

## Villa Maria Ursuline Academy of Bryan, Texas

The great hurricane of 1900 was devastating to Galveston, but ironically, it brought a period of unexcelled educational opportunity to the girls of Bryan. The founding of the Villa Maria Ursuline Academy of Bryan, in 1901, was the direct result of the havoc wreaked on the city of Galveston. The Ursuline nuns were searching for a place to establish another school for girls away from the coast, when they came to Bryan. They were welcomed with open arms and the promise of land and money to establish their academy and convent. Within a year, the school was established and had its first class of girls. The nuns also filled a need at the local Catholic parish by teaching at the St. Joseph's Catholic School. In this way, both the boys and girls of the area were offered the opportunity to receive a Catholic education from the Sisters of the Ursuline Order, who had a 400 year history in education. The town of Bryan boasted on being home to such a fine girls school. But after 28 years, the Villa Maria Academy closed its doors, and the Ursuline sisters moved back to Galveston. A large home was built on the former convent site, using the bricks from their once grand home and school, but it too was destined for a relatively short life. In a few years, the mansion and 50 acre estate was sold to a local boys preparatory school and used as a dormitory. The school's plan for the property was never realized and eventually it was sold again to cover debts. The once magnificent home had fallen to such a state of disrepair that it too was razed, but the bricks were used once again. Today, over 100 years after their first use, they are part of the guest center at Messina Hof Winery and Resort in Bryan.

The history of the Ursuline Order begins with its founding in Italy, in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century. The nuns established the first school for girls in North America, when they established a school in Quebec in 1639. In 1727, an Ursuline school was founded in New Orleans, and in 1847, the sisters arrived at Galveston and built a convent and girls academy there also.<sup>1</sup> The Galveston Ursuline Academy was used as a hospital during at least four yellow fever epidemics and during the Civil War when both Union and Confederate soldiers were treated by the nuns.<sup>2</sup> From Galveston, the Ursulines spread to other Texas cities, establishing their convents and girls schools in San Antonio in 1851, Liberty in 1859, Dallas in 1874 and Bryan in 1901.<sup>3</sup> The Galveston Convent and Academy suffered major physical damage from several hurricanes and was even destroyed by fire in 1854. In the 1890's, a massive Gothic structure designed by Nicholas J. Clayton was built,<sup>4</sup> and although it suffered severe damage by the hurricane of September 8, 1900, it served as shelter for over 1000 refugees of the storm.<sup>5</sup> With such massive death and destruction in Galveston, the Ursulines built the new convent and school in Bryan without knowing if they would ever re-establish their home by the sea. But it was repaired and lasted until 1961, when it suffered irreparable damage from hurricane Carla.<sup>6</sup> The Ursulines continued to teach in the Catholic schools of Galveston, until 1993.<sup>7</sup> Their girls school in Dallas is now the only active Ursuline Academy in Texas.

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<sup>1</sup> *Prospectus of Villa Maria Academy, Bryan, Texas 1916* from the Ursuline archives in Crystal City, MO, pg. 3

<sup>2</sup> Texas Historical Comm.(THC) marker no. 11588 'Ursuline Nuns in Galveston', erected 1997 in Galveston, TX

<sup>3</sup> THC website search results ([www.atlas.thc.tx.us](http://www.atlas.thc.tx.us)) for various 'Ursuline' related historical markers

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *Galveston, a History of the Island* by Gary Cartwright, Macmillan Pub. Co., 1991, pg. 169

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, pg. 301

<sup>7</sup> THC marker no. 11588 'Ursuline Nuns in Galveston', erected 1997 in Galveston, TX

In mid-October, 1900, only 6 weeks after the hurricane hit Galveston, Mother Superior Mary Joseph Dallmer visited several towns in the interior of Texas, including Bryan. She was searching for a location to build their convent and girls school.<sup>8</sup> The following week she returned, chose a site on the edge of town, and signed a contract with a committee representing the citizens of Bryan to establish their new convent and girls school. The contract called for the committee of citizens, comprised of J.L. Fountain, J.W. Doremus, W.S. Howell, John D. Daly, Malcolm Carnes, Paul M. Raysor and A.J. Buchanan, to purchase and give the chosen 50 acre site to the sisters. They were also to give donations of at least \$1000, in exchange for the establishment of the Ursuline Academy. Mother Mary Joseph had chosen a site with a slight hill on the edge of town which belonged to Major W.R. Cavitt<sup>9</sup> and his wife, Mary. It was part of the tract that had been given to Mary by her father, J.P. Mitchell in 1877.<sup>10</sup> Although the citizens of Bryan more than followed through on their promise and donated over \$2400 to the Ursulines,<sup>11</sup> construction of the Villa Maria Academy was financed mostly with \$18,000 out of the ‘storm fund’ donated from all over the United States for the relief from the Galveston storm.<sup>12</sup> On November 20, 1900, the Cavitt’s signed the deed for the 50 acre tract to the Ursulines<sup>13</sup> who named the site “St. Ursula’s Hill.” The Cavitt’s received \$1000 for the land, but were among the highest giving donors to the community’s fund, with a donation of \$200.<sup>14</sup> The plans for the

