Yesterday...

Loretto's St. Mary's Academy has welcomed Colorado students for 150 years. The doors opened Aug. 1, 1864, and they have remained open to educate and graduate many thousands of children from all religious, ethnic and economic backgrounds. The school year 2014-2015 is an entire year of celebrations and events to mark this milestone. From yesterday to today and tomorrow, St. Mary's Academy prepares young people for life in a changing, challenging world.

A. 1864: "The White House," a two-story framed home on the corner of 14th and California Streets in downtown Denver, served as convent and school. The school opened with 20 boarders and a number of day students. *Photo: St. Mary's Academy Archives.*

B. 1881: After several stages of construction, St. Mary's Academy was an imposing building taking up nearly the entire block. By the mid-1880s, there were 100 boarders and 125 day students. *Photo: The Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, #F-27533.*

C. 1891: Loretto Heights Academy was built to accommodate the boarders of St. Mary's Academy. The campus evolved into Loretto Heights College. *Photo: Loretto Heights College Photographic Materials, Archives and Special Collections, Regis University.*

D. 1911: St. Mary's Academy built a new facility at 1370 Pennsylvania Street at the encouragement of their neighbor Margaret "Molly" Brown. *Photo: St. Mary's Academy Collection. Ph. 00364 (Scan #10030254), History Colorado, Denver, Colo.*

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E. 1951-Present: Thriving at 4545 So. University Blvd, Cherry Hills Village, a Denver suburb. *Photo: Scott Dressel-Martin.*

Today...

St. Mary's Academy is still building, thriving, striving for excellence in its 150th year

By Regina Drey SL

"Through insightful leadership and community support, today's students enjoy robust learning environments and look forward to beginning the 2015–16 school year with a new community center, currently under construction."

– Regina Drey SL

Amid tearful farewells and prayers for a safe journey, three travelers left Santa Fe, N.M., on June 22, 1864, for a five-day journey by mail coach that would change dusty Denver City forever. Sisters of Loretto Joanna Walsh, Ignatia Mora and Beatriz Maes-Torres would make history at a time when education was taking hold and Catholic Sisters were an anomaly in the Colorado Territory. They would found St. Mary's Academy, which has continuously educated Denver students for 150 years.

The arrival of the mail coach at the Sisters' Santa Fe convent brought Father Joseph P. Machebeuf's dream of establishing a Catholic school in Colorado Territory one step closer to reality. In 1860, Machebeuf had left Santa Fe to head the Catholic Church in the Colorado and Utah Territories. He and his fellow Frenchman, Father Jean B. Raverdy, traveled to Denver City to establish St. Mary's Church. Located at 15th and Stout Streets, the church was a precursor to Father Machebeuf's efforts to establish schools.

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Aerial photo: Altitude Filmworks.
Photo at left: Scott Dressel-Martin.

...and Tomorrow...

St. Mary's Academy students take the playing field to form giant numbers marking their school's 150th anniversary. The Academy, located in the Denver suburb of Cherry Hills Village, offers one of the most striking vistas of any school along the Front Range corridor.

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Very young marching band of St. Mary's Academy students, circa 1938. Photo: St. Mary's Collection. Ph. 00364 (Scan #10026210), History Colorado, Denver, Colo.

Father Machebeuf invited the Sisters of Loretto to help start a school in Denver. The Sisters, whose order was founded on the Kentucky frontier in 1812, inspired him, and he believed they reflected the kind of resilience and courage the city needed at that time. Their tenacity and bravery were familiar to him — he knew of their work in starting Our Lady of Light Academy in Santa Fe in 1852, and in 1858 he had accompanied four newly assigned teaching Sisters on the hazardous route from Kentucky to Santa Fe. As it happened, in that group he made the acquaintance of Sister Joanna Walsh, who six years later would be one of the founders of St. Mary's Academy in Denver.

On that June morning in 1864, Sister Joanna, along with Sisters Ignatia and Beatriz, left for Denver with their few possessions packed in a single trunk. Santa Fe was a beloved home for the New Mexico natives Sisters Ignatia and Beatriz, and Joanna had spent the last nine years there teaching at Our Lady of Light Academy. None of the Sisters had any experience in the "wilds" of Colorado, and their sad departure was the beginning of a tough five-day trip marked by hot days in the cramped mail coach pulled by mules.

The Sisters arrived in Denver on June 27, 1864, representing the first order of Catholic Sisters to come to Colorado. The women moved into the former residence of George W. Clayton, which William H. Jones, writing in *The History of Catholic Education in the State of Colorado*, describes as the largest dwelling in the territory at the time. Purchased by Father Machebeuf for $4,000, the two-story frame house with a picket fence was located on the edge of town on the south side of California Street between E and F Streets (today's 14th and 15th), and facing the sweeping prairie. The Sisters assumed the debt on the house, and two months into living there, Sister Joanna wrote of the "tremendous weight on our shoulders, never before having owed a cent to anyone."

