

CHAPTER 15

FROM REGENSBURG TO RACINE: AN ODYSSEY

Maria Benedicta Bauer, a nun of Heilig Kreuz (Holy Cross) Monastery in Regensburg, Bavaria, had long followed with interest a mid-nineteenth century movement among Bavarian nuns to undertake a mission of education for the masses of German Catholics who were emigrating at that time to the United States. Galvanized primarily by the directors of the Ludwig Missionsverein and its collaborators in America, these nuns were prepared to leave their cloisters to teach the children of the emigrants.[\[1\]](#)

Maria Benedicta herself had been prepared to join the effort as early as 1827. That particular mission, for reasons unknown, was cancelled. But later, as prioress of her convent, she sent Holy Cross women to America in response to a plea from the Benedictine Abbot of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, Boniface Wimmer. The first of these women established a school in Williamsburg (now Brooklyn), New York, in 1853. They were joined by a second contingent in 1855. From the Williamsburg foundation (now headquartered in Amityville on Long Island) was to be born a long line of new congregations, fondly known as "The Regensburg Tree." The Racine Dominicans would spring up as a shrub beside that tree when Maria Benedicta Bauer would follow her sisters to the United States. She was intent, however, on establishing her own motherhouse.

Maria Benedicta was born Maria Anna Bauer on July 17, 1803, fourth of the six children of the blacksmith Johann Michael Bauer and his wife Anna Margaret Klotz' of Pielenhofen, Bavaria.[\[2\]](#) Only months before Maria Anna Bauer's birth, the Great Secularization was inaugurated in Bavaria, when nearly all religious communities were dispersed by order of the Napoleonic government, and their properties confiscated for state use. The proud Cistercian monastery that had dominated and largely ruled tiny Pielenhofen since 1237 was sold off in bits and pieces. In 1806 when Maria Anna was three years old, one small section of the central building was given over to twenty-nine Carmelite nuns from Munich and Neuburg who had refused to renounce their vows. There they would be allowed to live out their days on a meager government pension, but they were forbidden to receive any new members. It is probably these women who are referred to when the adult Maria Anna, by then the prioress Maria Benedicta, mentions in her journal the "pious sentiments which were imparted to me by pious nuns even from my childhood."[\[3\]](#)

M. Benedicta Bauer, 1853



Though no records of the Pielenhofen state school of that period have survived, it was almost certainly there that Maria Anna received her early education. In any case, it has been established that she did not attend either of the only two Bavarian nuns' schools to have survived the secularization, Holy Cross and Santa Klara in Regensburg.

At the age of seventeen, three years after the end of the Napoleonic domination of Bavaria, the blacksmith's daughter entered the Dominican monastery of Holy Cross to become part of a story that was already six hundred years old.^[4] There, after a year of candidature and another of novitiate, she made her first profession of vows in 1822. Her solemn profession would, by Bavarian civil law, have to wait until she was thirty-three years old. She spent most of her early convent years teaching in the state school for girls for which the nuns had been forced to assume responsibility in 1803 as the price of their continued existence as sisters. Already a fairly accomplished pianist and organist, she was soon given charge also of musical education within the community.

On January 16, 1845, Maria Benedicta Bauer was elected prioress of Holy Cross, then a community of sixteen choir nuns and eight lay sisters.^[5] By the time she would be elected to her fifth three-year term, the community would have grown to thirty-one choir nuns, twenty-one lay sisters, five novices, and four candidates.^[6]

Her terms as prioress were marked by a vigorous, if not always popular, campaign of reform in a community whose discipline had suffered much from the adaptations at first made necessary by the Secularization of 1803 to 1817, but later simply tolerated. Her efforts at outreach included a proposal in 1855 to receive and educate a number of ransomed African slave girls who would eventually be returned to Africa as teachers.^[7] She was also bent on the material improvement and expansion of the monastery. To that end she engaged in several remodeling projects and founded the first branch houses of Holy Cross, each with its own school for girls of the farming and laboring classes.^[8] Through this last enterprise, an occupation that had barely survived forty years became an aggressively pursued ministry for the Regensburg Dominican nuns. For the prioress, the establishment of branch houses seems to have been first of all a ministerial effort within the broader post-Secularization "re-Catholicizing" of Bavaria. But she apparently saw it also as an opportunity to transfer nuns who were having problems within the Regensburg monastery to communities where they might fare better or be less trouble to her.

