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## A Brief History of Providence College

Donna T. McCaffrey

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# A Brief History of Providence College

*A New York City native drawn to Providence College by the love and example of her uncle, Rev. Cornelius P. Forster, O.P., Dr. Donna T. McCaffrey '73G, '83 Ph.D., & '87G was a seminal figure in the history of the College — the same history she chronicled so fondly and scrupulously. Her 522-page doctoral dissertation, “The Origins and Early History of Providence College Through 1947,” described in vivid detail the people and the events that aligned a century ago to realize the bold vision of the Right Rev. Matthew Harkins, D.D., Bishop of Providence to build a Catholic college in the diocese. Dr. McCaffrey had a significant impact on generations of Providence College students, both as a faculty member and as a residence director who helped integrate women into the student population in 1975. This brief version of her dissertation was published in 1992, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the founding of Providence College.*

*Dr. McCaffrey died in January 2016, at the age of 66.*

At 4:00 p.m. on the afternoon of March 10, 1917, the first Providence College Corporation meeting was held at the Bishop’s House. The Corporation received a land grant of eighteen acres from the Bishop and \$10,000. Father Meagher pledged the Dominican teachers and \$25,000 to start the first building. Harkins brought his idea to his people. A wave of enthusiasm over the prospect of a Catholic college swept over the state of Rhode Island. Many wealthy Catholics contributed to Harkins’ fund-raising program to raise \$200,000, but the bulk of the donations came from those of modest means – the poor classes of laboring Catholic immigrants giving beyond what they could afford. Added to the major fund-raising efforts were a host of other events such as rummage sales and bake sales of Irish soda bread and Italian cannoli. By May 23, 1918, \$156,139.73 was raised, and ground was broken for the first building – Harkins Hall (Bishop Harkins would not allow the college to be named after himself).

World War I held up the opening for a full year. Then, on May 25, 1919, the dedication of the new college coincided with Bishop Harkins’ fiftieth anniversary of ordination. On September 18, 1919, with seventy-one students and nine Dominican faculty, Providence College opened her doors, pledged to a particular educational system. This pedagogy was basically “the scholastic system, adapted from Aristotle and the Ancient Greeks, Christianized by Thomas Aquinas and Albertus Magnus, and successfully carried out by the Order of Preachers for seven centuries in the great universities.”



Opening Day with faculty and students,

September 18, 1919

In the line of Dominic, Fenwick, Harkins, and Meagher, for the next seventy-five years Providence College grew and prospered. Early Presidents, Albert D. Casey, O.P. (1919-1921); William D. Noon, O.P. (1921-1927); Lorenzo C. McCarthy, O.P. (1927-1936); John J. Dillion, O.P. (1936-1944); Frederick C. Foley, O.P. (1945-1947) guided Providence College through her youthful, struggling early history. Providence College overcame the obstacles raised by World War I, survived the Great Depression and plummeting enrollment caused by World War II. The college grew from eighteen to forty-five and a half acres, from one building to seven, and produced approximately 2,500 alumni by 1947.

From nine Dominicans in 1919 to eighty-six laboring by 1947 and from one layman in 1927 to approximately eighteen laymen in 1947, the faculty ranks swelled to implement a curriculum leading to degrees of Bachelor of Arts, Bachelor of Philosophy, Bachelor of Science, or a Two-Year Medical Certificate meeting the then requirements of the American Medical Association. Prior to the official opening of the college in 1919, Dominican faculty taught the first credit-bearing PC courses to women religious in 1918. These “night school” students pursued degrees throughout the first five presidential tenures and firmly entrenched the college’s commitment to church and community service through the division of continuing education.

Finances played a large role in determining the physical growth of the college through World War II. Bishop Harkins’ initial fund drive was augmented by Bishop Hickey’s 1920 diocesan drive, Father Dillon’s 1937 Aquinas Hall drive, and Father Foley’s 1947 \$1.5 million building fund. The financial generosity and broad support of the Catholics of Rhode Island saw the college through the Great Depression and World War II. All gifts were sought and none overlooked. The most unusual donation, a first in PC history, came when a young fifteen-year-old MGM film star sold “her autograph in front of the Loew’s State Theater” for five and ten dollars a copy on February 18, 1938. The next day, at a Bridge and Fashion show in Harkins Hall, Ms. Judy Garland, not yet of *Wizard of Oz* fame (1939) “came bearing gifts” to Father Dillon’s Aquinas Hall fund. In appreciation, Ms. Garland, “a girl with a gift, was laden with roses,” by attentive PC students.

Fundamental to all five presidencies was the Catholic identity of the college, the retention of the seven-hundred-year-old scholastic nucleus, a strong commitment to liberal arts, and a successful adaptation to the trends of higher education set by regional and national accrediting associations. The idea of the founders, a Catholic college in Rhode Island, came of age.

From the solid foundations laid in the first thirty years, Providence College matured into a modern, fully accredited Catholic liberal arts college under the next five presidencies of Robert J. Slavin, O.P. (1947-1961); Vincent C. Dore, O.P. (1961-1965); William P. Haas, O.P. (1965-1971); Thomas R. Peterson, O.P. (1971-1985); and John F. Cunningham, O.P. (1985 to the present).

The later Dominican presidents, committed to the idea of the founders and early fathers, carried the college forward through adversity, economic crisis, national decrease in all-male college enrollments, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, oil embargoes, the civil rights and students' rights movements of the sixties, admission of women in 1971, the declining number of American clergy, the tragic death of ten women in the Aquinas Dormitory fire of 1977, the blizzard of 1978, and the Persian Gulf War.

