

# Margaret Mary Healy Murphy

A Most Remarkable Woman.

by

Leonard Hurley

Margaret Mary Healy Murphy emigrated from Cahersiveen to America with her family at the age of twelve, married at sixteen, widowed at fifty one and founder of a religious order in Texas at the age of sixty years. This remarkable compassionate woman, a relation of Daniel O'Connell, The Liberator, fought off discrimination and racial prejudice while administering to the *“disadvantaged poor and dark races”*.

Margaret Mary was the eldest of four children born to Dr. Richard and Jane Healy, nee Murphy, of Carhan, Cahersiveen, Co. Kerry on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 1833. Dr Richard, after the death of his wife, emigrated to America with his daughter, Margaret Mary in 1845, following his two sons and relations who had emigrated some years earlier. The youngest girl, Jennie, was left behind to be raised by relatives. They settled first in West Virginia where Margaret and her brothers continued their education. Margaret helped African American children and workers from a nearby plantation to read and write. Because of anti - Irish Catholic discrimination they decided to move westward. While on their journey Dr. Richard died, in New Orleans. The entire family, Margaret her two brothers, two uncles and two aunts, continued westwards. They eventually settled in Matamoros, Mexico, a border town on the southern bank of the Rio Grande where from 1846 to 1850 Margaret helped her two aunts in operating a hotel, The Healy Hotel. One of her uncles was shot dead, witnessed by Margaret Mary, in a dispute in front of the hotel. The remaining uncle travelled to California with his two nephews in search of gold. She never saw her brothers again.

Margaret Mary met John Bernard Murphy, born in Mallow, Co. Cork in 1821 while John was stationed in Matamoros as a volunteer in the American Army in the Mexican War (1846 - 1848). They married on May 4<sup>th</sup> 1849 in Matamoros Cathedral when she was just sixteen years. In 1850 they moved to Texas where they purchased a ranch at San Patricio, a town founded in 1829 by two hundred Irish families out of New York. In the Civil War John B. enlisted in the Texas Cavalry in the Union Army. He studied law under a future Governor of Texas and after the war the couple leased the ranch, moved to Corpus Christi where he practiced law and engaged in business.

Both John and Margaret Mary were committed Catholics and when yellow fever broke in 1867 in Corpus Christi, claiming a third of the city's population, the compassionate Margaret ministered to the many victims. The couple had no children but they adopted two girls both later becoming nuns. John B. supported his wife financially in her charitable work in San Patricio and

Corpus Christi. In 1875 hurricanes hit Corpus Christi leaving many homeless. Margaret purchased a centre for the homeless that later became known as "*Mrs. Murphy's Hospital for the Poor*". All were welcome regardless of creed or colour. The hospital did not survive because of racial prejudice. Around this time Jennie, the girl who had been left in Ireland when the family emigrated, arrived in Waco, Texas with an Order of Belgian Nuns to help in pastoral and educational work.

John Bernard judge, member of the Texas Constitutional Convention and Mayor of Corpus Christi (1880 - 1884) died leaving a large inheritance. Later Margaret Mary moved to San Antonio. After the abolition of slavery the African American population was abandoned and neglected. In 1887 The Catholic Bishops of America requested that all Catholics respond positively to the pastoral needs of African Americans. Margaret Mary responded by selling part of her ranch, Mount Echo, for \$20,000 which she used to construct a five hundred seated church and the first free school in San Antonio for the black population. Racial attitudes were particularly strong among the white population in the city. Many opposed her efforts for ' those ' people and she endured sustained criticism, prejudice, intimidation which contributed to a staff shortage. When she approached a bank for a loan she was told "*for your senseless Negro venture I will not give you a penny, but if you assure me that you will exclude Negroes I will gladly erect an entire new school*".

Margaret Mary purchased a site and built a school which she named after a seventeenth century Spanish Jesuit Saint, Peter Claver, who had spent his life helping slaves. The new school opened on September 17th 1888 with 120 students and four years later the school had 200 students both day and boarders in spite of the Ku Klux Klan terrorizing the staff.

On 6<sup>th</sup> June 1892 on the advice of her local Bishop Margaret Mary set up the first religious order for women in Texas which was called Sisters of the Holy Ghost. The name was later changed to Sisters of the Holy Spirit and Mary Immaculate. Mother Margaret Mary became head of the order. She returned to Ireland four times between 1896 to 1906 to recruit young women to dedicate their lives to helping the most marginalized and neglected. St. Peter Claver School flourished and became known as a prestigious academy for African American students. Mother Margaret Mary died on 25<sup>th</sup> August 1907 and is buried with her husband John Bernard in Holy Cross Cemetery, Corpus Cemetery.

The order which she founded still exists in Texas, Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Mexico and Zambia. After desegregation in 1970's the school was renamed and today is called the Healy - Murphy Centre and caters for teenagers "*at risk*". Margaret Mary Healy Murphy. A truly remarkable woman.