

They Travelled by Sea: A Mystery from the Deep

Our archivist uncovers the truth of the congregation's earliest days

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Piecing together the events of history can often be challenging. Memories can lose their sharpness over time and documents become lost, damaged, or hard to interpret. Often what we think we know in fact turns out to be something quite different.

Such is the case with the arrival of the School Sisters of St. Francis foundresses. Recently, Sister Irene Zimmerman contacted me with a question about the name of the steamship *Cologne* that brought the sisters to the United States on that first voyage. She thought Sister Connie Halbur had discovered the name was incorrect and written an article about it. This had me sitting up in my chair!

Having recently read both *He Sent Two* and *Undaunted They Walked*, I knew that the name *Cologne* (or *Koeln*) was well documented in the histories of the community. As an archivist, I know how often the "official record" can be incorrect and how frequently misinformation can be passed from one source to the next for many years. This was certainly something to investigate.

Sister Connie was an exceptional archivist, so my first thought was to find her article and hear her story. Unfortunately, that initial search was unsuccessful, and as the pandemic kept me working from home, I decided I would try to go online and validate that the "facts" we had were, in fact, incorrect.

Undaunted They Walked states, "To the casual observer they were not even noteworthy – three nuns huddled together on the second-class deck of the ocean liner *Cologne* as she ploughed into the New York Harbor from Bremen on October 12, 1873." Meanwhile Sister Francis Borgia Rothlueber's book *He Sent Two* reads, "On September 12, 1873, after 15 days of calm sailing the *Koeln* moved into New York."

So, with that information, I knew I was searching for a passage on the steam ship *Cologne/Koeln* that traveled in September or October of 1873 from Germany to New York Harbor. I began my search with passenger lists.

Prior to 1820, there was no requirement for documenting passengers on ships. People would travel on any kind of ship as long as there was room, and if you had money, you could sail. Captains would hold their boats until the cargo was filled. This led to overcrowding and unsafe conditions for sea travel. As a result, the Federal Government

passed legislation in 1819 limiting the number of passengers per ship. In 1820, the Customs Service required that Customs Passenger Lists be prepared by the ship's captain and filed with the Collector of Customs at the port of arrival.

Eventually the number of people traveling to the United States grew to a level that it made economic sense to build passenger ships. They began to sail on scheduled dates. Eventually, steam-powered ships replaced the old sailing ships, reducing travel time from months to weeks.

Passenger lists recorded each passenger's name, age, occupation, country of origin, country of intended habitation, location on the ship, and whether or not they perished at sea. According to the Library of Congress, more than 30 million immigrants came to the United States and during the past 200 years, more than half of them arrived through the port of New York. I needed to find three women out of roughly 15 million passengers! I had my work cut out for me.

I started with the Port of Bremen, guessing it would have been smaller than the one in New York at the time and they may still have departure lists. I looked up the State Archives of Bremen only to discover that passenger lists from 1875 - 1908 were destroyed due to lack of space in the Bremen Archives. Since I was looking for 1873, I still had a chance. Then I learned that with the exception of passenger lists for the years 1920-1939—which had been hidden in a salt mine—all other lists were lost in World War II.

The dates of those rescued lists were too recent for my search; however, the Bremen Archive does provide a list of ships that used that port. But there was no *Cologne* or *Koeln* among them. Between the lost lists and the lack of the ships' name appearing on record, I knew I would have to rely on arrival records in New York.

The National Archives has most of the passenger lists for New York arrivals archived on microfilm, but the microfilm service department is closed due to the pandemic. That meant my best bet would be to search arrival passenger lists on genealogy sites, which would mean that I would be searching by passenger name.

Now I really had a problem. Which names did the sisters use when travelling, and how did they spell those names? Mother Alexia would have been Emma Francisca Höll if she was using her birth name. Did she have another religious name from her time in Germany? Did she go by Emma or Francisca? Would the German spelling of Höll be the right one, or should I look for the later spelling Hoell?

Names are notoriously misspelled on official documents like censuses and passenger lists because they were often obtained verbally. The person recording the name in the chaos of a full passenger ship could easily mishear or not understand the passenger's accent. I would have to look for every variation imaginable of Emma Francisca Höll, Pauline Schmid and Helene Seiter and hope they hadn't used some other name unknown to me.

I searched for all three sisters on two different sites without any luck. Each search returned hundreds, sometime thousands of records, so one can never be sure if the needle in the haystack has been overlooked. I decided to return to the source. I scheduled time to visit the closed archives at Sacred Heart and dig through the records for any evidence of Sister Connie's notes. As I mentioned, Sister Connie was an excellent archivist and as such, she always documented her work. If she really made this discovery, it had to be captured somewhere.

