

COLUMBIA PREPARATORY SCHOOL

1992-2

by

Joseph Kehoe, C.S.C.

Presented at the

1992 Conference on the  
History of the Congregations of Holy Cross

June 5-7, 1992

University of Portland  
Portland, Oregon

(All rights reserved)

## Columbia Preparatory School

Fr. Joseph Kehoe, C.S.C.

1934-1955

In 1934, Columbia Preparatory School was made independent of its close association with Columbia University founded in 1901 in Portland, Oregon.<sup>1</sup> The prep school had been, for many years, the substantial part of that institution. Despite separation from the university, the prep school retained intact its facilities on the first floor of West Hall and on the campus. Only an office for the Principal of the prep school was new. In 1946, however, its quarters in West Hall were moved to two newly constructed wooden buildings nearby on campus. Finally, in 1949, assured that its future was secure, the prep school relocated about six miles away on the western edge of the city of Portland on a 50 acre spacious estate. Nevertheless, to the great dismay and bitter disappointment of many, Columbia Preparatory School closed forever at the end of the academic year in June, 1955. To record briefly, those eventful years from 1934 to 1955, in so far as the Congregation of Holy Cross was concerned, is the theme of his paper.

Alexander Christie, ordained priest in 1877 and named Bishop of Vancouver Island, Canada in 1898 was elevated within a few months to the Archdiocese of Portland, Oregon upon the sudden death of the incumbent. One of his first priorities was to found a boarding school for boys in Portland. Luckily or providentially, he found a ready-made site in north Portland on Waud's Bluff about 180 feet above the Willamette river. On its cliff, with a spectacular view of the city up river and a splendid panorama of the Cascade Mountain range about sixty miles to the east, stood West Hall. It was structured with classrooms, offices, a dormitory and a dining hall. In it, the Methodist-Episcopal Church had operated Portland University from 1891 to 1900. Christie purchased the fifty acre plot, quickly renovated the abandoned West Hall, and opened Columbia University in it in 1901 under tutelage of diocesan clergy. Its ownership and operation were transferred the next year to the

Congregation in the United States, Father John Zahm, and the President of the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, Father Andrew Morrissey, in Christie's words to "take over and make Columbia University the Notre Dame of the Pacific Northwest."

Columbia University, it must be said, was never a university. It began as a small preparatory and commercial high school at best. In 1904, it enrolled 176 boys, of whom 50 were pupils in grade school, 125 students in high school and only one student in college.<sup>2</sup> Its situation was not unlike other comparable schools growing into colleges and universities at the turn of the twentieth century. By 1921, however, the elementary grades and the commercial courses had been dropped while college classes were being added. By 1922, it was a two-year junior college. In 1925, it conferred certificates on five junior college graduates. The same year, it expanded into a four year college. In 1929, it awarded bachelor degrees to six graduates. In 1934, it gained accreditation on condition that Columbia Preparatory School become independent. In 1935, its president Father Joseph Boyle renamed Columbia University the University of Portland not only to avoid confusion with Columbia University in New York City but to make the severance from Columbia Preparatory School unmistakable, and to assert allegiance to the city of Portland.

Father Charles McAllister was appointed the first Principal of the prep school liable for its own faculty. Previously, some classes in the high school were taught by teachers in the university. During his first year, McAllister started a monthly paper edited by students called the "Crusader". It reviewed current events. He, also, published the first annual year book the "Columbiad" in 1935. It displayed individual pictures of members of the graduating class and pictures of all members grouped together of the junior, sophomore and freshman classes. Before the year ended, he reorganized the Mothers and Dads clubs composed of the parents of high school students. Formerly, the clubs combined parents of students in the University and the high school.

The curriculum of the prep school under the new principal remained a classical program

The curriculum of the prep school under the new principal remained a classical program including classes in English, History, Mathematics, Latin or French by way of substitution, and Religion. McAllister, a scientist by training, added a freshman class in biology. After a resolute recruiting drive in the summer of 1935, the principal was surprised to welcome a formidable enrollment in September mostly freshmen. Following is a table of enrollments from the year 1935 to 1955. The statistics are calculated from the class pictures in the annual "Columbiads."

