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The Almost Forgotten History of Claver College

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Abstract: This essay examines Claver College, an African American Catholic College located in Guthrie, Oklahoma from 1936-1942. The author argues that while there is still much that is unknown about the short-lived college, the institution provided an opportunity for African Americans west of the Mississippi River to access higher education and served as an entre for the Catholic Church into an African American community.

Keywords: Claver College, African American, Catholic, higher education, Guthrie, Oklahoma

The significance of Xavier University of Louisiana in New Orleans (XULA) as the first Black Catholic institution of higher education in the United States of America is familiar to those interested in Black Catholics and higher education. They know that its founder, Saint Katharine Drexel, SBS, made the commitment during the 1920s to provide an opportunity for Blacks to pursue college and university studies when they had few other educational spaces. Most Catholic colleges and universities did not accept Black students at this time. Since it began in 1925, thousands of African Americans, have graduated from Xavier. Yet, as significant as Xavier is for being the first Black Catholic college in the United States, it is not the only one that ever existed. The second such school was in Oklahoma, and during its brief existence, Blacks in the West also had the opportunity to access Catholic higher education.

On May 11, 1941, Sister Joseph Connors, a white Benedictine nun demonstrated her confidence in the future Claver Catholic College in Guthrie, Oklahoma. As dean of the four-year-old college for African Americans, she penned a letter that day to the headquarters of Theta Kappa Phi, the National Catholic Men's Fraternity to inquire about starting a chapter of their organization at Claver.¹ Almost one year

¹ Sister M. Joseph, O.S.B., Dean to Theta Kappa Phi National Catholic Men's Fraternity, Lafayette, Louisiana May 11, 1941. Folder "Claver College" St. Joseph Convent Archives, Tulsa Oklahoma (hereafter StJCA).

earlier in 1940, *The Catholic Advance* had praised the Benedictine Sisters for “making a go” of the country’s “second Catholic college” for African Americans.² The newspaper reported that the sisters had started the college “on a shoestring” budget in 1936, and now it had 40 Black men and women enrolled. *The Catholic Advance* declared that the college’s future was “secure.”³ However, it was not. In 1942, after only operating for six years, Claver College closed and seemingly vanished into thin air.

Claver’s Beginning

In 1936 Sister Joseph Connors sought and gained permission from her bishop to “do some work for the good souls” of African Americans living in Guthrie.⁴ Her religious community, the Benedictine Sisters of the Congregation of St. Scholastica, were known for unity and for facilitating educational opportunities for more than 400 years. The first three members of her immediate congregation had arrived in Guthrie after leaving Creston, Iowa during September 1889. Three years later, in 1892, they started an elementary school for girls that welcomed any religious denomination.⁵ In 1916, twenty -four years after the Benedictine Sisters opened the girls’ school, the State of Oklahoma accredited it and allowed it to start issuing college degrees.⁶ Sister Joseph was credited with having “the foresight” in seeing a need for a higher education institution that could provide not only for the educational needs of her own community of teaching sisters but also for lay students and other religious communities.⁷ Per Oklahoma law;

² It is the Second in Country: Oklahoma Sisters Make Go of College for Colored,” *The Catholic Advance (Wichita, Kansas) 19 July, Fri, page 5.*
<https://www.newspapers.com/image/179546669/?terms=colored%20catholic%20college%20oklahoma&match=1>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Regarding the ‘Colored College’ in Guthrie, Oklahoma,” “Claver College” Folder, StJCA.

⁵ This untitled source does not indicate that Black girls were unwelcome at this school. “Claver College” Folder, StJCA.

⁶ “Rich Achievements Mark History of Catholic Church in Oklahoma,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, Sunday, April 23, 1939.

⁷ “155” unnamed document, “Claver College” Folder, StJCA. Also see Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, *A System of Higher Education for Oklahoma, The Report of the State Coordinating Board with a Supplemental Statement Concerning the Activities of the State Regents for Higher Education* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education, 1942), 57 and page 68 of Stanley W. Hoig’s 1971 doctoral dissertation for the University of Oklahoma, titled “A History of the Development of Institutions of Higher Education in Oklahoma.”

however, the college, which had almost 100 students enrolled by the mid 1930s, barred African American women from attending.⁸