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<sup>8</sup> *The Bryan Eagle* newspaper, Oct. 18, 1900, pg. 2

<sup>9</sup> *The Bryan Eagle* newspaper, Oct. 25, 1900, pg. 1, clipping is also in Villa Maria Scrapbook in Ursuline archives, inside of front cover

<sup>10</sup> Deed recorded in Book ‘R’, pgs. 394-5, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>11</sup> *The Bryan Eagle* newspaper, Oct. 25, 1900, pg. 1

<sup>12</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, by Sister Ignatius Miller, Ursuline Centre, 1983, pg. 289, copy in Ursuline archives

<sup>13</sup> Deed recorded in Book 18, pgs. 602-4, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>14</sup> *The Bryan Eagle* newspaper, Oct. 25, 1900, pg. 1

3-story, brick structure came from the new Ursuline academy recently erected on Prospect Hill in San Antonio. They were adapted to fit the topography of the Bryan site, by the architect, Nicholas J. Clayton<sup>15</sup> of Galveston. Bids were taken for construction, but came in much higher than expected. It was then decided to eliminate the basement from the plans and leave the interior unfinished in the part of the building to be used as the sister's living area.<sup>16</sup> Bids were solicited a second time, and as before, the local contractor George Jenkins had the lowest bid. But this time, he was awarded the contract.<sup>17</sup> With Bishop Gallagher of Galveston and local dignitaries on hand, the cornerstone was laid on March 19, 1901 and the contractor assured Mother Mary Joseph that the building would be ready on August 23<sup>rd</sup>.<sup>18</sup>

Confident with the contractor's word, the Mother Superior returned to Galveston and made arrangements to furnish the new school and enroll girls for the fall semester. She had furniture and supplies shipped to Bryan for arrival on August 23<sup>rd</sup>, and she and her assistant arrived that day only to find that the Academy was not finished and without floors. There was nowhere to put the furniture.<sup>19</sup> The contractor soon finished the attic floor and the sisters lived there for 10 days, until some of the second floor was finished. Girls began to arrive for boarding on August 30<sup>th</sup>, and the school formally opened on September 16<sup>th</sup> with construction still going on around them. The Ursulines may not have been aware that George Jenkins had built Allen Academy in 1899, only a few blocks away, and ran behind schedule there also.<sup>20</sup> A

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<sup>15</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, pg. 289

<sup>16</sup> *The Bryan Eagle* newspaper, Jan. 31, 1901, pg. 7

<sup>17</sup> *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, pg. 289

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*

<sup>20</sup> 'A History of Allen Academy, 1886-1968', a thesis by Barbara L. LeUnes, 1970, Texas A&M Library, pg. 48

few weeks later, the number of boarding students had reached 24 and there were also a few day students. About 14 nuns came to Bryan with Mother Superior and some of them also taught at St. Joseph Catholic School in Bryan. Since they didn't have a carriage or even a horse, they walked the 1-1/2 mile journey between the schools each morning and evening. On October 21<sup>st</sup>, the feast day of St. Ursula, construction of the Villa Maria Academy was completed, and the Bishop traveled again from Galveston, for the dedication ceremony.<sup>21</sup>

In 1903, the sisters decided to mortgage the property of the Academy in Bryan in order to pay debts. The next year, it was discovered that their magnificent building was in danger of collapsing. Iron rods had to be installed and the front of the building was surrounded by covered walkways to add support to the walls. These unexpected repairs increased their debt considerably.<sup>22</sup> Despite the lower than expected enrollment numbers at Villa Maria each semester, the Ursulines had faith that God would not forsake them.

