

Frances Margaret Allen (1784-1819) remains to this day a link between the people of Quebec and those of the United States. Almost from its settlement New England had fought savagely with New France, the two peoples being caught up in the great wars of England and France and inflamed by religious prejudices on both sides. In 1807, when the twenty-two-year-old Fanny Allen came to Montreal to learn French and investigate the culture of French Canada, there was as yet only one Catholic Church edifice in all New England. Fanny herself was a scoffer in religious matters, a follower of the "Enlightenment." Yet Fanny Allen remained in Montreal to serve in the Hotel Dieu as a member of the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph.

The region now known as Vermont had been an unpopulated buffer zone between New England and New France for 130 years prior to the French loss of Canada in 1760. After 1760, the Allen family took the lead in making the Green Mountain territory an independent nation, freed from the exploitation of colonial governors in New Hampshire and, especially, New York.

Ethan Allen, Fanny's father, had promptly supported the American Revolution (1775) to the extent of taking the fortress Ticonderoga from the British, recruiting French Canadians to join in the cause and attempting to capture Montreal itself. But when Ethan Allen saw that the United States was hostile to the independence of Vermont, he investigated whether Great Britain, without requiring the Vermonters to make war on Americans, would guarantee Vermont independence.

After the Revolution, the Allens promoted free trade between Independent Vermont and Quebec. Ethan died in 1789, but the effort to establish relations with Quebec was carried on for the Vermont government by Fanny's uncle, Ira Allen. The Allens, determined to see Vermont a success, had invested all their money in Vermont land titles originally granted by New Hampshire, titles held to be worthless by the United States. Ira had become manager of the lands of all his deceased brothers.

After Vermont at last won admission to the United States on terms of independence, an influx of wealthy new arrivals of the Federalist Party spelled trouble for the Allens. The family gradually lost its holdings and much of its prestige, though the older settlers retained an almost mystical affection for the name of the deceased Ethan Allen. Fanny Allen's own estate from her father was almost entirely ruined.

But Fanny had a literary legacy from her father. Though self-educated, Ethan Allen had written popular political pamphlets, a lively account of his captivity as a British prisoner-of-war, and a large work on theology in which he attacked the New England clergy, their Bible and their Christ while maintaining a devotion to God. Ethan greatly resented the clergy of his day whom he regarded as insufficiently attached to the common man.

There were, of course, many devout Protestants in early Vermont, but Fanny's family had avoided their churches. Of Catholicism she had heard only worse reports. Thus it was a great shock to Fanny Allen to learn that French Canadians were not a morbid group of religious fanatics and that their religion, as she experienced it at the boarding school of the congregation of Notre Dame and at the Hotel Dieu, was actually conducive to peace, justice and mercy, qualities she had little experienced as a young girl watching the dismemberment of her own estate. Perhaps when her stepfather, Dr. Jabez Penniman, had become chief U.S. Customs official for Vermont, with his home in Swanton near the Quebec frontier, she had already begun to suspect that the pretty children of French Canada had very much to recommend them. Even then, Fanny resisted their mysterious Catholic religion until overwhelmed by an experience of God in the old chapel of the Congregation Notre Dame.

Fanny Allen was among the best liked and best educated young women in early Vermont. Her fiancée, Archibald Hyde, was just graduating from the infant University of Vermont when Fanny, compelled by her profound religious experience, announced her conversion to Catholicism and her desire to return to

Montreal to one or another of the convents. The decision rocked her family, which was just getting back on its feet and had looked forward to seeing Fanny secure in a wealthy family. It came at a bad time for her stepfather, Dr. Penniman, then engaged in a naval blockade of Lake Champlain, trying to compel Vermonters to respect the U.S. policy of no trade with Canada.

Fanny's years in the convent fell at a time when the sisters, cut off from their original patrons in France, were undertaking many laborious projects just to stay alive. Their diet was mainly a thin soup, their bedding was British army salvage. The war of 1812 cut Fanny off from her homeland and family. The Hotel Dieu, which had tended Ethan's wounded soldiers in the attack of 1775, was again flooded with suffering men to whom Fanny could minister in either language.

A spirit of prayer, simplicity and great poverty characterized the convent, but the health of many of the nuns was at risk and Fanny herself died in 1819 at the age of 35. She was tended in her last illness by Dr. Martyn Paine of Williamstown, Vermont, the young son of one of Vermont's founding families. Paine was then operating a practice among English Montrealers and he published a moving account of Fanny's death and the attitude of her sisters in religion.

