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Benedictine Pioneers in America: Lessons Not in the Books

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The Reshaping of a Tradition

American Benedictine Women
1852-1881



Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.

1994

Benedictine Pioneers in America

*or: What I Learned in School
This Winter*

(the School of Benedictine Spirituality)

Class:
"Spirituality of the
Benedictine Tradition"

taught by S. Ephrem Hollermann, OSB

Book covers.

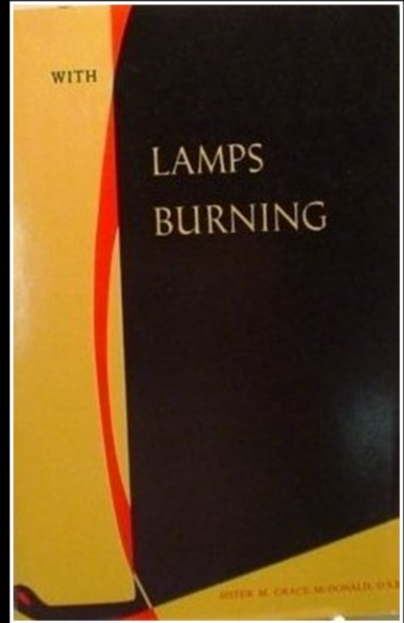
Class: from the School of Benedictine Spirituality - *Spirituality of the Benedictine Tradition* – taught by Ephrem Hollermann, OSB, January-February 2017

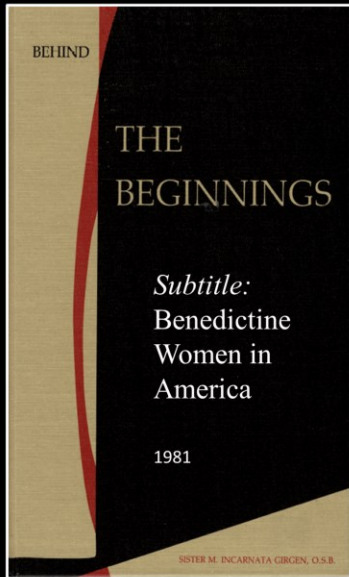


rev. 1993

...some things *not* conveyed in the histories by Colman Barry, OSB nor Grace McDonald, OSB

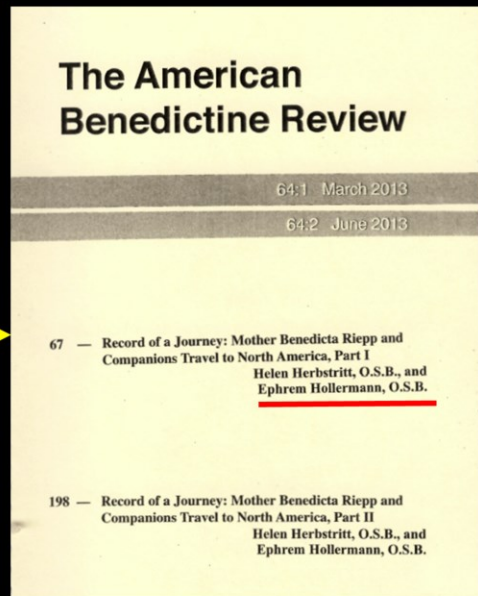
1957





Some invaluable resources on early history

including this recent addition to CSB/SJU history



Book covers.

Class: from the School of Benedictine Spirituality - *Spirituality of the Benedictine Tradition* – taught by Ephrem Hollermann, OSB, January-February 2017

