

“BY
UNEXPECTED
MEANS” —
The Founding
of St. Joseph
at St. Louis,
1863–1878

by
DANA
DELIBOVI

Today, in Ladue, Missouri,

seventeen Discalced Carmelite nuns devote their lives to prayer, in a beautiful, cloistered convent. This serene setting hides a difficult founding in the turbulent year of 1863. In the fall of that year, five nuns traveled to St. Louis from Baltimore to create a “Foundation” — the Carmel of St. Joseph. They came at the behest of the first Archbishop of St. Louis, Peter Kenrick, brother of the Archbishop of Baltimore, Francis Kenrick. Their Foundation was the first branch of Carmel in America, from which sprouted eleven other monasteries.¹

Archbishop Kenrick accompanies the Carmelites on arrival to St. Louis, painted in 1975 by Mother Virginia of the Carmel of St. Joseph. (Image: Dana Delibovi)

B & O Railroad advertisement from 1864 highlighting replacement and improvement of destruction wrought by Confederate attacks. (Image: Wikicommons)



Map created in 1860 showing train routes between Baltimore and the West. The sisters would most likely have taken the B & O from Baltimore to Parkersburg, West Virginia, then crossed the Ohio River to Cincinnati on the Marietta & Cincinnati Railroad, and finally onto the Ohio & Mississippi Railroad to St. Louis. Riverboat service was also available starting in the Wheeling or Parkersburg, West Virginia, termini of the B & O. (Image: Library of Congress)

52 ADVERTISEMENTS.

Baltimore & Ohio Railroad

RE-OPENED.



THIS GREAT NATIONAL THOROUGHFARE
IS AGAIN OPEN FOR
FREIGHTS & TRAVEL.

The Cars and Machinery destroyed are being replaced by
NEW RUNNING STOCK,
With all recent improvements; and as the
Bridges and Track are again in Substantial Condition,
The well-earned reputation of this Road for
SPEED, SECURITY and COMFORT
Will be more than sustained under the re-organization of its business.

In addition to the *Unequaled Attractions of Natural Scenery* heretofore conceded to this route, the recent *Troubles upon the Border* have associated numerous points on the Road, between the Ohio River and Harper's Ferry, with painful but instructive interest.

CONNECTIONS

At the Ohio River, with Cleveland and Pittsburg; Central Ohio, and Marietta and Cincinnati Railroads; and through them with the whole Railway System of the Northwest, Central West and Southwest.
At Baltimore with Five Daily Trains for Philadelphia and New York.

TWO DOLLARS ADDITIONAL ON THROUGH TICKETS
To Baltimore or the Northern Cities, give the
Privilege of Visiting **WASHINGTON CITY** en route

This is the **ONLY ROUTE** by which Passengers can procure *Through Tickets and Through Checks to or from WASHINGTON CITY.*

W. P. SMITH, Master of Transportation, Balt.

A MAP
OF THE
BALTIMORE & OHIO
RAILROAD
AND ITS
PRINCIPAL CONNECTING LINES
UNITING ALL PARTS
OF THE
EAST & WEST.

G 3701
1860
46
R 235

Baltimore: Lith. by A. H. Moore & Co.

Why did these nuns risk founding a monastic convent at such an inauspicious time and place?

These nuns made their mission at the height of the Civil War. They traveled on the Baltimore & Ohio (B & O) Railroad, a line often subject to Confederate attacks. They settled in St. Louis, a city still threatened by cholera outbreaks following the devastating epidemic of 1849, where anti-Catholic aggression still smoldered after its zenith in the mid-1850s. They endured fifteen years of hardship in their quarters at the Clay Mansion, on the grounds of today's Calvary Cemetery. The sisters tried farming and crafts to support themselves, rarely succeeding in these efforts. Despite the poor conditions, the Carmel of St. Joseph hung on, finally moving in 1878 to its first, true Carmel monastery in Soulard.²

Why did these nuns risk founding a monastic convent at such an inauspicious time and place? That question recurred in the research process for this article, articulated by Sister Constance Fitzgerald, archivist at the Carmelite Monastery of Baltimore, the cloister from which the sisters set forth in 1863. "The interesting thing in the archived materials on the foundation is that they say nothing about the Civil War," notes Sister Constance. "But why?"³

Why did the Civil War not worry, or not matter, to the Carmelites? Although this question has no definitive, single response, one practical reason appears to be the zeal of Peter Richard Kenrick, first Archbishop of St. Louis, and Mother Mary Gabriel Boland, first prioress of the St. Louis Carmel. Another

practical reason may have been conflict at the Baltimore monastery from which the Carmelite sisters hailed. In addition, the search for an answer elucidates three aspects of social and intellectual history.

First, it illuminates the role of religious women as workers in the relatively new, often troubled Archdiocese of St. Louis under the leadership of Peter Kenrick.

Second, it evokes the experience of life in the border states of the Civil War—Maryland and Missouri included. Of special note are implications for what has been termed the public "posture" of neutrality in the borderlands.⁴ It is certainly true that, when the issue is slavery, neutrality is immorality, but a neutral public stance was an expedient chosen by many, including Peter Kenrick. An aspect of this posture was a focus on church business as usual, which could include the founding of a convent in 1863.

Finally, the founding of the convent at such a difficult time and place shows how practical history synergizes with the intellectual history of the Carmelites, particularly the virtues of detachment from worldly concern and the spiritual determination extolled by the order's architect, St. Teresa of Ávila.

