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FROM THE RIVER TO THE FLORIDA WALK

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From the River to the Florida Walk:

The New Orleans Orphanage Gets a Farm and Grows into a College

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The rescue afforded St. Mary's Orphanage, New Orleans, in its early days by the Sulpician priest Gilbert Raymond and the Holy Cross priest Isidore Guesdon was short lived, but in 1856 Father Moreau decided to send a young Holy Cross priest aged thirty-seven to take over the institution. Father Patrick Sheil was born in Ireland and studied in Rome for the priesthood. From his arrival in January, 1857, Sheil gave St. Mary's Orphanage the stability it had lacked since Brother Vincent left to return to Notre Dame some years before. It is difficult to draw a picture of Sheil from his correspondence because his letters are business-like, matter-of-fact, and generally dull. Only occasionally does he let his personality filter into the text. For example, in writing to Sorin on March 1, 1859, he says of Father Levesque, "The South agrees well with Père Levesque—he is ruddy, fat and fair." This touch of whimsy surfaces only occasionally in Sheil's letters. In another letter to Sorin in July, 1857, he notes of a sister who previously worked at the orphanage: "If your charity be so great as to prompt you to send us back Sister Mary of the Conception, another Irish Sister whom her friends delight to call the Gendarme and who rendered much service here in former times, you will confer a great favor on us." One can imagine how wonderfully imperious this nun must have been, and yet her hard work at the orphanage endeared her to her colleagues so much that they graced her with a nickname.

One of the most important legal achievements for the institution happened during Sheil's tenure as director. In 1860, after several visits to Baton Rouge, the treasure of the trustees Thomas Layton secured incorporation papers for the Congregation from the State of Louisiana. The document is dated April 29, 1859, and gave to the Holy Cross religious all the privileges and responsibilities attached to the running of charitable institutions in the state.

Two reasons seem to have motivated this move by the trustees to try to transfer ownership

of the orphanage to the Congregation of Holy Cross. First of all, the General Council in France was interested in setting up the Louisiana Holy Cross religious as a province separate from Sorin at Notre Dame. Sorin probably sensed this development when he visited New Orleans and left with all the available cash on a visit during the early chaotic years. Having financed the original missionaries, he probably wanted to get back some of his original investment before the salary checks stopped flowing back to Notre Dame, an eventuality to come if the Louisiana men became their own province. A more telling reason for the incorporation of the Louisiana religious, however, surfaces a decade later in a letter that Father Shortis sent to Sorin on May 18, 1870:

> Father Sheil frequently told us that "the Trustees were indebted to the Cong. of H. Cross" over $40,000 (forty thousand dollars), that the debt and interest was increasing, that all the secular members were quite willing—most of them aunxious [sic] to hand over the asylum to the Community, or its legal representative, the Cong. of H. Cross, as the title reads in the Charter. I therefore take the liberty to apprise you, that if those gentlemen once get the power or permission to meddle in the affairs of the Asylum, it will take a smart man to meet them, and preserve the direction of financial and other matters, over all which the Community should have undisturbed control. F. Toohey does not know that I write on this subject. (IPA)

It is difficult to separate the subject from the subject matter of this letter as the writer seems to be writing clandestinely over the head of his superior to the provincial. Is he indeed the "smart man" needed on the spot? Is he forwarding his own agenda? At any rate, the information about the indebtedness of the trustees to Holy Cross is valuable as it helps to clarify why the trustees had turned over the financial control of the asylum to the Holy Cross Congregation in 1859.