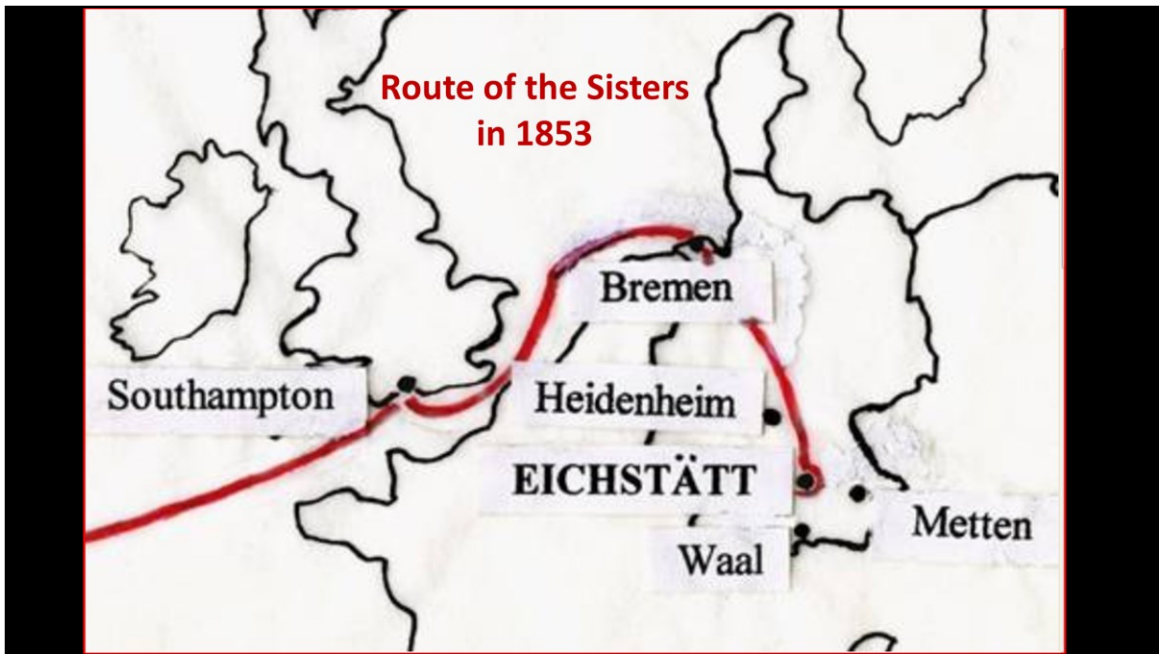


https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Europe_-_Europa

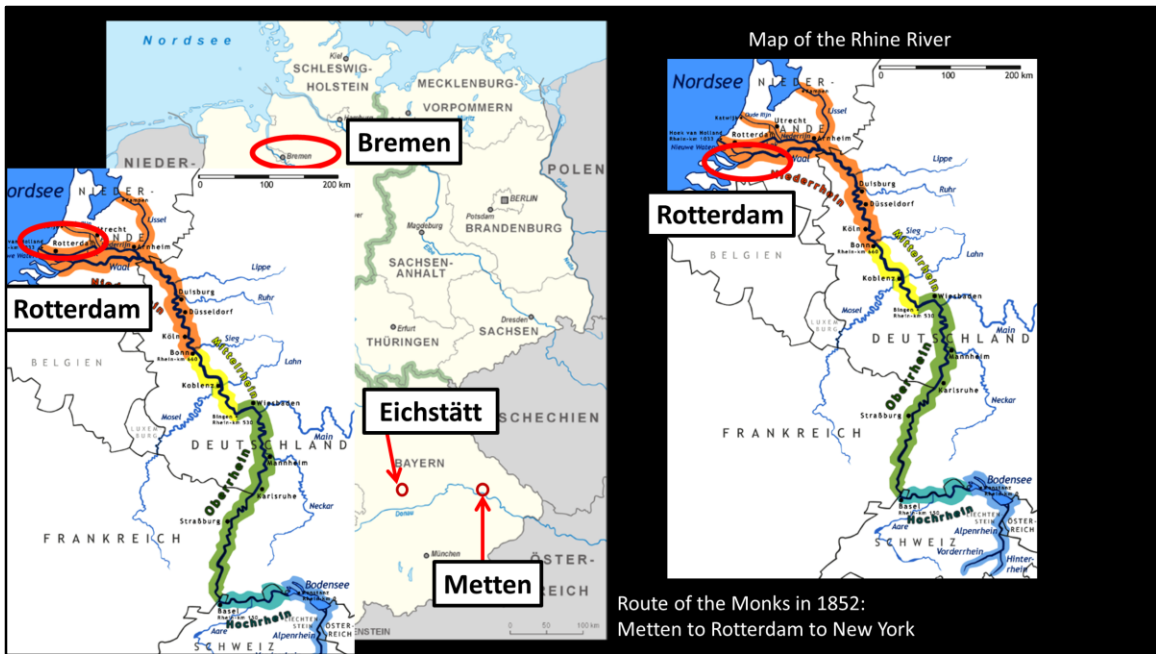


Route of the Sisters in 1853: Eichstätt to Bremen to New York

Route of the Sisters from Eichstätt, Germany to St. Joseph, Minnesota.
Graphic from the St. Benedict Monastery Archives.



