

**Archbishop Christie’s University:
“The Notre Dame of the Pacific Northwest”**

Rev. James T. Connelly, C.S.C.

Godfrey Vassalo, C.S.C., a longtime (1929-1974) faculty member at the University of Portland, often quipped that the university was built on a bluff and it had operated on that principle ever since. Founded as Columbia University in 1901, the school was renamed The University of Portland in 1935. In 2001 the University of Portland celebrated its centennial and in the following year, 2002, it completed its “Defining Moment” capital campaign having raised one hundred and fifteen million dollars, a record achievement for private institutions of higher education in Oregon. During its first century, the school had survived five wars, the Great Depression, a serious fire, several financial crises, devastating fluctuations in enrollment, 9/11 and great changes in American society. As the university entered its second century, it had achieved a level of financial stability and an academic reputation that its modest beginnings would not have suggested were possible. What had once seemed like a bluff looked like a bet being won.

An Offer That Couldn’t Be Refused

At ten o’clock in the morning on December 23, 1899, four of the five directors of the University Land Company, Rufus Mallory, the president, Francis McKenna, the treasurer, P.L. Willis, the secretary, and Guy G. Willis, plus one of the stockholders, H.C. Campbell, met to deliberate on what was for them an increasingly difficult situation.¹ Eight years before, in early 1891, a real estate company known as the Portland Guaranty Company had purchased six hundred acres on the outskirts of the City of Albina in the

area known as Mock's Crest and Waud's Bluff. The land had been acquired for \$300,000 paid for in bonds issued by the Portland Guaranty Company. Seventy-one acres would constitute the campus of a new Methodist university on a portion of the land along Waud's Bluff. The remainder of the acreage would be platted into residential building lots and sold to retire the bonds issued by the company to purchase the land. More than enough income was anticipated from these transactions to pay off the bonds with interest when they came due in 1896 and the surplus would be used to endow Portland University, the Methodist school that was to open on the site.²

The project was launched with high expectations. The neighborhood adjacent to the new campus was christened "University Park" and the advertisements for building lots touted the benefits of living near an institution of learning: "The proximity of a large student body has a tendency to elevate the tone of all things."³ Streets were named after American colleges and universities and potential residents were advised that

the sale of intoxicating liquor has been prohibited within a mile of the grounds, and this suburb of Portland is rapidly becoming the home of the best moral elements of society, who seek a place to educate their children free from haunts of vice.⁴

Things had started off well. The new school had been incorporated in December 1890 and had opened in September 1891. By January 1892, there were 210 students enrolled of whom thirty-seven were collegians.⁵ A building, West Hall, costing around \$32,500 and built by donations from Methodist congregations and other supporters, was erected on Waud's Bluff and occupied in the fall term of 1892.⁶ By 1893, the Portland Guaranty Company had sold more than \$300,000 worth of building lots, enough to pay off the bonds issued to acquire the land. But then the Panic of 1893 gripped the country

in a severe depression that lasted for almost eighteen months. Those who had bought the building lots were unable to make their payments and as the lots reverted to the company, it was unable re-sell them. When the company's bond issue came due in 1896, there was not enough money to redeem the bonds and the Portland Guaranty Company went into bankruptcy.⁷

On January 27, 1899, the seventy-one acres that constituted the Portland University campus, West Hall, plus all the unsold lots belonging to the Portland Guaranty Company were acquired at a court appointed receiver's sale for \$3,225⁸ by a new entity, the University Land Company, incorporated only in January 1899.⁹

Portland University had also fallen on hard times. The number of students was steadily declining and in May 1899, the Portland University trustees approached the University Land Company with a proposal. If the company gave them West Hall and thirty acres surrounding it "in fee simple," they would promise to raise an endowment of not less than fifty thousand dollars inside of five years and also promise that the building and the land would never be eliminated "from educational purposes nor encumbered by a mortgage." However, the company declined the proposal and voted instead to offer to donate West Hall and ten acres to whoever would open a school on the site.¹⁰ In June 1899 the school ceased operations on Waud's Bluff and moved to a site at East Thirtieth and Stark Streets in the city of Portland in hopes of being more accessible to the local population. When this move failed to produce the needed enrollment, Portland University closed its doors in May 1900.¹¹

