

PROVIDENCE JOURNEY:

On Steam and Wind

June 7–25, 1876

The Voyage of the Pioneer Sisters





JUNE 7, 1876

Departure from Mainz

The day had finally arrived.

For months the Sisters of Divine Providence had lived amid uncertainty. The Kulturkampf had closed schools, dismissed Sisters from classrooms, and left many wondering whether their congregation would survive in Germany. Yet Providence was opening another door.

On the morning of June 7, six Sisters gathered for one final audience with Bishop Wilhelm Emmanuel von Ketteler, founder and father of the congregation. The Bishop was deeply moved. According to the chronicles, tears filled his eyes as he addressed them.

He warned them not to place their confidence in human beings, even priests, but in God alone:

“Remain simple and avoid all deception. Do not place your confidence in man, even though he be a priest. Then God will not forsake you.”

He then presented each Sister with a holy card of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, signed with his own name.

After receiving his blessing, they returned to visit their families one last time. Parents, siblings, neighbors, and friends knew that this might be the final farewell. Ocean voyages were dangerous. America seemed unimaginably distant.

By evening they began their journey toward Rotterdam accompanied by Mother Vincentia and Sister Walburga.

Weather

Warm early summer weather across the Rhine Valley. Estimated high: 72°F (22°C)

Reflection

What would be hardest for me to leave behind if I knew I might never return?

JUNE 8, 1876

Rotterdam



Late in the evening the travelers arrived in Rotterdam.

Today Rotterdam is one of the world's largest ports. In 1876 it was already a bustling maritime city linking Europe to the wider world.

The journey from Mainz covered approximately 213 miles. Traveling by river barge could take twenty-four hours downstream and considerably longer against the current. Rail travel shortened the trip but it still represented a major undertaking.

The Sisters spent the night in an inn. The next day would bring the moment none of them could avoid.

Boarding the steamship.

Standing in the harbor they would have seen forests of masts, towering funnels, warehouses, cranes, and ships from every corner of Europe.

Beyond the harbor lay the North Sea and then the Atlantic Ocean.

Reflection

When have I stood on a threshold, knowing there was no turning back?

JUNE 9, 1876

Sister Xavier Schneider (1836–1901, Elizabeth — returned to Germany)



Born Elizabeth Schneider in 1836, Mother Xavier entered the congregation in 1857 after receiving encouragement from Mother Marie de la Roche herself.

She became a certified teacher, battlefield nurse during the Austro-Prussian War, local superior, and First Assistant to Mother Vincentia.

At age forty she was chosen to lead the American mission.

Her greatest gift was practical leadership. Those who knew her said she could assess situations quickly, recognize danger, know when to seek help, and act according to principle rather than popularity.

These gifts would soon be tested.

Reflection

When have I been asked to lead without knowing where the road would end?

JUNE 10, 1876

Boarding the Scholten

The steamship
W. A. Scholten waited at
the dock.



Built in Glasgow for the Holland America Line and launched in 1874, she represented modern technology. At 360 feet long—about the length of a football field—she was considered a powerful and elegant vessel.

Constructed of iron, she carried a single funnel and three masts. Steam power drove her engines while sails provided assistance when winds were favorable.

The vessel consumed approximately twenty-eight tons of coal every day.

The Sisters traveled second class, two women assigned to each cabin. The accommodations were surprisingly comfortable.

The fare was 240 marks per Sister after a religious discount.

Before departure Mother Vincentia and Sister Walburga boarded the vessel with them.

Then came the final goodbye.

The ship's whistle sounded.

Ropes were cast off.

Germany slowly disappeared behind them.

Weather

Cloudy with moderate sea breezes.

Reflection

What has helped me trust God when I could no longer see familiar shores?

JUNE 11, 1876

Life Begins at Sea (2nd class cabin)

The voyage settled into routine.

The manifest shows approximately ninety-nine passengers aboard along with crew members. Most were German or Dutch immigrants seeking new lives in America.

Among them were farmers, laborers, shoemakers, bakers, coopers, merchants, craftsmen, a priest, and several theological students.

Four additional women religious traveled in second class.

The Sisters were no longer surrounded by convent life.

No chapel bells rang.

No community schedule guided the day.

Prayer now depended entirely on their own fidelity.

Reflection

What spiritual practices sustain me when external structure falls away?



JUNE 12, 1876

Sister Francis Borgia Schröck (1843–1907, Regina)



Born in 1843, she entered the congregation in 1862.

She possessed striking dark eyes, an upright posture, and a broad smile.

Known for discipline and practical judgment, she disliked sentimentality and worldliness. Yet she was deeply devoted to Our Lady of Perpetual Help.

Years later she would become Provincial Superior and help establish Divine Providence Academy.

