

On June 21 or 22, 1809, Elizabeth Ann Seton left the comfortable home on Paca Street in Baltimore and set out by wagon for rural Emmitsburg, 52 miles west. In the Paca Street house where she had lived for just over a year, she had found the freedom to live her Catholic faith without the criticism and persecution that she had found in her native New York. In Baltimore she had begun a small school for girls, had taken private vows, and had welcomed several women who shared her evolving dream of beginning a religious community. Now with each slow mile that they traveled along the rough turnpike roads, that dream was becoming more real.

With Elizabeth was her oldest daughter Anna Maria, Maria Murphy (an early applicant for the sisterhood from Philadelphia) and her sisters-in-law Cecilia (who was ailing) and Harriet Seton. Elizabeth wrote that they had to “walk the horses all the way - and have walked ourselves...nearly half the time -- this morning four miles and a half before breakfast.”

When the group finally arrived after several days’ travel, they found that the house was not ready for them – an all-too-familiar refrain in community history. Fr. John Dubois, a Sulpician who was later to become the community’s priest-superior, lent them his small log cabin on St. Mary’s Mountain in the interim. Elizabeth wrote that they were “half in the sky...the height of our situation is almost incredible.”

About a month later the remaining Sisters left Baltimore for their new home in the Maryland hills, along with Elizabeth’s other girls Catherine and Rebecca and two boarding students. Around this time Elizabeth’s boys, William and Richard, also left Baltimore to begin their studies at Mount St. Mary’s.

When the second group arrived in Emmitsburg, the old stone farmhouse in St. Joseph’s Valley was, relatively speaking, ready. The Thompson sisters, two local women, came to join the sisters. Sixteen women and children moved into the Stone House, the first home of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s, as the community was first known. July 31, 1809, marked the beginning of their life together.

In their first few days, in typical Charity fashion, they got organized. Duties were assigned -- Sister Kitty, housekeeper; Sister Rose, Mother Seton’s Assistant; Sister Cecilia O’Conway, Secretary and School Sister; Sister Sally, Procuratrix, washer and baker. All took turns cooking and ironing. With no water supply at the house, nearby Tom’s Creek had to serve for washing clothes, an all-day affair. If it rained, the women had to carry their heavy, wet tubs of laundry back to the farmhouse. Provisional rules were adopted to guide the Sisters’ spiritual exercises and domestic chores.

After a few unsettling months because of disagreements with their clerical advisors, things soon settled down. By September Elizabeth could write to her friend Julia Scott, “We have the best ingredients of happiness – order, peace and solitude....Nothing can be more pleasant than our situation as to woods, meadows, etc., the comforts of life in plenty.” Though many hardships and trials awaited Elizabeth and the young community, this tiny seed would flourish and blossom into “an immensity of future good.” Today, 7 of the 12 congregations of the Sisters of Charity Federation trace their roots directly to Elizabeth’s foundation of the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph’s on July 31, 200 years ago.