June 2023

The Jesuit Colleges that Weren't: Conewago Latin School and Guadalupe College

Michael Rizzi

Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal, michael.rizzi27@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe

Part of the History of Religion Commons, Latin American History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1429
Available at: https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol12/iss1/4

This Scholarship is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.
The Jesuit Colleges That Weren’t: Conewago Latin School and Guadalupe College

Michael T. Rizzi
Director of Student Affairs
University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
rizzim@pitt.edu

Abstract

This article offers a brief history of two obscure and often overlooked Jesuit schools from the nineteenth century: the Conewago Latin School in Pennsylvania and Guadalupe College in Texas. Although neither school ever fully developed into a true institution of higher education, both began life similarly to other Jesuit schools of the 1800s, and under different circumstances they might have evolved, like those other schools, into true American colleges. The purpose of this historical sketch is to preserve the memory of these nearly forgotten Jesuit institutions.

In writing the history of Jesuit higher education in the United States, one challenge is determining which institutions “count” as colleges. The definition of a college, and the ages of students considered appropriate for “higher” education, have evolved over time. If a time-traveler from the twenty-first century could somehow visit Georgetown University, Saint Louis University, or any other Jesuit college in the early 1800s, those institutions would seem more like high schools than like any modern-day university. Typical students were in their mid-teens or even younger. The present-day structure of the American education system—a four-year “high school” followed by a four-year “college”—did not become standard until roughly the turn of the twentieth century.

It is especially challenging to classify schools that opened and closed in the 1800s, shuttering their doors before they could develop into modern institutions. Catholics (and other religious groups) founded hundreds of denominational colleges in the nineteenth century that did not survive. Historian Edward Power estimates that over 70% of the Catholic colleges founded in the 1800s closed, but this is partly a matter of definition, since many institutions were never legally chartered to grant degrees.1 Many so-called “colleges” in the nineteenth century were only high schools in practice. Nonetheless, some such schools did evolve into modern colleges and universities, eventually obtaining charters from their respective state governments that gave them the legal right to award bachelor’s degrees.

Jesuit schools present a special challenge because the traditional Jesuit curriculum, the *Ratio Studiorum* (in place from 1599 until roughly the 1910s), prescribed a seven-year plan of study comparable to what we today would consider a combined high school/college education. Nearly all Jesuit colleges founded in the nineteenth century originally structured themselves this way. Some Jesuit schools only offered the first few years of the *Ratio Studiorum* curriculum, after which students were expected to transfer to an established university like Georgetown that offered the full seven-year experience. One example of such a school is St. Joseph’s College (1884-1898) in San Jose, California, which advertised that students could begin a bachelor’s degree program on its campus and then transfer without examination into nearby Santa Clara University or St. Ignatius College (now the University of San Francisco).2

Some nineteenth-century Jesuit schools were neither legally chartered to grant degrees nor affiliated as feeder programs for established Jesuit

---

universities. This makes it difficult to consider them “colleges” in any modern sense of the word. For example: in Milwaukee, the Jesuits operated St. Gall’s Academy (also called St. Aloysius Academy) from 1862-1872. This school was not a college in any meaningful or legal sense, but nine years after it closed, the Jesuits opened Marquette University in the same city. Although Marquette claims 1881 as its founding date, the Jesuits were teaching in Milwaukee earlier at the pre-collegiate level.

This article will tell the history of two often-overlooked Jesuit schools that never made the jump to collegiate status—the Conewago Latin School in Conewago, Pennsylvania, and Guadalupe College in Seguin, Texas. Although both were initially similar to other Jesuit schools that evolved into full-fledged colleges, both closed before they could develop in the same way. As such, they are best considered examples of early Jesuit “high schools.” I therefore chose to exclude them from my recent book on the history of Jesuit higher education in the United States. Nonetheless, they remain interesting case studies. The purpose of this essay is to expand upon the narrative in that book and preserve the memory of two Jesuit schools that might have evolved into colleges, but never did.

