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St. Xavier: A course in pride

School marks its 175th anniversary with displays looking back at years of tradition and change

BY DENISE SMITH AMOS | ENQUIRER STAFF WRITER

A walk down the halls at St. Xavier High School is a stroll through 175 years of memories.

Drawings and photos show St. Xavier's first school, a four-story "college" for boys on Sycamore Street in downtown Cincinnati, now site of St. Xavier Church's parking lot.

A display case reveals a 1917 report card with an unfavorable grade underlined in red, a \$500 Confederate bill that once paid for tuition, and a 1950s St. X cardigan sporting class honor pins.

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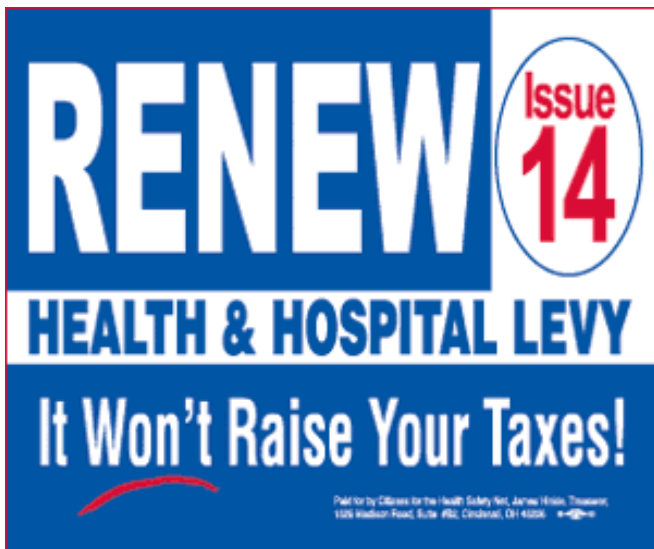
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ZOOM THE ENQUIRER / CARRIE COCHRAN
TODAY: St. Xavier students changing classes between fifth and sixth period stream around the statue of St. Francis Xavier, which was new when the Finneytown building opened in 1960.



A video reveals a Civil War diary, the stripe-shirted St. X football team of 1900, and images of Jesuits who over the years struggled through cholera, wars and near-bankruptcy to keep St. Xavier open until it thrived.

It's all part of St. Xavier High's history, and it's part of the school's Living Walls project.

As St. Xavier celebrates its founding - along with Xavier University's - this year, it is gathering pieces of its past.

Principal David Mueller says today's students should see how the city's oldest high school has changed through the generations while maintaining its mission to educate youth in service and leadership.

"We come from a long tradition," said Mueller, a member of the class of 1972. "But we keep adapting. ... It's the Jesuit way."

St. Xavier wasn't always the complex on 100 acres in Springfield Township.

The Rev. Edward Fenwick, Cincinnati's first Catholic bishop, founded it in 1831.

Fenwick's school was first called the Athenaeum but later became St. Xavier College, serving boys ages 12 through 20. Fenwick died of cholera a year after its founding.

Several years later, the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) took over, but the school struggled through cholera outbreaks, financial downturns and pollution in Cincinnati. Sometimes people paid tuition in bushels of food.



PROVIDED

1930s: At the old St. Xavier building on Sycamore Street, students wear coats and ties, facing forward, with Jesuit teacher in the back.



THE ENQUIRER / CARRIE COCHRAN

St. X freshman Nick Weston passes a piece of wall from the original building. The cross comes from the original student chapel.

Timeline

There were other troubles: 13 people died in 1859 after a church wall collapsed, and a mob blamed St. Xavier's president. The Civil War nearly closed the school when four Jesuits were drafted, but the community collected \$1,200 to get them deferred. And in 1882, the school's church was gutted by fire.

Through it all, a growing Irish and German immigrant population, a few tuition-free elementary schools, and the settling of Cincinnati's upland suburbs fed the school, which reached 425 students by 1899.

In 1919, Xavier University split from the high school, moving to Avondale with its oldest students. St. Xavier High remained downtown another 50 years, eventually becoming crowded.

"The classrooms were paltry, dingy rooms with little desks," says Dr. Rob Heidt, an orthopedic surgeon and 1969 grad who chairs the school's board.

With \$4 million, St. Xavier built a new school in Finneytown in 1960. Students called it the Finneytown Hilton.

When blizzards in February 1977 closed St. Xavier temporarily, classes moved to the Mabley and Carew department store downtown.

"The history classes were in the rug department," said the Rev. Denny Ahern, alumni chaplain. "A homeless person started lecturing on creative writing. He had some good ideas."

In more recent years, St. Xavier added to its modern campus, doubling in size and growing in technology. There are 300 computers in 11 labs and 50 smart boards (electronic white boards).

The school has added a science wing, fine arts wing, chapel, practice gym, music rooms, baseball, football, soccer, and lacrosse and track facilities.

St. Xavier offers courses its founders couldn't have dreamed of: bioethics, youth in literature, the Gospel according to popular culture, meditation. Last year, a sci-fi creative writing course drew seniors.

Discipline has changed, too.

Detention has been called "the jug" for longer than anyone can remember. (Legend has it that J.U.G. stands for "justice under God" or a slang variation on the Latin word for yoke -- *jugum*).

