A SAINT WITHIN OUR MIDST...

We dedicate this entire issue to Mother Cabrini, the first (naturalized) US citizen to be canonized a Saint by the Roman Catholic Church; foundress of the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Despite tremendous odds, she established 67 institutions which served the impoverished immigrant community. An integral part of the history of Dobbs Ferry, she walked the streets of our village and founded an orphanage here in 1914.

Mother Cabrini (top row, second from left, with hand on book) “and the first Sisters that arrived in the United States 125 years ago, in 1889.”

DOBBS FERRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY TO RECEIVE CABRINI OF WESTCHESTER’S CENTENNIAL AWARD

By Judith Doolin Spikes

The name of Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini is well known in Dobbs Ferry—and world-wide—for the 67 charitable institutions she founded during her lifetime (1850-1917), and for the fact that she was the first and only (naturalized) American citizen elevated to sainthood (1946). Less well known are the circumstances that led her to purchase a large property in Dobbs Ferry in 1913-14, just three years before her death, and to establish thereon a convent and the Sacred Heart Villa—an orphanage first, later a boarding school, and now the site of the St. Cabrini Nursing Home.

In celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Cabrini presence in Dobbs Ferry and the 125th anniversary of Mother Cabrini in the United States, the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Board of Trustees and Administration of Cabrini of Westchester will hold their annual Liberty and Justice Awards Reception on
November 20 at Estherwood. The Dobbs Ferry Historical Society will receive Cabrini of Westchester’s Centennial Award.

“It is only natural that we reach out to the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society for maintaining and treasuring the rich history of Dobbs Ferry as we celebrate 100 years of history in the village,” said Lorraine Horgan, Vice President of External Affairs for Cabrini Eldercare. “For 100 years, we have served the evolving needs of the community. We were founded as an orphanage, and now we serve the needs of elders.”

The needs of immigrants are also at the heart of Mother Cabrini’s mission. This mission was institutionalized in 1999 with the opening of Cabrini Immigrant Services, which now occupies a storefront at 121 Main Street where immigrants may receive free instruction in English, literacy, preparation for the citizenship exam, legal information, and more. Mother Cabrini is known as “the Saint of Immigrants,” and thus it is also only natural that the annual Liberty and Justice Awards Reception and fundraiser benefits Cabrini Immigrant Services.

For more information on the Liberty and Justice Awards Reception, call 914-693-6800 x502.

Life of Mother Cabrini
Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini was known during her lifetime as Mother Cabrini and is still commonly referenced as such. She was born in Sant’ Angelo Lodigiano, Italy, in 1850, into a fervently religious peasant family in a time of religious and political revolution. It was the era of the Risorgimento, a pursuit of national unity that embraced secularist and revolutionary liberalism, anticlericalism, and repression of the influence of the Catholic Church and of religious education. The Italian Church fought back with—in the words of her biographer, Segundo Galilea—“a generation of zealous bishops and pastors, fervent and apostolic lay people.” Her early years were influenced by her parish priest and by associations of laymen who combined Catholic teaching with missionary and social services.

Deeply religious from childhood and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus, as a young adult she became a public school teacher until she entered religious life in 1874 and discovered her vocation as a missionary. In 1880, at the age of 30, she founded the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. From the beginning, the order maintained a convent with an adjacent school-orphanage, without resources except for gifts and donations.

Mother Cabrini came to the United States with the first contingent of her missionaries in 1889, on a ship carrying 1,500 Italian immigrants. She had her first experience of pastoral care of immigrants during the voyage, and upon arrival in New York she and her missionaries settled with them on the Lower East Side. And there she had her first experience of immigrant life. In Galilea’s words, “She was in another world, another culture, without contacts, not knowing how to proceed, not knowing the language”—and found herself homeless upon arrival. Cabrini had expected to occupy—as a convent, as an orphanage, and as a school—a large house donated by the Countess of Cesnola, but New York Archbishop Michael Corrigan disapproved because the house was
located “in an aristocratic section in upper Manhattan and too far from the Italian district” (Galilea).

The Scalibrini Fathers in Little Italy welcomed Mother Cabrini and her missionaries to the New World, but the Fathers “had no access to the world of those Americans who usually supported religious or charitable works,” Galilea writes. “Most of the Italians were poor; rich Italians did not help. There was no hope of help from the majority of the U.S. clergy who in that period were ill-favored toward Italian immigration.”

Mother Cabrini and her sisters found refuge in the convent of the Sisters of Charity while she negotiated with the Archbishop. Corrigan relented after the Countess begged him on her knees, and on Palm Sunday of 1890, an orphanage for Italian children—along with a convent for the sisters—was opened in the house on E. 59th Street donated by the Countess. Mother Cabrini and her teaching sisters commuted daily to the Lower East Side, where they taught the catechism and other subjects and became known for their charitable actions. Ultimately, they secured in Little Italy a house for their convent with a courtyard where they conducted religious instruction, prayer, and singing.

