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THROUGH THE YEARS

Richard Campanella's GEOGRAPHIES OF NEW ORLEANS

Jesuit High's centennial in Mid-City evokes order's two-part history

BY RICHARD CAMPANELLA
Contributing writer

September 2026 commemorates the hundredth anniversary of Jesuit High School's South Carrollton Avenue campus, while the prior year marked three centuries since the Society of Jesus first arrived in New Orleans.

Unlike the Ursuline nuns, whose girls' academy has been in continuous operation here since 1727, the Jesuits have a distinctly bifurcated history in New Orleans, split by a 74-year absence.

French authorities first invited Roman Catholic orders to Louisiana to bring ministry and education to the remote colony. Capuchin priests arrived in the early 1720s, followed by the Jesuits in 1725 and the Ursulines in 1727.

To support their mission, the Jesuits purchased land from city founder Jean-Baptiste Le Moyne, sieur de

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Jesuit High's campus located off North Carrollton Avenue

PHOTO BY JASON CAMPANELLA

JESUIT

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Bienville. Eventually extending from today's Common Street nearly up to Felicity, the Jesuit plantation became one of the largest in the region, where enslaved workers farmed produce and cash crops like sugar cane.

Here and elsewhere, the Jesuits practiced strict allegiance to papal authority, leading some European monarchists to view them as a threat to their authority. In 1763, as the Louisiana colony began to shift from French to Spanish dominion, the Superior Council of New Orleans expelled the Jesuits and seized their land.

Similar expulsions occurred throughout the French, Spanish and Portuguese empires. In 1773, Pope Clement XIV capitulated to pressure and dissolved the Society of Jesus, though the order managed to endure on the eastern fringes of Europe.

By the early 1800s, circumstances had changed radically on both sides of the Atlantic. Monarchies had fallen; colonies gained independence; Louisiana became part of the United States; and in 1814, the Pope restored the Society of Jesus.

In 1837, at the invitation of Bishop Antoine Blanc, Jesuit priests returned to Louisiana, this time to open boys' schools and establish ecclesiastic parishes.

With its rapidly growing population, New Orleans needed both. In 1847, Jesuits from Lyon, France, purchased land on Baronne Street at Common for $22,000, thanks to a loan from the Ursuline nuns. The next year, they secured a state charter "for the purpose of forming and operating colleges, schools, and other literary and scientific institutions in (Louisiana), as well as to build and administer … churches of Roman Catholic worship."

The Baronne/Common parcel happened to abut the old Jesuit plantation, but this was probably coincidental. The main reason for its appeal was its centralized downtown location as well as its proximity to the new University of Louisiana campus across Baronne Street.

Formerly the Medical College of Louisiana, this state-run institution had erected a Greek Revival-style main building in 1843 and was now adding two matching halls. Predecessor of Tulane University, the imposing campus imparted an academic air to the area, which the Jesuits would match by establishing their College of the Immaculate Conception just across Baronne.

Classes began at "Jesuits' College" on Oct. 1, 1849, and within three years enrollment grew to 160 students. According to the school's 1856 commencement bulletin, the curriculum offered "Latin, Greek, English, French … Spanish and German" as well as "Poetry, Rhetoric, History, Geography, Book-Keeping, Mathematics, Chemistry, Moral and Natural Philosophy," plus "Religious education (and) two preparatory classes, for beginners." The division between preparatory and higher curricula eventually grew into the modern distinction between high school and college.

As for the campus, "every attention has been paid to comfort, cleanliness and ventilation. A courtyard, entirely cut off from the street, is reserved for recreation, so that [pupils] will be constantly secluded and superintended" during their 8 a.m.-to-5:30 p.m. sessions. The school year ran from Oct. 1 through mid-August, avoiding yellow fever season.

More projects followed. In 1851, the Jesuit fathers established the Church of the Immaculate Conception adjacent to the college, and in 1857, workers under the direction of Father John Cambiaso completed a magnificent Moorish-style edifice to serve local parishioners. By 1858, the adjacent college had expanded into a pair of three-story corner buildings.

Despite the turmoil of the 1860s and 1870s, Jesuits' College thrived and outgrew its original compound. The fathers acquired adjacent lots spanning roughly a quarter of the entire block, and in 1881 began work on a new school designed by James Freret. "The edifice," reported the Daily Picayune in 1882, "has a front of about 110 feet on Common street, and 120 feet on Baronne, (and) contains 22 comfortable sleeping apartments, a chapel, three parlors and several recitation classrooms."