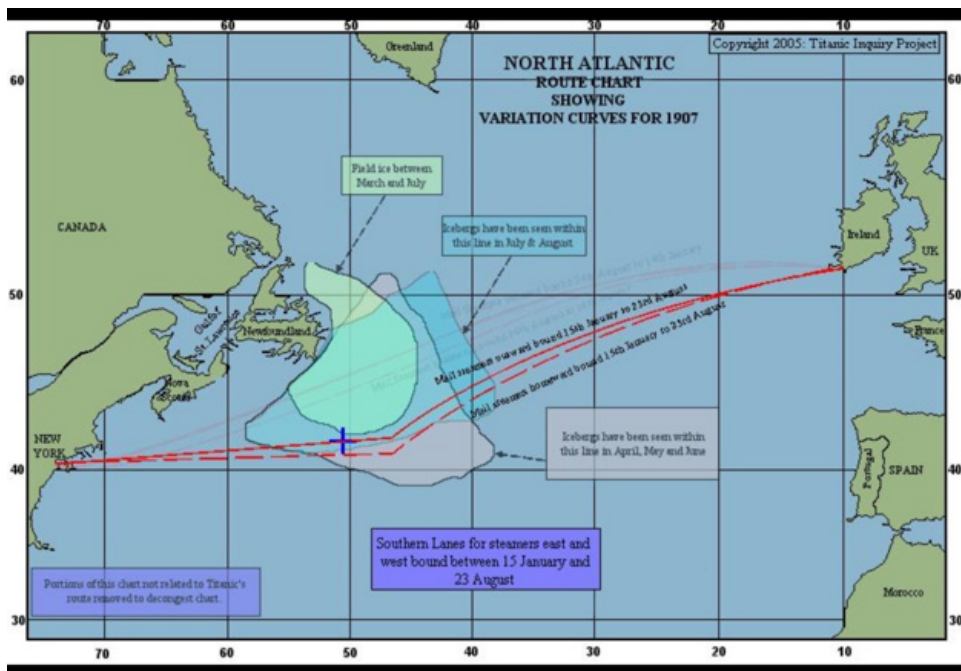
She was one of the strongest personalities aboard the ship.

Reflection

How do I maintain spiritual discipline when familiar structures disappear?

JUNE 13, 1876

Trinity Sunday at Vlissingen



After one day at sea the Scholten stopped at Vlissingen in the Netherlands to refuel.

Provisionally it was Trinity Sunday.

The Sisters left the vessel and attended Mass.

They received Holy Communion for the last time on European soil.

A local pastor noticed the group and invited them to breakfast.

The simple hospitality must have felt like a blessing from home.

It was here that Mother Xavier wrote another letter to Mother Vincentia.

Soon the ship departed once more.

The Atlantic awaited.

Weather

Cool morning, calm seas.

Reflection

Who has offered me unexpected hospitality when I most needed encouragement?

JUNE 14, 1876

Seasickness



Like many first-time travelers, the Sisters became violently seasick.

Food lost its appeal.

The motion never stopped.

The air smelled of salt, coal smoke, machinery, and humanity.

The beauty of ocean sunrises and sunsets meant little to travelers who could barely stand.

For several days survival itself seemed enough.

Reflection

When have I had to surrender all pretense of control and simply endure?

JUNE 15, 1876

Sister Lucy Weber (1852–1944, Barbara)



Only twenty-four years old, Lucy was petite, graceful, and deeply musical.

She loved choral singing and possessed remarkable gifts as an educator.

Years later she would become the congregation's first school supervisor and eventually the first directress of Divine Providence Academy.

Those who knew her always remembered her as a true lady—gentle, proper, and refined.

This difficult voyage would help form her into one of the congregation's most influential educators.

Reflection

What difficult experience later became preparation for something greater?

JUNE 16, 1876

Finding their sea legs



Gradually the seasickness faded.

Passengers emerged from their cabins.

Conversations began.

English lessons became a daily occupation.

The Sisters practiced words and phrases with English-speaking passengers.

America was approaching.

They knew almost none of the language they would need to teach.

Still, they persisted.

Sister Michael Kindhauser (1854–1942, Christine)



At twenty-two she was the youngest traveler.

She had recently passed her teaching examinations and possessed extraordinary patience.

Eventually she became the first novice mistress in America and held that office for twenty-six years.

She loved children deeply.

