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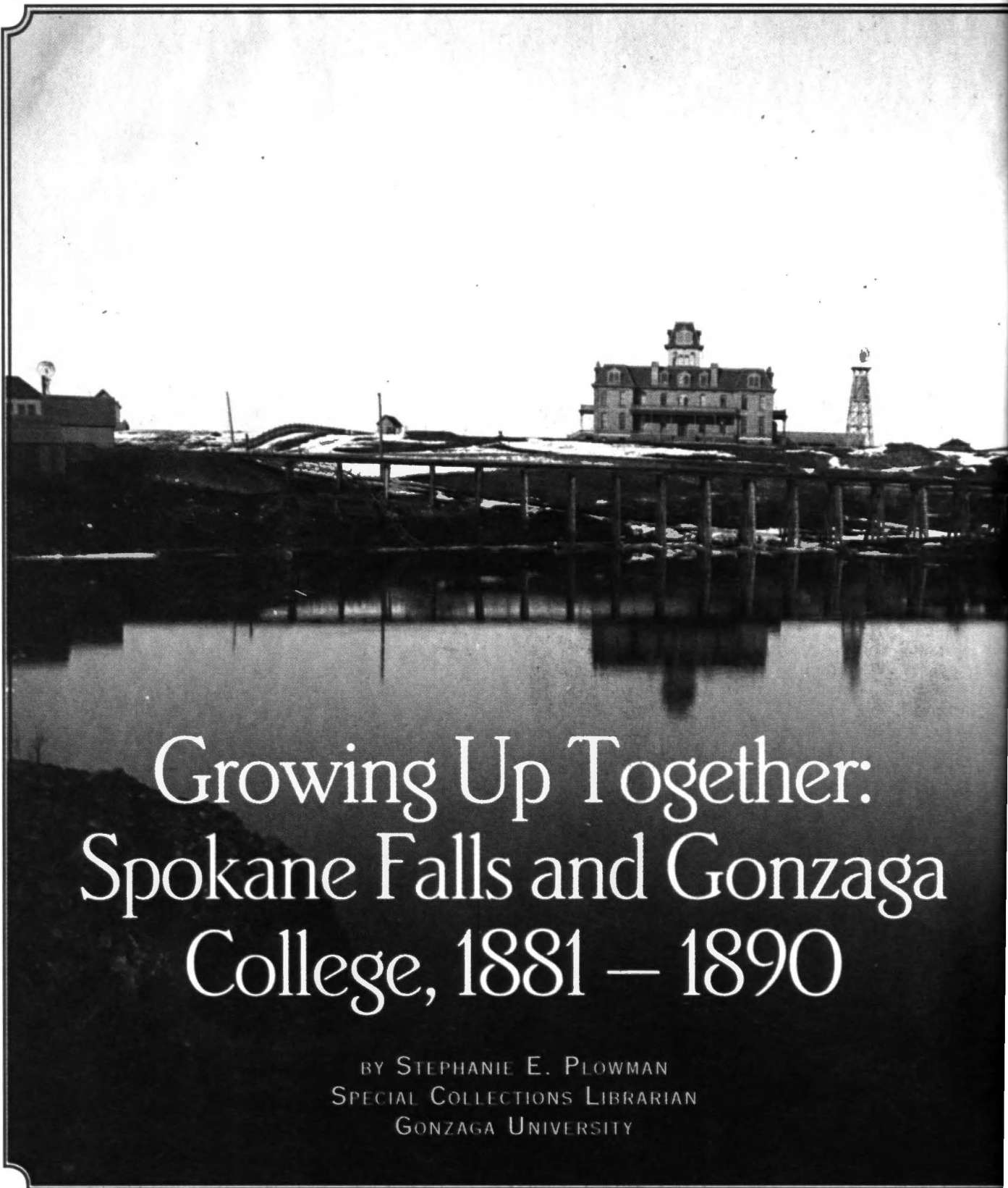
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Recommended Citation

Plowman, Stephanie, "Growing Up Together: Spokane Falls and Gonzaga College, 1881-1890" (2012).
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Growing Up Together: Spokane Falls and Gonzaga College, 1881 — 1890

BY STEPHANIE E. PLOWMAN
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On October 13, 1881, Fr. Joseph Cataldo of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits) purchased 320 acres on the north side of the Spokane River in Spokane Falls. He bought the property from the Northern Pacific Railroad for \$2.60 an acre. This purchase marked the beginning of a long relationship between Gonzaga and Spokane. Both Gonzaga College with its Jesuit fathers and Spokane Falls grew up together and needed each other to prosper and become Gonzaga University and Spokane.