Rev. Robert J. Slavin, O.P., fostered new post-World War II vision of unlimited horizon for the growth and development of Providence College. Stately, handsome, imperial, exuding an aura of authority, competence, and brilliant leadership, Father Slavin sought to bring Providence College to new heights in academia.

Under Father Slavin's tenure, the Albertus Magnus science building, Alumni Hall Gymnasium, and Raymond Hall dining/ dormitory complex were built.



Welcome in front of Providence City Hall

after NIT Championship

Providence College first joined the Eastern College Athletic Conference and in 1948 the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). In March 1961 Providence College men's basketball team won their first National Invitational Tournament, dazzling the crowds in New

York City's Madison Square Garden and bringing Providence College national athletic recognition.



War Memorial Grotto dedication, 1948

With Father Slavin's strong approval, Rev. Charles H. McKenna, O.P., energetically raised funds and built the War Memorial Grotto—Providence College's eternal tribute to remain forever a reminder of her sons who fought and died in American conflicts.

Father Slavin continued to foster Providence College's growth in every opportunity and mode he could envision. WDOM began broadcasting in April 1949. The first and innovative Summer School of Theology for Religious Women started classes in 1950. Providence College granted degrees in 1955 to students of the college affiliated with Cardinal Cushing School of Theology for Laity.

With student enrollment growth, divisions of old departments were made to form separate Biology, Chemistry, Physics, History, and Political Science departments. A Liberal Arts Honors Program for gifted students began in 1957. Stephen and Joseph Halls were opened after extensive remodeling of the newly acquired Good Shepherd property. When faculty, friends, students, and the State of Rhode Island mourned his death on April 24, 1961, Robert Slavin's indelible mark raised Providence College to new horizons of excellence and national recognition.

In 1961, Rev. Vincent C. Dore, O.P. succeeded Father Slavin at the beginning of one of America's most turbulent and uneasy decades. A gentleman of unlimited kindness, a humanitarian, Father Dore came to Providence College with the first class of 1923 and held almost every major position at the college prior to becoming the seventh president. His sobriquet, "Mr. P.C.," was apt. With an unflappable disposition and an astute eye to fiscal stringency, Father Dore led Providence College for the next four years.

During his tenure, Father Dore broke ground for Guzman, Meagher, and McDermott (the latter two paid from cash flow without loans). Children of the Great Depression, Father Dore and

Treasurer Father Fennell believed in building only what you could pay for. Father Dore also dedicated the Edward J. Hickey Laboratory Building. Providence College captured its second NIT tournament in 1963, played in its first NCAA Basketball Tournament in 1964, and went to NCAA Final Four in hockey, 1964. Father Dore encouraged the growth of the graduate program, secured additional student aid with the implementation of the Federal College Work Study program, and hosted such dissident college guests as Bishop Fulton Sheen and Peter, Paul, and Mary in Junior Ring Weekend Concert for the special gift-giving Class of 1964.



1963 NIT Championship recognition with, from left, Coach Joe Mullaney, Gov. John H. Chafee, Rev. Robert J. Slavin, O.P., and Ray Flynn '63

A member of numerous civic boards, Father Dore was Providence College personified to the state of Rhode Island. Father Dore was appointed Chancellor in 1965, a position he held until his death in December 1984. He was also the first Dominican to be buried from the new priory.

In 1965, young, dynamic Rev. William Paul Haas, O.P., artistic, cultured, imbued with administrative acumen and the sage wisdom of a philosopher, became the eighth president of Providence College. The college was at a physical, fiscal, and academic crossroads. Volatile national issues of civil rights, student rights, and U.S. involvement in Vietnam loomed while Providence College faced diminishing clerical teaching faculty, and professionalizing of collegiate institutions.

Father Haas immediately committed significant funding to improving the College's existing buildings/property and long-range funding for increased physical plant.

Providence College purchased the Elmhurst Academy property in 1966 and leased the nurses' dormitory (now Fennell Hall) from the city of Providence in 1968 to encourage enrollment growth via resident students. Major construction resulted in a high-rise nontraditional ten-story dormitory, Phillips Memorial Library, and the Slavin Center Student Union. Father Haas weathered student unrest, successfully assuaging a 1967 student hunger strike and dress code

challenge, a 1970 Kent State/Vietnam student strike, and a 1971 student takeover of the library. Treating students with dignity and respect, Father Haas steered Providence College through a stormy period that had wrecked many U.S. universities with violence and destruction. His tenure increased lay faculty and faculty involvement in Providence College. The first Faculty Senate meeting, first lay vice president, first lay faculty in the Departments of Religious Studies and Philosophy, the first full-time undergraduate woman faculty member, the first Committee on Academic Rank and Tenure, the first Providence College Chapter of AAUP, and the Providence-in-Europe Program in Fribourg, Switzerland, were all initiated under the tutelage of William P. Haas, O.P.

The president embodied current educational trends at Providence College substantially and symbolically. Diplomas were issued in English, a College Mace was forged, a freshman parents' weekend was inaugurated, a summer freshman orientation program was started, tuition was raised substantially, dress codes were abolished, a summer art and art history program in Italy began, and amidst great faculty and alumni controversy, Father Haas petitioned the Corporation and received the approval for Providence College's undergraduate day school to admit women students in the fall of 1971.

