

Spring 2001

Postcards from the Past: Mount Saint Vincent

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Recommended Citation

(2001) "Postcards from the Past: Mount Saint Vincent," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol22/iss1/5>

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Postcards from the Past

ESSAY

BY

REGINA BECHTLE, S.C.

- Mount Saint Vincent, Riverdale, New York -

Beginnings

Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton (1774-1821) founded the Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph's in 1809 in Emmitsburg, Maryland. In 1817 she sent three Sisters to New York, her native city, to manage an orphanage at Prince and Mott Streets. By 1846 over sixty Sisters of Charity were serving in eight New York missions, including orphanages, free schools and "select schools" (or academies) for girls.

In December of 1846 approximately half of the Sisters serving in New York formed an independent congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul, of New York. The community elected Sister Elizabeth Boyle (1788-1861), friend and former assistant to Mother Seton and veteran of the New York missions since 1822, as its first leader. The Ordinary of New York (then Bishop John Hughes) became the sisters' ecclesiastical superior. Except for that change, they kept the same rule as that according to which Elizabeth Seton and her companions had first professed their vows in 1813. It was the rule originally developed for the French Daughters of Charity by Saints Vincent de Paul and Louise de Marillac in the seventeenth century, and later adapted to the American situation by Elizabeth Seton and the Sulpician John Dubois.

In 1847 the new community bought six acres of property at McGown's Pass, near Fifth Avenue and what is now 107th Street in Manhattan. The sisters intended to build a motherhouse and novitiate and open a boarding school for girls, the Academy of Mount Saint Vincent, to help support the works of the community. As Procuratrix from 1846 to 1849, Sister Mary Jerome Ely (1810-1885) had charge of overseeing construction. Elected to succeed Elizabeth Boyle as Mother, she saw the Mount's new home come to near-completion in her first two terms, 1849-1855.

By 1854, two wings were added to the original building (a dilapidated frame house formerly used as a tavern), a stone house was built, and the property landscaped. A third building, a crown jewel of brick



Saint Vincent Point, once the site of a boat landing and bathhouses, juts into the Hudson River beyond the railroad tracks. The railroad station and bridge across the tracks is no longer in use.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

that would include the first chapel in the archdiocese dedicated to the Immaculate Conception, was under construction. At this time the congregation numbered over 160 sisters, and more than 200 students attended the academy.

Shortly before the Chapel was blessed on 19 March 1855, the community was informed by the city of New York that the plans of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux for a new "Central Park" included the Mount Saint Vincent property. After less than ten years in the place they had labored mightily to make their home, the sisters had to pick up, move on, and begin again.

The Central Park buildings stood empty from 1859 to 1862 when city officials suggested that they be used as a hospital for Civil War wounded. For three years, twelve Sisters of Charity administered Saint Joseph's Military Hospital and nursed hundreds of patients in their old motherhouse.

In 1995, Sister Irene Fugazy, S.C., the congregation's director of special projects on Saint Elizabeth Seton, arranged for a plaque to be installed on a rock at the spot in Central Park still known as McGown's Pass. The plaque commemorates the site of the first Motherhouse and academy.

Fonthill

Sister Mary Angela Hughes, the Archbishop's sister, was elected Mother of the Sisters of Charity of New York at the close of 1855. She had attended Saint Joseph's Academy, Emmitsburg, entered the novitiate in 1825, and chose to remain in New York during the separation of 1846. With mission experience in education, health care, and childcare in Frederick, Cincinnati, Saint Louis, Utica, and New York City, she was well suited for the immediate and daunting task of finding a new home for the community.

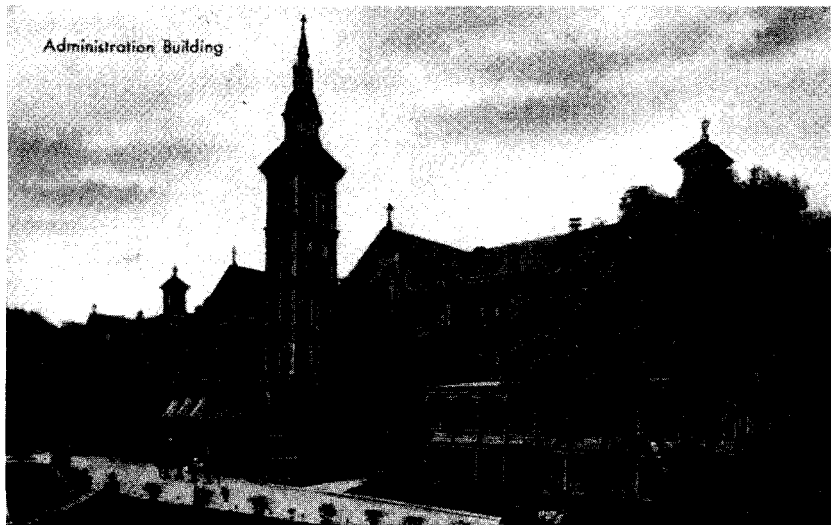
The search that began in April 1856, soon ended when Mother Angela and her companions were shown a striking, fifty-five acre estate just south of Yonkers in the Riverdale section of the Bronx. Fonthill was the home of Shakespearean actor Edwin Forrest (1806-1872), popular with New York's working class theatergoers and rival of the English actor William Charles Macready.

