to let them go.

Regarding her duties related to the school system, Clarke occupied a role similar to a state level administrator in the public schools. As previously explained, BVM superiors carried out the duties of the public school principals. School visitors compared with school superintendents. Some school visitors oversaw more than one local school and traveled regularly to other schools within an assigned geographic area to observe and assess the facilities and the teaching. There were sister visitors for clusters of schools in regions that were particularly far from the motherhouse, like the Chicago/Milwaukee area. There were regional houses, called central houses, where the visitors resided in Davenport, IA, Des Moines, IA, and Chicago. Although their duties were similar to those of public school administrators, the relationships among administrators and

teachers were necessarily different in the BVM system because of their religious and personal formation prior to becoming education professionals. The added component of being in community with their colleagues resulted in these Catholic school administrators having specific spiritual or religious duties in addition to their school duties. BVM administrators carried out religious rituals, led prayer services, and cared for the spiritual needs of the sisters they served.

**BVM Elections**

In addition to gender and duty differences between teachers and administrators in BVM schools and public schools, the sort of people occupying administrative positions and the method of their appointment in BVM schools also varied from the processes in the public school system. The highest administrators within the BVM congregation were chosen by popular election by all eligible members of the congregation, including the teachers and non-teachers. Years under vows with the congregation (specifically, at least five years professed) rather than position or duties within the congregation determined the women’s voting eligibility. Two documents left by Clarke written in 1878 and 1884 clearly explain the BVM elections procedures. For at least the seven years that these letters span, the BVM sisters used the same system to elect their leaders. The elections needed to happen in every location where BVM sisters lived in such a manner that all of the results would arrive in Dubuque by a certain date. The sisters could elect anyone in the congregation for the leadership positions. This suggests that there was at least the nominal possibility that the leadership could change if enough sisters agreed. Members of each household appointed two “tellers” to safeguard the process to make sure that a reader would name aloud the vote that was actually cast, and then burn the ballots. This
meant that only the reader and the tellers, if they could recognize their housemates’ handwriting, knew who voted for whom. This sophisticated process indicates that the BVM sisters took their elections very seriously. The elected sisters resided in the motherhouse and administered to or delegated the administration of the congregation and its spiritual and secular needs and the schools and their spiritual and secular needs wherever the sisters were located.

The women who joined the BVMs and were eligible by years of commitment to the congregation elected leaders to administer both the schools and the congregation in general. They elected the mother superior and four consulters. These five were then in charge of assigning teachers, superiors, and school visitors, and they chose from among the entire pool of spatially dispersed BVM teachers to fill the positions. It is difficult to ascertain what caused the leadership to make specific staffing assignments. Perhaps the leadership moved teachers in order to place those in the same location who were best suited to work together. Perhaps the leadership chose certain sisters as superiors for pioneer schools because of their experience opening new schools and working with new communities. It may also be possible that the leadership assigned an individual to a position in order to stretch the person, to provide her new opportunities for spiritual and professional growth. Of course all of these possibilities could have been true in different circumstances. The motivations for each move are unclear. It is clear, however, that Clarke and the leadership moved teachers and superiors regularly in order to accommodate growth of the student body, the opening of new schools, and natural changes in personnel like illness and death.

**Blurring the Lines**

The relationships resulting from continuously sharing space throughout BVM teachers’ careers are notable. At any school, public or Catholic, with more than one teacher, the teachers may have collaborated in their teaching efforts in some way. They may have shared friendship with one another, as well. Collaborating about teaching and sharing friendship among BVM teachers was not just a possibility, though; it was the intention of the structure of the system. The BVM teachers not only taught together, but they also lived together. Thus, they shared job space and home space, and they shared the interests and concerns related with each space. As Catholic sisters, the teachers woke, ate, prayed, recreated, worked, and retired to bed at the same hours. They received the same continuing education, attended the same meetings, cooked and cleaned for one another, and slept in the same rooms. Having shared so much time and space together meant that the teachers forged longstanding relationships with each other. If sociologist Roger Finke’s understanding of the impact of living in community is a generalizable concept rather than a contemporary phenomenon, then the nature of the BVMs’ spiritual, domestic, and professional relationships would have had a great impact on individuals’ compliance and agreement with core decisions about spiritual, domestic, and professional issues.

When sisters live in a communal living arrangement (under the supervision of a superior) their interactions with each other are increased, their interactions with the secular culture are decreased, and all interactions are closely monitored. This leads to increased bonds of friendship and loyalty to the group and decreased opportunities for such bonds to form outside the group. This intense community life also decreases the cost of monitoring behavior. Whether it be the vow of poverty or obedience, compliance and transgression are readily apparent to all.
The sister is part of a tightly bound network that will both support and monitor her behavior.\textsuperscript{30}

Membership in this sense does not end at nominal membership or some sort of “compartmentalizeable” membership. The women were not members in name only. Their behaviors demonstrated their membership, and sisters monitored each others’ compliance at all times. There was no easy way to set aside the religious aspect of their personal identities. Indeed, the historical record demonstrates how the lines between work, home, and religion blurred. This blurring allowed teachers to develop significant and meaningful relationships with each other and with their students, as archival evidence demonstrates.

Letters in the Mount Carmel archives confirm that BVM teachers developed very close personal relationships. In 1878 Xavier O’Reilly was teaching at St. Martin’s in Cascade, Iowa. She wrote a deeply sentimental letter to a teaching friend. The recipient is unnamed but she may have moved to one of the Chicago schools since O’Reilly worried about the sister losing her rural roots: “Bossy and Piggy are as usual. I hope you have a cow there—I’m afraid you’ll forget these dear old associations and become too fond of city life.”\textsuperscript{31} The mobility of the teachers required many to shift among rural, town, and urban life throughout their careers. All BVM teachers experienced similar transitions when moving schools. Having close, personal relationships may have helped the teachers cope with the difficulty of these transitions. O’Reilly spoke fondly of their students, but the letter mostly demonstrates the deeply personal relationships that existed


\textsuperscript{31} Mary Joseph O’Reilly to Unnamed Recipient, Cascade, IA, 1878, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
between herself and the recipient, and it confirms that some BVM teachers stayed closely connected after separating:

   A week has not yet passed, and its length to me seems endless since you left me. I catch myself continually talking to you in my mind and often call the other sisters by your name. I am so lost here without you that sometimes I feel it insupportable and cannot keep back the tears—indeed tears are the relief I find.32

In closing the letter, O’Reilly wrote, “I have written first—don’t leave me long to wait a reply.”33 It is likely that the response would have reciprocated the personal feelings shared by these colleagues and religious women, and it may have also sent information about urban life and urban teaching back to O’Reilly.

The significance of the community and the relationships the women created with each other and their students is also evident in a letter from an unnamed teacher who left for San Francisco shortly after Clarke’s death in 1887. The letter is dated December 24, Christmas Eve, likely invoking particularly significant memories of the congregation and of home. The teacher shared a fantastic account of the travels, landscape, and people that she and her fellow BVM teachers experienced on their journey to California. The writer explained that passing through Nebraska in the night was not a great loss since the scenery was monotonous. She described soil fertility, land formations, and urban development. She explained to the teachers and students back home that the significance of Cheyenne, Wyoming, was its importance to the livestock trade. As a hub for livestock trade, Cheyenne also supported machine shops and other businesses that provided steady employment and allowed the city to grow. The account was so specific that the writer even included elevation levels and accounted for grade change between Cheyenne and

32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
Sherman, then “the highest point reached by railroad in crossing the continent.”

Referring to cultural geography and then landscape esthetics, the writer also told her readers that Chinese men boarded the train at two stops in California and how beautifully the green plants contrasted with the red soil.

This high level of detail in descriptions continued throughout the very long letter. It was very well written and personal, and yet it also read like an engaging geography lesson. As this teacher traveled west from Iowa to California, she imparted knowledge back to her home school about the places and people she encountered on her travels. She was not a scout or travel writer charged with the task of describing new places and people. She imparted this information to her students and colleagues back home because of the professional, personal, and spiritual relationships they shared with each other. For example, her account became very personal when she wrote,

> While admiring [Bear Bay’s] smooth surface and watching the receding mountains a party on the train struck up, “Merrily we row away” and several other of your old songs. –Lake and all surrounding beauties were blotted from my view, dimmed by tears and distance, for an instant, I was in your midst, but the next moment realized that almost 2000 miles separated us, but not in heart, for never felt I nearer to you than at that moment.

The relationship this teacher had with her colleagues and students obviously involved far more than shared curriculum and space. The language she used to express her emotions is like the language one would use when addressing family or the dearest of friends. The spatial and organizational structures of the BVM school system allowed for

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34 Unknown to Students and Friends, San Francisco, 24 December 1887, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.

and even encouraged these sorts of complex relationships among teachers, administrators, and students.

The personal relationships boosted the teachers’ sense of belonging to the whole congregation. That feeling of membership came with certain responsibilities, too. In order to benefit from the support and friendship gained through belonging to the congregation, the teachers needed to meet the professional and religious expectations outlined by the rules of the congregation and the instructions of the administration. In addition to rules and administration that kept teachers in line with the congregation’s expectations, the friendships themselves may have been a form of monitoring. As the women supported one another personally, they also reminded one another of the commitments they had to keep their vows and maintain their membership in the congregation.

**Staffing the Schools**

Staffing the schools was one of the many critical tasks administrators oversaw in the BVM school system. Deciding where to place teachers demanded a good deal of time and thought considering the number of teachers and schools the leadership administered. Concerns about staffing permeated the leadership from school superiors to the mother superior. Sometimes teachers had choices about their appointments and thus had some control over their professional lives despite the stereotype of the rigid hierarchy within Catholicism and within the convent in particular. At other times, teachers received little notice of their new responsibilities and yet obeyed the instructions despite the short notice. The following accounts provide a view of how the BVM school system addressed staffing. The particularities of how BVM administrators and teachers negotiated staffing
serve as an example of the uniqueness of this U.S. school system compared to the public schools of its time. BVM teachers had some say in their appointments, yet they generally accepted Clarke’s directions. Their willing acceptance may have resulted from the genuine and personal relationships Clarke had with the members of the teaching staff since she, too, was a member of the congregation.

The desire to staff schools well led to Clarke and others recognizing abilities in the teachers and sometimes inviting the teachers to consider taking new positions rather than requiring them to do so. In 1958, Lewine Enderle retold an account given by Annunciation Hannon. Mother Clarke had invited Hannon to teach music. Hannon was very artistic and apparently would have been an asset to the music program. The teacher rejected the offer, though, claiming that teaching as a regular classroom teacher would enable her to make a greater impact because she would have more in-depth contact with more children. Thus, Hannon became a classroom teacher; she had a real role in determining her position in the school system based on her own assessment of her potential as a teacher. The administration, Clarke in particular, agreed with the assessment and the decision, and thus Hannon taught a regular classroom instead of music.36 Those who began their careers under Mary F. Clarke’s leadership held to the congregation’s high professional standards during Clarke’s life and even after her death. The continuation of the standards emphasizes the impact Clarke and the beliefs she and the early sisters had on the school system as whole. So, the beliefs extended across geographic space among the core and peripheral locations, and they extended through time beyond the death of the foundress. Because of the rapid population growth in

36 Mary Lewine Enderle, Remembrance of Annunciation Hannon, 1958, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
general and the particular growth of Catholic education at the turn of the century, BVM superiors faced the challenge of having enough teachers to staff their growing schools and finding teachers of good quality, as well. Agatha Hurley and Seraphina Short entered the congregation under Clarke’s leadership and both served as superiors in 1901. Hurley was in Chicago and Short was in Milwaukee. That year, Hurley wrote a thank you letter to Short, and she included information about her own health. The letter makes it clear that the women knew one another well enough to pick up where they left off last. The letter also discussed a novice who showed less than promising teaching potential. Hurley wrote of her surprise that the new teacher left Short’s school since Hurley knew that under Short’s supervision “she would be helped in her music class by one of the experienced teachers which she certainly needed.”37 This inexperienced or inadequate teacher had not only been reassigned to a school other than Hurley’s or Short’s, but had her own classroom, and Hurley followed the teacher’s progress despite the fact that Hurley was not the teacher’s superior. The concern seemed to stem from Hurley’s desire that all BVM teachers be competent teachers and have excellent supervision. Her concern was for the larger BVM school system, including each of the dispersed teachers, not just for her own school. It is unlikely that Milwaukee and Chicago superintendents or principals collaborated in this way about the quality and continuity of public school teaching. Practical public school concerns, like specific staffing issues, were geographically isolated by political boundaries like cities, counties, and states.

Communication about staffing assignments was not always clear, and sometimes the sisters wrote to the motherhouse for clarification of their assignments. The letters

37 Agatha Hurley to Seraphina Short, Chicago, 1901, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, IA.
seeking this sort of guidance indicate that Clarke, in fact, primarily made such
assignments, and that the teachers and superiors generally followed her instructions. In
her 1880 response to Agatha Hurley in Chicago, Clarke stated,

Sister M. Alexis is for music, Sisters M. Olympia and Fernanda for schools, Sr. M. Emerentia for Embroidery and small children Sr. M. Severina for sewing and general work. Sr. M. Elizabeth for housekeeping. Sister M. Gertrude wrote to Sister M. Veronica when Elgin would open school. To employ two teachers in place of the two sisters lent to her. I need not repeat that yourself will take the general superintendence of Elgin house until the required number of Sisters will be provided. This was already arranged.38

Clarke confirmed Hurley’s responsibilities as superior for the personnel of this location and for the new location in Elgin. The assignments were very clear and included faculty positions and women to run the convent. Clarke gave directions based either on her own decisions or on the decisions of the whole administration. Her role as the leader for these decisions was apparent through her directions to Hurley, yet Clarke signed this letter “Your Affectionate M. F. Clarke.” This was not, most likely, the language public school superintendents used in their correspondence with principals and teachers when naming teaching assignments. Clarke’s correspondence consistently combined professional concerns like job assignments with personal acknowledgement of the affection she had for her subordinates. The use of such personal language in her correspondence suggests that even Clarke, as the highest school administrator, shared personal and religious relationships with those she led. Those relationships may have played an important role in winning the teachers’ trust in Clarke’s decision making.

38Mary F. Clarke to Agatha Hurley, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 6 January 1880, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 49.
From Clarke’s letters we learn that sometimes the teachers received very little notification of their placements in new schools. In the following 1885 example, Clarke wrote to Matilda Lahiff in Des Moines to affect an immediate replacement for Mary Loyola: “Dear Sister, I have only time to say, I want you to take charge in place of Sister M. Loyola. Don’t fear God will help you and may He bless you and my dear Sisters.” Clarke offered no other instructions or words of advice. There are many similar letters in the collection of Clarke’s writings in the Mount Carmel archives, such as the following letter to Crescentia Markey:

Sept. 30, 1885
My dear S. M. Crescentia [sic],
I am going to give you change of a mission, it will not be a heavy one. I beg you not to show any difficulty you may feel about going. God will assist you and I will pray Him to bless you. Show the Sister who replaced you what you think necessary for the school. I am greatly hurried – you will hear from me again. May God bless you.
Your Affectionate
M. F. Clark

The number of letters of this sort in the archives suggests that this brief notification was, in fact, common. It is possible that other communications prepared Matilda Lahiff, Crescentita Markey, and the others who received similar letters for their new positions, yet the archives contain only relatively brief communications about the assignments. Sociologist Roger Finke claims that living in community allowed for monitoring and support, and it may very well be the case that BVM sisters complied because of their obligation to obey their superiors and their desire for membership. Clarke not only asked

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39 Mary F. Clarke to Mary Matilda Lahiff, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 18 August 1885, *My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM*, 101.

40 Mary F. Clarke to Crescentia Markey, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 30 September 1885, *My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM*, 103.
for compliance from Markey, but she also begged Markey “not to show any difficulty you may feel about going.” In exchange for their compliance, the teachers received physical, professional, and spiritual support for the changes that resulted from these decisions.

It was a rare occasion when a member of the congregation did not comply so consistently that she jeopardized her membership with the congregation. The decision to release a member from the congregation, and thus from her teaching duties, lay in the hands of the administration. Clarke’s 1885 correspondence to Bishop Hennessy in Dubuque explained the one such incident of record, the dismissal of a teacher from the congregation:

Sept. 29, 1885
Rt. Rev. Bishop,
Painful as it is to me to again trouble, I feel it is no longer a matter of choice but of duty I owe to the Community. It regards Sr. M. Casilda who, you may remember, was dismissed about three years ago, and whom we again took back on further trial. Now we are more than fully satisfied of the utter impossibility for us to retain her longer. Were she confined to a bed of sickness and that the most loathsome kind, most willing would she be attended to with us; but it is not so. She is in usual good health and well qualified to maintain herself by teaching, having given herself entirely to study here. She has not been under Vows for four years. We are all far below her idea of what religious should be, so it will not surprise any of us to hear of unkind and unworthy reflections. Poor child! If she finds the world as forbearing as we have been, it is more than I look for. I tried to do it but failed.
Your humble,
M.F.C.