The innovation and changes wrought so successfully were not without substantial faculty, alumni, and some student opposition. For personal reasons, Father Haas petitioned Rome for laicization from the priesthood and tendered his presidential resignation effective July 1971. Secular news and media attempted to concoct a scandal. Father Haas remained at Providence College for 1971-72, teaching and guest lecturing, until official canonical laicization approved his retirement from the priesthood. His controversial presidency effectively laid a solid modernized foundation for the next "builder President."

Thomas R. Peterson, O.P., became the ninth president in July 1971. The serene countenance, ready smile, and affable disposition belied a Viking tiger, ferocious in fostering both Providence College tradition and innovation.

A gargantuan building program directed toward academic and athletic improvement was immediately begun. In his first year, ground was broken for a self-contained hockey arena. As of 1972 men's varsity basketball games were moved to the Providence Civic Center. Three new outdoor athletic fields were added by 1976, and by 1981 a comprehensive field house was completed. In addition, from his inauguration on, the "builder President" cautiously, sagely, and with unmatched diplomacy negotiated the purchase of the adjacent Chapin Hospital property.

In his fourteen-year tenure, he effectively refurbished all the facilities on the new east or "lower campus." Completed were Dore Hall Dormitory, Hunt/Cavanagh Art Building, Physical Plant Storage and Garages, a ceramics center, East Hall, the first dormitory designed for women by a woman, Koffler Business Building, a Student Service/Recreation Building, Howley Social Science Classroom and Office Building, Saint Catherine of Siena Music and Performing Arts Building, and Fennell Hall Dormitory – all with adjacent parking lots!

To complete his building task, Father Peterson secured the donations to build a Dominican Faculty Residence, and in August 1984 the Dominicans, after sixty-six years of limited and inadequate housing, moved from fourth-floor Harkins (immediately converted to include a new Computer Center) to the St. Thomas Aquinas Priory, Gragnani Dominican Center.

Despite the time-consuming building program, Father Peterson, with his astutely appointed vice presidential cabinet, moved the college to new academic and national heights. Coeducation was successfully fostered with equal and integrated women's priorities in tenured faculty, sports programs, housing appropriations, administration, approval and encouragement of female student elections to Cowl Editor, Yearbook Editor, and Student Congress President.

New departments, increased lay and Dominican Faculty, entrenching of the Core Curriculum Development of Western Civilization, founding of the Quirk Institute of Industrial Relations for a Labor-Management Studies Program, a five-year liberal arts and engineering program with the University of Notre Dame, a \$25 million capital fund-raising campaign, an innovative central heating and coal conversion plant, institution of Oktoberfest and Community President's Day, hosting of nationally renowned figures such as James E. Cheek, Howard University President, Gerald Ford, Melvin Laird, John Dean, Bruce Springsteen, Ralph Nader, Commodore Grace Hopper, Vice President Walter Mondale, Christopher Dodd, Carl Yastrzemski, Arthur Fiedler, unionizing of physical plant workers, student representation on the Corporation, and myriad activities attested that the Peterson tenure was a new era at Providence College. Student population soared. Providence Diocese seminary students received their undergraduate degrees at Providence College. By 1979, Providence College attracted more out-of-state than Rhode Island students, and women outnumbered men in the freshman class. Tuition rose appropriately, and more students enrolled from parental college-degreed families.

In all, the Peterson era was a Camelot of growth and development academically, fiscally, and physically. The devastating Aquinas fire of December 13, 1977, took the lives of ten Providence College women, traumatized the Providence College community and the state of Rhode Island, and was garishly ranked in the "top 10 news stories" of the decade. What could have destroyed the college turned from defeat to victory. The heroic paternal concerns of Thomas R. Peterson, O.P. led mourning, shocked student, faculty, and administrative groups to a new familial consciousness. From grief, the "PC Family" emerged.

When Father Peterson passed the mace to the tenth president, Providence College was at a breathtaking plateau of excellence. Providence College was emerging as a Catholic liberal arts college of small-university stature.

A native Rhode Islander, former academic dean, former assistant provincial, satirical wit, philosopher, and thespian, John F. Cunningham, O.P., was inaugurated president in September 1985.

Reevaluation, redirection, new staffing, scrutiny of curriculum, preparation for the seventy-fifth anniversary, and Providence College's entrance into the twenty-first century became the themes of Father Cunningham's program.



Immediate physical growth needs were addressed through: ground-breaking for the Sowa Science Building Connector, construction of three apartment student residence complexes, rebuilding of Antonius Hall into the Western Civilization Program Center of Moore Hall, dedication of a Vietnam War Memorial and a contemplative tree grove in memory of Walter J. Heath, O.P., construction of an off-campus housing building, refurbishing of the old Good Shephard barn into the O'Reilly Infirmary and Security Building, relocation of Physical Plant to lower campus, refurbished storage building, and continued renovation of the former physical plant and the last Chapin property buildings.

A major capital fund-raising campaign is ongoing to procure further needed classrooms, dormitories, and office buildings. In academic enrichment, a President's Speakers' Series, an Asian Studies Program, expanded student opportunity for study abroad, the institution of academic minors to enhance student learning and post-graduation competitiveness all attest to Father Cunningham's presidential program. Far-sighted, his reevaluation of the Catholic identity of the college and his Plan Providence 2000 are laying the foundation of Providence College's growth and development toward further excellence.

The Post-World War II presidents have collectively moved Providence College into the national arena. The labors of these presidents culminated in national academic recognition for the college. In 1991, Providence College was ranked by *The National Review* among America's fifty top liberal arts colleges, and in 1990 by *Barron's* as one of the three hundred best buys in the United States. Additionally, the *U.S. News and World Report* of September 30, 1991, listed Providence College sixth in the Regional Colleges and Universities category.