Forrest had bought the property at a foreclosure sale for less than \$8,000 in 1847. On it he began to build a castle made of granite quarried in the neighborhood. One tradition holds that Forrest based his design on Lismore Castle, Irish country home of the Duke of Devonshire. Another version states that the castle was named after William Beckford's Fonthill Abbey in England. Described as "a superb example of the Romantic movement in architecture," the Norman Gothic Castle boasts six massed towers of varying heights, with a commanding view of the river.

The actor's castle, completed in 1852, never became his home. He came to suspect that his wife, Catherine Sinclair, was unfaithful and divorced her. In 1856, when the sisters came looking, Forrest's asking price for the property was a formidable \$100,000, which he agreed to discount by 5% for them. Also on the estate were the superintendent's stone cottage in Gothic revival style (later known as the Villa), and several barns, of which the present Elizabeth Boyle Hall, home of the Sisters of Charity Archives, is one.

The sisters, who were supervising construction of the new Mount Saint Vincent, moved into Fonthill Castle 2 February 1857. The small Carrara marble statue of Our Lady, that Mother Angela placed on one of the mantels, is preserved in the congregation's Archives.

The Castle was later used as the chaplain's residence and the college library. Today, it houses administrative offices and the college's Office of Admission.



The Administration Building included the Sisters of Charity Motherhouse (left) and the Academy and College of Mount Saint Vincent (right). In the niches flanking the bell tower are statues of Saint Joseph and Saint Vincent de Paul. Administration Building. College of Mount Saint Vincent on Hudson, New York, N.Y. Postmarked 18 September 1945. Printed by Eagle Post Card View Company, New York. *Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois*

Administration Building

Construction began 1 May 1857 on a motherhouse and academy overlooking the Hudson River. In the summer of 1859 sisters and students moved from McGown's Pass to their new Riverdale home almost ten miles north.

The tower bell, weighing over a ton, rang out for the first time in September 1859. That December the new Chapel of the Immaculate Conception, on the second floor of the Administration Building, was dedicated. For a renovation in 1874, Constantino Brumidi, artist of the Capitol Building in Washington, D.C., painted a dramatic fresco of the Crucifixion over the Chapel altar. Marble side altars and a Roosevelt organ, still in use today, were also added.

In May 1878 in the South Hall (1865) of the building, Thomas Edison demonstrated his telephone, phonograph, and electric pen to delighted academy students. Since a 1992 refurbishing by the college Alumnae/i Association, South Hall has been known as Smith Hall, in honor of Sister Doris Smith, S.C., college president from 1973 to 1992.

Throughout the years, the building has seen several additions to the original Early Romanesque Revival style, including work done in 1865, 1883, 1906-08, and 1951. The first two matched New York archi-

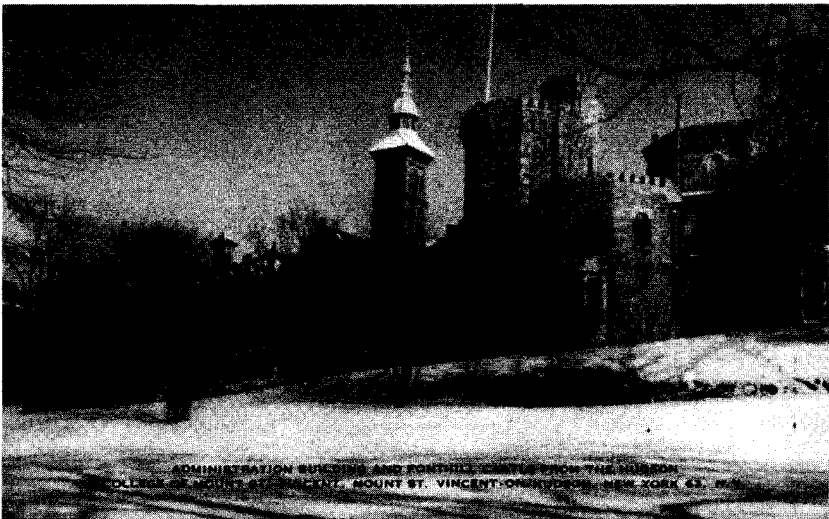
tect Henry Engelbert's original style. The early 1900s addition on the north side is more neo-Classical in style. The later 1951 wing at the far north end features neo-Federal elements.

