St. Anthony High School
1880 - 1971
St. Anthony Church, 1852
Story of a School

When Saint Anthony High School comes to an end in June, 1971, it will have completed some ninety years of service to Christian secondary education and the development of American citizenship in Minnesota. Its high school curriculum is said to have been launched about the year 1880, but actually its origins go back to the pioneer school opened in the village of St. Anthony Falls in the fall of 1853. It has always been a parish school, and its roots are deeply buried in the history of the parish.

The parish of Saint Anthony of Padua grew out of an early mission established in 1849 by Father Augustine Ravoux, a French missionary who played an important part in the early days of the diocese of Saint Paul. In his travels up and down the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers, Father Ravoux saw the need of a Catholic church for the many French-Canadian and European immigrants who had settled in the area of “the Falls”. In 1849, Father Ravoux began the building of a church which, although it was not completed until 1851, became the nucleus of the parish which developed there during the last one-hundred and twenty years.

The settlement of Saint Anthony Falls, which came after some years to be known simply as “St. Anthony” was, because of its proximity to the Falls discovered and named by Father Hennepin, a land of promise. The water power in the 1840’s had already been harnessed by the government with headquarters at Fort Snelling, to build a flour and a saw mill. The 1840’s and 1850’s were a “boom” period, when land is said to have sold for $1.25 an acre, and when the first territorial legislature selected St. Anthony as the site of a future Minnesota university. The area in which St. Anthony parish grew is referred to in the earliest newspapers of the time as “upper town”, now northeast Minneapolis.

The people in 1849 were hardy pioneers, some fur-traders coming by ox-cart or dog-train from the Red River valley, some prospectors from the east who came by way of Fort Snelling to follow up the possibilities of the flour and lumber industries on this advantageous point
of the Mississippi, some European immigrants following their missionaries to seek a new living in this land of promise.

It was because of this young and growing population, predominantly French in origin, but gradually attracting Irish and German and other immigrants from the Catholic countries of Europe, that Bishop Cretin, who came to the new Diocese of St. Paul in 1851 as its first bishop, saw the need of a permanent pastorate and a Catholic school. He appointed Father D. Ledon, also a French missionary priest, as St. Anthony's first pastor. Financial difficulties had always harassed these early pioneers, but Father Ledon succeeded in completing the little frame church begun by Father Ravoux. It was dedicated by Bishop Cretin in July, 1852.

Fortunately for the subsequent history of the parish, the grounds donated for the parish site were generous. A record book which still exists in the parish archives names Pierre Bottineau as the donor of fourteen lots, and three other donors of one and a half acres each for the building of a Catholic church. This land was destined to be also the site of the parish school which grew up there.

Father Ledon then turned his attention to the school. At his request and that of Bishop Cretin, three Sisters of Saint Joseph, lately arrived from St. Louis to work in the new diocese, came to St. Anthony Falls in November, 1853. They were Sister Philomene Vilaine, who had come to St. Louis from France in 1836, Sister Ursula Murphy, and Bridget Maloney, a postulant.

![St. Mary's Convent School, 1854](image-url)
There was, of course, no school building in the area; so during the first year the Sisters taught in very primitive conditions, occupying an abandoned house which had been the headquarters of fur traders. This was an elementary school of two rooms, one for the boys and one for the girls, similar in character to the isolated “country schools” which subsequently multiplied throughout the land. Emphasis on the three R’s and on religion predominated, and both English and French were spoken. The simple needs of the school were supplied by the parish. In the record book mentioned above, there is an interesting account book kept presumably by Father Ledon and his successor listing the bills paid for the upkeep of the Sisters and of the school in its early years. Cords of wood for fuel, sacks of flour and of potatoes, and other elemental supplies furnished the bare necessities of life.