In the words of the prioress of the fledgling St. Louis Carmel, Mother Mary Gabriel, "We must only be patient & remember that this earth is not our home. When God wishes he will give us a Carmel by unexpected means."⁵

"I Want an Order to Pray for Priests"

Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick founded the Carmel in St. Louis in communication with his brother, the Archbishop of Baltimore, Francis Patrick Kenrick. Peter Kenrick became Archbishop in 1847, the initial year of the newly constituted and vast Archdiocese of St. Louis, which ranged from the Mississippi to the Missouri River plains. By 1863, he already presided over an area well populated with religious women, including several orders installed under his tenure.⁶ Yet, the Archdiocese lacked the presence of a contemplative order, which Kenrick wanted to remedy. As described in the archdiocesan record, "Our own Archbishop Kenrick, thorough man of the active life, yet at the same time, a lover of quiet meditation, is reported to have answered the query: Why introduce an Order that does nothing but pray: with the words: 'I have a number of Orders for the works of charity and education, but I want an Order that will pray forever for my priests.'"⁷

Although priests surely needed prayers in the early 1860s, it was not an ideal time to start a monastery in St. Louis. Anti-Catholic bigotry, a nationwide problem, had peaked in St. Louis in 1854 with rioting triggered by the nativist Know-Nothings. This group was hostile to immigrants from Ireland, Germany, and "Romanist" cultures, which the Know-Nothings believed defied the Protestant-American principles of individualism and private prayer. Among the

Of course, these difficulties were compounded by the looming war.

mischief wrought in the 1850s by nativists was a threat to the Old Cathedral by the riverfront, thwarted by an Irish-Catholic immigrant.⁸

Cholera remained a scourge in the Mississippi Basin following the disastrous St. Louis epidemic of 1849, reported to have killed 145 victims per day during June and July alone. Conditions in St. Louis did not change after 1849, and the city remained what Father Pierre-Jean De Smet called a “natural ‘slop-bowl’,” around which “you find breweries, distilleries, oil and white lead factories, flour mills and many private residences of Irish and Germans—into this pond goes everything foul—this settles the opinion as to the real cause of all the dreadful mortality here.” Outbreaks continued to plague the city until the start of the twentieth century, including another major epidemic in 1866. Cholera strained the resources of the clergy, who were already pushed to the limit by the hemorrhaging finances of the Archdiocese, which Peter Kenrick could not staunch until around 1869.⁹

Of course, these difficulties were compounded by the looming war. The Archdiocese was forced to adjust the war’s affect on projects and communications. Diocesan plans for a regional synod in 1860 were scrapped out of concern for the “unfavorable atmosphere” of pre-war Missouri and other border states, where division existed between pro-slavery secessionists and anti-slavery unionists. Communication between St. Louis and other states

grew more arduous. Sectarian violence, and eventually battles of war, erupted in the Archdiocese, which at that time still contained all of skirmishing Missouri and Kansas. Peter Kenrick, like his brother Francis in border-state Maryland, refused to take sides in the war, although his ownership of several slaves belied his public neutrality.¹⁰

Despite the circumstances, Peter Kenrick maintained a strong will to bring the Carmelites to St. Louis as soon as possible. He corresponded with his brother in 1860 or 1861 to discuss the St. Louis Foundation.¹¹ But Kenrick’s was not the only formidable will involved. Mother Mary Gabriel Boland, prioress of Baltimore’s Carmel, championed the mission with a zeal to match the St. Louis Archbishop’s.

Mary Gabriel of the Immaculate Conception was born Ella Boland in Virginia in 1834. In 1863, she was only 29 years old, but she had been serving as the prioress of the Baltimore Carmel since her election to a three-year term in 1861. This testifies to the drive that propelled her to St. Louis and enabled her to steer the Foundation cheerfully despite years of infectious illness in this “slop-bowl” city. During her time in St. Louis, Mother Gabriel suffered from tuberculosis, which was complicated by malaria, bouts of cholera, and probably mercury poisoning from the drug calomel, a nineteenth-century panacea that she took for years. Her letters, however, even at life’s end, remain hopeful, sometimes ebullient. Three weeks before dying, Mother Gabriel wrote to

her brother John: “Our dear Lord is so good. He comes every day, & your lovely flowers are on the altar. . . . Be of good heart—God can raise me up.” According to Mother Mary Joseph Freund, current prioress of the St. Louis Carmel in Ladue, a convent anecdote backs up Mother Gabriel’s spirited character: “Mother Gabriel would say that, when she was a girl, she prepared for life as a Carmelite by going to dances all the time.”¹²

Then and now, electing a Carmelite prioress under age thirty was a curiosity, requiring special dispensation. Sr. Constance Fitzgerald notes, “Mother Gabriel was elected prioress in 1861 with only ten years in the convent. . . . I have to stress that this is very unusual.” This election came after several years of leadership instability in the Baltimore Carmel, which followed the closing of a convent school and the controversial, forced resignation in 1858 of a beloved prioress, Mother Teresa Sewall.¹³

These events, along with others in the archival records, suggest that discord as well as devotion may have inspired the founding of the new Carmel in St. Louis.¹⁴ Although the idea of mission motivated Mother Gabriel and her four companions, so did the need to resolve tension. A historical analysis prepared by the Baltimore Carmel states that “a sad peculiarity of this foundation, made during the Civil War, was that a period of community conflict and unrest was resolved when the five foundresses, led by Mother

The Carmelites Leave for St. Louis

On the Feast of St. Michael 29th September, 1863. Five Sisters left this Convent of Mount Carmel Baltimore, for a Foundation given by the Most Rev. Arch Bishop Kenrick of St. Louis. —

For the new Convent of St. Joseph, near St. Louis, we gave the following members. Rev Mother Gabriel, (alias Ella Boland), Mother Alberta, Mary Jane Smith, Sr. Bernard Elizabeth Dorsey, Sr. Agnes - Jane Edwards. — Sister Catherine (our sister) Mary Kearney. Our Community gave them \$3000, with a liberal supply of clothing. This was more than they could well afford, or was thought necessary when the Foundation bodes so promising — but they wished to strengthen all they could this first branch of our Order in America.

This Foundation took place during the time that Rev. H. B. Coskery was Administrator of our Diocese.

"On the Feast of St. Michael 29th September 1863. Five Sisters left this Convent of Mount Carmel Baltimore, for a Foundation given by the Most Rev. Arch Bishop Kenrick of St. Louis — For the new Convent of St. Joseph, near St. Louis. We gave the following members, Rev. Mother Gabriel (alias Ella Boland), Mother Alberta Mary Jane Smith, Sr. Bernard Elizabeth Dorsey, Sr. Agnes Jane Edwards — Sister Catherine, our sister Mary Kearney. Our Community gave them \$3000, with a liberal supply of clothing. This was more than they could well afford, or was thought necessary, when the Foundation bodes so promising — but they wished to strengthen as they could this first branch of our Order in America. The Foundation took place during the time that Rev. H. B. Coskery was Administrator of our Diocese." (Image: Sr. Constance Fitzgerald)

Gabriel . . . departed Baltimore.”¹⁵ A good deal of circumstantial evidence exists for this, plus two valuable supporting documents.