Conewago Latin School (Conewago, Pennsylvania)

One of the smallest Jesuit schools in US history was located in Conewago, Pennsylvania, on the outskirts of Gettysburg. Jesuits and other Catholics from Maryland settled in the area during colonial days. (The exact border between the two colonies was formalized in the 1760s, stranding several settlers who considered themselves Marylanders on the Pennsylvania side of the line.) The Jesuits founded what is now the Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Conewago in 1730. It is believed to be the oldest church in the western hemisphere with that name. At various points before they left the parish in 1901, the Jesuits attempted to start a school on the site. Although the operation was always bare-bones, it resembled, on a smaller scale, the early days of many successful Jesuit colleges.

Some teaching likely took place at the parish around the turn of the 1800s. The first unambiguous records show that five boys enrolled between 1835-1838, and a total of four Jesuit brothers operated a school on the site from 1844-48 and again from 1856-61. The fact that the teaching staff consisted of Jesuit brothers, rather than priests, implies that the school focused on lower-level education and perhaps trades. While this would not qualify it as an institution of “higher” education even then, other Jesuit schools with similar characteristics did eventually develop into true colleges. Jesuit brothers operated several primary schools and trade schools for Western Indigenous peoples in the 1840s and 1850s. Some of these, like St. Mary’s College (1848-1931) and the Osage Manual Labor School/St. Francis Institute (1847-1891), both in Kansas, were eventually chartered to grant degrees. While the Conewago school never was chartered as a “college” by the Pennsylvania state legislature, in the 1840s it was at a similar stage of development to those future Kansas colleges.

The Civil War and the nearby Battle of Gettysburg paused Jesuit education at Conewago. The closest the school ever came to achieving true collegiate status was in the late 1860s, when a Jesuit, Father Francis X. DeNeckere, implemented its most ambitious curriculum. Roughly around 1868, there were five teachers (three Jesuits and two laymen), and the school began to look something like the prep division of a typical Jesuit college of the day. It offered typical features of Jesuit college life like theater and intramural sports. According to one account, “The course of studies was strictly classical, and coincided to the letter with the catalogue of Loyola College, Baltimore Maryland.” It was around this time that the name “Conewago Latin School” seems to have come into use. That name and the lack of a collegiate charter clearly mark the school as a pre-college prep program, but the student experience would have been similar to the first year or two in the lower divisions of any Jesuit college.
Unfortunately, the Jesuits of the Maryland Province were expanding elsewhere at the time, and Jesuit faculty were in high demand at rapidly growing Boston College, Loyola College in Baltimore, Georgetown, and Holy Cross. The rural Latin School at Conewago fell behind those priorities. Sacred Heart Parish continued to sponsor a successful elementary school run by the Sisters of St. Joseph, but the Jesuit prep school for older boys deteriorated. Between 1881-84 and 1887-89, there was only one teacher—a layman named D.C. Smith. From 1890-92, another layman, Ignatius Langley, constituted the entire teaching staff. In between those years, the prep school seems to have been dormant.

The Jesuits withdrew from Sacred Heart Parish in 1901, but diocesan clergy assumed control of the church and the Sisters of St. Joseph continued to teach at the parish elementary school, which has survived under various names to this day. Now known as St. Teresa of Calcutta School, it is sponsored by a consortium of local parishes, serves students in preschool through eighth grade, and still maintains one of its two campuses in Conewago.

Guadalupe College (Seguin, Texas)

Records on Guadalupe College are sparse, partly because it was never affiliated with the mainstream Jesuit provinces or missions operating in the United States. Instead, it was a project of the Mexican Province, and during its brief life it functioned essentially as a side project for Mexican Jesuits forced out of their own country for political reasons. While it was never chartered as a college and unambiguously operated for only one academic year, it was still a Jesuit school on US soil.