In the past forty-five years, the Providence College campus grew to approximately 105 acres with the addition of the adjacent Sisters of Good Shephard property and the Chapin Hospital property. Through the arduous procurement of funds from loyal alumni, capital fund campaigns, loans, and the continued contributed service of Dominican administrators and faculty, the expansion of the campus mission to higher education was achieved.

By 1992, Providence College grew to over fifty-four facilities, including administration and classroom buildings, a science complex, an award-winning library with approximately 300,000 holdings, an art building, music building, Dominican residence, fourteen student residences, three athletic buildings with pool, ice rink, and indoor courts and track, five indoor and one outdoor chapel, a student recreation center, two cafeterias, and eleven parking areas! This impressive physical plant is self-contained in a visually evocative park-like setting located in the midst of a thriving New England city.

In 1991, the 287 teaching faculty members consisted of 217 full-time and seventy visiting and adjunct professors, including forty Dominican Fathers and eight Dominican Sisters. Over 73 percent hold doctorates. Over thirty-seven academic majors and programs for approximately 3,800 undergraduate students lead to the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees.

The scholarly milieu and academic community is enhanced by a growing Graduate School. Proposed in 1963 and nurtured and guided by Cornelius P. Foster, O.P., the Graduate School

enrolls approximately six hundred students yearly. Since 1964, over 3,772 students have been awarded an M.A., M.S., M.Ed., M.B.A., or Ph.D. from the Graduate School of Providence College.

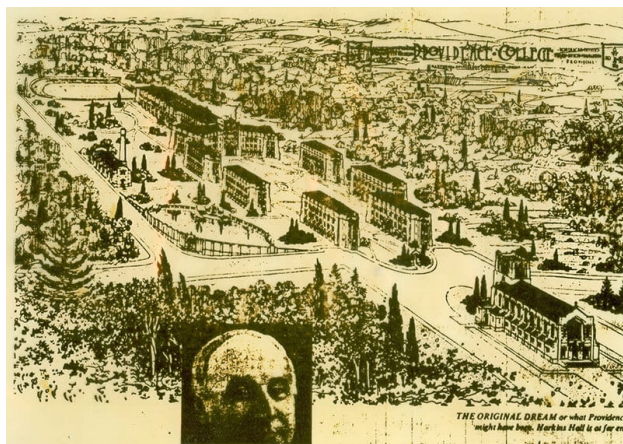
Serving the community of full time working people, newer immigrant groups, the Catholic Diocese of Providence, and those purely interested in pursuing personal intellectual enrichment, the School of Continuing Education remains the oldest division of Providence College. From 1925-1992, 2,393 students have been awarded degrees and certificates through the Providence College evening division, officially designated the School of Continuing Education as of 1972.

Poised on the threshold of the third millennium, 29,632 alumni bear the impress of Providence College as an indelible mark on their character and service in society.

Nearly seventy-five years ago, when Bishop Thomas Shahan addressed the crowd on that Sunday afternoon dedication of Harkins Hall, he told the crowd how fortunate they were to have the Dominicans as the teachers for the new college. He also predicted that, under their guidance and care, now augmented by a dedicated lay faculty:

*From these walls must one day go forth the young [people] destined to take the places of the faithful and laborious priests who now toiled daily for your spiritual welfare, the cultivated teachers and public speakers who will expound and defend the interests of the Catholic Religion, the writers of all kinds, poets, historians, philosophers without whom no society is honored, the journalists of courage and honest who are the watchdogs of liberty, the physicians and the lawyers whose ancient professions demand a very high degree of liberal learning.*

How very astute were Thomas Shahan's predictions. His hope became the reality that is Providence College. People with an idea, with courage, with belief in God, and the pursuit of truth have sacrificed to realize this educational idea. As Senator John O. Pastore remarked to then-Vice President Walter Mondale in 1978, "Providence College has wrought a social and intellectual revolution in the State of Rhode Island" – and, as we have seen, from this state unto the nation.



# The Founding of Providence College

*Much of the material used in this story was drawn from “The Origins and Early History of Providence College Through 1947,” the dissertation of the late Dr. Donna T. McCaffrey, former PC associate professor of history, which was published in 1985.*

In the first five months of 1915, Bishop Harkins met with Father Meagher in Providence and resumed negotiations for a college. Harkins and Meagher joined forces to make the idea a reality. With courage and boldness bordering on the foolhardy, they trusted in God to take care of the specifics, while they rolled up their sleeves and did everything but dig the foundation for Harkins Hall.

In mid-May 1915, immediately after consultation with Father van den Wildenberg, Bishop Harkins wrote directly to the Dominican Master General, “We petition your paternity to grant permission to the Fathers of the Province of St. Joseph to undertake the burden of a college of higher learning in our episcopal city.” In this petition Bishop Harkins conveyed his concern that “secular universities present dangers to faith and morals of Catholic students.” Bishop Harkins requested that permission be given this undertaking, as the college would provide the means by which the Catholic youth of his diocese could be “formed not only in the knowledge of humanities, but especially in the principles of sound and healthy philosophy, as well as in the pious discipline of a holy life.”



Rev. James Raymond Meagher, O.P.

No documents exist which reveal the progress of the petition over the summer of 1915. However, in the fall of 1915, Father Meagher wrote apologetically to the Bishop:

I regret very much that my work for some months has been for the most part in the Western part of our province and for this reason I have not had the opportunity of seeing you to report the progress of our obtaining permission from Rome for our new foundation in Providence.

