

# ROSARY NAMED CHURCHES & OTHER INSTITUTIONS



## **80 Years Teaching Black Students in Louisiana**

Holy Rosary Institute, begun in Galveston, Texas as a nuns-run industrial school for African American young women during the last quarter of the 19th century, moved in 1913 to

Lafayette, Louisiana. In 1947, it began admitting males as well. Its closing in 1993 is attributable to a variety of disparate causes, secular as well as otherwise.

For 80 years, it educated hundreds of African Americans “who went on to become some of the country’s finest doctors, lawyers, educators, nurses, and many other highly rated professionals in various fields.” The Institute and its Rosarites’ stories are detailed by former practicing attorney, now university professor Don J. Hernandez in his 2010 LSU Doctoral Dissertation “History of Holy Rosary Institute,” written while teaching at Southern University Baton Rouge, during his transitioning from lawyering to educating.

Hernandez had attained his J.D. from Thurgood Marshall School of Law 14 years after getting his B.A. in 1965 from Southern U. to which he returned to earn a M.A. in 1999, a career switch move. The lawyer-turned-teacher’s opening observations noted that:

“Through much of its history, this secondary school was staffed primarily by the Sisters of the Holy Family, the second oldest order of African American nuns in the United States, and the Divine Word Missionaries, one of the earliest groups of Catholic priests to accept African American candidates for the priesthood . . . .

“. . . the [Catholic] church dispatched men and women religious to the Americas in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Jesuit and Capuchin priests, together with the Ursuline nuns, pursued the Church’s mission in Texas and the Louisiana Territory. They

began to instruct Native Americans and in some instances enslaved Africans in the faith . . . Their ministrations were among the earliest attempts at formal education in the respective areas.

“When they entered the Union, neither Louisiana nor Texas had public education systems, and therefore, instruction in the basics remained with several religious orders throughout the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. They focused on the education of the whites. Less time and attention was devoted to instructing enslaved Africans and free persons of color. Changing socio-economic circumstances however, contributed to changing educational conditions for both groups.

“First, free women of color whose parents could afford it, were educated in France or in New Orleans by the Ursulines. Second, Catholic missionaries from Holland and Germany began migrating to the United States. Both groups began work among Native and African Americans in Louisiana and Texas. It is through the efforts of German missionaries that Holy Rosary Industrial School for girls began in Galveston in the 1880’s and in Lafayette in 1913.



1938-39 SSession  
Boarders and Day Pupils

“In Lafayette, the school’s presence contributed to the growth of a mixed socio-economic neighborhood on its boundary. The Holy Rosary campus initially consisted of one hundred acres purchased by Father Philip L. Keller, its founder. Those acres would eventually become the subject of contentious negotiations between the Sisters of the Holy Family, an African America Order of Nuns who staffed the school for many years, and the Diocese of Lafayette.

“Louisiana ranked at or near the bottom in educational achievement from 1877 through 1935. In 1909, there were only 87 high schools in Louisiana with an all white enrollment of about 3500 students.<sup>1</sup> Lafayette Parish had one public high school for whites and six one room elementary schools for African Americans. Only in 1919, after World War I, did Louisiana initiate a movement toward public secondary educational facilities for African Americans. In 1924, only four high schools were available to African Americans in Louisiana. They were in Baton Rouge, New Orleans and Shreveport.

“Until 1926, Holy Rosary Institute at Lafayette was the only diploma-granting secondary school for African American young women in southwest Louisiana. By 1930 the school began to adjust its curriculum to include classical learning for its young women. Ten

years later its student body included young men, and its curriculum was again expanded to combine industrial education subjects and classical training.



Fr. Adams with  
Boys' Basketball Team 1950

“The school’s enrollment steadily increased and for the first fifty years of its existence in Lafayette it had boarding students from around the United States and several foreign countries. Holy Rosary reached its peak during the 1960s with its enrollment reaching as high as four hundred seventy students.” When it celebrated its fiftieth anniversary in 1963, its enrollment was 461 with students representing twenty cities in Louisiana and twelve states. Over its eighty year

history, the faculty, administration and students experienced a transition from a training school for girls in domestic science to a secondary school stressing domestic science and teacher training.

“It was, however, during the 1960s in Louisiana that public and parochial schools in south Louisiana were integrated. Holy Rosary nevertheless remained an all black school, and by the end of the decade its enrollment began to decline. . . .

This [dissertation] project’s purpose is to accomplish four things:

- “first, to provide a limited review of Louisiana’s early history and the lack of education for its people;
- “second, to demonstrate the importance of Roman Catholic religious orders and Holy Rosary Institute in the education of African Americans in southwest Louisiana;
- “third, to enhance the historiography of education in southwest Louisiana by including the story of a pioneer institution that educated many young African Americans; and
- “[fourth] finally, to examine the possible reasons for its closure in 1993.” At this point, dear reader, you can click the link provided below to access Dr. Hernandez’s *The History of Holy Rosary Institute*. If your PDF reader provides a quick page access option, you could use it to skip over 173 actual printed pages and go directly to the **Conclusion** chapter which the Table of Contents lists officially as Page 166.

**But if you do, you’ll miss out** on some well-researched, straight-forward, insightful glimpses into the struggle of American society and Catholic Church in the U.S. to turn ideals into actual reality within the context of race. Hernandez, whose legal career included stints as chief deputy city attorney, chief public defender and a district judge in New Orleans, shows in his forthright telling -- of the tensions, troubles and turmoil between whites and blacks -- the

kind of judicious temperament and inclusive marshalling of relevant facts one wants in a historian, journalist or jurist.

This webmaster recommends at least scrolling down and sampling the stories of the students, nuns, priests and prelates as you work your way to the four-page **Conclusion** chapter. The Table of Contents lists that starting officially on Page 166 but actually is the 174<sup>th</sup> printed page sheet. [All those pesky small Roman numerals at the beginning throw off the official count.]

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Stay tuned; more to come in this subject category.