For several semesters, the school raised money and solicited donations to build a much needed addition with an auditorium, where the public could attend recitals and dramatic performances. In about 1911<sup>23</sup>, C. E. Jenkins was awarded the contract and built the three-story annex on the east side of the main building. He was a brother and sometimes partner of the Academy's original contractor, George Jenkins. The top floor of the 15,000 square foot addition served as a dormitory. The second floor had

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<sup>21</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, pg. 290

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*, pg. 291

<sup>23</sup> Newspaper clipping in Villa Maria Scrapbook, pg. 2, written on opening day of 1909-1910 school session, mentions plans for the addition; Sanborn Insurance Map of Bryan, TX, dated June 1912, shows the addition

classrooms and the auditorium was on the first floor.<sup>24</sup> It could seat 400 people and was often boasted in newspaper articles and the annual prospectus sent out to all who inquired about attending Villa Maria. The Academy had modern conveniences and was heated by steam and lighted with electricity.<sup>25</sup>

They worked hard at establishing a flourishing farm and were often praised in newspaper articles for their success at providing a very healthy diet for their students. In a September, 1910 article in *The Bryan Eagle*, titled “A Visit to Villa Maria”, Jerome Kayne described with great praise the fruits and vegetables being grown. He specifically mentioned corn, tomatoes, onions, potatoes, beets, peas, okra, pears and peaches, all with superlative descriptions. He quoted one of the Ursuline sisters as saying, “The crop is so plenteous every year that after supplying our own tables, we are enabled to give away an abundant surplus.” Advertisements for the Academy usually boasted of their fifty acre site with farm crops and animals, a large oak grove, basketball and tennis courts, and a “health record unsurpassed”.<sup>26</sup>

Touting their health record may have been the result of another article in *The Bryan Eagle* in which the author pointed out that all three of Bryan’s fine boarding schools and the A and M College suffered low attendance because people not familiar with the area perceived all of Brazos County as being river bottom land. He stated that Bryan should work to dispel this belief by advertising their “healthful situation” and that they were “ten miles away from the river, on a high ridge, free from miasma.” The article went on to say, “They are working wonders in gardening and farming.” It

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<sup>24</sup> Newspaper clipping in Villa Maria Scrapbook, inside of front cover, not dated

<sup>25</sup> *Prospectus of Villa Maria Academy, Bryan, Texas 1916*, pg. 5; also labeled on Sanborn Insurance Maps

<sup>26</sup> Typed transcript of *A Visit to Villa Maria by Jerome Jeffries Kayne*, in local history files of Bryan Public Library, cited as being from the Commercial Club Edition of the *Bryan Eagle*, September, 1910

stated that the sisters had a 400 bushel corn crop the previous season and had alfalfa and winter oats for grazing. It mentioned too that they had a vineyard and “grow fine blackberries, strawberries, raspberries, celery, and lots of other things not common in this section.”<sup>27</sup>

By 1910, the Academy had also built a beautiful grotto on their grounds. It represented the famous Grotto of Lourdes, France, and was built entirely of petrified wood pieces.<sup>28</sup> The centerpiece was an almost life-sized statue of Mary, from Lyon, France.

Despite all of their efforts, attendance at Villa Maria was never enough for the sisters to make the school financially self-sufficient. Although it was originally built without borrowed money, the Academy was falling further into debt as time passed. The sisters were very optimistic though and felt that God was always looking out for their best interests. In the 1910 *Eagle* article by Kayne, one of the sisters was quoted as saying, “A street car line between the two institutions is to be constructed in the course of a year.” She was referring to a planned extension of Bryan’s interurban trolley line which already ran from the A and M College to downtown Bryan. They were counting on this trolley to increase attendance from day students that would be able live at home. The interurban extension to Villa Maria was finally built and opened in the spring of 1913.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Newspaper clipping from *The Eagle*, in Villa Maria Scrapbook, pg. 26, not dated

<sup>28</sup> Newspaper clipping from *The Eagle*, in Villa Maria Scrapbook, pg. 10, not dated; photograph of the grotto is in *Prospectus of Villa Maria Academy, Bryan, Texas 1910-1911*

<sup>29</sup> Newspaper clipping in Villa Maria Scrapbook, pg. 26, mentions “Thursday, April 3” (1913)

The attendance did not increase the next year, and in fact there was only one graduate in the spring of 1914.<sup>30</sup> The town was beginning a period of rapid development during this time, and new subdivisions were springing up literally in front of the Academy. Automobiles were becoming more popular with the people in Bryan and the trolley extension must have also contributed to growth on the edge of town. Galveston was growing again also, having built a seawall and raised the ground level of the city. The Ursuline convent and school there had been restored and was thriving again.

