

**1633 — 1812**  
**Catholics Settle in America,  
Loretto Story Begins**

**1812 — 1830**  
**Foundation and Early Days;  
Moving Beyond Kentucky**

**1830 — 1900**  
**Education Mission Expands;  
Loretto Pushes Westward**

**1900 — 1960**  
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Leading American Educators**

**1960 — 1970**  
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**2000 — 2012**  
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Journey to Jubilee 1812-2012**

**2012**  
**Loretto Proclaims  
200th Jubilee!**



## On the road to Jubilee 2012

### A new beginning for Catholics seeking freedom of worship

*By Antoinette Doyle SL*

**W**hat motivates a person or group to leave familiar surroundings, a language and culture theirs from birth, and to move into the unknown? Are they compelled to depart, attracted by a new goal, or does the change happen by chance? As we trace the history of Loretto we shall note several forces at work.

Ancestors of early Kentucky Catholic settlers left England in November 1633 on two wooden sailing ships, the *Ark* and the *Dove*. They were going to America, seeking a new home with freedom of religion not available in their homeland.

The group of about 200 persons came equipped with supplies of food, tools, seeds, and roots for planting. Passengers included farmers, carpenters, blacksmiths, and personnel of all trades needed for a permanent settlement. After a hazardous journey they finally went ashore four months later on a small island off the coast of Maryland. They had reached their destination; it was March 25, 1634.

The colony, open to all who came seeking a new life, settled and grew. The

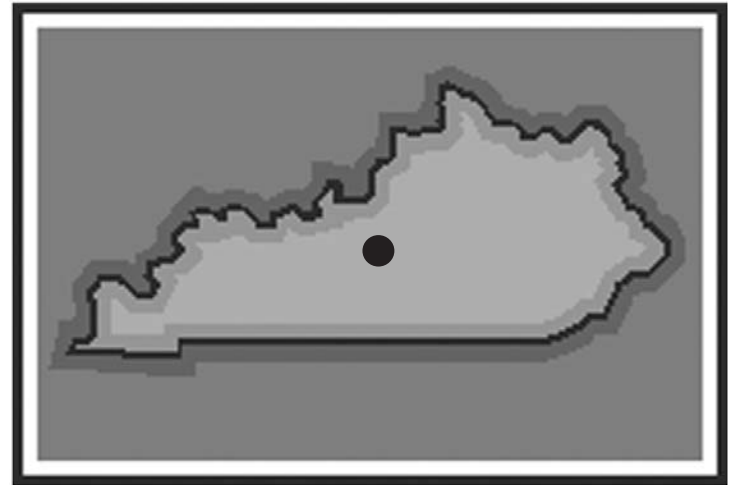
early acceptance of all religious groups, however, ultimately led to political and religious restrictions. Later settlers outnumbered the original Catholic group, and new laws treated them harshly politically, religiously, and economically. Freedom of religion was over for them, and they were ready to move again.

## Moving west from Maryland

A league of 60 of these Catholic families made a pact that they would migrate westward. In 1785 Basil Hayden obtained from the government a 5,000-acre land grant in what would become the state of Kentucky. This he divided, and the settlers bought tracts of perhaps 200 acres from him. They came in groups of 10 or so families at a time and settled along creeks. Before these places had town names, they were known as Pottinger's Creek, or Hardin's Creek, or Coleman's Run.

Drawn again by the search for freedom, the people's goal was to begin anew in

*Kentucky attained statehood on 1792, becoming the fifteenth state in the union. It was never a territory, and was originally part of Virginia until it became a state. The circle on the map at right indicates the five-county area known as the "Holy Land of Kentucky" shown in detail on the map below.*



places close enough to protect one another and share a priest for religious services, if their petition to the bishop would be honored.