But by the fall of 1854, Father Ledon had built a combined convent and school known from its opening as St. Mary’s Convent School. This was a rectangular frame building of two and a-half stories with five rooms on each floor, the upper floor intended for the Sisters’ residence. On the first floor there were two classrooms, again one for the boys and one for the girls, a music room, a parlor, and a kitchen. It was not long before the second floor was converted into a boarding school when the Sisters were asked to take in three children whose parents had both succumbed to the cholera epidemic of 1853. The Sisters who came here in 1854, were Sister Scholastica Vasques, Sister Euphemia Murray, and Sister Gregory LeMay. The latter was the first Sister to receive the habit of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Saint Paul.

This school was built on the site where the present St. Anthony Convent stands.

It was, for its day, an achievement, as is testified by the publicity given it in The St. Anthony Express of October 27, 1855.

“The Congregation [of St. Anthony Parish] without foreign aid has erected a large and convenient school, 45 feet by 30, and two and a half stories high. The school is under the direction of five Sisters of Charity of Saint Joseph, from St. Louis, Missouri. They are able to accommodate thirty boarders and eighty scholars. The attendance varies from 40 to 50, and is steadily increasing. Instruction at present is only given in English, although, if desired, instruction will be given in all different branches in French, and also music. Although the school is under the immediate supervision of the Catholic denomination, it is by no means intended as a Sectarian school, and those pupils who do not wish to attend upon the religious exercises or instruction there
given, are not required to do so. The coming spring the grounds will be adorned with shade trees and enclosed with a neat fence.”

This glowing account was characteristic of the early Minnesota newspapers who wanted more than anything else to attract newcomers to the territory.

But the story told by Sister Ignatius Cox has a different coloring. Sister Ignatius was the first English speaking postulant to become a Sister of St. Joseph in the St. Paul province. Assigned to the new school in 1855, she reached it by stagecoach from Saint Paul and saw before her a new building which stood “square and bare on the northeast corner of a fenceless piece of property, and had just received the first coat of paint.” Inside, the woodwork was of the most primitive kind, unfinished and unpainted. The classroom furnishings consisted of long bare desks and benches, and a teacher’s desk and chair — all equally unfinished. A picture of this building with its teachers and pupils may be found in the school archives, though it may have been taken in its later years.

It is unlikely, however, that the building remained long in this raw state. Since it served as the Catholic school of the area until the 1880’s it is reasonable to suppose that with a growing enrollment and a stabilizing financial income, the Sisters saw to it that improvements were made year by year to bring the school building into a state of respectability and permanence. The picture referred to above, for instance, has blinds on the windows of a color contrasting with that of the house. Except for a break of a few months in 1860, when the Sisters were recalled to St. Paul because the parish had no resident pastor and inadequate means of support, the history of education at St. Anthony’s has been continuous until 1971.

When Father John McDermott became the third pastor of the parish in 1860, he set about to complete the stone church which had been the dream of his two predecessors and of Father Ravoux. Begun by Father Fayolle, second pastor, whose illness and financial difficulties had slowed up the construction, it was completed by Father McDermott and dedicated by Bishop Cretin in 1861, on the site where it now stands as the “Mother Church” of Minneapolis. It has gone through several alterations, especially in its facade, but the body of the Church is identical with the 1860-61 structure. The last alteration made in 1947 is said to have restored the Church to its original architectural plan.

At this time, 1861, the old frame church was moved to the corner
St. Anthony Church, 1890
of Second Street and Eighth Avenue, and along with an old store building procured by Father McDermott was used as a school for some years. St. Mary’s Convent School across the Avenue had become, as the years after 1860 went on, a private boarding and day school for girls. It appears then that this church and store combination taking care of day students, boys and girls, was the immediate forerunner of the parish school built during the pastorate of Father Felix Tissot (1866–1887).

This building completed some time in the early 1880’s was a gray stone structure. All the stone for the Church and school is said to have come from neighboring quarries. It was a two-story building, facing Second Street, with a central stairway opening both to the east and west, and two large classrooms on each floor. It had long Gothic windows and pointed gables with a red trim, and was no doubt an imposing building in its day. To the north and south of it there was adequate playground space, the only other buildings in the block being the church and the rectory facing Ninth Avenue, also built by Father Tissot.

It was at this time that St. Mary’s Convent School was discontinued, and all students were henceforth enrolled in the parish school.

