

“It will require a miracle to give us a college at St. Louis”

1818-1832



The origins of Saint Louis University are profoundly contingent. In 1780, the greatly outnumbered, primarily French-speaking inhabitants of a village on the Mississippi River had somehow staved off an attack by English settlers and Native tribes. Just over three decades later, largely due to personal danger, a bishop chose to relocate from New Orleans to that village: St. Louis. He celebrated his first Mass there on Epiphany in 1818, and a few months later, as a banking crisis was engulfing the United States, established an “Academy for young Gentlemen.” Bishop Louis W. V. DuBourg rented rooms for this school in a house on Church Street, and a few years later he managed to recruit a small band of Jesuit novices to trek from Maryland to Missouri and teach Indian boys at another school he planned to start in the region, which closed after seven years. In 1826, DuBourg took actions that he thought had resulted in the closing of his original College. Or so it seemed to him at the time.

The uncertainty of Saint Louis University’s early years is not so unusual; not all of the schools, seminaries, and missions attempted by religious orders in North America survived. In the case of St. Louis, one of DuBourg’s unlikely schemes became a reality. To some extent without clear approval from their superiors, the Missouri Jesuits took over DuBourg’s failing, downtown St. Louis College and carried it forward to a state charter in 1832: the first university in the American West. The novice recruits went on to become central figures in SLU history.

The 1818 advertisement for Bishop DuBourg's "Academy for young Gentlemen"

EDUCATION.
 The Rev. Mr. Niel, assisted by three other Clergymen, and of the auspices and superintendance of the Right Rev. Bishop, will open on the 16th November next, in the house of Mrs. Alvarez, Church street, an Academy for young Gentlemen.
 None will be received before he can read at least tolerably well. The branches of instruction will be the Latin, English and French languages, Arithmetic, the Elements of the Mathematics and Geography, according to the ability of the pupil and the latitude of the parents.
 Such as may be disposed to encourage this Institution, are desired to transmit, during the month of October, their names to Mr. Niel, at the Bishop's, and not to delay sending their children after the commencement, in order that a proper distribution of the classes may be made at once, without confusion and loss of time.
 Terms—Five dollars per quarter, payable in advance. Books and Stationary at the expense of parents—each pupil must have a bag to bring in and carry out his books, for the eventual loss of which the masters do not hold themselves answerable.
 October, 21 21-25

Education.
 Le Rev. Mr. Niel, assisté de trois autres Ecclésiastiques sous les auspices, et la surintendance de Révérendissime Evêque, ouvrira le 16 Novembre prochain, dans la maison de Madame Alvarez, rue de l'Eglise, une Académie pour les Jeunes Garçons de cette ville.
 Nul ne sera reçu, qu'il ne sache au moins lire passablement on y enseignera l'écriture, les langues Latine, Anglaise & Française, l'Arithmétique, les éléments des Mathématiques et la Géographie, selon la capacité des élèves et le vœu des parents.
 Ceux qui seroient disposés à encourager cette Institution, sont priés de transmettre leurs noms dans le courant d'Octobre, à Mr. Niel au Presbiter, et de ne pas différer d'envoyer leurs enfans après l'ouverture de l'Académie, afin de pouvoir les classer dès le commencement, et éviter la confusion et la perte de tems.
 Conditions.—Le prix par quartier, est de 12 piastres, payable d'avance. Livres, papier, plumes, à la charge des parents. Les élèves doivent avoir un sac pour apporter et emporter leurs livres, dont les maîtres ne prétendent pas se rendre responsables.

"ESTABLISHING A COLLEGE ON THE SPOT"

It takes a certain audacity to declare that a few classes in rented rooms constitute an "Academy for young Gentlemen." This was especially true in the unsettling months leading up to the Panic of 1819.¹ Yet, an October 23, 1818 advertisement in the *Missouri Gazette* made this claim.

