

A History of St. Joseph's Presentation High School, Berkeley, for the Class of 1972

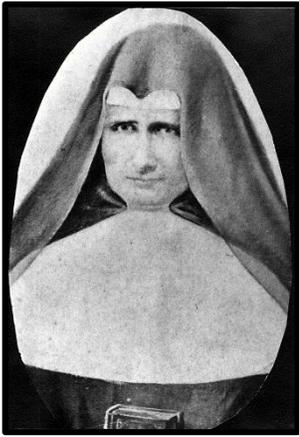
The history of St. Joseph's Parish and its church and schools in Berkeley is unique, in that it was the Sisters of the Presentation who established the first formal Catholic community there before the parish and the city were founded. Until that time, Berkeley Catholics went to Mass at Sacred Heart (1876) or Saint Mary's (1853) in Oakland, or at area farms when the circuit-riding priest visited from Contra Costa County. The timeline that follows recounts the story of the sisters and their Berkeley schools from 1877 to the present. Historical information about other area Catholic high schools is included for context.

- 1854 Nov 13** After a two-month journey from Ireland to New York City and on to Panama by steamship, a harrowing trip across Panama by train and mule, and up the West Coast on the steamer *Golden Gate*, five pioneer Irish Sisters of the Presentation of the Blessed Virgin Mary (PBVM), including Sister Mary Teresa Comerford, arrived in the bustling Gold Rush city of San Francisco to minister to the children of miners, immigrants, and the poor. Their first school opened December 1, 1854 on Green Street, with 200 children crowding into a shanty house. In 1855, Sister Teresa was elected Superior of the California Delegation, now to be known as Mother Teresa. Their first convent school for girls was established in 1856 at Powell and Lombard Streets, with an ethnically diverse student body of 300. In 1869, Sacred Heart Presentation Convent was established at Taylor and Ellis Streets, followed in 1878 by St. Joseph Convent, Berkeley and, in 1882, St. Joseph Convent, Sonoma. Over the next century, the sisters would continue to establish grammar schools, high schools, and convents in Northern and Southern California, New Mexico, and Washington State. Their secondary schools for girls included Presentation High Schools in San Francisco (1915-1991), Berkeley (1878-1989), San Jose (1962-present), and Bishop Conaty/Loretto High School in Los Angeles (1923-present, now conducted by the Los Angeles Archdiocese). ***One hundred years after the Sisters' arrival in San Francisco, the members of the PHS, Berkeley Class of 1972 would be born.***
- 1863 July 9** San Francisco Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany, O.P., opens Saint Mary's College and its high school and grammar departments on Old Mission Road in San Francisco, to serve young men. The Civil War Battle at Gettysburg had taken place the week before, from July 1-3, 1863.
- 1868 Mar 23** The University of California is founded in Berkeley, a mile from the site of the St. Joseph's Convent and schools that would be established ten years later.
- 1868 Aug 10** After a month-long journey by steamship, train, and mule, nine De La Salle Christian Brothers from New York City arrive in San Francisco to take over management of Saint Mary's College, which was failing under the management of the Archdiocese. The Brothers establish the Order's new District of San Francisco. The College and High School would relocate to 30th and Broadway in Oakland in 1889.
- 1868** Holy Names High School is founded on the shores of Lake Merritt, Oakland, by the Sisters of the Holy Names. It is one of the first high schools built in Oakland. "Holy Names Central High School" opened its doors at its current site on Harbord Drive in the Oakland hills in the fall of 1931 and combined the four high schools in Oakland then staffed by the Holy Names Sisters.
- 1868** ***One hundred years from now, our Class of 1972 would enter Presentation High School in Berkeley.***
- 1877 April 20** Berkeley farmer and Ireland native, James McGee, donates 2.7 acres of land in Central Berkeley to the Presentation Sisters in San Francisco to bring them to Berkeley to establish the city's first Catholic school. The land had previously been part of the Jose Domingo Peralta land grant. (Peralta's own 1851 adobe home had been built on the banks of Codornices Creek, bordering Saint Mary's College High School.)
- 1877 May 27** With hundreds from the East Bay and San Francisco assembled on McGee's open plain in Central Berkeley, with its sturdy pines and cypress trees, Archbishop Alemany lays the cornerstone for the Berkeley convent. Brother Justin McMahan, FSC, President of Saint Mary's College and High School in San Francisco, delivered the keynote address. Construction begins on a large convent and schoolrooms.
- 1878 April 1** The city of Berkeley is incorporated, combining the "Town" (Ocean View/West Berkeley), and "Gown" (the University area) into one city, named for 18th century philosopher, Anglican Bishop George Berkeley.
- 1878 June 27** Mother Teresa and six sisters travel on the 2 o'clock bay ferry to Berkeley and establish St. Joseph's Presentation Convent (1878-1992) and Schools (1878-1989/2007). It is the pioneer Catholic institution in the new city, serving as convent, school, and church, with public Masses held in the convent chapel.

