

Catholic boys school delayed by Civil War

This article continues the story of St. Joseph Academy, which earlier was known by other names: The Brownsville Academy, St. Joseph School for Boys and St. Joseph College. The name became St. Joseph Academy in 1930.

The Civil War years were a difficult time in Brownsville. Fort Brown was occupied at different times by Union and Confederate troops. On one occasion, military action caused large explosions, destroying much of the fort and part of downtown Brownsville. Many Brownsville citizens fled to Matamoros for safety.

During this difficult period, Oblate Father Pierre Parisot worked to get a Catholic boys school established. Needing materials to construct a building, he received permission to recover materials that had been damaged by the explosions. He hoped a school could be built as soon as “the lamentable period of warfare and discord ended, and peace, with her gentle healing, descended on our beloved country.”

He collected thousands of bricks, but before work could begin on the school, the bricks were appropriated by the troops occupying Fort Brown, who used them at the fort.

The Civil War ended in April 1865 and work began on getting the school opened. A temporary frame building was erected on the property on Elizabeth Street that had been purchased in 1863, and the school, initially known as the Brownsville Academy, opened in November 1865, with Father Parisot and two lay teachers conducting the first classes.

A Matamoros newspaper, the Daily Ranchero, reported on the opening: “The Brownsville Academy, established under the direction of the Catholic Clergy of Brownsville, will be opened for reception of students on the 2nd of November, 1865. The courses of instruction will embrace reading, writing, arithmetic, English, grammar, geography, bookkeeping, history and astronomy.”

The school began with 50 students, which was considered a personal achievement of Father Parisot.

In 1866, the school’s first brick building was erected, a two-story structure with classrooms on the lower floor and living quarters for the faculty on the upper floor.

Later, a newspaper advertisement announced that the Brownsville Academy would open for its second term on Jan. 2, 1867.

A very strong hurricane in October 1867 brought much destruction to Brownsville, but the brick building of the school withstood the storm. However, the facilities of the Incarnate Word Academy, a girls’ school, were severely damaged, and the sisters were forced to evacuate. The brothers offered living accommodations for the sisters, where they remained for 14 months while their new convent was built.

Here is a newspaper description of the difficult experience of the sisters during the hurricane: “The Incarnate Word convent suffered major damage, and Sister St. Clare later described her experience during the hurricane: “The evening of October 7, 1867 was, for us, one of horror. For three weeks previous it had rained in torrents; on that eventful night the wind rose and an icy rain penetrated everywhere. About 7 o’clock a fire lighted the air, lightning rent the clouds and peal after peal of thunder added new terrors to our already frightful situation. The house began to shake and tremble and we began to fear for our lives. We strove to barricade the doors and windows. The tiles were flying through the air. The sky seemed to touch and was like one great sheet of fire. The wind roared

as loud as thunder, and would have carried us away like a little feather had we ventured forth. A terrible crash was heard, and the new department, lately built for the boarders, fell in a mass of ruins, the pupils having left it a few moments before. The shock so injured the main building that we were obliged to leave it as soon as possible. The Oblate Fathers were kind enough to offer us a home in their newly completed college. We moved there, carrying with us the remains of our severely damaged furniture. We remained there 14 months during which we reopened our school.”

This story will be continued next week.

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