

HISTORY OF ST. JAMES SCHOOL

Alexandria, Louisiana

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The history of St. James School, Alexandria, Louisiana begins with the first Monday of January in the year 1894. On that day Sister Mary Xavier of the Congregation of the Sisters of Divine Providence of San Antonio, Texas, opened a school for colored children in a one room weather-boarded building on Watkins Avenue. It bore the name of Sacred Heart School and was in the parish of St. Francis Xavier with Rev. Leonard Menard as pastor. Sister Xavier lived at the St. Francis Xavier Convent, the school for white children, eight blocks away and twice daily walked the intervening distance.

One of the first problems which came up for decision was the question of whether the school was to be a mulatto or a mixed one. The former protested against the admission of the darker hued class, but the decision was quickly laid down. Sister Xavier's vigorous decree was that since she had been sent by her superiors to teach the colored, which to her mind were ebony, brown, tan and yellow, all children possessing any of the aforesaid shades or hues, or any modifications or variation thereof would be eligible for admission to this school, all things to the contrary notwithstanding.

Two years later Sister Rosine replaced Sister Xavier and was in turn replaced by Sister Pierre Fourier and later by Sister Richardese. The trying conditions under which the Sisters labored continued; they had to walk over a mile twice a day in all kinds of weather, carrying their lunch. The streets were unpaved, sidewalks did not exist, automobiles were a curiosity, and the street car did not run in that direction. Sister Pierre Fourier made the daily trip for five years, and then Reverend Mother Florence informed Father Menard that she could not permit Sister Pierre Fourier to return unless he built a school nearer the convent. The difficulty connected with the undertaking was that the whites objected to having a colored school in the vicinity. The following session the school was closed, but, in the meantime, Father Menard bought property between Fish and Beauregard on which he built a school. The next year Sister Pierre Fourier returned and reopened the school with an enrollment of eighty pupils; Rev. Mother then sent an additional teacher.

The pastor, Rev. Menard, was a fine old priest, but he often had to resort to diplomacy to keep peace between his white and colored parishioners. The last named were given the last six pews in St. Francis Xavier Church. This the whites resented. Things came to such a pass that in 1911, the date was not kept on record, Rev. Marcos, a visiting priest replacing Father Menard, said to the negroes, "Come with me; we will start our own church." The colored walked out with him. Upon his return Father Menard approved the step and gave them a building wherein they could conduct church services.

Father Marcos, realizing that the task was beyond his strength, resigned and the Bishop secured the Holy Ghost Fathers for this mission. The first pastor was Rev. Anthony Schmodry, C.S.Sp. He came to Alexandria in 1912. Tremendous was the task before him. He had to organize his parish, and poverty and privation hampered his every move. This good father, now long gone to his reward, will be remembered for his Christlike charity. Truly he had made his own the outstanding virtue of Him Who said, "Learn of Me, for I am meek and humble of heart."

In 1913, Rev. J. H. Cronenberger replaced Father Schmodry. He had been three years in Africa, had prepared the lepers for death, and had come in contact with adverse conditions, but the worst was not to be compared with what he found in Alexandria. He was not the man to sit and wait; neither could he brook the thought that his church and school were housed in barns. The parish income did not exceed six dollars a month. What could he do but pray, make sacrifices, and solicit. He did all three so well that in a short time he

succeeded in getting a generous donation from Monsignor Smith of Cleveland, Ohio, with which to erect a church and a rectory. The new St. James Memorial Church was blessed December 8, 1915.

The next work was the erection of a school. Money was lacking. The people did all they could by contributing their mite and more. Still this was nothing in comparison with what was needed. Only God knows how St. James School was built. Just as in Africa, Father Cronenberger dug the clay and shaped the bricks for his church, he now took the trowel and side by side with the workmen placed the bricks. When the building was completed there was not one cent of debt. By the spring of 1916 the new school was ready to be occupied. In April of that year Sister Pancratius, Sister Leander, and Sister Celine moved into it. The following September Sister Roche came to open a high school.