The letter explained the situation and communicated Clarke’s disappointment but did not indicate that she was asking for permission for her decision. She was providing a

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41 Ibid.
42 Mary F. Clarke to Bishop John Hennessey, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 29 September 1885, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 103.
rationale to the bishop for a decision that she had made; she was, therefore, informing the local bishop of her staffing and membership decisions without asking what she should do. The responsibility of determining who was following the standards of the community was left up to the leadership within the congregation and ultimately to Clarke as mother superior. Despite the support offered through the structure of the BVM system, Sister Casilda did not or could not accept the expectations. Casilda had gained teaching skills and was in good health, so Clarke felt confident that the teacher would be able to support herself outside of the congregation. Her health and professional training were not enough to ensure her place as a BVM teacher, and Clarke released her from the group. If Rousmaniere’s parallel between the development of the centralized school system to the general principals of a bureaucracy is a good one, then one might conclude that public school administrators would focus only on what was best for the school and would disregard the well-being of the teacher.

Having a novice leave the community was extremely rare. The women who completed their formation sometimes impacted their own staffing assignments simply by requesting a particular position. The accounts of these instances suggest that BVM teachers could affect their professional placements to some degree. If the circumstances met Clarke’s standards, she approved the move. In 1851, Clarke wrote Bishop Loras in Dubuque about a group of sisters wishing to leave their mission. The teachers had asked twice before to be removed, and Clarke denied their requests. We learn from the letter that the cause of their wanting to leave was that the bishop’s decision to divide the paying students from the free students caused problems with the families who associated the sisters with this decision. Although Clarke asked for the bishop’s blessing in closing the
mission, she also communicated her view of the cause of the problem. She had left the sisters in place after their previous requests to move, but she was no longer willing to protect the situation:

As things are, they are a source of annoyance to you; neither can they do good for their own souls or bodies – not for the public, which is now censuring them and calling upon them to know if the Sisters took to themselves what was said in Church yesterday. . .
I will have the removal arranged, so as to give you no trouble. I beg your blessing and your prayers that I may be able to bear to the end my many and endless crosses.43

Clarke granted the request of the teachers to leave the school, but she did not do so hastily. She only acquiesced after three requests. Clarke also followed the norms of the Church and communicated her rationale for pulling the teachers from the school to the Bishop. She asked for his blessing and prayers, but she did not ask for permission to make this decision. She had the authority to make these decisions despite the modern belief that the Catholic gender hierarchy would have made such independence impossible.

In another instance, Clarke acknowledged that she told an unnamed teacher that she would be able to move into an administrative position, but she also re-explained what it would take to change the teacher’s position. Specifically, Clarke had to be able to name a replacement; a teacher currently without a position had to be available to take on Sister’s teaching appointment. If there were extra personnel to do the teaching, then Sister would be able to superintend:

. . . I have not forgotten your request to be changed from your present position [sic] which you have held with credit. I told you I could not give you help then, but I would as soon as possible. I hoped if you got a Sister to teach, that you could

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43 Mary F. Clarke to Bishop Mathias Loras, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 27 January 1851, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 2.
Clarke’s comment, “Excuse my hurry,” is as important as the response to the request. Most of Clarke’s correspondence includes some similar phrase, and from time to time she explains to the recipient that she is behind in her correspondence because of the number of letters she needs to write along with the demands of her other duties. Clarke’s correspondence gives the impression that she spent a great amount of time communicating with the many dispersed BVM sisters about their placements and about the state of the schools and the convents. The repeated practice of acknowledging her haste may be evidence of Clarke having had a well-grounded relationship with these sisters. They would have understood her situation because they knew her well. This might also translate into the subordinates trusting Clarke’s and others’ decisions. The teachers and lower level administrators complied with their superiors’ staffing directions.

Staffing the many dispersed schools, particularly as the numbers and size of the schools grew, was complicated. Administrators recruited and prepared new members. They planned for pioneer staffing for the new schools and identified superiors and teachers who could competently maintain and improve existing schools. When teachers and administrators moved, someone needed to organize their travel plans and their acclimation to their new home and work. Administrators either did this work or delegated the tasks to someone under their supervision. The compliance that resulted from the monitoring and support of living in community prepared teachers to follow directions even at a moment’s notice, to really care for the state of all of the schools, and

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44 Mary F. Clarke to Unnamed Recipient, St. Joseph’s on the Priairie, 15 January 1879, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 44.
to know that as they moved to new locations, they would encounter colleagues and housemates who shared fundamental beliefs and experiences. Public school teachers had no assurance that their colleagues, if they had them, shared their views. The level of intimacy that the BVM teachers shared because of the amount of time and the spaces they shared together could not be achieved through only sharing work time together. Even those public school teachers who might have boarded together could not be assured that they would share fundamental values with one another nor with the families who provided them lodging. The relationships among BVM teaching professionals seems particular to this group of women or perhaps to all Catholic sisters who taught in the nineteenth century, yet these experiences are part of the whole of U.S. teaching in the nineteenth-century, not something apart from it.

Teaching Effectively

All of the bureaucratic roles necessary for a school system to function existed in the BVM system as they did in the growing nineteenth-century public school system, or at least the administrative tasks performed by public school administrators were also performed by specific persons in the BVM congregation. In addition to supervising the schools, BVM administrators also played major roles in the spiritual lives of women of the congregation. All of the women administrators shared formation, community living, and profession of values and beliefs with all of the other women in the congregation, just as the teachers did. Thus, while the administrators held “office,” so to speak, they still remained congregational peers with those they supervised. This means there was a non-supervisory relationship in addition to any supervisory relationship between all members of the congregation. Clarke’s 1884 letter to teacher Purification McDonnell in Holden,
Missouri, demonstrates how she communicated with teachers about personal struggles as well as strictly professional matters. Clarke voiced her concern for McDonnell’s colleague, Sister Humiliana, whom Clarke described as depressed and lacking confidence. Of course, the teacher’s personal state would affect her professional capacity, but Clarke’s concern was also for Humiliana’s overall person and her ability to meet the requirements of being a Catholic sister. Clarke, other administrators, and teachers in the BVM school system wore many hats. Their relationships with one another were very complex, which contributed to effective teaching.

As in the public school system, certain BVM teachers and administrators were responsible for instruction, some were in charge of personnel and building concerns, and others assessed the teachers and the schools as a whole. For all of the similarities between roles in the public school and BVM school systems, they were two different sorts of institutions. Because the public school system was assembled after the establishment of individual schools, and the act of joining the schools together was imposed upon the individual schools and their teachers. The staff members were not necessarily connected in any ways other than sharing in the task of educating children. The BVM system began with persons (teachers, administrators, and others) who shared beliefs, experiences, and space. This was good grounding for an active dialogue about teaching that could have led to teachers developing greater interest in their work and more effective approaches to teaching. Then these teachers and administrators opened schools dispersed over space but connected by the women who shared much more than their teaching or administrative relationships.

45Mary F. Clarke to Mary Purification McDonnell, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 24 March 1884, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 82.
Catharine Beecher remarked on the effectiveness of Catholic schools in the nineteenth century. She claimed that their success resulted from funding and support from the Catholic hierarchy and the acknowledgement of the teachers’ work as purposeful and professional. 46 During “formation,” the NBPE teachers lived in community, professed their faith, and studied in preparation for teaching as BVM teachers and other Catholic sister–teachers did, but they apparently did not achieve the success Beecher saw the Catholic teachers achieve. The American Women’s Educational Association, of which Beecher was the founding member, wrote about teaching in its 1853 annual report, “With [Catholic sister–teachers], it is a most praiseworthy and honored calling of God and their church, a privilege an angel might covet; with us, a depressed and joyless service, to be escaped as soon as possible. . . The results of these two systems must be infinitely different.” 47 The Catholic teachers’ lives differed dramatically from the lives of the public school teachers. These competing public school teachers even suggested that the differences extended to the contentedness of the teachers and the results of the systems, the quality of their teaching. It seems clear that the members of the American Women’s Educational Association found Catholic teaching more effective than their own teaching.

Sociologists of education Valerie Lee, Robert Dedrick, and Julia Smith study the impact of modern school organization on teacher efficacy and satisfaction. They report, “Schools in which teachers feel more efficacious are likely to be environments in which


human relationships are supportive . . . , where teachers ‘share beliefs and values about . . . the central mission of the school,’ and where they ‘feel accepted and respected’.”

They describe these schools as communal schools:

> While such schools may operate under bureaucratic structures, the cultural linkages among the staff facilitate communication about their activities, the sharing of difficulties and solutions, and professional interaction about the processes used to educate students. . . .

> Because of this collegial communication, a participant in such an organizational culture has access to both intrinsic and extrinsic sources of information about his or her performance. Such teachers are better able to establish external, goal-directed criteria about their performance.

Clarke outlined explicit goal-directed criteria for BVM teacher performance in “Regarding Schools.” I will explain that document more thoroughly in Chapter 4, but it reflects the communal approach and explicit communication about goals and expectations described by Lee, Dedrick and Smith. This document described what Clarke expected of the teachers, and other indicators suggest that BVM teachers met a certain level of efficacy as measured by students and families, too. BVM schools and teaching were effective enough that Catholic and non-Catholic families enrolled their children in BVM schools, and most of the schools remained open for many years. BVM teachers stayed in their teaching positions for an average of three decades and many left evidence that they valued the work that they did; they found satisfaction in their careers. Of Loyola Rutherford, an unnamed sister wrote, “Sister loved children and young people and nothing that concerned the welfare of the schools could be a matter of indifference to her.

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She was ever deeply interested in higher education.”50 Rutherford’s deep interest in and acute awareness of the children in her care signify the value she placed on her work and her devotion to the work. Mary Lewine Enderle stated that Annunciation Hannon “... was a wonderful teacher, the best of our primary teaching the Community ever had, and she spent herself educating our younger members who came her way.”51

Although teaching was a satisfying career for many BVM teachers, there were trials, too. For example, population density and the heat presented especially difficult circumstances for the BVM teachers who went to Chicago in 1867. Mary Scholastica McLaughlin traveled to her first teaching mission in Chicago in August of that year—one year after entering the congregation. The population of Chicago was already around 200,000 people.52 This was truly an urban environment, and McLaughlin and two other novices arrived in Chicago during an August heat wave. It was three days before they began teaching the school that lay teachers had been running through the summer term. Their superior, Mary Agatha Hurley, had become so ill during the heat wave that she received the sacrament of Last Rites in preparation for her potential death and was replaced with an acting superior. McLaughlin did not have great respect for the acting superior as she wrote, “It was evident she had never taught.”53

50 Memorial Address for Sister Mary Loyola Rutherford, 1915, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa, 1.
51 Mary Lewine Enderle, Remembrance of Annunciation Hannon, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
52 The official population for 1867 is unknown. The 1860 population was 112,172 and in 1870 it was 298,977. For more information, see Campbell Gibson, "Population of the 100 Largest Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States: 1790 to 1990," ed. Population Division (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998).
53 McLaughlin, Notes, 9.
Despite unfavorable circumstances, Scholastica McLaughlin demonstrated effective teaching in her first teaching appointment. Effectiveness may not have been measured in test scores or even by her own standards, but the families of the children she taught gave her and her colleagues “a great name” for having provided quality education to the children despite the families’ “want of means.”\textsuperscript{54} As a new teacher in a new, extremely hot, urban environment, McLaughlin taught 78 of the most advanced students at one of the first BVM schools in Chicago. None of these advanced students, however, even knew long division and all were poor. McLaughlin noted that because the BVM congregation decided not to separate select students from the poor students, unlike “Religious Orders from Europe who taught the peasantry,” the poor Catholics of Chicago flocked to the BVM-taught school.\textsuperscript{55} It was crowded. The crowding and the urban environment affected more than McLaughlin’s teaching. She also contracted cholera that summer from drinking lake water when she had been told to never drink the water. Her thirst got the better of her in her heavy, layered habit, and cholera followed. McLaughlin was unprepared to teach so many students in a crowded, urban setting. She became very ill, and from her own perspective she did not teach the students well. Despite her beginner teacher status and her ignorance of urban living, the families were grateful and McLaughlin and the other teachers received much praise from the families for their efforts.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{54} McLaughlin, Notes, 7-8.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 8-9.
The robust sense of community that permeated the BVM schools likely led to more effective teaching. Even McLaughlin’s complaint about the underprepared superior was grounded in her having learned from the congregation what defined a quality superior. She struggled to deal with the complications that arose, but there were others to help her when she was ill and with whom she could commiserate, at the very least, when teaching conditions were less than ideal. Evidence of “communal teaching” leads to the question of whether BVM teachers were also more effective than their public school contemporaries or at least more apt to understand administrative decisions, like relocating immediately. Although one can argue that obeying superiors did not make a teacher effective, obeying superiors did demonstrate a sense of orderliness or essentially being on the same page or of the same mindset. As David Tyack offered, orderliness and efficiency were valued and may have been seen as contributing to effective education.57 In their work comparing Catholic school and public school teachers, Lee, Dedrick, and Smith assert that the likelihood of being more compliant and more effective was greater, not because of the strict structure of the Catholic hierarchy but, to the contrary, but because of the shared experiences and beliefs about the mission of the schools and the participation in choosing the leadership by all members of the congregation. According to Lee, Dedrick, and Smith, feeling respected includes having an impact on decision making. Electing administrators and being able to affect their own staffing assignments suggest that BVM teachers did have an impact on decision making.58 Roger Finke argues that Catholic sisters who had more strict expectations to meet were more likely to

57 Tyack, *The One Best System*.

58 Valerie E. Lee, Robert F. Dedrick, and Julia B. Smith, "The Effect of the Social Organization of Schools on Teachers' Efficacy and Satisfaction."
commit to the mission of the group than Catholic sisters who met more relaxed expectations. 59 Lee, Dedrick, and Smith find that teachers who share values and a mission are more likely to be efficacious teachers. That the BVM school system’s organization resulted in teachers having the characteristics outlined by these sociologists could indicate that BVM teachers were, in fact, more effective, than teachers who were at less communal schools. Although I have not given evidence to prove that public schools were not communal, the organizational structure after the reforms certainly allowed public school teachers less input in decision-making at some levels than Catholic teachers experienced. There was also greater potential for public school teachers to not share faith-related beliefs or at least to have been limited in opportunities to talk about them after school and on weekends. According to Lee, Dedrick, and Smith’s definition, then, the public school teaching environment in the nineteenth century would have been considerably less communal than the Catholic school environment. 60

Conclusion

The BVM school teachers’ professional experiences depended at least partly on the support structure and school system that surrounded the schools. Nineteenth-century BVM schools resulted from both physical and ideological dispersion from the motherhouse of the central religious identity to the individual schools. Public schools during the same period were scattered across a city or a rural region and were “gathered” by the outsiders who made up the district or state regulatory agency. The BVM school system sought to accomplish the same goals as public education, but it did so with an

59 Roger Finke, "An Orderly Return to Tradition: Explaining the Recruitment of Members into Catholic Religious Orders."

60 Valerie E. Lee, Robert F. Dedrick, and Julia B. Smith, "The Effect of the Social Organization of Schools on Teachers' Efficacy and Satisfaction."
ideologically and spatially different model from what was becoming the standard public school model.

The links that bound the BVM teachers institutionally were religious, personal, and professional. These tight, multifaceted bonds existed across hierarchical positions and lasted for life. These characteristics indicate that BVM teachers’ and administrators’ experiences differed in important ways from the public school teachers during the same period. The concept of women teaching for an institution that shared their beliefs and their gender has not been presented in the literature of nineteenth-century education as a particularly common experience. It was common, however, for BVM teachers and for many others who taught and were Catholic sisters. The experiences of BVM teachers reveal to us that some U.S. women teachers experienced teaching as a lifelong and rich endeavor, not as an exception, but as rule in their communities.