Maria Benedicta Bauer's days as prioress in Regensburg ended abruptly during her fifth term in June 1858, when she was deposed from office and disenfranchised for life within the community by the new bishop of Regensburg, Ignatius von Senestrey. His charge against her was that she had abused her authority and "grossly mismanaged" the finances of the community.^[9]

It is true that the prioress could be harsh when crossed. How often she lamented in her journals, "Ach, meine Heftigkeit!" ("Ach, my heavy-handedness!"). Her correspondence provides a number of examples of her often caustic and impulsive manner. Yet it is equally clear that she dearly loved her sisters and was generally very warmly maternal in her dealings with them. She wrote in her journal:

I never (in my innate simplicity) had any doubt that any but one only of those currently in this convent had any persistent resentment toward me personally. Nor did I feel the least resentment toward one or the other. And if at times I have been Hot-tempered and cross with one or the other, they all know that I always mean well, and then, I always try to make up for my fault. -- So I believe there is scarcely anyone I have to suspect of harboring an ongoing resentment against me. -- In the future I shall try mightily to rid myself even of this brusqueness, rudeness, hot-temper.[\[10\]](#)

As for her alleged financial mismanagement, the accusation seems to stem from her efforts at expansion and renovation, and especially from her having used patrimony funds for those purposes. But the expansion and renovation projects initiated by her seemed in general to have been justified. And her use of the patrimony of some of the nuns (carefully documented by her) was probably based on counsel she had received from the Master of the Order, who refused to allow the Bavarian nuns to make solemn profession if the community would ever be in need of funds. In that case nuns under simple vows could donate their patrimony to the monastery.[\[11\]](#)

On examination, the bishop's basic case against the prioress is far from convincing. She in fact emerges as fundamentally vindicated in her administration, an administration made especially difficult by internal divisions, wrought primarily by an unscrupulous chaplain on whose dismissal she had finally insisted in April 1856. At the vortex of the dissension within the community were two young nuns, Cäcilia Solleder and Reginalda Brenner, both resentful of the chaplain's dismissal and of the prioress' policies in general. In the wake of discipline imposed on Cäcilia and the prioress' subsequent efforts to persuade the pair to join the missionaries in Williamsburg, they had secretly left the monastery in April 1858. It was they who had leveled the accusations upon which the episcopal investigation focused following their departure.

Maria Benedicta's removal from office left her with a bleak future if she remained within the walls of Holy Cross. But there is no evidence that she contested it. She returned instead to her longstanding desire to emigrate to the United States. Now fifty-five years old and already showing signs of the stomach cancer that would eventually cause her death, the ex-prioress sailed for Williamsburg via Bremen in September 1858. She was accompanied by three others. Maria Thomasina Ginker was twenty-four years old, three years professed, and novitiate companion of the two nuns who had been at the heart of the prioress' grief. Cunigunda Schell, twenty, was still a novice when the possibility of a new American mission materialized. Her profession was accelerated so that she could make her vows before departure. Finally there was the watchman's daughter from Regensburg, Crescenza Traubinger, who was fifteen years old. She had been encouraged to enter the monastery by Maria Benedicta Bauer. Now she became a candidate expressly to join her in looking for a new convent home.[\[12\]](#)

