

The Sisters of Saint Joseph laid the foundation for Chestnut Hill College with the cornerstone of St. Joseph Hall. All three are still going strong.

Standing Tall for a Century



St. Joseph Hall has changed little over the decades and continues to embody the heart and soul of both Chestnut Hill College and the Sisters of Saint Joseph.

*By Marilee
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Looking proudly out over Chestnut Hill College's campus, the six-story St. Joseph Hall stands as a reminder of the strength and dedication of the women who founded the College and built the building. Even those who

have walked its halls, studied in its classrooms and attended social events in the Rotunda may not know fully how intrinsic the structure is to the College's history. Built in 1901, St. Joseph Hall was the



first — and only — building for some time. And in the intervening decades, it has come to represent contemporary Chestnut Hill College and is still the campus centerpiece.

St. Joseph Hall and Chestnut Hill College were born from a vision that existed well before the first stone was laid. The story begins in the year 1650, in the small town of Le Puy-en-Velay in France, where Jesuit missionary, Jean-Pierre Medaille SJ, organized a congregation of six religious women whose purpose was (according to the congregation’s official formula for incorporation) to attend to “the instruction of girls, the care of orphans, and the visiting of hospitals and the sick.”

This was a revolutionary idea at the time. Instead of remaining in the cloistered environment of the nunnery, the women integrated themselves into the local community in order to serve the marginalized and underserved.

These women would come to be known as the Sisters of Saint Joseph or SSJs for short, named in honor of their patron, St. Joseph, whose life and virtue would be at the heart of the Sisters’ mission from their earliest days until the present. As Sister Roberta Archibald, archivist for the Sisters of Saint Joseph, wrote in her article, *Why Joseph?*, “Medaille called on Joseph to model a way of loving that is inclusive and active — love delivered through presence that is stirring and vivifying. What better model of the contemplative life in action could Father Medaille have given to our first sisters and to us than Saint Joseph?”

More than 350 years later, the impact of the SSJs is still felt, as is their direct influence. Over 40 sisters, the most of any SSJ college and among the most of any singular sponsored work, still teach and work

at the same place many of them graduated from as students. While they no longer share dormitory space in Fournier Hall like the early days, the Sisters are just as present on campus and their mission is very much entwined with that of the College’s own.

In the beginning

Chestnut Hill College may have begun with only St. Joseph Hall, but through the efforts of the SSJ Congregation and their commitment to the education of women, one building soon grew into two and two into three.

The gym, which was once housed on the fifth floor of St. Joseph Hall, now has its own space in the modern Sorgenti Arena in Martino Hall. The library too, which overflowed with books and students in the west wing of the second floor, also has its own building — Logue Library.

To know and love Chestnut Hill College is to know and love this iconic building and campus gem, and just as importantly, the women whose efforts and perseverance are responsible for its very envisioning and creation.

Building a legacy

In 1847, while visiting his brother in St. Louis, Mo., the American city in which the SSJs began their work on this continent, Bishop Francis Patrick Kendrick, third bishop of Philadelphia, was inspired and asked for volunteers to minister to his diocese. Four women, led by Mother St. John Fournier (CHC’s Fournier Hall is named after her) traveled to Philadelphia.

Shortly after they arrived, the SSJs settled in Chestnut Hill, deciding it was perfect location for their motherhouse — and it still is today. With the support and aid of Bishop St. John Neumann, a pioneer in Catholic education who is known as Father of the Parochial School System, the Sisters purchased an expansive mansion and grounds known as Monticello from John Middleton. Then, in 1875, they bought the summer home of John Bullitt, known as Ridgeway. These combined properties became the home of the novitiate, Mount St. Joseph Academy, and later, St. Joseph Hall.

The proposal to build St. Joseph Hall, the first, and for many years, only building of Chestnut Hill College, was submitted to the council of the SSJs in 1898. Due to a growing novitiate, it was decided that the students at Mount St. Joseph Academy would move into the new building and those in the novitiate would move



The Rotunda has hosted all kinds of events from dances to lectures, and of course, the annual and beloved Christmas Carol Night (pictured).

they weren't meant to continue their plans for the building but the Sisters were never ones to give up on anything and instead, they worked tirelessly to raise the money, managing to recover from their losses and re-lay the cornerstone for St. Joseph Hall only a year later."

to the old academy building. In the spring of 1899, the ground was staked off. A year later, on April 26, the cornerstone was laid.