BVM teachers lived in very particular spaces and practiced a particular form of communal living. They shared not only local identity, though. Separate schools were connected to one another culturally, professionally, economically, and through their shared missions. The sisters lived differently from the rest of society, yet they dispersed into society rather than secluding themselves. The strength of their group identity and commitment to common beliefs and practices allowed the teachers to live among the secular and to live at a secular level while at the same time adhering to spiritual practices and communal living that distinguished them from their students and the rest of the local community. Sociological considerations suggest that the expressed sharing of core beliefs may have affected the teachers’ effectiveness. The fact that BVM teachers first bonded over communal living and religious beliefs and then formed professional teaching
relationships certainly impacted their teaching experiences. BVM teachers experienced teaching differently from their public school contemporaries who did not share living space and religious profession of beliefs.

In-depth consideration of the intersections between the individuals and the BVM school system reveals that U.S. education had multiple internal organization and interaction patterns. The knowledge that Catholic school opponents, like Catharine Beecher, had of the Catholic system, as outlined in Chapter 2, suggests that Catholic school systems did not develop simply at the same time as other U.S. systems, but they also developed in response to one another. The nature of the BVM system developed through the intersection of the structure of the system itself—formation, elections, roles, etc.—and the individuals who participated in the system. Although the structure of the BVM school system cannot be reduced to the individuals who constituted the system, one also needs to understand that the actions of and relationships among individuals affected the institution and vice versa. In order to understand the system as a whole, one needs to have a clearer picture of both the system and the individuals. In order to understand U.S. education as a whole, one needs a clearer picture of public and private education systems. A clear understanding of the BVM system, for instance, will demonstrate that despite the religious focus of the system, the BVM system was both sacred and secular. This will become clearer in Chapter 4 through examining the role of the sacred and the secular in BVM teaching experiences in the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER 4 BVM TEACHERS AS RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR WOMEN

The core and periphery arrangement of BVM schools differed from the pattern found in public schools as they experienced reform. BVM teachers and administrators also shared complex relationships with one another that were unlikely to exist among public school teachers and administrators. A significant reason for these differences stems from the specific religious affiliation of the group. BVM teachers identified themselves as a group bound together because of truly meaningful religious connections and because of their shared secular experiences, as well. Understanding BVM teachers or their public school contemporaries in the 1800s requires acknowledging that one cannot reduce Catholic school teachers and schools to simply sacred institutions any more than one can reduce public school teachers and schools, with their strong Protestant influences, to simply secular institutions.¹ This chapter will illuminate ways that the sacred and secular intersected in the lives of BVM teachers. Within their identity as Catholic sisters, their activities and the spaces they occupied were both sacred and secular. The specific boundaries of sacred and secular BVM concerns and behaviors differentiated them from some U.S. teachers in some ways, yet these women were also part of the larger, variegated group of all U.S. teachers.

The received view of Catholic sisters past and present depicts them as either primarily or only religious women. They may do some work, but they are mainly “women of the church,” however that might be interpreted. I will argue, however, that living in community and being religiously based does not preclude meeting secular

¹ For reference to previous iterations of the argument against reductionism, see Chapter 1, p. 2.
standards by being highly professional. In fact, in the nineteenth-century United States, being Catholic sisters allowed women to have long and rich professional lives. The lives of public school teachers in the nineteenth century also had religious and professional aspects. Public schools offered explicitly religious teaching, and many communities expected certain religious attitudes and practices from their teachers. Still, the level of social and spatial separation of the BVM teachers from the laity and from non-Catholics emphasized the distinctiveness of the role of religion in the lives of BVM teachers. As the first mother superior of the BVM congregation, Mary Frances Clarke and the rest of the leadership of the BVM congregation and school system contributed to the teachers’ abilities to be both religious and professional women. In fact, the intention of the early members of the congregation was that the women in the BVM congregation would be able to be both Catholic sisters and teachers. Comprehensive appreciation of BVM schools as sacred sites and of BVM teachers and administrators as caretakers of these sacred sites requires us to understand both the role of religion and the role of secular concerns in the profession and the schools. A more complete acknowledgement of the sacred and secular aspects of BVM education extends our picture of what constitutes U.S. education, as well.

In the past fifteen years or so, geographers of religion have begun to argue that what we identify as sacred actually comprises both the sacred and the secular. Wherever one finds sacred spaces or practices, they are intertwined with secular circumstances.  

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2 I intend professionalism here to refer to the teachers identifying themselves and each other as career women. In order to earn this identification, the women studied their work, negotiated pay, earned recognition, and maintained their careers for most of their adult lives.

From an outsider’s perspective, a group of Catholic sisters is mostly united by their Catholicity: their religion and shared sense of spirituality. Understanding how the BVM teachers identified themselves in the nineteenth century entails recognizing that while they were religious women, this was not the extent of their identity or of their significance within society. I will first explain the nature of the BVM teachers’ identities as sacred at the personal and public level. Their explicit self-identification allows us to easily recognize their religiosity. Those easily recognized characteristics, however, can serve to obscure how these teachers also interacted in significant ways within secular society. Therefore, I will offer some examples of how the women also identified themselves secularly. The second focus of this chapter is on the geographic concept of group maintenance. In order to create a sacred identity and sacred spaces, the women within the congregation had to actively maintain that identity and those spaces. In order to successfully maintain their exclusive identity and spaces, the BVMs relied on both sacred and secular behaviors. This maintenance of their sacred identity and spaces enhanced their professional activities.

**Identity**

Geographer of religion Lily Kong argues that sacred and secular aspects of group identity contribute to the maintenance and creation of religious places, like BVM schools. Kong states that religious schools “provide a window to understanding how religious and

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4 Sociologist Peter Berger warns not to take our assumptions too lightly. We must carry out our investigations by challenging what we assume to be true and by looking for evidence of the nature of the group or behavior that lies beyond the easily accessed façade. Berger states that if we stop at the easy-to-access, superficial level, we may never reach an accurate understanding of the group or its behaviors and practices. Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology; a Humanistic Perspective* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1963).
secular cultures coexist—peaceably or otherwise—within societies.”⁵ According to Kong, the geographer must include an understanding of private and public aspects of group identity in her research. Exploring different scales of identity formation gives the researcher a more complete view of the group identity and how the sacred and secular intersect. ⁶ Logistical, economic, professional, and other secular concerns coupled with friendship contribute to the formation of the religious group identity on every scale.

Sociologists Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár assert that identifying self or places often involves using symbols to demarcate boundaries:

> One general theme that runs through this literature across the disciplines is the search for understanding the role of symbolic resources (e.g., conceptual distinctions, interpretive strategies, cultural traditions) in creating, maintaining, contesting, or even dissolving institutionalized social differences (e.g., class, gender, race, territorial inequality). . . . Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space.⁷

Cultural traditions like wearing a habit, living in community, and eating in silence were symbolic gestures that meant that there were boundaries between the women in the congregation and those outside the congregation. Ignoring either the more mundane or the explicitly religious behaviors of BVM teachers results in missing similar symbolic boundaries and gives an incomplete view of their lives and of the reasons why these women were able to teach so many students and administer to so many schools.

In the following sections, I will explain secular and sacred aspects of BVM teachers’ personal and public identities. BVM teachers experienced a definite tension

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between secular and sacred forces on their lives when they first entered the congregation and declared their personal identities as Catholic sisters. In their local communities, BVM sisters adopted a style of dress, a symbol, that would easily identify them not just as Catholic sisters, but as BVM sisters in particular. In these same communities, the congregation identified BVM teachers both as sisters and as professional teachers. At the national level, the nativist movement in the Northeast politically and violently targeted Irish Catholics, including the BVM teachers at St. Michael’s parish school in Philadelphia. At the global level, the women within the BVM congregation sought official religious status from the pope. This allowed them to carry out their missions wherever they desired throughout the world’s Church. Having a clearly defined group identity allowed the women to succeed individually as Catholic sisters and as teachers.

**Leaving home and entering the congregation**

In essence, BVM postulants and novices entered a program that both taught them the culture and life of the professed sisters and extracted from newcomers their reliance on and connections to their family homes, in essence changing their identities. This could not have been an easy transition even simply in terms of shifting daily habits. *The Constitution and Rules* of the BVM congregation dictated what time to awaken and to go to bed, when and how to pray, when and where to eat, what to wear, and with whom one could communicate. One of the rules stated that sisters should not take meals with anyone of the opposite gender at all (including their fathers or brothers), and only with the mother’s approval could eat with someone of the same gender who was not in the congregation. Joining this religious community was not the same as simply extending one’s previous Catholic life. It was a complete change for these women. The women’s
lives changed in ways that are well known. Catholic sisters abided by enclosure rules and membership restricted the sisters’ movements outside of congregational spaces without chaperones. In addition, the spatial and procedural boundaries surrounding BVM teachers entailed even more profound changes in the women’s lives than these rules suggest.

The first step women took in order to become BVM teachers was to exchange their family home and its culture and norms for those of the BVM community. They left their families and all that was familiar and immediately began living a life that was rule bound. In order to become a BVM teacher, each woman had to request entrance into the religious community as a postulant. Being postulants meant that the women had asked permission to join the congregation but had not yet completed the initiation period required prior to receiving the habit. The official habit was distinctive clothing worn by the BVM sisters beginning in 1852. 8 Prior to 1852, the sisters wore specific sorts of plain clothing that was similar to what other women of service wore. The adoption of a habit served as a symbol that publicly identified them as BVM sisters.

The initiation period was quite intense. The women lived at the motherhouse and abided by the rules of the congregation apart from wearing the habit. In addition to practicing new behaviors, each postulant answered questions “regarding,” as the first mother general of the congregation, Mary F. Clarke summarized in the congregation’s “Constitution and Rules,” “her country, her parents, her age, habits, qualities, the motives

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8 Clarke never wore the habit. She dressed simply in black and white with a gray shawl and a white bonnet. Harrington, *Creating Community: Mary Frances Clarke and Her Companions*, 71-2.
which induce her to enter religion, &c." Postulants also experienced a more formal, "strict examination" during this introductory phase of community membership. The bishop performed this task and examined the women on religious and spiritual matters. If the women did not meet expectations, they were, according to the constitution compiled by Clarke, “sent away as soon as possible.” The overwhelming majority of women passed this stage and continued on to the novitiate where they learned what it meant to be a Catholic sister and where they began learning the practices and beliefs of the sisters. Leaving the novitiate meant that the women had gained probationary membership with the congregation. They could claim being a BVM as part of their identities, and they could begin their teaching careers with the support of the congregation.

Most public school teachers did not go through a spiritual formation process that resembled the novitiate in any way. However, public school teachers with the National Board of Public Education (NBPE) experienced a similar spiritual examination to what the BVM teachers experienced during their religious formation. These public school teachers had to profess their conversion and faith in order to earn the right to continue to the West to teach. Some NBPE teachers did not meet this requirement on their first try. The same is true for some of the BVM teachers who returned to their family homes for a time after first considering religious life. For example, Mary Scholastica McLaughlin and her schoolmate Mary Cleophas Collins petitioned to enter the BVM community together in 1866. Both had begun the process a year earlier and both had decided not to


10 Ibid.
enter. According to McLaughlin, when the two girls went back to the convent in 1866, Father Terrence Donaghoe “was most gracious and said to me, ‘I knew you would come back.’”¹¹ The women who joined the congregation were typically young and sometimes poor. Collins owed tuition for the previous school year when she entered. Donaghoe paid the bill and then “sold her home two years later for $1600.”¹² Neither McLaughlin nor Collins contributed financially beyond that at this stage of becoming part of the community. McLaughlin recounted that they had only their school uniforms when they entered. Even though their decision to join was more labored than others’, they did decide both to sever their ties to home and secular life and to join the BVM congregation. Their path to the congregation meandered. It was not easy for women entering the congregation to decide to make such drastic changes, and their personal circumstances could interfere with either their religious or professional ambitions.

Once the BVM teachers committed to religious life (like the NBPE teachers committed to conversion), they could continue with their religious and professional formation. According to the “Constitution and Rules,” novices were accepted if they were virtuous, pliant and agreeable, healthy, debt free, and free from obligation for caring for parents. Once a woman was accepted, she began a probationary stage of membership as a novice and began wearing the habit. Although novices did not profess vows (poverty, chastity, and obedience), they lived their lives as though they had professed vows in order to prepare for the final stage as a professed sister. According to the BVM rules, this period lasted two years minimum and some of the teachers began their

¹¹ Mary Scholasitica McLaughlin, Notes, 1921, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa, 2.

¹² Ibid.
teaching careers during their two years as novices. The time in the novitiate was marked with self-examination. Although it was many years after her own time as a novice, Novice Mistress Angela Fitzgerald gave some insight into the difficulties and meaning of the transition from novices to professed sisters in her address to the novices on August 14, 1932:

Sisters, I will say to you what you have heard me say when you were novices. I loved you as novices but now as professed I revere, I revere you. You have smelled smoke and tasted fire and some have had gall and vinegar to take but with it all you come back to say you want it all forever.

This was no light endeavor the sister-teachers undertook. They experienced membership in their new community only after personal and social sacrifice. From Fitzgerald’s description, the transition not only required leaving what had been familiar, but also participating in an initiation process that resulted in some sort of personal transformation. This went well beyond any comparatively simple transition from being a young girl to being a young teacher in the nearby public schools.

Separating oneself from one’s family, neighborhood--one’s entire gemeinschaft experience-- in order to become a member of another exclusive, social community would have taken some major adjustments. Fitzgerald described the separation from family and from the possibility of marriage in her 1932 address as, “The right to pleasures of the senses, the love of family and home you have forsaken. . .” The teachers who left their homes and their families and friends would all need to adjust to the absence of the others from their daily lives, whether that meant loss of companionship, help, labor, parenting, or potential partnership. Even in the relatively less restrictive pontifical congregations,

13 Clarke, "Constitution and Rules of the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary."

14 Angela Fitzgerald, Address to the Novices, 14 August 1932, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
entrance into the congregation meant adhering to strict rules and a severe and immediate separation from home. All of the teachers made these adjustments as they changed their own personal centers from their homes and communities of origin to the congregation.

Sometimes the pressures of this change from family to congregation were particularly challenging. In 1853, Annie Seely wrote a series of letters to her family during her first years with the congregation. She had converted to Catholicism and had left home to join the BVM congregation. In Seely’s letters to her parents, her recounting of their words and their actions as well as the tone she used indicate that her parents were crushed. Her letters are an amazing account of Annie’s spiritual steadfastness and concern for her family’s peace of mind, as well as fine examples of her writing skills. The length and thoughtfulness of the letters indicate Annie’s desire to fulfill her obligation as a daughter as she moved from her birth family to religious life. They also explain her new commitment to the BVM community and to her life as a Catholic sister.

For example, she wrote on 21 March 1853,

Forget me if possible, & give me up as though I were dead; but I shall never forget you living or dead; never cease to beg of God to give you what he has given me. . . .I am happy, happier than I have ever been in my life, happy in the consciousness that I only live for God & that the remainder of my life will be spent in his service. . . .

The first letters are signed “Annie Seely” or “Annie”. The last letter is signed “Mary Baptist Seely,” her religious name. Taking on a new religious name symbolically marked a very specific point in the formation process. It marked a boundary that declared that the congregation had formally accepted this woman as a member. Boundaries, however, are both inclusive and exclusive. When Seely took her new name and claimed her

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15 Annie Seely to Mrs. Seely, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 21 March 1853, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
membership with the congregation, she simultaneously “gave back” her birth name. It symbolically marked the exclusion of her family from this new life. It must have been a heavy blow when Mrs. Seely read that first letter signed Mary Baptist. She had already lost a daughter to Catholicism, and any ideas Mrs. Seely may have had previously about being a mother to an adult daughter would have been dashed. She would not be able to enjoy her daughter’s wedding, new household, financial assistance to her aging parents, or children—her grandchildren. In addition, it must have seemed to Mrs. Seely as if Annie even rejected her own name.

The strength of Seely’s commitment to the congregation and the strength of the BVM group identity allowed her to move past her feelings about separating from her family and to focus more on her membership and opportunities as a BVM teacher. In trying to explain her decision to join the BVM congregation, Seely compared leaving her family to what she imagined a married woman experienced:

If I were married my duty would be so apparent to you that you would not think for a moment of asking me to leave my post no matter how much your own interest or happiness were concerned.

My duty is as plain to me now as though I were married and though you cannot see it in this light I am sure you will not think of urging me to anything so much against my own sense of duty.  

In some ways this mirrors Fitzgerald’s comment that giving up marriage was a sacrifice made by the BVM teachers. For Seely, her commitment is comparable to marriage. The letters that followed this explanation suggest that this line of argumentation did not persuade her parents to leave her be. In fact, her father arrived at the convent one day attempting to take Seely home with him. Her attempts at persuasion had not succeeded in convincing her parents that her choice to join the BVM congregation was going to turn

16 Ibid.
out alright, and her father’s attempt to restore order to his family by retrieving his
daughter from the motherhouse did not work either. Seely did not go home. Seely
directly addressed her parents’ deep sadness about her becoming a Catholic sister, and
she spent a lot of emotional energy trying to renegotiate her relationship with them and
her siblings. Baptist Seely claimed this new personal, religious identity, and in doing so,
she rejected her family’s own Protestant identity and her more mundane secular identity
as a daughter and a sister.