Now, Sister Joseph's definition of "do[ing] some work for the good souls" meant expanding her order's efforts to provide access to higher education to the area's African Americans.⁹ Exactly why she launched her plan to provide higher education to Guthrie's African American community – or if it was even her first attempt to do so – remains unclear. Any number of factors, or combinations thereof, however, could have influenced her. For example, she may have been acting upon the late 19th century Catholic initiatives to expand Catholic education.¹⁰

Knowing that Oklahoma had only one college in its entire higher education system that Blacks could attend at that time might have also influenced Sr. Joseph.¹¹ In 1897, Oklahoma lawmakers capitalized on the Morrill Act of 1890 and started the racially segregated land-grant institution Oklahoma Colored Agricultural and Normal University for Blacks. The school was later renamed Langston University in 1941.¹² Guthrie's proximity to Tulsa, where the deeply rooted racial hate whites felt towards Blacks was evidenced by a violent racial massacre in Tulsa in 1921, might have also played a role in Sister Joseph's actions to help provide educational opportunities for the community. Guthrie was approximately 90 miles northeast from Tulsa, and Guthrie's Black

<https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244/3053/7127617.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ "Regarding the 'Colored College' in Guthrie, Oklahoma," "Claver College" Folder, STJCA.

¹⁰ See Katrina M. Sanders, "Forgotten or Simply Ignored: A Historiography of African Americans and Catholic Education" in *Using Past as Prologue: Contemporary Perspectives on African American Educational History* edited by Dionne Danks, Michelle A. Purdy, and Christopher M. Span (Charlotte, N.C.: Information Age Publishing, 2015), 57-116.

¹¹ Oklahoma had six normal schools: Central, Northwestern, Southwestern, East Central, Southeastern, and Northeastern whose original basic purpose was to train public school teachers. They were all made "state colleges" in 1939 since they had grown to include additional degree programs. According to Stephen Hoig on page 130 of "A History of the Development of Institutions of Higher Education in Oklahoma, these colleges served "a student body composed essentially of those young people in its area who could not afford to go away to the University of Oklahoma or some other higher-ranked institution."

<https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244/3053/7127617.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y> Hoig

¹² Ibid.

residents were committed to achieving racial justice and education and growing their own social organizations and citizenship programs to do so. Perhaps that influenced her.

Then again it may have been a perceived shift in Catholic opinion about their segregated higher educational institutions. Virtually all of the prominent Catholic higher education institutions around the country during the 1930s prohibited Blacks from enrolling, but some Catholic institutions in the North were beginning to make "great strides towards an open door policy."¹³ Respondents to a 1941 survey sent to 120 Catholic colleges and universities outside of the South revealed 47 institutions had Black students enrolled at the time of the survey. Nine of those institutions had done so since the mid to late 1930s.¹⁴ According to Father John T. Gillard, S.S.J., a contemporary of Sister Joseph, this apparent shift in Catholic response to integration revealed that Catholic institutions were leaning towards making "the last citadels of Catholic inconsistency in education fall before the onslaughts of an aroused Catholic opinion."¹⁵ Finally, knowing that her religious order had a successful history of opening educational institutions in Oklahoma might have influenced and inspired Sister Joseph to forge ahead with Claver College.

The Benedictine Sisters, with Sister Joseph at the helm, founded Claver on February 1, 1936.¹⁶ They started small by offering Blacks college level religion and philosophy courses that could be transferred to other Catholic institutions. Accessible records do not show funding from philanthropist Katharine Drexel, but it is conceivable that the school might have secured some monies from her as well as from donors who

¹³ Philip Gleason, *Contending With Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: Oxford University Press) 155. Gleason discusses northern Catholic Colleges and their willingness to enroll Black students. He concludes that Loyola Chicago had the largest number of Black students during the 1930s.

¹⁴ John Thomas Gillard, *Colored Catholics in the United States: An investigation of Catholic activity on behalf of Negroes in the United States and a Survey of the Present Condition of the Colored Missions* (Baltimore: The Josephite Press, 1941), 213-214.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Francis Clement Herald*, no date, circa 1940, issue 2, p 9. "Claver College File" STJCA. Records do not indicate where the school was located in Guthrie. The *Francis Clement Herald* was Claver College's student newsletter.

contributed to their Catholic women's college.¹⁷ It is also possible that Claver secured funding from other Catholic agencies that supported Black education like the Bureau of Colored and Indian Missions, established in 1884 as part of the Commission for the Catholic Missions among the Colored People and the Indians; The Lenten appeal, established in 1887 to collect money from parishes to support Black missions; and the Catholic Negro-American Mission Board created in 1907 to bolster the Lenten appeal.¹⁸

