

Chapter 3 Beginnings 1947

The events of the month of March in the year 1947 are more than just a part of the chronology of Salve Regina College. They are a kind of epiphany of that Divine Providence that had been so silently at work since 1934. Moreover, they are an affirmation of that confidence in God which Mother McAuley herself so profoundly internalized.

For it was on March 15, 1947, that Robert Goelet, the scion of a wealthy New York landlord family officially³⁴ listed among the famous Four Hundred, sent a letter to Bishop Francis P. Keough of the Diocese of Providence. In this letter he made a gift of his Newport mansion, Ochre Court, to Salve Regina College in memory of his father, Ogden Goelet. He further authorized his counsel, Cornelius C. Moore, of the law firm Moore, Virgadamo and Lynch, to deliver to the Bishop the deed of the property to be used in accordance with the provisions of the Charter of Salve Regina College.

A special meeting of the Salve Regina Corporation was held on March 20, 1947. At this time the deed to Ochre Court was accepted with the provision that if the property were not used for its corporate purpose, it would revert to the Roman Catholic Bishop of Providence. However, it is important to note that this provision was later rescinded. For on March 27, 1947, Bishop Keough sent a letter to Bishop James E. Cassidy of the Diocese of Fall River, in response to his letter of congratulation upon the acquisition of Ochre Court. Bishop Keough hastened to inform him that it was not a profitable undertaking for a diocese to run a college; therefore, he relinquished it to the Sisters of Mercy as their possession.³⁵

The acquisition of this property was noted in particular in the press releases of the *Providence Visitor*, the *Providence Journal*, and the *Newport Daily News*, along with photographs of various views of the estate.³⁶

As a result, Mother Mary Matthew received many congratulatory letters from the major superiors of the various religious communities in the diocese, from individual alumnae of St. Xavier Academy, Bay View Academy, and several other sources. Notable among these was a letter written by Helene Burrell in the name of *International Federation of Catholic Alumnae*. Mrs. Burrell was the mother of Dr. William Burrell, presently Vice President/Dean of Faculty and of the Graduate School. Another came from Reverend Cornelius Collins, then pastor in Block Island, who later became one of the most generous benefactors through the years. James Hannen, a seminarian, was prompted to write because his grandfather worked as head gardener of Ochre Court for forty years. He himself had had "great fun" playing in the "big house."

³⁴ Lucy Kavalier, *The Astors* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1966), pp. 77, 131

³⁵ D.P.A. (Dioceses of Providence Archives)

³⁶ March 20, 1947

Meanwhile, Bishop Keough was receiving applications from various contractors and individuals for work at the College as well as requests for faculty positions and even for the registration of prospective students. He informed all of these that the College was under the direction of the Sisters of Mercy. He even compiled a list of these references which he sent to Mother Mary Matthew along with the promise of teachers' desks.³⁷

We may conclude, then, that for many the coming of Salve Regina College to the Island of Aquidneck was welcomed as a cultural, educational, and financial asset. Yet for some, its presence was merely an encroachment on the outer fringe of a closed society built upon the power, prestige, and privilege of the rich. The actual possession and occupation of six acres of land by an alien element in their very midst was a kind of desecration of one of the most magnificent "cottages" on what was known as "Millionaires Point."

Ochre Court, so-called from the color of the cliffs along the shore, was constructed at a time when Newport was at its height in that Golden Age between 1890 and World War I. Richard Morris Hunt, the famous architect, began his work on Ochre Court in 1888 and completed it in 1891 at the cost of four and one-half million dollars.³⁸ It is said to have been a wedding gift Ogden Goelet made to his wife, the former Mary Wilson, the daughter of Richard T. Wilson, a millionaire and head of his own banking firm.

Although Hunt received a thorough training in the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris, he always remained very much the American and was convinced that it was an error that America was not ready for the Fine Arts. In fact, in a letter he wrote to his mother from Paris, he said he would "return to America where an architect of the first quality would be much sought after."³⁹ He came to be known as the "Dean of American Architecture." No schools of architecture existed in the United States at this time.⁴⁰

Besides the many public buildings for which he is remembered, he came to be one of the first to be recognized as a domestic architect, thus stimulating a new direction in architecture. In collaboration with Karl Bitter, a young Viennese sculptor of rare ability, Hunt initiated the construction of his mansions. Among the first was Ochre Court.⁴¹

In structure, Ochre Court reflects the chateaux of France's Loire Valley and is also almost an exact replica of the castle of Edward VII. The style of architecture is that of the period of Louis XIII and the French Gothic period. It rises over three stories and comprises fifty rooms. Both in exterior and interior it remains an image of the opulence of the age. But it is more than that in its historic and social significance. Today, in an age in which

³⁷ D.P.A.

³⁸ Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), p. 348

³⁹ Baker, p. 24

⁴⁰ Susan R. Stein, ed., *The Architecture of Richard Morris Hunt* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), ix

⁴¹ Stein, p. 140

so much emphasis is placed on the visual arts, the educative value of the building as a treasure house of mythology, literature, and the arts and sciences cannot be overestimated.