He went on to attribute the lack of resolution to “a delay on the part of the Roman authorities in order to investigate our financial status.” Father Meagher also indicated that he had asked a representative of the Province to proceed to Rome and “make his report” on the financial status of the Province of St. Joseph; thus, Father Meagher assured the Bishop that he had “no fear of the outcome.”

The financial question was probably a major reason for the delay; yet, another underlying motivation may well have had its part here. Father Meagher knew that he could not expect to succeed where Father Heagen had failed in persuading the Master General to grant the necessary permission; but Father Meagher also knew Cormier’s term as General would be over in about ten months and that the aged and ailing Frenchman would not be physically capable of accepting reelection.

Nevertheless, the audacious Father Meagher gambled. He proceeded with plans and took the initiative. He indicated to Bishop Harkins that “the formal renewal of the application should come from the Provincial Chapter,” which would meet in mid-October 1915. On the advice of his representative in Rome, Father Meagher suggested to Bishop Harkins that “it would be advisable and most effectual as far as Rome is concerned to have a formal invitation [in English] presented by the Bishop to the Fathers to erect and maintain a College in Providence.” Tactfully, Father Meagher indicated that “this document could then be sent to Rome with the petition of the Chapter,” the result of which Father Meagher optimistically wrote would bring “an immediate response.”

Choosing to pursue the matter, Bishop Harkins responded almost immediately in a personal letter to “My dear Father Meagher” on October 9, 1915. Attached to the letter was “a simple petition and a couple of maps which show a) a location of land- b) and what a center of population this city happens to be-.”

The attached petition, written by Bishop Harkins on October 9, 1915, was the classic document of the origin of Providence College. Bishop Harkins on October 9, 1915, was the classic document of the origin of Providence College. Bishop Harkins described his diocese as “comprising in territory the entire state of Rhode Island... [with] a Catholic population of about 300,000... [and] no college.” He apprised the Dominicans that “the need of a college, catholic in spirit and under catholic auspices, is most evident, considering especially the steady growth in the number of the inhabitants of the diocese during the last twenty years.”

The Bishop explained his long-term goal, his selection of the Dominicans and his plan for the new college:

Convinced of the expediency of such a college, and having with continued interest followed throughout the last forty years the work of the Dominican Fathers in New England, I hereby extend an invitation to said religious community of the Province of Saint Joseph—the language of which province is English—to found within the limits of the Diocese of Providence a college in which the courses usual in colleges of three or four years in length and preparatory to degrees conferred by chartered institutions, except that of theology, would be followed.

Bishop Matthew Harkins also included with the invitation his generous intention to give the Dominicans “under the laws of the State of Rhode Island, a certain tract of land situated within ten minutes of the civic center of Providence, said land measuring eleven (11) acres.” In closing, the Bishop declared that “I will establish in said college, in such manner and form as will be agreed upon, scholarships representing in capital (\$10,000) Ten Thousand Dollars.”

The petition and the generous grants offered by the Bishop of Providence were immediately laid before the Dominican Intermediate Chapter then meeting in Washington. On October 11, 1915, the Chapter voted to accept the Bishop’s offer.

In his letter of the same date to Father Cormier, the Master General, Father Meagher spoke for the Fathers of the Chapter:

We humbly request of your Paternity permission to accept a college, (about which more details will soon be available) and which the most illustrious and Reverend Harkins, Bishop of Providence, wishes to grant our Fathers – a testimony of his high esteem of our Province.

Again, Father Meagher accentuated the Bishop’s concern for his Catholic youth. “It is true that in the city of Providence there already exists a celebrated secular university but because of the doctrine taught there, no little danger presents itself to Catholic students.” With the tradition of the Dominicans “the sound Thomistic philosophy to be taught by us ... would exercise a salutary influence against” the secular dangers.

Furthermore, the canny Provincial urged upon the Master General an additional benefit. Father Meagher indicated his belief that the college would “be a most fertile field for vocations to our Order,” as the Providence Diocese was rich with priestly aspirants. Again, six days later, the Provincial wrote diplomatically to Father Cormier that “the Intermediate Chapter of the Province has come to an end, having deliberated with fraternal Charity, and I write this summary to your Paternity that you might have more detailed information.” The summary emphasized Father Meagher’s fervent wish to begin the college work and offered a detailed synopsis of the college proposal. Placing the issue as the primary item of attention, Father Meagher wrote:

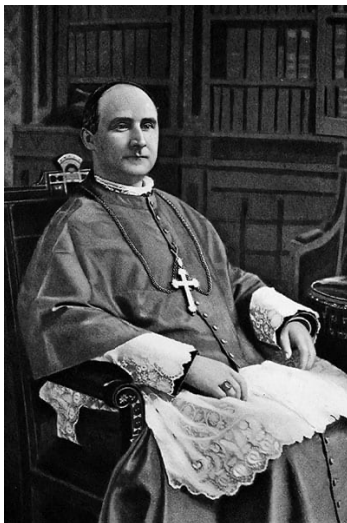
First, concerning the foundation of a College in the city of Providence, this will be a great help to promote the good of religion and to obtain vocations to our order. The city called in the

vernacular Providence, is the principal city in the State of Rhode Island. The Catholics there number three fourths of the population. There are numerous vocations to the clerical religious life both for the State of Rhode Island and for other States. There are more than sufficient Fathers in our Province to found such a College. For ten years, our Fathers have had the care of a College in the City of Columbus. This College in Columbus does not meet our needs because of the great distances involved. The City of Columbus is as far from the City of Providence as Rome is from the City of Paris. All the Fathers of the whole Province hope and pray fervently for this permission to found a college at Providence and that your Paternity will give permission. The Bishop of Providence, the Most Reverend and Illustrious Harkins, assured me before the Father Professors at the Formal Studium in Washington of his generosity not yet actualized but promised, and also of the assurance of generous support on the part of the other priests of the diocese and the friends of the Most Reverend Bishop.