"It was the great joy of Mother Clement Lannan to be able to build St. Joseph Hall and to the rest of the Sisters to watch as their dream and hard work was paying off," says Sister Roberta.

That excitement however was short-lived. On November 20, the quiet of the night was broken by the sudden collapse of the entire building. As Sister Maria Kostka Logue wrote in her account of the Sisters of St. Joseph, "Portion by portion it continued to fall until it was a mass of rubble ... Mother Clement returned to find but a jumble of wood and granite where the six-storeyed academy had been rising proudly. The building that was to have solved so many difficulties was now the greatest heartache of her administration."

The crumbling of St. Joseph Hall was devastating to the community both spiritually and financially.

"What a lot of people didn't know at the time was that the contractor had not covered the operation by insurance and therefore the entirety of the financial responsibility lied with the Sisters," says Ryan Murphy, Ph.D., director of service learning, SSJ Associate, and author of the dissertation, *Breaking Through the Glass Cloister: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Social Justice, and Gender Consciousness After Vatican II*.

"Lesser women may have taken it as a sign that

In 1903, the building opened and the first class of Mount St. Joseph Collegiate Institute (which would become Chestnut Hill College in 1948) stepped inside.

The more things change —

If not for the black and white imaging, it would be difficult to differentiate between a photograph of the outside of St. Joseph Hall taken in 1903 and one taken today. Because, despite various renovations, to the great pride and consideration of the community, the

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integrity of what was built by the Sisters of Saint Joseph more than a century ago, still remains.

Designed by noted ecclesiastical architect, Edwin Forrest Durang, St. Joseph Hall dominates the landscape. From a distance, the building, which still bears the inscription it had when it first opened, "Mount St Joseph Collegiate Institute," rises castle-like with arches and columns reminiscent of the French Gothic architecture and Loire Valley influence that characterized many French buildings from the 12th through 16th centuries and symbolizes the roots of the Sisters of Saint Joseph. It was constructed with

Wissahickon Schist, more commonly known as Chestnut Hill stone, the building material of choice in suburban Philadelphia for nearly 200 years, because of its durability and unique quality that allows highlights of gray, tan, brown and black to shine throughout each stone. A hardy, red terra-cotta roof caps the building and numerous windows of varying shapes and sizes complete the structure.

Visitors climb a steep staircase to enter the building through large, wooden doors. Inside, they marvel at CHC's crown jewel — a stunning, 95-foot, five-story rotunda — and hub of College activities. Designed in the Greco-Roman style, the Rotunda features marble floors, a grand chestnut staircase, balconies that wrap around each floor and a stained glass skylight, which contains 15 sections of leaded glass, each a symbol of Jesus, Mary or St. Joseph, designed by H.J. Smith and Sons in Philadelphia. The Bishop's Stairs at the bottom of the Rotunda were nicknamed for Archbishop Patrick J. Ryan, who formally opened St. Joseph Hall during his golden jubilee (50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood). Tradition holds that students may only descend these stairs for the first time on the day of their graduation, representing the final chapter of their collegiate career.

The space (and its adjacent two parlors) routinely hosts high-profile, public events including the Harry Potter Conference, Biomedical Distinguished Lecture Series, Steinway Artist Concert and Christmas Carol Night, as well as internal campus activities such as club gatherings, senior seminars and department meetings. And that's only on the first floor. Classrooms, offices, science labs, a music corridor, study nooks, an art gallery and an observatory, which has been in continuous operation since St. Joseph Hall first opened in 1903, fill the rest of the building.

A continuing influence

While St. Joseph Hall is the centerpiece of the work of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, it is not the only place on campus where they are immortalized. Fontbonne, the freshman dormitory, is named for Mother St. John Fontbonne, who restored the congregation amid the political climate of the French Revolution, which threatened the very mission and lives of the SSJs.

Fournier, which houses both classrooms and residence space, is named in honor of Mother St. John

Fournier, who was among the first group of Sisters to leave France and minister to the needs of those in St. Louis and Philadelphia. Clement Hall, the classroom wing of Fournier, bears the name of Mother Clement Lannan, whose vision of a college led to Chestnut Hill College becoming a reality. Logue Library is named in honor of Sister Maria Kostka Logue, who presided as dean of the first group of students and whose famous words, "Chestnut Hill College will prepare you to

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earn a living, because you must. But you are here to learn how to live," are still quoted today.

