

# Founding fathers (Preview): Six Boston College presidents, and the university they built ; profiles from Boston College Magazine

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# Founding Fathers

SIX BOSTON COLLEGE PRESIDENTS,  
AND THE UNIVERSITY THEY BUILT



Profiles from *Boston College Magazine*

With an Introduction by President William P. Leahy, SJ

Edited by Ben Birnbaum

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SIX BOSTON COLLEGE PRESIDENTS,  
AND THE UNIVERSITY THEY BUILT

*Profiles from Boston College Magazine*

BEN BIRNBAUM, EDITOR

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Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts

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## PREFACE

# Paper Trails

THE SIX CHAPTERS OF THIS BOOK ARE DRAWN FROM a series of profiles that appeared in *Boston College Magazine* between 1991 and 2007. (We're including Boston College's founder John McElroy, SJ, in our president's category. Though commonly and correctly called "founder," as the profile in this book reveals, McElroy did—at the request of his superiors—submit himself to the burden of Boston College's presidency for the hours necessary to enable the passage and signing of a state charter for the school in April 1863.)

Of the 25 men (26 with McElroy) who have held the title of Boston College president, why these six?

For one thing, as our subtitle makes explicit, each of them reshaped Boston College—whether by moving it from the cramped South End to the fields of Chestnut Hill (Thomas I. Gasson), or from near bankruptcy to resolute solvency (J. Donald Monan). For another reason—and no doubt related to the first—these six men left paper records that were sufficiently robust that their work and selves could be reconstructed by our writers.

Paper records, as it happens, turn out to be a rather rare presidential legacy at Boston College, particularly through the University's first 100 years, during which no president left more than six linear inches of paper for the archives, and five left less than an

inch. During that period, of course, all decision makers at Boston College were Jesuit fathers, and the chief of them, to whom they all owed obedience, was the rector-president, and all lived in close proximity in their Boston residence or later in St. Mary's Hall in Chestnut Hill. And so a few words exchanged in a corridor or over scrambled eggs could serve credibly and efficiently in place of memoranda of understanding, task force reports, and the limpid essays of consultants.

But also working against paper accumulation, I suspect, was the nature of the presidential appointment from the founding until the 1960s, during which a rector-president held his appointment for three years with possible renewal for a second term *only*. (This rule was maintained with some flexibility, based on the needs of the college. Robert Fulton, for example, served 13 years as president—during two non-contiguous terms—while another Jesuit, who merely argued to extend his tenure by a third three-year term was for his trouble dispatched to the missions in Jamaica.)

A January 7, 1907 story in the *Boston Herald* offers the only pre-War eyewitness account we have of a presidential succession and suggests why the presidential archives at Boston College are not a rich trove for historians. The headline reads: "Change in Rector: New Head is Named for Boston College."

The unsigned story goes on to relate that on the previous evening, at the one dinner table at which the entire Jesuit community was seated, Rector William Gannon, SJ, opened an envelope and "read to his associates the message just received from the provincial... announcing the appointment of [Gannon's] successor, and his transfer to another field of duty." (He was sent to New York to be an editor.) The moment, it turned out, was consequential, for his successor was the remarkable Thomas Gasson. The process, however, was anything but portentous. The *Herald* continued: "Immediately, [Gannon] relinquished his seat at the head of the table, exchanging it for that of Rev. Father Gasson." Succession on this occasion, took a matter of minutes.

## *Preface*

The writer then noted, for the sake of any poorly informed readers: “Like all such changes among the Jesuits, it came unexpectedly and without previous notice to the principals who are affected by it. Such changes, however, are but incidents in the life of any Jesuit priest or teacher.”

The virtual guarantee of a brief tenure, then, as well the uncertainty that they’d even be allowed to stay on in any capacity after resigning a presidency, likely kept rector-presidents from spending a great deal of time dreaming of the legacy that would be ascribed them by succeeding generations, and spared them a related amount of time that they might have given over to accumulating, copying, and preserving the paper evidence they’d need to support posterity’s elevated views. Instead, one might imagine, they just worked.

