

PROFILE

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private school established by wealthy planters, a county free school, or classes in the home of family or relatives.

Relatives and friends of the Sansburys began to move to Kentucky as early as 1775. Some came with a colony in 1785. Economic hardship in Maryland and the prospect of more fertile land in Kentucky were the primary reasons for going west. Probably because of the father's poor health – Alexis died in 1816 – his family remained in Maryland until late 1819 or early 1820.<sup>[5]</sup> The years after his death must have been extremely difficult for the family. In 1816-1817, crops failed and food became scarce. In that "year without a summer," Elizabeth and Mariah's brother Alexis, Jr., became a member of an organization to provide relief for the poor.<sup>[6]</sup> Yet the 1818 family records indicate that the widow Elizabeth Sansbury was still paying the debts of her husband's estate, which was valued at over five thousand dollars. Most of that amount represented the current "value" of sixteen slaves.

Cartwright Creek became the destination of this branch of the Sansbury family. Its waters begin in the knobs of central Kentucky in what is currently Marion County, then cut through Washington and Nelson Counties where it joins the Salt River. As the horse-drawn coach or wagon carrying the Sansburys lumbered down Bardstown Road near what is now Springfield, the most imposing sight that met their eyes was the cluster of buildings belonging to the

carry out the mission of the Church. Now as provincial, he made the first general appeal to St. Rose parishioners. Friars and parishioners awaited some response to the call of their pastor.

February 28, nine young women of the pioneer families, including Mariah and Elizabeth Sansbury, told Wilson of their intention to become Dominicans. By March all nine were planning to form a Dominican community. Five of the nine were related to Mariah and Elizabeth. "Four were ready for reception but had not yet come together in community since they had no house, no means and no provisions, so St. Rose [the friars] fixed up a log cabin for their dwelling." [8] They named this small building Bethany. The candidates' slight knowledge of religious life would soon be broadened. "They had not as yet the habit to put on or even an idea how to make it, therefore, the Very Rev. Father Provincial instructed them and provided .92 0.6 fixe0004 Tc -0.0

Six months after the move to the Cartwright Creek valley, the St. Mary Magdalene

Piety Hill, the highest point in the village of Somerset, was the location of Dominican life in Perry County, Ohio. Adjacent to Holy Trinity Church on this hill, Fenwick purchased land and buildings that were to become St. Mary Convent and Academy. Here Benven encountered, not fifth generation English Catholics of Maryland or Kentucky, but recent German Catholic immigrants. The four pioneers derived much satisfaction from being the first Dominican women religious in Ohio and the second Dominican foundation in the United States. They recorded the event in these words:

Sister Benven, Sister Agnes, Sister Emily, and Sister Catherine of the Order of St. Dominic, being invited by the Right Reverend Bishop of Cincinnati to make an establishment in Ohio, having obtained leave, left St. Magdalene's Kentucky, on the 11 of January, 1830, and arrived at Somerset Ohio, their place of destination, on the 5th of the following month, where they found a gratified public ready to receive and support them. The said Sisters took possession of the house and lot purchased by the Reverend Bishop of Cincinnati and commenced housekeeping February 25th, 1830, and commenced their school April 5 in the same year with forty scholars the first quarter.[\[14\]](#)

The school building had served previously as



Sister Angela Sansbury



Sister Benven Sansbury

#### A Note on the Sansbury Portraits

The likeness of Angela reveals an oval face, a heart shaped mouth, a somewhat distant look in her eyes and a relaxed pose: features that suggest a contemplative person. Her image reveals Mother Angela to be sensitive, intelligent, perceptive, anxious, artistic, beautiful, and distinguished in bearing. The portrait belies both the stereotypical rough frontier woman and the extraordinary achievements of this active contemplative.

The portrait of Benven shows a face square in shape. The mouth is firm with a small upper and full lower lip. The eyes are clear and resolute. With head erect and an open mantle over her shoulders, she appears to be ready to step forward to meet any need. The photograph presents a woman with a face that is kindly but strong; one can surmise that Benven could be either witty or determined. Those who knew Benven characterized her as stately, dignified and an observer of the Rule.

The portraits of the Sansbury sisters reveal stalwart Dominican women of the first two communities of vowed apostolic women in the United States. Through the choices and responses of Angela and Benven Sansbury, the Sisters of St. Catharine and St. Mary of the Springs congregations inaugurated what would become a procession of women who would join the friars as missionaries in the New World.