William McGucken, S.J., who wrote a comprehensive history of Jesuit high schools in the United States in 1932, dismissed Guadalupe College with only a passing reference: “The Mexican Jesuits had a college for Mexicans at Seguin, Texas for a time (1878-79), but this has no place in a history of American Jesuit education.” That statement likely reveals some level of 1930s-era prejudice, since there was nothing objectively un-American about the school. The fact that it enrolled Mexican students alongside U.S. citizens was not unusual; many established Jesuit schools—from Saint Louis to Santa Clara—also enrolled Mexican citizens in the nineteenth century. (The numbers are relative, since many schools had fewer than 200 total students at the time, but it was not unusual for most Jesuit institutions to have a dozen or so students from Latin America.) Spanish was a common first language for students in Jesuit schools in the nineteenth century, especially in California and the southwest. While it was short-lived and underdeveloped, Guadalupe College was not un-American.

The school’s origins date to 1873, when the Mexican government passed the *Leyes de Reforma* (Reform Laws) that authorized the arrest of foreign-born missionaries, putting Jesuits and other Catholic religious orders in the political crosshairs. Several Jesuits were thrown temporarily into prison. The local superior, the Spanish-born Andrés Artola, S.J., escaped by boat to Havana and then to New York. Under those emergency circumstances, Artola sought and obtained permission from Rome to establish a provisional Jesuit province known as the “Mexican Province in Texas.” Setting sail again for Galveston, Artola soon arrived in San Antonio and sent word to his fellow Jesuits to cross the border and escape persecution. A small group of fourteen Mexican Jesuits crossed into Texas in 1873 and established a house in the small, southern city of Seguin.

Shortly after the Jesuits’ arrival, the Diocese of San Antonio was carved out of the Diocese of Galveston in 1874. The first Bishop of San Antonio, Anthony Pellicer, encouraged the Jesuits in exile at Seguin to open a school that would serve as both a seminary and a place of education for laypeople, both of which the young diocese sorely needed (and both of which the Jesuits had previously operated in Mexico).
The Jesuits published a prospectus in Spanish to advertise their planned school in 1876, using the name Colegio de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe. The use of the Spanish term Colegio, which is more correctly translated as the equivalent of a US “high school” rather than “college,” indicates the true scope of the institution. Mexican historian Jose Roberto Mendirichaga describes the school as a place “of upper secondary education.” The word colegio or its equivalent in most European languages (including traditional British English) historically refers most often to a secondary school. For example, Stonyhurst College, the Jesuit school in England, today enrolls students aged 3-18. In the United States, that term became associated with higher education mainly because the earliest American schools—founded under the names Harvard College, the College of William and Mary, Yale College, etc.—evolved into what we consider post-secondary institutions.

Guadalupe College’s original 1876 prospectus promised that it would eventually offer the full classical Jesuit plan of study, along with a preparatory division and a commercial division for students who hoped to study business. If those ambitious plans had materialized along with the planned seminary, Guadalupe College would have been well on its way to becoming a typical nineteenth-century Jesuit school.

The school seems to have gotten off to a slow start. Historical accounts are contradictory, but the first class seems to have enrolled in the fall of 1877. There are no official records indicating how many students enrolled in that first academic year, but according to one secondhand account written years later, there were slightly over twenty boys enrolled, more than half of whom were Mexican citizens. Another account mentions at least five boys from Mexico City. The first student body also included seminarians from the Diocese of San Antonio.

In 1878-79, Guadalupe College reported (for the only time in its history) enrollment statistics in the Jesuit newsletter, The Woodstock Letters, claiming to have 71 students. There is no way to know how those 71 students were distributed among the preparatory, commercial, seminary, or nascent classical divisions. However, if Guadalupe College was like most Jesuit schools at the time, it typically would have begun by enrolling lay students only at the lowest (high school) levels with the hope of adding upper-level coursework as those students progressed. It is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of the lay students were enrolled in the prep or commercial programs, with only the seminarians pursuing higher studies. The most advanced lay students who enrolled that year would have been, at best, roughly the equivalent of high school sophomores today. The enrollment data in the Woodstock Letters also indicated that Guadalupe College was a commuter school, contradicting later historical accounts that describe it as a boarding school.