The first of these is the written record from sisters’ departure day, September 29, 1863 (see the sidebar, *The Carmelites Leave for St. Louis*). In the record, resentment is palpable. Money and supplies were given grudgingly to the sisters, not for their welfare, but the greater good of strengthening the St. Louis Foundation.¹⁶

The second is a letter, dated October 19, 1861, from Francis Kenrick to his brother, regarding Peter’s request for a Carmelite Foundation. Francis wrote: “As to the Carmelites [women], I do not wish to bar them, though I hardly dare praise them where they do not agree in their plans and aims. As to the rest, they are generally fervent [religious], and serve God sincerely. In the present state of things it is hardly practical to think of introducing new institutes into a diocese.”¹⁷ With this letter, Francis Kenrick tapped the brakes on a Carmelite convent in St. Louis. He warned his brother of the disagreement among the Carmelite sisters, withholding his recommendation from those involved. He stressed the impracticality of a St. Louis Foundation given the “present state of things” in 1861, which most likely alludes to both the Civil War and the conflict among the Carmelite sisters.

But Francis Kenrick’s voice of caution would soon be silenced. He died during the night of July 6, 1863. Within three months from that date, a determined Mother Gabriel would write to Archbishop Peter Kenrick, obtain his invitation to create a Foundation in St. Louis, get the approval of Baltimore’s

diocesan administrator, Father H.B. Coskery, and board a westbound train with four other sisters to start the Carmel of St. Joseph.¹⁸ Mother Gabriel would have her will, and Peter Kenrick would have his contemplative order.

“From How Many Dangers He Saved Us”

The sisters who journeyed to St. Louis were diverse in age but universally unaccustomed to worldly risks. In addition to Mother Gabriel were three Carmelites: Sr. Mary Alberta of St. Alexis (1829–1879), who was so sheltered even before taking her vows that she “appeared to know absolutely nothing” about the wider world; Sr. Mary Bernardine of St. Teresa (1835–1907); and Sr. Agnes of the Immaculate Conception (1814–1883), a Philadelphian, with “all the proverbial characteristics . . . all that steady reserve of manner” of the city’s scions. Also along on the mission was Sr. Mary Catherine of the Sacred Heart (1820–1916), a non-cloistered “out-sister” who could leave the convent enclosure to attend to the material needs of the other sisters. Accompanying the sisters was the chaplain of the Baltimore Carmel, Father J. Dougherty.¹⁹

After departing on September 29, it took two days for the sisters to travel from Baltimore to St. Louis, arriving on October 1, 1863. “There is no diary of their trip,” says Mary Ann Aubin, archivist of the Carmel of St. Joseph and librarian of the Kenrick-Glennon seminary in St. Louis. “They took the B & O railroad part of the way, but whether they crossed the Mississippi by rail or by ferry is uncertain.” In 1863, a likely route from St. Louis would be to take the B & O from Baltimore to

Parkersburg, West Virginia, and switch there for a patchwork of trains to Cincinnati and onward to St. Louis.²⁰

Taking the B & O during the Civil War was dangerous, though the owner of the B & O, John W. Garrett, tempered the risk as much as possible. A hybrid of Southern Democrat and Unionist and a practical border-state businessman, Garrett kept his political opinions to himself and maintained a laser-like focus on protecting his railroad. Nevertheless, the Confederacy or its guerrillas attacked, damaged, and looted the B & O frequently throughout the war. “The rupture of the B & O railroad . . . would be worth to us an army,” General Robert E. Lee said. In 1861, Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson and his troops began marauding on the B & O in Maryland; later in the war, Confederate regular and guerrilla attacks continued, including attacks on passenger trains. The year 1863 saw several major raids on the B & O, including a springtime raid conducted by Confederate commanders William “Grumble” Jones and John Imboden.²¹

Violent activity targeting the railroads was well known, the subject of sensationalized accounts in some of the Northern press as well as more temperate coverage in the *New York Times*. Attacks were such common knowledge that the B & O ran advertising trumpeting the replacement of “Cars and Machinery destroyed” on the line. “Living in 1863,” suggests archivist Mary Ann Aubin, “the nuns, being cloistered, didn’t know all that was occurring outside. But they did have a priest [Father Dougherty] accompany them from Baltimore to St. Louis. You’d think he would have known more of what



The Colonel Henry Clay Mansion at Old Orchard Farm, 5239 West Florissant Avenue, St. Louis, was the summer house of Archbishop Peter Kenrick and the first home (1863-1878) of the Carmel of St. Joseph. The mansion was built in 1836 (demolition date not published). (Image: Library of Congress)

was going on.”²² Despite this known risk, the five sisters went ahead with their travel to St. Louis. A quarter of a century later, Mother Gabriel would write to her brother in hindsight: “As you journey along, you can think of our journey through life—how we ‘pass by’ everything, sorrows and joys, darkness and light. And of the happy meeting that will be when our good Father, God, welcomes us home. I used to think that way as we traveled out West. . . . From how many dangers He saved us, and guided us to the right way.”²³

“The Bull is Very Troublesome”

Upon their October 1 arrival, Archbishop Peter Kenrick personally escorted the travelers to their first convent home: Kenrick’s summer house at Old Orchard Farm.²⁴ This house was the former Colonel Henry Clay

Mansion, located on the current grounds of the continually expanding Calvary Cemetery. Kenrick’s administration had purchased its original 323 acres to address the shortage of graves produced by the 1849 cholera epidemic.²⁵

The sisters got down to business right away. On the morning of October 2, Archbishop Kenrick celebrated mass in the convent. On October 5, the sisters held elections. Everyone got a job: Mother Gabriel was elected prioress, and other Carmelites were elected clavaries.²⁶ But these glowing reports of the convent’s first week were soon replaced with reports of hardship.