Entering the novitiate did require a fairly complete severing of oneself from past
relationships and identities, rejecting one’s birth name and taking a new religious name,
wearing unfamiliar and distinctive clothing, and renouncing one’s relationship with
family and friends. But what is less examined or even reflected upon by the laity and by
non-Catholics are the opportunities for new relationships and social positions—
professional and personal—that membership in the congregation—perhaps only
membership in the congregation—made possible for women. It is highly likely that
BVM teachers, who taught for thirty-two years on average, taught for many years longer
than their public school counterparts. Even NBPE public school teachers who went
through somewhat comparable religious formation were only required to teach for two
years when they went West. Some taught longer and stayed in the West and some
returned East to teach, but the average of thirty-two years for the whole group or for any
other group of public school teachers was unlikely if only because of the often enforced
social norms against married women or mothers working. Membership in the sisterhood,
at the least, entailed the possible benefits and constraints of a full and long professional
life.
Public Identity

Members of the BVM congregation publicly identified themselves as religious women and as professional educators. Seemingly mundane behaviors, from what the women wore to how the congregation documented and announced the deaths of their members, carried a great deal of significance. Having recognizable public identities as Catholic sisters afforded the women the structure and support that made it possible to have lifelong education careers. Equally important to the identities of the BVM sisters was the formal status held by the congregation. As a pontifical congregation, the group claimed a stronger connection to the pope and the global Church. Its formal, hierarchical relationships with the local and national Church were somewhat less restricted than other kinds of congregations and this allowed the group greater freedom in determining the locations of its schools.

Adopting the Habit and BVM Local Identity

Historian Glenda Riley states, “One of the most persistent stereotypes of western women has been that of the Saint in the Sunbonnet—the ubiquitous woman who supposedly helped ‘conquer’ the American West. Modern researchers argue instead that western women were extremely diverse and thus reacted in different ways to events . . . Western women were not a homogeneous entity or category.”17 The image of a nineteenth century veiled Catholic sister whose love of church and faith made her a simple and flat character in the history of women, of religion, or of teaching in the nineteenth century is clearly a superficial caricature, as well. The idea of the bonnet or the veil as a symbolic part of the women’s identities, however, holds particular

significance with Catholic sisters. The story of the creation of the BVM habit permits us to see that diversity to which Riley refers even within one congregation of women. The women may have expressed shared values, but they did not all choose to express them in the same ways.

A funeral portrait of Mother Mary Frances Clarke in her casket (1887) shows her wearing the official veil and habit of the BVM congregation in the nineteenth century. Appearing in a funeral portrait, Mother Clarke is, of course, dead. There are no other photographs of Mother Clarke, but according to all recorded accounts, she never wore the habit while alive. The habit had not been a part of the original costume of the BVM sisters. They had originally adopted plain dressing habits that were neither stylish, nor particularly unique. In fact, many women dressed similarly to the sisters. They wore simple black or brown dresses, perhaps with small patterns, like a calico print in white, that was gathered at the waist and cuffs. They also wore a fairly common frilled, white bonnet and a plain shawl. The sisters created their particular habit in 1852 after Bishop Mathias Loras mistakenly reported seeing a sister out past dark, which was in defiance of the rules of the congregation. In actuality, the bishop had seen a local woman whose dress was similar to the sisters’ own. According to Pulcheria McGuire’s *Annals*, Margaret Mann heard the account from Fr. Donagho and stated, “Father, that must have been Mrs. Corkery, she likes the Sisters so much she tries to dress like them.”18 This case of mistaken identity resulted in the bishop and Fr. Donagho ordering the BVM

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sisters to create a distinctive veil and habit. Catherine Byrne designed a habit that would not be eagerly copied by anyone outside the congregation (Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Agatha Hurley, BVM wearing official habit. Courtesy of Mount Carmel Archives.

Bishop Loras argued for adopting this publicly recognizable style of dress because he wanted there to be a visible boundary between the sisters and the rest of the community. In essence, the habit created a mobile, recognizable, sacred space that the sisters took with them. Of course, one can understand his desire to be able to identify the women easily for his own purposes, as well. The congregation did follow his directions, but Clarke never did. Perhaps her pragmatism took hold again, and she felt that the long and cumbersome habit would interfere with the practical work the sisters did every day. Perhaps her theology was such that it was more important for God to know her faith than

for other people to know her membership in the congregation. It had been clear that the male leadership was uncomfortable with the potential for misidentification, though, so starting in 1853, all BVM sisters, except for Mary Frances Clarke, identified themselves publicly as BVM sisters through their common clothing.

**Death Records**

In addition to displaying outward symbols of their religious identity, BVM teachers also publicly proclaimed their professional identity. Death records of sixteen BVM teachers indicated that their professional lives were important enough to record officially. Personal files of these women in the Mount Carmel archives include Licensed Embalmer’s Memoranda or other comparable documentation. These standardized forms listed demographic information including an entry for occupation. All of the Licensed Embalmer’s Memoranda included in the teachers’ personal files list teacher as occupation.20 A representative from the congregation would most likely have given the information to the embalmer. The deceased women’s religious status was indicated by listing their names followed by a comma and BVM. Thus, being a sister and being a teacher were both part of the women’s public identities. Upon the death of a teacher, the congregation formally recognized the occupation and the religious status of the women on these Licensed Embalmer Memoranda. When the teachers’ files include obituaries, the obituaries also named the sisters’ occupations.

This documentation at the time of death suggests that the congregation recognized both the religious and the professional aspect of the women’s lives as worth recording publicly. Because so many rural and urban communities throughout the country had

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20Licensed Embalmers Memoranda and obituaries are stored in the personal files of each sister in the Mount Carmel Archives.
rules or customs that prohibited married women or mothers from teaching, a great number of the women who taught in public schools would not have been teachers when they died. Therefore, death records would have been less likely to indicate that the women had been teachers. Their obituaries may have included remembrances or at least acknowledgement of their teaching days. BVM obituaries were quite extensive, though, and appeared in local newspapers and the congregation’s own publication. All BVM teachers would have had obituaries that publicly named their professions as teaching.

Nativism and BVM National Identity

There were many orders of Catholic sisters and nuns already present in the United States when the first five BVM members arrived in Philadelphia in 1833. Most of those congregations, however, were based in Europe, and the early BVM sisters did not wish to join a previously existing congregation or order despite the fact that some of the women had been lay volunteers with the Franciscans in Dublin. The early BVM sisters also turned down the opportunity to join the Sisters of Charity, which was founded by Elizabeth Seton as the first congregation of sisters native to the United States. The BVM sisters worked instead to establish their own rules and traditions as a new congregation native to the United States. They strove to identify themselves as part of the Catholic Church, but on their own terms. As this aspect of their identity faced the challenges of nativism, the BVM sisters found themselves opening schools in physically distant and sometimes socially hostile locations. Nativism allowed the teachers to unify and to differentiate themselves religiously and professionally from teachers who were not sisters. Rather than completely deterring their efforts, nativist prejudice helped
distinguish their efforts and accomplishments as they opened BVM schools in Protestant communities.

When the first BVM school opened in Philadelphia in 1833, the nativist movement was in full swing. In this particular period, the nativists, U.S. born Protestants of European descent, strongly opposed the presence of immigrant Irish and German Catholics in the United States. At various times in the mid-nineteenth century, they used intimidation, politics, and violence to demonstrate against these newcomers. In the spring and summer of 1844, nativist rioters marched through Philadelphia, assaulting and vandalizing the property of Catholics. One such group gathered at St. Michael’s Church, the parish where the BVM teachers opened their first school in the United States. The crowd threw bricks and stones and set fire to the BVM’s Sacred Heart Academy and convent and burned St. Michael’s to the ground. During the trial that followed, BVM Lucy Baker presented testimony regarding the arson and vandalism. She reported that she and two other women were in the school building when the rioters arrived. Baker opened the front door to show that there were only women in the building, hoping to encourage the rioters to stop. Instead, they met her with bricks and rocks, one of which knocked her unconscious. The rioters did not want to share their work, power, or even space with Catholic immigrants.

Although this was a local incident in Philadelphia, the nativist movement itself was national. The nativists in the Northeast created the American Republican Party in order to vie for recognized political power over the immigrants. The members of the BVM congregation found themselves as targets because of their sacred identity as Catholic and their secular Irish immigrant origins. The health and welfare of the teachers
and students and the safety of their school buildings, of course, had religious import. At
the very least, they were necessary conditions for the religious purposes of the BVM
school system. In effect, though, these concerns are the concerns of any school, and in
that sense they were secular concerns motivated in this instance by economic and
political debates. Newspapers ran illustrations of the fires at the church and the school.
It was up to the reader to approve or disapprove of the arson, but the arson clearly
indicated that these particular Irish Catholics were targeted because the American
Republican Party did not welcome their kind in general in the United States.

Anti-Catholic sentiment spread throughout the United States with westward
migration. The popular McGuffey Readers circulated anti-Catholic messages to the
teachers and children who used the materials, and the American Woman’s Educational
Association, with Catharine Beecher at its helm, regularly recorded anti-Catholic
sentiments in its writings.21 The 1853 annual report of the American Woman’s
Educational Association indicate a real fear and loathing of the progress that Catholic
teachers were making in the West: “The battle with stolid ignorance, with Catholic
superstition, or with infidel licentiousness must be, not chiefly with the sword, or even,
with the pulpit and the press. It must be a battle of the schools for the children.”22 These
Protestants loathed Catholics and Catholic schools. The Association clearly refers to
religious concerns, but the ultimate fear seems to be that Catholic teachers are winning
the U.S. children, and ultimately those who controlled the nation were in danger of losing
“possession of the helm” because of the success of Catholic education in the West.

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21 For reference to the Protestant, anti-Catholic content of McGuffey Readers, see Fraser, The School in the
United States: A Documentary History, 89-94.

22 Ibid., 20.
BVM teachers faced this national prejudice as they opened schools in anti-Catholic communities in the West. In 1857, five BVM teachers went to Burlington, Iowa to open a new school. An 1857 Burlington newspaper announcement preserved in Callista O’Regan’s file read:

MUSICAL ESCORT—On Saturday night five sisters of charity, came down from Dubuque on the steamer to take position in the Catholic school of this place. Yesterday they were escorted to and from the church by the Irish band. The Catholics are making extensive preparations for the advancement of education, of which we will say more hereafter.23

The announcement indicated that this arrival marked a particular Catholic presence in Burlington. These women who traveled to Burlington were facing relocation and all that opening a new school required as well as entering a community with at least pockets of anti-Catholic sentiments. The History of Des Moines County notes that Mary Joseph O’Reilly and her companions in Burlington eventually succeeded in establishing a stable school. The archivist noted significance of this feat:

The school prospered so well that soon nine Sisters were necessary. ‘Laying aside all religious prejudices, the schools of the Sisters were patronized by the wealthiest, the most influential, and refined citizens in the city.’ (HISTORY OF DES MOINES COUNTY by Western Historical Co., 1879. (Judging from the newspapers of 1869 this religious prejudice was calossal [sic].)24

Catharine Beecher had opened a seminary there in 1848, but the school only lasted from May until December. An 1848 Burlington newspaper claimed, "Miss Beecher's name has long since become a household divinity."25 The meaning behind the announcement of

23 There were three Burlington newspapers in operation during this period, the Burlington Gazette, the Burlington Hawkeye, and the Iowa Press. This newspaper clipping was referred to in writings by Mary Joseph O’Reilly, BVM. There is only a year given and no indication of which newspaper printed the article.

24 This document was found in Mary Joseph O’Reilly’s personal file in the Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

25 Iowa State Gazette 29 March 1848.
the arrival of the BVM teachers is difficult to make out, though. In addition to drawing
attention to the religion of the new teachers, the paper also remarked that they were
preparing to advance education in Burlington. Perhaps the thinking was that the teachers
would perform this secular act despite their religious affiliation, or the writer believed
that Catholic teachers were also good teachers. The BVMs in Burlington must have
succeeded in sowing at least some of these “seeds of their system” as they opened in
Burlington two more parish schools, in 1871 and 1874, and an academy in 1877.

Whereas Catharine Beecher’s presence in Burlington, Iowa simply suggested that
there was at least some anti-Catholic feeling when the BVM teachers arrived, in
Muscatine, Iowa, the national trend of anti-Catholicism was much more explicit. Mary
Felictas Carr helped open St. Mathias’s in Muscatine in 1862. It was not an easy mission
to establish since the population of Muscatine was largely Protestant. Carr later reflected,
“Str. M. Agatha did much to have the Sisters respected here, for it was a very bigoted
place when we came here, and now if I do say so we are highly respected by our
Protestant people, and former pupils.”26 At Felicitas Carr’s golden jubilee celebration in
1906, Mr. L. J. Horan gave an address in which he remembered Carr’s contributions as
well as those of all of the BVM teachers to the Muscatine community. Speaking of the
parish school, St. Mathias, Horan stated:

It was in the city of Muscatine the forerunner of higher education, dispensing
knowledge to students of all creeds long before our public high school came into
existence, and it has ever continued to grow and prosper under your solicitous
care, and from its portals have gone many, out into the world, and into the various
vocations of life . . .27

26 Felicitas Carr to Pulcheria Mcguire, Muscatine, Iowa, 24 November 1905, Mount Carmel Archives,
Dubuque, IA.

27 Golden Jubilee: Sister Mary Felicitas, 24 September 1906, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
BVM schools offered opportunities otherwise unavailable to Protestant and Catholic Muscatine families. Attending the BVM school, the students and their families experienced the Protestant-Catholic boundaries from a new perspective. As one of the speakers at Carr’s jubilee explained, the BVM teachers eventually provided a solid education and a place where Protestant students and their families could encounter Catholics in a non-threatening environment.

This speaker was one of Carr’s former students. Miss Stone praised Carr’s contributions specifically as a teacher of Protestant girls. Stone had been a student at St. Mathias and spoke of her memories and of how the BVM teachers positively affected their students. She stated that Carr “taught us to do our work and live near our God, far, far away from all human criticism, and human praise, being and living true to the ‘Over-soul’ within us, (as Emerson expresses it) . . .”28 Non-Christian students would perhaps have been uncomfortable in this school, but the social tensions of the day were primarily between Catholic and Protestant Christians. Stone’s affection for Carr was partially due to BVM religious and secular-based teaching. Stone referenced great thinkers that she “met” in her studies under the BVM teachers. Under the tutelage of Carr and other BVM teachers, Stone experienced a seemingly broad exploration of the concept of God and humanity; she referred to Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, who would be considered neither a mainstream Catholic nor a mainstream Protestant theological influence. This reference, however, and similar references Stone made to important thinkers and historical figures—Cunningham Geikie, Napoleon Bonaparte, and the Cliff Dwellers—indicate that the students received, and perhaps were encouraged to continue, a broad

28 Ibid.
education about religion and culture. Stone reflected that while at this BVM school, students learned “the highest and best in any line of instruction, not only from our text books, but in a thousand and one ways to become useful, honest women.” Stone closed her testimony to the effectiveness of her Catholic teachers with a litany of what she considered successes of former students. She listed women who were artists, linguists, who traveled broadly, married well, and worked for the church (not the Catholic Church).

While The BVM teachers persevered in Muscatine despite the negative feeling towards Catholics when they arrived, strong anti-Catholic sentiments also greeted the BVM teachers who opened a school in Holden, Missouri in 1884. Again, however, despite the bigotry the teachers experienced when the school opened, the BVMs persevered; in Holden, the school remained open for twenty-four years. These experiences in Burlington, Muscatine, and Holden support the idea that despite the negative feelings towards Catholics nation-wide, BVM teachers held firm to their identity and eventually eroded those negative feelings at the community level despite maintaining clear boundaries between themselves and others. Students and community members ultimately recognized the teachers as Catholic religious women and as highly effective teachers.