Evidence Found

After failing to find the original article by Sister Connie Halbur, which asserted that the ship's name was incorrect, I attempted searches of both the departure passenger lists from the Port of Bremen and the arrival passenger lists in New York. Again, I was unsuccessful in finding any of the three sisters on a list from 1873. I decided to return to the Archives and hunt down any notes Sister Connie may have left about her research and discovery.

The School Sisters of St. Francis Archives has a wealth of information about the history of the community. Some of this information is cataloged and organized in great detail; other parts of the collection remain relatively unknown. This is typical for any archive – the amount of work required to accurately identify and record the value, origin, meaning, and potential use of every single document and item in an archive is prohibitive. Most, if not all, archives lack the resources to achieve that lofty goal.

Finding aids are documents that explain in detail what items are in each collection, which helps researchers better identify what they need. One of the collections in our archives that has more information than is revealed in the finding aid is the Founding Era Sources collection. This is a loose grouping of materials from a variety of sources that provides information about the earliest days of the community and its foundresses.

After some searching, this was where I found Sister Connie's notes, titled "Brief account of the research to determine the name of the vessel on which our foundresses emigrated to the U.S." Fantastic! In this document, Sister Connie describes noticing that,

“the ship’s manifest for the *Coeln (Koeln)* does not include the names of our foundresses.” This inconsistency led her to do further research.

She discovered Mother Alfon’s Petition for Naturalization at the Milwaukee County Historical Society suggesting that she wasn’t sure which ship she, Mother Alexia and Sister Clara had arrived on in 1873. Sister Connie began searching ships, with this result:

“I researched every ship that arrived on Sept. 12, 1873, except those coming from unlikely countries, also with no luck. I then decided to try September 11, thinking that perhaps the ship arrived late in the day, and they were not processed until the next day. That hunch proved to be successful. As I worked backwards, I noticed a ship that had many religious on it. I remembered that the tradition was that there were many other religious on board the ship on which our foundresses came. (see HE SENT TWO, page 34.) So I examined that list item by item. Within a few minutes I spied their name [sic], with much delight!”

As it turns out, our foundresses did not leave from Bremen, they were not on the *Koeln*, and they did not arrive in New York on September 12! As the other items in this folder indicate, they left from Le Havre, France, on the *S.S. Europe*, and arrived in New York on September 11.

Huzzah! We had our answer thanks to Sister Connie’s hard work and thoughtful note. But Sister Connie, a true archivist, also left a question unanswered. She wanted to know why the oral tradition was so different from the documented history. She had a theory that Mother Alfons, who had taken three trips to Germany, took the *Koeln* and left from Bremen on a different trip, which got confused with the Foundress’s arrival. Sister Connie’s note ends with the following remark:

“To date, I have not located her on any ship’s arrivals, but when I have firmer clues, I will do more research. Thus far, the clues I have (when candidates who came from Germany with her said they arrived in the U.S.) have not borne fruit.”

So, I had my marching orders! With Sister Connie’s research, I was able to locate the actual arrival passenger list for the three Foundresses fairly quickly. There they were: Francisca Höll, Pauline Schmid, and Helene Seiter.

I wanted to understand why my initial searches hadn’t turned up the same result. Interestingly, I noticed two significant details about the arrival passenger list of *the S.S. Europe*. The first was that the transcriber of the passenger list misread the handwriting

of the ship's captain and cataloged Francisa Höll as Francisco Höll. Even one wrong letter in a name can change the whole result of a search. Secondly, the passenger list contains two columns which read "The county to which they severally belong" and "The country in which they intend to become inhabitants". Under "The country to which they severally belong," the country of origin is listed, usually not the specific place of birth. Their country of origin read France, presumably because they left from Le Havre, whereas I was searching for Germany thinking they had left from Bremen.

The next column, identifying the country of intended habitation, also said France. Did the sisters say France because they weren't sure if they were going to make it in the United States? Given their resolve, that seems unlikely. My guess is that the ship's captain was moving quickly and taking shortcuts to speed up the process, but we'll never know for sure.

Before moving on to solving Sister Connie's question about the history of the foundresses story, I had one more thing to do. I wanted to find out a bit more about the *S.S. Europe*. What type of ship was it that carried the Foundresses so far from home? What could I learn about their life at sea? And, most importantly, where is it now?

