

# WHY IS THERE NO JESUIT COLLEGE IN PITTSBURGH?

Michael T. Rizzi, Ed.D.

In 2019, the largest teaching order of priests within the Catholic Church, the Society of Jesus, withdrew from its last outpost in the greater Pittsburgh area. That year, the region's only Jesuit school, Wheeling Jesuit University, announced a major restructuring to save costs. Among other changes, it would eliminate some low-demand majors and refocus heavily on its business and healthcare degree programs. The Jesuits, who had helped to found the university in 1954 and who still maintained a small teaching presence on the West Virginia campus, were reportedly unhappy with this decision to de-emphasize philosophy, history, literature, and the humanities — all of which are central elements of a traditional Jesuit education.<sup>1</sup>

Almost two weeks after the university's announcement, the Jesuits decided to withdraw most their remaining priests from campus and end their affiliation with the school. Wheeling Jesuit University quickly renamed itself Wheeling University, and although it retains a Catholic affiliation through the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston, it is no longer a Jesuit institution.<sup>2</sup>

The departure of the Jesuits from Wheeling marks the end of a short and surprisingly weak connection between one of the Catholic Church's most influential religious orders and the Pittsburgh region. Despite its status as one of the largest and oldest Catholic dioceses in the United States, Pittsburgh itself has never been home to a Jesuit college or university. On the surface, this is very surprising. Most American cities with sizeable Catholic populations are home to a Jesuit college or at least a Jesuit high school. Even after the loss of Wheeling, there remain twenty-seven Jesuit colleges and universities in the United States, along with fifty-four Jesuit high schools and an ever-growing number of Jesuit middle schools (usually branded as "Nativity Schools" or "Christo Rey Schools") that focus on serving the inner-city poor.

Why was there never a Jesuit college in Western Pennsylvania? The Pittsburgh region is quite literally surrounded by Jesuit colleges, including two in the eastern half of the state: Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia and the University of Scranton. The Jesuits sponsor colleges and/or high schools in virtually every large industrial city between New York and Chicago, including Baltimore, Washington, Jersey City, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Toledo, Cincinnati, Detroit, and Indianapolis. With such an extensive geographic footprint, how could the famous order of teaching priests have overlooked Pittsburgh, located squarely at the heart of it all?



**St. Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits**

Source: Alfred Wesley Wishart, *A Short History of Monks and Monasteries* (Trenton: Albert Brandt, 1900), 263

In short, Pittsburgh never quite fit into the Jesuit map. Traditionally, different groups of Jesuits have claimed different regions of the United States for themselves, and Pittsburgh was always located in the "border zone" between these territories, perpetually on the fringes of what each group considered its primary zone of influence. Over the past two centuries, there have been three distinct groups of Jesuits — based in Maryland, Missouri, and Upstate New York — that conceivably could have opened a college in Pittsburgh, but all three decided to focus their ministry elsewhere.

To understand why and how this happened, it is important to understand how the Jesuits operate, and how they structure themselves. Founded in 1534 by St. Ignatius Loyola, a former soldier, the Society of Jesus is an all-male religious order principally focused on education and missionary work. Almost militaristically hierarchical in their command structure, the Jesuits organize their various ministries into "provinces," akin to dioceses. Each Jesuit province has responsibility for all Jesuit schools and activities within its geographic footprint, but can also send smaller groups of Jesuits outside the provincial boundaries. Those small excursions, sponsored by a province but not within it, are known as Jesuit "missions." As it grows in size and importance, a "mission" can be elevated to the status of a "province" in its own right.

Pittsburgh currently falls under the jurisdiction of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus, which covers most of the east coast including Pennsylvania and West Virginia. Hypothetically, if the Jesuits had ever opened a college in Pittsburgh, it most likely would have been through the efforts of the Maryland Province, so it is important to examine the Province's history to understand why it overlooked Pittsburgh for so long.