No letters or diaries from the Carmel of St. Joseph in St. Louis are extant before 1874. According to Baltimore archivist Sr. Constance Fitzgerald, “Lack of letters and annals is typical for first years of a foundation,

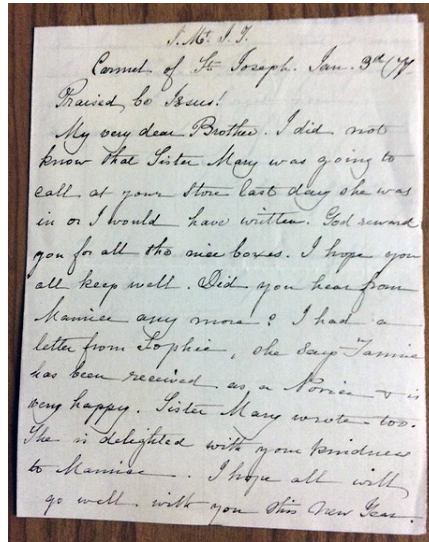
persisting up to ten years. Early on, there is no plan for creating an archive.”²⁷ Fortunately, church historians William Currier (1890) and John Rothensteiner (1928) gathered Archdiocesan and personal records to paint a picture of life in the new monastery at St. Louis.

The sisters endured, in Currier’s words, many “privations and sufferings.” Winter 1863–1864 was bitterly cold in St. Louis; nuns from temperate Baltimore were not prepared for this, and one had a “frozen nose” (probably, frostbite). They “succeeded badly” in their efforts at self-support, which included agriculture, sewing, and making artificial flowers. A poem written by one of the sisters—who is not identified in the record—invokes God to heal her heart’s losses: “Here bereft of all it cherished/Thou its every wound wilt cure.” The best that could be said was that none of the sisters died in these early years.²⁸

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Calvary Cemetery.”



Letter from Mother Mary Gabriel Boland to her brother, John, January 3, 1877, including thanks, some family news, and a mention of a visit to John's store by Sr. Mary (most likely non-Carmelite out-sister Mary Catherine, who could leave the cloister to do errands).

(Image: Archives of the Carmel of St. Joseph, St. Louis, Missouri)

Isolation vexed the convent. People living in the vicinity of the Clay Mansion could attend mass relatively nearby, at the residence of the convent's chaplain. But the area was sparsely populated, and “very few persons seemed to care to make the acquaintance of the poor praying women who lived out beyond Calvary Cemetery.” Some may have questioned the utility of an order devoted to prayer.²⁹

It might seem counterintuitive that isolation would trouble a convent cloistered from the outside world, but today's prioress at Ladue, Mother Mary Joseph, insists that isolation is detrimental to any monastery. “The isolation of the Carmel for its first fifteen years,” she notes, “had to be difficult. Too much isolation from the larger community isn't ideal for a cloistered order. Monastery and community—it works both ways. We need to know who we pray for, and when people in the community see our monastery or hear our bell, they are lifted to God. There is a practical aspect, too. When a monastery is part of the community, people help us with donations.”³⁰

Much of the material in Currier and Rothensteiner is anecdotal,

relying on a body of lore about the St. Louis Carmel handed down through the years.³¹ That is why the preserved letters of Mother Gabriel, written mainly to her Missouri-dwelling brother, John Boland, from 1874 until her death in 1893, are such an important historical trove. These letters document two persistent problems at the Carmel in its founding years: self-support, by work or by charity, and the threat of disease. But the letters also show Mother Gabriel's commitment to persevere despite worldly problems, illuminating her faith and character.

Mother Gabriel wrote of struggles with agriculture at Old Orchard Farm. She made no specific mention of help. Since Archbishop Kenrick owned slaves, as did other organs of the Roman Catholic Church in St. Louis, it is possible, but unverified, that slaves assisted on the property prior to Missouri emancipation in 1865; Mother Gabriel did say in 1875 that she must supply “meat for the men,” who may have been workers. Still, after eleven-plus years in St. Louis, the Carmel was still trying to get the hang of farming. There were problems with the timing for buying ducks (1877) and questions about

how to preserve tomatoes and purchase a wagon (1874).³² While asking around about animal husbandry, Mother Gabriel was referred by a “Mrs. Hudson” to her own brother, John, to whom she sent queries on October 10, 1874:

I have taken the management of the farm myself lately. The Sister in charge wished me to do so. . . . I thought it would be better to kill pigs enough to last all year. Is it better to buy the pigs now & fatten them or to buy them already killed? The bull we have is very troublesome. He kills or cripples every horse he can get at. He is apt to break through in the fields of our neighbors, etc. Don't you think we had better sell him & buy a gentle one in the spring? We are offered only thirty dollars, and he is a young bull. Do you think it enough.³³

From 1874 to 1877, Mother Gabriel corresponded frequently to her brother about a second income stream—sales of sewing and craft projects that included dresses, pillowcases, “drawers,” and shirts. Often, these letters suggest that John Boland was an engine of aid to the convent, whether helping to sell craft work or sending gifts outright. John Boland had a store, and so he was

Angel from the Soulard convent, where the sisters moved in 1878. (Image: Dana Delibovi)



Cloister at 18th Street in Soulard, completed in 1878, where the sisters made their first true convent home. It is now an apartment building called "The Cloisters." (Image: Jim Hess)

in a good position to trade and procure goods for the Carmel. Mother Gabriel also asked and negotiated for money. The words of a brief letter from 1876 are typical: "Some one [g]ave me this box of fancy paper, will you please buy it from me (it is too nice for Carmelites) and I am in need of a little money. Only give your usual price. Love to all."³⁴

Mother Gabriel would not have been surprised about the need to provide so much self-support. Since the St. Louis Archdiocese had faced financial troubles through at least 1869, its ability to supplement the convent was limited. In 1876, Mother Gabriel enjoined her brother "not even to speak to the Archbishop," on what seems to be the provision of better circumstances for the monastery. To do so, she told John, "would only bring you into trouble." She added this clear-eyed observation, which was also the first of several indications in her letters that the Carmel had a stake (with tax liability) in the property at Old Orchard Farm: "The foundation is a bad job from the first. I doubt if it will ever sell to much advantage." Mother Gabriel was equally sanguine about infectious disease in St. Louis.

