

**KELLEY, Sister Mary Gervase.** September 8, 1888–October 22, 1926.

CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY OF AMERICA (CATHOLIC SISTERS COLLEGE) (BA 1914, MA 1915, PhD 1917).

Helen Agnes Kelley was born in the Roxbury neighborhood of Boston, Massachusetts, the daughter of Mary (Callahan) (b. 1853) and John P. Kelley (b. 1848). According to the 1900 census, her parents were born in Massachusetts of Irish heritage. At that time her parents had been married sixteen years; the four surviving children of five born were: John A. (b. 1886), Helen, Mary E. (b. 1890), and William G. (b. 1891). John Kelley, her father, was a plumber. Some records report the last name as Kelly instead of Kelley.

Helen Kelley received her elementary education in St. Patrick's parochial school and graduated from St. Patrick's high school in Roxbury in 1905. She entered the community of the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, Halifax, Nova Scotia, on August 5, 1906, took her first vows on November 1, 1908, and her final vows on August 15, 1915. She used the religious name Sister Mary Gervase.

Community records were destroyed in a fire in 1951, so much of the information about Sister Mary Gervase is based on material that was reconstructed after the fire. According to these records, Sister Mary Gervase was a teacher in schools run by her religious community; she earned her "B" License in 1908 and her "A" License in 1912. According to her dissertation vita, "in 1910 she began work with the University of London, from which institution she received the Matriculation and the Intermediate Arts certificates."

It appears that Sister Mary Gervase was assigned to St. Mary's in Halifax 1908–13, to St. Patrick's in Roxbury, Massachusetts, 1913–17, and to Mount St. Vincent in Rockingham, Nova Scotia, 1917–23. In all of these assignments she was either a teacher or a student.

From 1908 to 1913, Sister Mary Gervase taught in Halifax public schools. From 1913 to 1917, including summer sessions, she was a student in residence at the Catholic Sisters College of the Catholic University of America, where she earned a BA in 1914, an MA in 1915, and a PhD in 1917. Her PhD was the first in mathematics earned by a woman religious in the United States; the next was awarded a dozen years later, also by Catholic University, to [Sister Marie Cecilia Mangold](#). Sister Mary Gervase's degree was one of the first two PhD's in mathematics awarded by Catholic University. Both she and J. N. Rice earned degrees in June 1917 under the direction of Aubrey Landry, and both of their dissertations are available in the [University of Michigan Historical Mathematics Collection](#). While Sister Mary Gervase returned to Nova Scotia after receiving her doctorate, Rice joined the mathematics faculty at Catholic and remained there about forty years.

Sister Mary Gervase was a teacher at Mount St. Vincent Academy in Rockingham, Nova Scotia, from 1917 until 1923. In 1923 she entered the Lourdes Sanatorium in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, as a patient. This tuberculosis sanatorium had been opened by the Sisters of Charity just over a decade earlier. Sister Mary Gervase remained there until her death at age thirty-eight in 1926. She was survived by her mother and at least one sister and one brother.

**Dissertation:**

**1917** On the cardioids fulfilling certain assigned conditions. PhD dissertation, Catholic Sisters College of the Catholic University of America, directed by Aubrey Edward Landry. Printed by National Capital Press, Washington, DC.

**References to:** [BioWMath](#).

Obituary. *Halifax Herald*, 23 Oct 1926.

**Other sources:** PhD dissertation vita 1917; Owens questionnaire 1940 (preparer unknown); communication with Mount Saint Vincent, Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul, via Miriam P. Cooney, CSC; US Census 1900, 1910 MA.

Last modified: December 13, 2008.