Ben Birnbaum  
Editor



## INTRODUCTION

# The Challenges of Leadership

*by William P. Leahy, SJ*

WHEN I CONSIDER THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AT a Jesuit Catholic university, I think first of the function a leader plays in helping people to connect with one another. This is no simple task, and it has never been easy even within the group of men known as the Jesuits. Going back to 1558, *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* spoke of the “wide dispersion” of Jesuits involved in various highly specialized works all over the world, and the need, therefore, to strive constantly for “unity of purpose and direction.”

In the modern university, fostering community is a particularly challenging task because scholars often lead solitary lives of writing and research, and are further separated from one another by departmental obligations and by the demanding responsibilities of teaching and advising.

In this complex context, a university leader must offer a vision of unified purpose, one that can be appreciated by all members of the community, whether senior faculty or students or alumni, and within which they can see themselves. Without access to such a vision, a community stagnates, its members becoming disheartened. As written in the “Book of Proverbs,” “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

I do not have a formula for creating a fresh and compel-

ling institutional vision, but I do believe that its development is only possible when other conditions are in place. First, I would say, a leader must be in dialogue with the tradition that gave birth to the institution and shaped its development. In the case of Boston College, this means engaging with the Catholic Church, with the Catholic intellectual tradition, and with the life and writings of St. Ignatius as well as documents of the religious order he founded.

A second responsibility for leaders is to know the contemporary institution, to be in daily conversation with the diverse collection of ideas and people that represent its history, mission, strengths, weaknesses, hopes, and potential. At Boston College, for example, those ideas will include liberal arts education and the formation of the complete student; and the people will include alumni, senior faculty, and young freshmen who are in their first days of living in view of Gasson Tower.

Leadership, however, can itself be isolating, and while in my first year as president of Boston College, acting on the advice of one of our trustees, I put together a small group of discussion partners with whom I could talk honestly about issues facing the University. I always confer with these four or five people before making a major decision. Not all of them are high-ranking administrators, and only one is a Jesuit, but they are all closely connected to the world of Boston College, and they are all honest. Sometimes their ideas have caused me to change my mind; at other times they have confirmed my intuitions.

Mentors, too, are important for leaders. I think of Jesuit leaders I have known over the decades: men such as Francis “Frank” Brennan and the late Jerome J. Marchetti, both of whom held executive positions at St. Louis University—Fr. Brennan, as dean of the Graduate School there from 1972–74, and Fr. Marchetti, as that University’s executive vice president for nearly three decades until 1985. They are models of thoughtful leadership for me. They had ideas, drive, tenacity, and energy—and they offered vision. But I also think of my peers, the 75 men with whom I trained as a

## *Introduction*

Jesuit novice and with whom I developed strong bonds. As much as mentors, peers have a decisive role in creating leaders, because they can affirm and strengthen us, or widen and stretch us.

In higher education today, I often see leaders, and those who want to become leaders, trapped by two fears. One is the fear of not being universally liked, and the other is the fear of failing, both of which rob people of an important freedom, the ability to make decisions and act on them. Being disliked is, of course, unpleasant for any human being, but it is a natural consequence of making decisions, which is what a leader does. Few decisions will please everyone, and the higher a person's place in a university, the more consequential for other lives those decisions become. As for failure, I know it well enough, and it's not all it's cracked up to be, as I often tell people. But to be human is to be wrong sometimes, and to be a mature human being is to learn what you can from failure, and move on.

Just as important as these inner qualities, however, are strength and resilience. For me, for example, prayer and discernment are indispensable to my ability to serve. In reflecting on the days and hours past, in seeking to understand how God is working in my life, and in choosing ways to collaborate with God's plan better, I find sustenance.

LEADERSHIP AT ITS MOST PROFOUND IS A FORM OF ministry, a form of service personified by the six "Founding Fathers" profiled in this book—Jesuit presidents who appeared at pivotal moments in the history of Boston College and helped build and rebuild the University. John McElroy was not an academic, but he was a leader who overcame difficult barriers to establishing a college for the children of Irish immigrants; John Bapst was a man of great zeal who suffered persecution and stayed the course; Robert Fulton understood the world of ideas and fostered an academic culture at the young college; Thomas Gasson showed extraordinary vision in moving Boston College to Chestnut Hill, and he withstood a formidable archbishop who had a truncated vision

## *Founding Fathers*

of what Boston College should be; Michael Walsh understood that Boston College could become a great research university and paved the way for turning this vision into reality; and Donald Monan, my predecessor whose presidential tenure extended 24 years, was the prime architect of Boston College's remarkable revival and growth following some difficult years.