It was at this time also that a high school curriculum was inaugurated and its first class of three was graduated in 1883. By this time,
the town of St. Anthony had been incorporated into the city of Minneapolis by an act of the State Legislature, bringing to an end the deep rivalry that had sharpened as the west side city had gradually grown larger and more prosperous than its east side neighbor. In one of the weekly papers published in St. Anthony as late as 1870, we find: “If you have money, invest now — before St. Anthony annexes Saint Paul and Minneapolis, for then there will be an increase in the value of real estate”. Inevitably the increase in value did occur, even in that part of Minneapolis henceforth known as Northeast.

The growth of the school after the introduction of the high school course and in consequence of the ever expanding Catholic population soon necessitated further building. It was in 1890 during the pastorate of Father James O'Reilly that a yellow brick building was built on the corner of Second Street and Eighth Avenue. The old frame church had been some time before sold to a neighboring parish where it again served as a temporary school.

The yellow brick building provided three large classrooms on the first floor for the use of the primary grades, and on the second floor an auditorium for school and parish use. In the rear of the auditorium and adjoining it was a meeting known as “The Temperance Room” because it was sponsored and used by the Father Matthews Temperance Society. By days, this meeting room was used for high school classes until the building was demolished.
By the end of the century, then, the St. Anthony parish block was graced by four buildings, the church on Main Street, the parish rectory on Ninth Avenue midway between Main and Second Streets, the two school buildings facing Second Street. Meantime, across Eighth Avenue the Sisters of St. Joseph had in 1888 replaced the old convent-school by a new convent which has ever since housed the Sister faculty and the music department of the school. The historic old St. Mary’s was sold and moved away, and is said to have been converted into an apartment house.

The enrollment in the high school department inaugurated in the 1880’s was relatively small. Because of financial and space limitations, registration was restricted almost entirely to families of the parish. It is also true that the tradition of a high school diploma as a “must” had not yet been established in the late nineteenth century.

There were other factors, too. The financial depression of the 1890’s, then referred to as “the panic”, reduced enrollment in all tuition schools, even though the tuition, from any point of view, was quite minimal. Then, too, the high school course was a three-year one leading to a high school diploma, but not to accreditation for college entrance. This seems to have been a traditional pattern in Catholic schools at this time, as it appears in the beginnings of De La Salle and other archdiocesan high schools. This remained the case at St. Anthony’s to and through the 1912 graduating class, the 1914 class being the first to receive four-year diplomas.

Of the high school during these thirty years we know only a few facts. It developed a standard academic curriculum but without benefit of science laboratories, library, or gymnasium. Besides the religion courses, students were required to take three years of English, three of Latin, two years of mathematics (algebra and geometry) two years of history and/or civil government, physiology and anatomy (studied through books and pictures) physics and physical geography (likewise), and special instruction in speech, choral, and good manners. Piano lessons were taught at the convent. A graduate wishing college entrance usually could qualify by taking entrance tests, and making up a fourth year of English and perhaps one or two other requirements. Not many of the graduates of this era went to college. But it is a notable fact that most of their children did!

We know, too, that during the latter part of the century and until the opening of De La Salle High School for boys, St. Anthony High School was co-educational. The Brothers of the Christian Schools had
been in the Archdiocese of Saint Paul for some years, but it was not until the turn of the century that Archbishop Ireland induced the Brothers to staff a high school for boys. This school, the first Catholic school for boys in Minneapolis, opening in 1900 and known as Hennepin Institute, was built on Nicollet Island, where it has since developed. Before its first class of thirteen was graduated in 1903, the name was changed to De La Salle Institute. Its emphasis for the early years over and above its strongly religious program was on business training. But like St. Anthony's, it soon developed a four year standard college entrance program and became an accredited and highly respected school. Its alumni, now spread throughout the country, have been known for civil and church leadership.

