

# A Rough First Week of School for Lewiston's Dominican Sisters

[September 28, 2018](#) [Children](#), [Education](#), [Lewiston-Auburn](#), [Maine](#), [Religion](#)

By [James Myall](#)

In 1903, Father Alexandre-Louisi Mothon, the curé of the Dominican monastery in Lewiston, wrote to the community of Dominican Sisters of Nancy, in France, asking them to send some of their members to Maine to teach the Franco-American children of Lewiston.



*Dominican Block, Lewiston, 1883. The children assembled outside are students at the school located in the Block. Their teachers, the Sisters of Charity, can be seen standing at the windows. Their vows forbade them from being photographed. Image: USM Franco-American Collection/Maine Memory Network*

Initially, the children of the city's French Canadian immigrants were educated by lay members of the community. The city itself briefly established a public school headed by a graduate of the state run Madawaska Training School, which trained French speakers to teach Francophone kids. However, in 1878, Rev Hervé had invited the Sisters of Charity of St Hyacinthe, QC, to teach the community's youth.

But the Sisters of Charity were not a teaching order. They were replaced in 1891 by the Dames de Sion. But the Dames de Sion were not supposed to teach boys according to the rules of their order, and they, too, gave up the task of teaching in Lewiston's parochial schools, in 1903. Thus Father Mothon turned to the Dominican Sisters of France for help.

His request was well-timed. A new government in France had recently taken steps to [secularize the French education system](#), and reduce the status of religious orders in France. The opportunity to teach in Lewiston came just as the sisters found themselves marginalized by the French state. Nonetheless the French nuns were reluctant to take up

Father Mothon's offer. Establishing a new chapter across the Atlantic would be a big undertaking, and the Sisters had no experience as teachers. On the other hand, their situation in France was precarious, and the US at least offered a guarantee of religious freedom they couldn't find in Europe.

After repeated requests from Mothon and others, the Sisters sent a small delegation to Lewiston to learn more. Despite some misgivings, they accepted the assignment, and in the summer of 1904, twenty-eight Sisters came to Lewiston to begin work. Their experiences were recorded in the official history of the new convent, a translation of which is located at the [University of Southern Maine's Franco-American Collection](#).



*The First Dominican Sisters in Lewiston, 1905. Image: USM Franco-American Collection.*

From the start, these women had their work cut out for them. For one, the order struggled to recruit Sisters who could speak English well enough to teach in the parish schools. In addition to the French nuns, the group included Spanish, Swiss, German, English, and Irish women. They also recruited one bilingual sister who had been born in New Orleans, and arranged the "loan" of four Dominicans from the congregation of St Mary of the Springs in Ohio.

Then there was the fact that the French sisters had never taught before. Nine of the sisters came to the United States as an advance group in June, staying in Fall River, Massachusetts, where the Dominican Fathers oversaw another French Canadian parish, and operated three parochial schools. In Fall River the Sisters shadowed the nuns who were teaching there, and learned the basics of the American education system.

The rest of the Sisters crossed the Atlantic in July and August, and the entire group made their way to Lewiston by August 24. The Sisters moved into the convent recently vacated by the Dames de Sion, and the new arrivals had to contend with workmen and decorators fixing up the place as they tried to settle in. They also shared the residence with an infestation of fleas. The nuns took this mostly in stride, noting that these were the "true signs of poverty" and that [St Theresa of Ávila](#) had also famously been "tormented" by fleas as she reformed the Carmelite Order of nuns in the 16th century.

Nonetheless even nuns bound to a life of poverty found some of the sleeping quarters, or cells, to be "inadequately small." The convent had no kitchen garden, just two shady strips of land where, "weeds grew abundantly."

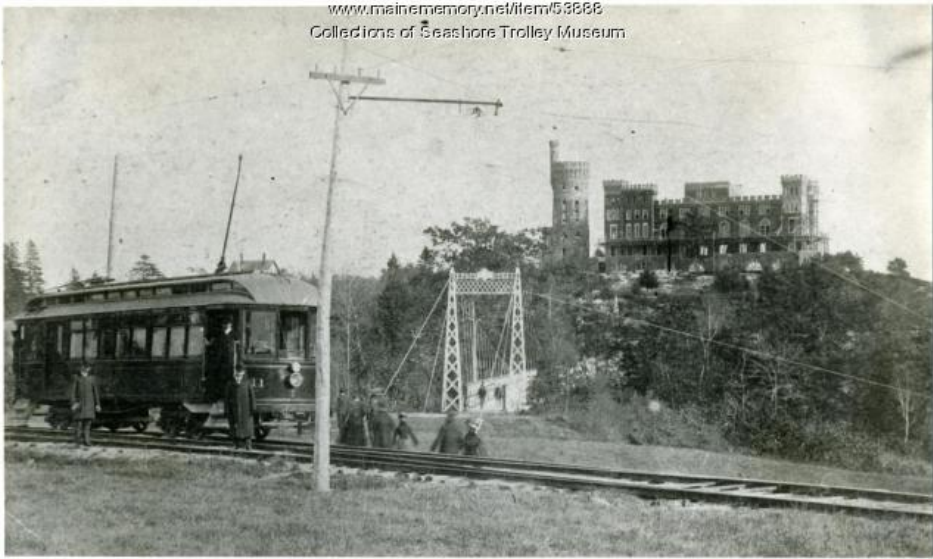
The schools, too, were in a poor state. The nuns spent some of their time "mending and covering books" in preparation for the start of the new term.



