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Research Note: The Missionary Sisters of Louisburg Square

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The Missionary Sisters of Louisburg Square

When we think of Beacon Hill today, we think of politicians, very pricey real estate, quaint cobblestone streets, and Bulfinch architecture. A hundred years ago, however, Beacon Hill was already an aging neighborhood, home to a diverse population. Descended as “a quaint, old-fashioned Bloomsbury-like district,” Beacon Hill’s southern slope was planned by a consortium called the Mount Vernon Proprietors, who intended to attract the wealthiest Bostonians of the early nineteenth century. One of the Hill’s most elegant addresses, Louisburg Square, was developed between 1834 and 1848 and its classic red brick bow front architecture and private park was coveted by the most “proper” of Bostonians. But, by the 1880s, the city and the Hill were undergoing dramatic changes.

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When the broad avenues and commanding brownstones of the Back Bay rose from the city’s landfill project, the steep, narrow byways and smaller brick facades of Beacon Hill seemed passé. Industrialists and the nouveau riche followed the fashionable across town to what were once single-family structures newly transformed into affordable rooming houses, bachelor apartments, and condominiums; and the large corner house on the corner of Mt. Vernon Street where the Infirmary stood remained for 22 years. Offices, a Common Room, and dormitories. The Society remained in the service of the Hospital for the next 45 years at this same time expanding their mission “to serve the sick, the children and the poor.” In 1875 they opened an orphanage for boys and a school for girls, both of which flourished. The Society also organized summer camps in Winthrop, Massachusetts, at Humarock Beach, and on the shore near Marblehead, so that children of various ethnic backgrounds could enjoy a brief respite from the overcrowded, dangerous streets of urban Boston. In 1880, with their novitiate and professions surging, the Society purchased three adjoining houses at Nos. 15, 17, and 19 Louisburg Square. Renovations were made to connect all three buildings. A temporary Chapel and Refectory were located in the large corner house, along with offices, a Common Room, and dormitories. The middle residence contained the reception room and kitchen, two large embroidery rooms, and several guest rooms. Within three years, a new Refectory and substantial Chapel were erected on a lot at the rear of the convent. St. Margaret’s School of Embroidery, which was founded by the multi-talented Sister Theresa shortly after her arrival in Boston. Through her skill and inspiration, students from within the Order and the general public, produced elaborately designed vestments, altar hangings and other ecclesiastical accessories of silk and linen. Examples of which were exhibited at the General Conventions of the Church of England in 1877 and 1880. Rapidly outgrowing its modest second floor work rooms on Louisburg Square, the Embroidery School was moved to 23 Chestnut Street, also on Beacon Hill. While still under the direction of Sister Theresa, the School became a founding member of the Arts and Crafts Society of Boston and participated in that organization’s first exhibition in 1897. The Embroidery School remained viable for decades completing commissions from churches throughout the country before its closing sometime around 1952.

With the decline of professions in the latter half of the 20th century, the Sisters have been forced to curtail their activities. St. Monica’s Home was closed in 1989, in 1990, the Sisters sold their Louisburg Square convent and moved into the renovated Garrison House. Meanwhile, back on Beacon Hill, times changed as well. The Museum of Afro-American History and the African Meeting House now stand across the street from what was once St. Monica’s Home, the majority of houses on Louisburg Square have been divided into apartments and condominiums; and the large corner house on Louisburg Square, once headquarters of the Society of St. Margaret, is now the home of John and Teresa Heinz Kerry. Still considered by many authorities as the finest row of townhouses in the United States, Louisburg Square remains a prime tourist attraction. Most of today’s residents and visitors, however, probably know little about the Sisters of St. Margaret who brought such distinction to Beacon Hill for over a century.

—Patricia J. Fanning is Associate Professor of Sociology and Associate Editor of the Bridgewater Review.