Sister Joseph recruited instructors for Claver from the Catholic College for Women, including three diocesan priests and four religious teaching sisters. She also hired four Black lay persons to work at Claver. They all donated their time and talents, receiving no salary for their work. Students paid \$5.00 for each semester hour or credit as their tuition. Tuition went toward equipment for the college. In addition to weekday offerings, Claver offered Saturday classes to help meet the needs of commuting students. Those who completed 128 semester hours of college courses received a Bachelor of Science degree. Students who already had a bachelor's degree could receive professional certificates for a minimum of 30 semester hours in Library Science. The departments of English, Education, and History offered graduate courses leading to the master's degree. Course offerings expanded in 1941 and the college offered "special opportunities" such as pottery, choral singing, Glee Club, physical education, football, and other athletics.¹⁹

Since some of the students attending Claver College had already received credits from other colleges, Claver was able to have its first graduation on September 8, 1939. There are discrepancies in the number of students in the first graduating class. While one source notes that Claver awarded the Bachelor of Arts and Science to 9 students – male and female—another source lists the graduating class as 15 students.²⁰ The second graduating class in January 1940 reportedly had 9 students. There were approximately 40 students enrolled during 1940. As the number of students grew, the faculty asked the State Department

¹⁷ Larry Odell, "Colleges, African American," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*. <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CO026>.

¹⁸ Amanda Bresie, "Mother Katharine Drexel's Benevolent Empire: The Bureau of Catholic Indian Missions and the Education of Native Americans, 1885-1935", *U.S. Catholic Historian* 32, no. 3, (Summer 2014):6.

¹⁹ "Claver College" Folder, StJCA.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

to recognize its degrees and grant certificates for the battery of classes offered. The state did approve the request, and before long course certificates were being offered to Blacks through the Catholic College for Women. This act generated both positive and negative reactions.²¹

Claver's Problems:

The remaining known records only hint at issues that may have contributed to Claver's demise. First, but not likely the most critical factor, was the initial hesitancy the Black community felt toward the college being established by a Catholic religious order. Black leeringness towards the Catholic Church was not confined to Guthrie. The Catholic Church was an immigrant church and thus concentrated on Catholic ethnic groups with whom leaders held an affinity. The Catholic Church had not allied itself with abolitionist efforts; rather, many of its religious orders, both male and female, had owned slaves.²² It had only slowly begun to move toward evangelizing Blacks after Emancipation when it realized schools were the best pathway into Black communities after the American bishops received pressure from the Holy See to step up its efforts to evangelize to African Americans. That promise of education also likely swayed Blacks in Guthrie and reduced their skepticism when they saw the opportunities the college provided.

Local whites were likely more threatened by Claver College and apt to push for its closure. For example, they began to protest the school when they realized Claver College students were not only utilizing the same resources – buildings, materials, etc. – that the white students utilized, but were receiving diplomas and certificates that bore the *name* of a white institution – The Catholic College for Women. To address these issues, the diocese and the sisters did two things. First, they secured a large downtown office building that was donated to them for their work with Claver College; and second, they officially made a distinction between the certificates and degrees awarded to whites and those awarded to Blacks.²³ White students would receive diplomas and certificates bearing the name "The Catholic College for Women," while

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sanders, "Forgotten or Simply Ignored," 57-116.

²³ Katrina M. Sanders, "Catholic Social Teaching, Vatican II, and Civil Rights: a Social Justice Trinity in the Fight to Save a Central Louisiana Black Catholic School," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 33, no.2 (Spring 2015): 85. See also, Madeline Hook Rice, *American Catholic Opinion in the Slavery Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

Black students would attend a coed branch first named "The Colored College of the Catholic College of Oklahoma" and later changed to "Claver College" in recognition of the patron saint of the enslaved and Blacks.²⁴

