

Letter of Mother Caroline Freiss, SSND on American Children
June 18, 1850
To Very Reverend and Esteemed Lord Court Chaplain
[Joseph Ferdinand Mueller]¹

Below is an excerpt from Letter #10.

“We opened St. Peter’s School (Philadelphia) in September, 1848, with 146 girls but now have 235.

I am writing from my own personal experience when I say that any School Sister who can influence them must be a most efficient and practical teacher. Never before had I encountered so imperative and urgent a need to be most firm and determined to insist on school discipline.

The dear children are like young horses where one must always hold the reins. Their fiery and passionate – also, restless and fidgety – temperaments prevent all undisturbed or uninterrupted instructions. The subject must be changed frequently and only a lively and vivacious presentation attracts them. The teacher must show a warm, lively interest in her pupils; only in this way can she work effectively and win their hearts. Then, even if at times she must seem strict or be severe, they have become devoted to her. Of course, this is indeed the general rule but nowhere is it so imperatively necessary as here.

Often the exertion and the fatigue endured in class was (sic) lessened a bit by the delightful answers given by some girls who were so naïve, e.g. ‘What causes thunder?’ ‘Two clouds come together and then they crash.’...Once I told the children that mercury was so called because it went around the sun so fast. Shortly after that one of the girls called another one, Mercury, because she walked and talked so fast - no incorrect judgment.

This year we hope to conduct our school examinations publicly for the second time with these pupils and to have an exhibition of their needlework. But America has such a different type of display! Nothing but laces is knitted. Every piece of clothing trimmed with lace – lace on the sleeves, on pants, on everything, in short, the whole child is enveloped in laces. No one would think of knitting stockings or of sewing any piece of clothing because you can buy such articles in the store very cheaply. Besides knitting lace, the children usually make quilts. Each one is generally three or four yards square. They sew from 100 to 1,000 patches together; these are varied in color (red, blue, green, gray, etc.) as well as material (cotton, silk, canvas). The patches are of different sizes and shapes and when sewed together they make various designs- stars, three or four cornered with oblique and straight lines. At our public examination such quilts covered our walls. On these we attached the handmade laces for exhibition. However,

¹ Barbara Brumleve, SSND, ed. *Letters of Mother Caroline Freiss, SSND*, (Winona: St. Mary’s College Press), #10, Baltimore, June 18, 1850, pp. 44-45.

each year we hope to prepare better needlework. The pupils have made a good start already knitting stocking and making simple articles of clothing, even dresses. The German parents, who cannot forget their dear fatherland, are glad to renew the culture and the customs of the School Sisters and rouse the consciences of their children.² Now, Reverend Father, you must have heard more than enough concerning our schools kindly pardon me...

Respectfully signed in the name of all

Maria Caroline Friess
German-American School Sister

² Originally the School Sisters were allowed to teach only girls. In New York [Most Holy Redeemer], the following was reported: "Since this school building is built next to the street you hear much noise all day long from the traffic of wagons and carts. It is easy to imagine how this racket makes teaching difficult. Besides this, the children were rough, undisciplined, and ill-mannered, when we took the school over. Three hundred fifty children were supposed to come. Five hundred thirty appeared instead... The children were grouped into classes and handed over to the teachers. Sister Hyacinth Zimmerman- a young, strong, courageous teacher – was given little ones in two groups numbering 162 pupils..." Ibid. p. 53.