In March, 1859, Sheil made another significant move for the institution. He brought about the purchase of new property for the orphanage. The site, bought from Victor Benit for $25,000, was located two miles below the city (one mile east of St. Mary's) and measured 227 feet, ten inches in width by 80 arpents in length, plus another tract adjoining the other and measuring one

arpent (.85 acre) by 80 arpents, for a total of 150 acres. The property, once owned by Governor Claiborne, was adjacent to the magnificent convent and school of the Ursuline Sisters who had been in New Orleans since the eighteenth century. The new property for St. Mary's was conceived of as a farm and ran like a ribbon of land from the river up to the Florida Walk (today Florida Avenue). The original tract stopped short of the river because a sugar refinery held the land at the river's edge. Gradually over the years pieces of the property bought under Sheil's directorship were sold off until the real estate assumed the length that it enjoys today from the river north to Rampart Street, about one-sixth of its original length. For example, in July, 1887, the block from North Rampart to St. Claude Avenue (called Good Children Street at the time) was sold to Joseph Dirmann for $2500, and in July, 1946, sixteen acres north of St. Claude was sold to Edgar Doerr for $3000 an acre. Also sold in 1946 were forty-one acres from Claiborne to Florida Walk. Bert Wilson of City Home Builders paid $48,765 for that stretch of property. The width of the remaining property has never been touched through sale.

The new property was at first called a "Model Farm," but by August, 1859, an entry in the association's cash book refers to "implements for St. Isidore," so the name "St. Isidore's Farm" came into being to distinguish it from the parent property on Chartres Street. The new land was turned over to orange trees and vegetable gardens. Flowers were raised and sold. Cattle grazed, and a dairy was started (called "Claiborne Dairy" in the 1890s). Gradually the orphanage split into two distinct operations, and the group on Chartres Street eventually moved across the river (in 1948). The large bell cast in 1860 in Cincinnati for the orphanage was taken by the brothers to the present campus on Dauphine when the Chartres Street buildings were razed in the early 1950's.

At the time of its purchase, the Reynes plantation was described by the brothers as "a beautiful suburban estate which extends from the graceful bend of the River to beyond St. Claude Avenue to what is now Florida Walk" (Wilson 163). A beautiful painting of the original buildings presently hangs on the fourth floor of the brothers' residence hall. The buildings in the picture are dark and silent, the trees dripping with Spanish moss. It is a solemn tribute to the site as it must

have appeared to Father Sheil and the brothers in 1859. The land was heavily wooded: several entries in the cash book in those early days refer to income from woodcutters. Of the buildings on the property, the large plantation house served as a residence for the religious brothers until it was torn down in 1928. Other buildings included barns, cooks' quarters, and workers' housing. Several other buildings were slave quarters, and they quite possibly came with slaves to the new owners in 1859 as the contract makes mention of "servitude." These buildings were soon raised up to accommodate a story added below each. The upper story in each housed the boys, and the lower story was used for classes.

During the difficult years of the Civil War, Sheil shepherded the staff and the boys successfully. The Confederate government nullified Union currency, and food was difficult to get. The sewing department at St. Mary's helped with tailoring Confederate uniforms, and iron was sold to help the war cause. For these efforts, the Louisiana guard took up a collection for the orphanage. On June 18, 1862, Sheil wrote to Sorin: "We suffer much from the war, especially since under General Butler the federal army took possession of New Orleans, he repudiated the Confederate notes. It will be hard to carry [on] through the summer." All suffered at the school. Communication with Notre Dame was difficult, and no new religious could come to New Orleans. Sheil was careful in his evaluation of Butler:

> I suppose Gen. Butler will hold out to us this axiom "The private good must give way to the general good" yet this axiom does not prevent us from feeling the pressure. I wish now as I always desired from the commencement of the war for peace.

But the institution prospered, and when Sheil died in 1867, the Holy Cross community was ready to change the character of the institution so that by 1871 New Orleans began to think of St. Mary's more as a school than as an orphanage.

By 1871 it was apparent that a reorganization of the orphanage was needed. The older boys were separated from the younger boys, the latter staying with the sisters at the asylum on Chartres Street, the former moving to St. Isidore's. The farm soon came to be known as St.