From the Columbiads

<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Total</u>
1935	106	1940	115	1945	251	1950	128
1936	148	1941	111	1946	259	1951	132
1937	141	1942	112	1947	160	1952	149
1938	143	1943	139	1948	160	1953	173
1939	127	1944	149	1949	145	1954	179
						1955	172

The impressive jump of 40 percent in the size of the student body from 106 in 1935 to 148 in 1936 initiated an immediate need for a larger faculty in the high school. To the eight teachers on the faculty, four more were acquired, one layman and three seminarians released temporarily from their theological studies at Holy Cross College in Washington D.C. The seminarians were college graduates and qualified to teach in high school because of credits gained from education classes in three summer sessions at the University of Notre Dame.

During the 1935-1936 academic year, one of the seminarians experienced a curious incident. As he was explaining the prerogatives of the Blessed Virgin Mary in his religion class, a student who had just finished a biology class asked whether the Immaculate Conception was the same as parthenogenesis. Replying that there was no comparison, the seminarian explained the meaning of the Immaculate Conception and the meaning of the scientific term parthenogenesis, in Greek, "virgin birth," applicable to the development of an egg without fertilization. He then expounded the meaning of the virgin birth of Christ. Later, telling the story to several older faculty members, he was

reminded that only a high school student could be expected to ask the wackiest questions.

Father John Lane succeeded McAllister as Principal in 1936 when McAllister was named Dean of the School of Nursing in the University of Portland. His first and second years in office passed serenely as enrollment remained steady at 141 in 1937 and 143 in 1938. It fell to 127 in 1939 however, as rumors spread that a diocesan high school was about to open in Portland. Central Catholic high school did open in September 1939. Lane was relieved that his tenure was up that summer and Father Charles Hamel became Principal. It was his misfortune to see enrollments drop in each of the next three years from 115 in 1940, to 111 in 1941 and to 112 in 1942 because of the expansion of Central Catholic High School.

Soon after the United States entered the war in 1941, the future of Columbia Prep brightened. The airport on Swan Island below the Bluff was taken over by the Kaiser Shipyard which attracted families of workers to north Portland which in turn supplied the prep school with increasing enrollments through out the wartime. Father Henry Geuss followed Hamel as Principal in 1942 and benefitted as enrollment increased from 139 in 1943, to 149 in 1944, to 251 in 1945 and 259 in 1946. The student body at the university, on the other hand, was shrinking ominously as students were enlisting or being drafted into military services. The university might well have failed had not the School of Nursing and the prep school thrived financially. The facilities vacated in west Hall were rapidly made available to the prep school.

The war draft act promptly brought notoriety to the prep school. The first number drawn by lot to draft men into the army was 158. One of the priests on the faculty held that number, Father Don Bridenstine. Although exempted as a clergyman, Bridenstine not long after became a chaplain and saw service in the army in Europe. It seems fitting at this point to pay tribute in general to the alumni of both the University and the prep school and particularly to those who graduated from the prep school after 1934 who were killed in the war. Of sixty-five casualties these five were prep

alumni Arvid G. Carlson, '40, John H. Carroll, '40, Robert Dillon, '42, John W. Boire, '43, Allan Knappenburger, '43, and Francis White, '43. Likewise, one prep school alumnus was killed in the Korean conflict, Pat J. McPherson, '46. The names of all 65 men are engraven in bricks on the "Praying Hands" war memorial on the campus of the University.