**Pontifical status and BVM Global Identity**

The BVMs sought to be recognized as a pontifical congregation, a sort of global-level status. Some nativist concerns about Catholics, in fact, had to do with Catholics following a non-American head of state, the pope. The BVMs chose the congregational

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29 Ibid.

identity that most directly linked them to the pope, that of a pontifical congregation. There is no record of the BVM congregation rejecting U.S. secular government leadership. Rather, they wished to be less restricted by U.S. diocesan leadership. The women may have worked for pontifical status because of the pope’s distance from them, which would give them more control over their everyday decisions. This challenges the idea that they sought the pope’s leadership over the leadership of the U.S. government. They could make secular logistic and economic decisions and not worry too much about papal interference whereas diocesan leaders would have been likely to have kept a closer eye on them if they were a diocesan congregation. Placing as much organizational distance between themselves and the local bishops as possible, even though the boundary was not absolute, actually allowed the BVM school system to look beyond diocesan needs and address national secular needs for school growth. For instance, as the city of Chicago grew, the poor immigrant population also grew. In 1867, BVM sisters joined other Catholic sisters in Chicago in meeting the national need for educating the urban poor. The teachers’ secular goals may have been to help the students fill newly developing employment sectors, for example, even if the Catholic teachers’ reasons for teaching also included the potential for catechesis or conversion.

In creating personal and social boundaries within which to claim their religious identities, BVM teachers reacted to or articulated ways in which the secular and sacred impacted one another. There were clear but sometimes painfully drawn boundaries between the sisters and their families. Lay women and BVM sisters performed similar pious works, yet the sisters eventually dressed so there could be no confusion about their works or their whereabouts and thus constructed more obvious boundaries between
themselves and the laity. BVM teachers who died were publicly recognized for their religiosity and for their professional careers. There was no similar systematic demarcation of the careers or religiosity of public school teachers when they died, often decades after relatively short teaching careers. National anti-Catholic movements assaulted and otherwise impacted the sacred and secular lives of BVM teachers, yet the BVM reputation grew to be praised by many grateful non-Catholic pupils who did not convert to Catholicism. These students recognized the religious boundaries between themselves and their Catholic teachers, but the boundaries did not completely isolate Catholic education from non-Catholic communities. Seeking pontifical approbation, which may not have been understood by outsiders, affiliated the congregation with the global church leader rather than a national or local church leader. This identity allowed the congregation to open schools where it saw needs, both secular and religious needs.

**Maintenance of BVM Teaching as Secular and Sacred**

Sociologist Roger Finke conducted research on U. S. congregations of Catholic sisters, and his 1997 study concludes that the decline in numbers of Catholic sisters since the second Vatican Council closed in 1965 resulted from a loss in benefits for the women who joined the congregations. Vatican II, from one perspective, allowed for a more agreeable lifestyle for Catholic sisters. Sisters no longer needed to wear long, unwieldy habits. They could live in single family homes or on their own rather than in convents or at the motherhouse. Less restrictive dress and living and working conditions were attractive in many ways, but Finke found that with a lessening of these restrictions came a loss of benefits, as well. Sisters lost the regular contact and reminders of their common mission, values, and goals. They were no longer surrounded constantly by a group of women supporting their professed beliefs and sharing strict rituals that served as
reminders of these beliefs. Finke states, “For when a group holds high costs for membership (such as the vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience) the group must generate a high level of collective goods (such as close social networks and religious experiences) to make membership worthwhile.”31 Thus, the numbers of Catholic sisters declined after the loosening of restrictions and the decrease in monitoring and supporting behaviors after the close of the second Vatican council. If Finke’s logic holds, then the reasons that women, including the nineteenth-century BVM teachers, did join Catholic congregations prior to Vatican II included the understood benefits despite the possibility of some rather steep costs. Women who entered the congregations determined that the social and religious benefits were valuable enough to balance out the costs of a more restricted life.

Finke imparts a predictive theory about membership in religious congregations. His quantitative studies on general membership in religious communities and in specific groups, such as Catholic women religious, support his position.

When a group prohibits members from participating in nongroup activities, it often provides alternative activities that serve as substitutes—substitutes that increase participation in group activities and prevent participation in the prohibited nongroup activities.

Rational choice theories propose that groups limit nongroup activities to generate high levels of participation and commitment (Hechter 1987; Finke and Stark 1992; Iannaccone 1994). Because groups rely on the inputs of individuals to produce the collective goods sought by the membership, the group’s ability to generate goods for members depends on their ability to obtain resources from members. The more resources an average member devotes to the group, the more the group can give in return. Thus, for successful groups, the relationship between the group and its members become reciprocal and self-reinforcing.32


32 *Ibid.*: 222.
The BVM sisters experienced these intense social expectations early in their membership with the congregation. Novices partially demonstrated their devotion by maintaining strict silence during their formation period, for example. Scholastica McLaughlin spent thirteen months in the novitiate and “never saw one sister speak to another in passing except in going back and forth to the dairy.”

Her fellow sister, “Mary Angela Quigley told [her] in after years that Father Donohue [sic] had guardians of silence.” According to Finke’s logic, this experience of ritualized silence and its monitoring through “guardians of silence” and other means strengthened the group. Even though silence is not itself a resource, it was a specialized, ritual behavior of the congregation that maintained a certain atmosphere at the motherhouse. The goods acquired through silence related perhaps to the women focusing more on their work and prayer. Obeying these kinds of rules also prepared the novices for obeying their superiors when they became teachers. In return, the women ate regular meals, slept safely, and expressed their faith within a supportive community. Those entering the congregation clearly understood the expectations, and it was clear that the expectations were distinct from those of general society. Individuals expressed their devotion by meeting the group’s expectations, and the group reciprocated by supporting and monitoring individuals’ behaviors. These reciprocal relationships maintained the sacred identity of the members and of the places, as well.

Geographer Lily Kong emphasizes the maintenance of place in order to retain its sacred identity: “Religious places, once established, require management and

33 McLaughlin, Notes, 1.
34 Ibid., 2.
maintenance . . . This analysis of the politics in management and maintenance has not
been given much attention by geographers and represents one avenue of research that
should be opened up.”35 By maintenance, Kong is referring to both the upkeep of the
physical space and the attention placed on its sacred identity. Geographers Julian
Holloway and Olliver Vains argue that ritualistic behaviors, like maintaining silence
during certain hours, contribute to maintaining and creating new religious spaces: “Thus
the corporeal enactment and performances involved in, for example, prayer, ritual and
pilgrimage . . . are central to the maintenance and development of religious spaces and
landscapes.”36 Combining Finke’s and the geographers’ ideas suggests that the behaviors
that maintain the identity of the sacred spaces are also those that result in a personal faith
identity and a sense of membership in the group for the women themselves. Finke states:

. . . [W]omen entering religious orders are seeking a community where their
religious commitments can be nurtured and expressed. Although the acceptance
of faith in the supernatural might be an individual choice, faith is sustained in a
group setting. When religious communities retain close social bonds and direct
the activities of members, they provide a haven of social and testimonial support
for the sisters’ high level of religious commitment. As moments of doubt arise,
support and confirmation of faith are close by. Moreover, religious rituals,
spiritual exercises, devotions, meditations, and prayer are a significant portion of
the structured community activities.37

The BVM congregation maintained its religious identity and spaces through personal
interactions and institutional rules or communications. These group maintenance efforts
were both sacred and secular, as Kong asserts, and the efforts resulted in delegating

35 Lily Kong, "Mapping 'New' Geographies of Religion: Politics and Poetics in Modernity," Progress in

36 Julian Holloway and Oliver Valins, "Editorial: Placing Religion and Spirituality in Geography," Social

37 Finke, "An Orderly Return to Tradition: Explaining the Recruitment of Members into Catholic Religious
Orders," 223.
duties to administrative and teaching roles that did not exist in public schools. The support and monitoring offered by the group contributed to its persistence and success, and it differentiated Catholic teaching from other forms of U.S. teaching.

**Personal Maintenance**

The development of personal relationships between specific sisters contributed to maintaining the entire congregation and its sacred spaces, the convents, schools, and the motherhouse. Personal correspondence that reminded one another of beliefs, duties, or even those comments that corrected inappropriate behaviors served to help the recipient realize what it meant to maintain her own membership in the congregation. Mary F. Clarke corresponded with the community about secular, practical concerns, and she also pointedly addressed individual teachers about their work and their faith. In 1861, Clarke wrote to three teachers and addressed each of their contributions:

Sister M. Justinus I address you first, as you are the oldest, I was glad to hear that your prayers were so effectual, for the common good. . .
My Dear Sister M. Seraphina you have the most laborious duty, but the most profitable for time and eternaty [sic], you teach the poor of Our Lord, do thank Him for that glorious privilege. . .38

Sister Dormatilla, the third recipient, received more practical encouragement regarding her teaching the select school students:

. . . altho your numbers are less, your duties are more arduous, as, those who can pay a little, will expect you to teach them every thing. It is dangerous, when it produces pride in the teacher, to be able to meet all their wants, and not seem deficient, but I know your good cheerful and willing heart, and that you will do your best, and don’t be uneasy, it is easy to tell them that such, or, such branches will not be taught for the present.39

38 Mary F. Clarke to Sisters Mary Justinus, Seraphina, & Dormatilla, Dubuque, Iowa, 7 June 1861, My Dear Sister, 5.

39 Ibid.
Clarke did not mention prayers or faith when addressing Domatilla, yet the rest of the section of the letter, which was addressed to all three teachers, did speak of prayer and faith. This letter and others like it confirm that even the superior of the BVM congregation contributed to the personal monitoring and support that Roger Finke claims is one of the benefits of living in community. These personal interactions contributed to the individuals’ sense of boundaries and belonging, and thus to the maintenance of the congregation as a whole. Lily Kong would additionally argue that the maintenance of membership contributed to the maintenance of the sacred spaces, as well. Without committed and stable group membership, the schools, convents, and the motherhouse would not have persisted. Support for membership and the stability of the group resulted in the group identity necessary to maintain the spaces the group created as sacred, meaningful spaces.

Even with their pupils, BVM teachers offered personal attention that made the transition to a boarding school easier. When boarding school pupils or when novices learned of the kindness and faith available through living in community, their commitment to the members and to the place strengthened. Sister Mary Borgi had been a student at Mount St. Joseph’s Academy in Dubuque, Iowa, in 1887 when Josephine Clarke was superior of the school. Borgi remembered Clarke having forged strong relationships with the students even though she was the superior. When Clarke traveled, she brought each student a small gift or treat that, according to Borgi, served to “make up for her absence.”40 This parental behavior helped many of the students overcome their homesickness and recognize the school as religious, academic, and very personal space.

40 Mary Borgi, Remembrance of Josephine Clarke, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
At the boarding schools, the teachers’ and students’ lives intertwined to the point that they could observe almost every aspect of each others’ behaviors, even those thought to have been private. Students and teachers shared religious, academic, and living spaces to some extent. The students and sisters had separate sleeping quarters, but students visited sisters’ living areas when they ran errands or shared the space for social events. Borgi wrote that when students’ and teachers’ spaces overlapped, students learned things that were not part of the formal curriculum. For example, Borgi was able to observe what Clarke did when she thought she was alone:

Sister always had great devotion to our blessed Mother and always had a large picture of her hanging over the head of her bed, when she was troubled about anything or suffered pain (which she often did) she always prayed to our blessed Mother, and would look up at the picture. She would say, are you not going to help me.41

The proximity of the students and teachers to one another—as they shared learning and living spaces—meant that they knew of one another’s behaviors in ways that allowed those who were young or those who doubted, to have access to those with practiced and more steadfast faith. These family-like connections that included observing others’ faith lives and doubts served as examples for Borgi as a student and reinforced for the teachers and other BVM sisters living at the school, as well, the sorts of behaviors that strengthened one’s faith and in turn strengthened the group and the identity of the place as sacred.

Individuals could have contributed to the maintenance of the group and the sacred spaces in either explicitly sacred or explicitly secular ways. The personalities and actions of specific individuals affected others in the congregation and students in complex ways.

41 Ibid.
So a secular act could result in the maintenance of sacred practices. Although it seems reasonable to conclude that actions that encouraged others’ spiritual growth or maintenance of chapels or other sacred spaces were religious by nature, secular acts were as likely to promote religious practices. Mary Loyola Rutherford became a professed BVM sister in 1869. She had been born Protestant, and her family moved to Muscatine, Iowa, when she was very young. Rutherford’s mother converted to Catholicism shortly after the family moved to Iowa, so conversion to Catholicism may not have brought a very heavy family burden to Rutherford herself. Rutherford did not immediately join the BVM congregation after completing her own schooling, though. She taught in public schools for many years before joining the BVM congregation and teaching in its Catholic schools. Her decision to join the congregation marked her religious identity, yet this identity was complex, as she did not become a BVM teacher in order to proselytize or to become known primarily for her Catholicity to the exclusion of her passion for education. Rutherford’s focus as a BVM teacher was on the development of schools for expressed reasons that were both religious and secular. In a draft of an address in memory of Rutherford in 1915, the writer stated,

> She was deeply interested in higher education. Saint Mary’s high school [Chicago], her pride and joy, is a monument to her zeal for God’s honor and glory in the work of education in Chicago. Sister used her influence to have the institution opened and was tireless in her effort to obtain funds and a suitable site of its establishment. She watched its growth and development with ever increasing pleasure.42

The address highlighted Rutherford’s interest in higher education and her clear devotion to Catholic education. The writer continued by remarking that Rutherford’s efforts extended her spirit for education and Catholicism into the hearts and homes of every

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42 Memorial Address for Sister Mary Loyola Rutherford, 1915, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
student she taught. According to the writer, Loyola Rutherford’s personal dedication to both education and Catholicism resulted in the maintenance of the sacred and secular experiences of Catholic education for these students and actually contributed to creating extensional sacred spaces wherever the students lived.

Agatha Hurley is a figure in the congregation whose administrative and secular attributes contributed a great deal to its maintenance. Her role—like the roles of the other individuals in the congregation—however, was more complex than this. A former student wrote to Hurley in 1902 asking to have all of the Chicago students and teachers pray for her because of some troubles she was experiencing. Her story reflects Hurley’s role in the continuation and extension of faith rituals and of sacred spaces referred to in the address for Loyola Rutherford. The writer remembered praying for others when she was a child, and as a result of that childhood experience, she believed strongly in the power of prayer; she asked Hurley, “... [K]indly ask the Sisters and pupils of the different houses and schools to remember me in their daily mass and communions, and in evening to say a few Hail Mary’s and Our Fathers. ...”43 The effort she put forth in sending the request suggests that the writer maintained her faith after leaving school and even considered her life to still be connected to the school and its traditional practices.

In addition to serving as evidence that these rituals affected the BVM students’ daily lives in school as well as after they left school, the writer’s letter also allows us to imagine how hearing from students about their memories of prayer, mass, and other rituals impacted the teachers. Agatha Hurley’s recorded achievements reveal her administrative, secular side. She had been the superior at five locations. She founded

43 Anonymous to Sister Mary Agatha Hurley, Chicago, Illinois, 3 May 1902, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
eleven schools in the Chicago area and even planned some of those schools. On her jubilee, the lay community commemorated her service to the community of Chicago with a fourteen-inch column in the *Chicago Tribune*. As superior, however, Hurley also served the spiritual needs of the sisters she oversaw and their pupils. The letter writer wrote to Hurley specifically. She requested the prayers from the school superior and, thus, from the person who also organized much of the formal prayer the sisters and pupils experienced while in her schools. These formal practices that Hurley oversaw contributed to maintaining the individuals’ identities as members of the congregation, the Church, or the school, and to the spaces themselves as Catholic places. Even as an adult, the writer saw Hurley’s role in her life as fundamental to her belief in prayer.

Prosper Lloyd wrote to Hurley in 1883, and the content of her letter also illustrates the range of impact Agatha Hurley had on specific individuals in the congregation. Lloyd joined the BVM congregation, left for a while, and then eventually decided to return to the community, and her letter to Hurley alludes to the importance of their shared sacred identity. It also suggests that Hurley played a personal role in Lloyd’s life, not simply an administrative role:

My loved Sister Mary Agatha—
I received Mother’s letter this morning as I was going to mass I read it in front of the Blessed Virgin’s altar. I shall go back to my loved convent home Monday on the evening train. Can you come over? . . .
I feel as though ten tons of sorrow were lifted from my heart. My prayer has not been in vain.
Your ever devoted child,
Mary Prosper

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45 Mary Prosper Lloyd to Mary Agatha Hurley, Chicago, Illinois, 21 October 1883, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
The letter to which she referred most likely granted Lloyd permission to return to the congregation, which was what Lloyd had hoped to hear. Having acquired permission to return, she wrote to Hurley and asked, “Can you come over?” suggesting that Lloyd sought Hurley’s ear not simply as an administrator, but as a friend with whom she shared faith. Their relationship was important to her sense of self as a Catholic sister, as was evident in her writing about prayer and the importance of her return to her “loved convent home,” the sacred space that meant so much to her. This letter and other archival evidence imply that Hurley, and other BVM administrators, maintained personal and spiritual relationships with those they supervised in addition to performing the secular duties of principals and superintendents. As Lloyd’s very personal letter to Hurley about her renewed commitment and returning to the convent confirms, these relationships between individuals maintained the larger group and their sacred places.

