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Jesuit Colleges and the Civil War

By Robert Emmett Curran

The restoration of the Society of Jesus in the United States marked the emergence of a continental Jesuit educational empire during the antebellum period. In 1805, shortly after five ex-Jesuits received permission from Rome to join up with the Jesuits' Russian province, which had evaded the suppression of 1773, Bp. John Carroll turned over Georgetown College for the revived Society to operate. Over the five decades after 1808, 15 Jesuit colleges were established. Jesuits began or took over eight colleges from 1843 to 1853. At the beginning of the Civil War, Jesuits conducted 14 colleges from Massachusetts to California.

These colleges were predominately preparatory schools for students ages 6 to 16. The overwhelming majority of the students at the largest Jesuit college, Xavier in Manhattan, were in the lower department. In 1860 Spring Hill College, with an enrollment surpassing 230, graduated two students. For the 1860-61 academic year, collegians made up less than ten percent of those enrolled at St. Ignatius in San Francisco. Almost all of these colleges offered either the traditional classical course or the commercial course that afforded students the opportunity for practical education.

Seven of the 14 schools had boarders as well as day students.

Georgetown, St. Louis, Xavier, among others, had heavy enrollment from the South. Even at Holy Cross and Fordham in the Northeast, southerners accounted for a fifth of the enrollment. A majority of these southerners were non-Catholic. Non-Catholics typically accounted for at least a third of the student body.

War's Impact

The closer a Jesuit college was to a theater of the Civil War, the greater it felt the war's impact. But whether a school found itself in the path of conflicting armies, as St. Joseph's, Bardstown, did in the late summer of 1862, or thousands of miles removed from the fighting, the war brought fundamental change to all the colleges.

At the outbreak of the war the superior general of the Society of Jesus, Peter Beckx, issued an order to Jesuit authorities in the United States to make sure that none of their subjects would say anything publicly about the conflict and its issues. To understand this gag policy one must appreciate the sense of being under siege that Jesuits had so acutely had under the pressure of anti-Catholic and nativistic forces over the past generation that had spawned bloody riots, church burnings, tarring and feathering of Jesuits, and assaults on the civil rights of Catholics and immigrants. Behind the policy imposing silence was a primal fear that civil war would somehow untap raw emotions, launching a new "Protestant Crusade" that would especially take aim at the Society of Jesus as the chief culprit for the nation's woes.

The gag policy worked among the Jesuit faculty everywhere except at Spring Hill, Alabama, where they were open and enthusiastic Confederates. Controlling the speech and

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emotions of the students proved to be another matter. At Georgetown student passions about the issues tearing the nation apart long preceded the actual outbreak of war. In December 1859, just days after John Brown's hanging had brought to a head the outrage North and South experienced over the slave insurrection that Brown had attempted, the debating society at Georgetown chose the topic: "Should the South now secede?" That topic proved so provocative that the debate extended over the next two weeks, with the affirmative prevailing. A free-for-all broke out, which the faculty quelled. As the Confederacy took shape in the Deep South and war loomed, students from that region headed home, culminating with the mass departure of the southern college seniors in April 1861. Student interest in the war was closely related to how immediate the war's impact was on the campus. In Baltimore, Loyola students organized drill companies in April 1861 in the immediate aftermath of the bloody clash less than a mile away between Union troops and Confederate sympathizers. The prosecessionist student militia was forming as part of the effort to defend Baltimore against any further attempts to transport troops from the North to subdue the rebelling states. Their drilling incited a counterattack from Loyola students committed to the Union. In the border city of Cincinnati, students at St. Xavier formed militia units, some of which likely responded to the governor's call for volunteers to defend the city from the Confederate armies sweeping through Kentucky in September 1862. At Fordham, life went on "as though there was no war," the students oblivious of alumni like Robert Shaw and James R. O'Beirne, whose heroic action would win the former iconic fame and the latter the Medal of Honor.

By one measure the Jesuit colleges equally shared in the war: that of providing chaplains for the Union and Confederate forces. Of the 54 identified Catholic Chaplains for the Federal armies, at least nine were Jesuits from their colleges. Jesuits comprised a fifth of the known Catholic chaplains that served the forces of the Confederacy. Fr. Joseph O'Hagan of Holy Cross and Georgetown was with the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula Campaign to Appomattox and witnessed some of the most brutal fighting of the eastern theater at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg.

The War Comes to Campus

Being in the nation's capital, Georgetown became the first Jesuit campus to be "militarized" in the wake of civil conflict. In early May, the 1400-man New York 69th Regiment took over most of the college buildings and grounds. During their three-week stay, President Lincoln as well as members of his cabinet reviewed the troops on campus. In August the following year, the government once more appropriated most of the college's buildings for 500 wounded from the Second Battle of Manassas. Hundreds of them converted to Catholicism, including virtually all of the more than 100 who

died. Georgetown continued to function as a military hospital for the remainder of the year.

