

# St Joseph's School, Darwin

1912 – 1958

## Details

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St Joseph's School, Darwin, was the official name given to the Convent School, Darwin, in 1912. Run by the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart, it provided a day school for boys and girls of primary school age and boarding accommodation for girls. It also accommodated State children, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, for whom the administration paid a subsidy. St Joseph's School was renamed St Mary's School in 1958.

St Joseph's School Darwin was the official name given to the Convent School at Cavenagh Street, Darwin, in 1912. St Joseph's School was a galvanised iron structure on the same grounds as St Joseph's Convent and was run by the Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart. It operated as a day school for girls and boys from all backgrounds and also provided accommodation for female boarders. In 1913 there were 28 children enrolled. Despite the name change St Joseph's was often referred to as the Darwin Convent in government documents and newspaper reports.

Conditions at the school were difficult. The following extract from an account of the school written by the Sisters provides an insight:

*Three Sisters taught from Grades 1 to 6 in the original school building – a long tin classroom facing onto Cavanagh Street. It boasted no partitions between the classes and had no glass windows – just corrugated iron shutters held open with sticks. A distinctive feature in front of each class was an array of beer bottles in which each child had brought along his or her drinking water. Water was so scarce that we had to keep padlocks on the drinking water.*

Gladys Turner boarded at the school in 1922. In a history of the school published in 2008, her main recollections were of 'strict sisters and terrible food'.

During the mid to late 1920s a number of fundraising activities were held to raise money for a new building. These included a competition to decide 'Who is Darwin's most popular young lady'. By asking that each voter pay a fee of 3 shillings to vote for one of three contestants, the School raised 873 pounds. Building commenced in 1928. That same year the Sisters reported that although attendance at the school was growing, their teaching was 'greatly handicapped by the absence of accommodation particularly in the case of the younger children'.

The erection of a new stone building provided improved dormitory accommodation upstairs and a new classroom and dining room downstairs. By 1932 the school catered for 102 students, 26 of those as boarders.

Children who boarded at St Joseph's were placed by their parents, or were committed to care at the Convent by the government. During 1934-1935 the government became aware that St Joseph's often received no funding from destitute parents who had placed their children in the school. From 1935, the government agreed to pay a subsidy to St Josephs in cases where no money was received from parents and it took full financial responsibility for children placed there by the government. During the 1930s a number of Aboriginal children under government care were admitted to the boarding section of the school, regularly referred to as the Convent. Government

correspondence in this period shows that during that time, children regarded as neglected were placed at the Convent by the NT Administration and the State Children's Council. In a 1935 memorandum the Administrator of the Northern Territory stated that:

*In the absence of an institution in Darwin for the reception of neglected children, the Convent acts as a kind of home for neglected girls.*

Rose Jenkins who boarded at St Joseph's School in 1936 recalled a daily routine which began by rising at 6am for Mass. This was followed by breakfast and chores, attending school and then doing more housework before dinner. The dormitory consisted of two rows of single beds with a statue of St Mary on the end wall.

In 1936 the school made national news when an Aboriginal woman went to court in an attempt to have her daughter released from the school. The girl had been maintained at the school by the Protector of Aborigines and was therefore under the control of the Protector. The case was lost and instead the mother was allowed to see her daughter for one hour per week under the supervision of the Sisters.

In 1937 the majority of buildings at the school were damaged by a cyclone. Rebuilding included the erection of the first concrete building. In 1942 when Darwin was bombed during World War II, children had not yet been evacuated. They took shelter under the beds in the dormitory. After the bombing, children were evacuated to the Pine Creek Home and later to South Australia. The school was used for a number of years as a Military Services Club.

The school reopened in February 1946 after the children were returned to Darwin. In 1947, 208 children were enrolled and by the 1950s numbers had risen to 400.

In 1958 the school was renamed St Mary's at the instigation of Bishop O'Loughlin who believed that the school should carry the same name as the local parish.

## Gallery



### Roman Catholic Convent

**Description:** This image is of the Convent School in Darwin and St Joseph's School, Darwin. This photo is undated, the date included is an estimate.



### War damaged Catholic Convent

**Description:** The description provided states: War damaged Catholic Convent Lot 374/5, Cavanagh Street, Darwin. Photograph taken for the War Damage Commission. The image shows the St Joseph's School, Darwin.

## More info

### Chronology

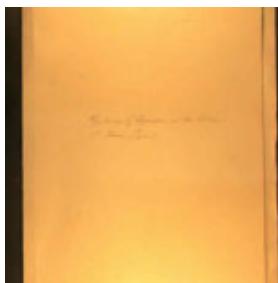
- Convent School, Darwin (1908 - 1912)
- **St Joseph's School, Darwin (1912 – 1958)**
  - St Mary's School, Darwin (1958 - current)

## Related Entries

### Run by

- [Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart \(1885 - current\)](#)

## Other Resources

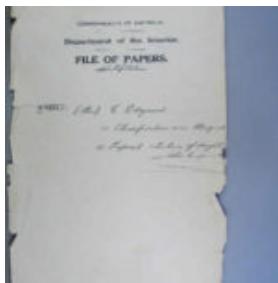


**Title:** Maintenance of children at Darwin Convent [altered from original title]

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1931 - 1935

[Details](#)



**Title:** Case between the Department of the Interior and an Aboriginal mother regarding the retention of her daughter in an Aboriginal compound [altered from original title]

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1933

[Details](#)

## Records

For more information and to access your records, follow the links below:

### Records held by other organisations

- [Records held by Roman Catholic Church, Diocese of Darwin \(1882? - 1983\)](#)
- [Maintenance of quadroon and other children at Darwin Convent \(1931 - 1935\)](#)
- [\(Mrs\) C. \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_ \(1\) Classification as an Aboriginal. \(2\) Proposed retention of her daughter in Aboriginal compound \(1933 - 1936\)](#)

You can view this page online by visiting <https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/entity/st-josephs-school-darwin/>