Route of the Sisters from Eichstätt, Germany to St. Joseph, Minnesota.
Graphic from the St. Benedict Monastery Archives.



Route of the Monks in 1852:
Metten to Rotterdam to New York

Left:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Atlas_of_Germany#/media/File:Karte_Deutschland_und_Gr%C3%BCnes_Band.png

Right: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Rhine#/media/File:Rhein-Karte.png>

Map of the Rhine, German texts. Drawn" by [Daniel Ullrich \(Threedots\)](#) with Adobe Photoshop 6.0 in January 2005

Rotterdam in the 1800s



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rotterdam#/media/File:Detroit_Publishing_Company_-_Rotterdam_-_Delftsevaart,_c._1895.jpg

The Delftsevaart in c. 1890–1905

This image is available from the United States [Library of Congress's Prints and Photographs division](#) under the digital ID [ppmsc.05853](#).

2.



Foundress Benedicta Riepp's grave



Founder Boniface Wimmer's grave



We have photos of Boniface Wimmer



...but have no known photos of Mother Benedicta

In 1852, at the age of 27, Benedicta and two others responded to Wimmer's call to come to America to help educate German immigrants and to spread the Benedictine way of life.



We have an artist's rendition of Benedicta



Mother Benedicta Riepp, OSB
Oil Painting, mid 1980's
by Sister Thomas Carey, OSB
Photo by Peggy Chevalier

Left photo from the archives of Monastery Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, IN.

2.

There
may be
a photo



No photos of Benedicta Riepp are known to exist, but there is reason to suspect that this photo may be of her.



Mother Benedicta Riepp, OSB
Oil Painting, mid 1980's
by Sister Thomas Carey, OSB
Photo by Peggy Chevalier

Left photo from the archives of Monastery Immaculate Conception, Ferdinand, IN.

3.

Benedicta was not in the first group of sisters to come to Minnesota

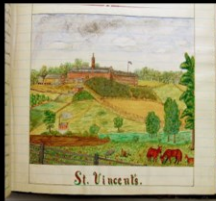


SISTER EVANGELISTA KREMETER,
ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE
ST. CLOUD CONVENT.

Below:
Mother Willibalda Scherbauer (on right)
and S. Benedicta Kump, ca. 1874.
Mother Willibalda was the first superior
of the community in St. Joseph.



(There is no known extant photo or picture of S. Benedicta Riepp.)
Other photos from *With Lamps Burning*



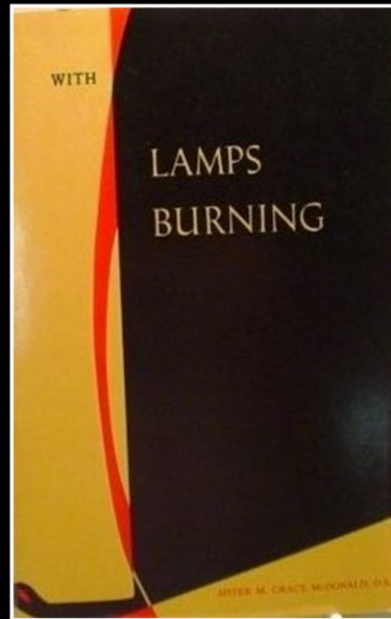
Regarding Boniface Wimmer:

3.5

- None of the men who came to America with Wimmer were monks (at least, not yet).
- Wimmer himself wasn't among the five monks who first went to Minnesota.
- None of the men who came to America with Wimmer in 1846 went to Minnesota in 1856.