We know, too, that during these years at St. Anthony High School, a fine esprit-de-corps had developed. This was due, no doubt, to the small numbers, the example of dedicated teachers, the close-knit bond that united the children of the parish and their families, and the faith and ideals they all shared. This probably would be considered a ghetto existence today. But it had its strengths. For out of it grew deep, deep loyalties, loyalties to their faith, their Church, their School, their country, and to each other — all of these so necessary to a minority group, such as Catholics were, if they were to establish their own identity in the new world of Minnesota.
The present school building at Saint Anthony's, on the corner of Second Street and Ninth Avenue was planned and begun in 1914 by Father Patrick Kenny who had become pastor in 1910 when Father James O'Reilly became Bishop of Fargo. It was completed in 1915 by his successor, Father E. J. Wilbee. Here for the first time were laboratories and library, gymnasium and auditorium, and, for that time, adequate classrooms. By 1970 standards, or even earlier, it was not luxurious. Radio, TV, cinema as educational media, modular scheduling, were still unknown; but the building was considered quite modern. The faculty, still almost entirely of Sisters of St. Joseph, were alert and progressive. Through their dedicated efforts, the high school was accredited by the University of Minnesota in 1924, and has ever since maintained the standards necessary for such accreditation.

St. Anthony High School has always been a parish-centered high school, the only one of its kind in Minneapolis. But as greater facilities were available after 1915, and its diploma was recognized for college entrance after 1924, students applied in increasing numbers from other parishes in the city. By 1960, as many as thirty-five parishes were represented on its student roster. The bourgeoning high school applicants in the 1940's and 1950's necessitated more space. But the costs of educating were rising, and it was not until the late 1950's, that another building program could be launched. Under the pastorate of Father Francis Lang, who had been encouraged by a promise of assistance from The Archbishop Brady High School Drive, construction began on a $400,000 addition to and renovation of the 1915 building. Part of the cost was covered by the Drive funds, the rest of the indebtedness assumed by the parish. The new wing, separate but adjoining the old, since its opening in 1960 has housed the grade school, leaving to the high school the 1915 building with more classroom space and an addition which included a new library, new laboratories, and new business and administrative offices.

Looking back, on the history of the high school since 1880, one might think of it as comprising two almost equal periods, its beginnings until its accreditation in 1924, and from that time to the present.

Of this latter period we have many more records. Better known, as it grew, to the public news media, it has frequently been in print and on radio and TV. Its official school records are more available. And its student publications reveal year by year the changing character of the school.
The Paduan, a yearbook published by the students between 1925 and 1959, with a long break during the 1930 depression and the 1940 war years, tells a vivid story. Insight, a small journal published by the journalism class three or four times a year between 1959 to 1969, keeps one aware of the changing times during that decade. The student newspaper, The Anthonian, published five times a year from 1939 to 1959, was a sprightly journal, planned, written, and edited with considerable talent, so much so that from its inception, it won the highest rating from the Catholic School Press Association, and frequently was rated “School Newspaper of Distinction”. There is also available in the parish records, a weekly bulletin, The Saint Anthony Herald, published by the pastor from 1946 through 1949, reporting parish and school news, while St. Anthony’s was preparing for the celebration of its centennial year in 1949.

These publications tell us about everything that goes to make up a typical modern high school with a Christian orientation, and especially of the spirit that pervaded and united it for the last half century.

They tell us of the gradual growth in enrollment and the changing character of the student body. The number of graduates rises from 18 in 1925 to 112 in 1964, its peak year. Coming as the students did from widespread parishes in Minneapolis and its suburbs, their ranks represented different racial cultures and as many as twenty different national origins, including exchange students directly from France and Germany — a fact which gave richness to their personal associations and educational experience.

In the faculty, too, we learn of change — not only in the additional numbers needed for the expanding enrollment, but also in the increasingly high qualifications and specializations demanded of the American standardized high school staff. The lay teacher in these years comes to play an important role. Students at St. Anthony High School had always enjoyed the experience of part-time lay teachers in specialized fields, such as Drama, Voice, Speech, and Choral; but for the earlier years, the school was almost entirely staffed by the Sisters of Saint Joseph. The dedicated Christian lay teacher comes during these later years to be a necessary and integral part of the faculty. Students and faculty of this era will remember as an outstanding example the devoted service of Mrs. Mary Rice McDonald who, for forty years, was a well-loved teacher, counselor, and friend to all.