When the directors of the University Land Company met on December 23, 1899, West Hall had stood empty for six months, the lots in University Park were not selling,

and some of those who had bought lots were unable to make their payments. John Mock, a stockholder in the company and the son of Henry Mock, one of the early settlers in the area, had allegedly donated much of the land for the Portland University campus that had come into the company's possession in January 1899.¹² In June of that year, Mock had been appointed a committee of one to confer with real estate agents about handling the company's lots. In September he had reported that he had been unable to find "any real estate agent who is willing, at present, to sell the company lands." Moreover, the company had to borrow eighteen thousand dollars to pay off two notes secured by mortgages on its land.¹³

Treasurer McKenna reported that he had been unsuccessful in his efforts to "procure the permanent establishment in West Hall of a college by the Methodists and by the Baptists and that he had thereafter entered into negotiations with the Catholics for the same purpose with a present prospect of possible success." The directors encouraged him to continue his efforts and set the terms of an offer. McKenna was to offer West Hall and the land along Willamette Boulevard "lying south and east of a southerly extension of the east line of Haven Street." The Catholics were to be required to "permanently establish and maintain thereon (sic) a school of college grade, opening the same for students at the beginning of the next college year, and perpetually supplying the same with instructors, apparatuses and appliances suitable and sufficient for a first class college."¹⁴

The Catholic Connection

More specifically, McKenna had been in contact, with Alexander Christie, the newly installed Catholic Archbishop of Oregon City, as the archdiocese was known until 1928. Christie had arrived in Portland in June 1899 from Victoria, British Columbia, full

of energy and plans for creating and developing the institutions that would consolidate the small Catholic population of Oregon. A native of Vermont who had grown up in rural Minnesota, Christie had been ordained a priest by Archbishop John Ireland for the Archdiocese of St. Paul and had been a parish priest in Minnesota for almost twenty years when he was appointed a bishop in western Canada. After less than a year in British Columbia, Christie was promoted to Portland as head of the oldest archdiocese west of the Mississippi.¹⁵

When the new archbishop arrived in Portland, young ladies could pursue a Catholic education beyond grammar school at St. Mary's Academy, established by the Sisters of the Holy Names in 1859. St. Mary's had opened a junior college department in 1899. But the city had no facility for the higher education of boys under Catholic auspices. Christie moved quickly to fill that void.¹⁶

Other than the minutes of the directors' meetings, which are in the University of Portland Archives, the records of the University Land Company appear to have perished and Archbishop Christie, whatever his other virtues, seems not to have been very careful about keeping his papers. However, a letter from Francis McKenna to Christie, dated October 3, 1899, has survived and indicates that McKenna had already made an offer to Christie when he reported to the University Land Company's directors just before Christmas of that year. The Company, according to the terms offered by McKenna in that letter, would let Christie "take charge of the Portland University building and ten acres surrounding" if Christie would conduct a school for five years, at the end of which he would receive a warranty deed for the premises.¹⁷

It would appear that there were further negotiations between Christie and the University Land Company because the deed filed with the Multnomah County Recorder of Deeds on July 19, 1901, conveyed to “the Roman Catholic Archbishop of the Diocese of Oregon” (sic) a larger tract of land, later identified as twenty-eight acres, and the buildings thereon in return for one dollar.¹⁸ Five months later, in January 1902, when Christie sought to take advantage of a previous offer from the University Land Company to give him seven lots in the University Park neighborhood for a church and a “boarding school for young ladies,”¹⁹ the company declined his request. McKenna reminded Christie that the company had already been very generous in his regard. It had given him twenty-eight acres, worth, by the company’s calculation, \$42,000 at \$1500 an acre, as well as a “brick building thereon” worth \$40,000 in return for two lots elsewhere in the city owned by Christie and valued at \$3,000. At that time, the company was also proposing to sell Christie another forty-three acres, which the company valued at \$70,000, for only \$20,000. The company, by McKenna’s calculation, had thus given Christie \$129,000 already and could not see their way to donate land for a church.²⁰ These valuations seem more than a little inflated when one remembers that the building on the property, West Hall, had been erected at a cost of only \$32,500 just ten years before and that the Company had purchased the acreage from the bankrupt Portland Guaranty Company at a receiver’s sale for only \$3,225 just two years before.