Archival documents make it clear that Maria Benedicta Bauer intended from the beginning to establish her own motherhouse in the United States. Nevertheless, she lived and taught with the sisters in Williamsburg until she had managed to devise a plan for action. This she did in consultation with Joseph A. Kelly, the provincial of the Dominican friars in Somerset, Ohio.[\[13\]](#) In June 1860, she and Maria Thomasina Ginker traveled by train and stagecoach to Somerset, where they were to spend some time with the "English sisters," learning the language there

instead of at Williamsburg where there had been little opportunity or incentive to learn it in the totally German school and community. Their two original companions elected to remain in Williamsburg.[\[14\]](#)

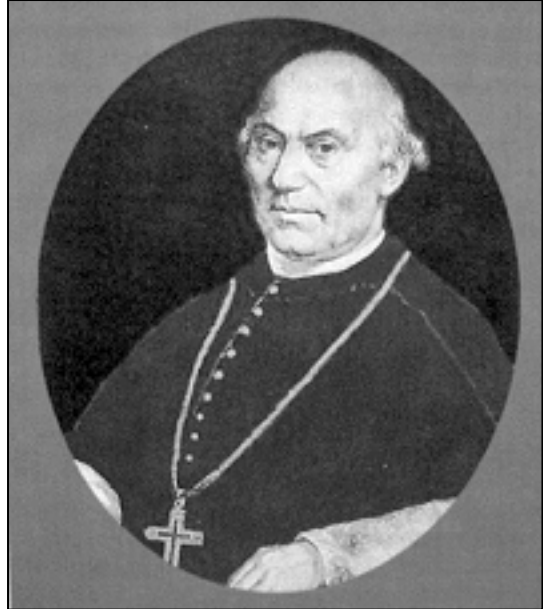
The "English sisters" were, of course, the small band of Dominicans who had been sent out in 1830 from St. Catharine's in Kentucky to the little hilltop town of Somerset on the National Road. By now they had a thriving convent and boarding school not far from the friars' church and priory at Holy Trinity. Both of the new Bavarian arrivals found Somerset a refreshing interlude. But by August it seemed the dream of a new motherhouse of their own was about to be fulfilled. The Dominican bishop of Nashville, James Whelan, had requested sisters from Somerset to establish an academy in his city. According to Maria Benedicta, the sisters "asked the two of us to settle in Nashville with the four sisters who had been called, to help them out with music and other necessary preparations for the coming recital. We accepted this on condition that we might, after the recital, share in the field of labor in the German parish in Nashville. This the bishop promised, and with this intention he took us with him."[\[15\]](#) Bishop Whelan's version suggests a slightly different dynamic: "S. Benedicta expressed a desire to come with them and I consented."[\[16\]](#) The four Somerset sisters, the two Regensburgers and the bishop left Somerset on August 15, 1860. They made their way by stagecoach, rail, river steamer and again rail, arriving in Nashville early on Sunday morning, August 19.[\[17\]](#)

The Regensburg sisters' sojourn in Nashville lasted only a few months. Maria Benedicta was increasingly vexed by the non-cloistered lifestyle of the American sisters. "These good sisters have as yet no rule as religious-no more than layfolk in the Third Order. So apparently they have no special obligations! But we have to conform as one house to all of the customs and practices here, since we are just foreign sisters from Germany."[\[18\]](#) Besides, both of the Bavarians found the southern climate and food a hardship. "The climate here has been so detrimental to my health," wrote Maria Benedicta, "that on my arrival here I was very ill for six weeks. And what is even worse is the English cooking, which I can tolerate less and less. Often I can't eat for a week at a time, since my digestive system is failing and I have to struggle constantly with vomiting. As a result my constitution, so healthy otherwise, will not stand up much longer. I often feel completely drained of strength."[\[19\]](#)

Although the missionaries wrote home to the Ludwig Missionsverein as late as December 12 to beg for funding for the motherhouse they hoped to build in Nashville the following spring,[\[20\]](#) they were fast coming to realize that the German parish there was too poor and disorganized to support a school. Perhaps, too, the fact that the St. Cecilia sisters owned slaves (as did most southern religious groups) disturbed the Bavarians; for Bavarians were notorious in the South for their anti-slavery activities.