Financing the school likely became more problematic as the growing enrollment, which was "entirely beyond" Sister Joseph's "original ideas or expectations," demanded more faculty and resources. Again, it is not clear exactly if or how much support Mother Katharine Drexel provided Claver or for how long, but at one point Sister Joseph tried to secure funding through the National Youth Administration (NYA) program. President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the NYA in 1935 to "do something for the Nation's unemployed youth." It was a New Deal organization established within the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and funded by the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935. The program, which followed the Great Depression, operated independently at the state level, and offered "writing, reading, and arithmetic" courses. It also had the Works Project that offered "unemployed, out-of-school youth" training and the Student Aid Program that provided "work-study training for high school, college, and graduate students" between sixteen and twenty-five years of age.²⁵ Congress distributed the federal funds each academic year to state educational institutions for scholarships and grants. Oklahoma had more than nine hundred educational and work facilities participating annually in both programs.²⁶

Sr. Joseph's efforts to secure accreditation suggest that NYA required it before releasing funds. The State Board, however, denied her request arguing that it could not provide verification of accreditation since it was responsible for accrediting classes and not institutions.

²⁴ Records do not denote the date "The Colored College of the Catholic College of Oklahoma" officially became "Claver," but the previous name still appears on most correspondence.

²⁵ Tally D. Fugate, "National Youth Administration," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*.
<https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=NA014>.

²⁶ Ibid.

The Executive Secretary of the State Board wrote to Sister Joseph:

After a careful study of the Statutes of Oklahoma in connection with this request, we have come to the conclusion that the State Board of Education does not have the authority to make a statement concerning any college that said, "college is an accredited institution of College grade level."

It is our further opinoin [sic] that the legal power of the State Board of Education with reference to the accrediting of institutions of higher learning within the State is limited to the accrediting of the courses offered by said institutions and submitted by students of said instututions[sic] to this Board as a basis for the issuance of teachers certificates in lieu of examinations.²⁷

Later he quoted the section of the Oklahoma Statutes of 1931 upon which he based his comment.

It appears that Sister Joseph continued her efforts to secure funding from the NYA by enlisting the aid of Guthrie's city officials. A letter from a city employee (whose job title is not noted) hints that either the NYA possibly had a quota or wanted one from Claver, but the correspondence does not reveal the type of quota or how it might be used. For example, the NYA may have asked Claver to verify the number of Black students enrolled, especially if it was still considered an extension of the white college. Frances Herber, a city representative, wrote to the Director of the Oklahoma City NYA College School Aid saying:

Dear Mr. Drake:

Since talking with you hear [sic] at my office about a quota for the colored branch of the Catholic College of Oklahoma Sister Joseph has received a letter from the Executive Secretary, L. Norman Duncan of the State Board of Education which read in part:

After a careful study of the Statutes of Oklahoma in connection with this request, we have come to the conclusion that the State Board of Education does not have the authority

²⁷ L. Norman Duncan, Executive Secretary, State Board of Education to Sister M. Joseph, Dean, Oklahoma Catholic College, Guthrie, Oklahoma July 24, 1939. "Claver College" Folder, StJCA.

to make a statement concerning any college that said, "college is an accredited institution of college grade level."

I had intended to come to your office today to talk to you about this but was unable to get away. What other certification or recommendation would we have to get to you in order to get a quota for the school? May I hear from you soon as to what other recommendation you may need. Sister Joseph is very anxious to get the necessary information to you.

Respectfully,
 Frances J. Herber,
 City Hall,
 Guthrie, Oklahoma²⁸

Claver's affiliation as a Catholic institution might have also contributed in some way to its lack of success. Although Catholic missionaries, like other religious denominations, had set out to propagate their faith in the Oklahoma Territory during the late 1800s, their established institutions "never knew large enrollments" since the state "had inherited considerable Southern prejudice against Catholics."²⁹ Many of Oklahoma's first Catholics – like those throughout the rest of the country, were from ostracized European countries – and most of its the priests were also immigrants. The rise of the Know-Nothing political party during the early to middle 1800s helped foster the perception that Catholics would always defer to Rome and could not be loyal United States citizens. Many in Oklahoma also held the belief that Catholics were not "true Americans" and discriminated against them "rather constantly from statehood in 1907 until about the mid-1920s."³⁰ During the 1920s, the state of Oklahoma saw "an active Ku Klux Klan, several popular anti-Catholic lecturers, three major anti-Catholic newspapers and job discrimination based on religion." Oklahoma's Legislature attempted to pass "convent-inspection laws." It adopted a "Bone-Dry law" which "forbade the importation or possession of even

²⁸ Francis J. Herber to Mr. Drake, nd. "Claver College" Folder, StJCA.