Columbia University

With West Hall and a twenty-eight-acre campus in his possession in mid-July of 1901, Christie had to move quickly if a school were to open in the fall of the year. *The Catholic Sentinel*, the archdiocesan newspaper, announced the acquisition of the property

in its edition of July 25, 1901, and stated that the new “institution of learning for young men” would be known as Columbia University and that the archbishop would “exert every effort to build up a great educational center at University Park.” The school was expected to open in September and the archbishop announced that while “students [would] be received ... irrespective of religious belief, ... it is designed principally for the education of Catholic young men.”²¹

West Hall, the building erected by the Methodists for Portland University, had stood empty for two years and repairs had to be made and the building furnished. This posed a problem for Christie as he had found the archdiocese heavily in debt when he arrived in June 1899.²² He would later claim to have spent “\$12,000 in repairs, improvements and furnishings on the University”²³ and Father John A. Zahm, C.S.C., the religious superior of the Congregation of Holy Cross in the United States, reimbursed Christie \$7,000 for furniture and improvements in 1902 when the Congregation agreed to take over the school as one of its own.²⁴ In later years, Christie would credit Francis McKenna, David M. Dunne, J. F. Shea, an architect, Major [Henry E.] McGinn and a surveyor named Williams as “the founders of Columbia” along with himself.²⁵

The dedication of the new university took place on Sunday, September 1, 1901. Archbishop Christie, accompanied by Bishops Orth of Victoria, British Columbia, and O’Dea of Nesqually, Washington, seventeen priests from Oregon and Washington, and a crowd of “several thousand people” that had converged on the university by “boat and street car” processed around the building with the archbishop sprinkling the walls with holy water and reciting the prayers of blessing.²⁶

The blessing concluded, Portland mayor Henry S. Rowe addressed the assembly and extolled the benefits of education “along the right lines.” The mayor said that he was especially glad to see the new institution established in Portland so that young men could be educated near home. The West, he claimed, “is the country of bigness, ... our mountains, rivers, railways, ranches, herds, actions and ideas, even men’s virtues and vices, are here on the larger scale.” The young men formed in this western university would not “touch with those classes which mold effete sentiment in older communities.” The Catholic Church “works with the great masses of the people; it builds no rich men’s colleges,” said Rowe, who announced himself pleased that this new university was under its auspices.²⁷

The main address of the day was delivered by M.P. Smith, a Paulist priest from San Francisco, who saw in the founding of Columbia University the fulfillment of the divine command to “Go, teach all nations.” He rejoiced that “undeterred by a first failure” the enterprise that “originally chose this unrivalled location, laid this foundation and reared these walls shall not be frustrated.” Posing the question of what the Catholic Church understood by education, Smith answered,

Our Church regards man not simply as a rational, but as a religious being, and while she aims at fullest and freest intellectual completeness, she sets still higher value upon the enlightenment of conscience, upon the development of character, upon not only implanting, but the stable exercise of moral principle.

The aim of a collegiate education, Smith continued, should be “culture, the foundation of a liberal education. It will aim ... at procuring that openness of mind, that stimulation of reason, that accuracy of judgment, that refinement of taste, that acquaintance with the thoughts of the right ... which we call culture.” Here at this Catholic university, “youth

will be led at least to the porch of the vast temple of learning and allowed glimpses of its treasures.”²⁸

The last speaker of the day was Archbishop Christie who declared that “this location is superior to any on the Pacific Coast” and expressed the hope that “in a few years” Columbia University would “offer opportunities for higher education unequalled by any other Western institution.”²⁹