By the end of December Maria Benedicta began corresponding with Michael Deisenrieder, a Bavarian priest of the Milwaukee Diocese whom she had apparently either met in Europe or to whom she had been referred by the chaplain of the Missionsverein, about the possibility of a move north. But Maria Benedicta had certainly heard of Bishop John Martin Henni's open and welcoming policies and of his particular eagerness to recruit German-speaking clergy and religious for his diocese. Thus with the first signs of spring, the two sisters were traveling once again, barely a month before the outbreak of the Civil War.

**John Martin Henni,
first Bishop of Milwaukee, 1844-1881**



A brief stay in Milwaukee brought them two new companions—candidates from Mother Caroline Friess' large supply! Mother Caroline was a Bavarian and the girlhood friend of the nun that Maria Benedicta had chosen as first superior of her branch house in Niederviehbach.[\[21\]](#) The two young women were not the first that the superior of the School Sisters of Notre Dame had given away to foster the new foundations of others. Within six years, one of them, Maria Oberbrunner, would be the prioress of the group she was volunteering to join, sight unseen![\[22\]](#)

At this time they also met with their new bishop, John Martin Henni, who suggested that they make Green Bay their temporary home. The German parish of St. Mary of the Assumption there had recently built a new school and would welcome trained and experienced teachers.

After yet one more journey by train and stagecoach, the two nuns and their two new candidates arrived in Green Bay on Good Friday, March 29, 1861. They quickly divided the new schoolhouse into classrooms and living quarters, and by Easter Tuesday began to register pupils. Maria Benedicta had determined from the start that the school was to be open to boys as well as girls and to children of any religious persuasion. It is uncertain whether this decision was purely her own, since earlier reports in the Green Bay newspapers had stated that the parishioners had promised the same. But by this time the sisters had already experienced Williamsburg, a school with both boys and girls. The welcoming of Protestants, however, would surely have been a bit strange to Bavarians, in whose native land Protestants were not even welcome to live! Bishop Henni may have influenced the nuns to assume a more open attitude.

What astonished Maria Benedicta most of all as registration proceeded was the ages of those who came. "The girls range in age from five to twenty-five. At first we were under the impression that these really grown-up 'ladies' had come to register their children, but they were registering themselves as pupils!"[\[23\]](#) On April 9 classes began.

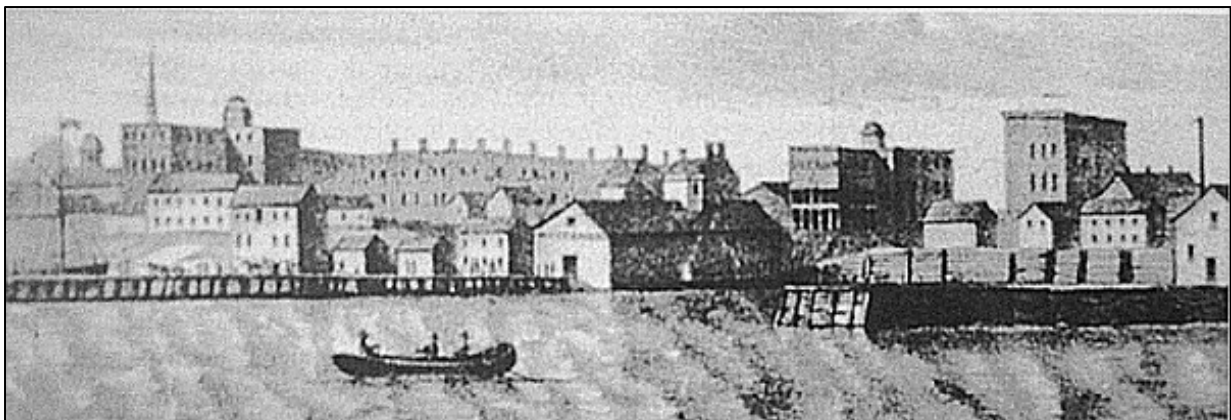
In spite of the bishop's repeated insistence that Green Bay was no place for a permanent foundation, by early May the always impulsive Maria Benedicta had purchased lots adjoining St. Mary's Church for her motherhouse. And though she resisted telling the local newspapers until she had written to inform Bishop Henni of the step she had taken, *The Green Bay Advocate* carried the story just a week after her letter to the bishop! The bishop apparently felt it better not to respond directly for a while. But he did send the rector of his seminary, Father Michael Heiss, who wrote to his friend: "In August I must go to Green Bay to give a retreat to the Dominican sisters who are building a convent there."[\[24\]](#) Heiss was well enough impressed to endorse the sisters' plea to the Ludwig Missionsverein for funding for the project.[\[25\]](#)

