

## She rolled up her sleeves to help San Francisco cholera victims

Written by Jean Bartlett, 2012  
(for *Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma*)



photo: [www.sistersofmercy.org](http://www.sistersofmercy.org)

Sister Mary Baptist Russell

**RUSSELL, SISTER MARY BAPTIST (RSM) (1829-1898).**

(*Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma, CA. XD-7-9/10*)

Born in Newry, Ireland, Katherine Russell was the third child of Arthur and Margaret Russell. Her family was able to provide their children with the best education possible and Katherine's love for the importance of education was lifelong. In the summer of 1845, a potato blight arrived in Ireland destroying 50 percent of what was expected to be a bumper crop. This natural catastrophe set off Ireland's Great Famine (1845-1852) and Katherine gave of her time and her heart to help those in need and she discovered her vocation. In November of 1848, Katherine entered the order of the Sisters of Mercy in Kinsale, Ireland, and it was not long thereafter that the postulant worked with victims of the cholera epidemic brought on by the famine crisis. In 1849, Katherine received the habit of a Sister of Mercy and the religious name of Sister Mary Baptist. In 1851 she made her final profession of vows and for the next three years, taught at the convent school. When Father Hugh Gallagher, a delegate of San Francisco's first Archbishop Joseph Alemany arrived at Kinsale seeking "apostles" for the West, he described such a picture of lawlessness that no one wanted to go. But then many in the religious community stepped up to volunteer and in 1854, the 25-year-old Sister of Mercy from Newry was appointed superior of the eight sisters chosen to start the mission out West. The harsh trip

took several months and when the eight sisters arrived, not only were they not greeted with any fanfare or a place to stay, an anti-Catholic newspaper wrote they should leave San Francisco immediately. Startled but undaunted, under Mother Mary Baptist's sturdy guidance the sisters rented a house on the 600 block of Vallejo Street and their work began. They visited the sick in a nearby hospital, they opened a night school for adults and they established a shelter for unemployed women. In 1855, a cholera epidemic arrived in San Francisco by way of ship. Mother Baptist offered San Francisco city officials her considerable experience working with cholera victims and they accepted with relief. The sisters were then asked to staff all of San Francisco's hospitals. Mother Mary Baptist was also gifted with good business acumen and she opened St. Mary's Hospital in July of 1857. (Relocated in 1905 by the Sisters of Mercy, St. Mary's Medical Center is the oldest continually operating hospital in San Francisco and the first Catholic hospital west of the Rockies.) Under Mother Mary Baptist's guidance, the pioneer sisters would additionally open, among other charitable institutions – a home for widows, an orphanage and the Magdalene Asylum (to assist and reeducate prostitutes). She established a program for the Sisters of Mercy to visit and minister to inmates in the city prison, the county jail and San Quentin State Prison, including those on death row. In addition, the Sisters of Mercy comforted the sick and dying, worked with the poor and the aged, and as their numbers grew larger, they went into Sacramento and Grass Valley, establishing other like nonprofits to help those in need. Mother Mary Baptist died at St. Mary's Hospital in 1898. She was buried at St. Michael's Cemetery next to the Magdalene Asylum. In her obituary, the San Francisco Bulletin called her the "best-known charitable worker on the Pacific Coast." In recognition of her heroic work, the city of San Francisco granted free public transport to all religious; a privilege which is still honored. In 1931, Mother Mary Baptist, along with more than 50 other Sisters of Mercy buried at St. Michael's, was reinterred at Holy Cross.

*This particular biography can be found in Jean Bartlett's 2012-released book, "[Holy Cross Catholic Cemetery, Colma: 125 Years of History, Ministry & Service](#)." There are more than 370,000 interred at Holy Cross. This book offers both the history behind the founding of the Cemetery, as well as more than 70 deeply researched biographical narratives on some of those at rest. The book is available at Holy Cross, [www.holycrosscemeteries.com](http://www.holycrosscemeteries.com).*