Four days later, on Thursday, September 5, 1901, the school opened. It had been only two months since Christie had secured the Waud’s Bluff property and one suspects that it was a bit of a scramble for the archbishop to cobble together a faculty for his new university. As president he chose Rev. Edmund P. Murphy, formerly a member of the Congregation of Holy Cross and president of the Congregation’s St. Edward’s College in Austin, Texas, in 1894-95. Murphy continued to serve as pastor of St. Patrick’s Church in Portland. Rev. James D. Murphy was vice president and prefect of discipline and Patrick E. Sullivan, a layman and graduate of the University of Notre Dame was the director of studies. The rest of the faculty consisted of an exiled missionary from China, three seminarians and an attending physician. Fifty-two boys enrolled on opening day, forty-two of them from Oregon, eight from Washington and one each from Montana and Victoria, British Columbia. At about ten o’clock in the morning, a bell was rung and classes began.³⁰

The Gentlemen From Indiana

The archbishop knew that he had neither the personnel nor the financial resources to staff, let alone develop, his new school, but he knew a bargain when he saw one and he began to look for a religious community that would supply both manpower and money.

By November 1901, he had proposed to the Congregation of Holy Cross at Notre Dame, Indiana, that they should take over Columbia as their own.³¹ Tradition has it that on a visit to Notre Dame and during a protracted meeting with Rev. John A. Zahm, C.S.C., the Holy Cross superior in the United States, “Archbishop Christie, in a characteristic gesture, struck the arm of his chair with the palm of his right hand and cried in an appealing challenge, ‘Take over Columbia and make it the Notre Dame of the Pacific Northwest’.”³²

In 1902, the Congregation of Holy Cross had 228 members in the United States and was operating the University of Notre Dame and three smaller colleges, St. Joseph’s in Cincinnati, Sacred heart in Watertown, Wisconsin, and St. Edward’s in Austin, Texas. The college in Oregon was the Congregation’s first venture into the Pacific Northwest and for almost forty years would be its only undertaking in the western United States³³.

Zahm and his council finally accepted the archbishop’s proposal and the Congregation of Holy Cross advanced Christie \$20,000 to purchase an additional forty-three acres of land bounded by Willamette Boulevard and Portsmouth Avenue. In May 1902, three members of the Congregation, Fathers Michael A. Quinlan, John O. Thilman and William Marr, arrived in Portland to take over the direction of the school and to make preparations for the 1902-1903 school year. Quinlan was appointed president by Zahm and held office for the next four years. In August, Brothers Wilfred Schreiber and Charles Harding³⁴ arrived from Notre Dame along with Father Patrick Carroll. In 1903, Thillman returned from a trip to the East with thirteen Sisters of the Presentation, members of a French religious community forced to leave their native land by the anti-

clerical laws of 1902-03.³⁵ In the fall of 1902, Columbia had an enrollment of ninety students and a faculty of four priests and seven laymen.³⁶

In 1902 and for many years thereafter Columbia University was neither a university nor the “first class college” that the University Land Company had wanted. The curriculum laid out by Quinlan and his associates was that of a college preparatory middle and high school for boys. In 1903-04 there were between one hundred and one hundred and twenty-five high school students and fifty boys in the seventh and eighth grades. When Christie informed Zahm in June 1903 that he was going to open a school for young boys in Portland, Zahm protested that this would compete with Columbia for students for whom a building was even then being erected on the campus. To adequately finance Columbia, Zahm argued, students on all academic levels who qualified academically and financially had to be enrolled. Instruction of the younger boys provided a surplus that would subsidize the instruction of older students on the higher levels.³⁷ The grammar school continued. When Rev. John T. Boland, C.S.C., arrived as the new president in the summer of 1914, he discovered that boys younger than eleven were routinely being referred to the nearby boarding school at Holy Cross Parish and stopped the referrals on the grounds that Columbia needed all the students that it could enroll.³⁸ Until 1927 the annual catalogue noted that provision for some of the grammar grades would be made for students who found it necessary to complete their elementary studies before pursuing high school work.³⁹ Columbia University was not incorporated by the state of Oregon to grant degrees until 1909 and the college courses that had been in the catalogue since 1902-03 were not offered until 1922 when a junior college was opened. The first bachelor’s degrees were not awarded until 1929.⁴⁰