Through their lived ministry of higher education, all six developed persuasive visions—each appropriate for its time—that brought together culture, faith, intellect, and an ever-growing community of men and women who drew sustenance from the vision these leaders offered. For their example, and for what they saw and what they built, all of us associated with Boston College today owe them much.

*William P. Leahy, SJ, has been president of Boston College since 1996.*





*John McElroy, SJ*

## CHAPTER I

# This Old Man

*by James O'Toole*

THE MAN WAS OLD. THAT WAS SO OBVIOUS that it was easy to overlook. When he first got the idea for what became the major accomplishment of his life—the creation of Boston College—he was already 65; his most intensive work on the project didn't begin until he was 73, and he was 81 before the whole business was successfully concluded. If he had never undertaken to establish a school for the sons of Boston's Irish Catholic immigrants, he would still have lived a full life. It was a teacher's life and a pastor's life. John McElroy, SJ, was born near the town of Enniskillen in County Fermanagh, Ireland, on May 14, 1782, just as the American Revolution was concluding. By the time he died in 1877, more than a decade after the Civil War, he had been for many years the oldest priest in the United States and the oldest Jesuit in the world.

Fermanagh was in the ulster province of Ireland, a border place where Catholics and Protestants claimed nearly equal numbers and sectarian tensions were sometimes high. McElroy's father was a farmer who managed to wring enough from the soil to send two sons across the Atlantic in search of a better life. Just after his 21st birthday, John followed his brother to America, settling in Washington, D.C.,

finding work in stores and on the docks there, and coming to know the Jesuits at their small college at Georgetown. Apparently impressed by these men, he felt the call to religious life himself, and was received by the order in the fall of 1806, at age 24. Centuries of tradition in Europe prescribed an extended and reflective preparation for Jesuits, but in America the process was usually more rough and ready. Years later, on the 50th anniversary of his joining the order, McElroy recalled sardonically that “I was promised time to study...but as yet it has not arrived.” Instead, the young novice was given a range of duties, including “assistant cook, gardener, prefect, [and] teacher of writing, arithc., etc.” to students at Georgetown. Expected as part of his formation to meditate daily on *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola and other devotional texts, he found that he often had to do this “the best I could in going to market.” McElroy originally intended to serve only as a lay brother of the Society, but his superiors identified him as a candidate for the priesthood. After an unusually short preparation—less than two years to study Latin—he was ordained in 1817.

Jesuit colleges in this country in those days were not the institutions of higher education we would recognize. They combined features of elementary and secondary schools with a few years of collegiate study. Parents who sent their children to them wanted mastery of the basics, not advanced learning. McElroy spent his first years as a priest at Georgetown teaching the lower grades, the boys affectionately known at all Jesuit schools as “the brats,” before accepting reassignment in 1822 to St. John’s Church in Frederick, Maryland, a small town 50 miles northwest of Washington. The Society had served this parish for many years and, in addition to his duties as pastor, McElroy was charged with opening schools. He set to the task energetically. First came a free school for girls, staffed by Sisters of the Visitation (who also ran a school for young ladies near Georgetown University), followed by an orphanage and the rather grandly named St. John’s Literary Institute, an academy for boys. The institute “aims

chiefly at a classical education, without losing sight of the English and Mathematical departments,” McElroy wrote in an early prospectus. Entrance requirements were generously defined—the ability to read and “a good moral character” were the only demands—and parents were expected to make a one-time \$50 tuition payment up front and to remit \$3 per year “for fuel, ink, and servants’ wages.” Not wanting to exclude anyone, McElroy proved a forgiving administrator, deciding that boys would be admitted even if their parents could afford only the annual fee. Students from out of town had to arrange for their own lodging, but there were several boarding houses nearby, and McElroy saw to it that within them a curfew and other rules were obeyed. “Strict attention is paid to religious instruction,” he noted, “as also to religious observances, both essential to form the moral character of youth.”

