

Constance and her Companions

THE MARTYRS OF MEMPHIS (9 SEP 1878)

Let's take a trip to Memphis. It is the summer of 1878. The city on the bluff of the Mississippi River is struck by its third epidemic of yellow fever in ten years. 30,000 citizens flee in terror. Death tolls average 200 a day. The area becomes so depopulated that the city loses its charter and will not reorganize for fourteen years. When it is all over ninety percent of the population has contracted yellow fever and more than 5000 people have died. Everyone who can afford to do so leaves the city and flees away from the river. It was not yet known that the disease is mosquito-borne, but it is observed that high and dry are safe. In the city is a community of Anglican nuns who have the opportunity to leave, but choose to stay and nurse the sick. St. Mary's Cathedral is located downtown in the most infected area of Memphis. The sisters came to Memphis in 1873 to found a Girls School adjacent to St. Mary's Cathedral. When the epidemic begins, the cathedral dean, George Harris, and Constance, the superior of the Sister of St. Mary, organize a team for relief work which includes the sisters, the rectors of Grace church and Holy Innocents as well as three physicians, two of whom are ordained Episcopal priests. This team has since been known as the martyrs of Memphis and we celebrate their life and

ministry this week. Most of them, thirty-eight in all, are themselves killed by the fever. One of the first to die on **September 9, 1878** is Constance, head of the Community of St. Mary.

The four martyred sisters and two priests are buried in Elmwood Cemetery in a joint grave. The cathedral has a pilgrimage to their gravesite every year to honor their sacrifice for the church and for the city.

The two Anglican priests are the Rev. Charles Carroll Parsons, rector of Grace Episcopal Church, Memphis; former U.S. Army artillery commander, West Point alumnus and professor (Served with classmate Lt. Col. George Armstrong Custer in Kansas, defense counsel in Custer's 1867 court-martial trial.)

- The Rev. Louis S. Schuyler, newly ordained assistant rector at Parsons' prior parish, Holy Innocents Episcopal Church, Hoboken, New Jersey.

When you visit this Cathedral of St. Mary's in our sister state, go up to the beautiful High Altar. It is a memorial to the four Sisters who died. The high altar of the cathedral was consecrated on Whitsunday or Pentecost **1879** and was commissioned by Bishop Quintard to memorialize the Sisters of St. Mary. Inscribed on the altar steps are "**Alleluia Osanna,**" Constance's last words.

This week is their feast day (September 9) where we commemorate their sacrifices.

- Sister Constance (née Caroline Louise Darling, b. Medway, Mass., 1846), superior of the work at Memphis, headmistress of St. Mary's School for Girls.
- **Sister Thecla**, sacristan of St. Mary's Cathedral and its school chapel, instructor in music and grammar (English and Latin)
- **Sister Ruth**, nurse at Trinity Infirmary, New York
- Sister Frances, a newly professed nun given charge of the Church Home orphanage
- **Sister Hughetta** (Snowden) survived the plague, and when she died in **February 1926**, her name was added to the steps, replacing the verse, "He feedeth among the lilies." The reredos (altar backdrop) is also a memorial to Sister Hughetta.

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St. Mary's Cathedral Web site. www.stmarysmemphis.org

Joanna