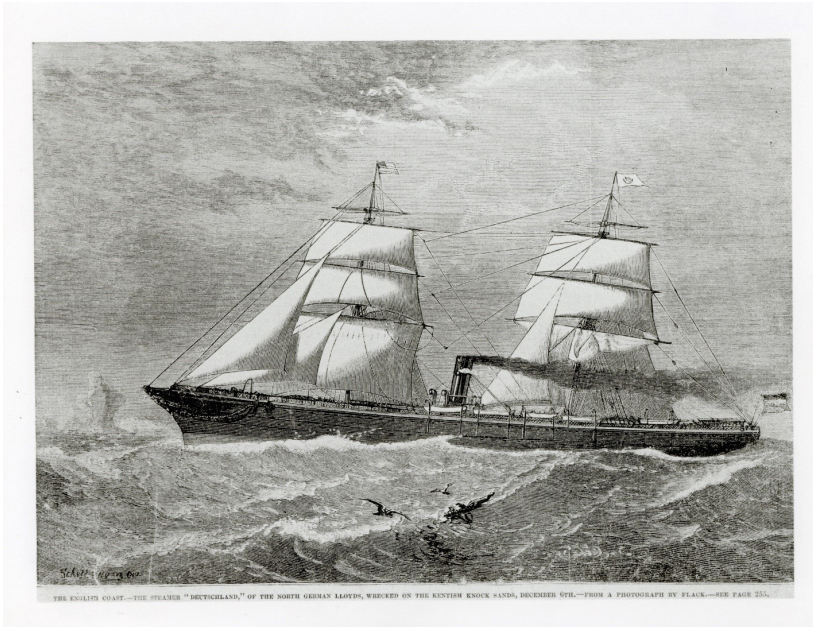
Even in old age she would ask visiting mothers if she might hold their babies.

Reflection

What skill am I still learning because God may need it later?

JUNE 17, 1876

The Wreck of the Deutschland



One unforgettable sight awaited them.

According to the chronicles, the Sisters saw or were told of remains associated with the tragedy of the Deutschland.

In December 1875, six Franciscan Sisters fleeing persecution in Germany had died when their ship foundered off the coast of England.

The disaster later inspired the famous poem 'The Wreck of the Deutschland' by Gerard Manley Hopkins.

For the pioneer Sisters this was no literary event.

It was a warning.

Other religious women had made this same journey and never reached America.

The Atlantic could be merciless.

Reflection

How does awareness of those who went before me — and what they risked — shape the way I carry their legacy?

JUNE 18, 1876

Sister Hedwig Beckhaus (1849–1899, Eva)



Little is known about Sister Hedwig.

She served primarily as a house sister rather than a classroom teacher.

Her hidden work sustained the mission.

She later made perpetual vows in America.

Her years of service were marked by suffering, and she died in 1899.

Yet without women like Hedwig, communities could not survive.

Reflection

How often do I overlook the importance of hidden service?

JUNE 19, 1876
Open Ocean



Days blended together.

Sky.

Water.

Wind.

Stars.

The Sisters spent evenings watching moonlight shimmer across the Atlantic.

The ocean seemed endless.

Somewhere beyond the horizon lay New York.

Reflection

What does it feel like to wait in open water — with no shore in sight but God's direction as compass?

JUNE 20, 1876

Sister Mathilda Gebhard (1844–1926, Anna — returned to Germany)



Born in 1844, Mathilda was a teacher and wartime nurse.

She had cared for wounded soldiers during Germany's conflicts and knew hardship well.

Though she helped establish the American mission, her health suffered badly in the new climate.

In 1878 she returned to Germany.

Her sacrifice reminds us that not every pioneer remains where she first serves.

Reflection

Can a mission still be successful even when our role in it is brief?

JUNE 21, 1876 — First Day of Summer Midway



This was the summer solstice — the longest day of the year in the northern hemisphere.

The sun lingered on the water long after supper. Somewhere behind them lay everything they had known. Somewhere ahead lay everything they did not yet know.

The Sisters were now truly in the middle — between the world they had left and the one not yet visible. There was nothing to do but sail forward.

Providence does not always reveal the destination. Sometimes it only illuminates the next wave.