St. John’s Literary Institute was a modest success during McElroy’s tenure, and he would probably have been content to pass the remainder of his career in the little world that was Frederick. In the mid-1840s, however, he was given an unusual new assignment. War had broken out between the United States and Mexico over the disputed territory of Texas, and troops were headed south to conduct what a cynical observer called “a short, offhand killing affair.” Advocates of annexing Texas pointed to alleged atrocities against American settlers there, while opponents thought the conflict a shameless land grab designed to increase the power of slaveholding states in the Congress. For the U.S. government, the controversial war was also tricky on religious grounds. To many, who cited recent examples of anti-Catholic nativism, it had the feel of an unprovoked “Protestant crusade” against an overwhelmingly Catholic country. At the same time, nearly a quarter of U.S. fighting forces were Irish immigrants, and the prospect of U.S. Catholics fighting Mexican Catholics was troubling. President James Polk, eager to cover his political flanks, hit on the idea of assigning Catholic priests to accompany the troops. The consolations of religion aside, their presence might reassure the Mexican

government and its citizenry that this was not a war against their faith. After consulting several Catholic bishops, Polk informally designated McElroy and Anthony Rey, SJ, as chaplains—he didn't really have the legal authority to appoint them—to the U.S. Army in Mexico.

McElroy apparently had private doubts about the conflict, writing a friend at the time that he hoped international mediation would forestall "the horrors inseparable from war." When the appointment came, however, he obeyed his Jesuit superiors and, at age 64, left for Mexico, arriving with Rey at Matamoros on July 5, 1846. Rey, 40, was a French priest who had come to America a few years before and taught philosophy at Georgetown. The two were readily accepted by the army's commanders, and were almost immediately invited to dine with General Zachary Taylor, whose emerging status as the hero of the war would propel him into the White House two years later, in spite of (or perhaps because of) his proud declaration that he had no political opinions whatsoever. McElroy was decidedly underwhelmed by the future president, finding him "plain, slow of speech, and more like a farmer than a Genl.," a common assessment of Taylor. Even so, "he received us with a great deal of cordiality," the priest said, "welcomed us to the army, and hoped our mission would be very beneficial." For the better part of the next year, Rey marched with the troops across the countryside, eventually losing his life in a skirmish, while McElroy remained behind at the base camp and hospital in Matamoros, tending the sick and saying Mass.

With the war's end, McElroy returned home to await new duties. At first, there was some thought of making him a bishop. In earlier years, he had periodically directed weeklong spiritual retreats for priests from various dioceses, which earned him a nationwide reputation. Benedict Flaget, the aging bishop of Louisville, Kentucky, expressed a preference for McElroy as his successor, saying of him, "I know of no clergyman who would under existing circumstances suit us as well. [Kentucky's priests] hold

him in sincere veneration since he once preached to them.” Instead, in October 1847 McElroy was sent to Boston to serve as pastor of St. Mary’s parish in the North End, responsibility for which had just been given to the Jesuits by the city’s Catholic bishop, John Fitzpatrick.

At St. Mary’s, there was more than enough to keep him and one other priest busy. The parish was the largest and perhaps the most active in Boston, with close to 900 baptisms and almost 300 marriages a year. But McElroy began to think of other projects too. After the drama of the Mexican War, he may have been a little bored with routine parish work, and his earlier experience in Maryland disposed him in particular to think about a school for boys. In the notes for an undated speech, which he probably delivered several times, he wrote, “Our youth must be preserved in their faith, well grounded in the principles of their religion and trained up in the practice of it. To this, a liberal, scientific education must be added to qualify them to act their part creditably in that sphere in which, by Divine Providence, they are to walk.”

Bishop Fitzpatrick encouraged him, writing to McElroy’s provincial in Maryland (the Jesuits’ Maryland Province had jurisdiction over activities in New England at the time) that “our ultimate plan is to have a College in the City.” All three men were heartened by the progress of the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, opened by the Jesuits just a few years before. But Holy Cross was a residential school, and its tuition of \$150 per year might as well have been a million dollars to most of Boston’s immigrant families. A less expensive day college, close to the city’s growing Catholic population, was needed. “In Boston we have at least 3,000 Cath. boys,” McElroy informed his superior in Maryland, “and as much as I know there is not one of them at H.C.”