At this point, Samuel M. Marino was chosen as the architect to transform Ochre Court into a college building. Mr. Marino had visited and studied at some of the finest residential buildings in the world. Among these were Versailles, the Palace of Fontainebleau, where he was privileged to study in the School of Fine Arts, the Chateau of Loire, the Casino of Monte Carlo, as well as a number of the finest manor houses of England.

With this sense for structure, form, and beauty, Mr. Marino approached his task with an inbred sense of preserving the aesthetic and at the same time finding ways and means to make the building serviceable as a college. The principal work of the first floor was the transformation of the ballroom into the chapel with the alcove converted into the sacristy. The drawing room beyond the chapel simply became an extension of the chapel itself. The great hall retained its original structure and grace. The remaining rooms on the first floor were substantially unchanged.

For Mr. Marino the most extensive and most difficult problem was the expansion of the heating system. He literally transformed the basement into a cafeteria with canary yellow walls and bright red leather furniture, together with a modern kitchen gleaming with stainless steel and fluorescent lights. A biology laboratory and a bookstore, together with a coke machine and a cigarette vendor in the inevitable smoker, utilized what had been a series of work rooms.

The building stands today as a fitting memorial of Samuel Marino's artistic and practical sense, of his ingenuity and craftsmanship in preserving the old while exploring the new. Ochre Court retains the grand manner of the era in which it was built. Indeed, the inscription over the fireplace in the Great Hall still holds true--Ex Candore Decus, Beauty from Splendor.

The question naturally arises as to the relinquishment by the Goelets of a mansion remarkable for its architectural splendor and select location. The circumstances that brought this about have their roots in the economic changes that resulted from the stock market crash of 1929. The Great Depression of the 1930's gradually had its impact on Newport society and foreshadowed the end of the Gilded Age.⁴²

The depletion of many of the fortunes and the consequent inability to retain a corps of servants required for the upkeep of "the cottages" contributed greatly to what was called "the Cottage Clearance."⁴³ More than anything else, the passage by Congress on August 30, 1935, of the Revenue Act of 1935 was the greatest determining factor in this situation. It marked the climax of President Roosevelt's campaign to democratize the federal tax structure and encourage the wider distribution of wealth.⁴⁴ Furthermore, these crucial years of the thirties and forties saw

⁴² C. P. B. Jeffrey, *Newport 1639-1976* (Newport, R.I.: Newport Historical Society, 1976), p. 53

⁴³ Cleveland Amory, *The Last Resorts* (New York: Harper, 1948), p. 243

⁴⁴ Link, p. 418

the leveling of the social structures that so characterized the 1890's.⁴⁵ Indeed, in 1946, when Robert Goelet offered Ochre Court to his daughter, then at Vassar, it is said that she turned it down with the statement that the thought of living there "oppressed her."⁴⁶ The times, indeed, had changed.

In addition to the renovation of Ochre Court in the interval between March and September, attention was also given to business matters attendant upon its acquisition and operation. Among these was the confirmation of the exemption of Salve Regina College by the Treasury Department from filing income tax returns and also from income tax gifts made to the College. At the regular meeting of the Corporation held May 16, 1947, it was unanimously voted that the power of assuming any financial obligations that would arise in the interest of the College would be invested in the Board of Directors instead of the Mother Provincial. It was likewise determined, at this time, to borrow the sum of one hundred sixty thousand dollars for the alterations, furnishings, and equipment for the College. While the borrowing of money was a constant concern of the College corporation, the gift of money was a pleasant and often unexpected and much appreciated expression of interest and generosity. As early as November 1947, the College was the recipient of what may well be its first such gift.

At a confirmation in Manville, Bishop Keough met, as he said, "a saintly soul" who opened her pocketbook and emptied into his hand a sum of money which "all told amounted to seven dollars for the new project in Newport." She refused to give her name and did not want even an expression of thanks.

Mother Mary Matthew received a letter from the Bishop with a check for seven dollars enclosed. "To me," he said, "it was very evident a great sacrifice, the widow's mite not in material value, but a gift with the blessing of God behind it."

Immediately upon the transfer of Ochre Court to Salve Regina College, a *Registration Office* was also opened at St. Xavier Convent beginning on March 24 and closing on April 12. Of the hundred applicants, fifty-eight were accepted. The new staff of the College came to be comprised of the following: Mother Mary Matthew Doyle - President; Sister Mary Hilda Miley - Vice President; Sister Mary James O'Hare - Dean; Sister Mary Martina Conley - Registrar and History teacher; Sister Mary Catherine Durkin - Librarian and Superior. The Departments of French, English, Home Economics, Mathematics, and Music were to be under the supervision of Sister Mary Ignatius Hines, Sister Mary Evangelista Scanlan, Sister Mary Martha Quinn, Sister Mary Rose Agnes Cavanaugh, and Sister Mary Rosina Lynch, respectively.