### Origins of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus

The Maryland Province is the oldest Jesuit Province in the United States, tracing its roots to the founding of the Maryland colony in 1634. That year, a trio of English Jesuits — Father Andrew White, Father John Gravenor, and Brother Thomas Gervase — accompanied the first Catholic settlers across the Atlantic. Father White presided over the first Catholic Mass in the thirteen colonies.<sup>3</sup>

In 1773, concerned about the Jesuits' outsized influence over the Church and over secular politics, the Vatican temporarily suppressed the Society of Jesus worldwide. This meant that the two dozen or so Jesuits working in Maryland around the time of the American Revolution were stripped of their identity and became diocesan priests. One of these ex-Jesuits, John Carroll, rose to become the first Catholic bishop of the United States and founded the country's first Catholic university — Georgetown — in 1789. Twenty-five years later, when the Vatican restored the Jesuit order worldwide, most of the remaining ex-Jesuits in Maryland rejoined the Society and assumed control of Georgetown, which has remained a Jesuit university ever since.

The Georgetown campus in Washington, DC became the headquarters of the Maryland Jesuits, who were elevated from the status of a "mission" to that of a "province" in 1833. Two years later, the Maryland Province leadership met to plan out future expansion, and identified four cities as potential candidates for new Jesuit colleges: New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Richmond.<sup>4</sup> Pittsburgh did not make the cut, but this was understandable because it was still a small frontier town. Moreover, the journey across the Alleghenies from Washington, DC was prohibitively grueling compared to the short, all-water trips to the other cities.

By that time, there was also a second group of Jesuits in the United States ministering on the American frontier. In 1823, a small band of Belgian Jesuit missionaries ventured west to what is today Missouri, where they accepted an offer to take control of five-year-old Saint Louis College (now Saint Louis University), the oldest college west of the Mississippi. St. Louis became the headquarters of a separate Midwestern branch of the Society of Jesus, and that mission was elevated to the status of a province in 1863.

### A Catholic College for Pittsburgh?

Meanwhile, the Diocese of Pittsburgh began operations in 1843, and its first bishop, Michael O'Connor, very quickly set out to establish a Catholic college for the city. At the time, it was relatively common for bishops on the American frontier to provide seed money for a new college and staff it for a few years with diocesan priests. Once the school was up and running, the hope was that it could be handed over to an established teaching order, such as the Jesuits or the Christian Brothers, who could devote their full-time attention to it. O'Connor made three attempts to open a Catholic boys college in Pittsburgh: first in 1844, second in 1848, and third sometime in the 1850s. All three schools failed after just a few years, in part because O'Connor could not find enough priests among his own diocesan clergy to staff them.<sup>5</sup> This was not unusual; approximately seventy percent of the Catholic colleges founded in the nineteenth century closed.<sup>6</sup>

There is no available evidence that O'Connor offered any of his three experimental colleges to the Jesuits. However, O'Connor held the Jesuits in high esteem, and in fact, he became a Jesuit himself. After resigning as bishop of Pittsburgh in 1860, he entered the Society of Jesus and eventually served on the faculty of Boston College.

If, hypothetically, O'Connor had invited the Georgetown Jesuits to come to Pittsburgh, they almost certainly would have declined the offer. During the 1840s and 1850s, the young Maryland Province was over-extended and was well behind on its original expansion plans. A former Georgetown president, Benedict Joseph Fenwick, was then serving as bishop of Boston and was badgering his colleagues to open a Jesuit college in his diocese. The result was the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, which opened in 1843 as the first Catholic college in New England. In 1851, the Maryland Jesuits followed through on their plans to open a college in Philadelphia (Saint Joseph's University) and a year later, did the same in Baltimore (Loyola University). They also faced an unexpected problem when Holy Cross caught fire in 1852, leaving that school's future in doubt.