²⁹ Hoig, Stanley W., "A History of the Development of Institutions of Higher Education in Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma," 180. <https://shareok.org/bitstream/handle/11244/3053/7127617.PDF?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

³⁰ Joan M. Biskupic, "Catholics Find Place On Prairies," *The Oklahoman*, March 31, 1985. <https://www.oklahoman.com/article/2103495/catholics-find-place-on-prairies>

sacramental wine," which essentially made the Catholic celebration of Mass illegal.³¹

Claver's Student Life

Claver's beginning and ending may be a mystery, but perhaps two of the known remaining pieces of evidence that can give the best insight into the college and the hopes and dreams of its students and faculty was its newsletter, *The Francis Clement Herald*. The first issue appeared in June 1939, three years after the school opened. The student-edited paper expressed hope that it would "become a monthly periodical published by the school" and that it would "serve to introduce [Claver] to the thousands of good citizens throughout the length and breadth of the nation."³²

The staff consisted of:

Editor	. . . . .	W.H. King
Assistant Editor	. . . . .	Ella Cethia Howard
	. . . . .	Thomas Purl
Athletics	. . . . .	Rayfield Elliot
Society	. . . . .	Juanita Burnett
Business Manager	. . . . .	Joseph Hobbs ³³

The students made it clear that Claver's purpose was "to encourage all, regardless of age to improve their talents and to use their time advantageously" and proffered Claver was "a fine place to build principle [sic] and character, a wonderful place for general improvement."³⁴ They "urged" high school graduates who planned on going to college to enroll at Claver because "OUR FACULTY IS THE BEST."³⁵

Claver's first graduation was a feature story of *The Herald's* first publication. Although no date was listed for the ceremony, which was

³¹ Ibid.

³² *The Francis Clement Herald*. "Claver College" Folder, STJCA.

³³ Ibid., p. 4. Joseph Hobbs wrote a thesis on the Benedictine Sisters in 1942 to fulfill his B.A. Because there are few known documents on Claver, it is my hope that by including the names of its students future researchers may be able to learn about the institution and the subsequent paths of its students. Mr. Hobbs was also a WWII Army Sergeant, honorably discharged in 1945 per his obituary, see obituary: <https://www.oklahoman.com/article/2717147/reverend-joseph-w-hobbs>

³⁴ Ibid. p. 7.

³⁵ Ibid.

held at the Guthrie Theater, the commencement exercise was said to have drawn "an immense crowd." Bishop Francis Clement Kelley, D.D., Ph.D. Litt.D. "conferred the baccalaureate degree upon ten candidates and presented tow [sic] of the members with state teacher's certificates from the State Board of Education." Although the article listed the names of faculty members: "the Reverend James T. O'Brien, C.S.Sp., B.A.; and Reverend Eric Beevers, Ph.D. both of Oklahoma City; Reverend C.A. McGinty M.A. of Still water, Oklahoma," it did not offer the names of the graduating students.³⁶

Articles like "EDUCATION OF DESIRES" By Carvie L. Burleigh in *The Herald* did provide some insight into the philosophy of education that might have surrounded Claver. Her article highlighted education's role as a civilizing mechanism and a way to train the human desire. She wrote:

The education of our desires could be defined as the training of the will or the schooling of the conscience, -- the guiding agency of man.

It would seem that our senses need to be schooled in order to interpret the things about us, quickly and correctly. Our intellects need to be educated, our imaginations need to be educated, so that the image made on our minds may be clean and wholesome. The savages have no clear imagination and no wholesome thoughts. In their minds there is nothing inspiring for their minds have not been educated. We need schooling so that we may cleave to the things which are lovely, pure, and wholesome.

But our desires need educating more than any of the traits of character stated in the foregoing. If our desires are not properly trained, -- in order that we may wish the best things and may refuse by our own free judgment the things that are bad, -- then all educational training must be a failure. We can readily see that all progress comes through the training, education, and expansion of the human desires. St. Thomas reasonably asserts that nature does nothing in vain.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid. Again, I included the names of faculty in hopes that future researchers may be able to use them to close our "wide gaps" of knowledge on African American students in Catholic institutions.

