

# Elizabeth Ann Seton

**Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, S.C.**, (August 28, 1774 – January 4, 1821) was the first native-born citizen<sup>[1]</sup> of the United States to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church (September 14, 1975).<sup>[2]</sup> She established the first Catholic school in the nation, at Emmitsburg, Maryland, where she founded the first American congregation of religious sisters, the Sisters of Charity.

## 1 Biography

### 1.1 Early life

Elizabeth Ann Bayley was born on August 28, 1774, the second child of a socially prominent couple, Dr. Richard Bayley and Catherine Charlton of New York City.<sup>[3]</sup> The Bayley and Charlton families were among the earliest European settlers in the New York area. Her father's parents were French Huguenots and lived in New Rochelle, New York. As Chief Health Officer for the Port of New York, Dr. Bayley attended to immigrants disembarking from ships onto Staten Island, as well as cared for New Yorkers when yellow fever swept through the city (for example, killing 700 in four months in 1795).<sup>[4]</sup> Dr. Bayley later served as the first professor of anatomy at Columbia College.<sup>[5]</sup> Her mother was the daughter of an Episcopal minister who served as rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church on Staten Island for 30 years. Elizabeth was thus raised in the Episcopal Church.

Her mother, Catherine, died in 1777 when Elizabeth was three years old. This may have resulted from complications after the birth of the couple's final child, also Catherine, who died early the following year. Elizabeth's father then married Charlotte Amelia Barclay, a member of the Jacobus James Roosevelt family,<sup>[3]</sup> to provide a mother for his two surviving daughters. The new Mrs. Bayley participated in her church's social ministry, and often took young Elizabeth with on her charitable rounds, as she visited the poor in their homes to distribute food and needed items.

The couple had five children, but the marriage ended in separation. During the breakup, their stepmother rejected Elizabeth and her older sister, Mary Magdalene. Their father then traveled to London for further medical studies, so the sisters lived temporarily in New Rochelle with their paternal uncle, William Bayley, and his wife, Sarah Pell Bayley. Elizabeth experienced a period of darkness during this time, feeling the separation as loss of a second mother, as she later reflected in her jour-



*Elizabeth Ann Seton, Appleton's*

nals. In these journals, Elizabeth also showed her love for nature, poetry, and music, especially the piano. Entries frequently expressed her religious aspirations, as well as favorite passages from her reading, showing her introspection and natural bent toward contemplation. Seton was also fluent in French, a fine musician, and an accomplished horsewoman.<sup>[6]</sup>

### 1.2 Marriage and motherhood

On January 25, 1794, at age 19, Elizabeth married William Magee Seton, aged 25, a wealthy businessman in the import trade. Samuel Provoost, the first Episcopalian bishop of New York, presided at their wedding.<sup>[7]</sup> Her husband's father, William Seton (1746–1798), belonged to an impoverished noble Scottish family, and had

emigrated to New York in 1758, and became superintendent and part owner of the iron-works of Ringwood, New Jersey. A loyalist, the senior William Seton was the last royal public notary for the city and province of New York. He brought his sons William (Elizabeth's husband) and James into the import-export mercantile firm, the William Seton Company, which became Seton, Maitland and Company in 1793. The younger William had visited important counting houses in Europe in 1788, was a friend of Filippo Filicchi (a renowned merchant in Leghorn, Italy, with whom his firm traded), and brought the first Stradivarius violin to America.<sup>[4]</sup>

Socially prominent in New York, the Setons belonged to the fashionable Trinity Episcopal Church, near Broadway and Wall Streets. A devout communicant, Elizabeth took the Rev. John Henry Hobart (later bishop) as her spiritual director. Along with her sister-in-law Rebecca Mary Seton (1780–1804) (her soul-friend and dearest confidante), Elizabeth continued her former stepmother's social ministry—nursing the sick and dying among family, friends, and needy neighbors. Elizabeth was a charter member of The Society for the Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children (1797) and also served as the organization's treasurer.<sup>[8]</sup>

When the elder William Seton died, the Seton family fortunes began to decline in the volatile economic climate preceding the War of 1812. The couple took in William's six younger siblings, ages seven to seventeen. Plus, they had five children of their own: Anna Maria (Annina) (1795–1812), William II, Richard (1798–1823), Catherine (1800–1891) (who was to become the first American to join the Sisters of Mercy) and Rebecca Mary (1802–1816). William was tormented by visions of debtors' prison.<sup>[6]</sup>