The prospectus of Villa Maria for 1916, like the previous ones, touted the school's quality of instruction as well as the great atmosphere for well-rounded development. It mentioned that their basketball team was a "strong one" and played games against neighboring schools. The boarding and tuition rates were \$100 per year for high school level and \$90 for grammar school. Musical instruction was an extra \$30 which included the daily use of a piano or violin. Laundry was also an extra \$10 per year.

In 1921, attendance was only about the same as when the school opened 20 years earlier. 24 boarding students were enrolled at Villa Maria. The Ursulines didn't waiver in dedicating themselves to providing high quality instruction for the girls. It was written in their school annals, "Insignificant as this number may seem, we are grateful and bow in submission of God's holy will." The next year, the Academy began holding Sunday school classes for the large number of Italian immigrants who had recently begun to arrive to work the farms in the Brazos river bottom.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Newspaper clipping in Villa Maria Scrapbook, pg. 29, context indicates date as May 28, 1914

<sup>31</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, pgs. 291-2



Financial burdens and poor attendance finally caught up with Villa Maria, and on May 4, 1929, the word came from the provincial prioress, Mother Meaney, that the Academy was to be closed after that semester. That summer, the sisters returned to Galveston, leaving three nuns to fulfill their teaching obligation at St. Joseph's school for one more year.<sup>32</sup> The three that stayed had joined the Ursuline Order at Bryan, as had nine other girls between 1907 and 1929.<sup>33</sup> Father Gleissner, of St. Joseph Church later wrote in his 'Musings of an Old Priest', "Never will I forget the morning of my last mass in the chapel, the adieus to the sisters with whom I had shared joy and sorrow, success and failure. For about 25 years I walked daily at 6 o'clock to St. Ursula's Hill to celebrate mass and many a time in the afternoon to give benediction."<sup>34</sup> Coincidentally, he was at the Ursuline Convent in Galveston when the Great Storm of September, 1900 hit the island.<sup>35</sup> Although he was assigned to a church in Hearne at the time, Father Gleissner may have helped promote Bryan as a good site for the new Ursuline Academy.

The Academy building was closed and put up for sale. It sat vacant for six years and over \$20,000 was owed on the property.<sup>36</sup> A lawsuit by the St. Joseph's Missionary Society of Mill Hill, London, England against the Villa Maria Academy created a need for action. Bryan attorney, F. Law Henderson, was the receiver in the case in which District Judge W.C. Davis ordered the sale of the property, in May

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid*, pgs. 292-3

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*, pgs. 293-4

<sup>34</sup> *St. Joseph Parish Bryan, Texas 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1873-1973* paperback booklet, no printing info given

<sup>35</sup> 'Musings of an Old Priest' by Father J.B. Gleissner, handwritten history of his priesthood, written about 1941, printed in the St. Joseph Parish 100 year anniversary booklet

<sup>36</sup> Letter from Mothers St. Rose Buest and Mary John Holman of Ursuline Academy in San Antonio to attorneys James and Charles Stubbs in Galveston, dated May 22, 1935, copy in the Ursuline archives

1935.<sup>37</sup> The Ursulines tried to at least retain mineral interests in the 50 acres, but Law Henderson wrote to their attorneys and stated that, “it can not be done ...”<sup>38</sup>

Williamson S. Howell, Jr., a Bryan native who had served overseas as a U.S. Consul General, purchased the property for \$8,000 cash.<sup>39</sup> Mr. Howell had the Villa Maria Academy torn down and the bricks used in constructing a massive Swiss chalet styled home for his family.<sup>40</sup> Other structures in the community may have also been built with some of the building materials from the Academy.<sup>41</sup> The 24-room Howell home was said to have cost more than \$100,000,<sup>42</sup> an exorbitant amount for the 1930’s.

In 1937, the few graves of Ursuline nuns on the property were exhumed and moved to Galveston.<sup>43</sup> Apparently St. Joseph Church was given the grotto and cornerstone of the Academy building. A similar grotto built of petrified wood was built at the church.<sup>44</sup>

In 1942, W.S. Howell, Jr. was named U.S. Ambassador to Uruguay and decided to sell the estate to Allen Academy, his alma mater. They paid less than \$25,000 for the home and 50 acres.<sup>45</sup> Howell died unexpectedly, before leaving the country. Allen initially housed their glider trainees at the Howell home, but the program was cancelled after a few years. Nat Allen’s plans to move the school to the

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<sup>37</sup> Notice of sale by receiver, case no. 12582, District Court of Brazos Co., TX, styled ‘St. Joseph’s Missionary Society of Mill Hill vs. Villa Maria Academy’, signed May 29, 1935, copy in the Ursuline archives

<sup>38</sup> Letter from F.L. Henderson to attorneys James and Charles Stubbs, dated May 27, 1935, copy in Ursuline archives

<sup>39</sup> Notice of sale by receiver ...