**Institutional Maintenance**

Geographer of religion Lily Kong critiques geographers’ tendency to artificially dichotomize places as either sacred or secular. Kong and geographers Catherine Brace, Adrian Bailey, and David Harvey conclude that geographers of religion have often failed to see the complexity of the intersection among sacred and secular behaviors and sacred and secular places. This complexity is very much in evidence in Mary Frances Clarke’s formal directives to the superiors and teachers of the BVM congregation. Clarke

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consciously meshed the sacred and the secular in her explanations of sorts of behaviors teachers were to undertake at BVM schools. In the 1884 *Book of Common Observances*, Clarke included a chapter called “Regarding Schools.” The chapter communicated important information about spirituality and religious instruction, but the majority of the information was about teaching in general. Clarke’s expectations in “Regarding Schools” clearly indicated that BVM teachers were to be both highly professional teachers and devout Catholic religious sisters.

Throughout the chapter, Clarke marked religious instruction and soul saving as the ultimate task of the sisters. The teachers recognized its importance, as well. Mary Lewine Enderle submitted an account of Mary Annunciation Hannon’s life as a teacher to the archives at Mount Carmel. Enderle had been a student of Hannon’s and later became a BVM sister herself. Enderle wrote of Hannon, “Sister told us . . . that Mother Clarke asked her if she would like to be music teacher and she told her she would rather teach school because in that way she could do more good for souls contacting more children.”

Hannon prioritized the religious aspect of her role as a Catholic teacher. Clarke, however, did not see teaching secular subjects as simply a necessary evil; she saw that excellent teaching of secular subjects might contribute to legitimating religious instruction. Clarke wrote about secular and religious teaching as two parts of a single effort. It follows that Clarke also saw the schools as both sacred and secular spaces. “Regarding Schools” documents Clarke’s thirty-one points on what was required of a good school that was also a Catholic school. Clarke wrote,

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48 Mary Lewine Enderle, Memoir of Annunciation Hannon, 1958, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
Of one thing, then let us be convinced from the beginning, that we can never attach our pupils to us and cause them to take a pleasure in acquiring a knowledge of our Holy Religion, unless we can justly merit their confidence and that of their parents, in our ability as efficient teachers, if both one and the other find not in our schools what they could find in others. Let us, then, acquire and impart secular knowledge with a view to this, and with a holy and intelligent zeal, keep our schools progressive with the times in which we live; by inventiveness and forethought, utilize our knowledge and our time to advance our pupils judiciously, and thus secure for our schools a good name. . .

According to Clarke, an excellent Catholic school necessarily offered excellent secular education.

As to the secular purposes or practices of the teaching, Clarke devoted points eleven through thirty of her thirty-one guiding principles in “Regarding Schools” to defining what it meant to be informed teachers, to manage student behavior, and to behave appropriately (both religiously and professionally) as teachers, as the following points illustrate:

13. The Sisters engaged in teaching must scrupulously employ the hour allotted for study. . . ; a little study every day will show surprising results; If any one fails, having the proper means, it will be from want of utilizing the time at her disposal.
14. . . . [T]he Sisters must qualify themselves to impart general elementary knowledge with ease, grammatical accuracy, and in language intelligible to the young.
15. In teaching, we must avoid two extremes, viz.: giving too much aid, or too little. When children come to us for an explanation—or even in teaching our class, we should endeavor to make them think. . . This should be done kindly, not in a cold or formal manner, but with a kind interest. . .
23. Are we mindful of this in the presence of the children, who are daily witnesses of our reciprocal relation? What scandal if they perceive that there is not a good feeling among us; if they should see the least mark of disagreement!

49 Mary F. Clarke, "Regarding Schools," in Book of Common Observances (Dubuque, IA: Mount Carmel, 1884), 64-5.

50 Ibid., 71, 72, 75.
“Regarding Schools” also included instructions on occasionally recognizing national or school-related historic holidays (in moderation), on subscribing to appropriate educational periodicals, and that the school year should be ten months long with monthly exams. This official document would have been available at each mission. As a part of the book including the official rules of the congregation, “Regarding Schools” would have been quite important. The teachers would have known about these points and would have been expected to follow them as well as possible.

Henry M. McCullough of the Works Progress Administration of Iowa reported that the same philosophy of providing quality secular education within a religious school persisted at BVM schools into the twentieth century. The BVM congregation maintained Clarke’s expressed teaching philosophy in its school system well beyond her death. In 1939, McCullough wrote of Immaculate Conception Academy in Davenport, Iowa, which opened in 1861, “There is the full complement of the practical and cultured studies and especial attention is given to art and music. While there is systematic religious instruction in the school, no undue influence is exercised over the religious instruction opinion of non-Catholic pupils.” McCullough, as an outsider, observed what he considered to be the successful mingling of religious and secular instruction fifty-five years after Clarke wrote that this was the intention of the BVM school system.

Maintenance of the congregation and its spaces over time required the leadership to manage both the secular and sacred aspects well. Clarke’s letters to the teachers reflect her overarching pragmatism, indicating that she managed these spaces by balancing sacred and secular concerns. Clarke wrote to Basil Healy in Rock Island, Illinois, in 

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51 Henry M. McCullough, Federal Writers Project: Works Progress Administration of Iowa, 19 June 1939, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
1881, “Do not mention about the Sisters keep the lent. Do as you have done[. It would not do to teach school every day, and all day, and fast.” Clarke permitted the teachers to refrain from this religious practice of fasting because she understood that the teachers could not teach effectively if they were hungry and weak. Teaching well in general was the key to the congregation’s definition of being a good Catholic teacher. A faint teacher would have taught neither math nor catechesis well. Such decisions helped to maintain a space where effective Catholic teaching could occur.

Secular Aspects of BVM Schools

Certain documents clearly demonstrate the institutional-level efforts to maintain BVM sacred spaces, such as schools, by caring for their secular foundations. Without such efforts, the religious meanings of the places would have been lost as the community or their structures crumbled. Xavier O’Reilly served as secretary to Clarke and on Clarke’s behalf sent the following instructions regarding maintaining quality schools and qualified teachers to all of the BVM houses:

. . . By same mail, you will receive a copy of the "Course of Study." Please introduce it into your schools immediately, as we are most desirous to give it two year’s trial. Be particular to notice how it works, and report to mother after each semiannual examination, what you find in it commendable or otherwise. You can have this copy framed; but we think it advisable not to have it copied till it proves its worth.

As we aid in conducting graded schools, we recommend you to procure for your teachers a copy of "How to Teach," by Henry Kiddle, A.M. – published by J. W. Schermerhorn & Co., New York. Also a copy of "Grube’s Method of Teaching Arithmetic" – published by S. R. Winchell & Co., Chicago. This little book fully explains the method of teaching "Combinations of Numbers," as mentioned in our primary Grades.

52 Mary F. Clarke to Mary Basil Healy, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 3 March 1881, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 55.
Clarke understood that “keeping the schools progressive with the times” meant that teachers needed to study the most recent research on teaching methods and to continue learning in their content-areas. Requiring progress in teaching and providing the resources necessary for teachers to make such progress were ways that Clarke maintained the schools. The post script of the letter also refers to the intermingling of the secular and sacred aspects of the spaces the BVM teachers used. Specifically, the chapel was more than just a place to hold service or to pray; it was also a common room, of sorts, where all congregation members could access important resources.

Sometime important resources included academic enrichment for the teachers. The resources for teachers’ continuing education included organized study at the schools and convents after school hours. In 1932, Mary Valeria Owens told Lambertina Doran that in “[i]n Sister Mary Margaret Mann’s time the Sisters had classes every evening from 6:00 PM to 7:00. Mr. Werner taught them German; Sister Mary Xavier taught Latin and German; Sister Mary Ildephonse and Sister Mary Lambert taught French. . .” Providing necessary materials or services helped support the teachers’ professional identities. The BVM congregation also monitored the teachers’ professional behaviors. Superiors held the teachers to standards by examining the teachers and evaluating their instructional practices. The sister visitor also observed and evaluated teachers and

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53 Mary Xavier O'Reilly to Superiors of BVM Schools, St. Joseph's on the Prairie, 23 October 1882, My Dear Sister: Correspondence and Notes of Mary Frances Clarke, BVM, 70-1.

54 Clarke, “Regarding Schools,” 64.

55 Mary Valeria Owens, Memoirs Recorded by Lambertina Doran, 1932, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
schools. Supporting and monitoring quality teaching were part of the same effort to maintain teachers within the congregation and to maintain the schools themselves, which were also sacred spaces. According to Clarke, without qualified and progressive teachers, the schools as sacred spaces would not have lasted.

The congregation also needed to account for its physical needs in order to sustain its sacred identity. Clarke’s many letters regarding land and building costs, renovation efforts, and appropriate space accommodations for the teachers and the children demonstrate that she and other BVMs were often specifically concerned with managing the secular, mundane aspects of maintaining the schools. She was not waiting counting on spiritual intervention to help with these affairs. Instead, her spiritual motivations for having schools combined with the secular efforts that set the plans in motion. For example, in 1884 she wrote to Baptist Seely in Des Moines:

March 3d, 1884
My dear S.M. Baptist,

I have received yours of the 25th ult. And have read it carefully. I see its advantages and disadvantages. If you build where you now are you would be near the school and Church, which is something not to be overlooked, especially for those who teach to get a warm comfortable dinner, but of course the house would be on Church property. From what S.M. Gertrude tells me of the size of the ground you now occupy for school and dwelling would I think be sufficient, as there will be no boarding school there we have five of them now which is more than enough. Select and parish schools will be much better and less laborious and won’t require so much help.

Dear Sister I don’t understand what Rev. Fr. Brazil means by saying the first payment $3000 won’t be due until Dec. or Jan. next, as I have not made the purchase yet, and would not make the purchase before having it well secured from all future claims from any one. If you are all satisfied that the lots are all you wish and that Fr. Brazil gives them as I understand for $17000, do you think that young Catholic lawyer there has experience enough to transact the business for us. When all satisfactory arranged and the property ours, I would like to make a payment of $3000 with our united aid and the remaining $14000 in seven notes of $2000 a year with .06 interest from the time the notes are drawn. Dear Sister if I have not made myself understood tell me I will expect to hear from you soon about all.
You don’t expect to build until the ground is paid for, on account of the interest, we could not meet all. In the meantime the lots could remain rented which would help it. Dear Sister we too need more room and need aid to do it but God is all sufficient in Him we will trust.

I will ask God to bless you all.

Your Affectionate
M. F. Clarke

This letter tackles some extremely important secular interests of the BVM school system: the opening, building, and financing of schools. The large sums to which Clarke referred indicate that these women managed very large budgets, supporting all of the buildings and land they owned, the school operating funds, and living costs for each member of the congregation. It was critical to the maintenance of the religious schools that the secular details fell properly into place. Mismanaged accounts or poor purchasing decisions could have meant the demise of the sacred spaces.

These “secular efforts” led to the maintenance and expansion of the BVM school system, these sacred spaces, throughout Clarke’s leadership and thereafter, as indicated by Mr. Horan’s observations. It is also evident from her letters that Clarke was acting from the beliefs articulated in “Regarding Schools” even prior to its publication. Clarke thoroughly developed this teaching philosophy over her years leading the BVM congregation. This documentation of the philosophy of BVM education substantiates the claim that the leaders of the BVM school system strove to provide an excellent experience of secular teaching and learning and a particular spiritual and religious experience, as well, and regular communication and action from the leadership ensured the maintenance of the teaching philosophy and the religious schools.

Sacred Aspects of BVM Schools

As administrators of the BVM schools, the women also maintained the religious aspects of the institution. “ Regarding Schools” opens by declaring that BVM teachers’ relationship with God was central to their lives. Clarke wrote, “It is from the motives that animate us, that all our actions are pleasing or displeasing to God. As Religious, and especially as Religious Teachers, how much more does this apply to us than those trying to sanctify themselves in the world.”57 Teaching was inextricably linked to religion for the BVM teachers. “Regarding Schools” assiduously addressed this link along with the importance of excellent secular teaching. The duties of the teachers according to points eight and nine included teaching prayers, the mass, and the sacraments. Point ten addressed the delicacy required of the Catholic teachers when teaching non-Catholic pupils:

. . . and we must not be intimidated in our religious instructions to the children, by the presence of non-Catholic pupils; though we should be careful not to make any remarks that could wound the feelings of such. However, persons of other denominations know that we instruct our children in our Holy Religion, and, therefore, when non-Catholic children attend our schools they expect to hear this instruction and never expect any concession to be made on their account.58

The expectations included acknowledging others’ beliefs, assuming parents fully understood that students would learn Catholic practices, and fully supporting the roles of the clergy and the ceremonies of the Church. The teachers would not need to figure out on their own how to deal with non-Catholic students because Clarke clearly described the religious intentions of the school system.

57 Clarke, "Regarding Schools," 64.

58 Ibid., 70.
Clarke wrote the superiors of the congregation regularly, instructing them to hold prayer times, masses, or other religious ceremonies. For example, on the Feast of All Saints in 1883 and the fiftieth anniversary of the congregation, Mary F. Clarke directed the superiors of the houses to conduct the following rituals:

It is proposed that the three days previous be spent in greater recollection, and that on the Feast, the holy Sacrifice of Mass, Holy Communion, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament be offered in thanksgiving to God, for past favors, and to implore a continuance of the same in the future.

Holloway and Vains would argue that it is partially through these shared ceremonies, mass, and common prayer that the BVM congregation maintained its schools and convents as sacred spaces. The chapels themselves were simply structures of stone or wood. They obtained sacred identity because of the meaning imposed on the structures through their specific uses—they were places where particular religious rituals occurred.

Superiors oversaw these rituals, and from time to time Clarke also instructed them to review or update general congregational rules. The resulting lists of approved and rejected behaviors typically distanced BVM sisters from the rest of society. According to Finke’s findings about more recent sisters, behaving differently from those outside the congregation would have provided strong group identity and cohesion. According to geographers of religions, these traditions and rituals also maintained the geographic identity of the group. Clarke directed Agatha Hurley to review the following rules with the houses she visited in 1885:

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59 See examples in My Dear Sister, 6, 11, 14, 18, 43.

60 Gertrude Regan to Agatha Hurley, St. Joseph's Convent, Dubuque, Ia, 21 October 1883, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.

In making the visitations of our houses, I wish you to give the following directions in my name. Do so in each house, before beginning the visitation. 1st. That no priest be entertained in the convent after 8 o’clock in the evening. 2nd. That no liquor nor beer, or alcoholic drink of any kind, be given to priests in the convent. 3rd. That no priest be permitted to take any meal with the Sisters on any occasion or feast whatever. 4th. That cigars must not be kept in the convent for the accommodation of priests. 5th. That no member of the Community be permitted to take refreshments of any kind outside the convent, except in accordance with the regulations laid down in our Custom Book. 6th. That serge, not cashmere, be used in making our Habits, Capes, Aprons, and cloaks. Should any sister receive a present of cashmere, it must be exchanged for serge, or else, used as shawl merino, for the Sisters in general. 7th. That when Sisters receive presents of money, in letters or otherwise, it may not be given to them, but put with the moneys of the house, for Community use. The Sister should be informed that the money was sent her, and she should gratefully acknowledge the receipt of the same. If the amount of such present exceed five dollars, the Superior should immediately remit it to the Motherhouse. 8th. That the Sisters never go out sleigh-riding or carriage riding merely for pleasure. They may accompany their pupils on such excursions to take care of them, but never otherwise. 9th. That no music teacher be required or allowed to take more than twenty-five music pupils. No lessons of any kind may be given to outsiders after dark. 10th That no Sister be allowed to wear buttoned or side-laced shoes, bought quilted winter or summer underwear. If such things be presented to the Sisters, they must request the donors to exchange them for what we are accustomed to wear: viz., front-laced shoes, and material for home-made quilted skirts and plain flannel underwear. 11th If any of the above prohibitions be infringed, it is the duty of any Sister who knows it to inform me at once. 62

Although many of these rules restricted secular behaviors, their formal prohibition for these Catholic sisters rendered them part of the sacred rituals and behaviors that helped identify the women and their spaces as Catholic. The resulting boundaries between the sisters and the rest of society imparted on the sisters and their schools an explicitly Catholic identity. The roles of the school administrators included maintaining these

62 Mary F. Clarke to Agatha Hurley, St. Joseph’s on the Prairie, 7 February 1885, My Dear Sister, 91-2.
behaviors, and according to rule “the eleventh,” all sisters’ duties included monitoring one another’s compliance with these and all other rules.