³⁷ *The Francis Clement Herald*, June 1939, Vol. 1, No.1, 10. "Claver College" Folder, STJCA. I used the Ancestry Library to try to find out more about some of Claver's students. A search through the Ancestry Library took me to the 1940

Burleigh's article and the use of the term "savages" highlights the deeply held beliefs of racial superiority that dominated American culture ever since the country began and that ultimately provided the rationale for enslaving Blacks and taking land from Native Americans and Mexicans and how it likely manifested in the curriculum, too. The eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries especially saw numerous pseudo-scientific racial inferiority theories that arguably helped shape the Catholic Church's relationship with people of color and that of Claver College with its students.³⁸ Catholic scholars have written about the Church's good deeds toward Blacks, its missionary efforts, and the Catholic Church being the "Only True Liberator" of Blacks.³⁹

Another article titled "Need of Commercial Education," in the same publication, with no by-line, indicated that the school or at least the students valued the importance of financial education. The writer stressed that understanding how to manage money held value for all groups of people and that "thrift" was a large part of financial and social success and independence.⁴⁰ *The Herald* contributors also wrote articles

Census that shows that Carvie L. Burleigh may be Carrie L. Burleigh, who then was 41 years old and a teacher living in rural Logan, Oklahoma.

<https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/86341994:2442>

³⁸ For more on pseudo-scientific notions of racial inferiority see Charles S. Johnson, "Mental Measurements of Negro Groups," *Opportunity*, February 1923, vol.1, no. 2, p. 21; and Charles S. Johnson, Public Opinion and the Negro," *Opportunity* 1, no. 7, July 1923, p. 204; and Vincent P. Franklin, "Black Sociologists and the Mental Testing Movement, 1920-1940" in *Black Psychology*, 2nd Ed., Reginald Jones, ed. New York: Harper & Rowe, 1980, 201-202. For more on scientific racism and Native Americans see [Reginald Horsman, "Scientific Racism and the American Indian in the Mid-Nineteenth Century," American Quarterly Vol 27, no. 2, May 1975 pp. 152-168;](#) and [David Wallace Adams, Education for Extinction: American Indians and the Boarding School Experience, 1875-1928.](#) Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995.

³⁹ For more information on the Catholic Church and its relationship to African Americans see, Katrina M. Sanders, "Chapter 3: Forgotten or Simply Ignored: A Historiography of African Americans and Catholic Education", *Using Past as Prologue: Contemporary Perspectives on African American Educational History* Dionne Danna, Michelle A. Purdy, and Christopher M. Span, eds. (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing Inc. 2015).

⁴⁰ *The Francis Clement Herald*, June 1939, Vol. 1, No.1, 10. "Claver College" Folder, STJCA. I used the Ancestry Library to try to find out more about some of Claver's students. A search through the Ancestry Library took me to the 1940 Census that shows that Carvie L. Burleigh may be Carrie L. Burleigh, who then was 41 years old and a teacher living in rural Logan, Oklahoma.

<https://www.ancestrylibrary.com/discoveryui-content/view/86341994:2442>

about the courses they enjoyed which encompassed various art forms as well as foreign languages like the “dreaded” Latin class and history.⁴¹

They also wrote about their dreams for Claver. They mentioned wanting an athletic department which was currently “less developed than any other department of our college,” and were “very optimistic over the future prospects for development of the athletic department” and athletic teams. They seemed excited that they saw “several of [their] students and professors in action” during the basketball season and noted a football team was also “taking shape.” They shared that the sports-related ambition “foremost in [their] minds” was to “beat” their “sister school—Xavier – should the schedule be arranged.”⁴²

The *Herald* also revealed that the students understood the financial problems that Claver faced. The last page of the first edition made a simple, clear appeal on Claver’s behalf:

*The pressing needs of the
Catholic College for the Colored:
A building Fund
Library Books
Science Equipment
An Endowment Fund*⁴³

The second newsletter also gives insight into Claver. It recalled that the first class graduated on September 8, 1939, with bachelor’s degrees in arts and science having been conferred on nine young men and women. The second class graduated on February 24, 1940, “bringing the total up to eighteen who have received degrees from the college in the four years of its existence.” Forty students were enrolled in 1940, and the faculty consisted of three Reverends, four teaching sisters, and four Black lay professors.⁴⁴ Claver did go on to organize an athletic club during the 1939-1940 school year and that provided “an opportunity for the school to be known outside of Guthrie”. The basketball team won five of its seven games, although Xavier was not

⁴¹ *The Francis Clement Herald*, June 1939, Vol. 1, No.1, p. 10. Folder “Claver College” StJCA. Apparently, Roman history preserved by Titus Livius, Livy, was taught at Claver.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 16. This was the last statement in the June 1939 issue of *The Francis Clement Herald*.