With this final plea to Father Cormier, both the good Bishop and the energetic Provincial had now to wait for an answer from Rome.

On November 8, 1915, the Italian-American liner *Ancona* sailed from Naples, Italy, under Captain Massardo. New York-bound, with 422 passengers and 160 men in the crew, the ship also carried a mail satchel containing the Acts of the Intermediate Chapter of the Dominican Province of Saint Joseph. The Acts were stamped with the approval of the Master General.

On November 9, 1915, the *Ancona* was torpedoed in the Mediterranean by a large submarine flying Austrian colors. With much of Europe engaged in World War I, submarine warfare was taking its toll on nonbelligerents. The *Ancona* sunk. About 270 lives were lost, including those of twenty-seven American citizens. All cargo and mail went down with the ship. "The Acts unfortunately went down with the *Ancona*." World war, not for the last time, delayed the institution of Providence College.



Bishop Matthew Harkins

Not until January 29, 1916, did Father Meagher inform Bishop Harkins that "after a long wait, I have received the Acts of our last Provincial Chapter in which permission is given to us to accept

your invitation to erect a college in Providence.” After the sinking of the *Ancona*, Father Meagher was obliged “to acquaint the Roman Authorities with the fact that we had not received the Acts and...obtain a new copy.”

“In approving the chapter, the General implicitly at least, approved the [college] petition.” Meagher acted upon the implicit permission and wrote Bishop Harkins that “I am most gratified that I am able to begin this work.” Meagher was premature in his action. The official permission – the Beneplacitum Apostolicum was not granted. Master General Cormier did not initiate the steps necessary to secure official permission. He “subjected it to a kind of pocket veto – – He just did nothing about it.” Was the Bishop’s dream to be thwarted again? No, official permission finally came from Rome because of Louis Theissling, O.P. Theissling replaced the ailing Cormier as Master General. The new Master General was a proponent of the active seven-hundred-year-old Dominican teaching apostolate and secured permission in 1915.

On February 14, 1917, Rhode Island Governor Robert Livingston Beekman signed the Act to Incorporate Providence College into law. On February 24, 1917, Benedict XV’s papal permission — the Beneplacitum Apostolicum – was granted, and on February 28 Master General Theissling ascribed his formal permission to the papal document. With the consent of the people of the State of Rhode Island and the blessing of the papacy, Bishop Harkins’ dream was legally and canonically founded. Providence College can thus date its founding in February 1917 as legally February 14, papally February 24, or as a Dominican institution on February 28.

## The Roots of the Dominican Teaching

### Apostolates

*Much of the material used in this story was drawn from “The Origins and Early History of Providence College Through 1947,” the dissertation of the late Dr. Donna T. McCaffrey, former PC associate professor of history, which was published in 1985.*

Standing in the limestone pulpit sequestered below the portal arch of the new building on Sunday afternoon, May 25, 1919, Right Reverend Thomas J. Shahan, D.D., then president of Catholic University, addressed a gathered crowd. Prelates, bishops, clergy, and thousands of Rhode Island’s Catholic laity were joined by civic leaders from the city of Providence and the state of Rhode Island to celebrate the dedication of the French Gothic edifice, Harkins Hall – the first building of the embryonic Providence College.

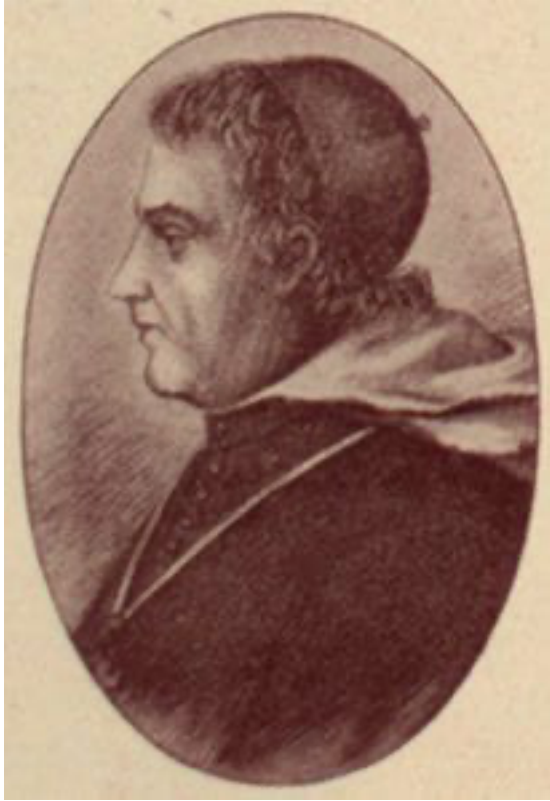
Handsome captivating in appearance, Father Shahan acclaimed in a stentorian voice, “the Catholic people of Providence and vicinity are fortunate, indeed, in the selection of the Fathers of St. Dominic, as the teachers for this new college.” Herein, lay the fundamental origin of Providence College.