**Conclusion**

The BVM school system persisted because of both secular and sacred maintenance efforts. By clearly identifying themselves as Catholic teachers, BVM teachers were able to support one another’s professional and religious commitments. A teaching staff truly committed to one another will cohere in a way that can positively impact the existence and the persistence of the schools in which they teach. Sociologists of education have understood that in modern schools when teachers share fundamental beliefs, like beliefs about the sacred, they view themselves as being more effective professionally. If this is a more universally applicable statement about membership and professional satisfaction and effectiveness, then being continuously immersed in reminders of why one joined a particular group and in the group’s expectations seems to ensure a strong sense of membership and a high level of retention; at least, this seems to have been the case with the BVM teachers. Geographers of religion remind us, however, that sacred spaces and sacred identities require certain secular inputs, as well. Both the strong religious identity and effective secular practices positively impacted the persistence of the BVM schools as sacred spaces.

The evidence from the Mount Carmel archives refutes that idea that BVM teachers lived serene, idyllic lives like the those implied by images of clear skinned, calm-faced, contemplative Catholic sisters. The evidence, likewise, contradicts the other stereotype about Catholic sisters—that all aspects of the teachers’ lives added up to some

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63 Lee, Dedrick, and Smith, "The Effect of the Social Organization of Schools on Teachers' Efficacy and Satisfaction."
form of victimization of a male hierarchy. The role of religion in the lives of BVM
teachers led to complex experiences of opportunities and risks. Risking opening a school
in anti-Catholic Muscatine, Iowa, for example, afforded the teachers the opportunity to
reap the professional benefits of being the first teachers to offer higher education to what
became a truly grateful community. The bookkeeping, household management,
curriculum decisions, and quality of teaching served as ways of maintaining the sacred
space, the Catholic school, when prejudice against Catholics during this period might
have resulted in the school’s failure if only religious or sacred concerns mattered in
determining the school’s persistence.

Religion played a significant role in the lives of all BVM sisters. As obvious as
this may seem, it is important to acknowledge the ways the women identified themselves
exclusively as Catholic sisters and Catholic. BVM teachers separated themselves
completely from their families. Their professional duties included all of the duties of
operating non-religious schools plus teaching religion, monitoring and supporting each
other’s Catholicity, and dealing with prejudice and sometimes violence from nativist
movements. Part of what is striking about these additional aspects of BVM teachers’
lives is that because specific sorts of behaviors helped ensure the identity of the group
and the spaces, teachers’ and administrators’ roles went beyond the parallel duties
necessary for operating a public school during the same period. BVM teachers were U.S.
teachers, but their experiences of teachings overlapped with public school teachers’ only
in some ways. Establishing and maintaining sacred identities and sacred spaces through
sacred and secular practices differentiates BVM teachers from public school teachers in
the nineteenth century, and understanding this provides a more complete picture of the various ways one experienced being a U.S. teacher during this period.
CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

In this dissertation, I have asserted that in order to understand U.S. education and teaching in the nineteenth century, we need to expand the content of the literature to include the experiences of those outside of the U.S. public school system. Catholic school systems and other minority status school systems did not simply operate co-terminously with the public school systems; they were part of the total fabric of U.S. education. Using the example of the school system of one congregation of Catholic sisters and explicitly geographic questions, I demonstrated that there were noteworthy similarities and differences between this particular Catholic school system and the experiences of its teachers and the more commonly discussed public systems of this period. Knowing what the similarities and differences are allows us to have a more accurate view of education systems and teaching in the nineteenth century in the United States.

I chose to investigate three geographically significant themes in this research of BVM teachers and schools between 1843 and 1887: the dispersion pattern of the teachers and the schools, the structure of the school system and its effect on the teachers within the spatially discontinuous organization, and the intermingling of sacred and secular behaviors that resulted in the founding and persistence of the group and its schools. The findings of my research indicate that within at least these three categories, BVM teachers’ lives differed considerably from public school teachers in the nineteenth century. An accurate account of the intersections between the individuals and the BVM school system reveals that U.S. education had multiple internal organizational and interaction patterns and multiple sorts of career experiences for women teachers.
The intentions and actions of decision makers in public and private schools impacted one another and the dispersion patterns of the schools in the systems. Anti-Catholic tendencies contributed to the particular form of public schools that emerged in the nineteenth century. The new public schools and aggressive behaviors against Catholic persons encouraged Catholics to move away, to the West in particular, and to open separate schools. The success of the Catholic schools and their rate of growth in the West spurred some Protestant, public-school advocates to sprinkle schools throughout the same region; at the time, these public schools, unlike the Catholic schools, were standalone schools, not reinforced by a larger organizing system. The public school teachers had no formal connections with one another until the centralization movement merged the schools together, creating a formalized superstructure of relatively disconnected individuals. In contrast, The BVM’s specific core–periphery organization spread across a portion of the West, and grew from a central motherhouse that sent groups of its members into the periphery in order to open new schools.

The dispersion pattern stemmed from the overarching structure of the religious congregation. Those responsible for each school took charge of their local professional, spiritual, and economic needs and retained a sense of autonomy. The congregation instilled a shared religious and professional belief system in its member when each teacher and administrator entered the congregation through the novitiate at the motherhouse. The tight religious, personal, and professional bonds spanned the congregation’s geographic range and its hierarchy, and it lasted for life. BVM teachers experienced teaching differently from their public school contemporaries who did not share living space and religious and professional beliefs. Sociological considerations
suggest that the expressed sharing of core beliefs may have positively affected these teachers’ effectiveness. The experiences of BVM teachers reveal to us that some U.S. women teachers experienced teaching as a lifelong and rich endeavor, not as an exception, but as regular occurrence in their communities.

The BVM religious congregation and its school system made it possible for women teachers to be lifelong professionals. The school system persisted because of secular and sacred efforts to maintain the religious identity of the sisters and their sacred spaces. Both a strong religious identity and effective secular practices impacted the persistence of the BVM schools as sacred spaces. The duties of Catholic school professionals extended well beyond the duties of public school professionals. These extended duties helped to ensure the sacred identity of the group and maintained the schools as sacred spaces. Their professional duties included all of the duties of operating non-religious schools plus teaching religion, monitoring and supporting each other’s Catholicity, and dealing with prejudice and sometimes violence from nativist movements. These women were like the earlier and first women school administrators in the United States, also Catholic women religious. Their duties matched those of public school administrators, including male administrators, and extended beyond those duties to include specific religious duties.

Having established that the BVM teachers’ and administrators’ experiences differed from their public school contemporaries and that the structure of the school systems varied, too, it stands to reason that the students in the Catholic schools I examined also had different experiences from public students. All BVM Catholic schools, both urban and rural, ran for ten months a year. Agricultural seasons may have
impacted attendance from time to time for day students, but the seasons did not determine
when school was in session. If the BVMs opened a school, they staffed the school with
multiple teachers and maintained the staff as long as they ran the school. This meant that
students experienced constancy and routine in their schedule and in their instruction. In
contrast if communities opened a public school, particularly in rural areas, the schedule
may have fluctuated with the agricultural seasons or according the availability of
teachers. This meant Catholic women teachers had steady employment throughout the
year. Also, in those areas that enforced rules against married or pregnant women
teaching, the turnover in staffing may have been quite frequent compared to the staffing
in BVM schools. Vows of celibacy or chastity meant that Catholic sisters were always in
compliance with these social norms and could therefore practice their profession full time
throughout their lifetime.

The BVM teachers’ constant companionship and support for their professional
lifestyle may have led to a higher level of satisfaction in and enthusiasm for their work
compared to public school teachers. This would have impacted the students as well as
the teachers. BVM teachers taught for many years, so curricular continuity would have
been greater than in public schools before standardization efforts began. Even new
schools, which were staffed by experienced teachers and superiors who specialized in
pioneering new schools, would have had fairly well developed curricula since they could
rely on their colleagues at other locations for help and on their own previous experience
teaching. Newer teachers lived and taught with more experienced teachers and thus had
built-in professional development even before formal, advanced education was available
for or required of women teachers, and BVM teachers received training and support for
their continuing education. Not all public school students received instruction from similarly trained or supported teachers. Learning from these two groups of teachers would have been different in some important ways. The sort of school system the BVM congregation developed, the relationships among the women in the congregation, and the lifelong teaching careers the women enjoyed made those learning differences possible. In this U.S. school system, only women administered the schools. The teachers were all women, and they held lifelong careers. These U.S. teachers and administrators also willingly participated in their centralized schools and found personal and professional benefits from their participation.

**Epilogue**

Both mothers general who followed Mary Frances Clarke after her death in 1887 as leaders of the congregation continued aspects of Clarke’s approach to running a school system although their approaches differed significantly from one another. The BVM congregation elected Cecilia Dougherty and Gertrude Regan as mothers general alternately between 1887 and 1919 (Table 5.1). Regan immediately followed Clarke as mother general, and her rapid establishment of schools earned her the nickname “the expansionist.” During Regan’s leadership, the BVM Council received invitations to open new schools at least weekly, and she regularly accepted the invitations. The congregation opened twenty-nine schools under Regan’s twelve years of leadership.

Dougherty was not so inclined and spent less energy establishing new schools. She served three terms lasting sixteen years and opened twenty-five schools total in that

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Her reluctance to open more schools, however, did not indicate a complete departure from Clarke’s philosophy, for it was during the years of Dougherty’s leadership that the congregation focused more specifically on paying off debts, improving teaching, and streamlining the process for ensuring high quality teaching. Despite their different rates of expansion, the combined dispersion efforts of Regan and Dougherty led to BVM schools opening in Nebraska, Colorado, South Dakota, and Montana in addition to states where BVM schools had previously existed.

Table 5.1  BVM Mothers General, 1888–1919

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Name of Mother Superior</th>
<th>Number of Schools Founded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1888–1894</td>
<td>Gertrude Regan</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894–1900</td>
<td>Cecilia Dougherty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900–1906</td>
<td>Gertrude Regan</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1906–1912</td>
<td>Cecilia Dougherty</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912–1915</td>
<td>Ascension Lily</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1915–1919</td>
<td>Cecilia Dougherty</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These expansion efforts could only have happened with an increase in the number of BVM teachers, and this did not always happen in a timely manner. Tuberculosis

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2 Both Gertrude Regan and Cecilia Dougherty also closed schools during their terms as mothers general. The congregation trended towards opening schools in more urban locations where they could be more sure of larger enrollments. McDonnell, *Counterpoint Melodies*, 1-2.
claimed a number of sisters’ lives, and the rate of population growth was fairly staggering, often outpacing the rate of increase in the numbers of sisters. Cecilia Dougherty’s teaching philosophy emphasized excellence in teaching and a desire to meet accreditation and licensure standards. Struggling to match the teaching population to the ever expanding territory of the BVM school system, Dougherty focused on religious preparation, the consistency of the curriculum, and teaching strategies rather than on founding new schools. In an October, 1894, circular sent on Dougherty’s behalf by Crescentia Markey, the BVM schools’ faculty learned that there would be a meeting to prepare them to address “uniformity and grading.” This marked the beginning of what eventually became annual summer institutes. Teachers and superiors gathered to assess and improve curricula and to gain continuing education. Dougherty began this annual practice in 1898, explaining:

It is intended to make the work of the institute as practical as possible, and apart from the lectures by distinguished speakers, our own members will conduct the exercises. The teachers in the primary, grammar, and academic departments will assemble in separate study halls for the work peculiar to each grade. . . Sisters have been named to prepare papers on given subjects, and all who attend the institute are expected to make the preparatory study necessary for deriving the greatest amount of profit from the lectures and the other work of the institute.

Both the concept of such a meeting and the process indicate that the system retained its sense of unity, organization, and systematization well after Clarke’s death.

Dougherty also contributed some to the growth in systematization of the schools.

Needing a new building for the BVM high school in Chicago after its first year of

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3 Crescentia Markey, Circular from Mary Cecilia Dougherty at St. Joseph's Convent, Dubuque, Iowa, to the Bvm Congregation, 20 October 1894, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa. Crescentia Markey, "Circular from Mary Cecilia Dougherty at St. Joseph's Convent, Dubuque, Iowa, to the Bvm Congregation (Dubuque, Iowa: Mount Carmel Archives, October 20, 1894).

4 Ibid.
operation, Dougherty continued the letter about the summer institute with the following instructions to the congregation:

As you have probably heard, the school was opened in a rented building with only limited accommodations. Next year, it will be necessary to have more room, and we hope to be able to provide a building in every way better suited to the proposed work. In order to obtain funds for the erection of such a building, we ask the Sisters to join in the enclosed “Novena of Grace in honor of Saint Francis Xavier.” To the prayers specified add the Salve Regina for the conversion of sinners and the De Profundis for the souls in purgatory. . .5

As in the previous period, spiritual and secular concerns merged comfortably in communications from the mother general, and the heads of the schools were charged with guiding curriculum development, expanding the physical plant of the congregation in general, and conducting prayer. Keeping in line with concerns about maintaining a unique, religious identity, Dougherty (through her secretary Cresentia Markey) added the following post script: “Note: When the Sisters travel in the day time, they should not take off their bonnets and sit in the trains with their face veils thrown over their heads.”6 Simply wearing bonnets and veils was not enough; the rules that ensured exclusive identification as BVM sisters extended to how one should behave with respect to one’s bonnet and veil.

During and after Mary Frances Clarke’s tenure as mother general, the BVM congregation dispersed schools and teachers from an established core, their motherhouse. Their female superiors, school visitors, and other administrators, who held duties identical to those of principals and superintendents in the public schools, additionally oversaw the religious development of the members of the congregation and the students.

5Ibid.

6 Mary Cecilia Dougherty, Circular from Mary Cecilia Dougherty at St. Joseph's Convent, Dubuque, Iowa, to the Bvm Congregation, 30 October 1899, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
They consistently implemented practices that contributed to the maintenance of the Catholic identity of the congregation and the schools. As times changed after Clarke’s death, her successors took advantage of new opportunities to extend the congregation’s efforts to establish excellent schools with highly qualified teachers. In an attempt to prepare BVM teachers for college-level teaching, Cecilia Dougherty sent the first BVM teachers to receive masters-level education at Catholic University in 1911.

This account of the period following Clarke’s tenure demonstrates that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there is room for far more research on Catholic teachers and schools as part of U.S. education as there is for the nineteenth century. It is also important to point out that Catholic historians in the past have also failed to recognize the roles Catholic teachers, those who were Catholic sisters at least, within Catholic education. Catholic historians of Dubuque diocesan schools, for example, did not necessarily recognize the work the women did as entirely legitimate. In *With Faith and Vision; Schools of the Archdiocese of Dubuque, 1836-1966*, Justin Driscoll recounted that Archbishop John Keane appointed Fr. John M. Wolfe as the first superintendent of schools of the Archdiocese of Dubuque in 1922. Although it is the case that Wolfe and his team were the first appointed to lead this particular geographic grouping of all Catholic schools in the diocese, Driscoll’s description of this fact is somewhat misleading: “. . . with the establishment of the archdiocesan office of education, unity, organization, and system-wide planning emerged through the schools at both elementary and secondary levels.”

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been systematically organized together, but he overlooked the unity, organization, and systemization that congregations like the BVM congregation had incorporated into their school systems. Rather than portraying the change as a re-organization, Driscoll chose to imply that where once there had been disorganization, there was now order; but my findings contradict the idea that the BVM school system, which constituted a portion of the Dubuque diocese, lacked organization in the years prior to consolidation of the diocesan school district.

Driscoll asserts that until the consolidation of the schools into the diocesan system, “the pastor was the principal director of the parochial school. Mothers general of the communities whose members taught in the parish schools were important visitors and inspectors during the formative years of the Catholic schools.” At the level of staffing, curriculum development, and formation of school structures, however, BVM teachers and administrators made their own determinations. If the pastor held differing ideas, then there is some evidence that decisions of the BVM congregation took precedence. Also, partially because of the dispersion pattern, superiors and other administrators played critical supervisory roles in the schools. They had their own decision-making powers with the consent of the mothers general under whom they served. All of these administrators, including the mothers general, contributed far more to the schools and the congregation-based school systems than being occasional visitors.