We see, too, the curriculum changing, opening out to the needs of contemporary life. To the strongly academic core subjects were added
St. Anthony High School classes and activities, 1971
such courses as home economics, business, physical education, journalism, and required units of Social Problems. These with new methods of teaching made possible by new equipment, such as films, recordings, and other audio-visual aids, helped to keep the school in tune with its times. Modular scheduling with its emphasis on more independent and more responsible study appears in more recent years.

The students, too, enjoyed the co-curricular inspiration of the Minneapolis Symphony concerts, of good drama, music, and lectures available on the civic scene. That these, along with their teachers, had their impact on student growth is reflected in the obviously growing appreciation of good literature, music, and art.

We find a good picture, too, of a busy student life, such as one finds in a typical American girls' high school. We learn that the uniform was adopted in 1926 and went through various adaptations; and that the “cap-and-gown” graduation pictures first appear in the 1943 Paduan. We read of the ups-and-downs of the Student Council and the shifting opinions about student government. We read of a prevailing interest in athletics, and some fierce competitions in basketball. There are fashion columns, articles on hair styles, on the inevitable “pet peeves”; and fine editorials on dating, on smoking, on “following

St. Anthony Church, 1971
the crowd”. The annual social event of first importance over the years was the Junior-Senior Prom, seconded by the Mardi-Gras celebration, the earnings of which contributed to the J.S. and many other fine causes.

On the religious side, there are evidences of the Liturgical Movement and the changing forms of public worship. Students prepared for and attended the Eucharistic Congress of 1941 and the Eucharistic devotions it fostered. As Catholics, they shared in the proceedings of the epoch-making Second Vatican Council and its influence on Catholic thought and teaching. There is a new interest, born of the Council’s teaching on ecumenism and the brotherhood of all men, in the challenges of Christian living in the modern world. Concern for racial justice, for the issues of war and peace, for the problems of youth and of the aged, is expressed in action. Students enter into apostolic works. They become involved in volunteer hospital work, as aides in homes for the aged, in Red Cross work, in the needs of the poor, and in the understanding of other religious denominations.

As the changes of the years are reflected in these pages, so are the difficulties. The financial problems of a school relying almost solely on tuition, with no state aid or wealthy benefactions, are always critical. To supplement its income each year, there were the assistance of the parish, the countless fund-raising activities of the student clubs and organizations, and the support of the Parent-Teachers association. The Patroness Society, the mothers’ group established in 1943, was one of its greatest benefactors. Many of the material improvements in the school were made possible by this group of parents.

St. Anthony School was born in Minnesota territorial days. It antedated and witnessed Minnesota statehood. Its history stretches out over five wars and far into the sixth. It has served, as a Catholic school, under the leadership of eight popes and seven diocesan bishops. It has survived several financial crises on the national scene, and many of its own.

Its faculty, students, and alumni have been aware of its unique history as the first Catholic school in the city of Minneapolis, and of its pioneer struggles to survive. In 1933, all joined in celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the high school by honoring the three graduates of 1883, all then living. Again in 1958, they observed the seventy-fifth anniversary. And because of its roots in the parish, they joined
the pastor and the people in the week-long festivities marking the 1949 centennial of the parish.

The alumni of the school have shed luster on its name. Many of them have been, women and men, successful and prominent in business and professional life. Many have shown leadership in the Church and in civic life.

But most of all they have been known as faithful bearers of the Christian message as they dispersed throughout the city and the land. This is the purpose of the Catholic school. It has been achieved at St. Anthony's for this more than a century of progress only through the dedicated and heroic lives of priests, Sisters of Saint Joseph, and faithful laity — all of whom have had an abiding faith in its mission.
This sketch was written by Sister Antonine O’Brien, C.S.J. The material for it was gathered from:

- The archives of St. Anthony Parish
- The archives of St. Anthony School
- The archives of St. Paul Seminary
- The *History of the Sisters of St. Joseph, St. Paul Province* by Sister Helen Angela Hurley