

The Josephite Seed is Sown

Governess in Penola 1860 – 1862

In 1860, when she was 18, Mary was employed as a Governess to the children of her uncle Alexander Cameron, in Penola, South Australia. They called him 'King Cameron' because he owned the township.



It was a town with far more kangaroos and emus than people, however it was seen as an important centre on the Adelaide to Melbourne road.

Cameron built himself a simple house of the river red gum slabs on a lagoon about five kilometres south of Penola. By the time Mary arrived to take up her duties it had grown to 15 rooms, sorely needed by ten little Cameron children.

She also taught other people on the property. It was here that Mary first saw the need to supply education to Australian bush children. It was here that Mary met then man who would change her life, the local priest, Father Julian Woods. Mary was 18, Julian was 28. They discussed the idea of setting up a Catholic school in Penola. Julian had been living in Penola for four years.

Mary later wrote, "*I heard the Pastor... speak of the neglected state of the children in the parish... and I had to go and offer myself to aid him...*"

The seed for the Josephite order was sown.

Of this meeting, Mary wrote in later years, "*At last He (God) gave me a Director to whom for the first time I told all my desires (and) discouragements, explaining also my position towards my family. He told me that for a time longer my duty was to them, but reassured me as to my vocation, and gave me certain rules for my spiritual guiding. This was Father Woods.*"

Portland 1862 – 1865

Mary returned to Melbourne in 1862, then travelled to the busy Victorian coastal town of Portland to act as governess to other Cameron relatives.

A year later, in October 1863 Mary obtained a job as a teacher in the Portland Catholic Denominational School. Now, with a steady income to pay the rent and bills, her plan was to get all the family together.

The MacKillop family moved into Bayview House. Mary established this as a boarding school for girls. Maggie was the teacher, Flora did the housekeeping and Mary helped in the evening.

In March 1864, Maggie wrote to Father Woods, "*I like Portland very much. Perhaps I would not care for it so much if we were not all together and in a home of our own*"

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at last. Oh! It is so pleasant to have papa with us... I do not remember ever being so happy."

During the Portland years Julian continued to support Mary's idea of a religious life. However, he could also see that to pursue this aim she could not remain the family provider forever.

Mary prayed that somehow she would be able to leave Portland but *"...I had not the courage to break away from them."*

The problem was solved for her by a misunderstanding at the Portland school. The headmaster was dismissed and Mary wrongly blamed. It was time for Mary to leave Portland and begin the school in Penola.

Sharing a Vision

Fr Julian was a man of energy and infectious enthusiasm. *"He could coax a bird off a bush,"* Mary wrote.

During her time in Penola they had many meetings and she started to realise that her yearnings for something deeper in life had a purpose at last, a partnership with God.

When Mary moved to Portland, they wrote constantly. Together, they planned a new teaching order. Father Woods took his inspiration from an order he encountered in France who moved around the countryside teaching peasants.

Unlike traditional nuns who spent years behind convent walls, the Australian nuns would reach out and spread across the outback teaching and helping the poor and sick. Their motto became 'Never see a need without doing something about it.' They would call the order, The Sisters of St Joseph.



In October 1865 Julian wrote to Mary from Penola asking her sister Annie's help at the school he was establishing.

Mary and her sister Lexie arrived in Penola in January 1866. On the feast of St Joseph, 19 March 1866, as a symbol of her devotion to a religious life, Mary dressed in black.

In January 1867 Bishop Sheil visited Penola, gave his approval to the education project and addressed Mary as Sister Mary – Sister of St Joseph. She wrote to her mother, *"I have such an earnest longing for the Order of St Joseph and know well how hard it will be to get it established here, but everything God blesses will prosper. None other is so fitted for the wants of the colony."*