Archbishop Christie appears to have been disappointed by the slow growth of the Columbia campus. Although a large indoor athletic facility, the Colosseum, had been erected in 1902 and another building to house the Sisters of the Presentation and the school for young boys in 1903, Christie wanted more and in 1909 began pressing the Congregation of Holy Cross to erect a new building on the campus. In September 1911, Christie Hall, a residence hall with 142 private rooms and facilities for recreation as well as the university library, was dedicated by the archbishop. However, growth was slow. Enrollment in the fall of 1914 totaled only 152 students.⁴¹ By 1915 the Holy Cross Congregation had invested over \$130,000 and numerous personnel in the development of the school.⁴² By the spring of 1928, with three hundred students enrolled, there were twelve Holy Cross priests and brothers and six laymen on the faculty.⁴³

Christie and His University

Christie thought of Columbia as his school down to the time of his death in 1925. He was always on hand to give out the diplomas at graduation, was the guest of honor at the annual Founder's Day celebration on May third, the feast of St. Alexander, and enjoyed bringing visitors out to tour the campus. As late as 1919, the archbishop frequently came to dinner with the faculty and students.⁴⁴ James T. Covert, the author of *Point of Pride*, a history of the University of Portland, has described these occasions.

One former student recalled a visit in the early years of the school: "I remember when Archbishop Christie drove out and it was my honor to put 'Dandy' [his horse] in the stable and feed him. And, later, I waited upon His Grace and coughed through the smoke of...[his] villainous cigar." The students always knew when he was expected because a special silver teapot would be put on the main table. Then they would be instructed to give the archbishop a rousing applause when he entered. After the meal he would get up and make some comments. He was a dynamic speaker with a flair for the dramatic. The boys delighted in his penchant for saying "methinks," and for his usual remark: "I have not seen you for

so long I am going to give you this afternoon off.” No doubt the members of the faculty just looked at each other as the students cheered uproariously.⁴⁵

Alexander Christie should be remembered as a patron of education in the Archdiocese of Portland and in Oregon. When he came to Oregon, there were only five Catholic schools in Portland out of twenty-six in the entire archdiocese. By the time of his death in 1925, there were twenty-one parochial schools in Portland alone and forty-seven in the archdiocese, thirteen academies and one college for girls, three high schools and colleges for boys, two normal schools, one seminary, and three training schools for nurses.⁴⁶ His university, Columbia, renamed The University of Portland in 1935, is part of his larger legacy to both church and state in Oregon. It was characteristic of his faith and audacity to open a university in 1901 with borrowed money and a faculty of seven, whose credentials were their zeal and their availability.

¹ University Land Company, Inc., Minutes of the meetings of the directors, 1899-1909, 23 December 1899: 50, in University of Portland Archives [hereafter AUP].

² George R. McIntire, “History of the Methodist University of Portland, 1891-1900, in Relation to the Educational Policy of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North),” (M.A. thesis, University of Oregon, 1922), 53-57; See James T. Covert, *A Point of Pride: The University of Portland Story* (Portland, OR: University of Portland Press, 1976), 11-25, for a summary account of the history of Portland University.

³ Eugene E. Snyder, *Portland Names and Neighborhoods: Their Historic Origins* (Portland, OR: Binford and Mott, 1979), 33.

⁴ Covert, 11-12.

⁵ McIntire, 59, 61.

⁶ Covert, 14.

⁷ McIntire, 72-78.

⁸ University Land Company, minutes, 5 June and 27 June, 1899: 42, 44-46.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 January 1899: 37-38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 27 May, 1899: 38-39.

¹¹ McIntire, 85, 89-90.

¹² Covert, 29-30.

¹³ University Land Company, minutes, 27 May 1899, 5 June 1899, 29 June 1899, 15 August 1899, 30 September 1899, and 23 December 1899: 46-51 and *passim*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23 December 1899: 52-53; McIntire, 78-79.

¹⁵ John R. Laidlaw, *The Catholic Church in Oregon and the Work of its Archbishops* (Smithtown, NY: Exposition Press, 1977), 22-30; Edwin V. O’Hara, *Pioneer Catholic History of Oregon (Centennial Edition)* (Patterson, NJ: St. Anthony Guild Press, 1939), 205.