Life at Sea

We have the arrival passenger list into Castle Garden, New York, with the names of the three foundresses on it as evidence. We know that they traveled in second class; that they identified themselves amongst the over 50 "Sisters of Charity" on the ship; and listed their country of origin as France. But what else can we learn about their voyage? What can the *S.S. Europe* itself tell us?

The culture and history of ocean travel is long and fascinating. Today, when most people no longer travel by ocean liner, there is still a wealth of information on the history of sea travel in general and the stories of each individual ship. The *S.S. Europe* was a French transport ocean liner owned by Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, a French shipping company, established in 1855 by the brothers Émile and Issac Péreire. The ship was built by Scott Shipbuilding & Engineering Company in Scotland in 1865, the year the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique had its maiden voyage with the *S.S. Washington*.

In 1873, the year the foundresses sailed, their ship had been converted from a paddle steamer – a vessel propelled by paddles and sails – to a screw steamer – a ship that was propelled by a steam engine. This innovation made the journey faster and allowed ships to carry more weight. Without even knowing it, the foundresses were benefiting from

new, cutting edge maritime technology on their voyage. Was the ride smoother? Safer? It is difficult to say without more information about the design of the *S.S. Europe*.

In the late 19th century, ocean line accommodations were improving steadily. The arrival of cabins for second class passengers gave many immigrants who could pay a little more the option of getting out of steerage, which usually consisted of large rooms where anyone not travelling first class would be confined to a small space in the company of hundreds of other passengers. While first class passengers could move freely about the ship, second class passengers were more limited in their movements to assigned rooms and decks. The designs of these spaces would echo those in first class but would generally be smaller and be built of cheaper materials.

Finding more information on the particular design and accommodations of the *S.S. Europe* would give us a more detailed understanding of the level of comfort the foundresses experienced on their voyage. Right now, those answers are locked away in the Glasgow Archive in Scotland, which is closed due to the pandemic.

What is known is that the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique eventually became famous for representing a glamorous French image abroad and artifacts from their ships are still sought after by collectors today. Unfortunately, there are no artifacts left from the *S.S. Europe*. In March 1874, less than one year after the foundresses sailed to the United States, the ship scraped bottom while leaving port at Le Havre, creating a slow leak that eventually caused the ship to founder. All passengers and crew were rescued at sea and the *S.S. Europe* was abandoned and sank.

Travel by ocean liner in the late 19th century was a challenging and sometimes harrowing trip. Mother Alfons was particularly terrified of sea travel, as described in *Undaunted They Walked*:

Nothing could have been less to Sister Alfons' personal pleasure. She cringed before the necessity of being thrown into close concourse with seculars and became mentally nauseated at the mere thought of crossing the ocean....To Sister Alfons, native of the Baden highlands, the very sight of broad expanses of water was terrifying.

Nonetheless, it was Sister Alfons who was called to return to Germany in 1876 to bring back more postulants for the community, and so she went on the first of two voyages only three years after first arriving in the United States.

If Sister Connie Halbur's theory was correct, it was this voyage that got confused with the foundresses' arrival, changing the traditional narrative of the community's history for many years. Was she right? There was only one way to find out, so I knew my next task would be to find the passenger arrival list and learn the story of that second trip.

The Return Voyage

I wanted to continue Sister Connie's research and find out if her theory was true. At the time of her second sea voyage, Mother (then Sister) Alfons was the novice mistress of the growing community at New Cassel. They had received a visit from Father Ferdinand Brommer, the pastor in Bühl (Buehl), Germany, with news that several young women were ready to begin their new life as members of the community at New Cassel. Mother Alfons was selected to make the voyage.

In *He Sent Two*, we learn a little bit more about that life-changing trip, which confirmed Mother Alfons' worst fears about sea travel:

We have no record of her thoughts or experiences on this journey back to Baden and Buehl. We do know that as long as she lived she never forgot the return voyage to America: 22 days of constant storms and high winds. When she and five new postulants made their way from the ship in New York, they found that they had crossed during the stormiest month in 38 years, a month in which 96 ships were lost on the Atlantic.

She did, however, achieve her goal of returning with five postulants, named Martina Segginger, Rosa Huber, Rosa Roell, Theresia Seiter (Sister Clara's sister), and Rosa Schroff.

I began my search with Mother Alfons herself because I had some sense of how her name would likely appear – Pauline Schmid – based upon the previous passenger list from the *S.S. Europe*. This time, the search went quickly and the sisters were easily spotted. They were listed as Pauline Schmidt, Rose Huber, Rosina Röll, Theresa Seiter, Louisa Schiel, Rosa Schroff, and Martina Segginger. They arrived in New York on the *W.A. Scholten* out of Rotterdam on Monday, November 19, 1877.