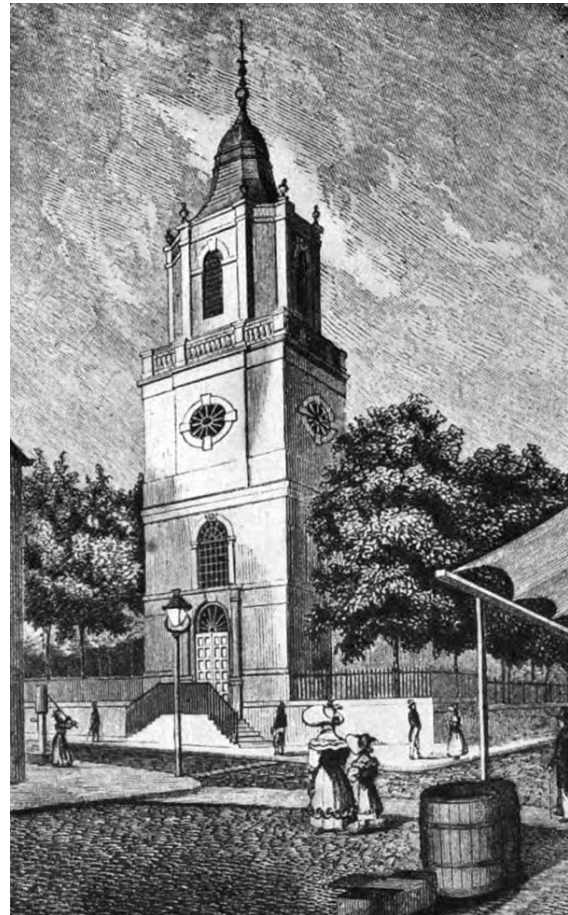
### 1.3 Widowhood and conversion



*The Seton home in New York City was located at the site on which a church now stands in her honor, with the formerly matching building to the right (7 State Street) forming part of the shrine.*

By 1802, the United Kingdom's blockade of Napoleonic

France and the loss of several of her husband's ships at sea led William Seton into bankruptcy. Elizabeth spent that Christmas watching the front door to keep the seizure officer out of their Wall St. home. The following summer she and the children stayed with her father, who was still health officer for the Port of New York on Staten Island.<sup>[6]</sup> Through most of their married life, William Seton suffered from tuberculosis. The stress worsened his illness; his doctors sent him to Italy for the warmer climate, with Elizabeth and their eldest daughter as his companions. Upon landing at the port of Leghorn, they were held in quarantine for a month, for authorities feared they might have brought yellow fever from New York. William died on 27 December 1803<sup>[5]</sup> and was buried in the Old English Cemetery. Elizabeth and Anna Maria were received by the families of her late husband's Italian business partners, who introduced her to Roman Catholicism.



*St. Peter's, Barclay Street, 1785*

Returning to New York, the widow Seton was received into the Catholic Church, on March 14, 1805 by the Rev. Matthew O'Brien, pastor of St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church, New York,<sup>[8]</sup> then the city's only Catholic church. (Anti-Catholic laws had been lifted just a few years before.) A year later, she received the sacrament of Confirmation from the Bishop of Baltimore, the Right Reverend John Carroll, the only Catholic bishop

in the nation.

In order to support herself and her children, Seton had started an *academy* for young ladies, as was common for widows of social standing in that period. After news of her conversion to Catholicism spread, however, most parents withdrew their daughters from her tutelage. Seton was about to move to Canada when she met a visiting priest, the *Abbé Louis William Valentine Dubourg, S.S.*, who was a member of the French *émigré* community of *Sulpician Fathers* and then president of St. Mary's college. The Sulpicians had taken refuge in the United States from the religious persecution of the *Reign of Terror* in France and were in the process of establishing the first Catholic *seminary* for the United States, in keeping with the goals of their society. For several years, Dubourg had envisioned a religious school to meet the educational needs of the new nation's small Catholic community.<sup>[8]</sup>

## 1.4 Foundress

After struggling through some trying and difficult years, in 1809 Elizabeth accepted the invitation of the Sulpicians and moved to Emmitsburg, Maryland. A year later she established the *Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School*, a school dedicated to the education of Catholic girls. This was possible due to the financial support of Samuel Sutherland Cooper,<sup>[5]</sup> a wealthy convert and seminarian at the newly established *Mount Saint Mary's University*, begun by John Dubois, S.S., and the Sulpicians.

On 31 July, Elizabeth established a religious community in Emmitsburg dedicated to the care of the children of the poor. This was the first congregation of religious sisters to be founded in the United States, and its school was the first free Catholic school in America. This modest beginning marked the start of the Catholic parochial school system in the United States.<sup>[9]</sup> The congregation was initially called the Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph's. From that point on, she became known as "Mother Seton". In 1810, the sisters adopted the rules written by St. Vincent de Paul for the Daughters of Charity in France.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 1.5 Later life and death

The remainder of her life was spent in leading and developing the new congregation. Mother Seton was described as a charming and cultured lady. Her connections to New York society and the accompanying social pressures to leave the new life she had created for herself did not deter her from embracing her religious vocation and charitable mission. The greatest difficulties she faced were actually internal, stemming from misunderstandings, interpersonal conflicts and the deaths of two daughters, other loved ones, and young sisters in the community.

