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An Historical Moment: Saint Louis University: 200th Anniversary of Saint Louis University

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AN HISTORICAL MOMENT



Left: The first building constructed by the Jesuits in 1829 to house Saint Louis College

Below: Saint Louis University downtown campus, 1890.

Inset: Peter Verhaegen, S.J., the college's first president.

All photos courtesy of Saint Louis University Libraries Digital Collections.

Saint Louis University

200th Anniversary of Saint Louis University

By Amelia Blanton Hibner



Founding

In 1818, on the banks of the Mississippi River, Bishop Louis DuBourg founded Saint Louis Academy. After it expanded to a college in 1820, DuBourg realized the college was more than he could manage and appealed to the Belgian Jesuits at Georgetown College for assistance. In 1823, twelve Jesuits made the treacherous



journey to St. Louis and took control of the college three years later.

Under the leadership of the college's first president, 29-year-old Fr. Peter Verhaegen, S.J., the college began its history of "firsts." In 1832 it changed its name to Saint Louis University and received its formal charter from Missouri, making it the first university west of the Mississippi. It followed

with two more firsts west of the mighty river, opening medical and law schools in 1836 and 1843.

Race Relations

Though not often remembered, six Jesuit-owned slaves traveled west with the Jesuits from Baltimore in 1823 and worked on a farm in Florissant, Missouri. These same slaves, or others hired, likely contributed to the construction of the college's new building in 1826. Sadly, the



Left: Philosophy students with Tom Sherman, S.J., circa 1880s.

Middle: Students lining up to register, 1951.

Bottom: A woman accepting her graduation award, 1956.

Jesuits in St. Louis continued their history with slavery, purchasing a slave as late as 1862 before Missouri abolished slavery in 1865.

The university's history with race took a turn in 1944, when Fr. Claude Heithaus, S.J., delivered a sermon where he lambasted SLU for its failure to racially integrate and called upon students and university officials to act. While it resulted in his banishment from Saint Louis, the sermon also moved the university to admit its first five students of color, making Saint Louis the first university in any of the former slave states to establish an official policy of integration.

Challenges over race were brought to the forefront of the university's consciousness with the recent occupation of campus by student protestors in 2014. These protests were eerily similar to the 1969 occupation of an office by the Association of Black Collegians, which resulted in a list of ten demands from the students. The peaceful occupation in 2014 resulted in a thirteen-point agreement between the protestors and the university that commit SLU to enhance diversity, equity, and inclusion.



Beyond the Society

As the university expanded, it wrestled with the equally expanding roles of women and lay people. In 1908 the university admitted five women to the Law School, marking the beginning of women's history at SLU as students. In

1929 the university conferred its first PhD, in physics, to a woman, Mother Marie Kernaghan, R.S.C.J. However, it wasn't until Fr. Paul Reinert, S.J., became president in 1949 that women and men were allowed to sit side-by-side in class.

Fr. Reinert's vision for expansion continued with the establishment of a lay board of trustees in 1967, the first of its kind at any Catholic

college or university in the United States. When the new board met for the first time, ten Jesuits, nine Catholic laymen, and nine men of other faiths were in the room. In 2014, the university celebrated another milestone with the inauguration of its first lay president, Dr. Fred P. Pestello. Under his leadership the university has seen new strategic and master building plans.

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