Between the startup costs for the two new colleges and the rebuilding efforts in Massachusetts, the Maryland Province was accumulating significant debt and was pushing its teaching staff to the absolute limit. Even if they had been offered an opportunity to come to Pittsburgh at the time, the Maryland Jesuits would have been in no position to accept. To further illustrate this point, the Jesuits actually withdrew temporarily from their college in Philadelphia. In 1859, Father Felix Sopranis, a representative of the Jesuit superior general in Rome, came to the United States

to inspect the Jesuit colleges. He concluded that the Maryland Jesuits had taken on too many projects and ordered them to reduce their commitments by closing Saint Joseph's College, which would not reopen for thirty years.<sup>7</sup>

### Help from the Missouri Jesuits?

In theory, if the Maryland Jesuits were stretched too thin to open a college in Pittsburgh, they could have given permission for the Missouri Jesuits based out of St. Louis to do so. However, the Missouri Jesuits were facing challenges of their own. At the same time that Bishop O'Connor was attempting to build a Catholic college for Pittsburgh, other bishops across the Midwest were doing the same with varying degrees of success. In 1831, the first bishop of Cincinnati, Dominic Fenwick, opened a college that he named "the Athenaeum." Much like the Pittsburgh colleges, it struggled to fill its classes and suspended operations from 1838-1839. Fenwick's successor in Cincinnati, Bishop John Baptist Purcell, traveled to Rome in 1839, begging the Jesuit leaders to take the beleaguered school off his hands. That same year, Bishop Frederick Rese of Detroit made a similar request, inviting the Jesuits to establish a college in Michigan.<sup>8</sup>

A series of letters passed between Rome and St. Louis discussing the two offers. Ultimately, the Missouri Jesuits decided that they could only spare enough men to staff one additional college, and Rome decided to prioritize Cincinnati over Detroit. A small team of Jesuits from St. Louis arrived in Ohio in 1840 to take control of the Athenaeum, which they renamed St. Xavier College (known today as Xavier University). As a result of this decision, Detroit, like Pittsburgh, would go without a Catholic college for decades.<sup>9</sup>

As the nineteenth century progressed, the Missouri Jesuits radiated out from St. Louis to establish several new Midwestern colleges, including Loyola University in Chicago,



**St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia, established in 1851 — the oldest Jesuit college in Pennsylvania, c. 1927**

Source: St. Joseph's University Archives

Marquette University in Milwaukee, Creighton University in Omaha, Rockhurst University in Kansas City, and, finally accepting an offer they had turned down thirty years earlier, the University of Detroit in Michigan. However, they never ventured farther east than Detroit, keeping all of their colleges within a few-hundred-mile radius of their St. Louis headquarters.

Meanwhile, the Maryland Jesuits were focused almost entirely on the Boston-Washington Corridor. They opened Boston College in 1863 and resurrected Saint Joseph's College in Philadelphia in 1889. Unrelated to this expansion, a third group of Jesuits — this time from France — independently established a mission in the New York City area centered around the school known today as Fordham University. In 1879, the French mission in New York merged with the Maryland Province, which gave the Maryland Jesuits a significant academic portfolio. By the 1890s, they were operating nine different colleges and universities on the east coast, none of them farther west than the District of Columbia.

### Stuck in the Middle

Pittsburgh was caught in between these two epicenters of Jesuit activity in the nineteenth century. It was just far enough away from the hearts of both the Maryland and Missouri Provinces to fall outside of their strategic priorities. The Maryland Jesuits were busily trying to establish or

maintain a college in every big city from Boston to Washington, which consumed all of their resources. The Missouri Jesuits, meanwhile, focused on the Great Plains and naturally prioritized cities like Chicago and Milwaukee that were closer to home. Neither side was able to pay much attention to the border zone between their two territories, which included the rough triangle between Buffalo, Cleveland, and Pittsburgh.

How, then, did both Buffalo and Cleveland eventually become home to Jesuit colleges while Pittsburgh did not? The answer lies in another quirk of history.