Spokane Falls incorporated in 1881 with about 600 residents. Recognizing the need for a college, several Spokane civic boosters co-signed a letter to the Jesuits dated October 1, 1881 asking them to start a school for boys. These businessmen initially pledged money to help with the erection of the building.

When Fr. Cataldo originally purchased the land, he wanted the school to be for Indian boys as at the time there was competition for the native children to go to a Protestant school in western Oregon. By the time Gonzaga College opened in 1887, his attitude and the earlier concerns changed so the school was open just for white boys, who were not necessarily Spokane Falls residents.

Construction on the original college building began in 1883 under the guidance of Fr. Urban Grassi, SJ who worked with local architect Henry Pruesse. The building was 50 x 100 feet with a basement and two stories and a mansard roof. The bricks were made on site by a Spokane Falls citizen to save time and money. The fact that the first building was constructed out of brick demonstrated the Jesuits' faith in Spokane Falls. They expected the school and city to be around for years to come.

Once the building was completed there was little money for the interior furnishings, including a furnace. Fr. James Rebmann replaced Fr. Grassi to

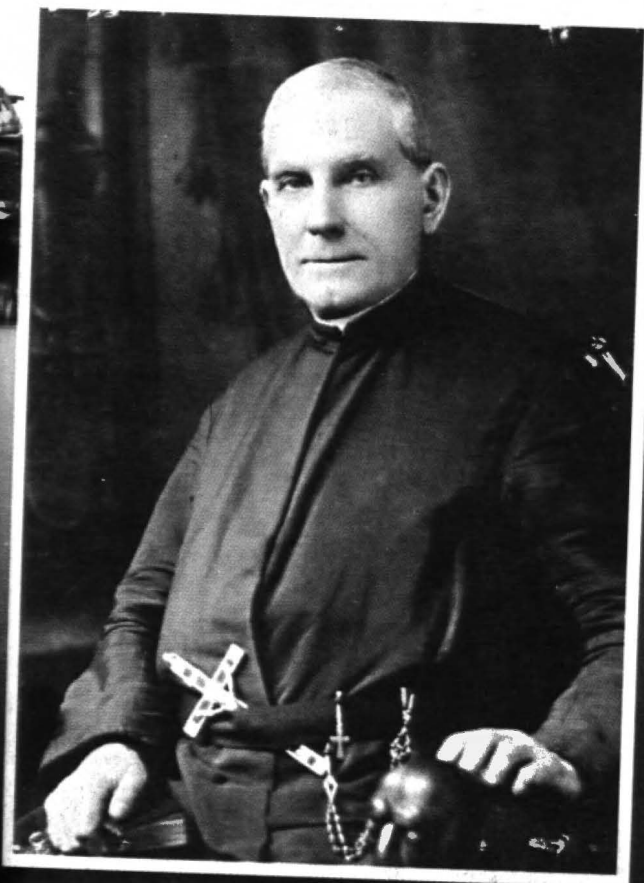


Photo of Gonzaga College circa 1889, courtesy of Jesuit Oregon Province Archives, Image 543.1.01. Inset photo, Fr. Joseph Cataldo, courtesy of Gonzaga University Library, Image rg.1887.1895.14.