The College of Mount Saint Vincent

At the request of then-Archbishop John Farley, the Sisters of Charity expanded the academy into an independent four-year liberal arts college in 1910, beginning with freshman and sophomore classes. It was the first women's college within New York City limits. The academy's charter was officially amended and in 1913 the College of Mount Saint Vincent conferred its first eight baccalaureate degrees.

Sister Mary Ambrose Dunphy served as the first dean. In 1956 Sister Catharine Marie O'Brien became the first Sister of Charity appointed as president of the college, replacing the Archbishops of New York who had held the position since Archbishop Farley.

In 1959 the Mount became the first Catholic women's college to be accredited by the American Chemical Society. The longest-running Cooperative Program in the nation began in 1964 with nearby Manhattan College, founded by the Christian Brothers. Ten years later the Mount enrolled its first male students. A Core Curriculum was insti-



The cross atop the castle was donated by Michael O'Connor, superintendent of the 1857 construction. Administration Building and Fonthill Castle from the Hudson. College of Mount St. Vincent, Mount St. Vincent-on-Hudson, New York, N.Y. Circa 1940's. Printed by Artvue Post Card Company, 225 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

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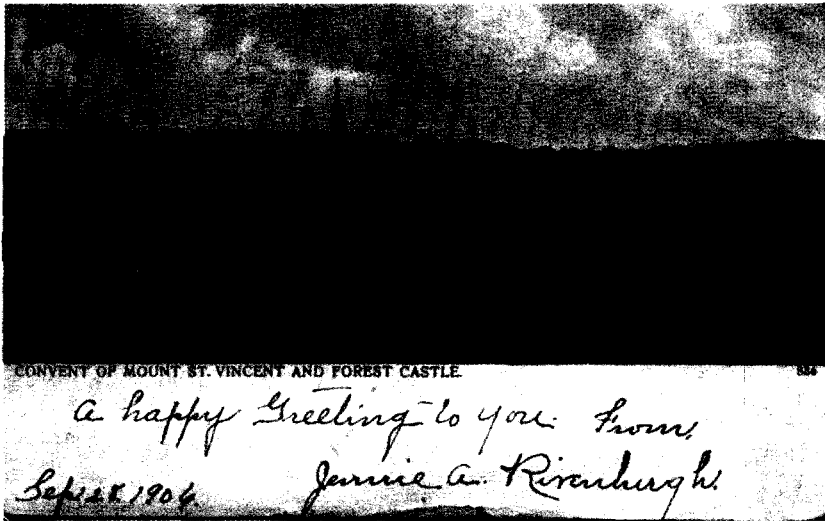
A statue of the Guardian Angel stands watch at the foot of the "Via Angelorum" near the Castle. West from Via Angelorum. College of Mount Saint Vincent, On-Hudson, New York City. Printed by The Albertype Company, Brooklyn, N.Y.
Vincentina Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

tuted in 1987 to support the college's commitment to a strong liberal arts education. A Master's program in nursing was first offered in 1988, soon followed by a Master's in urban multicultural education.

Over 1,500 students are currently enrolled in more than 25 programs on the Mount's seventy-acre campus, and at several other sites. Mount Saint Vincent proudly includes Corazon Aquino, former president of the Philippines, among its graduates.

In addition to the Administration Building and Fonthill Castle, current college buildings include:

- Maryvale, built as a laundry for the academy in 1859, now serves as the Business and Economics building.
- Four residence halls: Elizabeth Seton Hall (1911; renovated 2002), a six-story Italian Renaissance design; Cardinal Spellman Hall (1963); Alumnae Hall (1966). Another residence, Marillac Hall, was part of the adjoining Randolph estate purchased in 1920.
- Cardinal Hayes Auditorium and gym (1930) – Renamed the Grace Center after a 1990 renovation, it now includes a fitness center, dance studio and other athletic facilities.
- The Science Hall (1954).