Starting in the 1880s, she wrote of her malarial and tubercular symptoms and worried about contracting cholera from food. She chronicled her travails with the "blue mass"—the mercury-laden drug calomel, which "Dr. Papin" prescribed for her ills. She also remarked about her brother's chills in a letter of September 25, 1876, which will depart with the "first hard frost"—evidence of her attribution of infectious cause.³⁵

Mother Gabriel's letters express two of life's most pressing problems: poverty and illness. Yet, the tone of the letters is hopeful overall, and they are full of concern for family members. There is no complaint about having to juggle agriculture and crafts with the daily schedule of mass, verbal prayer, mental prayer, and reading that is the primary job of Carmelite nuns. From the earliest, the letters include reminders to rise above worldly troubles, to guard against "weak faith" that is "easily overcome by the fear of the world's frown, or the desire of its smile," as she told John in 1876. But transcending worldly things did not mean ignorance of worldly things. Mother Gabriel knew about infection risks and about the

"temptation of drink" to which two people she knew ("M.C. & L.") had succumbed. She also knew about politics. On October 31, 1876—a week before one of the most contentious elections in U.S. history—she told her brother, "Go to confession before election day. You might get killed. Go home *early* that day."³⁶

Despite hardships, the Carmel gradually became established. By 1877, the convent had increased in size, allowing four sisters to leave for New Orleans and begin a new Carmelite Foundation. Private donations eventually eased the burdens of self-support and isolation. Construction began on the order's first, true cloistered monastery—an apartment building today. It was built on land given by a "Mrs. Patterson" at the corner of Victor and Eighteenth Streets in Soulard, supported by financial donors that included some familiar names: Dr. S. L. Papin, Mrs. E. Hudson, and, of course, Mr. John Boland. The Carmel of St. Joseph moved into their new Soulard monastery in summer, 1878.³⁷

Only one letter from Mother Gabriel to her generous brother survives from that busy year, penned December 22, 1878. "You

have furnished our Christmas table nicely,” she wrote, and “all the Nuns thank you and wish you a happy Christmas.”³⁸ The founding years were over; “unexpected means” had finally delivered a real convent to the Carmel of St. Joseph.

*“Why?—We Just Do
What We Do”*

Exactly why the Carmelite sisters made their Foundation in 1863—at the height of war, instability, and disease—remains opaque. Archivists Mary Ann Aubin and Sr. Constance Fitzgerald call it a “historical mystery.”³⁹ Although Archbishop Kenrick wanted the Carmel very much, he was warned off the Foundation by his own brother, Archbishop Francis Kenrick. Was it only Peter Kenrick’s firm will, plus the persistence of Mother Gabriel, that drove him to go against his brother’s recommendation in 1863? Was the interpersonal conflict among sisters at the Carmel in Baltimore really so much worse than any risk of travel and resettlement during the Civil War? What additional factors may have motivated both archbishop and prioress?

Reflecting on the mystery leads to insight on three aspects of social and intellectual history that may have helped to spur the Carmel’s founding in an inauspicious time: the role of religious women in the nineteenth-century Archdiocese of St. Louis; the experience of life in the borderlands of the Civil War; and the relationship between the intellectual tradition of the Carmelites, embodied by St. Teresa of Ávila, and the life ways of Carmelite sisters.

The historical record shows clearly that Peter Kenrick

welcomed religious women to St. Louis; Kenrick introduced eleven orders under his tenure as Archbishop.⁴⁰ Kenrick’s motivation for bringing religious women to St. Louis was decidedly unsentimental. He wanted women to work and to manage the work of others. Of the St. Louis founding of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, an order that housed and rehabilitated “strayed” women, Kenrick wrote: “The inmates of the establishment will, under the direction of the religious ladies already mentioned, occupy themselves with every species of work suitable to their sex and situation; and thus will be enabled to contribute to the support of a house to which they will owe so much.” The Sisters of Mercy came to care for the sick and to educate poor girls and women; the Ursulines and the School-Sisters de Notre Dame came to teach German, Irish, and other immigrant children.⁴¹

The requirement of self-support multiplied the nuns’ work. Archbishop Kenrick, from need and from temperament, kept a tight rein on the purse strings of the Archdiocese, and he expected orders to solicit donations and take in paid work. He gave the Sisters of Mercy the “moderate support” of \$800 a year, arguing that “small as is this sum, the Sisters will have no reason to complain of insufficient support” because the Catholic Community of St. Louis would be “disposed to assist them.” The Sisters of Mercy were forced to take in sewing and laundry in addition to their nursing and educational duties, prompting the Mother Superior from their home convent in New York to suggest returning if life in St. Louis was too strenuous.⁴²

This pattern of primary work plus the work of supporting the

convent played out in the first fifteen years of the Carmel of St. Joseph, where the sisters had to perform their main work—a rigorous schedule of morning-to-night prayer—while farming, selling crafts, and finding benefactors. The Carmelites, like other religious women in St. Louis, were working women with heavy responsibilities. Mother Gabriel made this role plain in her letters. From the cloister, she quizzed her brother on farming, committed to craft projects (“We will attend to her work as directed”), bargained on payments (“just let me know how much over \$5 it will be”), and even asked her brother to mail a missive she had written to address sales and taxation of a lot. These letters carried no hint of resentment at having to work hard, but they were stalwart and grateful: “[W]e might have had great trouble & even lost the property from its [the tax bill’s] not being paid in due time. So we must thank our Lord.”⁴³

Mother Gabriel was willing to work, but, as her early drive toward mission attests, she was not willing to be subordinate. The fact that a twenty-nine-year-old prioress felt quite entitled to contact the Archbishop of St. Louis to ask for a Foundation subverts any notion that religious women were wholly disempowered in the nineteenth century. Equally important, Archbishop Kenrick’s direct assent to her request shows, much to his credit, that he was not put off by an assertive woman. Kenrick embraced the role of religious women as workers, and Mother Gabriel embraced the role of a working, managerial woman. These attitudes may have counterbalanced concerns about making a Foundation during the Civil War. There was work to be done, and religious women had to do it.