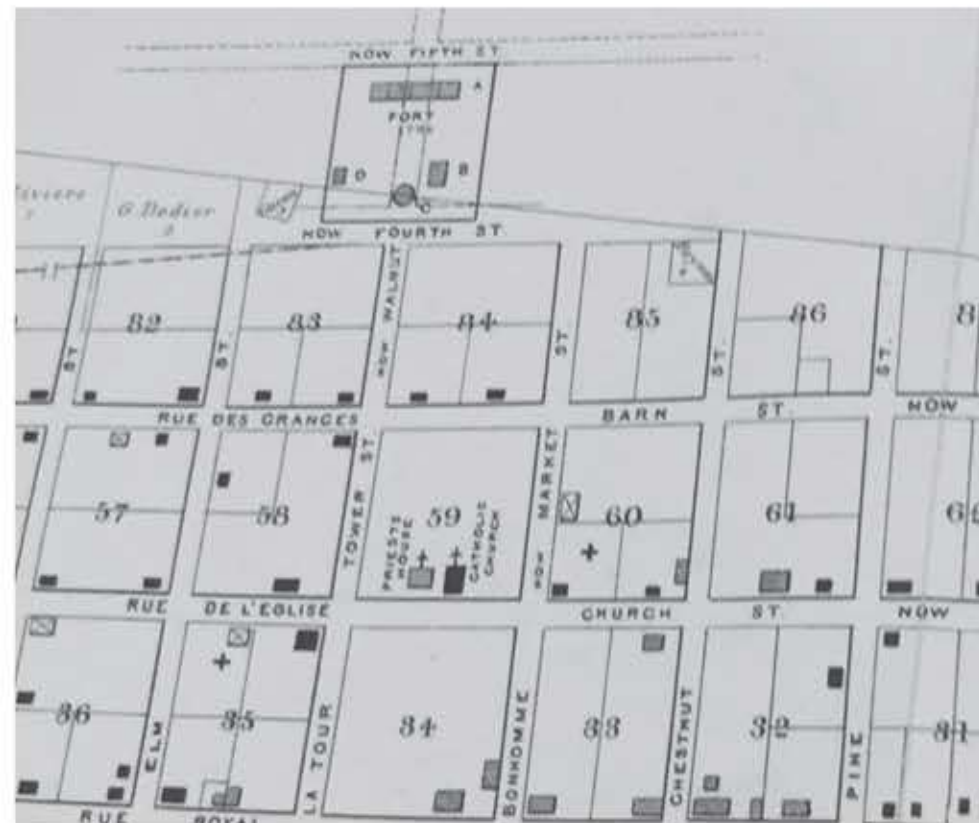
Under the heading "Education," readers learned that classes in Latin, English, and French languages, as well as "Arithmetic, the Elements of Mathematics and Geography," would be offered in a house on Church Street for \$12 per quarter. This announcement marks the humble origin of Saint Louis University. Careful attention to pedagogy is evinced in the reference to: "the ability of the pupil and the intention of the parents." This phrase anticipates the debate which was still occurring a century later: whether school curricula should be adapted to student needs.² There is respect for order: for making "proper" assignments, avoiding "confusion and loss of time." One hears the guarded sternness that neither books nor the bags to carry them are the responsibility of the teachers. This tone is balanced with an awareness of the limits in the local environment. Students must "read at least tolerably well."

With this advertisement, the highly persuasive, peripatetic and visionary Bishop Louis W. V. DuBourg quietly set in motion a new era in St. Louis, at that time a muddy, bustling settlement.

First classes were held on November 16, taught by three diocesan priests under the direction of Father François Niel, of France, curate of the Cathedral. Father Edmund Saulnier was later placed in charge of the school, called at various times the "Latin Academy" or "St. Louis Academy." From his studies in Bordeaux and his administrative experience at Georgetown College in Washington and St. Mary's College in Baltimore, DuBourg had a clear vision in mind: "It would be a true Classical College, infused with Catholic religious formation, but open to all comers, whatever their religious persuasion."³

The house used for the first classes was registered to Eugenie Alvarez and shown as Block 60 on an 1804 map, listed as "a house of posts on wall since 1770."⁴ In the contemporary style, the wooden logs of the walls stood vertically rather than horizontally.

