“It will require a miracle to give us a college at St. Louis”

1818-1832

The origins of Saint Louis University are profoundly contingent. In 1810, the mostly French-speaking inhabitants of a village on the Mississippi River had somehow staved off an attack by English settlers and Native tribes. Just over three decades later, largely due to personal danger, a bishop chose to relocate from New Orleans to that village: St. Louis. He celebrated his first Mass there on Epiphany in 1818, and a few months later, as a banking crisis was engulfing the United States, established an “Academy for young Gentlemen.” Bishop Louis V. Dufourg rented rooms for this school in a house on Church Street, and a few years later he managed to recruit a small band of Jesuit novices to teach in Missouri and teach Indian boys at another school he planned to start in the region, which closed after seven years. In 1829, Dufourg took actions that he thought had resulted in the closing of his original College. Or so it seemed to him at the time.

The uncertainty of Saint Louis University’s early years is not so unusual, not all of the schools, seminaries, and missions attempted by religious orders in North America survived. In the case of St. Louis, one of Dufourg’s unlikely schemes became a reality. To some extent without clear approval from their superiors, the Missouri Jesuits took over Dufourg’s failing, downtown St. Louis College and carried it forward to a state charter in 1832—the first university in the American West. The novice recruits went on to become central figures in SLU history.
"ESTABLISHING A COLLEGE ON THE SPOT"

It takes a certain audacity to declare that a few classes in rented rooms constitute an "Academy for young Gentlemen." This was especially true in the unsettled months leading up to the Panic of 1839. Yet, on October 23, 1818, an advertisement in the Missouri Gazette made this claim.

Under the heading "Education," readers learned that classes in Latin, English, and French languages, as well as Arithmetic, the Elements of Mathematics and Geography, would be offered in a house on Church Street for $12 per quarter. This announcement marks the humble origins of Saint Louis University. Careful attention to pedagogy is evident in the reference to "the ability of the pupil and the intention of the parents." This phrase anticipates the debate which was still occurring a century later: whether school curricula should be adapted to student needs.

There is no mention of the method of teaching, for it was understood that this was the responsibility of the teachers. This tone is balanced with an awareness of the limits in the local environment. Students must "read at least tolerably well."

With this advertisement, the highly persuasive, peripatetic and visionary Bishop Louis V. Daulbourg quietly set in motion a new era in St. Louis, at that time a muddy, bustling settlement.

First classes were held on November 16, taught by three diocesan priests under the direction of Father François Niel, of France. One of the Jesuit Fathers in the area, these classes were held in a small house on the corner of Main and Chestnut Streets. The building was later occupied by the Jesuits and became part of the old Jesuit College, which later became part of Saint Louis University.

The building was small, with just enough space for a few desks and chairs. The students were instructed to bring their own books and materials. The classes were held in the evenings to accommodate the working schedule of the students.

In 1821, the school was reorganized as Saint Louis College, and it moved to rented rooms in a two-story brick building on the corner of Main and Chestnut Streets. The building was later occupied by the Jesuits and became part of the old Jesuit College, which later became part of Saint Louis University.

The college was initially small, with just a few students and a handful of teachers. However, it quickly grew in size and importance, and by the 1830s, it had become a major institution in the city. The construction of the new cathedral was also a major undertaking, and the college was involved in the planning and construction of the new building.

The college was initially supported by the diocese, but it later became a separate entity, with its own board of trustees. The college remained in rented rooms for many years, and it wasn't until the 1850s that the college was able to purchase a permanent building on the corner of College and De Soto Streets.

The college continued to grow and expand, and by the end of the 19th century, it had become one of the major universities in the country. The college was also involved in the development of the city, and it played a major role in the growth of the city's cultural and educational institutions.