

# Georgetown University: A Brief History

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"Congratulations, venerable Mother . . . ! You alone, among all the colleges, have lived as long as the republic."

That inscription, in Latin, greeting the visitors to the celebration of the completion of Georgetown's first century in 1889, reminded them of the University's unique origin as an American Catholic institution of higher learning. Two seemingly unrelated events created the conditions for this establishment of the first Catholic college in the United States: the Suppression of the Society of Jesus and the American Revolution. When Pope Clement XIV, under pressure from the courts of Europe, suppressed the Jesuit order in 1773, Reverend John Carroll, a Marylander who had entered the Society in Europe in 1753, and remained there to teach in Jesuit colleges, returned home in 1774. Had the Society not been suppressed, it is highly unlikely that Carroll would ever have seen America again. A year later he became a staunch supporter of the revolution against England. For Catholics the revolution meant the opportunity to free themselves from the civil disabilities that had plagued them and other minorities in most colonies, including Maryland. With independence Catholics were now able, at least theoretically, to vote, hold office, worship publicly, and educate their children in their own schools.

No one saw more clearly the needs and possibilities for the education of the Catholic community in the young republic than did Carroll, whom Rome appointed as first head of the American Church in 1784. Carroll wanted to take full advantage of the unprecedented freedom given to the Church in the United States to establish a school in the liberal arts tradition that had so distinguished Jesuit education for more than 200 years. He wanted his academy to be "the mainsheet anchor" of American Catholics, an institution that could uniquely "give consistency to our religious views in this country," by fostering an education that would combine the best of the Catholic and republican cultures. Under Bishop Carroll's leadership, ex-Jesuits established Georgetown in the late 1780s. In 1789 he secured the deed to some sixty acres of ground on a hill overlooking the village of Georgetown, a thriving tobacco port in Maryland. A few months before the academy opened in January 1792 the bishop learned that the capital would be established in the neighborhood. It "gives a weight to our establishment," he noted, "which I little thought of when I recommended that situation."

Lack of resources—money, faculty, and students—severely crippled the College during its first two decades. With the partial restoration of the Society of Jesus in 1805, the order was given the direction of the institution. For the next forty years European Jesuits constituted a substantial portion of the faculty and were responsible for the significant contributions that Georgetown made in the sciences in the second half of the century, most notably in astronomy. A year after the complete restoration of the order in 1814, the College secured its first charter from the United States government. In accordance with Carroll's determination that his academy "open to Students of every religious Profession," nearly a fifth of the students during the first ten years were Protestants. By the 1830s Jews were attending the College. Throughout the nineteenth century religious pluralism characterized Georgetown's student population.

From the beginning, Georgetown was a national, indeed international school. Its proximity to Washington with its diplomatic community was obviously a major reason for its cosmopolitan character but not an exclusive one (in the 1790s, for instance, nearly 20 percent of the students came from the West Indies). Its faculty was as diverse in origin as its students, not only Jesuit emigrés from Poland, Italy, Germany, and Belgium, but also Sulpician refugees from France between 1791 and 1815.

By and large, however, Georgetown was a southern college in the antebellum period. Of its alumni who served in the Civil War, more than four-fifths were Confederates. The war nearly closed the College. The student enrollment fell from 313 in 1859 to 17 in fall 1861. Federal troops briefly occupied the campus in the first month of the war. In fall 1862 several of the College buildings were turned into a hospital for four months after the Second Battle of Bull Run (Manassas, Virginia).

In the postwar decades, the College increasingly became more northern and Catholic, but the majority of students continued to range between the ages of 10 and 16. By 1871 Georgetown comprised not only the College on the hilltop, but also two professional schools of medicine and law in the city, founded by local doctors and lawyers in 1849 and 1870, respectively. Two presidents in the last three decades of the century attempted to convert these loosely connected schools into a university. Reverend Patrick Healy, S.J., the son of a Georgia planter and his common-law slave wife, as prefect of studies (1868–1878) and president (1873–1881) reformed the College's curriculum, with a new emphasis on history and the natural sciences. To provide adequate library, classroom, laboratory, and residential facilities, he constructed the magnificent Flemish Renaissance structure that now bears his name. At the professional level he oversaw the lengthening of the programs in both medical and legal education from two to three years. In 1880, he founded the Alumni Association.

