

Jesuits in Jefferson County: A Story of Regis College



Photo courtesy of

Photo courtesy of Golden Pioneer Mu

“Swiss Cottage,” at far right center, was Morrison’s largest building and dominated views of the town from 1874 to 1982, when it was demolished.

By Sally L. White

One day in 1883, Joseph Machebeuf, Vicar Apostolic of Colorado, attended term-closing exercises at Las Vegas College in New Mexico. After six years in operation, this Jesuit institution was becoming established, having a seven-year program to take its resident students through basic instruction, as well as courses in humanities, poetry, and rhetoric, and a five-year commercial course (sciences and mathematics) that could lead to a degree of Bachelor of Science. Bishop Machebeuf was impressed; sufficiently so that he asked Aloysius Gentile, Superior of the New Mexico Mission, to

send Jesuits to establish a college in Colorado.

Father Dominic Pantanella, newly designated President of Las Vegas College, immediately undertook travels to Colorado in the interests of the proposed new institution. In fact, he was away the majority of his nineteen months as President of the New Mexico school. (1)

Bishop Machebeuf had already purchased a hotel in Morrison to become the home of this new Colorado college. This imposing structure, built in 1874 by George Morrison for former Colorado Governor John Evans, had originally been known as the Evergreen Hotel, sometimes also as the “Swiss Cottage,” though, with more than 45 rooms, it was hardly

a cottage. Machebeuf obtained the property, then deeded it over to the Jesuits.

“Machebeuf negotiated for the sum of ten thousand dollars, a neat amount in those days, the purchase of a Mountain-Hotel and Summer Resort, styled ‘Swiss Cottage,’ and another much smaller building for menial servants,” reported Francis Kowald, one of the fathers at Morrison College, in his reminiscences on those years. (2) The building, he noted, was “still well preserved;” it was just ten years old at the time.

When Father Pantanella returned from Europe in August 1884, his superior, Gentile, sent him to Denver to tell Machebeuf there was no time to prepare the school for

opening that fall. But Machebeuf was persistent. On August 10, 1884, Pantanella was appointed Vice Rector of the new college, while his successor at Las Vegas College launched a remodeling and expansion program there.

By mid-September, just five weeks later, the required renovations at Morrison were completed, and a faculty of eight assembled. Fr. Pantanella named his new school the College of the Sacred Heart, and as such the facility opened its doors. The legendary John Brisben Walker was an early supporter: his two oldest sons arrived on September 13th. John B. Walker, Jr., was 14 years old at the time; his brother David only 10. (3) Board and tuition for a five-month session cost \$120. All 24 original students lived at the college, which, as a former hotel, had ample residential space. Morrison was too far from Denver to allow day

students to commute there.

“There is something intriguing about such a gathering of Jesuits in a small mountain town at the foot of the Rockies in 1884; it is also amazing when one reflects that this faculty was to expend its efforts for some twenty-four students,” wrote Regis historian Harold Stansell in 1977 (1). We have no record of the frontier town’s reaction to the collection of educated and cosmopolitan clerics who arrived to maintain the school and conduct classes in French, elocution, painting, penmanship, and diverse other disciplines.

And the students? Stansell reports that the “horizons of the students were definitely limited,” in this rustic environment so far from Denver. Sports and games were improvised and hiking and exploring in the foothills under the watchful eye of the Jesuits were common pursuits. Occasional

excitement reached them from the town, when murders or floods generated distractions. But isolation was the rule, as the students remained at school throughout the year, without even the usual holiday vacation as relief. One student initiated a plan to burn the school down, just to provide an “extended holiday.” The attempt was unsuccessful; the student expelled.

