

A Brief History of St. Catharine Academy

The story of St. Catharine Academy has its beginnings in 1845 when Archbishop John Hughes went to Ireland to seek Sisters of Mercy to serve the needs of his rapidly growing Diocese of New York. He was successful in obtaining volunteers from the religious group that had begun only fifteen years earlier by Catherine McAuley, named Venerable by the Church. In 1846 a small group of Sisters arrived to continue the many forms of service by which they had become known in Ireland: visiting the sick in their homes, giving religious instruction, providing lodging for young immigrant women, and undertaking various forms of education. Some years later, in the fall of 1889, the Sisters of Mercy opened the school that was the forerunner of the St. Catharine Academy we know today.

The school opened at the request of Rev. Edward Slattery, who had asked for a small group of Sisters of Mercy to assist him in developing a newly established parish. At his suggestion, they used part of their residence to start a school. On Nov. 22nd the first academy opened and was dedicated to St. Catharine of Genoa. Ten years later, increased enrollment required a move to a larger building, which also was able to accommodate boarders. So began a pattern of growth and movement that was to become part of SCA's ongoing reality.

What in the World Was Happening in 1889?

The world to which SCA opened its doors was an expanding world. New states were being admitted to the Union: North Dakota (39th), South Dakota (40th), Montana (41st), Washington (42nd). There was dramatic growth for industry with the increased production of iron and steel, and for some, this was a period of great wealth and extravagant lifestyles, for which this period of history earned the name: "The Gilded Age."

A Growing Immigrant Church

The Church of New York also was expanding as the prospect of jobs, a better life and a new beginning continued to attract a great influx of immigrants to the United States. By the middle of the 20th century, the once dominant Irish names heard in the school gradually gave way to names that today reflect the diversity of the surrounding neighborhood. Throughout its 125 year history and up to the present moment,

St. Catharine Academy has remained faithful to its original mission of educating the daughters of immigrants.

Changing Attitudes About Women

By the 1890s, the country was feeling the effects of the Women's Rights Convention, held in Seneca Falls, NY in 1848. In education and employment, women were seeking greater freedom, a goal that was very consistent with the vision expressed by the founder of the Sisters of Mercy when she began her work in Ireland, in 1831:

"There could be no work more productive of good to societythen the careful instruction of women."

Looking back, it is evident that the school that opened in 1889 did so in a rapidly changing and imperfect environment. As the 19th century moved into the 20th century attitudes about women and what they could do were changing. The turn of the century saw an increased presence of women in the workplace. Those with minimal skills took jobs in factories and as domestics. Women with some level of education or training found work as nurses, teachers and salespeople in stores. Office jobs were available to women who displayed manners and refinement and also possessed basic clerical skills. The challenge for the school was to prepare students with the skills needed to achieve success in these multiple settings. Meanwhile, women were calling for more education and seeking admission to institutions of higher learning.

This was the world for which St. Catharine Academy was to prepare its graduates.

Challenges for a New Age

The journey from “The Gilded Age” of the 1890s to the “Digital Age” of the millennium has been challenging and costly, but it also has been necessary. Some alumnae may remember with humor a typing class which had only one electric typewriter; however, a student today who is without computer proficiency and technical competence is a student who is unprepared for college or the job market. Where typing skills once might have decided who got the job, now it is those who have a firm foundation in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math). For this reason, St. Catharine Academy devotes considerable resources to specialized STEM classes, such as robotics. Regardless of what skills the future will demand, SCA always will keep working to stay ahead of the curve.

Based on Core Values

Over the course of its 125 year existence, St. Catharine Academy has identified core values that are considered integral to the educational traditions of the Sisters of Mercy.

As we look back, there are three essential elements of our past that we must take into our future.

- Embedded in the mission of the school is the conviction that educational excellence is educational relevance.
- Embedded in the school’s history of service is the experience of the immigrant whose compassion is shaped by walking in the shoes of another.
- Embedded in the school’s vision that nothing can be more productive of good for society than the education of women is the belief that when administration, faculty, parents and students work together to help each student achieve her potential, we fulfill the mission of St. Catharine Academy.

We move forward in confidence and with God’s grace, building on a past that provides inspiration and guidance for the future.