

# Elizabeth Ann (Bayley) Seton

A summary biography

## First Generation American

Her paternal father and grandfather (the Bayleys) immigrated from **England**, 1726

## Born

Elizabeth Ann Bayley, was born in **New York City** on August 28, 1774, of devout, and well to do Episcopalian New Yorkers; one of three children; baptized at St. Paul Church (Episcopal), a true “daughter of the American Revolution.” Her father was a **British Army surgeon** during War of Independence; afterwards, a prominent surgeon, Columbia College professor of Anatomy, and the first Health Officer of the Port of New York.

## Girlhood

Small-boned and dainty, with “great big brown eyes and **a face fit for a cameo**” emotionally attached to her father, Dr. Richard Bayley (d. 1801 of Yellow Fever) an eminent surgeon and the first professor of Anatomy at what is now Columbia College; public health officer at the Port of New York at Staten Island. He remarried (Charlotte Barclay) and fathered four more children

## Motherless

Her mother, **Catherine (Charlton) Bayley** died 1776; Elizabeth was 2. The children were sent to live with their uncle at his New Rochelle home, *Pel Bayley House* (2 years) summering at their maternal grandfather’s home, the priest-rector of St. Andrew Episcopal Church.

## Adolescent

She was **strikingly beautiful**, vivacious, spirited, a musician, loving by nature, and a practicing Christian. She admired Quakers who “wear such pretty bonnets.” She was a musician, fluent in, and loved, the French language, accomplished horsewoman, popular guest at parties and balls, including President Washington’s Inaugural Ball (!)

## Married

At 19, (Jan 25, 1794), she married **William McGee Seton** (26), a wealthy New York shipping magnate (Seton, Maitland and Co.), in the early stages of consumption and established a family home on Wall Street where they would have five children, Anna Maria (1795), Willy, Richard, Catherine, and Rebecca (1802)

## Active Volunteer

At 23, joined the ***Society for Relief of Poor Widows with Small Children*** in New York City

## A “Rock”

She proved herself to be a **“survivor,”** with a sickly husband, a major financial ruin (1800), genuine fears of debtor’s prison, and facing bankrupt in 2 1/2 yrs. Her **faith** held the family together

## **Quarantine**

**Yellow fever** epidemic strikes William's father and hers; William's consumption worsens; "the Italian sun" is suggested for a cure; they eventually sell all their possessions, many inherited, to finance European trip. William, Elizabeth and Anna Marie ("Annina") (8) depart, leaving the other four children with her family in New York. The sea voyage takes seven weeks.

**Leghorn (Livorno), Italy** (near Pisa), Intend to stay with Filicchis, in Florence, her in law's friends; but the Setons had to be quarantined four weeks in a stone tower (the Lazaretto) on a canal, because of fear of Yellow Fever. Eighty days of near despair, nursing husband, sharing stories and playing games with her eldest daughter, Anna Marie, "Annina" (8), her daughter, and conducting prayer services; mother and daughter often skipped rope to keep warm

## **Tragedy**

William, her husband, 37, dies of tuberculosis, Dec 27, 1803, Pisa, Italy, just nine days after they are let out of quarantine; with the assistance of a laundress, she prepared his body personally. Spends six months with Filicchis in Florence.

## **Catholic Influences**

Waiting to embark from Livorno, she attended a Catholic Church with Filicchis; She was deeply impressed by doctrine of the Real Presence; it would be at the heart of her conversion to Catholicism

## **Returning Home**

She returns to New York and her four other children, poor and widowed, June 1804

## **Conversion to Catholicism**

She agonized over turning away from her family beliefs and becoming a Catholic, but chooses to do so, and is baptized at Church of St. Peter, New York, 1805. She chooses Mary as her Confirmation name thus having the names of all three influential biblical women surrounding Jesus: Elizabeth, Ann and Mary

## **Founded a boardinghouse**

She taught schoolboys in building on Prince Street; religious prejudice snuffed out support; it failed after her former friends and family deserted her. They accused her of "corrupting the young with Catholicism." She was determined to leave New York.

## **Invitation to start a new life**

President of St. Mary's College and former Jesuit and first bishop in America, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore, offered her an opportunity to found a Catholic school in Baltimore, MD, residence, so she left New York City, 1808 and founded the first Catholic School, the Pace Street House, Baltimore, MD

## **Religious vows**

In 1808 Bishop John Carroll (whose brother had signed the Declaration of Independence) receives her vows as a Sister of Charity

## **“Mother” Seton**

In March 1813, when, with her sister-in-law, her three daughters, and four other women; she took evangelical vows before Bishop Carroll, she founded the “Sisters of Charity of St. Joseph,” at Stone House, on an Emmitsburg farm, MD. with Motherhouse. Clothing, black dresses with shoulder capes, simple white muslin cap (bonnet), “widow dress.” White House (log cabin), first residence; first Catholic parochial school, St. Joseph’s Academy (3 students)

## **Tragedy**

Her sisters-in-law die, continued prejudice from New York relatives (they called her “that pest of society, hypocrite and bigot”), and within two years, two of her children would die, organizing Religious Order, money troubles, possessive clergy, additional schools, demand for more Sisters. Her sons were “ordinary,” self-centered; she supported them even in their failures, writing letters and worrying about them; William married and had a bishop for a son; Richard remained adrift his whole life, went to sea and died; Catherine, her youngest, became a Sister of Mercy in New York, dying at age of 91.

## **Last Years**

Painful due to tuberculosis; In a letter to a friend, she remarked quite determinedly “I’ll be wild **Betsy** to the end.” She had always grown through trials and tribulations

## **Death**

On January 4, 1821, at age 47, she died with this final bit of advice to her Sisters, “Be children of the Church; be children of the Church!.” Her actual last word to her sisters was “Jesus!”

## **Legacy**

Baltimore archbishop Patrick Kenrick said, “Elizabeth Seton did more for the church in America than all of us bishops together.”

## **Beatification**

Pope John XXIII, June 22, 1963

## **Canonization**

Pope Paul VI, September 1976

## **Significant influences on her spiritual life, Vincennes, Indiana**

Bishop (later, Archbishop) John Carroll, Baltimore

Father (later, Bishop) John Dubois

Father (later Bishop) S. Gabriel Brute’