When war ended and peace came, the fortunes of the university and of the prep school became reversed. Under the G.I. bill, war veterans began to flood the university. On the other hand, the shipyard closed and its workers moved on. Father Hamel returned as Principal in 1946 when Geuss fell ill and was again unlucky when enrollment slipped to 160 in 1947. Since the campus was no longer large enough for both the university and the prep school, a proposal to close the prep school was considered but rejected. The prep school, however, was removed from West Hall into two hastily constructed wooden buildings nearby but still on campus. As discussions concerning its future continued, it seemed apparent that it would be to the advantage of the prep school to relocate elsewhere off-campus.

Father Michael Early named Principal in 1947, a former President of the university from 1935 to 1939, and a native of Portland began to investigate the most attractive site for a rejuvenated school. It was his conviction that the enrollment could be raised from the 160 totalled again in 1948. After a thorough search, Early decided that he had found the ideal location on the western boundary of the city of Portland, the spacious Wilcox estate of 50 acres on sale. It comprised a thirty room main house, and other buildings including a manager's house, a green house, a stable, a garage, several smaller buildings and a swimming pool. In reply to an inquiry from the Provincial Father Thomas Steiner, both Father Theodore Mehling, the President of the University in cooperation with Early replied in separate letters on August 18, 1948. Mehling stated that funding would involve an investment of \$225,000.00. Interest would amount to \$9,000.00 annually at 4 percent. "I do not think the debt will be beyond our power to handle" he urged. Future prospects for the growth of the prep



school he said were optimistic. Besides, he hinted that, if the prep school had its own identity, it would attract the financial support of persons who would not be interested in the present setup and it would be a great source of vocations for Holy Cross. In his letter, Early noted that the project was financially sound. "We are not starting a new school," he maintained, "we are simply changing the location of a school that is already soundly established." He added, "we have more applicants for boarding students than we can accommodate and could raise the cost of room and board to \$1000 per annum without adverse consequences in the new location. Moreover, he continued that the exodus of the high school from campus would release 22 rooms for use by college boarding students. From the resultant income, he added Mehling had agreed the university would cover the interest costs of \$9,000 per annum on the loan of \$225,000.00. The result of this arrangement he stated would make it possible for the high school to set aside a greater amount each year to pay off the principal and even to establish a growing fund for the creation of further facilities. Transportation, he concluded, would present no problem. To lend credence to the future of the financial position of the prep school, Early, also, submitted likely financial summaries for the two academic years 1947-48 and for 1948-49. For 1947-48, he calculated that total income would amount to \$34,330.00 and expenses \$26,200.00, leaving a surplus of \$8,130.00 and for the year 1948-49, income \$44,450.00 minus expenses \$21,400.00 meant a surplus of \$23,050.00. He also, estimated a budget for the first year 1949-50 at the new location. Income would total \$51,000.00 and expenses \$39,900.00 netting a possible profit of \$11,100.00. The numbers included tuition for 120 students at \$200.00 per year, and board, housing and tuition for 30 students at \$900.00 per year. The estimates at 150 students were placed low, he admitted, to allow for the change in location. Thereafter, he thought the enrollment would increase each year until the objective of reaching 500 students would be reached, 250, day and 250 boarding students. Incidentally, by contrast, in McAllister's first year in 1934 as Principal, tuition cost \$130.00 per annum and room, board and tuition \$485.00.

Permission to proceed with the project was received from the Provincial. The loan was secured from the bank at 4 percent interest. The estate was purchased for \$155,000.00 and \$70,000.00 spent immediately on improvements. The main house was remodeled into a principal's office and thirty rooms for boarders. The manager's home was rebuilt into quarters for the clerical faculty. Two quonset huts were bought and equipped as classrooms. The pasture land was leveled into playing fields. The prep school reopened at its new location in September, 1949. Its last year on campus had been an unhappy one for Early when the enrollment shrank to 145 in 1949. He was further depressed when enrollment despite the effort to attract students tumbled to 128 in 1950 and climbed to only 132 in 1951 and not much higher to 149 in 1952.