Weather

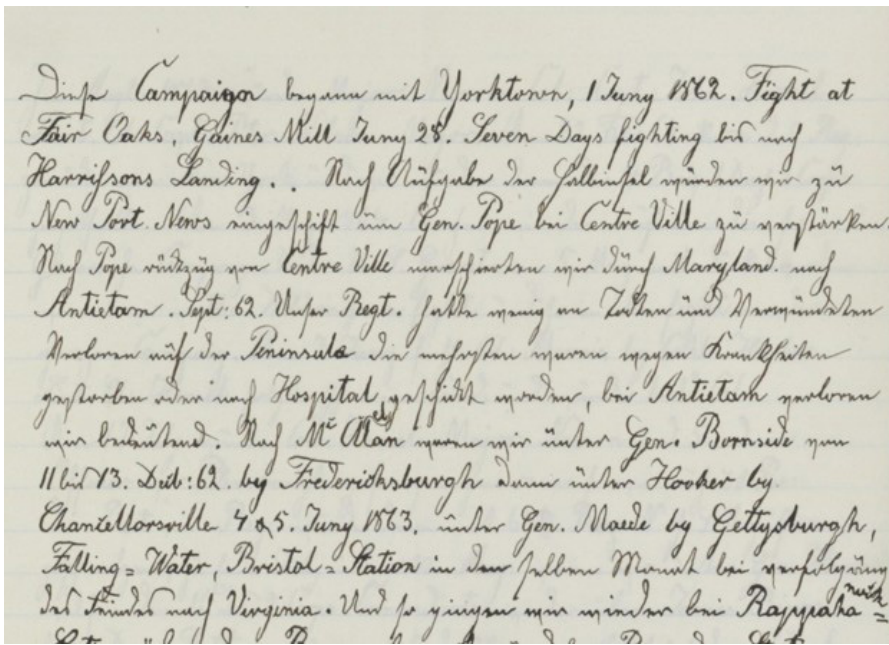
Clear skies, long evening light.

Reflection

What does it mean to live faithfully in the middle of a journey — when the beginning is past and the end not yet in sight?

JUNE 22, 1876

Letters Home



Die Campaignen begann mit Yorktown, 1 Juny 1862. Fight at
Fair Oaks, Gaines Mill Juny 28. Seven Days fighting bis nach
Harrison's Landing. . . Nach Aufgabe der Halbinsel zogen wir zu
New Port News umgeschifft im Gen. Pope bei Centreville zu verfahren.
Nach Pope vortrückung von Centreville umschifften wir den Maryland. nach
Antietam. Sept: 62. Unser Regt. hatte wenig an Tode und Wunden
Abolern auf der Peninsula die umschifften waren wegen dem
großeren denn im Hospital geschildert worden, bei Antietam verloren
wir brüderlich. Nach McAllan waren wir unter Gen. Burnside von
11 bis 13. Oct: 62. by Fredericksburg dann unter Hooker by
Chancellorsville 4 & 5. Juny 1863. unter Gen. Meade by Gettysburg,
Falling = Water, Bristol = Station in dem selben Monat bei verfahren
das trüben nach Virginia. Und so gingen wir wieder bei Rappahannock =

As the voyage continued, the Sisters composed letters they would post upon arrival in New York.

What do you write to a mother you may never see again? What do you say to a sister, a brother, a friend who stood weeping at the station?

Mother Xavier was a faithful correspondent. Her letters to Mother Vincentia formed part of the congregation's early American chronicles.

To write was to remain connected — to hold the thread across the water even when the shore had long since vanished.

The Sisters wrote. They prayed. They waited.

Weather

Mild, overcast skies with a following wind.

Reflection

To whom do I remain in faithful correspondence — through letters, through prayer, through memory — even across great distance?

JUNE 23, 1876

The Last Night at Sea



By now the Sisters knew that land was near.

A different quality entered the air. The sea color shifted. Birds appeared. The engine's rhythm seemed to quicken.

What did they feel in those last hours? Relief, certainly. But also something harder to name — the strange grief of an ending, even a welcome one. The ocean crossing had formed them in ways they could not yet understand.

They had prayed together in the absence of a chapel. They had cared for one another through sickness. They had practiced a new language and faced the shadow of the Deutschland.

They were not the same women who had boarded in Rotterdam.

Tomorrow: America.

Weather

Clear evening, rising warmth.

Reflection

How has a long passage — one I did not choose to extend — changed me in ways I could not have anticipated?

JUNE 24, 1876

Land!



At last the cry came.

Land.

The passengers arrived in New York Harbor.

The Sisters rejoiced simply to stand again on solid ground.

But a disappointment awaited them.

No one had come to meet them.

The captain kindly invited them to remain aboard while they considered what to do.

For women who had crossed an ocean in obedience and trust, this was their first lesson in American reality.

Providence rarely unfolds exactly as planned.

Weather

Warm summer day.

Reflection

When has God answered my prayer differently than I expected?

JUNE 25, 1876

Arrival and the Future

The journey across the ocean had ended.

The greater journey was about to begin.

Within months the Sisters would experience poverty, uncertainty, language barriers, broken promises, and ecclesiastical obstacles.

They would struggle in Dungannon.

They would eventually relocate to East Liberty in Pittsburgh.

They would build schools, a motherhouse, a novitiate, and a future.

From six women came generations of Sisters, teachers, students, and ministries.

Their ship completed its voyage.

The Ship of Providence did not.

One hundred fifty years later, we are still sailing in the wake of their courage.