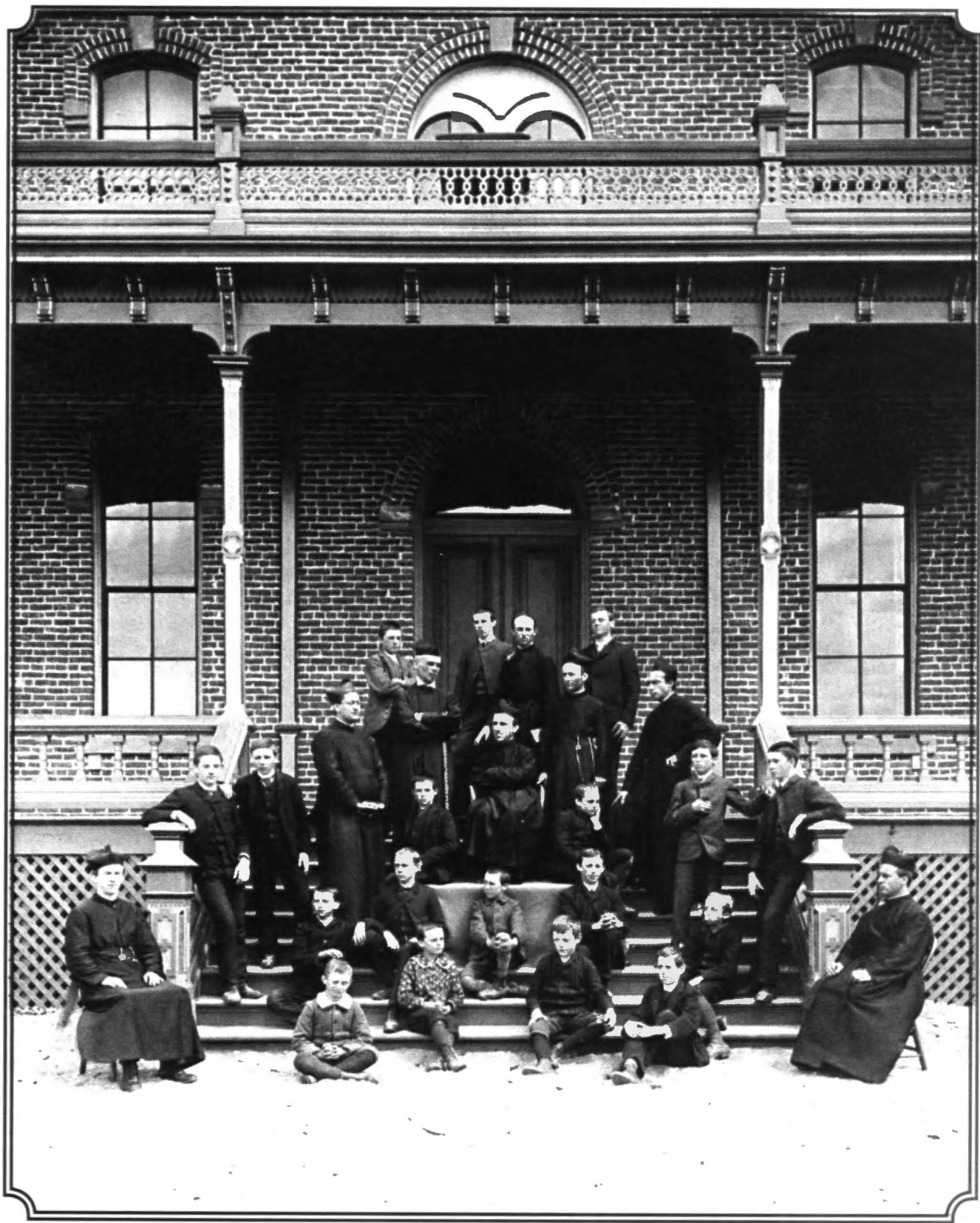


Above, the original Gonzaga College, built to the west of its present day location. Image gp.ov1001.03, courtesy Gonzaga University Library. Opposite page, the original class of students, and faculty, 1888. Image gp.st0101.01, courtesy of Gonzaga University Library.

head up the Gonzaga project and became its first president. He was able to purchase books, stationary, students' desk, bedding, and band instruments from a Jesuit school that was closing in Wisconsin.

Without major donations from civic leaders, the Jesuits were still able to complete the building with hard work and careful budgeting. Several residents such as James Monaghan, M. M. Cowley, Louis Adams, and others supported the Jesuits and Gonzaga as they could. Monaghan's son Robert was in the first class of students.

Spokane Falls recognized the importance of Gonzaga College to the city's prosperity. In the *Spokane Morning Review* newspaper dated January 1, 1887, one full page is devoted to listing and describing the improvements to Spokane Falls by proudly showing its growth. Such improvements included: water works, electric lights, 62 telephone boxes, railroad improvements, sewage system, 2 fire departments, a hospital, Our Lady of Lourdes Church, and 14 more, plus mentioning the construction of new homes.





One improvement listed was the College of Gonzaga, which “is a college exclusively for boys and solely under the charge of Jesuit missionary fathers. The building is unquestionably the most commanding and imposing one in the northwest.” It goes on to say that the “curriculum will be that used in every large catholic institution of learning, including a commercial course, the classics, the elementary course, literature, philosophy, theology and the natural sciences.”

Prior to Gonzaga’s opening in 1887 the Jesuits allowed the Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company to build an extension along the north side of the river. Recognizing the importance for the growing city for more railroad access, the Jesuits did not want to slow Spokane’s development so they agreed despite having concerns about its impact to campus. As expected, the railroad severely impinged upon the campus environment. No longer did the


Jesuits have clear access to its river front; plus the sounds and smells of the busy train locomotives provided distractions in the classrooms. Gonzaga College opened on September 17, 1887. At the time Spokane Falls included 7,000 residents, 18 churches of various denominations, 7 schools, and 25 saloons. Tuition and room and board was \$250. For the first three years, only boarding students were admitted for the 10 month academic year. By the end of its first year there were 20 students admitted under the requirements that the male students had to be able to read and write and not be under the age of 10. Spokane Falls residents could attend public schools, parish church schools, Spokane College (a Methodist college that opened in 1883 and closed 1892), Spokane Business College (opened in October 1887), and the Sisters of Holy Names School.