*The "Little Canada School" on Lincoln Street in Lewiston. This may well be the public school operated by the City of Lewiston for French-Speaking children in the 1880s. Image: USM Franco-American Collection / Maine Memory Network*

The outlook was not much improved once the Sisters met their prospective charges. The nuns were introduced to the Lewiston children in a special church service in late August. The youngsters were "badly behaved and idle," "yawning, stretching, pushing and laughing," throughout. Perhaps it was just high spirits during school vacation? It was, in any case "not too reassuring."

One last task before the start of the school year provided some relief for the harried Sisters. The Dominican Fathers' annual summer picnic had been delayed so that the Sisters could join the excursion. The clergy and women religious of the parish took nearly 200 children on a day trip to Casco Castle, the newly-opened "trolley park" in Freeport. The journey by electric trolley took 2 and a half hours but was apparently worth it. The amusement park included a wooden mock castle, a stone tower (which survives today), a zoo and access to the beach. The boys went swimming while the girls (who were not allowed to swim) played games with the sisters. The children had a picnic lunch of fruit, cake and ice cream, toured the zoo, and listened to concert by the parish children's band, before heading home. "An ideal day," the Sisters concluded.



*Casco Castle, Freeport, 1906. Image: Freeport Historical Society/Maine Memory Network.*

Soon enough though, it was back to the task at hand, and the Sisters were thrust headfirst into their first days of teaching. The hope that the disobedience of the children was just due to summertime high spirits was soon dispelled. The older boys "didn't listen to anything...made noise, stood on tables, defying the teacher. One of them said "you won't hit me?" The Sisters tried to take names and addresses of the troublemakers but many simply refused to give them. Everyone was dismissed after first period.

The second day of school was not much better. Father Knapp, the director of schools for the parish, gave the students a test to group them into classes. The answers displayed a great lack of knowledge. The sisters recorded a selection of answers from the first three grades:

*Where is Canada?*

— *A country in France*

*What is France?*

— *The capital of Canada*

*Who discovered America?*

— *Joan of Arc*

*Who was Christopher Columbus?*

— *The Governor of Maine*

*Who were Adam and Eve?*

— *We haven't reached that part yet.*

Father Knapp recommended frequent use of the "strap" to keep students in line. The French sisters were taken aback. Corporal punishment was common in American schools at the time, but unknown in France. In general, the experience of teaching was much harder than the sisters had anticipated, and not helped by the large class sizes – 80 children in each class. Still, when Father Mothon found Sister Marie Barthélemie crying in the middle of her classroom surrounded by unruly students, he remarked that he "thought they would have had more trouble than this."



Children at the "Academie St Dominique," Bates Street, Lewiston, 1908. Image: USM Franco-American Collection.

Gradually, the sisters restored discipline, with the assistance of Father Knapp, and his successor Father Laferrière (who had a telephone installed at the school so they could call on him for help when needed). They implemented a new curriculum, and made tweaks like a merit system for good behavior.

The progress was such that by Christmas 1905, the Sisters notes that the children in the upper grades could finally write their regular letters to their parents without having to copy the text from the blackboard. Behavior was much better, too. When the Prioress of the convent visited the school at the Dominican Block at the holidays, the children presented her with a "gold book" of their accomplishments. It listed prayers, rosaries and masses said; as well as homework well done and good marks received. One page listed "acts of virtue" the children were proud of:

*I didn't chew gum (11)*

*I was hit, and didn't hit back (12)*

*I didn't lie, all day (1)*

*I didn't stop in the street (32)*

*I didn't turn my back in class (135)*

A far cry from the raucous scenes of a year before.

The Dominican Sisters would continue to run Lewiston's parish schools for many decades, and as recently as this year, there was [still a teaching sister in the school](#)

[system](#). The remaining sisters of the order still live at their convent in Sabattus. From rough beginnings, the Sisters came to thrive in Lewiston, leaving their mark on thousands of local Franco-Americans over the years.