She died of tuberculosis on January 4, 1821, at the age of 46. Today, her remains are entombed in the National

Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

By 1830, the Sisters were running orphanages and schools as far west as Cincinnati and New Orleans and had established the first hospital west of the Mississippi in St. Louis.<sup>[9]</sup>

## 2 Legacy



*Sign of the shrine*

Elizabeth Ann Seton had a deep devotion to the Eucharist, Sacred Scripture and the Virgin Mary. The 23rd Psalm was her favorite prayer throughout her life. She was a woman of prayer and service who embraced the spirituality of Louise de Marillac and Vincent de Paul. It had been her original intention to join the Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, but the embargo of France due to the Napoleonic Wars prevented this connection. It was only decades later, in 1850, that the Emmitsburg community took the steps to merge with the Daughters, and to become their American branch, as their foundress had envisioned.

Today, six separate religious congregations trace their roots to the beginnings of the Sisters of Charity in Emmitsburg. In addition to the original community of Sisters at Emmitsburg (now part of the Vincentian order), they are based in New York City; Cincinnati, Ohio; Halifax Regional Municipality; Convent Station, New Jersey; and Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

Mother Seton School in Emmitsburg, Maryland, is a direct descendant of the Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School. It is located less than a mile from the site of the original school and is sponsored by the Daughters of Charity.<sup>[10]</sup>

Seton Home Study School, a Roman Catholic home-schooling program based in Front Royal, Virginia, received its name from St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

Seton Hall College (now known as Seton Hall University) was formally founded on September 1, 1856, by Diocese of Newark Bishop James Roosevelt Bayley, a cousin of



*Statue in St. Raymond's Cemetery  
Bronx, New York*

President Theodore Roosevelt. Bishop Bayley named the institution after his aunt, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.

A number of Roman Catholic churches are named for Mother Seton. These include St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Parish in Crofton, Maryland, established in 1975<sup>[11]</sup> in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the same diocese in which she had founded Saint Joseph's Academy and Free School.

### 3 Canonization

Elizabeth Ann Seton was beatified by Pope John XXIII on March 17, 1963. The pope said on the occasion, "In a house that was very small, but with ample space for charity, she sowed a seed in America which by Divine Grace grew into a large tree."<sup>[12]</sup>



*A relic of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton on display for veneration at St. Patrick Catholic Church in Columbus, Ohio.*

Pope Paul VI canonized her on September 14, 1975, in a ceremony in St. Peter's Square.<sup>[1]</sup> In his words, "Elizabeth Ann Seton is a saint. St. Elizabeth Ann Seton is an American. All of us say this with special joy, and with the intention of honoring the land and the nation from which she sprang forth as the first flower in the calendar of the saints. Elizabeth Ann Seton was wholly American! Rejoice for your glorious daughter. Be proud of her. And know how to preserve her fruitful heritage."<sup>[1]</sup>

Her feast day is January 4.<sup>[13]</sup>

Elizabeth Seton is the patron saint of seafarers.<sup>[14]</sup>

### 4 See also

- Sisters of Charity Federation in the Vincentian-Setonian Tradition
- Saint Frances Xavier Cabrini, the first citizen of the United States to be canonized by the Roman Catholic Church
- National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Emmitsburg, Maryland
- Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Bayley Seton, Manhattan, New York City

Saints portal

### 5 References

Notes

- [1] “Biography of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton”. National Shrine of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton. Retrieved 26 December 2013.
- [2] Frances Xavier Cabrini was the first American citizen to be canonized; she was born in Sant'Angelo Lodigiano, in the Lombard Province of Lodi, Italy (then part of the Austrian Empire).
- [3] “The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton”. *The Seton Legacy*. The National Shrine of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. 2010-09-15.
- [4] Barkley, Elizabeth Bookser. “Elizabeth Ann Seton: A Profoundly Human Saint”, *St. Anthony Messenger*, Franciscan Media
- [5] Randolph, Bartholomew. “St. Elizabeth Ann Seton.” *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 13. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1912. 2 Jul. 2013
- [6] “Biography of Elizabeth Ann Seton”, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Roman Catholic Church, Crystal Lake, Illinois
- [7] Emmitsburgh Area Historical Society
- [8] St. Elizabeth Ann Seton biography, Archdiocese of Baltimore
- [9] “St. Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774 – 1821)”, Seton Healthcare Family
- [10] Mother Seton School, Emmitsburg, Maryland
- [11] “History”, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Catholic Parish
- [12] “History: A Historical Perspective”. Three Bridges, New Jersey: St Elizabeth Ann Seton Parish. Retrieved 26 December 2013.
- [13] Foley O.F.M., Leonard. “St. Elizabeth Ann Seton”, *Saint of the Day, Lives, Lessons and Feast*, (revised by Pat McCloskey O.F.M.), Franciscan Media
- [14] “St. Elizabeth Seton”, *Catholic Maritime News*, Vol.75, Spring 2014, p.3

## 6 External links

- Full text of the homily by Pope Paul VI on the occasion of the canonization of St. Seton
- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Online Museum
- St. Elizabeth Ann Seton biography, Archdiocese of Baltimore

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