- 1878** The sisters' Berkeley schools open with elementary instruction for boys and girls and secondary education for girls – St. Joseph's Presentation Academy. The oak railing on the staircase just inside Presentation High School's "Senior Door," leading up to the second floor of the 1924 high school building, is from the sisters' St. Peter's Boys School (1881) originally on the site.
- 1879 April** At the invitation of his sister, Mother Teresa, Father Pierce Michael Comerford leaves his retirement post on the Island of Mauritius in the Indian Ocean to become the first pastor at St. Joseph's; the first Catholic parish in Berkeley is officially established by the San Francisco Archdiocese. In 1883, the original St. Joseph's Church, a small wooden structure, is built on the southwest corner of Addison and Jefferson.
- 1881** The Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur open St. Joseph's School in Alameda for girls in grades 1-12. In 1935, the Marianist Brothers opened St. Joseph's High School for boys. The schools merged in 1985 as coed.
- 1906 April 18** The sisters' two San Francisco convent schools are destroyed in the Great Quake and Fire and the nuns go to work teaching in the refugee camps in The City and in Oakland. From the roof of the Berkeley convent, the Berkeley sisters watched the fires burn across San Francisco for three days. Many San Francisco sisters moved into the Berkeley convent, now badly overcrowded, until the archbishop offered them his residence in The City, as he was moving to San Mateo. The earthquake's devastation would bring an influx of new residents to the East Bay, many relocating to the parish and schools at St. Joseph's, Berkeley.
- 1907** A new St. Joseph's Church is built at Addison Street & Jefferson Avenue, then the largest church in Alameda County, known for its Modern Roman architecture and stunning German-made stained-glass windows.
- 1912** The San Francisco sisters move into their new Motherhouse at Turk and Masonic and the Academy of the Presentation opens on Masonic Avenue, on land that previously held two cemeteries (all existing cemeteries in the city were closed in 1900 and relocated to Colma and Daly City). In 1930, the school moved around the corner onto Turk Boulevard and eventually became known as Presentation High School (1915-1991). The magnificent, pillared, three-story Motherhouse would remain in use until the present Motherhouse at 2340 Turk Boulevard was completed in the 1970s. Though the stately old building on Masonic is now owned by the University of San Francisco, the upper floor still serves as the home to the Sisters' Administrative offices.
- 1921** The Franciscans open St. Elizabeth High School in East Oakland. The school closed in 2017 and in 2018 re-opened as Cristo Rey De La Salle High School, a project of the De La Salle Christian Brothers.
- 1924** The Sisters move St. Joseph Presentation Academy (SJPA) for girls into a new brick and stucco three-story classroom building on Jefferson Avenue just below the 1878 convent, with the original Lourdes Grotto and lush Academy gardens at the back. In 1951, its name was changed to St. Joseph's Presentation High School, since it was at that time a parish school. In 1964, the school was again owned by the Sisters of the Presentation, and the name was again changed, to simply "Presentation High School."
- 1927** The Christian Brothers move Saint Mary's College High School from 30th and Broadway in Oakland to a new campus at Peralta Park in North Berkeley, a mile from St. Joseph's Presentation Academy. It is the only Catholic high school for boys in the city. In 1928, the College moved to its new campus in Moraga.
- 1927** The Salesian Fathers open Salesian High School for boys in Richmond.
- 1951** The San Francisco Archdiocese opens coed Bishop O'Dowd high school in Oakland.
- 1953-54-55** ***Our Class of '72 is born. Baby Boomers! A decade earlier, many of our parents had served in World War II.***
- 1962** The Diocese of Oakland is established, now separate from the San Francisco Archdiocese.
- 1966** The Presentation Sisters move from the 1878 convent into a new convent on Allston Way at Jefferson, just below the high school. The old convent is set to be demolished, but on June 6, 1966, a still-unsolved fire consumes the massive structure and the original Academy classroom building behind it. The area would become a gravel parking lot for the high school and later, tennis courts for student athletics.