But Fanny's mother (Frances Montessor Allen), who at first moved heaven and earth to prevent the girl's plans, at least became more sympathetic. With her mother's reluctant blessing, Fanny sold her own interest in Ethan's estate (the home farm itself, near Burlington) to Jabez Penniman for the paltry sum of \$200.00, just enough to pay another year in Montreal. She became a novice at the Hotel Dieu in 1808. By the time of her final vows, in 1811, her stepfather had been reconciled (his love for Fanny had never been in question) and he endowed her with a sum sufficient to compensate the convent for her expenses there. The profession ceremony was attended by many well-known Vermonters, a fact which did not prevent Fanny's being mocked in the newspapers in Vermont.

After Fanny's death a long series of people associated with her began to experience desires for closer ties with the French-speaking nation in Canada and even with Catholicism. Fanny's fiancée, who eventually succeeded Dr. Jabez Penniman as head of Customs, began to defend the rights of Quebec immigrants in New England. There were no priests in Vermont, so he taught the Canadian children their catechism under the direction of the pastor of Chambly. He endowed the first Catholic edifice in Vermont (1830), which was soon laid in ashes by its opponents. Eventually he became a Catholic himself.

Fanny's brother-in-law, Vermont Supreme Court Justice William Brayton, also became a Catholic. When Judge Brayton and his wife saw themselves slipping to an early grave, they provided that their three girls be taken to the Boarding School of the Congregation Notre Dame in Montreal. It was Dr. Penniman himself who complied with this wish, conveying the girls by buckboard to the very place that had witnessed Fanny's discovery of religious experience.

Reverend Daniel Barber, one of Vermont's pioneer Anglican priests, had attempted, on request of Fanny's parents, to prevent her conversion. But he himself decided, in the year following Fanny's final vows, to conclude his days as a Catholic.

Cynthia Marvin, who had known Fanny all Fanny's life and had visited her frequently in the convent, married Dr. Penniman after the death of Frances, when Jabez was nearing seventy years of age. After his death, Cynthia also became a Catholic.

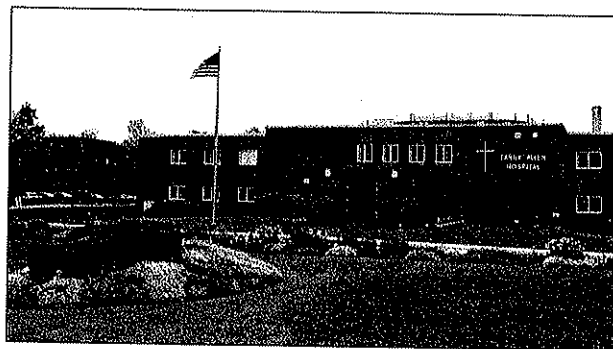
Miss Abby Hemenway (1828-1890), Vermont's great compiler of local histories, pursued the story of Fanny Allen, became a Catholic and followed Fanny's footsteps to Montreal. Though she did not, in the end, become a nun, she devoted much of her energies to preserving the stories of devout Protestants and Catholics and upholding the life of Fanny Allen as a model of reconciliation between peoples.

The memory of Fanny Allen is kept alive today by the Fanny Allen Hospital, Hotel Dieu which is located in the heart of the Allen holdings near Burlington on the farmstead of Jabez Penniman.

Fanny Allen Hospital was established in 1894 and sponsored by the Religious Hospitallers of St. Joseph, Fanny's community. A member of Covenant Health Systems, it joined with the Medical Center Hospital of Vermont in 1995 and the University Health Center to form Fletcher-Allen Health Care. An article in the lease agreement with Fletcher-Allen Health Care stipulates that the Fanny Allen Campus is to retain its Catholic identity and presence, thereby promoting its mission, values and heritage.

The Fanny Allen Campus is a vital part of Fletcher Allen's health care delivery system. Its services include a walk-in care center, X-Ray services including CT scanning and ultrasound Laboratory, operating rooms for ambulatory surgery and special procedures, 35 bed acute in-patient comprehensive rehabilitation center and out-patient rehabilitation therapies.

The Fanny Allen in Vermont, like the various health care facilities throughout the U.S., Canada, France and Latin America, is known for a spiritual atmosphere which appeals to people of all faiths. Thus the spirit of Sister Fanny Allen continues to inspire reconciliation and harmony in her native place.



Life of
Sister Fanny Allen, R.H.S.J.
1784-1819

by
David Bryan