One of these settlers was Bennett Rhodes, whose land was at St. Mary's, Ky. Records show that he settled his father's will in Maryland in 1797 and was listed

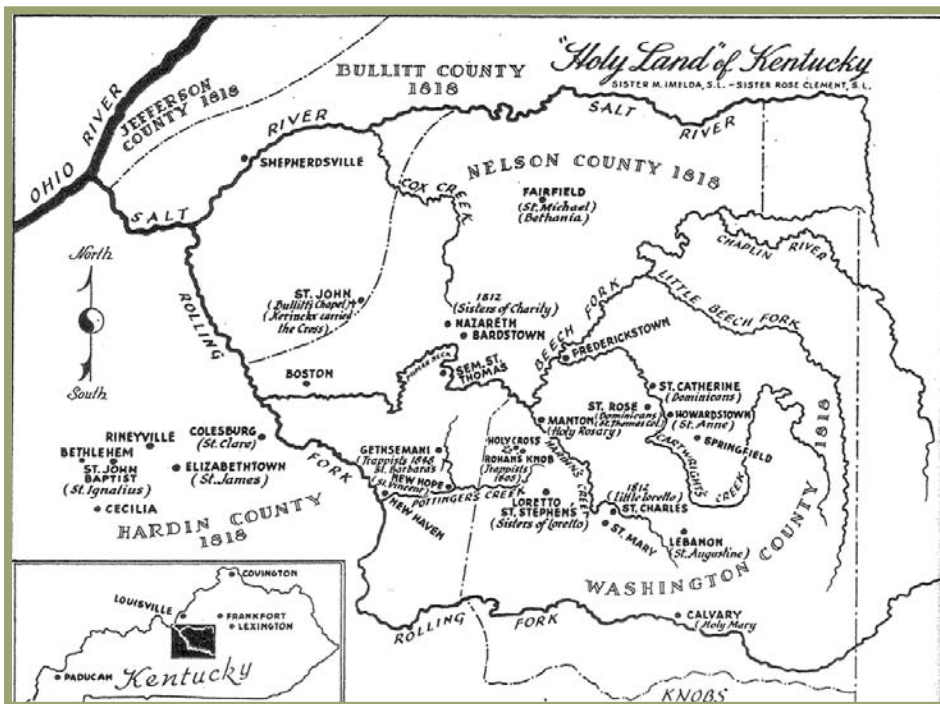
as married in Kentucky in 1801. Soon afterward his sister Ann came to Kentucky for health reasons and lived first with a cousin and later with her brother Bennett. Their sister Mary soon joined them. These women are significant in Loretto history.

## Missionary priests arrive

Stephen T. Badin (1768-1853) was forced to leave France after the French Revolution. The seminary he had entered was closed in 1789, and he came to America drawn by his desire to be a priest in active ministry. Finishing his studies, he was ordained by Bishop John Carroll in Baltimore in 1793, the first priest ordained in America.

He was sent as a missionary to Kentucky, which had become a state in 1792, and eventually settled on land in the area of the Catholic settlements. He named his place St. Stephen's Farm. This is now the location of Loretto Motherhouse. While other priests were in the region for short periods of time, Badin stayed for more than 20 years, returning to France in 1819. Nine years later he came back to America to continue his missionary work, but not in Kentucky.

A long-term helper arrived in the late 1700s in the person of Rev. Charles Nerinckx (1761-1824). He was forced to stop public ministry in his native Belgium due to restrictions placed on priests after the Revolution. Because he would not sign the oath pledging allegiance to the nation and king over the church, and to avoid imprisonment or death for his refusal to do



*Loretto Sisters Mary Imelda and Rose Clement created this map for the book "Giant in the Wilderness, A Biography of Father Charles Nerinckx," written by Helene Margaret and published in 1952. Catholic families were drawn to the verdant, fertile area just east of the Ohio River where five counties were founded among the Salt River, Rolling Fork, and Beech Fork tributaries. Priests and orders of monks and nuns came to build and sustain the faith as the people settled the land. The counties of Jefferson, Bullitt, Nelson, Hardin and Washington became the original homes of the Trappist monks, the Sisters of Charity, the Dominicans, and, of course, the Sisters of Loretto. The rich history and religious traditions of that early time continue today in the heart of the Kentucky "Holy Land."*