The earliest surviving word from Bishop Henni on the matter came only after Maria Benedicta had written in early December to ask permission to begin building the following spring.[\[26\]](#) Then later in the same month she wrote to tell him that she was beginning to realize that

Green Bay is so small, and the German parish so poor that they send scarcely thirty-six children to the school, and hardly half of these are able to pay two shillings a month. We receive as a rule no more than four or five dollars a month, but our expenses are usually half again as much. Besides, our holy rule says we are never to build a convent if there is no prospect for continued existence.[\[27\]](#)

Henni reminded her quite gently in his response: "You, dear Sister, probably already know that I've always objected to the founding of a motherhouse in Green Bay. I gladly consent to your establishing a school there, but the motherhouse must always have an independent location and more spacious grounds.... I am sure that there are more suitable places."[\[28\]](#) A month later he wrote with suggestions of several possible Wisconsin locations, urging that she take a trip to visit each of them in spring.[\[29\]](#)

There is no evidence at all that Maria Benedicta ever followed his suggestion. On May 1 she signed the deed to a house and lot in Racine, and on May 12 she and her small community, along with a few boarding students and orphans, arrived to take possession.[\[30\]](#) The nuns opened their first Racine school in the basement of St. Patrick's Church on June 1, raising money to supplement tuition by giving concerts at which their superior performed on the organ.[\[31\]](#)



Racine, Wisconsin, in 1858, looking south across the Root River from St. Patrick's Parish

By 1863 the sisters were teaching in several schools in Racine and one in Port Washington. The next year saw the establishment of an academy for girls within the new motherhouse that had been built at Pearl and Chippeway Streets (later renamed Park Avenue and Twelfth Street).

When tuition, concerts and grants from the Ludwig Missionsverein did not bring in sufficient funds to support the schools, the nuns received Bishop Henni's permission to beg from door to door. Maria Thomasina found this task not entirely pleasant, as she wrote to Rev. Paul Kagerer of the Ludwig Missionsverein:

Last autumn, so that we would be able to pay the pressing debts we had assumed for the needed addition to the building [for the academy], I actually had to go out, with our bishop's permission, to take up a collection among the people. That was a difficult duty for me, but the example of our holy father Dominic gave me courage to go from house to house and beg for a kind donation from the people. I devoted six weeks to this duty, and here and there had to put up with great unpleasantness. But in this case the unpleasantness could only lead to trust, since our begging got us out of our pressing need.[\[32\]](#)

All this while, the sisters were continuing to live the monastic regimen of the Second Order and to maintain cloister to whatever extent they could. The stomach cancer that had surely been present already for a few years before Maria Benedicta left Regensburg became more serious in early 1865. By June of that year she was confined to bed, and Maria Thomasina found herself taking on more and more responsibility for the young community. The prioress died on October 13, 1865, leaving eight professed sisters, seven novices, and eleven candidates.