The first three years at the new location were proving a disaster for Columbia Prep. Father James D'Autremont took over from Early in 1952. Following strenuous pleas to raise donation from many sources, D'Autremont was able to up enrollment to 173 in 1953, to 179 in 1954 and 172 in 1955. It had become increasingly clear that the size of the student body would never reach 200 students, and that requests for financial assistance were proving unsuccessful. Moreover, the need of a new building was paramount. To avoid getting deeper in debt, Columbia Preparatory School was closed at the end of the academic year in June, 1955.

In the aftermath of its demise, certain recriminations surfaced concerning the reasons for the closing. Some said the school was inaccessible because of poor roads. Others said it was too far from Catholic parishes in north and northeast Portland. Others had heard that the Congregation of Holy Cross was going to open a new high school in Chicago and they resented the implication that could be drawn from that fact. Others thought that Holy Cross was more concerned regarding the future of the University of Portland. And some blamed the Archbishop of Portland for lack of financial support.

While it may be true that transportation problems and accessibility had much to do with the decline in attendance at Columbia prep, the accusations involving the Congregation of Holy Cross and



Archbishop Howard deserve clarification. The optimism of Early about the future of the prep school was decidedly overblown. For six years the school was sinking into debt contrary to expectations. The fact that the congregation was considering the establishment of a high school in Chicago had been under consideration for some time. It was a matter of speculation that the prep school had not closed earlier. It is a fact, however, that it did not close until the congregation opened a new high school in Niles, Illinois. It was apparent at the time that the university could not come to its aid for the simple reason that the university was incurring debt as war veterans had graduated and the administration was finding it necessary to reduce faculty and facilities. The university had assumed the prep's debt and was hard pressed for several years to pay off the bank loan. Proceeds from the sale of the property when the school closed were insufficient to cover all the debts that had accrued.

As to the charge that Archbishop Howard when appealed to might have agreed to permit the parishes to be asked for donations, is misinterpreted. It was a matter of fact that he had always encouraged the success of the university and the high school. It was his contention that they should be able to make their own way. As he was making do with his problem of secondary education in the diocese, so he expected the Congregation of Holy Cross to do the same. He hoped to find vocations to the priesthood for the diocese from the diocesan high schools with the same success that Holy Cross was attracting vocations to the priesthood out of Columbia prep. It may be remarked that of all the expectations Mehling and Early hoped to realize when Columbia prep would become relocated, one did come true. It was a remarkable source of vocations to Holy Cross. Though others did not persevere, these alumni became priests, James Burtchaell, '51, James Rigert, '53, Richard Berg, '54 and Kenneth Requa, '55. Of Columbia prep alumni in earlier years the following were ordained priests in Holy Cross, Michael Early, '12, Charles Corcoran, ex '24, Robert Sweeney, '25, Joseph McGrath, '26, James Anderson, '32, Adrian SteMarie, '36, Jack Doherty, '39, Michael Murphy, ex '39, and Arthur Schoenfeldt, '48.

The number of men on the faculty of Columbia prep beginning in 1934 fluctuated between 8 and 16. At any one time, laymen numbered four or five, the rest were members of Holy Cross. They usually included young priests and a Holy Cross Brother or two. Up to 1941, there were, also, one or two seminarians. Only in the 1935-36 year were there four seminarians one from the preceding year. When the prep school was on the campus of the university, all Holy Cross religious resided in Christie Hall on the third floor. When the school moved to the estate, the high school religious faculty lived in the remodeled manager's house.

In retrospect, there seems to be little doubt that Columbia prep when it moved to its final location was doomed to failure. It could not muster the student body and the finances necessary to make it a growing success. As it continued to struggle to survive, the option to close it had finally become the reality. The optimism inspired by the dream of refurbishing the Wilcox Estate was no more than a mirage.

1. All historical facts about Columbia University and the University of Portland were taken from "A Point of Pride," by James Covert, 1976.
2. "Remembering the Prep." "Portland," Fall Issue, 1985 by L. Teske, C.S.C.

Kind thanks to Roxanne Dimyan, Acting Archivist for help in the research.