Virtually all of the US citizens came from Texas, but their hometowns were spread across the state; Guadalupe was not simply a school for local boys from San Antonio. According to one account, out-of-town students initially lived in the same building as the Jesuits, but the students were forced to find their own accommodation as more Jesuits arrived. (This may explain the aforementioned discrepancy in descriptions of the available student housing.) Most of the Jesuit faculty did not speak English, forcing them to hire local laymen as teachers for the commercial division. One notable lay teacher whose name appears in the records is John Ireland, a Seguin lawyer who would later serve as governor of Texas from 1883-1887.

That snapshot from the 1878-79 school year is the only major window we have into the campus community at Guadalupe College. Early in that academic year, the Mexican Jesuit provincial decided that the school should close. The costs of paying the large number of lay teachers, combined with the costs of acquiring a campus and the weakness of the peso against the dollar, resulted in more debt than the meager tuition income could justify. The political situation had improved in Mexico, and the government was no longer persecuting Jesuits to the same extent that it had...
five years prior. To the disappointment of the bishop of San Antonio, most of the twelve Jesuits teaching in Seguin began returning to Mexico, where they joined the faculty of the newly opened Colegio de San Juan Nepomuceno, a secondary school in Saltillo, capital of Coahuila state. That Mexican high school operated from 1878 to 1914 and was essentially the successor of Guadalupe College, absorbing most of its academic staff.

The decision to close Guadalupe College was poorly timed. When Father Artola resolved to shutter Guadalupe’s doors in August, 1878, advertisements for the school were already in print in Texas newspapers. Rather than dismiss the students who reported to campus in response to those ads, the Mexican provincial allowed a dwindling crew of Jesuits to remain in Seguin and finish out the 1878-79 academic year. Four Jesuits from other US provinces later arrived in Seguin to recuperate from grueling missionary fieldwork elsewhere, and their presence helped to forestall closure until the 1879-80 year. When that school year came to an end in June, 1880, whatever semblance of a Jesuit school remained in Seguin finally closed for good. Two Jesuits briefly stayed behind in Seguin to continue parish ministry, but by 1884, even they had been recalled to Mexico.

To accommodate the displaced seminarians, the diocese added a seminary division to St. Joseph College, a twelve-year-old school for boys in Victoria, Texas. (Like Guadalupe, St. Joseph was a “college” in name only; it still exists today as St. Joseph High School in Victoria.)

The building that once housed Guadalupe College was sold to the Sisters of the Incarnate Word, who used it as an orphanage. The historic structure still stands and is now home to St. James School, a K-8 parochial school in Seguin. It is recognized as the oldest continuously used school building in Texas.

None of the available sources indicate that Guadalupe College ever obtained a charter to grant degrees from the Texas legislature, which means that it was never legally a college in the American sense of the word. Among Jesuit schools at the time, this was unusual. Most Jesuit colleges founded after the Civil War obtained a state charter within a year or two of starting classes. In the early nineteenth century, some Jesuit colleges like Georgetown and Holy Cross had operated temporarily without charters, but this was increasingly rare in the late nineteenth century, when state governments were starting to function efficiently and (especially on the frontier) were often eager to charter new colleges. It was not particularly difficult to obtain a charter in Texas; the oldest degree-granting Catholic college in the state at the time, St. Mary’s University in Galveston, had opened its doors in 1855 and was chartered by 1856. This makes it somewhat puzzling that Guadalupe College apparently never sought recognition from the state. Nor was it open long enough to develop, in practice, the comprehensive seven-year course of study that it had so ambitiously promised in its 1876 prospectus.

There are several possible explanations for why Guadalupe College never obtained a state charter. Because the school existed for at most three years, during the last two of which the decision to close it had already been made, it is possible that the Jesuits felt no pressing need to apply for a charter. In practice, Guadalupe was never more than a secondary school with a seminary division. Seminaries did not need state charters, and students in the prep or commercial programs were not eligible to earn degrees, so the Jesuits may have seen no urgent need for a charter as long as no students were enrolled in a degree-granting program. This was the case at some other Catholic schools in Texas at the time. St. Edward’s University in Austin was originally founded as a high school in 1877; it did not legally become a college until 1885. Likewise, St. Mary’s University in San Antonio began life as a high school in 1852 and did not start to offer bachelor’s degrees until thirty years later. Secondary schooling was a growing industry in Texas at the time; in 1870, the state government had made education compulsory through age eighteen for all citizens, so the Jesuits (and other orders) may have chosen to emphasize their prep and commercial divisions to take
advantage of the growing demand for high schools in Texas.