Trunk brought from Baltimore to St. Louis on the Carmelite sisters' journey in 1863.
(Image: Archives of the Carmel of St. Joseph, St. Louis, Missouri)



Carmelite doll wearing a habit sewn by Mother Gabriel. Craft-making, including the sewing of clothes and linens, was a self-support activity of the Carmel of St. Joseph from 1863 to 1878. The grille at the right is a small open door from behind which cloistered Carmelites received visitors.
(Image: Archives of the Carmel of St. Joseph, St. Louis, Missouri)

Moreover, in wartime Missouri and Maryland, getting to work may have been an aspect of coping with war by sustaining neutrality. This is a highly speculative claim, but the attitudes of Peter Kenrick, viewed in historical context, support the notion that fulfilling daily responsibilities may have helped to further his public stance of neutrality—a stance adopted by many in the Civil War border states. Starting a Carmelite Foundation in 1863 was one more way to do just that.

Historians William E. Gienapp and Christopher Phillips have emphasized the range of nuanced opinions peculiar to the Civil War borderlands—Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky, and Missouri, where slavery and Unionism coexisted. Phillips has argued that people and organizations in these states were often driven to make compromises and to adopt a carefully curated persona or “posture” of neutrality, frequently masking actual opinions. In some cases, the persona may have involved a focus on conducting business as usual whenever possible to sustain evolving borderlands “trade patterns” that embraced both North and South.⁴⁴

A prime example was John W. Garrett, owner of the B & O railroad, who concentrated on his

business as a source of “common prosperity” and ran “a Southern-leaning railroad headquartered in a slave-holding border state that for half a century had developed profitable trade with the North and West.” Baltimore’s Archbishop Francis Kenrick also typified this attitude: doing the job of ministry was part and parcel of staying neutral. “[O]wing to his own position as head of a border-state diocese,” Francis Kenrick tried to give “no offense to either side: he simply acted as the minister of religion . . . whose sole object should be to hasten the work of peace by every means that seemed available to that end.”⁴⁵ Another example: Archbishop Peter Kenrick.

Archbishop Kenrick’s position on the Civil War has been called “obscure.” He diligently remained agnostic on the matter, even avoiding news reports to help him steer clear of opinion. Given that Kenrick owned slaves, he may have been inclined toward the Southern cause, although he never stated this publicly. Throughout the war years he remained neutral, stubbornly keeping his attention on the work of ministry. He wished, as he wrote to his brother in 1862, “to get involved as little as possible in these turmoils,” and to “be of service to the end.” According to Philadelphia Archbishop Patrick John Ryan, “During our Civil War, he [Peter Kenrick] kept

aloof from politics . . . because he believed that, in the peculiar circumstances of Missouri as a border state, the interests of religion would be best forwarded by a prudent silence.”⁴⁶ Archdiocesan business-as-usual went hand in hand with public neutrality.

Kenrick often exhibited his resolve to remain neutral and attend to work. During the war, he concerned himself with one of his pet projects (and peeves), the “prompt dispatch of business” from Vatican leadership (which, to his frequent annoyance, still held sway over administrative decisions in the United States). He also dealt with illness, injury, and damage to churches wrought by fighting in Missouri. In 1865, he refused Union orders to fly the flag from church steeples. He also forbid priests from taking the Union loyalty oath required by the Missouri Constitution that went into effect on July 1, 1865. Kenrick ultimately won both battles, informally and in court.⁴⁷

In this context, Kenrick’s 1863 go-ahead for the Carmel seems like one more way he focused on “the interests of religion” as an aspect of neutrality during the war. “Keep neutral and carry on” is the roughest of conjectures to help explain why, at the height of the Civil War, it made sense to those involved to

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 Sr. Stella Maris Freund,
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start a new Carmel. It is a piece of the psychosocial history of the border states, illuminated by the Carmel’s founding, that warrants further investigation.

Mother Gabriel preserved no letters that speak of war or neutrality, but her surviving letters are imbued with Carmelite spirituality. This tradition was endowed to the order by St. Teresa of Ávila. Two core Teresian principles—detachment from the world and spiritual determination—shine through Mother Gabriel’s letters. This intellectual legacy informed the decision to found and persevere with the Carmel of St. Joseph.

The founding of the St. Louis Carmel follows the injunctions and example of St. Teresa to her sisters. In her book of counsel to her nuns, *The Way of Perfection*, Teresa advised sisters to “begin with great determination” on the path of prayer so that “[t]hey know that come what may they will not turn back.” For Teresa, the path of prayer included mission work. Her reform of the Carmelite order included the founding of convents in her native Spain, requiring her to combine her life of intensive prayer and meditation with travel, finance, law, writing, and negotiation. She has been called “an extremely

businesslike mystic”—a description reminiscent of Mother Gabriel. Teresa offers the metaphor of a determined spiritual journey, which speaks directly to sisters who traveled to St. Louis. Carmelite nuns must have “a very determined determination to persevere... whatever work is involved, whatever criticism arises, whether they arrive or die on the road.”⁴⁸

Determination comports with another virtue, detachment from the world, which is made possible for Carmelite sisters by the full reliance upon God. A nun finds the determination to follow the path of prayer and mission because she practices detachment “from all created things”—money, food, bodily health, physical safety, and the like. “It doesn’t matter which Carmelite community you are in,” says Sr. Stella Maris Freund, currently of the Carmel of St. Joseph in Ladue. “It can be St. Louis or anywhere—our life is God alone.” Current prioress Mother Mary Joseph traced this “back to the original formal founding. We are outside of the world—outside of our location. It doesn’t matter where you are—we come to pray.”⁴⁹

Mother Gabriel, like all Carmelite sisters, was intimately familiar with St. Teresa’s writings.