- 1968** ***Our PHS Class of '72 graduates from many different grammar schools*** within days of the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and that of Martin Luther King, Jr. two months earlier. As excited young teens, 98 of us enter freshman year at Presentation that Fall, amid political, racial, and cultural tensions, post-Vatican II changes in the Church and religious life, the Vietnam War, the Civil Liberties Movement, student activism on the heels of the Free Speech Movement just up the street at Cal, with sit-ins, riots, demonstrations, National Guard patrols, and city-wide curfews. Just two blocks from school, construction of massive underground tunnels is underway for the new BART system. World War II had ended just 23 years earlier, and the Korean War in 1953. The Vietnam War would continue for seven more years. On stage during our high school years: "Hair," "Godspell," "Jesus Christ, Superstar," "Fiddler on the Roof," "Cabaret," "1776," and more. The Black Panther Party, Woodstock, hippies, the Haight/Ashbury, Telegraph Avenue, the "Age of Aquarius."
- 1972** BART opens on September 11! Thanks, Mr. Bianco! Queen Elizabeth II marks 20 years on the throne (70 in June 2022). Richard Nixon is President and Ronald Reagan is Governor. "The Godfather" is the most popular movie, and "All in the Family" is the most popular television show. The Class of 1972 holds its Senior Ball at the Mark Hopkins Hotel in San Francisco on May 26, followed on May 31 by the Baccalaureate Mass at St. Joseph's Church and graduation dinner with parents at Spenger's Fish Grotto. The Communion song is "Try to Remember" from The Fantasticks. For the first time, PHS graduation moves from St. Joseph's Church to the larger Oakland Auditorium Theater at Lake Merritt, held on June 3. The hour-long ceremony is capped by the graduates singing, "Peace I Leave with You, My Friends." ***Our four-year journey ends.***
- 1978** The City of Berkeley marks its Centennial, and the Presentation Sisters celebrate 100 years teaching in Berkeley with a parish Mass and reception attended by hundreds of their former and current students.
- 1978-79** St. Joseph's Parish celebrates its centennial with a year-long series of events, culminating on April 29, 1979 with a Mass attended by nearly 2,000. Historical displays at the reception in the high school cafeteria included the engraved silver trowel used by the archbishop to lay the convent cornerstone on May 27, 1877.
- 1989** The Sisters close Presentation High School, Berkeley, after 111 years.
- 1989** Salesian High School, Richmond, transitions to coeducation after 62 years as an all-boys school.
- 1990-93** Planning and construction of "Presentation Faculty Housing" gets underway, a project of the University of California for academics' housing on the high school property. The 1924 high school building is converted to condominiums, and dozens of additional condos are built around the perimeter of the property. Presentation Convent (1966) on Allston Way and the high school cafeteria are renovated into living and community spaces. The Lourdes statue in the Grotto is removed, and St. Joseph's parishioners are invited to take roses, camellias, and other plantings from the grotto gardens to transplant at home. The finished property is named "University Terrace." Several PHS-Berkeley all-school reunions were held on the site in the late 2010's. The iconic Monkey Puzzle tree in the old grotto area was felled after a storm in 2021.
- 1993** Berkeley designates the high school property a city historical landmark, honoring the Sisters' work.
- 1995** Saint Mary's High, Berkeley, opens its doors to young women after 132 years as an all-boys school.
- 2007** St. Joseph's Grammar School across the street from Presentation High closes after 130 years. The school marks the closing with a Mass and school tour attended by hundreds of alumni, friends, and parishioners. Shu-Ren International School is now located on the property. The Marian Hall auditorium is still in use.
- 2022 Oct 8** ***The Presentation High School Class of 1972 celebrates its fifty-year anniversary with a reunion luncheon at Trader Vic's restaurant on San Francisco Bay in Emeryville. Welcome back, friends, and congratulations! We are now 69 members, with 12 classmates having passed away. We remember them with love.***

Prepared by Jeanne Gray Loughman, St. Joseph School, Berkeley '68, PHS '72, for the Presentation High School, Berkeley, Class of 1972 fifty-year reunion, October 2022. (Please forgive any errors.) Sources: Various, including: <https://presentationisterssf.org/>; <https://www.utberkeley.org/the-community/history/>; <https://stjosephtheworkerchurch.org/parish-history> Mother Teresa Comerford's California Memoirs are available online. Note: Mother Teresa died in San Francisco in 1881 and was buried in the St. Joseph's Convent cemetery in Berkeley. Today, she is among the dozens of pioneer Presentation and Holy Names Sisters who founded Catholic schools in the Bay Area and are buried at St. Mary's Cemetery in Oakland, along with many of the earliest priests who founded/served East Bay parishes.



Photos: PBVM-SF web site, University Terrace web site, St. Joseph's Parish, Berkeley, various online images.

Left: Mother Teresa Comerford, PBVM, Berkeley Foundress (1877).

Right: St. Joseph Presentation Convent and school (1878), Berkeley (California Street side), and first St. Joseph's Church (1883) at top left.



Above: Presentation Motherhouse, Turk and Masonic, San Francisco, 1912-1970s. Now University of San Francisco property. Right: St. Joseph's Presentation Convent, Berkeley (1878), with addition on Jefferson Avenue at Addison Street. Both structures were destroyed by fire on June 6, 1966.



Above left: 1924 Dedication of the new St. Joseph's Presentation High School building (adjacent to the Jefferson Avenue convent shown above). Above right: SJPHS Class of 1924. Veronica Meehan, second from left, center row, would become Sister Mary Ambrose, PBVM, 8th grade teacher for the Class of 1972 girls from St. Joseph's School. Bottom right: Presentation today: University Terrace condominiums house Cal faculty.