This voyage would have been quite different than Mother Alfons's first trip to the United States. The *W.A. Scholten* was a much smaller ship carrying only 39 passengers, and her small group made up half of the second-class passengers. Aside from one priest, they were the only religious on board.

Amongst their group is an unfamiliar name – Louise Schiel. There is no record of a Louise Schiel in the community's history books or register, so it doesn't appear as though she joined the School Sisters of St. Francis. Was she intending to go to New Cassel with the others? Was she a young woman traveling alone in need of the sisters' cheerful company? There is no way to know for sure, but for this journey, she counted herself amongst the "Sisters of Charity" arriving in the United States.

And what of the fabled storm? Factual evidence of the loss of 96 ships in the month of November is scarce, but on the day of their arrival, a *New York Times* article titled "Terrible Gales on the Ocean" had this to report:

Very few vessels arrived in port yesterday. Up to 9 o'clock at night only two steamers – the *W.A. Scholten* from Rotterdam and the *City of Washington* from Chester, Penn. – and about a dozen sailing craft had passed Quarantine. The first-named steamer was 20 days out and her passage was tempestuous throughout.

Given the size of the ship, the "tempestuous" ocean must have made for a very difficult passage for Mother Alfons and her young charges. It is interesting to note that here, as with the *S.S. Europe*, discrepancies about the arrival date appear. The date on the passenger list clearly states November 19, 1877, while the *New York Times* article dated that same day reports the steamer arriving "yesterday." There is no way to know exactly when the passenger list was dated, but as the official source of record, it is the best source of information we have.

Despite the bad weather, it was lucky for Mother Alfons and the other women that they arrived safely. The future for the *W.A. Scholten* was not as bright. On November 19, 1887, the exact 10-year anniversary of the sisters' arrival in New York, the *W.A. Scholten* collided with the British steamship *Rosa Mary* in the English Channel and sank. Of the ship's 210 passengers and crew, 132 lost their lives.

The legacy of that ship lives on however, as it was part of the Holland America Line – a line of shipping and passenger ships founded in 1873 as the *Nederlandsche-Amerikaansche Stoomvaart Maatschappij* (Dutch-American Steamship Company), or *Holland-Amerika Lijn* for short. It was headquartered in Rotterdam and provided service from Europe to the Americas over the North Atlantic. The recent history of the Holland America Line is one you may recognize. In 1989, they were purchased by Carnival Corporation and became Holland America Cruises headquartered in the United States. If Mother Alfons had learned she was traveling on what would become one of the

premiere cruise lines of the 21st century, she might have been more than a little surprised!

It was my hope that this second journey would validate Sister Connie's theory about the arrival story of the Foundresses, but I had no luck finding a match in any of Mother Alfons's travels during that time. This was to be the end of my story, but I just couldn't give up on Sister Connie and her mission to explain the source of the misinformation.

After much reflection, it occurred to me that perhaps I was following Sister Connie's theory too closely and I needed to go back to the beginning. In the end, it was Mother Alexia who led me to the answers I needed.

The Missing Journey

Sister Connie Halbur's theory – that the details of that story actually came from another trip by Mother Alfons – was an excellent idea. But Mother Alfons's next trip, a voyage on the *S.S. Amerique* from Le Havre, France, with seven new postulants in 1881, was also not proving the theory true. Clearly, I was looking in the wrong place or in the wrong way.

In archival research, this often happens. Without realizing it, the researcher becomes convinced of her original theory and keeps trying to find the facts to support that theory. I had forgotten my Sherlock Holmes lesson: "It is a capital mistake to theorize before one has data. Insensibly one begins to twist facts to suit theories, instead of theories to suit facts." (Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Scandal in Bohemia*).

So, when I looked at the facts, I remembered there were two foundresses traveling at that time, not just Mother Alfons. The other seafarer? Mother Alexia.

He Sent Two contains a single sentence about a return trip Mother Alexia took around the same time Mother Alfons was traveling back and forth to Germany. It states, "Mother Alexia returned to New Cassel on September 12, 1879, with 23 new postulants." Suddenly, the September 12 date stood out in relief on the page. September 12 was the same date incorrectly attributed to the foundresses' arrival in America. Also, 1879 was the only other date in the 1870s I hadn't explored, and is closer to 1873 than any of the later voyages after 1880. Could this be the journey I had been looking for all along?