Plans for “our college in Boston” were delayed, however, by the more pressing needs of the city’s new poor. Immigrants were flooding into Boston as never before, fleeing famine in Ireland in staggering numbers: Some 66,000 Irish entered the country

through the city's port in 1846, the year before McElroy's arrival, for example, as compared with barely 500 in 1836. The plan for a college was "too large a one to be executed all at once," Fitzpatrick conceded. "Situated as we are, and limited in our resources, we can only make small beginnings."

Then, in 1853, McElroy saw his opening. Boston was in the midst of a decades-long development boom as land in the South End, Back Bay, and elsewhere was steadily reclaimed from the sea. New properties were coming on and off the market, and new buildings were going up everywhere. He found a tract for sale close to downtown on Causeway and Leverett Streets, a spot later occupied by the Boston Garden. The area was known as the "jail lands," because the city jail had once stood there. McElroy made a down payment of \$13,000, arranging a mortgage for the remaining \$46,000, but the property came with complicated zoning restrictions. Whoever bought the land was supposed to put up several private homes and stores, and those projects would have to be reviewed by the city council before the sale could be finalized. Two years of contentious negotiations ensued, fueled in part (McElroy and Fitzpatrick rightly thought) by anti-Catholic bigotry from nativist Know-Nothings, who were enjoying a brief political ascendancy in Massachusetts. In the end, the council "obstinately refused," in Bishop Fitzpatrick's words, to reconsider the zoning rules, not the last time town and gown would clash over use of the school's property. McElroy was 75 when his deposit was refunded.

McElroy soon identified a new site in the city's South End. There, an entire city block fronting Harrison Avenue was on the market, and city officials—the Know-Nothings having been swept from office in the most recent election—endorsed the \$50,000 sale. The delay actually proved beneficial. The money for purchasing land had been earning interest, and some important new gifts had come in, including a bequest of \$3,000 and the beginnings of a library from the scion of an old New England family, Joseph Coolidge Shaw, who had converted to Catholicism and become a

Jesuit before dying of tuberculosis at age 30. Even more important was the support offered by Andrew Carney, whom McElroy described as “a respectable gentleman very friendly to me.” Carney, an immigrant from Ireland, was Boston’s first significant Catholic philanthropist, having made a fortune in the tailoring business and then in real estate. He not only committed \$5,000, but he also promised to pay all the construction expenses and, according to McElroy, “give us time to refund him when able to do so.” Taking advantage of these offers as soon as possible was critical. “The liberal benefactor who has offered so generously is now advanced in years,” McElroy observed (understandably attuned to that circumstance), and work had to begin right away, lest “some accident” cancel out Carney’s generosity. Ground was broken in the spring of 1858, with Bishop Fitzpatrick and Fr. McElroy sinking the first shovels and digging out a shallow hole in the moist South End dirt in the shape of a cross. Within two years, a college building and the adjacent, Jesuit-staffed Church of the Immaculate Conception were completed; this would be the school’s home until its move to Chestnut Hill in 1913. Reflecting on his early difficulties with city officials, McElroy gloated over the school and the name he chose for it, enjoying “our pious revenge for all the trouble Boston has given us to help embellish their city and erect for them Boston College!”

McElroy had no doubt that his classrooms would soon be full. He noted that the Sisters of Notre Dame had recently opened a school for girls that attracted nearly a hundred pupils, in spite of its high tuition (\$10 per quarter). “I am sure parents will be more disposed to send boys to college than they are to send their girls to a pay school,” he wrote with a condescension common at the time, partly “in hopes of their having a vocation for the holy ministry.” In this, he was overoptimistic, at least at first. When classes finally began in the fall of 1864, just 22 boys showed up—“only one or two had talent,” a fellow Jesuit complained—although by the end of the year the number had doubled and would increase steadily thereafter.