She mentioned the words of the saint multiple times in her letters and promised to lend out a copy of Teresa’s autobiography. She made many comments about the need for determination, in one letter proclaiming, “Let us have patience and look to the *end* when things look dark to us.” Here, “end” was emphasized because it means eternal life in God, against which all worldly things—and worldly worries—prove inconsequential, meriting only detachment. “[T]he evil one so loves to worry us with thoughts of what will never come to pass. Saint Teresa calls the Imagination the ‘fool’ of the home (of our being). [S]he says if we want to be in peace and happy we must pay no regard to the fool who roves the world over.”⁵⁰

In the final analysis, the Carmelite sisters came to St. Louis during the tumult of the Civil War because they were heirs to the Teresian tradition. This tradition stressed determination to press on with spiritual aims, detached from worldly concerns. For nuns with such an intellectual history, war was a worldly “created thing,” so it need not affect the spiritual mission to found a monastery. “You ask why they started this Carmel during the Civil War,” declared Sr. Stella Maris. “Well, it’s because we just do what we do, and pray.”⁵¹



The Carmel of St. Joseph in St. Louis today, the home of the Carmelite sisters since 1928. (Images: Dana Delibovi)



ENDNOTES

Acknowledgment: Thanks to Mother Mary Joseph Freund, Sr. Stella Maris Freund, Mary Ann Aubin, Sr. Constance Fitzgerald, and Dan Zink for their help with this article.

¹ Charles Warren Currier, *Carmel in America* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1890), 265–66. Note on terminology: Carmelites use the terms *convent* and *monastery* to describe their cloistered dwellings; this article will use that terminology interchangeably.

² Kathleen Waters Sander, *John W. Garrett and the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017), 157; Walter J. Daly, “The Black Cholera Comes to the Central Valley of America in the 19th Century—1832, 1849, and Later,” *Transactions of the American Clinical and Climatological Association* 119 (2008), 144. The first prioress of the Carmel of St. Joseph in St. Louis, Mother Mary Gabriel, wrote in letters of cholera contraction and mortality risk during the 1880s and 1890s; see *Correspondence from Mother Gabriel Boland to Her Brother John: 1874–1893*, Archives of the Carmel of St. Joseph, St. Louis, MO, 82, 125, 183, 248; Samuel J. Miller, “Peter Richard Kenrick, Bishop and Archbishop of St. Louis, 1806–1896,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 84, no. 1 (March, June, September 1973), 60; Historic American Buildings Survey, District of Missouri, “Colonel Henry Clay Mansion,” Project no. Mo-18, 1937, U.S. National Parks Service, Washington, D.C.; Mary Ann Aubin, *The Past is Prologue: 150 Years of Carmel in St. Louis* (St. Louis: Carmel of St. Joseph, 2013), 7, 8.

³ Sr. Constance Fitzgerald (Archivist of the Carmelite Monastery of Baltimore), phone interview by Dana Delibovi, Baltimore, September 19, 2019.

⁴ Christopher Phillips, *The Civil War in the Border South* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 2013), 17.

⁵ Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 4.

⁶ Katharine T. Corbett, *In Her Place: A Guide to St. Louis Women's History* (St. Louis: Missouri Historical Society Press, 1999), 68, 72.

⁷ John E. Rothensteiner, *History of the Archdiocese of St. Louis: in Its Various Stages of Development from A.D. 1673 to A.D. 1928* (St. Louis: Blackwell Wickland Co., 1928), 331.

⁸ Sarah Hinds, “In Defense of the Faith: The Catholic Response to Anti-Catholicism in Early Nineteenth-Century St. Louis,” *The Confluence* (Fall/Winter 2015), 15. Miller, “Peter Richard Kenrick,” 60.

⁹ Paul W. Brewer, “Voluntarism on Trial: St. Louis' Response to the Cholera Epidemic of 1849,” *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 49, no.1 (Spring 1975), 102; G. J. Garraghan, “Some Early Chapters in the History of St. Louis University,” *St. Louis Catholic Historical Review* 5, nos. 2–3 (April–July 1923), 114; G. F. Pyle, “The Diffusion of Cholera in the United States in the Nineteenth Century,” *Geographical Analysis* 1, no. 1 (January 1969), 65–74; Archdiocese of St. Louis, “1843–1903: The Immigrant Church,” accessed October 25, 2019, <http://www.archstl.org/history/immigrant-church>; Miller, “Peter Richard Kenrick,” 27–28, 56–59.

¹⁰ Miller, “Peter Richard Kenrick,” 26, 63–65. See also corroborating evidence: *Carte Ecclésiastique des Etats-Unis d’Amérique* (Paris: Les Missions Catholiques, 1877), archived June 11, 2017, <https://imgur.com/WbbTmnr>; John Joseph O’Shea, *The Two Kenricks* (Philadelphia: John J. McVey, 1904), 200.

¹¹ *The Kenrick-Frenaye Correspondence* (Philadelphia: Cathedral Archives of Philadelphia, 1920), 465. Dates of Peter Kenrick’s overture to Francis Kenrick are estimated based on a response by Francis in the fall of 1861.

¹² Transcription of the *Book of the Dead, Foundation of St. Louis, and Necrology*, aggregated 2019, Archives of the Carmel of St. Joseph, St. Louis, MO, 4, 8. See also: Inno McGill, “Our Lady of Mount Carmel,” *The Indian Sentinel* 2, no. 1 (January 1920), 119; Currier, *Carmel in America*, 261; Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 105, 175, 229, 248; Mother Mary Joseph Freund (Prioress of the Carmel of St. Joseph), Sr. Stella Maris Freund (Sister in the Carmel of St. Joseph), and Mary Ann Aubin (Archivist of the Carmel of St. Joseph), interview by Dana Delibovi, St. Louis, August 24, 2019, October 28, 2019.

¹³ Fitzgerald interview.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The Carmelite Nuns of Baltimore, “History of Our Community,” accessed October 26, 2019, <https://www.baltimorecarmel.org/history-of-our-community/>.

¹⁶ Descriptive notes, September 29, 1863, Archives of the Carmelite Monastery of Baltimore, Baltimore, MD, Record Group IV, Series 1, Folder 1, Box 2.

¹⁷ *Kenrick-Frenaye*, 465.

¹⁸ Currier, *Carmel in America*, 265–66.

¹⁹ Book of the Dead, Foundation, Necrology, 1–6, 8; Currier, *Carmel in America*, 266, 284, 288.