Because there were not enough perpetually professed sisters to hold a canonical election, Bishop Henni appointed the thirty-one-year-old Maria Thomasina Ginker to be prioress. She was in office less than a year when she contracted typhoid fever from a novice she was nursing. Unaware of the gravity of her illness, she decided to preach the community's annual retreat in late August 1866, when the scheduled preacher cancelled at the last minute. The retreat, for which her carefully written conferences still survive, ended with the reception of three novices on August 28. The second prioress of the Racine Dominicans died on September 6.

Maria Benedicta Bauer's work in this country had been marked from the beginning by her determination to Americanize. She had emphasized in all of her advertising for her schools that both English and German would be used. As she had done in her schools in Bavaria, she recruited as students especially the children of the working class. The latter emphasis continued to be strong in the community after Mother Benedicta's death in 1865. Efforts at adapting to the American culture, however, became much weaker during the long administration of Maria Hyacintha Oberbrunner, especially with the advent of Jodocus A. Birkhaeuser, who served as chaplain from 1868 until his death in 1908. Their influence served to keep the Racine Dominican community heavily German in its internal life as well as in its ministerial choices even into the 1920s.

NOTES

1. The *Ludwig Missionsverein* of Munich was established in 1838. Supported by donations from interested Catholics and particularly from its royal patron, King Ludwig I, the society made grants to fund the travel costs and foundations of 3dVdr:d11 I missionaries.
2. The children born to Johann Michael Bauer and his wife were Johann Baptist (1798-1806, Anna Maria (1800-1808), a stillborn infant (1802), Maria Anna (1803-1865), Michael (1806-1879), and Maria Katharina (1809-1811). Anna Margaret Klotz', however, had a daughter by a previous marriage, Maria Margaretha Schmid, born in 1793. She has to be the unnamed sister mentioned several times in M. Benedicta's journals, since the other girls had all died earlier. (M. Benedicta's journals, all from 1854 and 1855, are in the Racine Dominican Archives(RDA).
3. *Tagebuch II*, "Retreat Notes, 1854."
4. The monastery of Heilig Kreuz had been established in 1233.