### The Buffalo Jesuits: Pittsburgh's Best Hope

Beginning in the late 1860s, a fourth group of Jesuits began ministering in the northern United States. This branch consisted mainly of German refugees who were fleeing the persecutions of Otto von Bismarck's *Kulturkampf*, during which the newly united German government sought to stamp out Catholic influence and unify the country under Protestantism. Several dozen Jesuits were forced to flee Germany during this time, and they found a convenient home in Buffalo, which had a large German-speaking population. This ragtag group in western New York organized itself as a formal "mission" of the Society of Jesus and established Canisius College as its primary ministry in 1880.

Of course, many northern cities, including Pittsburgh, also had large numbers of German immigrants. So why did the Jesuit refugees choose to settle in Buffalo? It was mainly a matter of convenience, because their French Jesuit colleagues in New York had already established a small parish ministry there. Since the 1850s, the French Jesuits had operated two parishes in Buffalo, St. Michael and St. Ann, which they willingly handed over to the German refugees. Buffalo, unlike Pittsburgh, therefore had two ready-made churches and rectories capable of housing the homeless Jesuits.<sup>10</sup>

The Buffalo Mission was an awkward addition to the American Jesuit map. It was kept separate from the Maryland and Missouri Provinces mainly for cultural reasons, not geographic ones. Its primary objective was ministry to German immigrants, and its assigned territory mainly included the area around Lake Erie. As part of their outreach to other German-speaking communities in the Midwest, the Buffalo Jesuits eventually branched out to open St. Ignatius

College (now John Carroll University) in Cleveland in 1886. They opened a third college on the lakeshore, the now-defunct St. John's University in Toledo, in 1898.

If any group of Jesuits had the potential to open a college in Pittsburgh during this time, it would have been the Buffalo Mission. Pittsburgh's significant German population, particularly in neighborhoods like Troy Hill and Sharpsburg, would have provided ample ministry opportunities for the refugee priests. Pittsburgh was also located just 200 miles from Buffalo, even closer than the distant outpost at Toledo.

However, the Buffalo Jesuits never ventured south into Pennsylvania for two reasons. First, Pennsylvania was still under the Maryland Province's jurisdiction. This by itself would not have been a deal-breaker, since the Buffalo Jesuits simply could have sought permission of the Maryland Jesuits before opening a college in their territory. Second, and more importantly, the Jesuits were not the only German refugee priests coming to the United States at the time. Another religious order simply beat them to Pittsburgh.

### Duquesne University

Almost concurrently with the Jesuits' arrival in Buffalo, another group of German priests, the Spiritans, were also fleeing Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* and seeking a new ministry in the United States. Although the Spiritans were a much smaller and younger order than the Jesuits, they had a respectable tradition as educators in Europe. The Spiritans settled mainly among the German immigrants in Pitts-



**Spiritans on the faculty of Pittsburgh College of the Holy Ghost (Duquesne University), 1888**

Source: Duquesne University Archives

burgh, and in 1878, they accepted the invitation of Bishop Michael Domenec to open a Catholic college in the city. The result was Duquesne University, the only Spiritan university in the United States. With a Catholic college already operating in Pittsburgh, the Buffalo Jesuits naturally looked, instead, to Cleveland when they expanded in 1886.

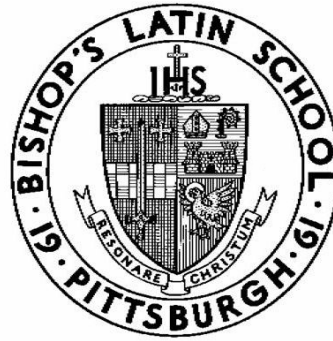
In the long term, it was probably in Pittsburgh's best interests that the Spiritans, rather than the Buffalo Jesuits, opened the city's first successful Catholic college. As time went on and immigrants began to assimilate, the German character of the Buffalo Mission began to wane and it became less clear why the mission should even exist. In 1907, the Buffalo Mission was dissolved and its assets were divided among the other Jesuit provinces. Canisius College, being in upstate New York, went to the merged Maryland-New York Province, while St. Ignatius College (John Carroll University) in Cleveland along with all other Midwestern ministries went to the Missouri Province.