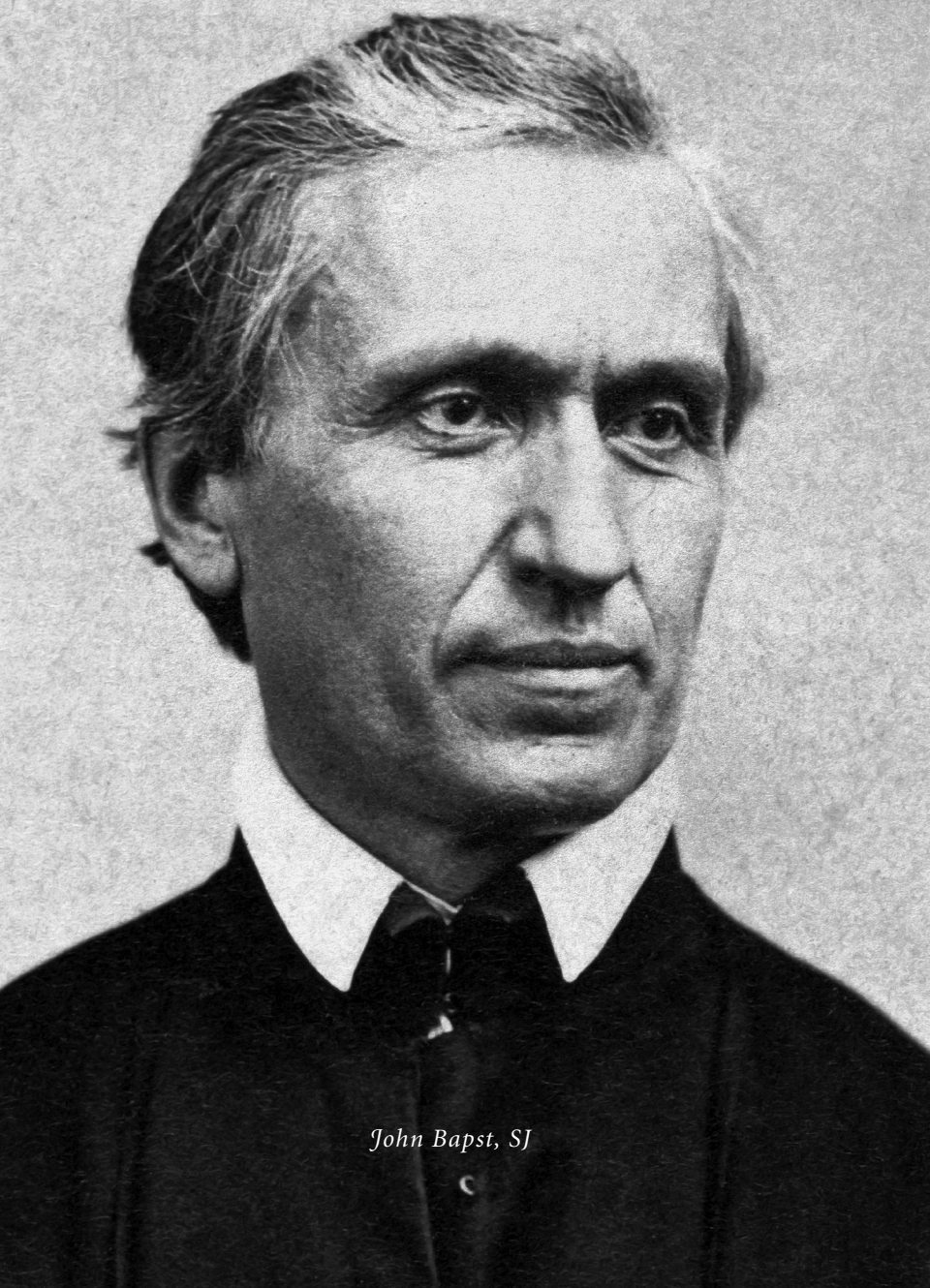
THOUGH MCELROY SAW THE PROJECT THROUGH to birth, he would not linger to watch it mature. Had he been younger, he might have guided its first years, but he was already in his eighties, and it seemed best to turn management over to younger Jesuits. Before doing so, however, he became the school's first president. Historical accounts of Boston College generally identify his confrere, John Bapst, SJ, as the first to hold that office, but doing so slights McElroy. In 1863, a year before classes began, the final legal work was being done to obtain a charter from the state to grant degrees. Matters were proceeding smoothly enough, but in the midst of drawing up the papers, a new benefactor—a woman whose identity comes down to us today only as “Mrs. Noonan”—offered a gift of \$8,000. To take advantage of this windfall, the school's corporation had to be formed right away, and Jesuit officials in Maryland did not hesitate. The provincial, confident of unquestioned obedience from members of the Society, wrote a hasty letter to McElroy. As soon as the governor signed the school's charter, he said, “hold a meeting with the incorporators mentioned in the charter and tell them in my name to elect you President.” They could meet again after that to choose the permanent officers. Within four days of the governor's action, McElroy reported that these orders had been obeyed: “I am elected the first Presdt. of Boston College.” Later that summer of 1863, the trustees met again to elect Bapst, and McElroy handed over the office with a simple, “*Deo Gratias!*” He asked for two or three months off, “to recruit my spirits, not the body, which does not require it.”