Known to the townspeople as the "Sisters' School" and to the Sisters as "the White House," the home served as convent, boarding student residence, and day school (*p. 11, photo A*). An advertisement in the *Rocky Mountain News* in 1864 announced a "healthy and pleasant" location and a comprehensive academic curriculum enhanced by piano or guitar, French or Spanish, and drawing, painting, embroidery, and other fancy work. Tuition for day students was $3 per month for primary grades and $4 for the upper grades. Boarding students paid $120 per term. Under the "mild and efficient care of the Sisters of Loretto," St. Mary's Academy, like other Loretto schools, welcomed students of all faiths.

St. Mary's Academy opened on August 1, 1864, 12 years to the day before Colorado became the 38th state. And its first educational milestone came in 1875. Eleven years after it opened, St. Mary's Academy awarded the Colorado Territory's first diploma — high school or college — to Jessie Forshee on June 27. Some time after graduation Jessie joined the Sisters of Loretto, taking the name Sister Vitalis. She earned advanced degrees, helped establish a teachers' college for Sisters, served as dean at Webster College in St. Louis, and taught nearly every academic subject. In later years, her colleagues sometimes referred to her as a "walking encyclopedia."

Almost from the beginning, the school needed classrooms, music rooms, reception areas, and other spaces to keep pace with the expansive academic program. Initially, small structures and additions to the White House met the school's needs. In 1880, however, building projects begun after the fire in 1867 culminated in an impressive building designed by J. C. Casper, described by the *Rocky Mountain News* on Jan. 1, 1881:

> *The building is of brick but its front is gorgeously and artistically trimmed with white stone, being surmounted by a slated French roof and galvanized sheet iron cornice of very tasty design, and a belfry high above. ... The building will be heated by steam. Its ventilation is said to be almost perfect. The arrangement of the whole is such that the three buildings are in easy communication as though they were in reality but one.*

The building and surrounding grounds covered a large portion of the land between 14th and 15th Streets (*p. 11, photo B*).

The school's growth in the 1880s paralleled the city's prosperity. By 1884, an enrollment of 100 boarders and 125 day students prompted the school's leadership to consider building a separate suburban campus for boarding students and maintaining the downtown location as a select day school. In July that year, the *Rocky Mountain News* reported the Sisters of Loretto "have been feeling the need of larger facilities for work and of a boarding school more free from the dangerous features which always associate themselves with the center of a large city." The article further cited initial negotiations for land in Villa Park, deemed by the writer as a beautiful suburb and favorable site.

Four years later the Sisters chose to locate the new campus at Sheridan Heights, seven miles southwest of Denver, with views of Fort Logan. The new campus would make its own history as Loretto Heights Academy and, a few years later, the well-regarded Loretto Heights College (*p. 11, photo C*).

The 45-acre Loretto Heights Academy campus, with commanding views of the Rocky Mountains, opened in 1891. In the months before construction, Sisters and students would picnic at the site, traveling from downtown Denver on a new branch of the railroad that stopped a short walk from the future school. When seeking a more leisurely pace, they went by carriage to Sheridan Heights, which the school newspaper rated as the finest carriage drive in the vicinity.

Recess at the Pennsylvania Street campus in 1936. Photo: St. Mary's Academy Collection. Ph. 00364 (Scan #10042945), History Colorado, Denver, Colo.

Architect Frank E. Edbrooke designed the boarding school's red sandstone building, with its imposing 10-story tower visible from many spots in Denver. Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the campus is now home to Colorado Heights University. Reminders of Loretto's presence on this land can be found today in the Sisters of Loretto cemetery, tucked away on the northwest corner of the campus (*see related story, p. 20*).

The progress of St. Mary's Academy and Loretto Heights Academy — like development throughout Colorado — was significantly curtailed with the devaluation of silver in 1893, and the Sisters of Loretto feared the possibility of defaulting on loans due on the new boarding school. The community's leadership skillfully negotiated with bankers, and slowly both schools flourished again.

Central to the success of both institutions was Sister Pancratia Bonfils, a native of St. Louis and first cousin of Frederick G. Bonfils, founder and longtime editor and publisher of *The Denver Post*. Joining Loretto at age 13, her first teaching assignment two years later brought her to St. Mary's Academy. Her leadership shaped Loretto Heights Academy, and in 1918 her dream of a college for young women was realized with the opening of Loretto Heights College. She took on the title of Mother when she assumed leadership roles in the school and convent.