As the relative newcomers, both Canisius and John Carroll were relatively low priorities in their respective networks during the twentieth century. The Maryland-New York Jesuits were focused heavily on meeting the needs of their growing research universities like Georgetown and Fordham, so they never developed Canisius into much more than an undergraduate liberal arts school. The same happened in Cleveland. The Missouri Jesuits already had their hands full maintaining large universities like Loyola and Detroit, so they never developed a law school, medical school, or any other professional programs (apart from business) at John Carroll University. In Toledo, the Missouri Province actually closed St. John's University in 1936.

By contrast, as the one and only Spiritan university in the country, Duquesne benefitted from the undivided attention of its founding religious order. It added graduate and professional programs in law, pharmacy, nursing, education, music, and other fields, and by 1911 it elevated itself to university status, briefly making it the only Catholic university between Washington, DC and South Bend, Indiana.<sup>11</sup> Today, Duquesne enrolls nearly 10,000 students while John Carroll University enrolls fewer than 4,000. If the Buffalo Jesuits had ever opened a college in Pittsburgh, it likely would have developed along the same modest lines as the one in Cleveland and would not have become the powerful economic force for the Pittsburgh region that Duquesne is today.

### Epilogue: Wheeling Jesuit University and the Bishop's Latin School

Although Pittsburgh itself never had a Jesuit college, it did briefly have a Jesuit presence. In the baby boom that followed World War II, there was a tremendous increase in



**Bishop's Latin School Seal**

Source: Diocese of Pittsburgh Archives

demand for education, and circumstances were finally right for the Maryland Jesuits to expand into the Pittsburgh area. In 1946 the Maryland-New York Province split in two, with Pennsylvania remaining under the authority of the Maryland Province and most of New York and New Jersey spinning off into a separate New York

Province. The new, smaller Maryland Province suddenly had less territory to cover, and Pittsburgh was the most logical place for it to expand.

Because there were already plenty of Catholic colleges in the Diocese of Pittsburgh (including one large Catholic university), the city itself was not a promising location. But West Virginia, whose population was peaking in the 1950s and which lacked any Catholic colleges at all, seemed to have much more potential. In 1951, Bishop John Swint of the Diocese of Wheeling invited the Jesuits to open a Catholic college that would serve the state's northern panhandle, and sensing a unique opportunity to enter the Pittsburgh market without directly competing with Duquesne and other existing colleges, the Maryland Province accepted. Wheeling College began offering classes in 1955 and added the word "Jesuit" to its name in 1986.<sup>12</sup> For a time, it branded itself as "Pittsburgh's Jesuit University."

Another, even more tenuous connection between the Jesuits and the Pittsburgh region took shape six years later. In 1961, Pittsburgh Bishop John Wright established the Bishop's Latin School as a preparatory (high-school-level) seminary and invited the Maryland Jesuits to staff it. During its short, twelve-year existence, the Bishop's Latin School operated in three different Pittsburgh neighborhoods — Homewood, East Liberty, and South Side — and sent many boys to the priesthood before low enrollment forced its closure in 1973. It was the only Jesuit school of any kind ever to operate in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, and the only significant Jesuit presence ever in western Pennsylvania.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion: "Not *Really*..."

Several years ago, I asked a Jesuit colleague whether Pittsburgh had ever played a role in the Jesuits' long history in the United States. His response, after a second or two of thought, was, "Not *really*..." Despite a brief presence at the Bishop's Latin School and what we can now identify



## Bishop Canevin High School recently adopted the Ignatian charism

Source: Father Aleksandr J. Schrenk

as a temporary presence in nearby Wheeling, the Catholic Church's largest teaching order has never played a significant role in this large and important diocese. On the surface, this is almost shocking. However, when we understand the history of the Jesuit order in the United States, it at least makes some modicum of sense.

