

# Ascending the Heights (Preview): A brief history of Boston College from its founding to 2008

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# Ascending the Heights

**A BRIEF HISTORY OF BOSTON COLLEGE**  
FROM ITS FOUNDING TO 2008

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## “A College in the City”



**M**ANY 21ST-CENTURY visitors often wonder why Boston College is called Boston College when it is actually situated in the suburb of Newton, and why it is referred to as a college when it is actually a major national university. A brief look back at the early history of Boston College might help explain these apparent misnomers, and shed some light on the long and intimate relationship between the college and the famous city for which it is named.

It all began back in the 1840s with Bishop John Fitzpatrick, third bishop of Boston, who looked around and saw growing numbers of young men with hardly a hope of educational advancement. These were the sons of Irish immigrant families who arrived in America des-

titute, during the years of the Great Famine in Ireland. Like other immigrant groups, the Irish suffered the effects of bias and discrimination on account of their Catholic faith as well as their Celtic origins. Desperately poor, long deprived by the English penal laws of opportunities for education, they became members of a depressed laboring and domestic class, struggling to achieve the means and the education to improve their lives and create a new future. Just as his predecessor, Bishop Benedict Fenwick, had his dream of The College of the Holy Cross as an idyllic residential institution in rural Worcester, Fitzpatrick had his own vision of a more modest day college in the city, where young Irish lads could be trained for the service of the Church and the benefit of society. This was a concept the 35-year-old bishop discussed often, and at great length, with John McElroy, SJ, as early as 1847, after the Jesuit arrived in Boston to administer the strife-torn St. Mary's Church in the North End.

McElroy was an immigrant from Ireland who had worked as a missionary, a preacher, and a retreat master, before serving in the Mexican War as one of the original two Catholic military chaplains in the United States. Now 65 years old, just mustered out of the army, he had come to Boston in response to Bishop Fitzpatrick's plea for a strong and competent leader of St. Mary's Church, where rival factions were fighting over the appointment of a pastor. He also responded enthusiastically to the bishop's idea of a "college in the city" for poor Irish boys, putting small amounts of money aside for construction as he walked around the city looking for a place to build such a college.

Fr. McElroy was undoubtedly influenced not just by the bishop but also by St. Ignatius Loyola, who gave this practical advice to his small band of Jesuit followers: Seek out convenient locations in large urban centers—the *commodo luogo*. These are the places where Jesuit universities could exert “the moral power of education for the good of the city and for its reform.” Convinced that the city was a natural crossroads of trade and commerce, usually a center of cultural ferment and intellectual ideas, Ignatius conveyed the idea of an urban ministry that would serve all classes of people, from the scions of royal families to those who could not typically afford private education. St. Ignatius emphasized that Jesuit schools were to be “for everybody, poor and rich.” As pastor of St. Mary’s Church, Fr. McElroy continued to keep his eyes open for a piece of property suitable for the construction of a church and a school.

In 1853, Fr. McElroy purchased some of the Leverett Street property near Causeway Street where the old jail had been torn down to make way for the new Charles Street prison. Once word got out that the so-called Jail Lands had been purchased by Roman Catholics, however, the anti-immigrant Nativists pressured city authorities to restore some old zoning restrictions that limited construction on that property to “dwellings or stores.” With a Nativist political movement called the Know-Nothings ascendant during the mid-1850s, the bishop decided to sell off the Jail Lands and seek a less controversial site for his college in the emerging South End of Boston.

The South End had been built largely on landfill, a gradual process that widened the slender corridor

of land (the “Neck”) that connected downtown Boston with the mainland, opening up more living space for the modest-sized city. By the mid-1850s, the South End, with its broad thoroughfares, grassy parks, tree-lined squares, and handsome rows of bowfront houses, was regarded as prime residential property. Bishop Fitzpatrick agreed with most Bostonians that this new development was surely the area into which the city’s well-to-do population would eventually gravitate when forced to abandon the older parts of town because of the “encroachments of trade and commerce,” and he decided that the South End would be the ideal location for a new and more spacious cathedral for Boston. The simple old brick church on Franklin Street, constructed in 1803, was clearly no longer large enough to accommodate the city’s rapidly expanding Catholic population. The bishop sold off the Franklin Street property on September 16, 1860, celebrated a sad farewell Mass in the old downtown church, and began planning for an impressive new cathedral.