Boniface Wimmer; Pierz photo from *Worship & Work* p. 38c
Portrait at left from a painting in the collection of St. Vincent's Archabbey,
Pennsylvania.

Early St. Ben's
history according to
With Lamps Burning



In the absence of records and letters, details of the preparation for the new venture and the journey are meager.



June 18 when they stepped on board their steamer, the *Washington*, in the port of Bremen. The gang plank was drawn up and the ship pulled out of port.

The presence of two Premonstratensian priests from Tyrol and two Servite priests from Innsbruck cheered those on board and made bearable the days that followed, for Mass was said and devotions were held in common every day when the weather permitted.

With Lamps Burning, p. 9

Route of the Sisters from Eichstätt, Germany to St. Joseph, Minnesota.
Graphic from the St. Benedict Monastery Archives.
Text from *With Lamps Burning*, p. 9 (p.11 of the pdf at
<http://cdm.csbsju.edu/cdm/ref/collection/CSBArchives/id/2419>)

One of the priests was Father Max Gardiner, a noted Indian missionary who was returning to his work in the Mississippi River region. He delighted his listeners with stories of Indian life.¹²

The ship reached New York safely on July 3, and the sisters disembarked the next day amid the celebration of the Fourth of July. Father Boniface Wimmer had failed to have someone at the port to meet them.

Arrival in New York City is a bewildering thing at any time; arrival for foreigners in the midst of confetti, fire crackers, and shooting cannon was worse. For the timid cloistered nuns the experience must have been terrifying. To add to their distress, there was no one to guide them to Pennsylvania.

*With Lamps
Burning, p. 9*

Route of the Sisters from Eichstätt, Germany to St. Joseph, Minnesota.
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"The Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, also known as the Premonstratensians, the Norbertines and, in Britain and Ireland, as the White Canons (from the colour of their habit)"

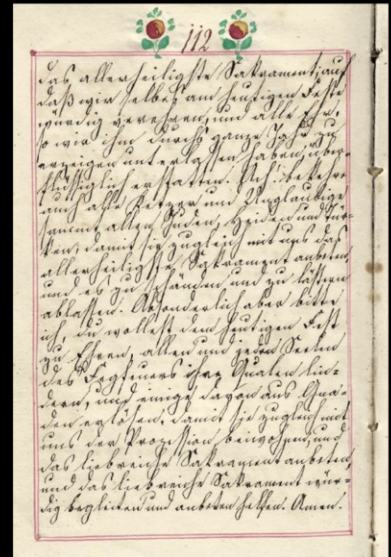
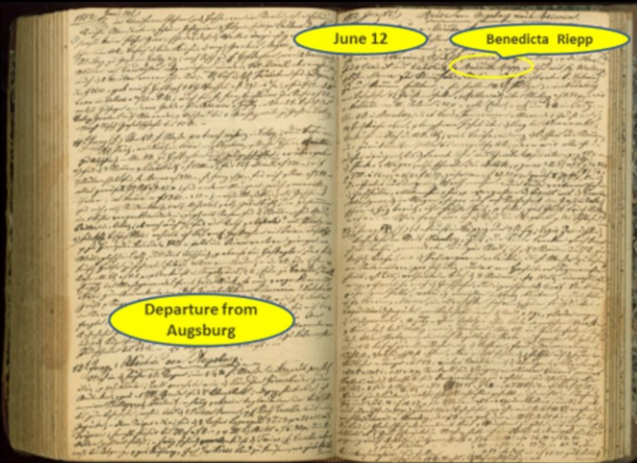


<http://northernarchaeologicalassociates.co.uk/profile/SAE/sae-04.jpg>

Premonstratensian abbey at Egglestone, County Durham. Premonstratensian Monk "The Order of Canons Regular of Prémontré, also known as the Premonstratensians, the Norbertines and, in [Britain](#) and [Ireland](#), as the White Canons (from the colour of their habit), are a [Roman Catholic religious order](#) of [canons regular](#) founded in [Prémontré](#) near [Laon](#) in 1120 by [Saint Norbert](#), who later became [Archbishop of Magdeburg](#). Premonstratensians are designated by *O.Praem.* (*Ordo Praemonstratensis*) following their name."