I began searching the passenger lists for a Francisca Höll around 1879 and turned up nothing of use. Then it occurred to me that I might have luck finding one of the

postulants. Unfortunately, they weren't listed in any history books as the previous postulants had been. I turned to the official register of the community to look for a reception class that might be a good match for the date and number of sisters.

My luck was beginning to turn. When sisters came from overseas to join community, their arrival date was noted in the register. Of the reception class of August 15, 1880, 21 sisters arrived in the United States on September 12, 1879. One sister was received in October of that same year, giving me 22 names to search out. It wasn't long before I met with success thanks to Victoria Herzog (Sister Hieronyma), whose name appeared on the passenger list of the *S.S. Weser* exactly as it was written in the official register.

I quickly located several of her fellow postulants on the same ship, and I knew I was on to something. While I continued to search for the remaining postulants, it still puzzled me why I couldn't find the name Francisca Höll. Then I considered that I might be once again overly committed to my first approach, and thought perhaps she was traveling at last under her new religious name. Sure enough, there she was: Mother Alexia was identified as "Miss Alexia," a sister from Milwaukee.

The passenger list for the *S.S. Weser* shows two dates, neither of which match the date in the official register. The passenger list cover is dated September 9, 1879, and the top of the first page is dated September 10, 1879. How can that be? It is hard to say exactly without deeper research. Passenger lists could be filled out at the point of departure or the point of arrival and my research didn't identify any consistent practice as to when the date was applied to that list. However, as the quote from *He Sent Two* states, "Mother Alexia returned to New Cassel on September 12, 1879," which suggests their ship arrived earlier than that date. The date in the official register could be the date they reached New Cassel, not the date they docked in New York. It is possible, even likely, that the difference between the dates was the travel time from New York to Wisconsin. Train timetables from that period show the journey from New York to the Midwest to be a roughly two-and-a-half-day trip.

Only one month ahead of Mother Alexia and her charges, in August of 1879, a young Robert Louis Stevenson took a similar train journey from New York to California, stopping in Ohio a little over two days after he left New York. Stevenson's journey to meet a divorced woman did not meet his parents' approval, so he needed the least expensive way to get to America and then California.

At that time, people traveling as emigrants could take advantage of extremely low one-way fares across America by traveling on designated "emigrant" or "colony" trains. These trains were known for their spare conditions – essentially wooden planks to sit on

in empty box cars. Women and families were separated from single men and Chinese travelers, who each had their own cars. Stevenson wrote and published a diary of his journey called *An Amateur Emigrant* where he describes the trains in this way:

Those destined for emigrants on the Union Pacific are only remarkable for their extreme plainness, nothing but wood entering in any part into their constitution, and for the usual inefficacy of the lamps, which often went out and shed but a dying glimmer even while they burned.

There is nothing in the community records to indicate whether or not Mother Alexia and her group took a designated emigrant or colony train, but they certainly would have traveled a similar route under hopefully better conditions. Passenger travel on regular trains improved significantly in the 1850s with the introduction of better seating and specialized cars like dining and observation cars, so one can hope that Mother Alexia could finance the more comfortable accommodations for her group.

Regardless, I had enough circumstantial evidence to support the theory that Mother Alexia and the postulants arriving on the *S.S. Weser* could have reached New Cassel on September 12, aligning with the date that was for so long assumed to be the foundresses arrival date. I felt comfortable moving forward with this theory.

And what of the ship? The name *S.S. Weser* does not look or sound like *S.S. Koeln*, but the North German Lloyd shipping company's fleet included both *the S.S. Weser* and the *S.S. Koln*, and both ships sailed from Bremen – the same port that was named in community lore.

The *S.S. Weser* was an ocean liner built by Caird & Company of Greenock, Scotland, providing service from Bremen to New York until 1895, after which it was sold to an Italian company and scrapped in 1896. Is it possible that at some point a sister sailed on the *S.S. Koln* out of Bremen and that ship got mixed into the history of the foundresses? Perhaps. I haven't found another sailing on a ship of that name yet, but the North German Lloyd shipping company was well known to Mother Alexia and was once of the premiere shipping companies in the late 19th century, so it is not unlikely the sisters used that company for passage more than once.

So with the day (September 12), the ports (Bremen to New York), the passenger (Mother Alexia) and the shipping company, this voyage feels as close as we can come to the origin of the mistaken story of the foundresses' beginnings in the United States. Will we ever know for sure? Probably not, but that is what makes looking for answers so much fun.