²⁰ Freund-Aubin interview; B & O Railroad Museum, “Baltimore & Ohio Railroad, 1860,” accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.eduborail.org/NPS-4/Map-1-NPS-4.aspx>. See also: William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), overleaf. Route validated by Dan Zink (Archivist at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Museum), personal communication to Dana Delibovi, Baltimore, November 4, 2019.

²¹ Sander, *Garrett*, 115, 117; Thomas, *Iron Way*, 111; Edward Hungerford, *The Story of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad: 1827–1927* (New York: G.P. Putnam & Sons, 1928), 2:5–19, 32–34.

²² *Report of Brig. Gen. Benjamin S. Roberts, U.S. Army, of Operations April 24–May 5* (Charlestown: West Virginia Archives and History, May 21, 1863), accessed October 28, 2019, <http://www.wvculture.org/history/sesquicentennial/1863jonesimboden.html>; Thomas, *Iron Way*, 112–13; Woods’ Baltimore City Directory, *Advertisements: Baltimore & Ohio Railroad Re-Opened* (Baltimore: John W. Woods, 1864), 52, accessed October 28, 2019, <https://archive.org/details/woodsbaltimec1864balt; Freund-Aubin interview>.

²³ Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 85.

²⁴ Currier, *Carmel in America*, 266–67.

²⁵ Archdiocese of St. Louis, “Calvary Cemetery,” accessed October 29, 2019, <https://cemeteries.archstl.org/locations/calvary#485743-historical>.

²⁶ Currier, *Carmel in America*, 267. "Clavary," literally, one with a key, is a Carmelite sister with administrative responsibilities. Elections were held, by rule, every three years, and it appears that positions cycled among the sisters; for example, Sister (then Mother) Alberta was prioress of the St. Louis Carmel three times before her death in 1879, and Mother Gabriel is documented to have been prioress (after her initial stint in 1863) in 1876 and 1890. See: Book of the Dead, Foundation, Necrology, 2; Gabriel-Boland, Correspondence, 12, 160.

²⁷ Fitzgerald interview.

²⁸ Currier, *Carmel in America*, 267–69.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 267–68; Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 114. Community-attended mass at the residence of the first chaplain, Father Edmund Saulnier, is chronicled; however, Father Saulnier died in May of 1864, and public masses with other chaplains are not reported.

³⁰ Freund-Aubin interview.

³¹ Currier, *Carmel in America*, 266–69; Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 331–33.

³² Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 1, 2, 15.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1–2.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 3, 5–7, 13, 15, 6.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3–5, 13, 15, 44, 45, 52, 54, 56, 61, 68–72, 75, 77, 81–83, 85, 86, 90, 93, 95–96, 99, 122, 133, 141–42, 155, 158, 171, 175, 195–96, 221, 229, 233, 252, 261, 267.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 9, 11. The disputed presidential election of 1876 pitted Hayes (Republican) against Tilden (Democrat); see William H. Rehnquist, *Centennial Crisis: The Disputed Election of 1876* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2007), 99.

³⁷ Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 332. Currier, *Carmel in America*, 317.

³⁸ Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 19.

³⁹ Freund-Aubin interview; Fitzgerald interview.

⁴⁰ Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 27, 31, 33, 329. The orders were: Ursulines (1848), Sisters of the Good Shepherd (1849), Sisters of Mercy (1856), the School Sisters de Notre Dame (1858), the Carmelites (1863), the Little Sisters of the Poor (1869), the Sisters of St. Mary (1872), the Sisters of St. Francis (1872), the Oblate Sisters of Provence (1880), and the Sisters of the Precious Blood (1882).

⁴¹ Peter Richard Kenrick, Lenten Regulations; Seminary Needs; Arrival of Sisters of Good Shepherd in St. Louis, February 2, 1849, Archives of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, St. Louis, MO, Record Group RG 01 C, Series 03. See also: Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 28; Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 31; Corbett, In Her Place, 67–68.

⁴² Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 32, 33.

⁴³ Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 1–18.

⁴⁴ William E. Gienapp, "Abraham Lincoln and the Border States," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 13 (1992), 13, 18; Phillips, *Civil War in the Border South*, 9, 17, 18; Phillips, *Civil War in the Border South*, 15, 17, 18, 23; Gienapp, "Lincoln and the Border States," 13.

⁴⁵ Sander, *Garrett*, 116, 119; O'Shea, *Two Kenricks*, 200. Care must be taken when considering Francis Kenrick's mindset, since he did, as noted, withhold recommendation of the Carmel in St. Louis in 1861; in that particular at least, he did not evince as strong an attitude of pressing on with that work than did his brother, Peter.

⁴⁶ Miller, "Peter Richard Kenrick," 64–70; See also Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 210–19; Patrick J. Ryan, "Most Reverend Peter Richard Kenrick, D.D.," *American Catholic Quarterly Review* 21 (January to October, 1896), 426.

⁴⁷ Miller, "Peter Richard Kenrick," 66–70; See also Rothensteiner, *Archdiocese*, 211–13, 215–19. Peter Kenrick's legal battles against provisions of the 1865 "Drake Constitution" (nicknamed for firebrand St. Louis Unionist Charles Drake) is a valuable subject of study, well chronicled by both Miller and Rothensteiner. Argument and decision of the United States Supreme Court on *Cumming v. State of Missouri* (1866)—which overturned Missouri's conviction of a Catholic priest for refusal to take the loyalty oath required by the 1865 Missouri Constitution—is available at <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/71/277.html>. Archbishop Kenrick paid legal expenses for this case in excess of \$10,000 (Miller, 70.).

⁴⁸ St. Teresa of Ávila, *The Way of Perfection*, ed. Kieran Kavanaugh (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2000), 251, 253; Cathleen Medwick, *Teresa of Ávila: The Progress of a Soul* (New York: Image Books, 1999), x; St. Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 229.

⁴⁹ St. Teresa, *Way of Perfection*, 107–9. Freund-Aubin interview.

⁵⁰ Gabriel Boland, Correspondence, 35, 36, 50, 51, 72, 102, 131, 133, 144, 162, 163.

⁵¹ Freund-Aubin Interview.