Buying property and directing the construction of buildings were well-honed skills by the time Mother Pancratia led the school to a new campus on Capitol Hill. Over the years, the first wood-frame building once on the edge of Denver City had evolved into a stately building with beautiful grounds. The school was now part of an ever-growing, bustling downtown. The Sisters, however, desired a location more conducive to learning. With St. Mary's Academy seeking a home, Mother Pancratia's friend Margaret Brown suggested the empty lot at 1370 Pennsylvania St., next door to her home. She also contributed financially to the project.
The year before the school opened in September 1911, letters flew back and forth among architects, contractors, building inspectors, and Loretto leaders discussing construction, safety features and aesthetics. They slowly made decisions about bricks, moulding, Tiffany-style lamps and the installation of more than 1,900 square feet of Venetian

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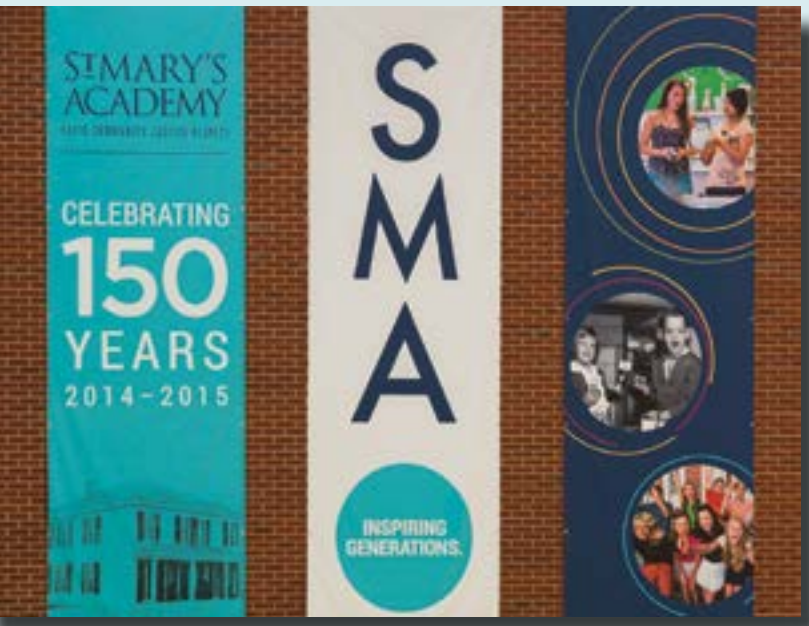
. . . the dream goes on!

blinds. With student safety a priority, the addition of metal stairs, fireproof doors in classrooms, and fire doors in halls and corridors proved valuable assets when a fire in 1916 caused only minimal damage (*p. 11, photo D*).

The four-story, Neoclassical red-brick building with a shady backyard offered what the quiet school leaders had been looking for. Spacious classrooms, well-equipped science and art labs, and attractive architectural features graced the building. On an upper floor was a museum with 400 mineral and numerous botanical specimens donated by the University of Colorado at Boulder. In the outdoor space, students built a stone grotto to house a statue of Mary given to the school by the mother of a student who died in her junior year. The statue now graces the Circle Drive on the current campus.

Students enjoy a fall afternoon on campus. Photo: Scott Dressel-Martin.



Three large banners easily seen from the street publicize St. Mary's Academy 150th anniversary. Photo: Regina Drey SL.

The move to University Boulevard, like earlier relocations, enabled the school to grow. The school building in Capitol Hill was sold to the F. W. Woolworth Co. in 1951 for regional offices, and after years as office space for businesses and professional organizations, it eventually became home to the Intermountain Divisional Headquarters of the Salvation Army.

In choosing the next site for St. Mary's Academy, several areas in Denver were serious contenders. But first choice was Lorena and Allan Ramsey Hickerson's property in Cherry Hills Village, with a large home that could immediately serve as a school and residence for the Sisters. The estate's 10 acres were a good start toward the 24-acre campus of today. Longview — as the family called the property — was surrounded by open land and exquisite views, including the tower of Loretto Heights College to the northwest, a reminder of the school's early days. The move from Pennsylvania Street to South University Boulevard took place in the summer of 1951 (*p. 11, photo E*).

A year after moving to University Boulevard, a new classroom building housed the entire school and a vision for the future was taking shape. Through insightful leadership and community support, today's students enjoy robust learning environments and look forward to beginning the 2015–16 school year with a new community center, currently under construction.

Through all the years, the moves, the growth, and the challenges, generations of children have attended and graduated from St. Mary's Academy. What started as a dream of a few people in the nascent city of Denver is today a thriving, vibrant school community. What was once a small, two-story "White House" is today five buildings on 24 acres of land south of the original downtown campus. A school that started with only a handful of pupils today includes more than 600 students. On August 1, 1864, St. Mary's Academy opened as a school for the children of Denver — 150 years later, the dream continues.