Stansell credits the students of Sacred Heart College, on one of their foothills explorations in the nearby red rocks, with the discovery of the acoustic properties of the natural amphitheatre between the two largest sandstone monoliths. (These two, Ship Rock and Creation Rock, now flank the modern amphitheatre, built between 1936 and 1941. Other sources name J.B. Walker himself as the origin — and exploiter — of this revelation (4), although one

“Swiss Cottage” at the height of its life as a resort hotel, circa 1910-20.
(The Town was renamed Mt. Morrison in 1908.) From a 1910 historic postcard.

Photo courtesy of Jan McKinney





Photo from U.S. Geological Survey collection.

Aerial view in 1934 shows layout of the grounds around Swiss Cottage, center left of photo. The main business section of Morrison is to the right.

suspects that early inhabitants were well aware of this natural wonder long before its historically recorded discovery by settlers from the eastern states.) Kowald reports this important discovery in greater detail:

“During the first ramblings in the vicinity of Morrison, the identical scholastics [two especially adventurous students] accidentally discovered a grand nature-made amphitheater. It consisted of an extensive stretch of almost level ground, shut in on three sides by huge Red-Rocks with high abrupt walls, having the sloping foothills to the west as a background and accommodating entrances or exits to the north and south. The magnificent space was well adapted for exercising their lung power in loud-speaking, for which they frequent[ly] repeated parts of oratorical speeches, sermons, and

selections of elocutionary contests and exclamations they could call to mind. It was after some practices of this kind, that they lit upon a certain position which returned an echo, whose last two syllables were very distinct. ... Visits to the Red-Rocks on days of prolonged walks became a frequent pastime among the students, as soon as they became aware of the existence of the “Echo-amphitheatre,” and the amusement was great when they vied with one another in improvising sentences, pious, serious and otherwise that would quickly re-echo some solemn, cheering, witty ending or some weird frivolous or ridiculous saying.”

This amusement, Kowald says, lasted for weeks, but ultimately the “Novelty wore away and the magic power of attraction to the

place began to wane before examinations.” (2, p. 92-93) In all, Kowald seems to take a more charitable view of Morrison as a setting for the college than Stansell did later, remarking on its natural beauties and fine climate. He also cites the high quality of the school, as noted in letters from relatives of students, one from a notable, Senator A. A. Salazar (Feb. 17, 1885).

“My dear Friend: In a visit paid the other day to some of my young relatives who are studying in the Jesuit College at Morrison, I had an opportunity to inspect the workings of the institution, and I am surprised to hear that so notable a place is not as widely known as it deserves. ... The locality of the College is so near Denver that it is well known: no better spot could be selected for a boarding-school, picturesque

and unsurpassed for healthiness.” (2, p. 46)

The location at Morrison, with its challenges, was destined to be only a temporary home for the college. By 1885, within a year of opening, discussions were already underway to find a more

permanent location, and in its third year, the dormitories were already crowded. When Pantanella looked to Colorado Springs, Bishop Machebeuf again intervened, insisting that the college stay within his own “Episcopal see,” that is, in the Denver area.

In 1887, the college’s catalogue explicitly (and with significant foresight) stated: “The College of the Sacred Heart... is not a new college in any sense but that of location and building. It is the consolidation of the Jesuit College of Las Vegas, New Mexico, founded, Nov. 7th, 1877, and that of Morrison, Colo., founded, Sept. 15th, 1884.” Establishing the continuity of the two—soon to be three—school sites clarified the basis for the celebration of the 125th anniversary of Sacred Heart College, now known as Regis University, in 2003, only 119 years

from the date the Jesuit institution arrived in Colorado and established its first school at Morrison.

In transferring the school from Morrison to Denver, the Jesuits again enlisted the help of their old friend, John Brisben Walker. Walker just happened to own 1,600

sixty feet in height, and to contain at least four floors, the walls of which shall be built of stone.” We can only hope they brought the stone from the stone quarries of Morrison, active at the time.

Alas, we learn from Kowald that the stone was imported. The walls

were of “light grey, rocky mountain lava stone,” possibly Castle Rock rhyolite, with “Connecticut Red Sand Stone trimmings.” (2) Perhaps the output of the Morrison building stone quarries was fully committed elsewhere.