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Premonstratensians>

4. There is a diary of the journey!
written by Fr. Max Gärtner



(another example of German script)

The American Benedictine Review

64:1 March 2013

64:2 June 2013

67 — Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and Companions Travel to North America, Part I
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.

198 — Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and Companions Travel to North America, Part II
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.

It was found at Saint Norbert Abbey in DePere, Wisconsin.

First its old German handwritten script had to be translated to German, and then to English; then relevant parts were published in 2013.

Fr. Gärtner wrote:

last bittersweet words. I left the house with a heavy heart. It was high time to meet nephew Carl, who walked ahead to avoid a long wait. We found each other there and again walked by foot to spend the last evening in nice company. < >

June 12, 1852

Trip from Augsburg to Bremen

The morning started with rain. At 4:30 a.m. we said Holy Mass in Carl's small chapel, enjoyed a short breakfast afterwards, exchanged souvenirs (some things of mine from Vienna) and left. Maybe the rain was luck, to shorten the "Good-bye." It rained hard. I had only a

p.78

Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and
Companions Travel to North America, Part I
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and
Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.

In the train from Munich [bound for Bremen] were Xavier,⁴³ the two Servites, [Vitus] Deindl, three suitcases, and two crates. The Rev. Court Chaplain had paid the freight until Leipzig. He also had handed me a letter to Bishop [John Martin] Henni [of Milwaukee], as well as one to the superior of the School Sisters, Caroline Freiss,⁴⁴ in Milwaukee, and a third one to the leader of the nuns from Eichstätt, Benedicta Riepp.

With the help of Fr. [Name], station of Pleinfeld (near [Name]) Wimmer as their destination, he [Fr. Schmidt] arranged my presence until a different [Name]. This was done by exchanging one at the expense of the [Name] while my confrere Fr. Xa

class. Of course, he outdid me at each main station by caring also for this group [of nuns] so that no one would be left behind, as it is easy to be late for the train, even by a few minutes. For this reason I sternly enjoined them not to loiter anywhere, nor to go aside when there was no necessity. At any rate, they are always to go in twos and watch the time so as not to arrive too late.

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Gärtner's first mention of Benedicta Riepp

p.79

p.79

Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and
Companions Travel to North America, Part I
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and
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while my confrere Fr. Xavier stayed with the rest of the group in third
class. Of course, he outdid me at each main station by caring also for
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to be late for the train, even by a few minutes. For this reason I sternly
enjoined them not to loiter anywhere, nor to go aside when there was
no necessity. At any rate, they are always to go in twos and watch the
time so as not to arrive too late.

With the help of Fr. Schmidt,⁴⁵ these nuns joined us at the way
station of Pleinfeld (near Nurnberg), with St. Vincent and Fr. Boniface
Wimmer as their destination. Since they had tickets for second class,
he [Fr. Schmidt] arranged that they should remain there first without
my presence until a different arrangement could be made in Nurnberg.
This was done by exchanging my third-class ticket for a second-class
one at the expense of the nuns, and thus I could become their guardian,

p.79

⁴⁵ Anton Schmidt, S.J., Chaplain at St. Walburg Convent in Eichstätt

p.79

**Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and
Companions Travel to North America, Part I
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and
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With the help of Fr. Schmidt,⁴⁵ these nuns joined us at the way station of Pleinfeld (near Nurnberg), with St. Vincent and Fr. Boniface Wimmer as their destination. Since they had tickets for second class, he [Fr. Schmidt] arranged that they should travel with me until a different arrangement could be made. This was done by exchanging my third-class ticket for a second-class one at the expense of the nuns, and thus I traveled in second class while my confrere Fr. Xavier stayed with the nuns in third class. Of course, he outdid me at each station, and I was to be late for the train, even by a few minutes. I enjoined them not to loiter anywhere, and they were always on time so as not to arrive too late.

p.79 & 81

Finally, at 11:00 p.m. we departed.

June 14, 1852, Cloudy

The nuns were very relieved to have me close by, especially in case wagons would have to be exchanged or if other problems would arise.