Isidore's College or Industrial School. A letter from T. Wharton Collens to Sorin in 1871 attests to the reputation the farm was developing locally. Collens notes that the farm shows that the Holy Cross Congregation was interested in industrial schools and model farms "in which orphans as well as paying pupils would be brought up, not only to a rational skill in some productive art, but also to religious knowledge and practice" (April 11, 1871 IPA). Although the primary intent of this letter was to encourage young men at St. Isidore's to join a lay group of religious called the "Reductions," the letter is interesting for several reasons in addition to the recognition that the farm was getting locally. First of all, the letter indicates that the school was growing beyond its original mission as an orphanage. In fact, the school at St. Isidore's would eventually separate totally from St. Mary's orphanage, the two going in different apostolic directions, although they both continued to be staffed by Holy Cross religious. Secondly, the letter indicates that the particular charism of Holy Cross lies in its dedication to poor and working class students, an emphasis that the Congregation maintains to this day even as its schools require ever heightening tuition to stay viable.

The insights into the mission of St. Isidore's came from no ordinary citizen writing to Sorin. Judge Collens sat on the board of directors for the asylum in 1870, a board which included the following citizens: Archbishop J.M. Odin, Rev. N.J. Perché (bishop coadjutor), Rev. C. Maenhaut, Rev. J.M. Toohey, Thomas W. Collens, Edward Bermudey, R.A. Bourk, Octave de Armas, A. Robert, Victor Sere, George W. Byrne, John Devereux, J. Llado, Thomas Layton, and John T. Moore. Within a generation of the Holy Cross Congregation's arrival in New Orleans, there were already shaping in the minds of men such as Judge Collens a perception of the apostolic duality that Moreau's congregation maintains even to this day.

Not all the brothers were happy with the changes taking place in 1871. For example, Brother Ignatius (Thomas Everard) wrote the following in July of that year to Sorin:

> I can not find words to express my gratitude towards you, for allowing me to be changed from New Orleans; after the community taking charge of the Asylum for 22 years, and I

spending 20 years in it to be taken out of our hands by mean directors and mean intriguing Sisters, is what I can not bear; it is a bad day for the poor children of New Orleans, the day we left the Asylum.

Some people find change very difficult, but from what we know of the buildings at St. Isidore's, Brother Ignatius was probably reluctant to leave the nice buildings on Chartres Street and the life he had known there in good times and bad for two decades. Brother Ignatius was one of the first young men recruited in America to join the Holy Cross Community (July 26, 1842), and he outlived all of the pioneer brothers in Indiana, dying at Notre Dame April 28, 1899, almost thirty years after he wrote the above letter. Interestingly, he did not leave New Orleans in 1871 but went on to spend many more years working at the school.

In addition to agricultural skills, the boys studied English, mathematics, music, and geography, the institution thus gradually moving away from its emphasis on farming. By 1879 the Holy Cross religious had set up a "college" at St. Isidore's in the French style, including primary and secondary grades. Attracting young men from outside the area, the "college" soon took in boarders. It was the first such boarding school for boys in the state. But when Father Joseph Scherer arrived in September, 1880, to assume direction of the school, he found terrible conditions. Spirits were low, the cash-box was empty, and the mortgage stood at $1141.60. The only teachers were one priest and Brother Ignatius. The school needed a strong prefect of discipline. Scherer begged Sorin for sisters to take over the kitchen. Total enrollment was fifteen boarders, three orphans, and two day students, an enrollment that Scherer thought would drop once he announced tuition increases for the boarders from nine dollars per month to ten, and for the day students from one dollar per month to two dollars. The farm was hurting for lack of cultivation: the few brothers working it were old and infirm. Profits were going to pay the lay help. By May, 1881, enrollment, however, had improved to such an extent that Scherer was planning to limit admissions. Personnel were still needed, and he was overworked. Besides being president, he was a teacher, prefect, steward, and infirmarian. Enrollment apparently did not hold

up. Father P.J. Franciscus in the fall of 1883 reported but fourteen boarders and ten day students. He attributed the decline to the reputation the school still had as an orphanage and industrial school.