In short, the Jesuits never developed a college in Pittsburgh because Pittsburgh happened to fall, geographically and logistically, too far outside the scope of what the American Jesuits felt they could handle given their resources. There were three Jesuit bases of operations — Maryland, Missouri, and Buffalo — that potentially could have opened a college in Pittsburgh at any given time. All three of these missions and provinces were too preoccupied with their work in other cities that, unfortunately, trumped Pittsburgh in importance. As significant as Pittsburgh was in the American Catholic Church, the need to open Jesuit schools in bigger cities (like New York, Boston, and Chicago) or more underserved cities (like Milwaukee, Buffalo, and Cleveland) was always too pressing. When the Spiritans successfully opened Duquesne University right under the Jesuits' noses, any Jesuit expansion to Western Pennsylvania became unnecessary.

Nonetheless, there remains one school in Pittsburgh that self-identifies as "Jesuit." Bishop Canevin High School, located on the borders of the city, Green Tree, and Crafton, decided in the 2000s to adopt a Jesuit charism inspired by Ignatian spirituality. Even though the Jesuits have never taught at Bishop Canevin, which in fact was a Franciscan or a Diocesan school throughout its life, its principal at the time, Kenneth Sinagra, saw value in exposing the students to the rich Jesuit tradition and philosophy of education.

Today, with the full support of the Jesuit educational network, Bishop Canevin students and faculty participate in prayer, retreats, and other activities inspired by the spiritual writings of St. Ignatius Loyola and cultivated by the Jesuits throughout the centuries. Despite the recent news from Wheeling, there remains at least one place in Pittsburgh where the Jesuit spirit lives on.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> Greg Toppo, "A Jesuit University Without History of Philosophy?" *Inside Higher Ed*, April 5, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/05/two-years-after-rescue-wheeling-jesuit-guts-faculty-programs>.
- <sup>2</sup> Greg Toppo, "After Cuts, Jesuits End Ties to Wheeling Jesuit," *Inside Higher Ed*, April 11, 2019, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/11/jesuits-balk-affiliation-downsized-wheeling>.
- <sup>3</sup> John M. Daley, *Georgetown University: Origin and Early Years*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press), 1957, 1.
- <sup>4</sup> Robert Emmett Curran, *A History of Georgetown University: Volume I, From Academy to University* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 138.
- <sup>5</sup> Joseph F. Rishel, "The Spirit that Gives Life:" *The History of Duquesne University, 1878-1996* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), 301 n. 7.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward Power, *Catholic Higher Education in America: A History* (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1972), 61.
- <sup>7</sup> David Contosta, *Saint Joseph's: Philadelphia's Jesuit University, 150 Years* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph's University Press, 2000), 35.
- <sup>8</sup> Lee J. Bennish, *Continuity and Change: Xavier University 1831-1981* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1981), 22.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> Edward Dunn, "A Gymnasium in Buffalo: The Early Years of Canisius College," *Urban Education* 18, no 4 (1984), 426. Arthur C. Bender, *A Brief History of the New York Province*, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.jesuitseast.org/Assets/Publications/File/The%20History%20of%20the%20New%20York%20Province%20Jesuits.pdf>.
- <sup>11</sup> Rishel, *Spirit*, 12-15.
- <sup>12</sup> John C. Bates, "Rev. Clifford M. Lewis, SJ — Journalist, Husband, Priest, College Co-Founder, and Historian." *Gathered Fragments* 27 (2017), 65-78.
- <sup>13</sup> Bishop's Latin School Alumni Association, "Bishop's Latin School History," accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.blisalum.org/History.html>.