In retirement, McElroy traveled the country giving retreats and performing other pastoral duties, before eventually returning to Frederick, Maryland. His eyesight gradually failed, and this finally slowed him down. “I am unable to travel without a guide,” he told a visitor, “and that would be making two do the work of one. I have often known one to do the work of two, or even three”—he was referring to himself—“but I think the reversal of the rule would be unprofitable.”

McElroy was a man of his times, with what today would pass for crotchety, even bigoted, opinions: He attributed the turmoil between factions in a Catholic Philadelphia parish during the 1820s, for example, to the influence of “many Quakers and some Jews.” He also indulged in occasional self-reinvention, recounting stories about himself that got better with each retelling. Just off the boat in 1803, he claimed, he had met President Thomas Jefferson “several times,” a highly unlikely possibility.

The old Jesuit remained an imposing figure to his death, which came in Frederick on September 12, 1877, at age 95. A newspaper reporter who interviewed him in his last years was impressed to find that “his face was full, his complexion ruddy, the grasp of his hand firm and decided, and his figure, when relieved from the natural inclination which the use of a cane gave to it, was upright and steady.”

History not only denied McElroy his rightful place as Boston College’s first president, but seems also to have taken him for granted in other ways. No building on the campus would be dedicated to McElroy until 1961; there would be no McElroy prize or student society; his name has been associated only with the lowest category of alumni annual giving. This might not have displeased him. He was a man of energy but not personal ambition. He gladly relinquished all his worldly possessions when he entered the Jesuits, an unimpressive list: “sundry articles of wearing apparel not necessary to describe in particular; ...watch + chain, razor, razor strop, and shaving box; ...a few pictures of different saints.” His real gift, to posterity, was more enduring.



*John Bapst, SJ*



*Robert Fulton, SJ*



*Thomas I. Gasson, SJ*



*Michael P. Walsh, SJ*



*J. Donald Monan, SJ*

#### FROM THE INTRODUCTION BY WILLIAM P. LEAHY, SJ


Leadership at its most profound is a form of ministry, a form of service personified by the six “Founding Fathers” profiled in this book. John McElroy was not an academic, but he was a leader who overcame difficult barriers to establishing a college for the children of Irish immigrants; John Bapst was a man of great zeal who suffered persecution and stayed the course; Robert Fulton understood the world of ideas and fostered an academic culture at the young college; Thomas Gasson showed extraordinary vision in moving Boston College to Chestnut Hill; Michael Walsh understood that Boston College could become a great research university; and J. Donald Monan was the prime architect of Boston College’s remarkable revival and growth. For their example, and for what they saw and what they built, all of us associated with Boston College today owe them much.

#### ABOUT THE EDITOR

Ben Birnbaum is editor of *Boston College Magazine* and executive director of the University’s Office of Marketing Communications. He is the editor of *Take Heart: Catholic Writers on Hope in Our Time* (Crossroad, 2007), and an essayist whose work has been anthologized in *Best American Essays*, *Best Spiritual Writing*, and *Best Catholic Writing*.

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