⁴⁷ Walburga Dietrich was born in 1804, professed in 1841, and died in St. Marys, Pennsylvania in 1877. At the time of this journey she was forty-eight years old, while Maura Flieger was twenty-nine (born in 1822, professed a lay sister in 1848, and died in Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1865), and Benedicta Riepp turned twenty-seven on day #11 of this ocean voyage (born in 1825, professed in 1846, and died in St. Cloud, Minnesota on March 15, 1862).

p.79 & 81

Record of a Journey: Mother Benedicta Riepp and
Companions Travel to North America, Part I
Helen Herbstritt, O.S.B., and
Ephrem Hollermann, O.S.B.

July 8, 1952, Fair, New York Harbor

Our last morning on the vast ocean was full of beauty and warmth. At 5:00 a.m., the much-awaited pilot came on board the old *Washington* to guide us safely along the coast of Long Island, where we were already welcomed with much applause. What seemed like a detour in waters that were quite calm, prolonged the real entrance into the beautiful bay of the world-renowned city of New York, a city protected from the outside by two impressive forts. Then the bay opened up to the beautiful landscape of Staten Island, full of spectacular sights—forests, fields, villages, cities and bays.

Once we got [to Staten Island], a rumor spread fast that on the national holiday [Fourth of July] the over-loaded pier, with masses of people, collapsed and cost the lives of thirty people.

p.209-210

5.

They arrived in
New York City
on July 8th, *not*
on the 4th of July

p. 209-210

New York City
as seen from
Williamsburg,
1848

our spirits lifted with the beautiful view of thousands of sailboats of all kinds—back and forth, up and down—looking like a busy ant-hill on water. Xavier and the nuns found the view very picturesque—the magic of the bay with the high buildings in the background, with its blowing flags of all colors, the billowing sails beyond number, the high-rising smoke clouds of the steam boats, the whole mix of busy working people. We finally had the renowned city of New York in front of our eyes.

p.209-
210



https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:New_York_City_in_the_1840s#/media/File:NYC_1848.jpg

New York City as seen from Williamsburg, 1848. Brown, Eliphalet M., 1816-1886 --
Lithographer Foreman, Edgar W. -- Lithographer
(No statue of Liberty yet!)

There is ample evidence when one considers the whole diary account that Boniface Wimmer was careful to place the Sisters in the charge of a seasoned missionary, Rev. Gärtner, and that they were well taken care of on the entire journey.

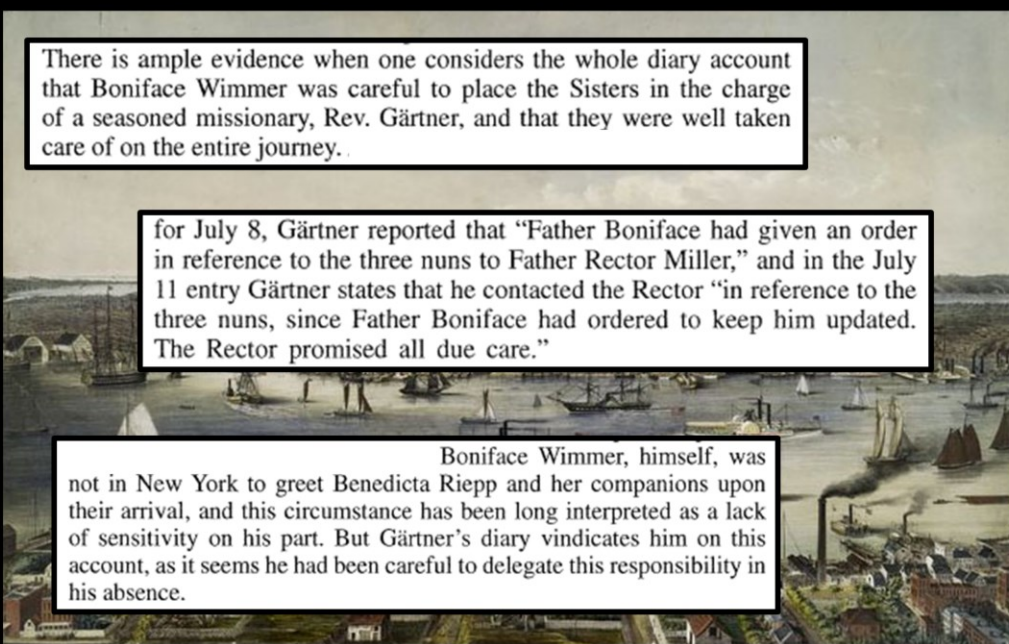
6. They weren't on their own



p.219

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:New_York_City_in_the_1840s#/media/File:NYC_1848.jpg

New York City as seen from Williamsburg, 1848. Brown, Eliphalet M., 1816-1886 -- Lithographer Foreman, Edgar W. -- Lithographer (No statue of Liberty yet!)