Topped with an ornate cupola and encompassing the parish church, the compound looked like something out of Paris or Florence. Together with the University of Louisiana, which had just received an endowment from retired merchant Paul Tulane, the new Jesuits' College iterated Baronne Street's status as the academic epicenter of New Orleans.

Following a decade and a half of additional growth, the Jesuit fathers decided to replace the 1882 buildings with a larger four-story complex. In 1899, workers erected a new rectory to the left of the church and replicated the same façade up Baronne and around the corner onto Common.

All the while, the Jesuit administrators, like others in New Orleans, had been casting their eyes Uptown. Downtown had become congested, whereas Uptown beckoned with leafy environs and recently electrified streetcar lines. Houses went up by the hundreds, creating new residential neighborhoods in need of schools and churches.

The administrators of the recently renamed Tulane University of Louisiana were also looking for a new home. They and their Jesuit neighbors both realized the ideal space was the former Foucher tract — the sole Uptown plantation that had never been subdivided. Its riverside section of St. Charles Avenue had become Upper City (now Audubon) Park in 1879, and, six years later, hosted the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. But the lakeside section of St. Charles remained open.

In 1889, Father John O'Shanahan, superior of the Jesuits' New Orleans Mission, purchased part of this parcel for $22,500. In 1891, he established the Holy Name of Jesus Church and parochial school.

That same year, Tulane administrators bought the adjacent property, and in 1893 augmented it with an acquisition from the real estate company developing Audubon Place. In 1894, work began on Gibson Hall and three other buildings, and by year's end, Tulane moved its classes Uptown and eventually demolished the old Common Street campus.

Now it was the Jesuits' turn to make the move. In July 1904, The Daily Picayune reported "the Jesuit Fathers are preparing to extend their educational influence by establishing a school uptown, on the property owned by them, opposite the Audubon Park," because the current campus at "Baronne and Common is overcrowded (with) over 400 pupils."

The new Uptown institution would start with a grammar and secondary school and eventually shift to higher education. Fundraising began in 1907, and three years later, work began on Marquette Hall. Classes commenced in 1911 at what was soon renamed Loyola University. An early commencement bulletin described the new "Tudor Gothic" campus as "admirably situated … on St. Charles Avenue, opposite Audubon Park … easily accessible … from all parts of the city."

With the new Loyola campus dedicated to higher education, the old downtown campus became Jesuit High School for secondary education. But the problem of urban congestion persisted, and the Jesuit fathers set out once again to find a more suitable location.

In 1923, they secured an ideal site on South Carrollton Avenue between Banks and Palmyra, a former dairy across from the New Orleans Baseball Park. Long known as the Breisacher Property, the land had risen in value from $4,000 in 1896 to $115,000 in 1923 — testimony to the ongoing development of what is now known as Mid-City.

Because the Jesuits first had to cash out their downtown property before constructing anew, they moved their 540 students into an interim building on Howard Avenue. Demolition then proceeded on Baronne and Common for the construction on the Pere Marquette Building. Unfortunately, the pile-driving destabilized the adjacent Immaculate Conception Church, which was subsequently disassembled and rebuilt.

Construction on the new Jesuit High School on South Carrollton progressed through spring 1926 at a cost of at least $1,250,000. "Among the unique features of the school building is the fourteen-foot corridor with classrooms on one side only," reported the Times-Picayune in July. "This will shut the evening sun, invite cool breezes and guarantee that quiet so helpful for successful classwork. The physics and chemistry departments have been planned with great care and equipped with all modern conveniences … and a large hall accommodating some 700 boys will answer the purpose of an assembly room."

Classes began in the new Jesuit High School on Sept. 24, 1926, and continue a century later for nearly twice that number of boys. (Disclaimer: my son is one of them.) Loyola, meanwhile, enrolls over 4,300 students on a campus situated between the vibrant Holy Name of Jesus parish church and parochial school — all adjacent to Tulane University, the Jesuits' neighbor, in one form or another, for nearly 180 years.

And back downtown on Baronne Street remains the majestic Church of the Immaculate Conception, roughly marking the geographical origin of the Society of Jesus in New Orleans, and still affectionately known as "the Jesuits Church."

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