

# Port Keats Mission

1935 – 1978

**Other Names:**

- Wadeye
- Wertnek Nganayi

## Details

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Port Keats Mission was established by the Catholic Church in 1935 at Wertnek Nganayi in the Daly River district. It moved to Wadeye in 1938. A Mission school and dormitories were established for Aboriginal boys and girls aged 5 to 17 years. The school closed between 1942 and 1946 due to World War II. In the 1970s control of the Mission was passed to the NT Government and in 1978 to the Kardu Numida Council and it became known as Wadeye.

Port Keats Mission was originally established in the Daly River district of the Northern Territory in 1935 by Father Richard Docherty and the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. Initially located between the Daly and Fitzmaurice Rivers in a place known as Wertnek Nganayi, it was moved 10 miles inland to Wadeye in 1938. The move was made due to a lack of supplies of fresh water and the need for more space to allow for the construction of an airstrip. Father Docherty continued as the Superintendent of the Mission after the move.

A school was established for the children at the Mission from its early days. A 1939 report to the government from the Port Keats Mission, after the move to Wadeye, details the missionaries' intention to set up dormitories to separate Aboriginal boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 17 from the influence of their families. The Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart took charge of the girls while the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart took responsibility for the boys. The missionaries provided accommodation, education, medical care and religious instruction.

In 1941 the school was closed due to the Second World War. It was reopened in 1946.

A 1951 report on the mission put together by a government inspector included the following statement on Mission policy provided by the Superintendent.

- 1. To obtain control of and train the children through dormitories.*
- 2. When the children are baptised to purchase the complete marriage rights of the girls and boys from the parents and guardians.*
- 3. To christianise the children.*
- 4. To raise the standard of living of the people through the development of agricultural and stock activities*

The report notes that the majority of children on the Mission over five years of age lived in the dormitories. While the boys were permitted some freedom of movement, the girls were 'not allowed away from the supervision of the Sisters until they leave the dormitory for marriage'. The report noted some concern about the 'sheltered life' led by girls in the dormitory.

The dormitories at Port Keats Mission continued to operate as mission dormitories, and later as a residential school, until 1975. The NT Government took control of the Mission in the 1970s. In 1978 control was passed to

the Kardu Numida Council and the community's name was changed to Wadeye.

## Gallery

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### Port Keats Mission

**Description:** This is a photograph taken at Port Keats Mission in 1949. It shows a group of women and children lined up outside the mission buildings. A caption on the rear of the image reads "The Girls at Port Keats Mission".

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### Port Keats Roman Catholic Mission, Northern Territory

**Description:** This image is an aerial view of the mission at Port Keats.

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## More info

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### Related Entries

#### Run by

- [Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart \(1885 - current\)](#)  
The Daughters of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart ran Port Keats Mission and were in charge of the girls in the Mission school and dormitories.  
Date: 1935 - 1975
- [Missionaries of the Sacred Heart \(1885 - current\)](#)  
The Missionaries of the Sacred Heart ran Port Keats Mission and were in charge of the boys at the Mission School and dormitories.  
Date: 1935 - 1975

#### Related Events

- [Interstate movement of Northern Territory children \(1930s - 1970s\)](#)

### Resources

- McAloon, Dan, [War comes to Australia, seen through a missionary's eyes](#), The Catholic Weekly, 20 April 2008

### Other Resources

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**Title:** Port Keats, Catholic Mission - Northern Territory

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1934 - 1955

[Details](#)

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**Title:** Port Keats Mission Station

**Type:** Image

**Date:** 1934 - 1941

[Details](#)

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## Records

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

### Records

- [Records held by Roman Catholic Church, Diocese of Darwin \(1882? - 1983\)](#)
- [Port Keats, Catholic Mission - Northern Territory \(1934 - 1955\)](#)
- [Port Keats Mission Station \(1934 - 1941\)](#)
- [Copies of review inspection reports - Hermannsberg \[Hermannsburg\], Oenpelli, Yirrkala, Elcho Island, Groote Eylandt, Finke River, Roper River, Milingimbi and Port Keats \(1959 - 1959\)](#)

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