The two Sansbury sisters are remembered for the leadership they provided, especially for the St. Mary's community in Ohio. Over the years, Benven served either as prioress or sub-prioress, treasurer or novice mistress, in the three communities where she lived. After Angela's move to St. Mary's, she, too, was elected prioress and held that position until her death.

Under Benven's leadership as prioress, the academy flourished and the number of students increased rapidly. In 1832 Nicholas Dominic Young, O.P., the Dominican Provincial and mentor, arranged for the incorporation of the school as St. Mary's Female Literary Society. "I

have obtained an Act of incorporation for our sisters, this will save them much trouble and make the Institution more generally known."[\[18\]](#) Following the Kentucky procedure, building a chapel took precedence over other structures. Angela and Benven sought financial assistance jointly from their friends abroad and at home. They avoided the dilemma of their earlier Kentucky experience.

Angela's death came in the midst of the flurry of building activities at St. Mary's. She had been ill for only eight days. She was forty-five years of age. One of the students at the Academy gave this account:

I have to tell you that which is most painful. Mother Angela died Saturday night, on the 30th of Nov., between 10 and 11 o'clock. The affection of the sisters, I should judge is very great at being deprived of a member so amiable. We were all present when she died. We attended her funeral on Monday at ten o'clock. There were three Rev. Fathers attended by a concourse of people; the church was crowded. . .[\[19\]](#)

Benven succeeded Angela as prioress at Somerset. She continued to serve St. Mary's and its missions for more than thirty years. She also demonstrated her loyalty and concern for the welfare of the St. Mary Magdalene community. She ensured that the property in Kentucky remain in the hands of the Literary Society of St. Mary Magdalene. On March 11, 1847, for one dollar, she gave the Society her undivided interest in the 106 acres in Kentucky. She framed an agreement in strong legal terms. "The said Literary Society and the said Elizabeth Sansbury [sic] does further covenant and agree that she will warrant and forever defend the above sold land . . . from and against the claim or claims of all. . ."[\[20\]](#)

If Benven's continuous calls to leadership were difficult, her ministry demands were no less taxing. She was called at age sixty to be involved in caring for infants in Tennessee. In 1855 she answered the call of the friars in Memphis to establish St. Peter's Orphanage there, and she remained for almost two years. Less than ten years later in 1864, at the age of seventy and in the midst of the Civil War, she and two companions arrived in Nashville, Tennessee, to staff an orphanage established by St. Mary's Orphanage Association.[\[21\]](#)

Benven endured two years in Nashville, years troubled because of the war. Shortly after they arrived, one of her companions, Gertrude O'Meara, became ill and died. Benven and her only other companion cared for the fourteen orphans until more sisters joined them from Kentucky. However, on December 1, 1864, a real crisis occurred when the sisters and orphans were notified they would have to leave immediately because of shelling by the Union armies. With the help of Father Joseph Kelly and friends, all were evacuated to the basement of the cathedral. The orphanage was leveled by the ensuing barrage, but rebuilt in 1865.

Benven was back in Ohio just three weeks when fire destroyed St. Mary's at Somerset on June 6, 1866. After the fire, Benven helped establish a temporary academy at St. Joseph Priory in Somerset. There she was prefect of the boarders and teacher. Although she often expressed her great love for Somerset and its people, yet as sub-prioress she voted on July 7, 1866, to move the sisters' convent and academy to Columbus, Ohio, a city with much more promise for growth.





16. Flaget to Louis DeLoul, Bardstown, July 5, 1833, The Filson Club, Louisville, Ky. (FCA).
17. Apostolic women religious with a simple vow of poverty retain possession of personal property, but not its use without permission. So making a will was appropriate.
18. N.D. Young to Fredric Rese, Somerset, Dec. 19, 1832, University of Notre Dame Archives (UNDA), II 4e.
19. Jane Lawe to R.L. Lawe, Somerset, Dec. 12, 1839, copy at CDS.
20. Washington County Records, Kentucky, Deed Book Q, 323.
21. Thomas Stritch, *The Catholic Church in Tennessee* (Nashville: The Catholic Center, 1987) 114.
22. Democratic Union, Somerset, Ohio, May 11, 1864.
23. Council Book, ms., CDS.
24. *Freeman's Journal*, New York, June 14, 1873, 3.