<sup>40</sup> The Eagle newspaper, article by Mark Willis, approximately 1976

<sup>41</sup> Mrs. Ethyl Burgess told Julie Schultz in the 1990s that her husband, Hershel Burgess, had built their house on Lee Street in College Station with bricks and wood from the Villa Maria Academy, Julie Schultz relayed this story to this author, Henry Mayo, in 2003

<sup>42</sup> ‘A History of Allen Academy’, pg. 173, referenced there to the *Bryan Daily Eagle*, Jan. 2, 1943

<sup>43</sup> *Ursulines of the Central Province*, pg. 293

<sup>44</sup> brochure from St. Mary’s Catholic Church between Vanderpool and Utopia, Texas states this, and photos show grotto in *St. Joseph Parish Bryan, Texas 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1873-1973* booklet

<sup>45</sup> ‘A History of Allen Academy’, pg. 173, referenced there to the *Bryan Daily Eagle*, Mar. 18, 1946

old Ursuline property died with him in 1946,<sup>46</sup> but in 1950 a large gymnasium was built on the land. It was dedicated as a memorial to the Allen students who had died while in the armed services in the two world wars.<sup>47</sup>

Although it was practically unused, Allen Academy retained ownership of the property until 1973. At that time it was one of 20 tracts that they lost to the banks which had loaned them money.<sup>48</sup> Maria Pults, from Houston, purchased the entire 50 acres and buildings from the banks, in 1975.<sup>49</sup> A few months later, it was surveyed and a three acre tract containing the Howell house was platted.<sup>50</sup> Pults began selling off the adjacent property in small tracts, but planned to restore the Howell house at an estimated cost of \$200,000.<sup>51</sup> The house and three acres were instead sold in 1977 to A.P. Boyd and F.M. Young for \$50,000.<sup>52</sup> Still no improvements were made to the house or three acres, and they were sold to Paul Bonarrigo in 1981.<sup>53</sup> By this time, the house was in such disrepair that it was condemned,<sup>54</sup> so the Bonarrigo's had it taken apart for the materials. They gave the bricks a third life at their Messina Hof Winery,<sup>55</sup> a few miles east of where they were first used as the Villa Maria Academy.

The high quality education given to the girls at the Villa Maria Ursuline Academy most certainly made positive changes in their lives, but little physical evidence of the school and convent remain. The statue of Mary from the grotto now stands on top of the old cornerstone from the Academy, in the carport behind St.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid*, pg. 175

<sup>47</sup> *ibid*, pg. 199

<sup>48</sup> Deed recorded in vol. 340, pg. 169, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>49</sup> Deed recorded in vol. 345, pg. 432, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>50</sup> Plat of Howell Estate Tract, recorded in vol. 349, pg. 715, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>51</sup> *The Eagle* newspaper, article by Mark Willis, approximately 1976

<sup>52</sup> Deed recorded in vol. 381, pg. 109, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>53</sup> Deed recorded in vol. 482, pg. 227, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

<sup>54</sup> personal interview by Henry Mayo with Paul and Merrill Bonarrigo on Mar. 4, 2003

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*

Joseph Church in Bryan.<sup>56</sup> Much of the petrified wood from the Villa Maria and St. Joseph grottos is now forming the grotto at St. Mary's Catholic Church between the towns of Vanderpool and Utopia, Texas.<sup>57</sup> The south five acres of the old 50 acre Ursuline tract, where the grotto was located, is now occupied by the Allendale apartments.<sup>58</sup> An auto body shop sits near the west corner of the tract, approximately where the Academy main buildings sat. Today, relatively few citizens of the area know the history and importance of the property at the corner of Ursuline Street and Villa Maria Road in Bryan. Other street names such as Howell Street and Howell House Lane, also give clues to the history of the area.

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<sup>56</sup> personally viewed and photographed by this author, Henry Mayo, 2002

<sup>57</sup> brochure from St. Mary's Catholic church, between Vandepool and Utopia, Texas

<sup>58</sup> Plat of Allendale Apartments, recorded in vol. 523, pg. 425, Deed Records of Brazos Co., TX

A copy of the Villa Maria scrapbook as well as photos, maps and other resources used to prepare this historical narrative will be put in the permanent files of the Carnegie History Center in Bryan, Texas.

Henry P Mayo – November 2003