Across the country colleges adapted to serve wartime needs. For the medical department at Georgetown, the war proved a huge boon for enrollment. As the only medical school in the capital, it became the major training center for surgeons and other medical personnel for the Union army. For some colleges, necessity rather than opportunity prevailed. At St. Joseph's, Bardstown, government officials appropriated the vacant college buildings for a military hospital.

When both sides introduced a draft in 1862 to raise troops, very few students in Jesuit colleges were affected since the vast majority were under the age of 18. Jesuits themselves, particularly scholastics and coadjutor brothers, were subject to it. The drafting of Jesuit scholastics and priests led Jesuits John Early (Baltimore) and Peter De Smet (St. Louis) to use their connections with Secretary of War Edwin Stanton to secure exemptions for religious drafted in the Union army. Jesuits in the Confederacy were also subject to the draft that the Confederate Congress had enacted but eventually were also exempted.

Survival, Inflation, and Shrinking Enrollments

Student enlistments for both sides significantly reduced enrollment in most Jesuit colleges. For Spring Hill, the occupation of New Orleans by the Federal Army in the spring of 1862 cut off its principal market for both students and provisions. St. Joseph's of Bardstown, whose boarders were overwhelmingly from the Deep South, lost most of its out-of-staters when the war came. The greatly reduced enrollment and the near impossibility of collecting the fees of the students from the Deep South led to a financial crisis which caused classes to be suspended. It marked the end of St. Joseph's as a Jesuit institution.

Dependent as it so deeply was on a southern constituency, Georgetown felt the war's impact at the beginning of school in the fall of 1861, when only 50 students enrolled, a sixth of the number on the books the previous year. Salvation for Georgetown's enrollment crisis came from a very local source: the District of Columbia, whose population had more than doubled since the war's start. By 1864, district residents accounted for over half of the college's student body, many of them the sons of artisans or businessmen and the children of those in government service.

Galloping inflation forced substantial increases in tuition and other fees. Georgetown hiked tuition by 70 percent, even as financial aid was cut. Holy Cross had to impose increases of similar scale. The rise in tuition at Santa Clara brought about a class shift in its student body, as the sons of the wealthy replaced those of the middle class. Bp. Joseph Alemany lamented that "very, very few of my Catholic people" could now afford Santa Clara. To provide an accessible



An engraving of St. Joseph's, Bardstown. Image courtesy of the Missouri Province.

alternative, the bishop in 1863 founded Saint Mary's College in San Francisco. Remarkably, by war's end, the number of Jesuit colleges was the same as in 1861, with the opening of classes at Boston College in 1863 offsetting the closing of St. Joseph's, Bardstown.

Assassination and Consequences of the War

On the evening of April 9, 1865, the college building at Holy Cross was aglow with candles illuminating its many windows. Lee had surrendered in Virginia just hours before; the war was over. There were no such illuminations at Georgetown, Bardstown, or St. Louis, to our knowledge. For most of the Jesuits and students at these institutions in the "middle ground," the end of the Confederacy brought at best relief and resignation, not joy and celebration. Six days later, and three days since thousands of federal forces had occupied his campus, the president of Spring Hill College entered the study hall to inform the students that President Lincoln had been assassinated by John Wilkes Booth. He tried to impress upon them what a despicable murder this was as well as the danger they would court with the federal soldiers throughout campus should they betray any sympathy with the assassin. Three Georgetown alumni were eventually implicated in the assassination, including David Herold, Booth's accomplice in his abortive attempt to escape into Virginia, and Dr. Samuel Mudd, who treated Booth after he broke his ankle fleeing Ford's Theater. Herold was one of the four conspirators executed. Mudd received a life sentence.

For some Jesuit colleges in the aftermath of the war, the loss of their traditional southern market forced a new concen-

tration on prospects near at hand. Xavier of Cincinnati had success when it discontinued boarding just before the war. St. Louis found it increasingly necessary to replace the heavily Protestant students from the Deep South with Catholics from its metropolitan area. Three factors were at play here: the increasing availability of institutions of higher education in the South, the post-Appomattox poverty that consumed the vast majority of planters and professionals who had traditionally sent their sons north, and the growth of a Catholic middle class in greater St. Louis. The pauperization of so many of the Catholic planting families that had been the bulwark of Spring Hill outside of Mobile, compounded by the smallpox and yellow fever epidemics that struck the region in the late 1860s and the general instability that characterized Reconstruction, led to a sharp drop in enrollment from a peak of 300 in early 1865 to less than half that number by the end of the decade.

Michael David Cohen (*Reconstructing the Campus: Higher Education and the American Civil War*) found that the Civil War created the forces that have shaped modern higher education in America. The Morrill Land-Grant College Act set the standards that have increasingly defined American higher education as having a diverse student population and a curriculum that privileges vocational preparation and military training. There is a symbiotic relationship between state and school in which the latter assumes a growing role in the public arena. For most Jesuit colleges outside the formal public sphere, the war produced the opposite effects. Their students became increasingly homogeneous; classical education reigned supreme; and they became much less involved with government and the larger society – islands unto themselves, isolated from the social and educational mainstreams. ■