A very important hand drawn map of the 1889 property can be found in the Indiana Province Archives at Notre Dame. One page (drawn on stationary printed with the letterhead "St. Isidore's College") shows the property (adjacent to the Convent of the Ursulines) running from the river to the Florida Walk. The other page shows the inner square of the property with the Reynes House (marked "Dwelling House"), two college buildings (former slave quarters), an exhibition hall, a chapel, work house, and stables. The map is our only proof of a cemetery on the property at a spot which today is approximately where the swimming pool parking lot is located on Dauphine Street. Brother Carl Smith heard mention of this graveyard in the early days of his religious life and remembers that construction workers on the upper school building were told to be alert for a cemetery and possible remains. At that time everyone had forgotten the actual location of the burial grounds. The brothers who had been interred there, however, were long before transferred to Notre Dame. An entry in the House Council Meeting book for November 8, 1895, notes that a discussion involved "the transfer of the remains of the Community members from the little grave yard northwest of the new Holy Cross College to the Cemetery at Notre Dame, Indiana." The negotiations for the transfer were completed a week later. Three brothers who died in New Orleans after 1895 were buried elsewhere. In the 1960s St. Patrick Cemetery authorities requested that the remains of brothers be removed because their mausoleum was deteriorating. A shoe box sized box rested in Brother Malcolm O'Neil's office at the school until Brother Edmund Hunt carried it to Austin, Texas, for deposition at Assumption Cemetery, St. Edward's University. Only Brother Isidore is unaccounted for among the three who died after 1895.

By the mid-1880s dropping enrollment was attributed to the terrible condition of the buildings. In January, 1885, St. Isidore's suffered the loss by fire of a large stable. Students were able to rescue three cows, but two other cows perished. Farm equipment was lost along with

a large store of hay and potatoes. Scherer estimated the loss at $450, but fortunately the building was insured for $500. In spite of the hardship, the school continued on. One year later, in April, 1886, Scherer wrote to the Superior General at Notre Dame that St. Isidore's was "flourishing" with fifty-five boarders, and "the students are mostly unexceptionally [sic] good!" At the beginning of 1887 he maintained his faith in the future of the school and reported the erection of a new house fifty feet by thirty feet. It had a laundry on the first floor and rooms for female servants on the second.

How odd it is, therefore, that the mood at St. Isidore's changed radically two years later under a new president, Father Peter Klein. Morale had declined, and in February, 1889, the local Holy Cross council petitioned Notre Dame to sell the property for $30,000, noting that such was a fair price because three quarters of the land was "swamp." The school, however, held on. Then in November, 1893, the religious were told to sell out, this time for $40,000. Discipline was lax: the teachers were told that tuition dollars were more important than respect. The air was unpleasantly poisoned when local businessmen constructed a slaughterhouse adjacent to the east edge of the property, a situation that survived into the 1940s.

Resuscitation came with a new young president, Father Nicholas Warken (ordained in 1890), and the dream of a new building, the "Main Building." The dire situation was spelled out in a long letter signed by Warken, two other Holy Cross priests and two brothers. The letter was sent to the provincial superior at Notre Dame and expresses the tenacity with which the faculty wanted to remain at Holy Cross College:

> We, the undersigned, ask permission to erect a new building, one which will accommodate about two hundred students. Our reason for asking this permission is, that we have come to the conclusion; that it is time for us either to build, or to close for to go on as we are at present, and have been for some time past, is a waste of time and energy. The number of students is up to the average of former years; but we are not making progress, and

consequently if we are not advancing, we are going backwards. How to close; the question is, can we close? Yes, by making a present, of the property, to the Archbishop. What a shame it would be! There is no doubt, that were we to close in June; in the following Sept. There would be another college started here, by some other religious body, or by seculars. We know of many anxious for us to close.

The letter points out how the city is expanding in the direction of Holy Cross as evidenced by the new streetcar line to be soon laid on the levee complementing the line that already serviced the school.

We are in the city, and at the same time out of the city; we have all the advantages of a city life, but none of its disadvantages. Parents in the South are very fond of their children; therefore they do not like to send them far from home, a place like this is just what they want; where they can come to see them, on Sundays and Thursdays, in case of sickness they are near home; parents can go and come without expense or loss of time.

Working on the assumption that Notre Dame was ambivalent about the school, the Holy Cross faculty stressed the need of staying in New Orleans. If only they could have a proper building!