Continuing the Challenge. Their analysis did not differ from Driscoll’s. Archbishop Jerome Hanus wrote the foreword to the book an indicated that it would serve to reaffirm the importance of Catholic schooling. The actual emphasis appears to be the importance of diocesan-organized Catholic schools over other systems or organizations of Catholic schools, however. The editors fail to consider schooling prior to the development of the diocesan superintendency and school board in 1922, or they fail to communicate that their goal is to reveal views that have been held about Dubuque Catholic schools rather than to provide an accurate account of the development of Catholic school systems in the diocese.

8 Ibid.
Driscoll offers no evidence that Catholic schools were in chaos prior to their geographic consolidation, yet he suggests that the creation of the diocesan school system introduced order, not a new order. Contrary to Driscoll’s description, this dissertation describes how the BVM school system had soundness and structure throughout the period of Mary Frances Clarke’s leadership. Evidence in the archives suggests that this orderliness continued after her death, as well. Father M. J. Ryan’s account of BVM schools in Kansas City adds to a wider understanding of what we know about the organization and quality of BVM schools after Mary F. Clarke’s death. Ryan wrote to Seraphina Short in 1911 about what he had been hearing about BVM teachers:

> About a week ago the Bishop called representatives from all the teaching orders together to discuss various textbooks from the schools of the diocese. He was very much pleased with the B.V.M’s—in fact they are the only ones he spoke of. The Bishop is a great friend of mine and comes to see me quite often and there is scarcely a week that he does not send for me to come to his house and spend the evening with him. The last time I was there he said, ‘I wish all Sisters in the Diocese were like the B.V.M’s—then it would be plain sailing’.

From Ryan’s and the bishop’s perspective, the BVM sisters were an exemplary teaching order. Perhaps Justin Driscoll’s comments about the chaos of the Catholic schools in the Dubuque diocese would be more accurate if he were more specific. If he stated that there were many separate systems that the diocese sought to consolidate in order to simplify the Catholic system in Dubuque, his argument would be stronger. This would make it clear that the role of the diocesan superintendent was to unify portions of several internally organized systems under one structure, but he makes no suggestion that any of the schools in the diocesan system in 1922 qualified as organized, unified, or systematic.

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9 M. J. Ryan to Seraphina Short, Kansas City, MO, 9 May 1911, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
Driscoll does not suggest that their organization might have impacted the organization of the diocesan school system that followed. According to his account, they were simply disorganized. Driscoll does reveal, however, that Wolfe, the first superintendent of schools of the Dubuque Archdiocese, faced opposition from teachers and pastors throughout the area. Wolf, nonetheless, “required all schools to conform to uniform regulations.”¹⁰ This parallels the sorts of reactions offered by teachers and local administrators during public school consolidation. The discontentment of the teachers and pastors could indicate that there was more to the story than that establishing a diocesan superintendent saved Catholic schools from the chaos of their previous organization. These stories of Catholic school centralization belong to the history of U.S. school centralization, and they will be more useful if they are understood more completely than accounts like Driscoll’s.

This misinterpretation or lack of depth in understanding the nature of the systems founded and run by Catholic sisters parallels the received view about Catholic sisters in general. This received view of Catholic sisters holds that their lives were rigidly ruled by those to whom they vowed obedience and to the male hierarchy like those who rescued Dubuque Catholic schools from their chaotic state in the 1920s. Evidence suggests that daily life as a Catholic sister was more “normal” than this interpretation might suggest. That rules of obedience existed did not mean that everyone accepted each interpretation of the rules or their enforcement. The rules of obedience within the BVM congregation, however, helped ensure that the sisters practiced the behaviors that identified the members of the congregation as somehow different from lay persons, but as the writer of

the following account suggests, life as a Catholic sister did not always precisely follow the written rules. The writer explains an incident in the 1920s that occurred during an evening meal. By rule, the women would have eaten the meal in silence. They could, however, be granted a time of recreation during the meal by their superior and could then converse while they ate. The existence of the rule of silence during meals did not mean they could not ask for a temporary change in the rule, and the rule of obedience did not mean that they accepted directions without comment.

Sister Mary Tertulla Reynolds, . . . was my superior at St. Mary’s High School in Chicago from August 1926 to August 1930. This incident occurred during that period.

It was a Saturday. We were at noon dinner. We had all worked very hard that morning and were tired. Someone had the bright idea of asking SM Tertulla for recreation [permission to talk]—it was easier to relax at the meal if we could talk. St Mary’s was a Provincial House and the Provincial sat at the head of the table, the Superior to her left (she could see the entire dining room from that position) and any visiting Superior would be sitting across from her. There were about forty Sisters in the Community.

Sister Mary St. Augustin was chosen to be the “speaker.” She went to the table, whispered something (asking recreation) to the Superior; then returned to her placed grinning but WE DID NOT HAVE RECREATION.

Afterward she told us what happened. Sister Mary Tertulla replied, “Recreation? With that one across the way from me as narrow as the BEE’S EYE BROWS; go sit down.”

The visiting superior, from the point of view of the Tertulla Reynolds, would have been a stickler for the rules and would not have allowed conversation during the meal. This meant that Reynolds denied the request because of the visitor’s presence and her assumed interpretation of the rule, not because of her own interpretation. Also, rather than simply saying “no,” Reynolds let the speaker know that she disagreed with the strict interpretation. Perhaps narrow interpretations of the lives of Catholic sisters arise from actual accounts of personalities like the superior with the “narrow eyebrows,” yet these

11 Mary Josine, Remembrance of Sister Mary Tertulla Reynolds, Mount Carmel Archives, Dubuque, Iowa.
are not the only women in the congregations, and they need to be understood in the context of the whole group. Stories like this one and other evidence from the BVM archives that challenges the received view of Catholic sisters and their institutions suggest that small and large protests, such as those against the creation of diocesan school systems, were part of the experiences of Catholic teachers and Catholic sisters in general. This means that historians and social scientists have an entire body of relatively untapped information about U.S. women and U.S. institutions to explore.

Understanding the BVM school system and the experiences of BVM teachers and administrators helps to identify and begin to move beyond the stereotypes and unsupported generalizations about Catholic sisters and religious education that have allowed us to set Catholic education apart from U.S. education. We begin to understand Catholic education as something more than just an anomaly; it is a necessary component for understanding U.S. education. BVM schools and teachers constitute an important part of the history and geography of U.S. education, and understanding them suggests that research on other Catholic school systems might similarly contribute to our knowledge of U.S. schools as a whole.

**Further Research**

The process of researching particular pieces of BVM education exposed me to other viable lines of research connected to BVM education as part of U.S. education and to Catholic education as part of U.S. education in general. In some places in the country during the nineteenth century, a significant minority of children attended Catholic schools. For a period of time, Catharine Beecher and others in the Protestant-based public education community worried that more girls in the West received education
through Catholic schooling than through public schooling. Whereas my research uncovered that BVM school systems and experiences of teaching differed from public schools, studying Catholic education more generally might also lead to learning whether the BVM school system was an aberration among Catholic schools in this period or whether it was a fairly common sort of Catholic school system. Did BVM schools and teachers share characteristics with others schools in their region? Were there similarities among congregation-led schools based on country of origin of the founders? Did school systems of pontifical congregations differ from school systems of diocesan congregations? Did the size of the congregation impact the school systems and teachers’ experiences? It is also possible to research the BVM school system in the twentieth century in order to understand its entire history better and to compare its workings in later periods with the public school system or other private school systems of those times.

This dissertation’s scope was, of course, limited. Beginning to understand one Catholic school system and its teachers’ experiences, however, provides a stepping stone for integrating our knowledge of private and public schools as critical parts of U.S. education. This section explores some viable possibilities for future research in Catholic education.

Catholic schools and public schools both went through an external centralization process to create geographically contiguous school systems. Not all regions experienced consolidation at the same time, though, and Catholic schools in the Iowa dioceses seem to have begun geographical consolidation later than urban public schools did. Congregations maintained control over their schools for a period of time, but as population density increased, bishops created diocesan-level school boards. In the
Dubuque Archdiocese, this began in 1922. The strengthening of the male Church leadership through increasing numbers of priests led to congregations needing to be more responsive to local pastors and bishops than their official Church status might have originally required or than their earlier practices demonstrated. There were more men in the diocesan hierarchy who were physically closer and present more often as the female-led congregations made decisions about their schools.

Ultimately, diocesan and local and state governance became more complex as population increased, and congregations needed to respond to different kinds of accountability expected of their teachers and schools. The Catholic bishops determined that this accountability and the quality of Catholic schools were best monitored through diocesan-level school districts. Was this process of centralization similar to what happened in the public schools? Because of the vows of obedience, a Catholic bishop could simply appoint a superintendent and the system would be created. Geographically contiguous Catholic school systems may have emerged somewhat differently in the public schools.

Although the bishop held the power to organize and name the school district, there were many teachers and administrators with years of professional and personal experience in differently organized Catholic school systems. They may have offered their obedience, but it is possible that the opposition to which Driscoll referred meant that the teachers and administrators responded negatively to the changes that were occurring in ways other than through outward protest. Further research could examine this transition in Catholic schools to geographically centralized school systems in comparison
with the transition in public schools in order to provide a more complete understanding of how teachers responded to school centralization in the U.S.

Catholic schools, like public schools, also sought legitimization through state processes. Historian Ann Marie Ryan states, “Catholic religious orders and congregations, along with the church hierarchy, developed schools that provided individuals the resources to facilitate their social mobility and meet the larger groups’ goal of moving Catholics into professional and influential positions in the broader society.” In 1916 Illinois passed a law requiring students entering higher education for dentistry, medicine, and teaching to have graduated from an accredited high school. Laws such as this one meant that students attending Catholic schools could not participate in these professions if Catholic schools did not go through state accreditation processes. In order to receive accreditation for their schools, they needed to follow the policies drawn up by the states where the schools were located. For the BVM schools spread across several states, this would have become more and more complicated. Creating a single, cohesive school system from geographically distant peripheral schools was one thing. Adjusting curricula and meeting standards in each state where the BVMs opened schools required a different sort of effort. Being able to collaborate with other Catholic schools within the same states and communities would have allowed the BVM administrators to balance their efforts. Perhaps the benefits of consolidation outweighed the constraints, and BVM teachers and administrators had a more balanced response to the centralization process than straightforward opposition. The response of Catholic U.S.

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teachers to Catholic school centralization can only be made clearer, however, through further research.

The possibilities for future research in Catholic education seem innumerable. As I completed my research for this project, though, I began to wonder specifically about more complex connections between Catholic and public education. I had recognized particular relationships between public and private schools that resulted in location and dispersion patterns of schools. Is it possible historically that the presence of Catholic schooling in the West directly or indirectly affected the sort or quality of education offered in the public schools? Further research might explore whether the model of Catholic education in the nineteenth-century West was stable and pervasive enough that it impacted the nature of public schooling even as centralization set in.

My curiosity about this question resulted from another case in the history of Dubuque schools. By World War I, more Dubuque students attended religious schools than public schools. The fact that three teaching congregations of Catholic sisters located motherhouses in the city might have contributed to the high numbers of students in Catholic schools, as these three congregations provided plenty of teachers and their efforts established an unusually high number of Catholic schools. The women taught for very low compensation, so the schools remained relatively accessible to pay and free students alike into the latter half of the twentieth century. As time progressed this large number of schools and teachers might have affected public education in the city, as well. Many of the graduates from those Catholic schools, for example, became teachers in the

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public schools, and many school board officials and other administrators in the public schools attended Catholic churches.

By the late 1960s, there were so many students in the Catholic school system that an unusual agreement developed between the diocesan school board and the Dubuque Community School District. As the tail end of the baby boom hit junior high school, both Catholic and public school systems struggled to meet the increases in enrollment. Although a complete rationale is not included in published minutes of the school board, during the 1969–1970 school years, the Dubuque District Board minutes announced the approval of a two-year lease for a junior high school. The public school system leased the building and equipment of a former Catholic high school for two years at the cost of $66,000 per year. Although the public school system leased the building for a public junior high school, all of the students attending the Washington Junior High annex during those two years were officially students from Holy Ghost, St. Anthony’s, and Nativity Catholic schools. In fact, all students who ever attended the public school were concurrently enrolled in Catholic schools. These students wore uniforms and went to weekly mass. During half of the day at their Catholic schools, they took literature, social studies, religion, language arts, and physical education. They rode public school buses to the public school building for the other half of the day, where they took math, science, art, music, technical, and domestic arts. The school board eventually changed the Washington Junior High School annex’s name to Jones Junior High School, and at its peak, all seventh and eighth students from eight Catholic schools attended classes for half of each day there. Jones closed after the 2004–05 school year as a result of the

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consolidation and closing of several Catholic schools in Dubuque and the building of Mazzuchelli Middle School, a separate Catholic middle school.

At the time of the opening of the Washington annex, the public school system’s infrastructure had developed in concert with the large enrollments in the Catholic schools and was not equipped to handle an enrollment influx that could follow an exodus from the Catholic system. The local tax base supporting Dubuque’s public schools did not differ dramatically from that in any other community of its size, but because of relatively low enrollments due to the success of the Catholic schools, the per pupil expenditure may have been relatively higher in the public school system. Perhaps not wanting to upset this delicate balance, the two systems agreed to open the Washington annex with state-of-the-art instructional accommodations. It would be a public school, staffed with teachers paid through the public school system, yet the only students attending the school were Catholic school students.

This situation in Dubuque reflected an unusual relationship between Catholic and public schools even in the Midwest, but implications of it may relate to other communities as well. The long history of solid, “equalish” education for pay and free students existed in the Catholic school systems by the time public schools established themselves in the West, and families were willing to invest in or to commit to Catholic education because of its reputation for high quality and their desire to have their children practice Catholicism at school. Education for all was not a new idea, although in this case all students were welcome only if they were willing to attend mass and perform

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16 I do not wish to suggest that there were no racial or ethnic inequalities in these schools. Instead I am asserting that Catholic schools in the West were perhaps “as equal” as public schools when they came to fruition.
other external Catholic rituals. It is quite clear that the nature of Catholic education in Dubuque impacted the enrollments in public schools and the decisions that public school administrators and school board members made. Reducing the history of education in Dubuque to that of public education would cause us to miss this integration of the public and Catholic systems. I propose that the same is true of U.S. education overall.

There are at least two general reasons to examine more carefully the nature and role of Catholic education as an essential piece of U.S. education in the nineteenth century. First, considering the availability of education for all children, studying Catholic education provides the opportunity to understand the educational experiences of a significant percentage of U.S. girls as well as many boys. Second, studying Catholic education turns the focus to smaller regions, and learning what happened in specific locations or throughout certain geographic regions reminds us to consider the specific before we make generalizations. Although at the national level many more U.S. children attended public schools than Catholic schools in this period, a significant minority of the U.S. population did attend Catholic schools and that education played especially significant roles in particular regions or locations. These U.S. students shaped their understanding of education in general on their experiences in Catholic schools. 

Catharine Beecher realized that the West housed a specific cause for concern for public schools and the fate of U.S. children in the West. She was concerned because some U.S. children there were learning Catholic values in addition to more standard subjects.

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17 For example, in 1867 in Dubuque, Iowa, there were 2966 students enrolled in public schools and 400 students in Catholic schools. Average daily attendance in an 1857 survey of public schools fell well below enrollment, though. There were 2035 students with 1049 actually attending on average. Data come from Wilke, *Dubuque on the Mississippi, 1788-1988*, 188. There was certainly a majority of students attending public schools, but the impact of Catholic education in the area appears to have had a greater impact than minority status by numbers might suggest.
because Catholic schools were prevalent, well staffed, and relatively well funded. According to Beecher, in these western communities Catholic schools taught more girls than public schools did. This meant that Catholic schooling actually held fairly high status in these areas of the United States.

Understanding the experiences of significant minority populations leads to a more complete understanding of the entire social scene. The BVM congregation created a school system in the nineteenth century that differed dramatically from the local public schools. The congregation sent teachers socialized in BVM spirituality and teaching philosophy from the motherhouse to the peripheral schools. Although Phebe Sudlow’s accomplishments in Davenport, Iowa, as the first recognized female U.S. public school principal (1860) and superintendent (1874) are remarkable because she was operating in a male-dominated system, she was not the first woman to hold those roles in U.S. schools. The BVM administrators were all female and even though they did not work in the male-led public school system, they held their positions and performed the same duties as public school administrators and were working within a male-led hierarchy. Catholic schools in the United States had only female administrators in every position well before the BVM congregation appointed their first female administrators in their Iowa schools in 1843. These female administrators and the teachers they oversaw lived, prayed, and worked together, and as a congregation they built a strong, dispersed educational system that served many U.S. students.


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