The humble beginning of Pittsburgh Catholic College of the Holy Ghost is a memorable part of Duquesne University’s legacy. With no money, no land and no buildings, Spiritan Father Joseph Strub, C.S.Sp., established the college on Oct. 1, 1878, in leased space atop a bakery on Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh’s Hill District.

Equally fascinating, but perhaps lesser known, is the history of the Administration Building. Constructed by the Holy Ghost Congregation in 1885 on a bluff overlooking the Monongahela River, the five-story structure became the foundation of Duquesne University, both literally and figuratively.

One hundred twenty-five years later, Old Main continues to unite and inspire members of Duquesne University to live out the Spiritan mission of providing a faith-filled educational experience to all who seek it.

This exhibit was developed to honor this historic building and its lasting legacy.
Map of City of Pittsburgh, detail Boyd’s Hill site

Before Old Main dominated the Bluff, a smaller structure stood on the site known as Boyd’s Hill. This map from 1872 details the property which included a private hospital built by Dr. A. G. Walter in the 1850’s. The hospital operated for many years and was even used as a stop on the Underground Railroad.

First Building

After buying the property from Dr. Walter’s heirs, the Spiritans moved the hospital to a lot across the street to make way for a new “main building.” Pictured here, circa 1930, the former hospital was the first campus building. Known as St. John’s Hall and later as St. Mary’s Hall, it served the campus as an office building and dormitory until it was razed in 1971.
Creating a College

Construction of Old Main, pen and ink illustration, 1883-84
The Spiritans hired architect William Kaufman to design the new building for the expanding college. Thirty feet of earth was removed from the hill crest and a brickyard was established, all to facilitate construction. The final cost totaled $150,000.

Pittsburgh Catholic College
Completed and dedicated on May 3, 1885, Old Main soon became a symbol of the college. At this early date it served a variety of needs, housing students, classrooms, libraries and laboratories. A combination chapel/auditorium was located on the fifth floor.

A University is Born
The school was granted university status on March 30, 1911, becoming the first Catholic university in the Commonwealth and the only one between Washington, D.C. and South Bend, Indiana. The name change to Duquesne University of the Holy Ghost was formalized on May 27, 1911.
The Holy Ghost Fathers believed in educating the mind, body and spirit of their students. Here, boys from the Preparatory School engage in an outdoor gymnastics drill. Their activities were held next to Old Main, the center of campus life in the early 20th century.

Sr. Mary Fides Shepperson
Duquesne was one of the first universities in the nation to admit women and minorities. Sister Mary Fides Shepperson earned a bachelor’s degree in 1911 and a master’s degree in 1913. By 1927, 214 women had graduated from Duquesne; all but 40 were nuns.

The Voice of Education
In 1949, Duquesne established WDUQ, the first collegiate radio station in Pittsburgh. Two studios were installed on the second floor of Old Main, and a 16-foot broadcast tower replaced the building’s cupola.
Building Faith: A Commemoration of Old Main

1885

Duquesne Campus, view from downtown

Both Duquesne and the city of Pittsburgh experienced growth following World War I. School administrators sought to meet campus needs, such as new buildings and facilities, through massive fundraising drives. The city’s growth also changed the look of campus, clearing away the multitude of billboards under Old Main when the Liberty Bridge was built in the early 1920’s.

2010

A Developing Campus

Student Boom

Following World War II, veterans enrolled at Duquesne in record numbers, boosting enrollment to 5,280 students by 1948. In this 1947 photo, students lined up to register for classes in Old Main, which continues to house the Office of the Registrar.

Duquesne Campus, bird’s eye view

Continued growth at Duquesne during the 1960’s did not always bode well for campus buildings. A master plan for the University called for the demolition of Old Main in order to make way for a student union. School president, Father Henry McAnulty, C.S.Sp., quietly got the word out about the proposal, and Duquesne alumni reacted quickly. With their help, the school raised $700,000 for Old Main’s restoration and the building was saved.
Lightning Strikes Old Main

Old Main Fire
Disaster literally struck Old Main in the summer of 1975. Hit by a bolt of lightning during a thunderstorm, the fifth floor of the building was destroyed by fire, along with several valuable paintings and thousands of dollars of other property. Amazingly, no students or faculty inside the building were injured, and Fr. McAnulty’s Irish prayer book was unharmed.

Initially, the fire department advised Duquesne to tear down Old Main, believing the building to be irreparably damaged. It was, however, too important a campus fixture to be demolished. The University rebuilt Old Main’s top floor, maintaining it as the primary symbol of the school.
Toward the New Millennium

13 Boardroom at Old Main
During Fr. McAnulty’s presidency (1959-1980), Duquesne began to play a larger role in the Pittsburgh community. The painting on the boardroom wall shows Old Main in relation to other city landmarks, such as Mellon Arena and the U.S. Steel Building.

14 University Centennial
In 1978, Fr. McAnulty hosted a centennial celebration on the top floors of the Administration Building. That same year, Old Main was designated a historic landmark by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

15 First Lay President
Dr. John E. Murray, Jr., Duquesne’s first lay president (1988-2001), oversaw the development of two new schools, upgrades in technology, campus beautification projects and successful fundraising campaigns that helped advance the University’s status as a national leader in Catholic higher education.
High Alter
Duquesne’s first chapel was on the fifth floor of Old Main. By 1894, however, a new chapel was under construction, connected both symbolically and physically to the University’s “main building.” While it took a decade to complete, the chapel has been a prominent part of the school’s landscape ever since, a lasting icon of Duquesne’s emphasis on spiritual as well as academic development.

Chapel Exterior
The red brick exterior was styled to complement Old Main, with stone towers constructed at the corners to resemble a castle. The stained glass windows, made in Munich, Germany, were donated and represent the 15 mysteries of the rosary. Marble tablets in the back of the church memorialize the names of generous donors who contributed to renovations over the years.

New Cupola
Restored and refurbished throughout the years, the chapel received substantial renovations in 1994, including a new foyer that displays the names of each school and the University seal. In 1996, a new cupola with chimes was added and, etched glass panels of Spiritan co-founders Claude Poullart des Places and Francis Libermann were installed at the entrance in 2010.
A Lasting Legacy

Old Main, like the University it represents, has stood the test of time. It was the city’s first Catholic college and is the only Spiritan university in the world. From this single building on the Bluff, a University was born, which today includes a 50-acre campus, 10 schools, 44 buildings and more than 150 academic programs.

Renovated and revered for five generations, Old Main remains a beloved symbol of Duquesne and “Catholic education in the Spiritan tradition.”

Information and artifacts for this exhibit were provided by University Archives, The Spirit that Gives Life, by Dr. Joseph F. Rishel, and the Facilities Management Department.