There is ample evidence when one considers the whole diary account that Boniface Wimmer was careful to place the Sisters in the charge of a seasoned missionary, Rev. Gärtner, and that they were well taken care of on the entire journey.

for July 8, Gärtner reported that “Father Boniface had given an order in reference to the three nuns to Father Rector Miller,” and in the July 11 entry Gärtner states that he contacted the Rector “in reference to the three nuns, since Father Boniface had ordered to keep him updated. The Rector promised all due care.”

Boniface Wimmer, himself, was not in New York to greet Benedicta Riepp and her companions upon their arrival, and this circumstance has been long interpreted as a lack of sensitivity on his part. But Gärtner’s diary vindicates him on this account, as it seems he had been careful to delegate this responsibility in his absence.

p.219

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:New_York_City_in_the_1840s#/media/File:NYC_1848.jpg

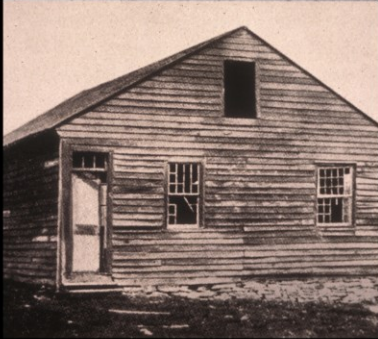
New York City as seen from Williamsburg, 1848. Brown, Eliphalet M., 1816-1886 -- Lithographer Foreman, Edgar W. -- Lithographer
(No statue of Liberty yet!)

7 A “new” photo: the Sisters’ first convent, St. Mary’s

In response to Boniface Wimmer, three sisters go to America:

Benedicta Riepp,
Walburga Dietrich, and
Maura Flieger –

to St. Mary’s in Erie, PA, to staff a school and start a convent there.



1850s

More sisters follow in the next few years, and Wimmer has Benedicta start accepting novices, against her better judgement and that of her prioress back in Eichstätt.

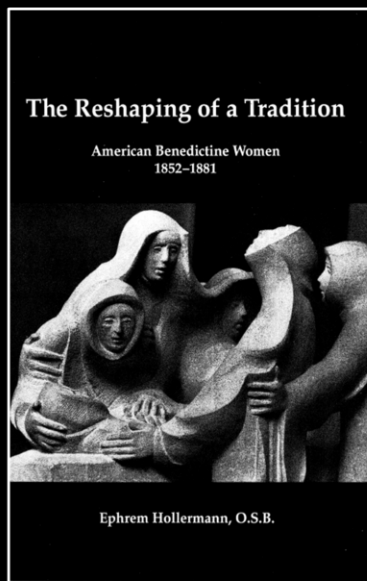
(Thus begins the struggle between the two.)



2014

Left photo from S. Ephrem Hollerman, OSB. (scanned from a book)

The right photo, of St. Joseph Monastery at time of closing, 2014, is by Ray Beimal, St. Marys, PA, courtesy of Ephrem Hollerman, OSB.



Benedictine Pioneers in America

or:

What I Learned in School This Winter:
Seven facts about the pioneer
Benedictines not documented in *With
Lamps Burning* nor *Worship & Work*

Created by Peggy Landwehr Roske, CSB/SJU Archivist,
from resources of the CSB, SJU and
Saint Benedict's Monastery, April 2017

Special thanks to
Ephrem Hollermann, OSB

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Class: from the School of Benedictine Spirituality - *Spirituality of the Benedictine Tradition* – taught by Ephrem Hollermann, OSB, January-February 2017