## Civilized Europe might be restricting priestly service, but missionary work on the frontier was wide open and waiting.

this, he set out for America to continue his call to religious service. Arriving in 1804, he studied English for several months at Georgetown College and then was sent to Kentucky to assist Badin. Civilized Europe might be restricting priestly service, but missionary work on the frontier was wide open and waiting.

Nerinckx began his trip to Kentucky with a group of Trappist monks who were migrating from France to open a monastery not far from Badin's cabin. Traveling with baggage sufficient to open a new establishment, they were very slow. Nerinckx soon bought a horse and came on alone.

Daniel Boone and some earlier frontiersmen had taken the southern route in Kentucky. Nerinckx, however, traveled from Baltimore to Pittsburgh on foot,

turned south, crossed the Ohio River at Maysville, and then went on land again to Badin's area east of Bardstown. The total journey took about four months.

He arrived in 1805 to begin a ministry in that area that would last until 1824. He and Badin were circuit-riding priests, going from one settlement to another to serve and encourage the people in their faith.

Badin and Nerinckx believed that the way to secure religion in the families of the area was through the education of youth. For this they envisioned a group of religious women. A first attempt in 1805 resulted in a group of 20 interested women, but as time to start drew closer, the women and the community lost their enthusiasm. In 1807 a second attempt failed when just before seven women were to enter, fire destroyed the place that had been built for the convent.

In 1812 the pattern changed. The impetus came from women, not from the priests. Distressed because her brother's children were not being educated, Mary Rhodes had opened a log-cabin school on his property. She was joined by Christina Stuart and later by Ann (Nancy) Havern.

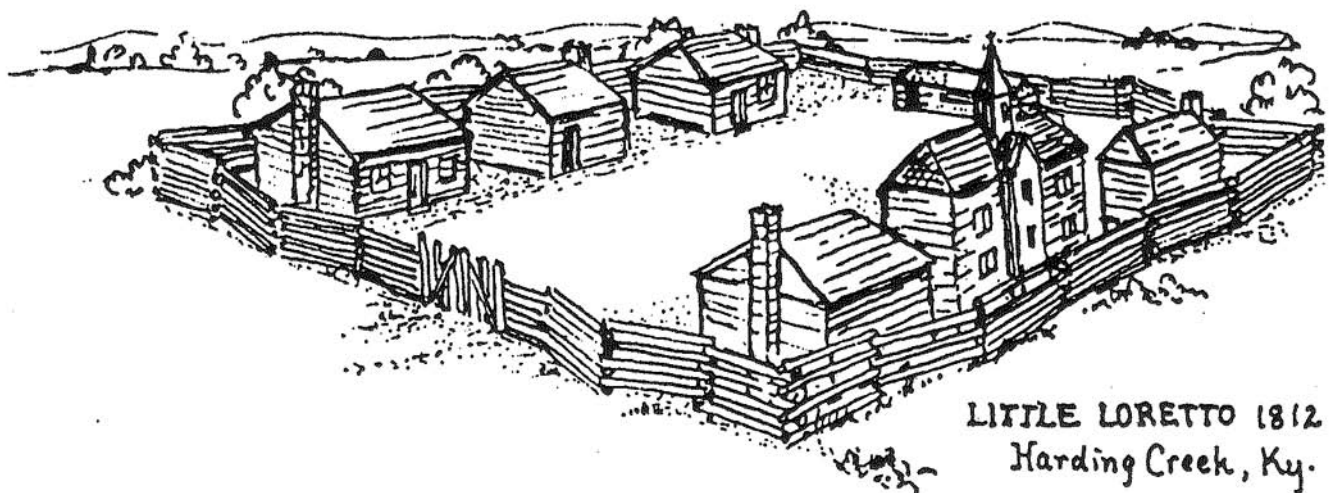
These three women wished to continue teaching but to do so as dedicated religious sisters. They asked Nerinckx to

help them begin. Because this had been the dream of the priests, he agreed. He moved from St. Stephen's Farm to St. Mary's, about 10 miles away, built himself a cabin at the cost of \$6.50 plus his own labor, and the adventure began. The spot was called "Little Loretto."