⁴⁴ *The Francis Clement Herald*, circa 1940, issue 2, 9. “Claver College” Folder, StJCA.

listed as a competitor.⁴⁵ Claver's library was also growing as the school had been the "recipient of many subscriptions to various publications and numerous volumes of books."⁴⁶ The staff for the paper had only slightly altered since its first issue. W. H. King was still the editor and Ella Howard remained the assistant editor. Rayfield Elliott now covered sports and Joseph Hobbs had assumed the new business manager role. They dedicated the issue to Sr. Joseph because they said Claver students had become "heirs to knowledge, truth, and Christian ideals" that they would "cherish throughout [their] lives" They lauded Sr. Joseph "whose determined effort to send forth from this college men and women, prepared and willing to impart knowledge; staunch and uncompromising in truth and with Christian ideals which will influence all things for good, shall be rewarded."⁴⁷

The Death of Claver College

Claver College closed its doors in 1942. The rationale for the closing is murky as known remaining documents offer numerous brief and incomplete explanations and potential motives. One possible reason may have been related to the small size of the Benedictine community in Oklahoma. The sisters were pressed to provide enough teachers for the college. A second reason may have been due to "misunderstandings on the part of the State Department in 1944" and "certain factors" that hampered the work of the College. However, what these "misunderstandings" and "certain factors" were not specified.⁴⁸ In a letter dated May 14, 1941, Sister Joseph told Reverend Dr. Eric Beevers, Claver's philosophy professor, that there were "political connivings [sic]" at play in the demise of Claver. She referenced "a tabulated summary of points" but did not identify what those points were, who or what entity devised them, or how they might have been applied to Claver.⁴⁹

A third reason for the closing might have sprung from local politics and a disagreement over an available position at Claver. In the same

⁴⁵ Ibid. p. 16.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid. p. 4.

⁴⁸ "Claver College," 201, nd. "Claver College" Folder, StJCA. Since Claver is noted in some documents as closing in 1942, Sister Joseph and supporters may have thought there was a chance of saving the school until the "misunderstandings" in 1944

⁴⁹ Sister M. Joseph, O.S.B. Dean to Reverend Doctor Eric Beevers, Prague, Oklahoma May 14, 1941. Folder "Claver College" StJCA.

letter to Dr. Beevers, Sister Joseph noted that while she had a credentialed candidate in mind for the opening, "the real difficulty" seemed to stem from local adversaries who wanted their own candidate hired. Although Sister Joseph did not denote the race of her candidate, she did write that it did not matter where her candidate obtained a degree because those controlling the fate of the school would not approve the hire.⁵⁰ Although there is no response to Sister Joseph's note to Dr. Beevers on file, another piece of correspondence confirming Claver's closure hints that its curriculum and staff did not meet State Board of Education requirements. This document stated that Claver College at Guthrie was closed and that it would not be reopened under its "present circumstances. Further it declared that if Claver College reopened in the future that it would have to "meet all the requirements of the State Board of Education."⁵¹

Records do not provide Claver's official closing date, but they do emphasize Sister Joseph's unwavering commitment to the institution and to its African American students. An untitled document -- which actually appears to be a selected page from a thesis -- notes that even though Claver College was "short-lived," the "essence of this noteworthy pursuit remains unchanged." It called Claver College "a monument' to Sisters Joseph's "love for [the Black community] and her deep-seated desire to promote their educational advancement at a time when such an effort by whites was unheard of in Oklahoma."⁵²

Conclusion

Sister Joseph and supporters were optimistic about Claver College, its trajectory and that of its students. While the lack of historical sources -- both physical artifacts and oral testimonies -- hamper a detailed account and interpretation about the college and its students, they still provide a brief glimpse into America's only Black Catholic higher education institution in the West. In its short existence Claver provided its African American students with sound academics, but it also provided

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Unsigned letter from Bishop of Oklahoma City and Tulsa to J.M. Staten, State Board of Education, State Capitol, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, August 4, 1942. "Claver College" Folder, StJCA.

⁵² "155" untitled document. Folder "Claver College" StJCA.

the Catholic Church a pathway into Guthrie's African American community that it might not have had otherwise.⁵³

⁵³ One student, Anderson L. Tipton, would go on to become a principal at the African American high school in Guthrie, while the paths of other students are not as clear. <https://faverhighalumni.wordpress.com>

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