Owing to the inconvenience of living on Fourth Street and teaching fourteen blocks away on Seventh Street, Father Cronenberger arranged with Mother Florence for an independent community. On October 15, 1916 St. James community moved into a cottage near the school. Three years later the convent was built. God sent to Alexandria a Mr. Guthrie who aided greatly in the erection of this building.

Sister Roche remained in Alexandria three years; with another member of the community, Sister Hildegardis, she did great work during the influenza epidemic of 1918. Both were untiring in ministrations to the sick and dying.

In 1919 Sister Xavier returned to Alexandria. Her former students were happy to have her labor in their midst once more. She found the house bare of necessities; the school was poorly furnished. Surely there was need of organization. Sister called into service the mechanics of the parish and assigned each a task. Some built wardrobes; others repaired furniture, and one donated money which defrayed the expenses of a swinging door in the corridor. The school was also improved.

After inquiring into the religious status of the parishioners Sister found to her great sorrow that several, for one reason or another, were not practicing their religion; these fell in for solid lectures every time Sister met them. Her interests were by no means confined to their spiritual welfare. Once when the children of a family missed school Sister went to see what was the matter. She found the doors barred and the father and mother who were sick in bed refused to admit her. Upon her insistent demand to enter, they allowed her to come in. They told her that neither they nor the children had tasted food for two days and that they had decided to remain together and starve to death. That family did not starve due to Sister's intervention.

During the superiorship of Sister Xavier, His Eminence Cardinal Pietro F. Biondi, Papal Legate in the United States, paid a visit to the Sisters of St. James community. Upon entering their humble abode, he said, "The peace of Jesus Christ be with all who reside in this house." The object of his visit, he said, was to look after the interests of the less favored portion of the Holy Father's large flock. After thanking the Sisters for teaching the colored of Alexandria, he blessed them in the Holy Father's and in his own name.

In the summer of 1927 Father Cronenberger requested and received State approbation for the school. The graduates received teachers' certificates until 1933 when the state department of education took teacher training out of the high schools. Available records show a gradual but steady growth in the enrollment: from 253 in 1919 to 711 in 1954.

Sister M. Rodriguez was in charge of the community from 1931-37. She entered at once with heart and soul into her new duties; the work fired her missionary zeal which was soon to be exercised in the apostolate of saving souls. That summer an old man lay prostrate from paralysis in the home of his only son whom he had disowned in the day of prosperity for marrying a Catholic. The depression hit him hard. His wife died, and he was all alone, sick and destitute. His Catholic daughter-in-law took him in at this extremity and cared for him. Sister Rodriguez visited him though she knew well that he hated the Catholic Church. On that particular day he was very restless, being disappointed because the minister, deacon, parson, and elders of his church seemed to neglect him. Sister spoke kindly to him and pinned a Sacred Heart badge and Miraculous Medal on the bed promising that the Sisters would pray for him. Some time later the family persuaded him to go to Mercy Hospital in Hot Springs, where he remained two months. After his return he was able to walk with the aid of a cane. One of his visits was to the rectory to ask for instructions and Baptism. He often sat long hours in the church staring at the altar. Fired with a new energy the old man became a fisher. He found a crony who like himself was sick, and who was also a staunch believer in Protestantism. The former persuaded his friend that he was all wrong and needed the Sisters to come and pray for him; they did so. The neophyte looked upon every word Sister Rodriguez said as a direct revelation from heaven. He wanted Catholic literature and never seemed to be satisfied. He, too, asked for Baptism and soon received also Extreme Unction and Viaticum. He died very grateful for having received the gift of faith and last rites of the Church.

In the summer of 1937 Sister Mary of the Nativity was placed in charge of the community and remained one year. Sister M. Alexandra was in office from 1938-44; others in succession were Sister M. Fortunata from 1955-57; and Sister M. Corsini who entered on her duty in July 1957.