In the meantime, Fr. McElroy had also seen the new South End as an attractive and practical location for a modest-sized Jesuit church, as well as for the “college in the city” he had talked so long about with Bishop Fitzpatrick. Not only was the newly developed area convenient to young Catholic boys in the city itself, thanks to a new horse-car railway line that operated from Scollay Square to Roxbury by way of the South End, but it would also be accessible to neighborhoods like South Boston, Roxbury, Dorchester, and other “adjoining towns” where immigrant families were beginning to take up residence.

With his customary energy and enthusiasm (he was always making his Jesuit superiors nervous), Fr. McElroy made an offer for an attractive parcel of land in the South End, on Harrison Avenue, between Concord and Newton Streets. Once again he encountered incessant delays and postponements—partly because of the usual bureaucratic delays, partly because of Nativist sentiment, which was waning at that point in Massachusetts—but on July 22, 1857, the Land Committee of the City of Boston finally agreed to sell him the tract of land. The cost: 50 cents a foot, 25 cents less than the going property rates at that time, since the land was to be designated as “church property.” Bishop Fitzpatrick was forced to postpone his own ambitious plans for building a new cathedral in the South End because of the growing controversies between the North and the South that would erupt into wholesale civil war, and undoubtedly disrupt the local economy. But on April 7, 1858, he personally presided over the groundbreaking ceremonies for the Jesuits’ Church of the Immaculate Conception out of which would eventually come his cherished “college in the city.”

## DEO GRATIAS

**A**FTER A PERIOD of serious study and prolonged discussions, in March 1863, Fr. McElroy submitted his formal petition for a college charter to the Great and General Court of Massachusetts. The petition passed the House and the Senate on March 31, and was promptly approved by Governor John Andrew on April 1, 1863. Three months later, the trustees of Bos-



ton College had their first formal meeting, at which John Bapst, SJ, was elected the first president, after Fr. McElroy, now 81 years old, declined to serve any longer as pastor and interim head of BC. Indeed, after McElroy handed over all property and holdings still in his name, he rejoiced: “*Deo Gratias!* I am indeed now a poor man, as a religious ought to be,” and went off to other, less remarkable assignments.

The choice of Fr. Bapst as the college’s first president was considered a special honor to a priest who had suffered painfully for his faith. When the Swiss-born Jesuit came to the United States, he worked among the Indians of northern Maine. In October 1854, a Know-Nothing mob tarred and feathered the priest, permanently impairing his health. After serving six years, Fr. Bapst retired from the presidency and was succeeded by Robert Brady, SJ, who served one year and was, in turn, succeeded by Robert Fulton, SJ, who had been dean of Boston College and held two terms as president (1870-1880 and 1888-1891). Over a period of 18 years, Fulton “shaped the academic standards and style of the College,” in the words of the University’s late, official historian, Charles F. Donovan, SJ.

After ground was broken for Immaculate Conception Church in 1858, it took two more years for the college buildings to be completed. Because of the continuing crisis of the Civil War, however, in addition to a shortage of Jesuit teachers in the area at that time, Jesuit authorities decided to use the classroom buildings temporarily as a seminary, and later as a high school for young boys. On Monday morning, September 5, 1864, Boston College officially opened its doors for classes,

and although the first class of only 22 students did not seem very promising (“Many came gratuitously,” wrote Fr. Fulton rather dourly in his diary, “and only one or two had talent”), the numbers grew steadily as the new college, in its own building, started out on its half-century at the Harrison Avenue location. By the end of the first year, Fr. Fulton was able to record an enrollment of 48 students, and each year the numbers grew slowly but impressively—rising to 81 students in 1866, to 114 in 1868, and to a total of 140 boys in 1870 from various parts of the city.

Under Fr. Fulton’s able direction, the school had begun to settle into a smooth and efficient Jesuit routine, with special church collections, personal contributions, and local fairs and cake sales supplementing the meager income from tuitions. Andrew Carney, a poor Irish immigrant who had become a prosperous clothing merchant and enterprising investment banker in the city, became a close friend of Fr. McElroy and Bishop Fitzpatrick, and served as a generous benefactor of the college during its early years. And there were other kinds of contributions, equally beneficial. Joseph Coolidge Shaw, SJ, a graduate of Harvard and a member of a very prominent Boston family, had converted to Catholicism. After becoming a Jesuit priest, he donated a valuable collection of books he had purchased in Paris and Rome, to begin what would eventually become the Boston College library. In addition to raising funds and educating their students according to the traditional Jesuit program known in Latin as the *Ratio Studiorum* or plan of studies, school authorities also made efforts to expand the educational benefits

of the college to members of the general public in the South End community. A circulating library of 1,000 books was established in the basement of the adjoining Immaculate Conception Church, and the same room was used as a meeting place for young Catholic men of the city. This arrangement prepared the way for the founding, in 1875 by Fr. Fulton, of the Young Men's Catholic Association, an independent organization he hoped would promote culture, religious development, and sociability. (It did just that, for nearly half a century, in Boston.)