Strangers visiting the place are enchanted with its beauty and would love to remain. The place is quiet, and secluded; large spacious grounds for out-door sports and recreation. Then being so near the city, the expense necessary to keep a college are [sic] comparatively small, vegetables and fruit can be got cheap and a great variety of them. After considering all these advantages we must come to the conclusion that this is the place, and the only place for a colege [sic]. And that we have not met with success in the past, we must lay the fault before our own door. It is the unanimous opinion of everyone here, and of everyone who has visited St. Isidore's that if we had an imposing building, to grace these already beautiful grounds, something that would strike the eye, "a thing so necessary in our age of progress," St. Isidore's could cope with any institution in the state.

Time and again has it happened that parents have brought their sons to enter them,

but on seeing the poor miserable buildings, and still more miserable accommodations, took them back with them. Only the other day a gentleman told us that he was ashamed to tell his friends where his son was attending school fearing they may come to see him. Yet this same man is a good friend of the house. Parents are well satisfied that their children can learn as well if not better here than in any other college; but they do not like the buildings and accommodations. The classes are well taught and as far as teaching is concerned, we are equal to any faculty in the city, but we are behind the age in buildings. (IPA)

How quickly the "swamp" has become graceful and "beautiful grounds." One man's swamp is another man's Eden. On April 16, 1895, the provincial council at Notre Dame approved the building project.

The Main Building stands today as a solid legacy of the final decade of the nineteenth century. It was designed by the noted architect James Feret and construction began under the supervision of Father Warken, but only the central section, not the two proposed wings, was built. Total cost was $15,000. The 1895 yearbook shows that the Main Building was positioned so that most of the landscaping survived, including an orange grove and magnolia trees. On September 8, 1896, it was blessed by the archbishop of New Orleans, Francis Janssens. Dormitories were on the third floor, classrooms on the second floor, and library, dining room and offices on the first floor. On the front of the building, facing the river, was a tower, the top of which was lost in 1910 to a hurricane and never replaced.

The Main Building was constructed with twelve foot high ceilings and had transoms into the corridors so that when the outside gallery doors were opened along the length of the structure front and back, breezes off the river could cool the interior south to north. The gallery walks on the first and second floors were latticed with beautifully scrolled ironwork in the French style. Several small rooms on the second floor facing north were used as living quarters by chaplains and some of the brothers until the early 1960's. Brother Vincent Hinderschied lived there as did Father Donald MacGregor, a Holy Cross missionary retired from India in the 1950's. He played the

bagpipes afternoons on the gallery when classes were over. He was a gentle confessor to the students, and the wailing of his bagpipes added a musical touch, albeit strident, to the sultry New Orleans air. He also played the trombone and flute. He ate a tablespoon of honey every day which helped him, so he said, genuflect at Mass in spite of his arthritis.

In 1912 two wings designed by Julius Koch and constructed by alumnus Lionel Favret were added to Feret's Main Building, but earlier plans indicate that wings were actually part of the 1895 plans. The 1912 additions and renovation, however, greatly altered the original look of the structure, and some critics were not happy with the results:

> Three facade chimneys and dormers were removed, as were the handsome chimneyed gabled ends. The steeply pitched gambrel roof was replaced by a low-lip one, and the characteristic Feret belvedere was discarded. A central tower with a Romanesque style arch was added to the otherwise well-balanced facade. The architectural integrity of Feret's building was violated by these changes: the original building is barely recognizable except for the cast-iron galleries at the first and second levels. (Wilson 163)

The two new wings housed a large chapel for the boys on the west end of the building and a new dormitory on the east end, eventually known as the Senior Dorm.

In the same year that the Main Building was constructed, Archbishop Janssens suggested that the name of the school be officially changed to "Holy Cross College." The school had been authorized by the Louisiana legislature in 1890 to confer college degrees, a practice which continued until about 1912. Although Holy Cross was not chartered by the Louisiana assembly until June 20, 1890, it began awarding degrees in 1879. Both bachelor and masters degrees could be earned at the school. One of the more famous degree recipients before the turn of the century was Jules Jeanmard, who in 1918 was named the first bishop of Lafayette, Louisiana.