5. Chapter Acts, Heilig Kreuz, January 16, 1845 (Bischofliches Zentralarchiv Regensburg (hereinafter BZAR) K1 114/19: *Priorinwahlen*: 1832-1900, and *Schematismus der Geistlichkeit des Bistums Regensburg fur das Jahr 1844* (Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1845).
6. **Schematismus der Geistlichkeit des Bistums Regensburg fur das Jahr 1857** (Regensburg: Georg Joseph Manz, 1857).
7. While Maria Benedicta's own proposal seems not to have materialized, a group of such girls was actually received by the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Munich about the same time. Every one of these girls, however, died of lung diseases and emotional trauma before their planned transfer to the United States. (M.B. Bauer correspondence: BZAR, K1 114/6, *Klausurdispense*: 1832-1944; Notre Dame documentation from SSND Archives.)
8. Documentation for the various renovation projects as well as for financial aspects of the branch foundations is found in Maria Benedicta Bauer's notebooks, Racine Dominican Archives. Correspondence concerning the branch houses of Niederviehbach (1847), Mintraching (1853), and Williamsburg (1855) is found in BZAR, KL 112/1: *Filialkloster Niederviehbach*, K1 114/29, *Filialkloster Mintraching* 1852-1860; and K1 114/31, *Filialkloster in Williamsburg (USA)*: 1853-1895. Other documentation in the archives of the *Ludwig Missionsverein*, Munich, and Kloster St. Maria, Niederviehbach.
9. Letter of Bishop von Senestrey, announcing the deposition to the nuns of Heilig Kreuz and its branch houses (BZAR K1 114/2: *Oberhirtliche Visitation*, 1837-1921). No such letter, it seems, was sent to the nuns in Williamsburg, although they were still subject to the prioress of Holy Cross.
10. *Tagebuch II*, June 15, 1854. The one whom she suspects resents her is probably Reginalda Brener, friend of Cäcilia Solleder. The reasons for Reginalda's resentment will be dealt with shortly.
11. Letter of Dominicus Lentz, O.P., socius to the Master, to Maria Benedicta Bauer, Jan. 27, 1857. BZAR K1 114/2: *Oberhirtliche Visitation*, 1837-1921.
12. BZAR, K1 114/31, *Filialkloster in Williamsburg (USA)*: 1853-1895
13. This correspondence has not survived, or at least it has not yet been found.
14. Crescenzia Traubinger had in the meantime been received into the Williamsburg community as Sister Maria Dominica. Both she and Cunigunda Schell, already professed, lived out their lives as members of the Williamsburg group.
15. Letter of Maria Benedicta Bauer to Bishop John M. Henni, Jan. 14, 1861, Archives, Archdiocese of Milwaukee (MM).
16. Letter of Bishop James Whelan to Bishop John M. Henni, Nashville, March 7, 1861, MM.
17. Sister Mary Frances Walsh, who chronicled the journey and the early years at St. Cecilia's in Nashville (The Annals of St. Cecilia Convent: 1860- 1888), never mentions the presence or participation of the two Bavarian nuns. This could be explained by the fact that she was concentrating only on her own congregation. Certain discrepancies, however, between her account and Maria Benedicta's lead one to suspect that the omission reflects the tension which seems to have grown between Maria Benedicta (and possibly Maria Thomasina) and the former Somerset sisters by the time they parted company.
18. Maria Benedicta Bauer to Bishop John M. Henni, Jan. 14, 1861, MM.
19. Maria Benedicta Bauer to John Henni.
20. Archives, *Ludwig Missionsverein*, Munich (#395).
21. Maria Amanda von Schenk, first of the superior Niederviehbach convent.
22. As Mother Maria Hyacintha, she would be appointed by Bishop Henni to succeed Mother Benedicta and Mother Thomasina after the untimely deaths of the two foundresses within a year of each other (October 1865 and September 1866). The other candidate from the Notre Dame community was Cunigunda Loesch. She became Sister Rosa, but was later obliged to leave the Racine community when Bishop Henni refused her a temporary leave of absence to recover her health.
23. Maria Benedicta Bauer to Bishop Henni, June 6, 1860, MM.
24. Michael Heiss to Kilian Kleiner, July 5, 1861, MM.
25. Heiss to Kleiner, Aug. 30, 1861, MM. "They certainly are fully deserving of favorable consideration by the esteemed Board of Directors."
26. Bauer to Henni, Dec. 10, 1861, MM. There is, of course, the possibility that he did write immediately, but that Maria Benedicta found the response too embarrassing to keep! (All of Henni's extant letters to her are in the Racine Dominican Archives, with no copies in Milwaukee.)
27. Bauer to Henni, Dec. 28, 1861, MM.
28. Henni to Bauer, Jan. 3, 1862, RDA.
29. Henni to Bauer, Jan. 12, 1862, RDA.

30. The German Catholic newspaper, *Wahrheits Freund*, under the date of May 28, reports that "On the twelfth of this month the venerable Mother Benedicta Bauer of the Order of St. Dominic with eleven companions arrived here with the intention of founding a motherhouse of her Order in Racine." The pastor, Matthew W. Gibson, tells of the coming of M. Benedicta and "Sister Thomas" and their eight novices, two of whom "were received last week in my Parish." (Letter to *Propaganda Fide*, Sept. 8, 1861, Archives, *Propaganda Fide*, Rome) Documents in the Racine Dominican Archives account for three novices (Sisters Hyacintha Oberbrunner, Rose Loesch, Raymunda Muller) and two candidates (Barbara Fox, Mary Endres), and at least one boarder, Mary Rositer. Since there is no record of Sister Dominica (Barbara) Huber, who had been received in Green Bay, it is assumed she had left the community.
31. *Racine Weekly Journal*, May 28, 1862, 3, and June 11, 3. Parents often could not pay the tuition because the Civil War had so tightened their finances.
32. Maria Thomasina Ginker to Paul Kagerer, Racine, June 10, 1865, Draft Copy in RDA.