Reverend Joseph Havens Richards, S.J., the son of an Episcopal priest, continued Healy's efforts during his decade-long presidency (1888–1898). Richards began graduate courses in the arts and sciences, built new facilities for the law and medical schools, including a hospital, and thwarted efforts to transfer the professional schools to the new Catholic University of America. During these years Georgetown began to establish a national reputation in baseball and football. Expansion at the professional level continued in the new century. The Washington Dental College was acquired in 1901. Three years later the nursing school was founded to provide support for the University Hospital. By 1914 the total University population was 1,378, of whom 912 were in the law school, one of the nation's largest, and exclusively a night school until 1921. (A college degree was not yet required to study law.) Dr. George Kober, dean from 1901 to 1927, ably led the medical school through the period of reform that revolutionized American medicine in the early part of this century.

World War I caused a brief decline in the professional schools. On the main campus the entire student body was mobilized by law into the Students' Army Training Corps. In 1919 the Preparatory School completed its separation from the University with its relocation in suburban Maryland. That same year the School of Foreign Service was founded under the direction of earlier Jesuits and Reverend Edmund Walsh, S.J., to prepare students for careers in diplomacy or international business. Within five years the enrollment reached 500.

In the 1920s, University enrollment nearly doubled, with substantial increases in all schools, except law. New facilities—New North, Copley, White-Gravenor, the Medical-Dental building—reflected the

growth. The football team, a national power since 1914, peaked under Coach Lou Little in the late twenties.

The Depression was a period of consolidation for Georgetown. Under the presidency of Reverend Arthur O'Leary, S.J., the Graduate School was formally organized and faculty recruited for selective programs in mathematics, the natural sciences, economics, history, and government. O'Leary also revitalized the Alumni Association with James Ruby as first director. He was also responsible for the brief revival of intercollegiate football under Jack Hagerty in the years preceding World War II.

The second "Great War" transformed the main campus from a college to a testing center for the Army Specialized Training Center. By 1943 there were but 130 students at the law school. The medical school alone kept its prewar enrollment. In 1944 the Graduate School admitted women for the first time.

As in the 1920s enrollment virtually doubled, as the GI Bill® opened the University's doors to many who could not have considered such an education before the war. Temporary buildings accommodated the overflow of students. Substantial numbers of lay faculty were hired on the main campus and at the Medical Center. The new hospital was opened in 1947. Under the presidency of Reverend Edward J. Bunn, S.J. (1952–1964), the University entered the modern world of higher education with the restructuring of schools and the introduction of professional standards for faculty. Two new schools were established from the School of Foreign Service: the School of Languages and Linguistics (1949) and the School of Business (1955). The School for Summer and Continuing Education, now the School for Continuing Studies, was organized in the 1950s.

Recent decades have been a remarkable period of growth and achievement for the University, with Georgetown taking its place among the nation's leading institutions of higher education. The Walsh School of Foreign Service opened its campus in Doha, Qatar in 2005 and welcomed 25 undergraduate students. SFS-Q alumni now number more than 300. The McCourt School of Public Policy, founded in 2013, offers four graduate degree programs and nine dual degree programs.

Georgetown is dedicated to excellence in undergraduate education, and its undergraduate students rank among the finest in the country, as the growing number of Rhodes, Marshall, and Mellon fellowships won over the past several years attests. Their faculty are accomplished in teaching and research. The University is home to leading centers of scholarship in a variety of academic disciplines such as German and European Studies, Contemporary Arab Studies, and Muslim-Christian Understanding. The Medical Center continues to build upon its tradition of excellence in education, research, and patient care, establishing itself as a leader in the interdisciplinary fields of cancer research, child development, and the neurosciences, as well as the ethical dimensions of science and medicine. The Law Center ranks among the top law schools in the nation in the quality of its faculty and programs, gaining particular distinction for its leading clinical and international programs.

Now in its third century of service, and in all of its endeavors to sustain and strengthen its position among the nation's leading institutions of higher education, Georgetown remains committed to its founder's vision and its Catholic and Jesuit tradition, striving to educate new generations of capable and responsible leaders and undertaking inquiry, contemplation, and discourse which advance human knowledge and, in turn, the common good.