Six days a week, the doors of the college on Harrison Avenue were opened punctually at 8 a.m., and school was in session from 8:30 until 2:30 in the afternoon—except for Saturday, when classes ended at 1:30 p.m. After attending morning Mass, students went off to their assigned classrooms, where they studied not only religion and philosophy, but also Latin, Greek, and English, as well as arithmetic, chemistry, and modern language. The Boston College charter provided that no student could be refused admission, or denied any honors or degrees, “on account of the religious opinions he may entertain.” And so, the rare non-Catholic student was not required to participate in any exercises judged to be “distinctively Catholic,” but Catholic students were obliged to attend daily Mass, recite the daily catechism lesson, make their confession once a month, and participate in an annual retreat.

Despite such a heavy academic schedule, many students found time to engage in a variety of extracurricular activities. About 40 pupils became members of the Sodality of the Immaculate Conception, designed

to give honor to the Blessed Mother, while around the same number of students joined the Society of St. Cecilia that supplied the music for daily Mass and other religious services during the school year. Among other activities was a debating society, reported in the first published catalogue in 1868-69, with Fr. Fulton as its advisor; in 1890 the group renamed itself the Fulton Debating Society in his honor. The mention of a production of Shakespeare's *Richard III* in that same catalogue is evidence of a dramatics society, while *The Stylus*, a literary magazine, made its appearance in 1883, and continues to this day.

That same year, the Athletic Association was created to give some formal structure to the various sports activities. In those days, baseball was the principal sport, and football came later, in 1893, when students began playing an informal schedule with neighboring colleges. Boston College students on their way to athletic events soon became conscious of the fact that they had no striped ties to wear, no arm bands to put on, and no pennants to wave, proclaiming their school affiliation. To work out a solution to this problem, they called upon a classmate, T.J. Hurley '85, composer of such perennial favorites as "For Boston" and "Hail Alma Mater," to head up a committee to decide upon a set of school colors. Hurley and his committee reported back to the student body that their choice was maroon and gold—in part because the papal colors were maroon, purple, and gold, and because no other Jesuit college happened to have those colors. The student body accepted this report unanimously, and promptly put together the first Boston College banner.

The growing sense of unity and pride at the new college in the South End was further reinforced when, in October 1870, Fr. Fulton announced the formation of a military drill company known as The Foster Cadets. Attired in Civil War-style uniforms, with the initials BC on the insignia of their caps, the cadets engaged in competitive prize drills, marched proudly through the streets with their fife-and-drum corps, and were assigned a prominent place in the city's St. Patrick's Day parade on March 17, 1875.

## INTO THE WEST

**B**UT THE DAYS of the old South End were numbered. The early prospects of the South End as the city's most fashionable residential area outside of Beacon Hill quickly soured as another group of real-estate developers began filling in the north side of the Boston Neck, and proceeded to lay out what became known as the Back Bay. The wide streets, the elegant extension of Commonwealth Avenue so reminiscent of the Champs Elysees, and rows of impressive residences designed in the Second French Empire style quickly eclipsed the South End as Boston's most desirable address. By the 1880s and 1890s, while the Back Bay was flourishing, the South End was deteriorating into a rundown and often neglected neighborhood. Its once-handsome bowfront brick mansions were being converted into inexpensive boarding houses, and its tree-lined streets were crowded with small shops and dingy saloons. The stately Cathedral of the Holy Cross, which Archbishop John Williams had completed in 1875 to re-

place the original church on Franklin Street, was now all but obscured by the dark, rusting elevated railway that ran along Washington Street with a deafening clatter, which priests complained often drowned out sermons and interrupted religious devotions of their parishioners.

