

Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare (To Praise, to Bless, to Preach):

Early work of the Dominican Sisters

This article is the second of twelve, one per month, celebrating the Bicentennial of Dominican Women in the United States. This series celebrates highlights of the history of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, whose history hails from Washington County, Kentucky.

The courageous women who first wore the Dominican habit encountered many challenges in their early years. Their schedule alone was quite demanding, waking at midnight to pray, then up at five each morning for prayer, meditation, Mass, more prayer and study, and the work of the day. The daily work of the Sisters included gathering firewood, tilling the land, making clothing from flax and wool, and doing the construction and repairs needed to convert the property's old stillhouse into their first school – and then they took classes from the Dominican Friars to prepare to become educators themselves!



Gratefully, the Sisters received special permission to change their hours for prayer to prevent sheer physical exhaustion from fulfilling their goals.

The Dominican Sisters lived in the one room convent at Bethany for about a year. At the death of their parents, the Sansbury sisters, Angela and Benvin, inherited 106 acres with three buildings, which of course became property of the Congregation. Their new home boasted

three rooms: the chapel, a kitchen with dining area, and a room for work and study, with a loft for sleeping. This land along Cartwright Creek, called Sienna Vale, is known as the cradle of Dominican Sisters in the U. S.

In August 1823, the Dominican Sisters opened St. Mary Magdalen Academy to fifteen young women. The students brought provisions intended to last for the entire school year, however, the Sisters needed to farm the land to continue to feed the students and themselves.

The academy was successful and grew. The Sisters also began teaching young boys before those twelve and older “graduated” to the St. Rose school run by the friars. But

as the number of students grew, the Sisters realized that they would need to build a new school building. This caused the Congregation to incur a substantial debt, which was disturbing to the Friars. The Friars considered dissolving the Congregation and selling its land assets to pay the debt, but Prioress Angela Sansbury would not hear of it. With the support of the community and much prayer and hard work, including making and selling soap, candles, and cloth, the Congregation was able to pay their debt.

In 1839, the Sisters incorporated as the Literary Society of St. Mary Magdalen. As the number of Dominican Sisters grew, they expanded their mission of education. The Dominican Sisters eventually opened more than 100 schools across the United States, Puerto Rico, and Vietnam.