¹⁶ On Catholic schools in Oregon and Vancouver, see Wilfred P. Schoenberg, *A Chronicle of the Catholic History of the Pacific Northwest, 1743-1960* (Spokane, Washington: Gonzaga Preparatory School, 1962).

For St. Mary's Academy see numbers 276, 291, 774 and 1033. For St. Michael's College in Portland (1871-1895) see numbers 420, 677 and 961. For Mount Angel College in Mt. Angel, Oregon, see numbers 726 and 1154. For St. James Academy in Vancouver, Washington (1864-1911) see numbers 245, 336 and 990.

¹⁷ Francis McKenna to Alexander Christie, 3 October 1899, in folder "Christie, Archbishop A., Re: Columbia University (U. of P.) 1899-1905," Archives of the Archdiocese of Portland [hereafter AAP].

¹⁸ University Land Company minutes, 5 May 1900 and 11 July 1901: 63, 68-69; Office of Multnomah County Recorder of Deeds, Book 281, page 55.

¹⁹ University Land Company minutes, 23 December 1899: 53.

²⁰ Francis McKenna to Alexander Christie, 21 January 1902, AAP.

²¹ "Columbia University," *The Catholic Sentinel* (Portland, Oregon), 25 July 1901: 1.

²² Patricia Brandt and Lillian A. Pereyra, *Adapting to Eden: Oregon's Catholic Minority, 1838-1986* (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 2002), 81.

²³ Alexander Christie to John Zahm, no date, copy in AAP.

²⁴ John A. Zahm to Alexander Christie, 5 April 1902, AAP.

²⁵ "Founder's Day," *The Columbiad* (Columbia University, Portland, Oregon), May 1908: 146; see also David Dunne's scrapbook, volume 2, 36, and *The Oregonian* (Portland, Oregon), 4 May 1916.

²⁶ "Dedication of Columbia University," *The Catholic Sentinel*, 5 September 1901: 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1, 4.

³⁰ Covert, 34.

³¹ Minutes of the Provincial Council, Province of Indiana, Congregation of Holy Cross, 11 November 1901, Indiana Province Archives Center, Notre Dame, Indiana [hereafter IPAC].

³² Patrick J. Carroll, "My Columbia Memories," 3. Unpublished manuscript, 1949, File 8, Box ZGX3, UPA.

³³ Philip Armstrong and James T. Connelly, *The History of the Indiana and Midwest Provinces* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Indiana Province Archives Center, 1996), 7-16; Annual community lists, 1902, IPAC.

³⁴ The title, "Brother", designates a member of the Congregation who is not ordained.

³⁵ Joseph A. Kehoe, *Holy Cross in Oregon, 1902-1980* (Notre Dame, IN: Province Archives Center, 1982), 15; On the Sisters of the Presentation see Franklin Cullen, "Presentation Sisters in Holy Cross Apostolates, 1903-1963," paper presented at the Conference on the History of the Congregations of Holy Cross, St. Edward's University, Austin, Texas, 6 June 1993.

³⁶ Kehoe, 11.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 13-15.

³⁸ John T. Boland to Andrew Morrissey, 15 August 1914, Papers of the provincial administration of Rev. Andrew Morrissey, C.S.C. [hereafter Morrissey Papers], IPAC.

³⁹ The notice no longer appeared in the *Columbia University Catalogue* for 1927-28, but see the catalogues for 1922-23, page 91. AUP.

⁴⁰ Kehoe, 16; James T. Connelly, *The University of Portland: A Century of Teaching, Faith and Service, 1901-2001* (Portland: University of Portland Press, 2001), 33, 36.

⁴¹ Kehoe, 24-25.

⁴² Andrew Morrissey to Alexander Christie, 19 May 1915, Morrissey Papers, IPAC.

⁴³ Teaching schedule for February-June 1928, undated, Papers of the provincial administration of Rev. James Burns, C.S.C., IPAC [hereafter, Burns Papers].

⁴⁴ John T. Boland to Andrew Morrissey, 27 September 1917 and 24 February 1919, Morrissey Papers.

⁴⁵ Covert, 54.

⁴⁶ "Archbishop Christie as Educator," *The Catholic Sentinel*, 26 July 1923: section 3, 4.