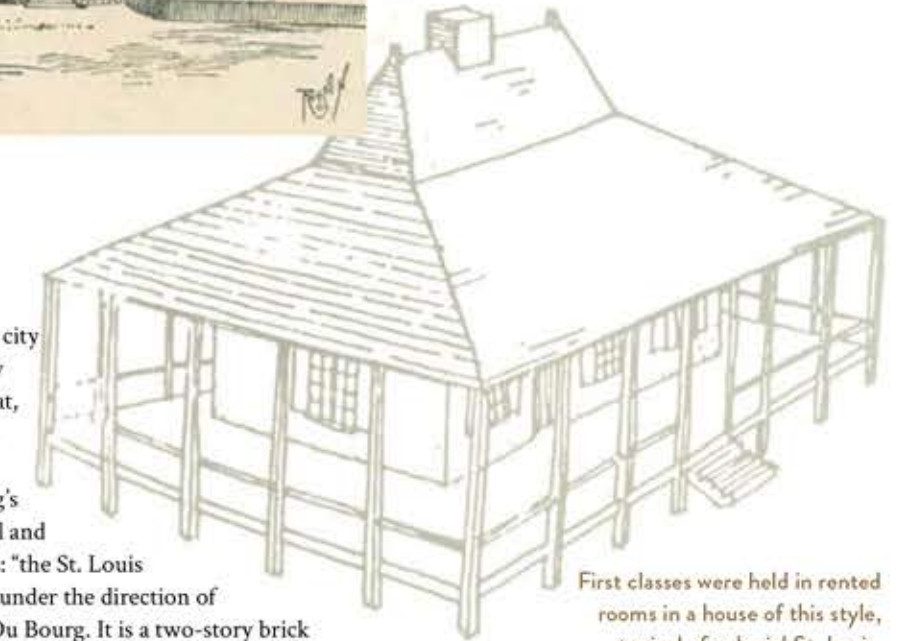
In 1820, the school's name was changed to St. Louis College, as it moved from rented rooms to a two-story edifice of brick erected on the property of the Cathedral block, on the south side toward Walnut Street. The townsfolk contributed funds: "subscribing" to pay the costs of constructing⁵ on donated land



The Alvarez house was the site of first classes, and is shown on Block 60 of this map, reproduced in Thomas J. Scharf's 1883 publication, *History of Saint Louis City and County*.



The 1820 college was part of a complex of buildings including the cathedral and priest residence.



First classes were held in rented rooms in a house of this style, typical of colonial St. Louis.

between Second, Third, Walnut and Market streets. The 1820 teachers included: Father Aristides Anduzi, Father Leon Deys, François Guyot, John Martin, Niel, Father Saulnier, Samuel Smith, and Patrick Sullivan; by 1823, Elihu Shepard and City Engineer Colonel Rene Paul joined the teaching staff.

The intellectual atmosphere of the school benefited from its association with visiting seminarians. Vincentian novices were in St. Louis from "the Barrens," while their own building in Perryville, Missouri was under construction. They received theological training in St. Louis under Father Felix De Andreis, who was the first superior of the Lazarists in the United States. Part of Bishop DuBourg's house was given up as a seminary for the Vincentians. SLU historian Rich Roberts notes: "Saint Louis University thus began as a "one-room schoolhouse," where the curriculum stretched from the 'three R's' (reading, writing and arithmetic) all the way to college-level theology."⁶

An 1821 city directory states that, connected with DuBourg's cathedral and library is: "the St. Louis College, under the direction of Bishop Du Bourq. It is a two-story brick building and has about sixty-five students, who are taught the Greek, Latin, French, English, Spanish and Italian languages, mathematics, elementary and transcendent, drawing, &c. There are several teachers. Connected with the college is an ecclesiastical seminary, at the Barrens, in Ste. Genevieve county, where divinity, the oriental languages and philosophy are taught."⁷ Leo-Raymond de Neckère, later Bishop of New Orleans, wrote in November 1819 that "M. De Andreis began today the teaching of the Sacred Scriptures."⁸

Bishop DuBourg had travelled a long, complex route to be in St. Louis in the first place. To understand his founding role at the university, some context is helpful.