The history of Providence College began more than 775 years ago. Dominic Guzman, a Spanish nobleman, embraced poverty and had an idea. He wanted to establish an order “for preaching and salvation of souls.” He petitioned the papacy, and on December 22, 1216, Pope Honorius III gave his support to Dominic’s idea and declared the Order of Preachers “inviolable for all time to come.” In his Bull of 1216, Pope Honorius prophesied that Dominic’s brethren would be “champions of the faith and true light of the world.”

Dominic immediately sent his sons to study at the great European universities. Where they went to study, they remained to teach. St. Thomas Aquinas took Dominic’s idea and affirmed that teaching was one of the essential objects of the Order and in his *Apologia for Religious Orders* argued the appropriateness of the teaching apostolate for religious. For the next six centuries the Dominicans held the teaching chairs of Scripture and Theology at nearly all the major European universities – from Oxford to Lyons, Paris, Bologna, Bordeaux, Cologne, Milan, and Valencia. By the nineteenth century a host of Dominican men and women had carried on the Dominican teaching tradition throughout Europe. The idea then traversed the Atlantic Ocean.





Rev. Edward Dominic Fenwick

In Europe at the time of the persecution of Catholics in England, the Napoleonic purges in Europe, American-born Dominican Father Edward Dominic Fenwick had an idea – to bring the Dominican Order to the newly formed United States. Fenwick wanted to begin his American foundation with a college. He came home in November 1804 ready to found a college in Maryland on the property his family owned. Yet, first, U.S. Bishop John Carroll was in desperate need of missionaries for the dangerous wild frontier of Kentucky. Sacrificing his collegiate idea to the pressing needs of the infant U.S., Fenwick and his small band of three traveled west, by foot or on horseback, to bring the faith to the pioneers. For the next sixty years the persistent theme of the Dominican college apostolate was a dominant influence in Fenwick's Province of Saint Joseph. Before the Civil War, three Dominican colleges were opened: in 1805 Saint Thomas College, Kentucky; in 1841 Saint Joseph's Studium, Ohio; and in 1846 Sinsinawa Mound College, Wisconsin. Three U.S. bishops, scores of future missionary priests, and Jefferson Davis became alumni. Unfortunately in the mid-nineteenth century, the Dominican Constitutional interpretation of the new Master General, Alexander Jandel, O.P. emphasized the consensual contemplative Dominican life over the active Dominican teaching apostolate. All three Dominican Colleges closed before or because of the Civil War, were not reopened. Although dormant for the next forty years, the Fenwick ideal of a Dominican teaching apostolate was strongly entrenched in the American Order of Preachers. They were ready to respond to the call of the Bishop of Providence, Rhode Island.

Irish Bostonian Mathew Harkins went as a young priest in 1884 to the Third Plenary Council. The American Catholic Church was in crisis, faced with an overwhelming influx of Catholic immigrants, beset by a vicious nativist anti-Catholic movement, and persecuted by strong

prejudice ingrained in a predominantly Protestant country. Harkins listened at the Council of Bishops to the plea of Bishop John Lancaster Spalding:



Bishop John Lancaster Spalding, 1840-1916

We live in the midst of millions who still bear the yoke of inherited prejudices and who because for three hundred years real cultivation of mind was denied to Catholics who spoke English, conclude that Protestantism is the source of enlightenment and the [Catholic] Church the Mother of ignorance.

Young Harkins caught the fire and passion of Spalding's appeal:

To be intellectually the equals of others, we Catholics must have with them equal advantage of education, and so long as we look rather to the multiplying of schools and seminaries than to the creation of a real university our progress will be slow and uncertain, because a university is the great ordinary means to the best cultivation of the mind.

Matthew Harkins absorbed and made these ideas his own.

On April 14, 1887, forty-one-year-old Matthew Harkins was consecrated Bishop of Providence. Amongst his many labors, Harkins quickly began a gargantuan educational building program in his new diocese. From the onset, he enlisted the support of the diocesan clergy and consistently pressed priests and pastors to educate the young of the Providence Diocese. In the late 1880s, twenty-odd years after the close of the Dominican colleges, Bishop Harkins envisioned a Catholic college as the capstone of his diocesan educational program. Long-time friend, Bishop

Louis Walsh of Portland, wrote in 1921, "I had many talks during several years with the late Bishop Harkins on the erection of a Diocesan college in Providence and found the idea strongly entrenched in his mind, almost from the beginning of his Episcopate." Bishop Harkins "was particularly anxious to see his idea and plan realized."

In the first twenty years of his episcopacy, Harkins' dream took various forms. Jesuits invited by his predecessor, Bishop Hendricken, to found a college departed unsuccessfully in January 1899. Much to Harkins' "regret," this closed one avenue. In 1902, a secondary school was entrusted to the Christian Brothers. LaSalle Academy was legally incorporated with a special clause granting the institution the right to confer degrees normally associated with a college institution. The student population growth on the high school level prevented collegiate expansion. The Bishop waited implementation of his dream. In 1910 the "time was ripe" for accomplishing the "idea strongly entrenched in his mind."