From August 28 until September 20, Sister Mary James, Sister Martina, Sister Rose Agnes, and Sister Mary Catherine lived in St. Mary's Convent, Newport. Twice each day they traveled back and forth to the College spending their time typing, mimeographing, arranging books—in fact, doing whatever had to be done. The architect, Mr. Samuel Marino, was also in their midst, directing the installation of ducts, the drilling of holes, and, in general, raising fine marble dust that seemingly had to be removed every hour of the day. These workmen worked overtime nights, Saturdays, and Sundays in order to have the College ready for entrants on Sunday, September 21st.

⁴⁵ Richard O'Connor, *The Golden Summers* (Toronto: Longman, 1947), p. 307

⁴⁶ Amory, p. 243

On Saturday, September 20, 1947, the other four members of the faculty arrived: Sisters Mary Ignatius, Evangelista, Martha, and Rosina. Needless to say, they were somewhat dismayed by the hustle and bustle going on when they realized that the full complement of the students were to arrive on September 22. The entire staff of eight Sisters were honored at a farewell dinner at St. Mary's. The first faculty meeting was held in St. Mary's Convent community room after dinner. Sister Mary James, Dean, presided, opening the meeting with a prayer. Plans were discussed, instructions given, programs distributed. Thus armed, they said good-bye to the Sisters at St. Mary's and officially entered Salve Regina College. It was Sunday, September 21, 1947, the feast of St. Matthew, patron saint of the President, Mother Mary Matthew and birthday in heaven of Hermanus Contractus, alleged author of the anthem, *Salve Regina*.

On the same day the first students arrived. The first to register, but the last to arrive was Patricia Dooley; the first to arrive, but last to register was Eileen Schwenk. Mother Mary Matthew and Mother Hilda greeted the students and their parents. It took some time to group the girls in their respective dormitories and place a name and greeting on each pillow, while at the same time the men were arranging furniture! What a disappointment to find that not all the beds had arrived. Some found it a lark to sleep on mattresses on the floor and gaily camped out for the night.

September 22 was a busy day with the arrival of the day students, registration, orientation, and tests. Michael F. Walsh, Director of Education in Rhode Island, welcomed the faculty and the students "as an integral part of the educational system of Rhode Island." All told, students were registered from Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and British Honduras.

Details for the blessing and opening of the College on Mercy Day, September 24, 1947, were finalized. This simple but significant ceremony included the procession and blessing of the College building and grounds by Bishop Keough at 10:00 a.m., followed by Mass in the chapel at 10:30 a.m. The homilist for the occasion was Reverend John Kenny, Assistant Superintendent of Diocesan Schools. He congratulated the students and faculty and stressed the importance of a Christian education in the modern world. The music was provided by the fifty-eight college students in white dresses and blue veils. At this time the anthem, *Salve Regina*, became the official hymn of the College.

Among the clergy attending were the following: Monsignor Peter E. Blessing, Vicar General of the Diocese of Providence; Reverend Peter A. Fahey of Pawtucket, and Reverend Patrick J. McGee of North Attleboro; Very Reverend Joseph R. Slavin, O.P., President of Providence College; the Reverend Daniel M. Galliher, O.P., Registrar of Providence College; and Reverend Vincent C. Dore, O.P., Dean of Providence College; the Reverend Russell J. McVinney, Rector of Our Lady of Providence Seminary; the Reverend Dom Gregory Borgsladt, O.S.B., Headmaster of Portsmouth Priory; and many other clergymen from Providence and Fall River.

Among the distinguished officials present were the following: Mayor Dennis J. Roberts of Providence; Chief Justice Edmund J. Flynn; Dr. Michael J. Walsh, State Director of Education; James P. Hanley, Superintendent of Providence Public Schools; Dr. Lucius A. Whipple, President of Rhode Island College of Education; Dr. Harry Nugent, Speech Instructor at Providence College; and Alderman Charles E. Maloney, representing the City of Newport.

Mr. and Mrs. Goelet were among the honored guests in addition to the Sisters of the Holy Ghost and the Sisters of St. Joseph.

At the conclusion of the Mass, Bishop Keough extended to Mr. and Mrs. Goelet his heartfelt thanks as well as that of the students and faculty for their "magnanimous gift." In asking the girls to remember their benefactors, he reminded them that the school was open to all, regardless of race, color, or creed.

A luncheon and reception followed the Mass. The College was then open from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. for afternoon guests. The day concluded with Benediction.

Excellent coverage of this event highlighted in each case by a variety of well-chosen pictures, appeared in the *Newport Daily News* of September 24, 1947, and in both the *Providence Journal* and the *Providence Visitor* on September 25, 1947.

The stage is set, Ochre Court in readiness, the faculty and students waiting in the wings, so to speak, to bring to fruition the ideals and goals set forward in the Charter, the course of study, and in the meetings and discussions conducted from 1934 to 1947. A dream has become a reality; the reality, a responsibility; the responsibility, a sacred trust.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ Except for the references cited, sources for this chapter are found in the Salve Regina University Archives.