Still, most nineteenth-century American Jesuits typically envisioned their schools as degree-granting institutions from the beginning. In 1877, the same year their Mexican colleagues opened Guadalupe College, Italian Jesuit missionaries founded Las Vegas College (forerunner of today’s Regis University) in the New Mexico Territory. Like Guadalupe, Las Vegas primarily served Spanish-speaking Mexican-American students. Las Vegas College, however, obtained a charter from the territorial government less than a year after it opened, even after delays caused by anti-Catholic prejudice among lawmakers.²⁶

Perhaps the most likely explanation is that, as refugees, the Jesuits at Guadalupe College were more concerned about their immediate survival than about obtaining a charter, and they focused at first on secondary schooling because it was less complicated, more familiar, and more like the colegios they had run in Mexico. This is similar to what happened at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York around the same time. Like Guadalupe, Canisius was founded by Jesuit refugees fleeing persecution—in this case, from Germany. The school they founded in Buffalo in 1870 was originally a German-style progymnasium—a recreation of the kind of lower-secondary school common in Germany and roughly the equivalent of an American middle school today. It took an unusually long time—thirteen years—before Canisius College upgraded its ambitions, enrolled older students, and obtained a state charter to grant degrees in 1883. Both schools were heavily influenced by the educational traditions of their founders’ home countries, but Canisius eventually evolved into a degree-granting college in the American tradition, whereas Guadalupe closed before it could do the same.

Guadalupe was never much of a school; the facilities at Seguin were so rudimentary that students did not even have desks. The windows leaked, and the walls were bare.²⁷ Nonetheless, it was a Jesuit school in the United States, and it should be remembered perhaps not for what it was, but for what it could have been.

Somewhat confusingly, four years after the Jesuits closed Guadalupe College, a group of Texas Baptists founded another school by the same name, also located in Seguin. This “second” Guadalupe College served African-American students and existed until 1937. It took its name from Guadalupe County in Texas, not from the Catholic Patroness of Mexico. Despite sharing a name and a location, it had no connection to the old Jesuit project.

In later years, the Mexican Jesuits would return to Texas, where they established a seminary called Ysleta College on the outskirts of El Paso. That seminary functioned as a house of training for Mexican Jesuits from 1922 to 1951, when it relocated to Mexico. The only true Jesuit college for lay students ever to operate in Texas was St. Mary’s University in Galveston, a fully chartered degree-granting institution under the jurisdiction of the New Orleans Province from 1884 until 1922, when it closed as a cost-saving measure.

**Conclusion**

Although the Conewago Latin School and Guadalupe College never crossed the legal or practical thresholds that would have been necessary to include them on a list of “true” Jesuit colleges and universities in this country, they are nonetheless part of the Jesuit story in the United States. Their origins were similar to those of other Jesuit schools that did survive and did evolve into degree-granting institutions. Lacking the political will or the resources to develop these two schools, the Jesuits turned their attention to other ministries, making both schools rather obscure footnotes and “what-ifs” in Jesuit history.
Endnotes


2 Michael T. Rizzi, Jesuit Colleges and Universities in the United States: A History (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 228-230. I count fifty-four Jesuit schools that meet a reasonable definition of a “college,” meaning that they were either chartered to grant degrees or were formally affiliated as a feeder program/satellite campus of another Jesuit institution that was legally chartered. Twenty-seven of those fifty-four schools survive as Jesuit colleges today.

3 Rizzi, Jesuit Colleges, 102.


9 Rizzi, Jesuit Colleges, 102.


17 Woodstock Letters, “Our Colleges in the United States and Canada,” Woodstock Letters 8, no. 3 (1 September 1879), unnumbered page.


26 Rizzi, Jesuit Colleges, 213-16.