The Jesuits were not quite done with Morrison and Jefferson County, however. They

retained ownership of the property, all of Block 15 on the Morrison plat, for most of the next 20 years. Stansell reports that the Jesuits used the facility as a “villa, that is, a place of rest and recreation” for their community. The property ultimately was purchased by the Colorado Resort Co., one of J. B. Walker’s enterprises, to become the “Mt. Morrison Casino,” a major feature of Walker’s schemes for foothills tourism. Stansell records the date of sale as 1909 (with transfer complete by 1915), but other records in the Regis archives



This close view of the end of the building in 1976 shows details of its construction. With its structure already declining, it was demolished in 1982 despite efforts to save it.

acres in a very auspicious location on the northwestern outskirts of the city. The property was his first acquisition upon moving to Denver in 1879, and he had developed a very successful farm, known as Berkley Farm, where he pioneered the growing of alfalfa and demonstrated its value as a cash crop. He donated 40 acres to the Jesuits for a new school site, and the relocation began. In typical fashion, Walker stipulated that the Jesuits “erect and maintain a College designed for the education of youths and young men,... the building thereof to be not less than 297 feet long, no less than

indicate the transaction began several years earlier. An agreement dated 1906 outlined the terms and schedule; by November 1907, Walker had already asked for an extension on the first payment.

No longer a seat of higher learning, Morrison embarked on its active role as a scenic destination and foothills resort under the guidance of its new citizen, J.B. Walker. In the 1960s-70s, the imposing three-story

building that once housed the Jesuits and their students fell into hard times and disrepair; it was demolished in 1982.

Today, the Denver campus of what is now Regis University retains the stamp of Walker's earlier ownership. According to Jan Loechell, research librarian at the University, descendants of the alfalfa planted by the "Alfalfa King" himself in the 1880s still thrive in casual or neglected areas

amid the more formal plantings on campus. A statue donated in 1890 by "the parents of J. Brisben Walker" also still stands in front of Main Hall, providing a continuing link between the Jesuits and one of Morrison's — and Jefferson County's — most visionary citizens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sally White is Museums Coordinator for the Town of Morrison.

NOTES

Regis: On the Crest of the West is a thorough history of the school in all of its locations during its first hundred years. Written by Harold L. Stansell, S.J., it includes an extensive chapter on the years 1884-1888 when the school was known as Sacred Heart College and was housed in the original Evergreen Hotel in Morrison. Regis Educational Corporation, 1977, 238 p.

"A Brief Historical Sketch and Some Reminiscences of Sacred Heart College conducted by the Jesuit Fathers at Morrison, near Denver, Colorado, from October 1884 to June 1888," by Francis Kowald, S.J.

Typewritten manuscript on file at the archives of Regis University, made available courtesy of Elizabeth Cooke, archivist. Obvious typos in the manuscript have been corrected, as we trust they would have been were it a completed text.

Genealogical records and other information on the Walker family were generously provided by Margaret E. (Peggy) Walker, granddaughter of Gerald Walker, the youngest son of John Brisben Walker and Emily Strother Walker. Peggy also, in 1985, compiled a 12-page unpublished history entitled "John Brisben Walker."

In Jefferson County Colorado: The Colorful Past of a Great Community (1962), Sarah Robbins recounts in detail Walker's hike with friends in "the 1880s," during which he realized and exclaimed upon the superb acoustics of the natural amphitheatre; in 1911 he brought the distinguished singer, Mary Garden, there to experience the phenomenon. In History of Red Rocks Park (1962), Nolie Mumey recounts the Mary Garden tale, but notes that Walker had brought another singer, Nellie Melba, "the first to bring music to the Red Rocks," there earlier in the 1900s.

Regis Main Hall today. Photo by S. L.White,2004.

