

Michigan Women's HALL OF FAME



Theresa Maxis Duchemin

(1810 - 1892)

Inducted: **2001** *Era:* **Historical** *Group:* **African American**
Area(s) of Achievement: **Religion, Social Work/Mission Work**

A woman of singular achievement and spirituality, Theresa Maxis fought the patriarchal, racist, and sexist Roman Catholic hierarchy of her time to become a crusader for humanity. Born Marie Almaide Maxis Duchemin to a Haitian refugee and a British military officer, she co-founded the Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary Sisters (IHMs,) with a Redemptorist priest, to educate girls of the Michigan frontier. Despite poverty, pioneer hardships, and the loss of her co-founder, Maxis and her IHM sisters established schools and sheltered orphans. Under her leadership, the IHM order and its social services expanded into Michigan, Ohio, and Pennsylvania.

Maxis fought opposition from church authorities throughout her career. When she had dared to 'pass' as a white woman and established the St. Mary's Academy for young ladies in 1849, the Bishop revoked her superiorship, largely because of her bold initiatives. When she moved East in 1859 to carry on her charitable activities, the church authorities continued their racist resistance. They judged her to have 'all the softness, slyness and low cunning of a mulatto.' Sensing that her presence was harming her sisters and her work, Maxis exiled herself to Canada. In her final years, some church authorities banned Maxis from visiting her sisters in Scranton, Pennsylvania, and Monroe, Michigan, for fear she might cause an upset, but she was too frail to fight back.

Today in Michigan 700 IHM members and 100 associates labor in her spirit, committed to the eradication of the oppression of women, the shaping of just social structures, the building of a culture of peace, and a right relationship with the whole earth community. The original two organizations now number four and their 2000 members serve people all over the world.

Image Courtesy of Sisters, Servants of the Immaculate Heart of Mary