Today's jug is 45 minutes of sitting in a classroom. Decades ago, Ahern said, it involved memorizing long poems or passages.

"You couldn't go home until you got it right," he said.

Hamilton County Sheriff Simon Leis Jr., a 1952 grad, recalls an unhappy choice he made as a junior or senior. After an infraction, he was told to go to the jug or take 10 swats with a paddle.

Oct. 17, 1831: Opened as the Athenaeum in downtown Cincinnati.

1840: Jesuit president runs school of 76 students, including 24 boarders.

1854: Boarding school closes and discussions ensue about closing rest of St. Xavier for falling enrollment, threat of bankruptcy, and cholera.

1859: Church wall collapses, killing 13.

1863 Four Jesuits drafted in Civil War, but they get deferred.

1882: Fire destroys St. Xavier church on Good Friday.

1901: St. Xavier wins Interscholastic Athletic Association's football award after competing with Hughes, Woodward, Walnut Hills and other high schools.

1919: High school and college separate. High school enrollment: 500.

1945, 46: St. Xavier seniors take classes at Xavier University to keep college open during World War II .

1960: Xavier moves to Finneytown.

1969: Natatorium built

1986: Xavier Hall multipurpose center opens.

1998: New chapel, science wing, intramural gym and music rooms

2003: St. Xavier renovates athletic facilities for football, soccer, lacrosse and track

2004: New fine arts wing

Little-known St. Xavier facts

Leis picked the paddle. After two smacks by a scholastic - a priest in training -- Leis was in such pain that the Jesuit let him go, but Leis said he learned his lesson.

As it has for decades, St. Xavier still requires students to take public speaking. Now they pick up computer skills as well.

Freshmen in an oral communications class mine Internet databases, form bibliographies electronically, and generate PowerPoint and multimedia presentations to go with their speeches.

"I like all the technology. I think it's pretty awesome," said Eric Naugle, a 14-year-old freshman from Blue Ash.

A black-and-white photo from the 1930s shows clearly how St. Xavier has changed.

In it, students sit in suit coats and ties in rows of wooden desks, facing forward, unsmiling, as their teacher, a black-clad Jesuit, stands in back of the class.

Ahern, a 1956 alum, explained that at that time, students didn't switch classes and they rarely talked during the day - only during lunch.

The educational belief, he said, was that teachers imparted knowledge and students had little to offer.

Last week, Scott McCormack's senior physics class showed a contrast. Students sat in clumps, talking all at once to solve problems from the day's assignment.

McCormack said his students regularly work together, even on parts of tests.

"They learn as much from each other as they do from me," he said.

The Rev. Walter Deye, St. Xavier's president and a 1966 graduate, described his school's culture this way:

"Back then we put all the boys into one rowboat and said, 'Everybody is doing it together; don't question what you're told,' " he said.

"Today, we're outfitting each student with scuba gear and saying, 'Get into the water and explore it, and come back and talk to me.' "

CLASSES THEN AND NOW

Category	Then	Now
Enrollment	1919: 474	2006: 1,523

From the 1840s until 1917, students attended class on Saturdays but had Thursdays off. Study hall in the 1840s began at 5:30 a.m. Tuition was \$40 a year.

During the 1850s, St. Xavier Jesuits targeted poor Irish immigrants who lived in Bucktown (where free or escaped slaves lived, on Eggleston Avenue), encouraging them to send children to what was St. Xavier Elementary school, a tuition-free feeder elementary school.

1870s: School lasted from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., followed by two to three hours of homework daily.

1940s: Sports teams were called Conquerors, until a sportswriter spied George Ratterman (who later became a Cleveland Browns quarterback) and his basketball teammates shooting long bombs. The writer nicknamed them the Bombers and it stuck.

Three years ago the school created the X Men, three students who could sing. Now the choral group numbers 120 and last year won national awards.

Last year St. Xavier collected 100,000 pounds of food charity and "adopted" 560 families for the holidays.

Enrollment of 1,523 exceeds school officials' preference of about 1,475 students.

Tuition is \$9,475, but a quarter of students receive financial aid totaling \$1.7 million this year.

X-travaganza, the school's annual fundraiser, broke records this year. The March event netted more than \$650,000 for the school. More than 900 volunteers were involved.

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Staff	1919: 24 Jesuits and 3 laymen	2006: 5 Jesuits and 180 faculty and staff
Course list	1917-18 (22 total): General Biology, Botany, Chemistry, Debate, Elocution, English, French, Physics, Physical Geography, Physiology, German (including Scientific German), Spanish, Greek, Latin, History, Algebra, Geometry, Plane Trigonometry, Religion, Zoology	2006-07 (108 total): Notable classes include Oral Communication, The American Dream, American Film, Black Authors, Information Processing, Leadership for the 21st Century, Meditation: History and Practice, The Gospel According to Popular Culture, Bioethics, Women in American History.
Dress code	1831 until 1970s: suits or sportcoats, ties	1970s to now: No uniform. No jeans. No T-shirts. Students must be clean-shaven unless for religious reasons, wear collared shirts.
Social life	Proms or dances were forbidden until 1940s	Proms and dances allowed.

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