The name "Holy Cross College" endures on the school's gazebo, which stands prominently today at the north face of the Main Building. Originally it was a shelter for boys awaiting the Dauphine, Levee, Barracks electric streetcar. According to tradition, the gazebo was

built by a friend of the school sometime before 1916.

The "Sixteenth Annual Catalogue of Holy Cross College" gives a poetic description of the school in 1895:

> This college is exceptionally well situated, on rising ground overlooking the Mississippi river, on the outskirts of the city. The buildings are close to the levee, and the refreshing breezes from the Gulf are almost continually wafted along the bosom of the Father of Waters, and are nowhere enjoyed to better advantage than at Holy Cross College.

Such effulgence was typical of college brochures at the end of the nineteenth century. A similar brochure existed for Sacred Heart College run by the Holy Cross order in Watertown, Wisconsin, where the pure spring waters were touted as salubrious and essential to the health of growing young men. These texts were a lovely blend of sentiment, fantasy, and reality. The Holy Cross prospectus in New Orleans includes the following description of the local Eden:

> The college buildings are surrounded by a delightful orange grove. The fragrant magnolia and other shade trees line the walks and dot the pleasure grounds of the students. Beyond the college property are beautiful promenades, extending along the river bank to the United States Barracks, almost a mile distant, and thence to Jackson's Monument and the historic Chalmette battle ground.

Once parents of future students were aware of the beauty of the grounds, they were apprised of the excellent curriculum and the awards for diligent study: "Besides the Weekly Notes, the Roll of Honor, the Monthly Bulletin, Gold and Silver Medals are awarded at the close of the year." Morals were closely supervised, incoming mail read by the president, and any books of an immoral character immediately destroyed.

Two courses of study were available to students: commercial or classical. In the former, focus was reserved to mathematics, bookkeeping, commercial law, and elocution. In the classical, after two years studying the fundamentals of Latin and Greek, freshmen translated Ovid, Sallust, and Catiline. Sophomores tackled Cicero and Virgil's *Eclogues* and *Georgics*. Thereafter,

students used their three years of Greek to work on the *Iliad*. Juniors translated the *Aeneid*, Livy, the *Odyssey*, Thucydides, and Horace. Seniors translated Tacitus and Sophocles. In 1899 a third course was added: the Literary Course for students not wishing to study Greek. Latin was retained, but English courses were substituted for Greek. The Literary Course was "eminently calculated to prepare young men for any of the professional courses of Law, Medicine, or Theology."

Medals and rewards have been a part of education at Holy Cross since the beginning. Recently one of the early medals came back to Holy Cross. Awarded for penmanship and Christian Doctrine to William Corbo in 1897, the medal measures 2 1/4 inches in height by 1 1/4 inches in width. It consists of two parts attached by a link: the upper half for excellence in penmanship, the lower for excellence in Christian Doctrine. The 1897-98 catalogue gives a full page to advertise the honor and notes that the medal was donated by Rev. E. Aveilhe of New Orleans. William Corbo lived in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, and the medal has been given on permanent loan to the school by his daughter, Mrs. Ethel Faustermann of Jefferson, Louisiana.

The catalogue of students for 1894-95 lists seventy-four names, fifty-five of them students from New Orleans and thirteen from towns around Louisiana. It would be difficult to say how many of the New Orleans boys were day students and how many were five day boarders. Cities outside of Louisiana are represented by boys from Chicago and Pass Christian. Out-of-country students came from France, Honduras, Puerto Rico and Cuba. Tuition and board was $20.00 per month for boarders. Tuition for day scholars was $4.00 per month for the Commercial Course, $6.00 per month for the Classical Course. "Minims" were students under the age of twelve. In 1907 there were a dozen of them.

Thus Holy Cross in New Orleans evolved from a pitiful orphanage of neglected children in 1849 to become half a century later a modern school for boys. As one wanders the grounds today, one can wonder what it must have been like before the Civil War when a plantation gradually began to become first a farm and then a college with Holy Cross as its common denominator.

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