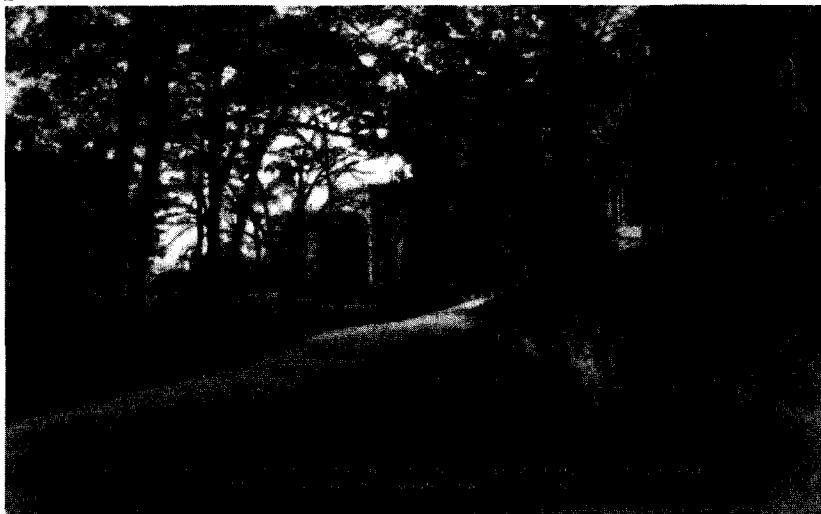
To its announcement of the academy's fall opening at its new location, the *Freeman's Journal* of July, 1859, announced: "Visitors can reach the Academy...by the river steamers, touching at Yonkers, by the Hudson River [railroad] cars, which will stop on the grounds, or by private conveyance on the turn-pike." The new railroad helped to boost the academy's enrollment. Convent of Mount St. Vincent and Forest Castle. Postmarked 29 September 1906. Printed by Bryant Union Publishing Company, New York.

Vincentiana Collection, DePaul University Special Collections, Chicago, Illinois

- The Elizabeth Seton Library (1968) – A statue of Saint Vincent de Paul with two contemporary students, sculpted by Sister Margaret Beaudette, S.C., stands at the entrance. It is modeled on the original located at DePaul University, Chicago. The Library is also the permanent home of an interactive, portable museum on Saint Elizabeth Seton produced by Sister Irene Fugazy, S.C.

The Sisters of Charity of New York

Until 1971 two strong and populous institutions, religious and academic, coexisted in the stately red brick Administration Building. The section north of the bell tower served as the Motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity, where numerous professed sisters, novices and postulants prayed, worked, studied, ate, and slept, and where official community business was conducted. Classrooms, offices and dormitories for the academy and later the college occupied the south half. In 1971 the college expanded into the north half of the building, although the 1951 addition, formerly the novitiate, became a residence for retired sisters.



Thomas Cornell, a civil engineer who showed the Forrest estate to the sisters in 1856, reminisced in 1893: "In place of the broad and easy carriage road by which we now descend the 'Via Angelorum'...., we then followed a steep wagon track running obliquely down the wooded hillside...." "Via Angelorum Looking West to the Hudson," *College of Mount St. Vincent*. Mount St. Vincent-on-Hudson, New York, N.Y. Dated 20 March 1947. Printed by Artvue Post Card Company, 225 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

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Other campus features notable in the congregation's history include:

- The superintendent's cottage, the Villa, built in vernacular Gothic revival style between 1847 and 1855. Now a sisters' residence, it housed a school for young boys from 1888 to 1911. Lionel Barrymore and Eugene O'Neill were two of its more illustrious alumni.
- The 1859 brick Gatehouse (now a sisters' residence).
- A hilltop cemetery, where many of the pioneer sisters and all of the Mothers General (now known as Presidents), are buried – Special markers indicate the graves of several sisters who nursed in the Civil War hospital at McGown's Pass.
- Lourdes Grotto (1873), erected in the goldfish pond of the original Forrest estate. Said to be the oldest outdoor grotto still in use in this country, it was described in *Long Day's Journey into Night* by playwright Eugene O'Neill.

- Le Gras Hall, built by the Sisters of Charity as Saint Vincent Free School in 1875 before the local parish was founded. It served as a parish school until 1911, and subsequently as a college auditorium, gym, cafeteria, library, and dormitory, and the congregation's juniorate. In 1971 it became the Sisters of Charity Center, housing the congregation's administrative offices.
- Rosary Hall (1906), built as a laundry, is now a sisters' residence and heating plant.

Several campus buildings have been given landmark designation by New York City, including Fonthill Castle, Elizabeth Boyle Hall, and the Villa.

For more information on the Sisters of Charity of New York, go to < www.scny.org >. For a current view of the college including a virtual walking tour of the campus, go to < www.mountsaintvincent.edu >.