In his search for a religious order to staff the college, the Bishop turned to an entirely new sector. As an active committee worker for The Catholic University's Board of Trustees, Bishop Harkins had contact with one of the Church's oldest teaching orders, the Dominicans. On August 20, 1905, the Dominican House of Studies, incorporated on December 18, 1902, as the College of the Immaculate Conception, opened on Bunker Hill Road, now Michigan Avenue, Washington, D.C. Here the American Dominicans educated aspirants to the Province of Saint Joseph. Many Dominicans also engaged in "study at The Catholic University just across the street." Victor O'Daniel, O.P., long-term historian of the Province of Saint Joseph, forcefully attests that "whenever Bishop Matthew Harkins of Providence, Rhode Island came to The Catholic University, he paid a visit to the House of Studies." However, not until November 1910 does Harkins mention any visits in his otherwise precise diary. That "dinner" visit was preceded by contact with John Dominic Maria van den Wildenberg, O.P. Earlier in the summer 1910, Bishop Harkins' quest for a college foundation was augmented by the association of the Bishop and this son of the former Belgian Consul General at Chicago. Assigned to the Dominican mission (preaching) band in 1906, Father van den Wildenberg was "taking Father Sullivan's place" at Saint Agnes Parish in Rhode Island for "two of three weeks" in July 1910. The Bishop struck up a comfortable relationship with the Dominican, recreating at least one day at Narragansett Beach.



Bishop Matthew Harkins

Some conversation about a college must have ensued. Ten days later on August 3, 1910, Bishop Harkins met formally with both Father van den Wildenberg and the Dominican Provincial, Matthew Leo Heagen, O.P. The three “spoke about [a] foundation.” As a preliminary to the founding of a college, by October 1910, serious discussion between the Bishop and van den Wildenberg arranged “property matters” for a “parish to be taken by [the] Dominicans” in Harkins’ Diocese.

The Belgian Dominican met again with the Bishop on November 14, 1910, and arranged a meeting for Harkins at the “Dominican House of Studies.” In Washington the next day, Harkins “arranged about [the] foundation” and “took dinner” with the Dominicans. Although the content of the conversations was unrecorded, there is no doubt that by November 24, 1910, Matthew Leo Heagen, O.P. “placed before the [Provincial] Council a petition from Bishop Matthew Harkins of Providence [inviting the Dominicans] to undertake the establishment of a new college in the City of Providence, Rhode Island.” The invitation was extended; the Bishop had chosen the Dominicans for the college of his long-time hope. In turn, the Dominicans, heirs of a seven-century teaching apostolate, were interested in this new undertaking.

The Provincial wrote the Master General Hyacinthe Cormier, O.P., on January 7, 1911. He reported that the Provincial Council had accepted the Bishop’s offer to renew the collegiate apostolate. “The Fathers voted unanimously that we petition the Master General and the Holy See to make this foundation.” They also asked “permission to borrow \$150,000 to build a church and rectory in Providence.”

Permission for the parish work was forthcoming. In regard to the establishment of the college, Victor O’Daniel was in attendance when the “offer was heartily accepted by the Provincial and his council.” O’Daniel recalled that Father Heagen and the councilors “requested the Bishop to wait until [the Dominicans] had more priests for the purpose.” Dominican Father James B. Walker, a reliable source for that period in provincial history, later noted that:

The Council of the Province unanimously approved of accepting the offer, but requested the postponement of making the foundation for a few years so than an adequate staff of professors

could be provided. The Bishop graciously consented, predicting that the college, when founded, would be a source of great good, not only for his diocese but also for the order.

Later that year, on September 22, 1911, Bishop Harkins “met the Master General, Fr. Cormier,” in Rome “at the Dominican House.” What transpired is unknown. However, although permission had yet to be received from Rome, Bishop Harkins for all practical purposes had found the religious order to staff his college. At 9:30 a.m., November 13, 1911, Bishop Harkins held a “meeting of [the] new Corporation” called “Dominican Fathers School Corporation.” From February through April 1912, the Bishop met several times with Fathers Heagen and van den Wildenberg.

In anticipation of the Rhode Island arrival of the Dominicans, the Bishop continued pragmatic steps to convert his dream into reality. By December 1911 arrangements were made to purchase acreage on the east side of River Avenue in northwest Providence on had been the Bradley Estate. Twelve and a half acres including a two-and-a-half story house with outbuildings were secured. The owner of the land preferred to sell her property to the diocese rather than have it subdivided into house lots. In 1913 additional land was sought and contiguous acreage comprising approximately six and a half acres was purchased by Bishop Harkins.

Meanwhile, the permission sought from the Master General by the American Province was not forthcoming. “Permission to accept the college [apostolate] was presumably refused, although the documents are silent on the matter. “ “Father Cormier, refused permission – probably because without any explicit authority for it in the Dominican Constitution, he had given the Americans permission to institute” a school in Columbus, Ohio, for the preparation of “young men for the priesthood.” The Master General’s “conscience was troubled.”

Without Roman permission, Father Heagen was unable to pursue the matter. Harkins’ hope for an educational capstone and Fenwick’s century-old goal of an American Dominican college might well have ended here. However, two significant personalities moved to center stage. On October 11, 1913, James Raymond Meagher, O.P., was elected Provincial-successor of Heagen, and in August 1916 Dutch-born Louis Theissing, O.P., was elected Master General to succeed the ailing Father Cormier.

For at least two years the college idea lay dormant in the Bishop’s house. The new Provincial Meagher later recalled, “It was only by accident that I heard about” the Bishop’s offer, as Father “Heagen never mentioned it.” Father Meagher, however, “saw a good prospect in such an idea and approached the Bishop,” on December 15, 1915. Meagher later recalled the Bishop’s surprising first remark. “Why, I thought the Dominicans had given up all idea of doing anything regarding the college?”

Far from abandoning the idea, young Raymond Meagher shared the Bishop’s broad vision. He too was a builder and accomplisher. Thus, by 1915 Harkins found a man equally strong in devotion to Catholic education. Father Raymond Meagher, Irish Bostonian, was committed to the Dominican seven-hundred-year-old tradition and to Fenwick’s American dream.