

# Mother M. Caroline Friess



*School Sister of Notre Dame*

*American Pioneer*

Sister Mary Luke Baldwin, SSND

# Mother Mary Caroline Friess School Sister of Notre Dame: American Pioneer

*Risk taker, woman of prayer, friend of the poor, innovative educator, undaunted missionary, leader at ease with leaders, builder with business acumen, example of apostolic spirituality, woman full of love and dearly beloved*

Mother Caroline Friess led the School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America for 42 years from 1850 until her death at 68 in 1892.

## Youthful missionary

Josephine Friess, the future Mother Caroline, was born August 21, 1824 in a suburb of Paris of a French mother and German father. She grew up in Bavaria, where she entered the School Sisters of Notre Dame, receiving the name Sister Maria Karolina.

Sister Caroline came to America in 1847 at the age of 23. By mid-1848 she had already traveled by riverboat, lake steamer, wagon, stagecoach and railroad from their headquarters in Baltimore to Pittsburgh, Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee, Buffalo, Rochester, Philadelphia, and New York. Her guide on this long journey was the Redemptorist Father St. John Neumann. He had invited Blessed Theresa Gerhardinger, Foundress of the School Sisters of Notre Dame, and Sister Caroline to accompany him on a visit to Redemptorist missions in cities where they might consider opening parish schools. Sister Caroline quickly realized that life in this new world would demand all her creative energy.

## Creative Leader

Before returning to Germany in 1848 Mother Theresa put Sister Caroline in charge of the SSND schools and business matters. In 1850 she appointed the 26 year-old-woman her vicar in North America. By this time there were already 24 sisters, 17 candidates or prospective members, 30 orphans, and about 1,250 pupils in seven schools.

She also directed Mother Caroline to build a motherhouse in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where Bishop John Martin Henni would welcome them. Mother

### *Publication Note:*

*This is a reprint of text in a brochure published by the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53202, for the Centenary of the death of Mother M. Caroline Friess.*

*Reprinted, with pictures, by School Sisters of Notre Dame NAMA Sponsorship Office, 2007.*

Caroline, with three other sisters and a candidate, arrived in Milwaukee on December 15, 1850. Three weeks later she began the first SSND parish school in the West in what is now called Old St. Mary's. By October she had built an annex to the small motherhouse convent and opened St. Mary's Institute, a resident and day schools for higher studies. The astute business woman, pioneer educator, and spiritual leader had begun a remarkable lifework.

She moved quickly. She saw needs and responded to them. Were there orphans? The sisters would care for them. The place was poor? She would find funds and dedicated teachers. Too far away? She would travel there and see what could be done.

## Intrepid Traveler

For ten months of almost every year Mother Caroline traveled thousands of miles back and forth to the east coast, up and down the Mississippi, across the stormy Great Lakes, on muddy country roads, and rumbling railroads. She survived derailments, ferryboat accidents, near shipwreck, and a terrible explosion on the Mississippi steamboat which killed all but 160 of the 500 passengers.

Undaunted, Mother Caroline continued to send Sisters wherever Providence called them: small towns, rural parishes, urban centers. In the words of Bishop J. L. Spalding, "She was one of the great wonderworkers of the early years... her influence extended beyond the interest of her order."

## American Citizen

During her first years in Milwaukee Mother Caroline became an American citizen. This land was her land; its people were her people; she loved her Church as the people of God. She worked untiringly to provide schools and orphanages for the children of immigrants—German, Irish, Polish, Bohemian, French, Dutch, Italian, African Americans—as well as Native American. She received women of all cultures and nationalities into her congregation. She helped other religious congregations get started—even encouraging some of her own candidates to join them. "We are all serving the same God! She would say.