In McCaffery Lounge, the words that Jean-Pierre Medaille first told the sisters as he commissioned them to work beyond the convent walls and "circle the city with love," are written in several different languages above the fireplace and recently, three maxims, short prayerful guides that Father Medaille gave the Sisters, have been painted onto the walls of Martino and St. Joseph halls. These sayings, which are also incorporated into residence life's "Maximize your Life" programming, are just further reminders of how Chestnut Hill College and its students, alumni, faculty and staff, still live in mission with the women who were and continue to be so instrumental to life at the College. 

One of CHC's traditions is for students to descend the Bishop's Steps on the day of their commencement, for the first time in their undergraduate careers.



Called to the Mission

In 1985, under the leadership of Roberta Archibald SSJ, the Sisters of Saint Joseph established a group for lay people interested in learning more about the congregation and the work of the Sisters. Associates in Mission began as a way for individuals to commit to living in mission with the SSJs and contributing to religious life, not through vows, but through their daily lives.

“Most people join because they have come to know the Sisters through their own experiences and feel a connection to them,” says Kerry Rusak, program coordinator for the associates.

Chestnut Hill College, which was the first of the SSJ sponsored educational works to have associates, began the group following the annual Mission Alive retreat for staff and faculty in 2005. The following year, several retreat participants attended an orientation. Ten educational sessions followed as part of the discernment process, each one teaching more about the SSJs, their history and their mission.

“The biggest thing people interested in this process should know is that while there is a formal commitment ceremony, being an associate is not about meeting a checklist or following strict guidelines,” says Rusak. “It’s about that individual choosing to carry out the mission and unioning with God, self and others, in their own lives.”

CHC still has a large population of sisters working on campus and more who live next door at the motherhouse and one of the largest Christian growth groups in the SSJ congregation. CHC’s group is made up of men and women, 23 staff and faculty members, seven former staff and faculty members and 10 alumni.

“Associates are not ‘junior sisters,’” says Ryan Murphy, director of service learning, SSJ Associate, and author of the dissertation, “Breaking Through the Glass Cloister: The Sisters of St. Joseph of Philadelphia, Social Justice, and Gender Consciousness After Vatican II.”

“We are just individual people who have come together to continue spreading the mission of the Sisters of Saint Joseph and committing to live out that mission in our daily lives in a deeper, more personal way.”

Anyone interested in becoming an Associate in Mission may call the office at 215-248-7239 or email Sister Rita Woehlcke, director, at rwoehlcke@ssjphila.org. More information on the Associates can also be found on their www.ssjphila.org/home/associate-members/associates-faq/.

The pin given to Associates at their commitment ceremony was designed by Sister Therese Benedict McGuire, former professor of art, and features the logo designed by Sister Kathleen Szpila, assistant professor of art history, depicting a cross and globe with three stylized persons.





Windows to the Future

With a few exceptions, such as replacing the copper roof on the observatory, converting the fourth floor from dormitories to offices and adding air conditioning to the second and fifth floors, St. Joseph Hall remains much the way it was in 1903. This includes more than 500 windows of varied shapes and sizes, most of which are the originals that were placed over 115 years ago.



“Although St. Joseph Hall has outstanding structural bones, the building is in great need of energy-efficient upgrades,” says Kimberly Moyer, senior director of development. “Our goal to replace the windows in St. Joseph Hall will dramatically improve facility and operational costs by greatly reducing the energy and heating expenses each year.”

The windows of St. Joseph Hall come in a variety of sizes and shapes, but share the need to be replaced.

According to Moyer, some of the windows on the second and fifth floors of the building have been replaced, but the rest are the original wooden-framed, double-hung windows from the turn of the 20th century.

“This is no small task,” she says, adding that since each window was handcrafted, there is a unique quality to them which makes replacing the windows that much more expensive. The replacements also will be custom-made.

Fundraising is in its early stages and more information will be forthcoming. Until then, contact Kimberly Moyer at moyerk@chc.edu or 215-248-7089 with questions.