By June 1890, the uptown orphanage was caring for 400 children, an additional nine sisters had arrived from Italy, and Mother Cabrini had concluded that the New York mission was sufficiently established that she could return to Italy to discharge her responsibilities as Superior General of all the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart.

She returned to New York the following spring, to finalize the transfer to the Sisters of the Sacred Heart a retreat house owned by the Society of Jesus in West Park, on the Hudson River about 100 miles north of New York City. She decided that the large mansion surrounded by broad fields was ideal for an orphanage and for headquarters of the U.S. Novitiate of her order. For the rest of her missionary life, Mother Cabrini traveled constantly, founding schools and orphanages and other religious and charitable institutions, and then visiting and expanding her works, which eventually spread from Italy and the U.S. to Africa, Australia, Latin America, Spain, France, England, and the Philippines.

**Mother Cabrini in Dobbs Ferry**

It was Mother Cabrini’s custom to establish a school or orphanage in a city, and then
venture out into the surrounding suburbs or countryside seeking less expensive properties with more fresh air for the orders’ orphanages, schools, and hospitals. “She had a penchant for real estate,” says Robin Larkins, Director of Cabrini Immigrant Services.

Records of Mother Cabrini’s physical presence in Dobbs Ferry include pages from a diary kept by a Missionary Sister traveling with Mother Cabrini; deeds (1913 - 1914) that transferred to her and her order two adjacent sites on Broadway now united into one, the Cabrini of Westchester Nursing Home and its parking lots; and a photo (on page 3) showing Mother Cabrini (and many others) at the 1914 opening ceremony of the Sacred Heart Villa, standing before the entrance to the former Mackenzie School. It is likely, Larkins says, that Mother Cabrini first noticed these properties as she was traveling to the West Park novitiate from another of her establishments in New York City.

The approximately 12-acre Cabrini property embraces land that in the mid-19th century comprised two separate estates. There has been some confusion in secondary sources as to which estate is now the site of the Cabrini Nursing Home (and formerly, of the Villa of the Sacred Heart orphanage and school), and which is now the Nursing Home’s south parking lot.

Primary sources indicate that Mother Cabrini’s first purchase occurred in December 1913, and that this is the site upon which the Cabrini Nursing Home building was erected in 1973. This land was in 1865 T.H. Hardcastle’s estate, “Glentower.” In 1886, a 65-by-80-foot addition was erected facing Broadway; this structure housed the Westminster Classical School for Boys until 1891. The Reverend James Mackenzie subsequently operated the Mackenzie School there until Mother Cabrini purchased it in December 1913. In early 1914, the Sacred Heart Villa orphanage and school was inaugurated in the former “Glentower” / Mackenzie School building in a ceremony attended by Mother Cabrini (see photo page 3). (This is the building that was razed in 1973 to make way for the Nursing Home, officially opened in 1977 and expanded in 2009.)

According to a manuscript diary kept by a Missionary Sister who worked with her at this time, Mother Cabrini spent her first night in Dobbs Ferry on April 25, 1914. Up to that time, she had made occasional day visits and communicated daily by telephone from New York City to the four (and by March, nine) resident Sisters.
who were presiding over the conversion of the MacKenzie School into the Sacred Heart Villa orphanage and school. Over the next two years, Mother Cabrini made other overnight visits but seldom stayed for long, as she was also occupied at the time with several other Sacred Heart missions in New York City, up farther north along the Hudson River, and at other sites, including Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Seattle, Washington.

Behind the Nursing Home today is a charming stone structure overlooking the Hudson River that has often been mistaken for ruins of the “Glentower” estate. In fact, the structure was erected during Mother Cabrini’s tenure here. Paraphrasing a letter in Mother Cabrini’s own handwriting, Lorraine Horgan (Cabrini’s VP of External Affairs) and Susan Herceg (Development Coordinator), explain that a local parish priest was building a church for his congregation (believed to have been that of Our Lady of Pompei) and found himself with an excess 1,000 cartloads of quartz and granite stone, which he offered to Mother Cabrini. At the sight of the sparkling blue and white stone, she exclaimed, “It looks like a castle!” and she ordered that a large open terrace with rooms on either side be built with a castle-like appearance behind the Villa.

Also in 1914, Mother Cabrini acquired the second, adjacent estate, “Bonnieview,” which is now the Nursing Home’s south parking lot. The beautiful tower Victorian mansion (see photo below) was owned in 1860 by T. Foote, by William J. Syms in 1865, by Julius Nathan in the 1880s, and by Major Orlando Jay Smith (founder of the American Press Association) and his heirs from 1891 to 1914, at which time title passed to the Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart. “Bonnieview” and its lush gardens survived until at least 1930, when it appears on a Sanborn’s insurance map as a convent; it is possible that it survived until 1973 or even later.