Not wanting to be trained by other religious congregations, the women asked Nerinckx to write them a rule, which he did on one sheet of paper. Thus began one of the first orders of sisters founded in the United States. Originally known as "The Little Society of the Friends of Mary Under the Cross of Jesus," the title later became the much shorter "Sisters of Loretto."

The three women were received on April 25, 1812. We can imagine that many people crowded the "church" to witness this ceremony in the wilderness. Attracted by this way of life, three more young women joined the group in June of that year. They were Ann Rhodes and Sarah Havern, blood sisters of the foundresses, and Nellie Morgan, known as Sister Clare, the first not to take her given name in religion. It is said that the community had two reactions to this new way of life. Among the young men in the area, some rejoiced that all the old maids could be taken care of by being sent to the convent; others speculated that all the good prospects for wives might enter, and they were disheartened!

*Edith Ann Jaeger SL drew this depiction of "Little Loretto," the original complex of log buildings where Mary Rhodes, Christina Stuart, and Ann Havern had come to teach the children of pioneer families in Kentucky. In 1812, the women were established as The Little Society of the Friends of Mary Under the Cross of Jesus. Father Charles Nerinckx suggested the log complex be called "Little Loretto" after a shrine in Italy built to honor the Nazareth home of the Holy Family.*



When there were just three sisters, Mary Rhodes was leader of the group. When there were six, it was time for them to elect the superior themselves. Their choice was Ann Rhodes, for they said she was the youngest and the holiest. Her term was short, six months, for she, who had come to Kentucky for her health, died of tuberculosis Dec. 11, 1812, having been permitted to make vows on her deathbed.

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Mary Rhodes was next elected to be the superior.

The life of the young community was not easy. They began with two cabins on the Rhodes property, one for themselves and one for the school. Two more were soon added. They accepted boarders as well as day students, so there was round-the-clock care for them. There were lessons to prepare, a garden to tend, the religious exercises required of their new life, and to earn some cash, they took in spinning, sewing, and weaving. Tuition for boarders was half in cash, half in produce — potatoes, flour, sugar, coffee, meal, tallow, and lard. No one was refused if unable to pay, and orphans were taken in.

If the life was difficult, why did the first women want to take it on? They were drawn by their love of God and their desire to serve the neighbor and the church. Why did others follow them? They also were inspired to serve God and the community through a total dedication of their lives, and they saw the happiness of the women who had begun the life despite the hardships they encountered. Within four years of their foundation, the sisters, who then numbered 24, were ready to

open their first daughter house at Calvary, Ky. It, too, was a boarding school, another response to a need, another brave step in their role as religious educators on the frontier.



**About the author:**  
Loretto history buff and retired philosophy professor Antoinette Doyle SL has been serving on the Motherhouse Tour Committee for

many years and enjoys sharing her love of Loretto history with people who visit the Nerinx, Ky., property. With a doctorate in philosophy from St. Louis University, Sister Antoinette taught for 22 years at Loretto Heights College in Denver. She then retired to the Motherhouse where she served as financial controller for 15 years. She continues to guide visitors around the beautiful Motherhouse grounds.



Photos by Donna Mattingly SL.

The log cabin built by Father Charles Nerinckx in 1812 still stands on Loretto Motherhouse grounds today. Originally, the cabin had been built several miles from what became the Motherhouse site, and was later moved to this newer location to ensure its preservation as a significant historical artifact.