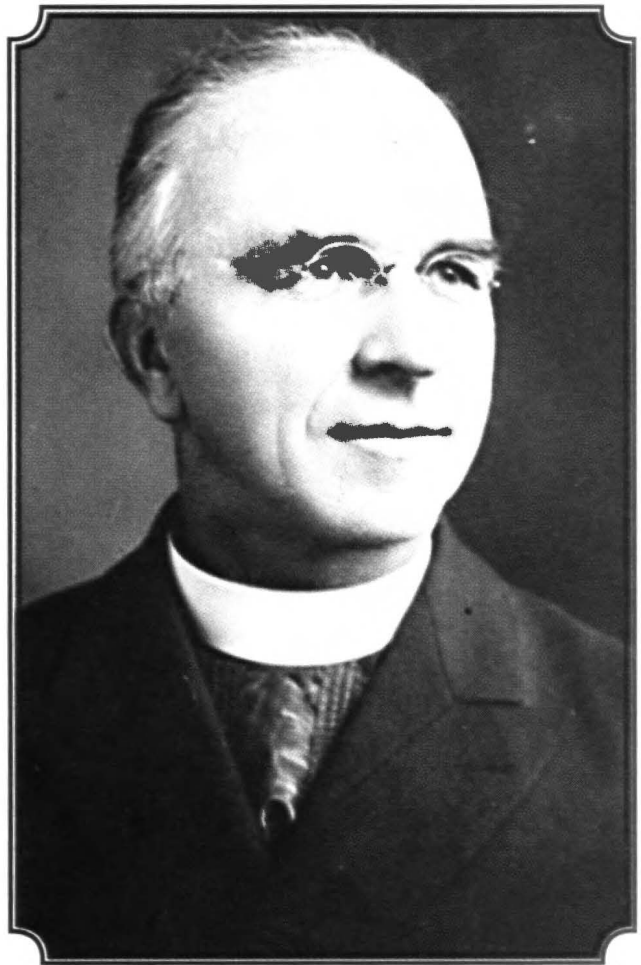
Concerned about the education of boys who were not prepared for college level course, the

Jesuits opened St. Ignatius School in 1889. Under the guidance of the Gonzaga Jesuit administrators, the school was held in an old carpenter shop in town, which had been converted into a church. The school closed three years later with the pupils attending Gonzaga as day students.

Gonzaga College supported the city after the Spokane Falls fire on August 4, 1889. This disaster burned 40 acres of downtown. Gonzaga opened its doors to shelter victims since school was not in session. Many refugees who had lost everything stayed in the dormitories, halls, and classrooms for a month until the school reopened for its academic year in September. Afterwards, many of the victims purchased property in the Gonzaga neighborhood.

In addition to providing Spokane Falls with a college, the Jesuits were also instrumental in starting the Catholic churches in the city in the early 1880s. Besides purchasing the northern property, the Jesuits bought 2 lots downtown to build a church and school. Fr. Cataldo founded the first church and later the Jesuits established the Church of our Lady of Lourdes in 1886. The early Gonzaga Jesuits mostly recruited from Europe were both professors and priests helping the Gonzaga students, Spokane Falls residents, and Native Americans. Before Fr. Rebmann's departure from Spokane Falls, which had a Catholic population of 4,000 in 1890, he had been a priest for Our Lady of Lourdes, St. Aloysius, St. Anne, and St. Francis Xavier.

Now, 125 years after it opened, Gonzaga University and the city of Spokane are flourishing. Both have benefited from each other over these many years. As written in the *Spokesman* paper on June 30, 1890, it stated: "Gonzaga and Spokane are one. They began together, have grown together, and a bright future is in store for each." 



Above, Gonzaga College's first president, Fr. James Rebmann, 1887. Today, Rebmann Hall, named in his honor, houses the Gonzaga University Department of Philosophy. Image Rg.1887.1895.01, courtesy of Gonzaga University Library. Opposite page, a view of downtown Spokane after the great fire of 1889. Gonzaga College became a place of refuge for Spokane residents in need after the fire burned 40 acres of town to the ground. Image 01.2.02, courtesy of the Jesuit Oregon Province Archives.