

Ellen Tolan

Ellen Tolan's father, John Peter Tolan, purchased the Orringh Stone farm on East Avenue from the Stone heirs in 1860. He worked for the Yale Nursery in Brighton as an agent, selling trees, shrubs, and bulbs in New York and Pennsylvania. He married Ellen McKeon in 1870 and they had two daughters, Mary born in 1872, and Ellen in 1875. Sadly, John Patrick Tolan died in 1879, leaving his wife and young children on the 90-acre farm. Ellen McKeon Tolan died in 1914. Shortly after that, Mary Tolan entered the convent of the Sisters of Mercy. Her dowry to the order was her portion of the land she inherited from her parents. The Sisters of Mercy built their motherhouse and Our Lady of Mercy High School on the property in 1928.

Mary Tolan became Sister Mary Joseph. Her teaching career took her to parish schools in Rochester, Elmira, Corning, and Hornell. In her later years she returned to the motherhouse on Blossom Road, serving as the portress (the person who greeted visitors at the door). She died in March of 1945 at the age of 73, two years after celebrating her silver jubilee as a Sister of Mercy.

Ellen stayed on in the old house on East Avenue, leasing her part of the Stone-Tolan land and selling some of the acreage for income. In the neighborhood were nieces and nephews and cousins. In addition to her family visitors, she employed a local woman to cook and clean. In her later years she would say that she never lived alone in the house.

Miss Tolan adopted the latest in horseless carriages when she bought her electric car (pictured). It is said that she used to drive it to Sibley's in downtown Rochester to purchase her groceries.

In 1956, concerned about nearby development and pestered by people who wanted to buy her property and tear down the house, she sold it and the five remaining acres to the Landmark Society of Western New York, retaining life use of the house. After breaking her hip in a fall, she went to the Pavilion Nursing Home on Barrington Street. When dwindling funds prevented her remaining there, she went to the Sisters of Mercy Infirmary where she died on October 5, 1970, at the age of ninety-six. Her funeral was at St. Thomas More Church on East Avenue and she is buried in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery.

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