The residence of the Sisters having proven too small a larger building nearby was purchased, moved to its present location, renovated, and occupied during the first years of Sister Alexandra's administration. Much to the Sisters' satisfaction it contains a chapel where Our Blessed Lord dwells in His Most Holy Sacrament. Some of the chapel furnishings were donated by Most Rev. J. Desmond, Bishop of Alexandria, a true friend of St. James Parish. Incidentally, the present tabernacle in chapel and that in church are gifts of the family of Rev. Leo Kettl, C.S.Sp.

The parish long felt the need of a large auditorium, and an opportunity to get one offered itself when a used building on the tenth block of Lee Street was offered for sale. Through the efforts of Father Campbell, C.S.Sp. and the cooperation of Most Reverend William O'Brian, Auxiliary Bishop of Chicago, a donation of \$20,000 was obtained from Cardinal Samuel Stritch, also of Chicago. This sum was supplemented by \$5000 contributed by the parishioners and Cardinal Stritch Auditorium was dedicated on February 22, 1948. Just two days before the event Father Cronenberger celebrated Mass as usual, went to the rectory, suffered a heart attack, received the last sacraments and died.

Before long the increased enrollment necessitated the separate housing of the high school department. The construction of a red brick building was begun in the summer of 1949, and this building with six classrooms and two office rooms was ready for occupancy in November of the same year.

Parents repeatedly asked for the opening of a kindergarten department. There was no room available but the request came again and again. In Sept., 1952, one was opened in a rented building at 1046 Winn Street, with Miss Betty Edwards in charge. In the summer of 1955 St. James Parish purchased a

lot with a house and garage at 1503 Eighth Street at a cost of \$6,500. It stands opposite the church door and at present houses the kindergarten and home economics department.

At the close of the school session 1957-58 the enrollment was 552 and the community numbered nine sisters.

In July 1959, the parish received a new pastor, Father Joseph Hannicheck. The following summer the Sunday bulletin of August 21, contained the names of Rev. Joseph Hannicheck, pastor, and Rev. Francis Stocker, assistant, for the last time, as on August 20, the official appointment of Rev. Anthony Thelin as the new assistant, was disclosed, though he did not arrive until August 24. Father Stocker took up his duties as burser for the Holy Ghost Fathers in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

During the year of 1960, we were very fortunate in having the gravel road, namely, Eighth Street, in front of our convent and high school building, paved. This was due mainly to the efforts of Sister M. Gerard, who spent much of her time in writing letters to the City Council requesting that this project be undertaken by the city. Later this same year, a new school bus was acquired for the parish of St. James.

The Parent-Teacher Association of St. James donated one hundred new folding chairs for our gym and church. The Student Council undertook the job of redecoration in the interior of the gym. The curtains were removed and cleaned; walls were given a fresh coat of paint and parts of the ceiling were restored. The high school boys donated their time to help do the work.

The years of 1961 to 1965 were really "booming" years for the St. James High School basketball teams. Each of these years showed that the teams won the LIALO district championship trophy and in 1962, also copped the championship of the Catholic tournament.

In 1963, Sister Josephine Elise was placed in charge of the community.

During August of the following summer, the grammar school building received a new roof. This news would probably give those Sisters who have formerly taught in this building reasons to heave a sigh of relief, should they be re-assigned to St. James.

1964 saw the closing of the St. James kindergarten. The people of the parish did not particularly relish this closing, but there were not enough pupils to merit having a teacher; therefore after due consultation with all concerned the decision was made. This was also the final year of the annual Harvest Festival.

In February of 1965, Father Charles Boykins was ordained in the Order of the Divine Word fathers. He is a former student of St. James. His present assignment is on the "gold coast" of Africa.

January, 1966 was the opening of the Centennial year of the Sisters of Divine Providence. On May 8, a joint centennial celebration was held by all the Sisters who staff schools in Alexandria. Bishop Greco celebrated Mass at St. Francis Cathedral. This was followed by a dinner and reception which was held at the Ramada Inn in Alexandria. The St. James Concert Choir rendered part of the entertainment during the dinner.