“Bonnieview,” the former O.J. Smith mansion, after purchase by Mother Cabrini in 1914. According to the Cabrini Commemorative Journal of 2014, it served as the “Regina Coeli School and Novitiate” at sometime between its purchase in 1914 and its demolition sometime after 1930. Its site and grounds are now the south parking lot of the Nursing Home.

Cabrini of Westchester Nursing Home and Cabrini Immigrant Services

As the world has changed since 1917, so has the mission of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart evolved to meet changing needs. When the number of orphans declined, the Sisters turned their orphanages into charitable boarding schools; as
the population they served became more prosperous and more integrated into the larger society, boarding schools closed or became day schools—the trajectory followed in Dobbs Ferry by the establishment inaugurated by Mother Cabrini as an orphanage, which at some future date (as fewer parents died young and the number of orphans greatly declined) became first a boarding school and then a day school known as Sacred Heart Villa and Girls Academy.

During her lifetime, Mother Cabrini also founded hospitals and clinics to serve impoverished Italian immigrants who were not welcomed by other facilities; as the immigrants prospered and as governmental and other sources of social supports became widespread, such institutions were less essential. By the late 1960s, the growing numbers of the frail elderly moved the Sisters of the Sacred Heart to establish eldercare facilities. Such was the pattern in Dobbs Ferry, where in 1973 the Sacred Heart Villa Girls Academy was closed, its building razed, and a new building erected on the site—the St. Cabrini Nursing Home.

Twenty years later, new needs emerged. In 1999, Herceg said, the Missionary Sisters (based in Rome) directed all Cabrini institutions to “look outside their doors” to see what was needed in their communities. “What we found was a large, almost hidden immigrant population in the Rivertowns,” added Horgan. “Cabrini Immigrant Services was established that very year. Since then, said Larkins, individuals from 103 countries have benefited from CIS services, from one-to-one tutoring in English, to health care screening, referrals to assistance with naturalization and immigrant issues, and beyond.”

The storefront ministry has also partnered with other local organizations such as South Presbyterian Church, Larkins explained, to organize and support a Food Pantry, and with SPRING Community Partners, a mix of teachers and parents from the Springhurst Elementary School to begin a homework center at CIS. “Addressing the needs of immigrant children led us to more closely connect with the needs of the family—it creates the relationship through which
people trust us,” Larkins added. Like the Nursing Home, CIS serves people of all faiths and all ethnic and language groups.

Sources:

Interviews with:
Susan M. Herceg, Development Coordinator, Cabrini Eldercare (Sept. 23, 2014)
Lorraine Horgan, VP for External Affairs, Cabrini Eldercare (Sept. 23, 2014)
Robin Larkins, Director, Cabrini Immigrant Services, (Sept. 24, 2014)

Manuscript diary kept by Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart who travelled with Mother Cabrini in the last five years of her life; a copy of entries for years 1913-1914 is in the offices of Cabrini Immigrant Services. Orally translated to English by Antonietta Salvi for JDS; notes archived in the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society.

Map Collection in the archives of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society.

All photographs are from the Cabrini Commemorative Journal (April 24, 2014) and are reproduced courtesy of Cabrini of Westchester. Captions taken from the Journal are enclosed in quotation marks.
ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Dobbs Ferry Historical Society was held at the Mead House on September 18th.

Featured was an impressive presentation by local architect, Niall Cain, (shown on left) entitled “From Philipsburg to Dobbs Ferry: How Zoning Forms Our Communities.”

Cain noted that the village was formed from pieces of ten large estates, purchased by individuals when Philipsburg Manor was repossessed by New York State after the American Revolution. He traced some of the subsequent landowners and the ways in which they used covenants written into property titles as a means to impose restrictions on subsequent development of the property.

Using the development of the Villard Estate as an example of responsible real estate development that allowed for a range of housing options, he showed photos of sample houses from the Villard Hill development brochure and paired them with photos of the houses as they stand today. He discussed the Supreme Court decision in Euclid vs. Ambler that laid the foundation for the enactment of zoning codes.

Members elected the following people to three-year terms as trustees: Madeline Byrne, Jeanne Cronin, Teri Colao, Mary Donovan, Ellen Klein, and Robert Sanzo. At a subsequent meeting of the Trustees, Frank Farrington and Mary Donovan were chosen as co-presidents; Madeline Byrne and Robin Costello as co-vice presidents, Jonathan Donald as Secretary and Ellen Klein as Treasurer.