

# Marycrest

## A LEGACY OF PEACE AND GOODNESS



Mary Therese Anstey/Historitecture

Detail of a carving on the front door of the Marycrest Motherhouse proclaiming "Pax et Bonum" or "Peace and Goodness."

For 75 years Marycrest, the 25-acre campus of the Sisters of St. Francis, has been an oasis of peace and the site of innumerable works of goodness amidst the hustle and bustle of northwest Denver. Now, as the Motherhouse and grounds are redeveloped for a new chapter in the city's history, this exhibit reflects on the legacy of Marycrest, on its buildings, its landscape, and its people.

The following interpretive panels were developed by Historitecture LLC as part of an agreement among Marycrest Land LLC, the City and County of Denver, and History Colorado for the redevelopment of the site.



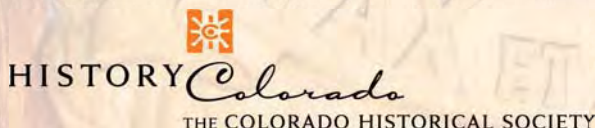
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Mary Therese Anstey/Historitecture

One of the many impressive landscape features of Marycrest is Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, with its sandstone campanile.

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## TIMELINE

- 1917** Sisters of St. Francis first arrive in Denver and teach at St. Elizabeth's School
- 1938** Midwestern (or Sacred Heart) Province of the Sisters of St. Francis created and headquartered in Denver
- 1938** Mother Lidwina Jacobs acquires the former J.B. Walker estate, "Willowcrest," in northwest Denver, for \$25,000
- 1950** Sisters purchase the adjacent Painter property, including its mansion, on Federal Boulevard
- 1954** First section of the Motherhouse completed and opened
- 1958** Remainder of the Motherhouse built
- 1958** All-girls Marycrest High School opens in old Painter House
- 1960** New Marycrest High School building constructed
- 1963** Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine completed
- 1963** Damen Hall, a home for at-risk mothers and their children, started
- 1964** Adult Education Tutorial Program established
- 1966** Peak of women taking vows, with 26 at Marycrest alone
- 1968** Queen of Peace Oratory House of Prayer constructed
- 1971** Marycrest Emergency Housing program established
- 1988** Marycrest High School closes
- 1998** Marycrest Assisted Living residences open
- 2005** With dwindling numbers, sisters offer Marycrest for sale
- 2008** Remaining sisters move to *Casa Chiara*, eco-friendly duplexes on the Marycrest site

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## SISTERS OF ST. FRANCIS

In 1835, Catherine Damen, a Dutch peasant who devoted herself to teaching religion and caring for the poor and sick, founded the Sisters of St. Francis of Penance and Christian Charity. The Order sought to follow the example of St. Francis, with Sisters taking a vow of poverty and dedicating their lives in service to God and their communities with unfailing charity and humility. The Sisters first arrived in the United States in 1874, settling in Buffalo, New York. The work of the Order quickly spread throughout the country, with missions in West Virginia, Ohio, Nebraska, South Dakota, North Dakota, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, and California.



History of the Franciscan Sisters, by W. J. Metz/Public Domain

Mother Catherine Magdalene Damen, founder of the Sisters of St. Francis.



Mary Therese Anstey/Historicature

Statue of St. Francis, namesake, patron, and exemplar of the Order, at Marycrest.

The first Sisters came to Denver in 1917, teaching at St. Elizabeth's School. Division of the North American Province in 1938 required a new site to serve as headquarters for the Denver-based Sacred Heart Province. On May 4, 1938, Mother Lidwina Jacobs purchased entrepreneur John Brisbane Walker's former Willowcrest estate for \$25,000. The Sisters then converted the existing mansion for use as a convent. Mother Erica Hughes was the first Provincial Superior and postulants and novices arrived in late 1938 and 1939.

*Deus Providebit ♦ God Will Provide*

The living conditions of the nuns and novices at both Marycrest and throughout the Order were austere, humble, and routine. The women ate simple meals of whatever was available. The furniture inside each bedroom, or cell, was simple. Rituals filled daily life. Sisters awoke at five, responding to a caller who knocked on the door of each cell and said, "Arise, you who sleep, Jesus Christ will enlighten you." The response was "Deo Gratias" ("thanks be to God"). Each day included prayer, meditation, mass, and service to the community. At ten the lights in the convent darkened.

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## ARCHITECTURE OF DEVOTION

As their numbers and ministries soared, the Sisters at Marycrest found their facilities woefully inadequate. In 1947 the Sisters commissioned renowned Denver



Colorado and Its People (1948)/Public Domain

Architect John K. Monroe.

architect John K. Monroe to design a new Motherhouse. He envisioned an ornate edifice with a large, east-facing chapel. The dormitory wing was designed to house ten

professed Sisters, six novices, and four postulants, leaving plenty of space for additional young women interested in becoming nuns.



John F. Connell, "Sketch of Motherhouse Addition," November 1955

Architect John F. Connell's early sketches for the Motherhouse addition included both a three-story wing to the east and a chapel extending southward. The Motherhouse was ultimately constructed with a single-story wing to the east and no chapel wing.

On January 20, 1953, construction began on the three-story dormitory wing. The remainder of the Motherhouse was constructed in 1958 from plans by architect John F. Connell, largely based on Monroe's original concept. Connell suggested

the Chapel wing be added later, but it was never completed. Another notable difference was the location of the belfry. Monroe

envisioned it centered on the façade of the Chapel; Connell wanted it on the west side of the Chapel wing. It was ultimately constructed at the northwest corner of the central entry bay. The Marycrest Motherhouse was dedicated on November 26, 1958.



Mary Therese Anstey/Historitecture

In honor of the 750th anniversary of the death of St. Francis, the Sisters commissioned Brother Mel Meyer to remodel the Motherhouse Chapel. Brother Mel was a member of the Marianist Order and a trained architect and artist. Completed in 1976, his scheme featured "Mod" frescos and furnishings, and fixtures of "rusted steel, welded scrap metal, and hammered ammunition shells."

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## LANDSCAPE OF REFLECTION

In the spirit of their patron, St. Francis, the Sisters have long cultivated the Marycrest campus to evoke inspiration and reflection. In 1940 they erected Our Lady of Grace statue in a sunken garden with "a charming lily pond" at the rear of the Motherhouse. They later replaced the pond with a rose garden, hauling



Mary Therese Anstey/Historitecture

Statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, installed in 1942.

buckets and wheelbarrows of dirt from elsewhere on the site. In 1942 a statue of the Sacred Heart of Jesus was erected on a small rock mound near the northwest corner of the Motherhouse.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Sisters continued their improvements. The St. Francis statue near the southwest corner of the campus was erected in response to the threat of Interstate 70 cutting through the campus. After much prayer and the subsequent re-alignment of the free-

way, the Sisters expressed their gratitude with a depiction of their Order's patron saint facing toward the street.

Between 1958 and 1963, the Sisters consulted with landscape designer Jack Harenburg, who suggested the planting of a wide variety of

other tree species, including Ponderosa pines, crab apples, catalpas, Scotch pines, blue Pfitzers junipers, elms, lindens, hackberries, pinyons, maples, white pines, and birches. In 1963 the Sisters added the landscape's most impressive feature, Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine, designed by architect Henry J. De Nicola.



Henry J. De Nicola, "Proposed Shrine for Marycrest Motherhouse," 1963



Mary Therese Anstey/Historitecture

Henry J. De Nicola's 1963 Our Lady of Lourdes Shrine as planned and as it currently exists.