Clearly, many Catholic leaders began to feel that it was time for them to move some of their downtown institutions to better quarters. As an indication of things to come, in 1880 when Archbishop Williams began building St. John's Seminary, he chose to do so on property he purchased in the rural suburb of Brighton. Not long after he succeeded Williams, in 1907, Archbishop William O'Connell moved the operations of his own chancery office from the South End to Granby Street in the Back Bay, before eventually moving to a site near the diocesan seminary in the hills of Brighton, which had been annexed by Boston in 1873.

In addition to more peace and quiet, the faculty and students of Boston College also felt the need for more space, more room, and a less depressing location than the congested streets of the South End. Although student enrollments were holding up, and there was still space available in the two buildings themselves, there was no adequate recreational space in the immediate vicinity. In addition to classrooms and two large assembly halls, Fr. Fulton had made provision for a sizeable gymnasium in the basement of the college, but this was far from adequate for anything like a successful athletic program. As college president in 1898, Timothy Brosnahan, SJ, managed to purchase 402,000 square feet of land about a mile away, on Massachu-

setts Avenue near the Dorchester line, but it proved to be not at all suitable for the school's growing recreational needs. Aside from the space problem, there was also a growing recognition that the older students in the college program needed a place apart from the younger students ("the boys in knickerbockers") who were enrolled in the high school.

Boston College was not the only Jesuit college in the United States moving from its original site at the turn of the century. For a variety of reasons, including a greater interest in sports and the advent of modern transportation facilities, many Jesuit colleges relocated to larger campuses "outside the urban core," while high schools remained generally in their original sites, according to Thomas Lukas, SJ, a Church historian. This was true of Boston College High School, which stayed in the South End until 1950, when it moved to its present location at Columbia Point near Boston Harbor. Some indication of the thinking at the time can be gathered from the fact that in 1900 the realty firm of Meredith and Grew recommended to the Boston College president, W. G. Read Mullan, SJ, three parcels of land for his consideration—all three of which were west of the city. Two were in Brighton, where St. Elizabeth Hospital now stands and where Mt. Alvernia Academy stood for many years; the other was the site in Newton that remains the home of Boston College.

In 1907, Thomas Gasson, SJ, who had served as professor of ethics and economics at Boston College for the preceding 12 years, became president, and at once pressed with great zeal for a new site and what Fr. Donovan (who served as University historian from



1979 until his death in 1998) called “a new vision of academic prestige” for the college. A new location was selected, west of the city, in what was then an almost rural village of Newton called Chestnut Hill, where four parcels of land were acquired by Fr. Gasson. The property, overlooking the reservoir, had belonged to Amos Adams Lawrence, son of a wealthy textile magnate and distinguished member of a then famous philanthropic family. A design competition for the development of the campus was won by Charles Donagh Maginnis, of the Boston firm Maginnis and Walsh.

On June 19, 1909, some 30,000 people—students, dignitaries, parishioners, and many others—turned out for a groundbreaking event that heralded the construction of the first in a series of handsome structures done in the English collegiate gothic style. The architects felt that this style would not only be suitable for the topography of the area, but would also be most appropriate for an academic institution with a strong religious foundation. The first structure, raised on what had been the site of the Lawrence farmhouse, was a classroom building initially called the Recitation Building, and later the Tower Building. That original gothic structure, still presiding over the Heights, is today known as Gasson Hall, in honor of the man who decided that Boston College should move to the “magnificent site on Commonwealth Avenue towards Brighton.”

# An Unfading Quest

In this concise and highly readable work, Thomas O'Connor tells the extraordinary story of Boston College. He takes us back to the beginnings of this institution as a small “streetcar” college in the South End of Boston, founded to educate the children of Irish immigrants, and he traces the transformation of Boston College into a major national university. Along the way, O'Connor candidly brings to light the University's achievements and struggles in the face of religious bigotry in its early days and financial near-ruin at more than one critical turn. And, he chronicles Boston College's unfading quest to achieve the highest standards of academic excellence in both teaching and research. Finally, O'Connor writes about the fresh challenges Boston College has now taken upon itself—to become the preeminent center of liberal arts learning in the United States and the leading Catholic university in the world.

*Ascending the Heights* is the inspiring story of Boston College, written with an eye to the celebratory year of 2013—the centennial of the University's arrival in Chestnut Hill and the sesquicentennial of what is now a thriving international Jesuit center of learning. A perfect graduation gift, a *vade mecum* for a first-year student, or a refresher for the Golden Eagle.

William B. Neenan, SJ,

Vice President and Special Assistant to the President, Boston College.



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