



History in the Making: Mary MacKillop Place

An 1880's map of St Leonards by Higginbotham and Robinson identifies the future site for the first novitiate in Sydney (the original was in Adelaide, South Australia) for the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Alma Lane, North Sydney.

St Leonards, later known as North Sydney, has a complex and rich history in the founding of the early Catholic community, which underpins the story of the arrival of the Sisters of Saint Joseph to Mount Street in 1884.

The Sisters of Mercy, Loreto Sisters and the Marist Brothers, Jesuits and The Grail all served the community's educational and social needs at the time of the arrival of the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

On 19 March 1884 the formal opening of the novitiate for the Sisters of Saint Joseph in Sydney was celebrated.



Holtermann Collection
View from "The Towers" at Sydney Grammar School looking across to Alma Cottage fronting Alma Lane.

The establishment of the new novitiate in the unassuming two storey stone cottage, originally built in 1855, was due to the generosity of Dean John Kenny a seminary companion of Alexander MacKillop, Mary MacKillop's father. The two men met during their stay in Rome.

Dean John Kenny's parish work (1867-78) included St Leonards where he was responsible for the building of the first stone Catholic church, St Mary's Church, Ridge Street, North Sydney, which was opened in 1868.

The history of Mary MacKillop Place begins with the purchase of this cottage (now known as Alma Cottage) by Dean Kenny from John Whitton, a Chief Civil Engineer, in August 1867. John Whitton oversaw the massive expansion of the railways across the state from 1856 to 1890. Records indicate that Dean Kenny resided in this cottage from the mid-1870s onwards.

It was during this time that the Marist Brothers opened in 1888 St Mary's School (next to St Mary's Church), which would be later staffed by the Sisters of Saint Joseph in the early 1900s. The Sisters produced a network of practice schools for young novices including the Ridge Street School which became known as the 'Practice and Demonstration' School.

After Dean Kenny's death his legacy of bequeathed property to the Sisters of Saint Joseph secured the Mount Street location as a significant site for pilgrims to this day.

The Land and Property Management Authority produced an informative booklet in 2010, the year of Mary MacKillop's Canonisation, entitled '*Mary MacKillop (1842-1909) Records of a Saint.*' This booklet details the 'Old System deeds' and shows how the Order gradually acquired land over time, including the purchase of land from the trustees of Reverend John Kenny who in 1887 sold Number 2 Alma Terrace for 1,000 pounds.

In April 1890 the Congregation purchased Number 1 Alma Terrace. The original deeds include those personally signed by Mary MacKillop and were held in trust for a 'Convent or Residence for the Sisters of the Religious Community of Women known as the Sisters of Saint Joseph of the Sacred Heart at Mount Street North Sydney.'

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During the decade that followed the original cottage was remodelled to provide further additional accommodation on the upper floor for novices and trainee professed teachers. Aged and infirm Sisters were accommodated on the ground floor of the cottage, including Mary MacKillop.

The cottage also contained Dean Kenny's Chapel which used by the Sisters for daily Mass. This same room was later made into an office to produce "The Garland" from 1906. This was a booklet for public circulation. "The Garland" editions, spanning eighty-six years, are a revealing record of the many student teachers in training that studied in these buildings and Congregational events that form a historical account of the growth of the site.

This two storey cottage with neighboring paddocks and an orchard provided 'peace and quiet in the midst of a good-sized garden' as referred to in Mary MacKillop's correspondence of the day. An 1875 photograph in the Holtermann Collection at the State Library of NSW identifies the two storey cottage and the adjacent weatherboard building, the garden, paddocks and outhouses which included a kitchen.

It is clear from her correspondence that Mary found solace at this location in the final stages of her life. Mary died in the cottage on 8 August 1909. Sr Campion Roche recalled in later years the day that she visited the convent which was the day of Mary's death. Sr Campion recalled that Mary MacKillop died in the "main room on the ground floor with the fireplace." Mary's bed was where her desk is today.

In the final years of Mary's life, the site was developed in 1900 with the building of the Free School fronting Mount Street. This was a Practice School for trainee teachers known as St Joseph's Training School formally established in 1913. A foundation plaque is still visible on Mount Street. A second plaque was added to commemorate the Centenary in 2000.

It was Mary MacKillop who insisted on the importance of teacher training from the beginning. The primary aim of Mary MacKillop's system was, and remained always, education in the faith. An early recognition by the Sisters of Saint Joseph that an education in religious knowledge would not alone suffice produced a balanced education in secular knowledge that would enable them to serve the Church in Australia.

Mary MacKillop's guiding principle was 'we are religious first and teachers second.' She understood the responsibility to nurture a child's mind and upheld the principle that education was a child's right and that all children were to be treated equally.

Eventually St Joseph's Training School became the Catholic Teachers College in 1957. Originally it was Abbotsleigh Girls' School which consisted of four terraces and purchased by the Sisters in 1914 to be used as a Novitiate until 1956.

This period was pivotal in the administration of teacher training, due to the impact upon the training of teachers by the Sisters of Saint Joseph. The introduction of the Diocesan Scheme to train lay teachers for expanding the Catholic school system was initiated a year later in 1958. This was to be the precursor of the establishment of the Australian Catholic University which opened in 1991.

Another significant building that graces the site is the Mary MacKillop Memorial Chapel. It is a Victorian Gothic style building, in which the first Mass was celebrated on 8 December 1913. It was officially opened on 18 January 1914 by the Archbishop of Sydney Michael Kelly.

This memorial to the life of Mary MacKillop includes her final resting place. The Catholic Press, quoting the Archbishop's words, described the event as a 'typically Australian inauguration.' "Mother Mary of the Cross had been inspired by God. Her work flourished in New South Wales... Mother Mary was the greatest benefactress of



Australia, and the Sisters are doing well to erect a memorial to her,” he said, “and all were privileged in being able to take part in it.”

Mary’s successor, Mother Baptista Molloy who was elected at the 1910 General Chapter, was responsible for initiating the building of a new Chapel for the 50th Anniversary of the Congregation in 1916, and in honour of their Foundress.

Designed by Sydney Architects Eaton and Bates, the Chapel was built by a local builder Mr Charles Schultz. The block plan and specifications were submitted by the builder to North Sydney Council in December 1912. Large enough to accommodate five hundred people the new Chapel would fulfil a lifelong wish of Mary MacKillop: a space for all Sisters of Saint Joseph to worship together. The land on the high side of Mount Street adjacent to the convent was donated by the Daly family for the Chapel.

Mary MacKillop Place, initiated in 1995 as a place of pilgrimage for national and international visitors, was designed and developed with buildings named after key supporters in Mary MacKillop’s life. These include: the Lochaber Centre for multipurpose small conferencing use, Anderledy Lodge for pilgrim accommodation and onsite accommodation for Sisters. These cottages for Sisters are named after two of Mary MacKillop’s most supportive friends Mrs Johanna Barr-Smith and Mr Emanuel Solomon.

A chapter in the history of Mary MacKillop Place is unfolding for the 2020 decade. The site will witness the building of a new facility for accommodation in a four-storey building and new adjacent green space. The accommodation had its in legacy in the previously existing Anderledy Lodge which was built in 1930 as an infirmary for aged and frail Sisters who required nursing care. This major redevelopment will mark another significant milestone in the evolution of the site as a place of hospitality for an increasing number of pilgrims and guests. This will pay tribute to Mary MacKillop’s original intent to offer a place of welcome and rest for all who visit.

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