## Commissary General

In 1881 Mother Caroline became Commissary General of the School Sisters of Notre Dame in North America, a new position established to facilitate the government of the congregation. Elected by her sisters to this post, Mother Caro-



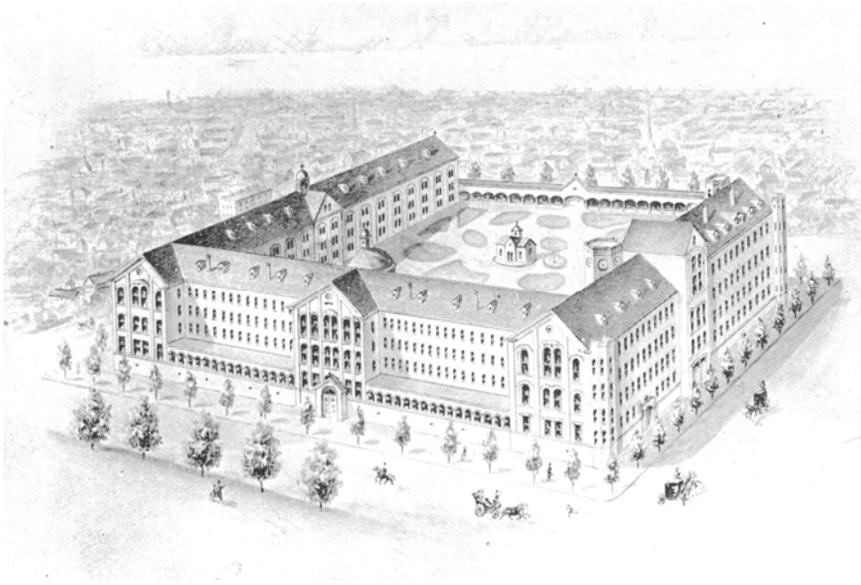
*This photograph of Mother Caroline, with a novice who was shielding her from the sun, was taken in Milwaukee shortly before her death in 1892.*

line continued to promote unity and yet meet the needs of a rapidly growing community. There was now a motherhouse and provincial superior in Baltimore and there would soon be another in St. Louis.

## Woman of prayer

Each of her sisters felt loved by Mother Caroline. The phenomenal growth of the community did not keep her from praying for them one by one. During the last years of her life she prepared a legacy for them. She built the Chapel of Perpetual Adoration at the Milwaukee Motherhouse. Here she hoped her sisters would be drawn to their Lord. Here they would pray always, embracing the needs of the whole world night and day, year after year.

Mother Caroline died just nine days before the dedication of the Adoration Chapel. Her body was laid out there, and its new bell named Carolus in her memory, tolled her passing. On it was inscribed in Latin, "Matrem plango. Filias voco." The mother I mourn. The daughters I call."



*A drawing of the Milwaukee Motherhouse, 1892, from a biography of Mother Caroline by Father P.M. Abbelen.*

## From the Milwaukee Sentinel, July 23, 1892

“Mother Caroline is dead. The head of the Western order of the Sisters of Notre Dame passed quietly away at the Notre Dame convent in this city at 7:20 o’clock yesterday morning. She has left a life work’s record that will be an endearing monument to her piety and zeal.... Her energy knew no limit and under her guidance schools were organized throughout the country, until now they number more than 200, with an attendance of 70,000, in seventeen states and twenty-nine dioceses....

“Mother Caroline was a woman of fine presence and she must have been strikingly beautiful when she was young. She had indomitable courage, great persistency in carrying out all that she undertook and was possessed of fine literary attainments. Her good deeds and the charm of her personal character had made her beloved wherever she was known.”

## Comments from her Contemporaries

### *Sister of another religious congregation:*

“She was a friend in need when the outlook for us was very dark.”

### *Archbishop F.X. Katzer of Milwaukee:*

“A valiant woman....she possessed an uncommonly clear understanding, a penetrating judgment, remarkable will-power—all these combined with the most winning goodness of heart, unselfish kindness, deep and tender feeling, really astonishing prudence in the most trying circumstances of her life. Her heart was full of loving sympathy for all the sorrows and joys of others.... Hers was a manly spirit, in the best and most beautiful sense of the word. She possessed everything in the character of a man that is an ornament to woman as well....”

### *City official to the unemployed:*

“Try that big-hearted mother superior on the hill.”

### *Elias Fred Schauer, C.Ss.R.:*

“One of the brightest lights of her sex in the Catholic Church of America. She was an apostolic woman who knew her mission in behalf of rising Catholic generations....”

### *Archbishop John Ireland:*

“Thanks be to God for having given us Mother Carline. That noble saintly woman has been a blessing to the Church in America for nearly half a century. She was a power for good in all our dioceses.”

### *An artist much in demand:*

was once asked whether he have time to paint her portrait. In astonishment he replied: “Why it would take me three months to point those eyes! And then perhaps not do justice to them.”



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9/29/10