

Supporting Good Habits: The Rockefellers, the Sisters of Mercy, and Higher Education in New York State

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Abstract

In 1950, the Sisters of Mercy opened Mercy Junior College in Tarrytown, New York for younger members of their order. In 1961, with financial assistance from the Rockefeller family, they relaunched it as a private 4-year institution for women at a new complex in Dobbs Ferry. From 1911 onward, however, the Rockefellers had a complex relationship with the Sisters of Mercy, who then lived in Tarrytown next to the **main Rockefeller estate of Kykuit. While the Rockefellers' financial support of the Sisters toward the construction of a new complex in Dobbs Ferry is modest in comparison to the Rockefellers' other** philanthropic endeavors in the field of education, it represents the most significant support to New York higher education outside of Rockefeller University, which Rockefeller, Sr. founded in 1901 as an institute for medical research. This article consequently explores the complex relationship between the Rockefellers and the Sisters of Mercy to illuminate a neglected aspect of Rockefeller philanthropy in their home state of New York. **As a result of the Rockefellers' aid, Mercy College was able to thrive and evolve** into a multi-campus, co-educational and secular institution. Today, as Mercy University, it offers nearly 100 undergraduate and graduate degree programs and its main campus in Westchester County still consists primarily of the buildings built with Rockefeller assistance.

Keywords

Mercy University; Sisters of Mercy; John D. Rockefeller; John D. Rockefeller Jr.; Nelson Rockefeller; New York State; Westchester County; Higher Education; Education history

Introduction

On Sunday, May 20, 1962, a collection of New York State and Catholic Church dignitaries made its way to Dobbs Ferry for the dedication ceremony of Mount Mercy-on-the-Hudson, a magnificent new complex comprised of over 80 acres overlooking the Hudson River for the New York province of the Sisters of Mercy. The Sisters had already moved into the unfinished facility during the fall of 1961, but the stress of moving and construction delays had prevented a proper dedication ceremony. That time had finally come, and all the individuals involved in this massive undertaking now had a moment to bask in the glory of their accomplishments. The complex, which had cost more than \$6 million to build at a time when the national average price for a house was less than \$20,000, included **eight impressive brick buildings “of contemporary architecture”**: the provincial

house, a residence for student Sisters, a faculty residence, a residence for senior Sisters, a chapel, Our Lady of Victory Academy, a parish elementary school, and what was then Mercy College (now Mercy University).¹

Although Francis Spellman, Cardinal and Archbishop of New York, presided over the ceremony and blessed the complex with the assistance of Rev. John Maguire, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of New York and Chancellor of Mercy College, the star of the ceremony was New York Governor (and future vice president of the United States) Nelson Rockefeller. His role in the celebration exceeded his capacity as Governor; he stood as the symbol of the Rockefeller family, whose financial contributions **to the Sisters' educational endeavors had culminated in a generous \$1.6 million gift to finance part of the complex's construction.** Nelson, his father, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., and grandfather, John D. Rockefeller, Sr., had all

donated funds to aid the Sisters when they had resided in their previous complex, located in Tarrytown near Kykuit, the main Rockefeller mansion. However, it was Nelson's father who made this especially magnanimous gift on top of his offer to purchase the Sisters' too-small Tarrytown property. Without his financial assistance, the Sisters' dreams of expanding their educational mission, the heart of which was the launching of Mercy College as a four-year institution, could never have materialized. Since he had died in 1960, the Sisters had eagerly been awaiting an opportunity to express publicly their heartfelt expressions of gratitude to his son.²

Malcolm Wilson, Lieutenant Governor of New York under Nelson Rockefeller and one-time trustee of Mercy College, later lectured at its commencement exercises on how significant the move had been to the development of Mercy College:

More than I suspect many of you know, 1827 in Dublin, Ireland marked the beginning of the Sisters of Mercy...The New York Province...was established in 1846 and I was present at the 100th Anniversary in 1946 in St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City. The Mother House of the New York Province stood in Tarrytown diagonally across the road from the Pocantico Hills estate of the Rockefeller family. As a matter of fact, when I first started going up to see the Governor and later Vice President [Nelson Rockefeller], I entered the grounds by way of what was then known as "the Sisters' Gate." In 1950 a college, not for general registration but for members of the order, provided higher education for the Sisters. By the late 1950s it was very evident that they would have to serve a larger constituency. Not only did Mr. Rockefeller, notably John D. Rockefeller, Jr., purchase the house and all the buildings and grounds but also provided a very generous gift that made it possible to move Mercy College to Dobbs.³

As a result of the Rockefellers' aid, Mercy College was able to thrive and evolve into a multi-campus, co-educational and secular institution. Today, as Mercy University, it offers nearly 100 undergraduate and graduate degree programs and its main campus at Dobbs Ferry

still consists primarily of the buildings built with Rockefeller assistance.

The Rockefellers' support of the Sisters and the development of Mercy University is an important component of broader New York history. John D. Rockefeller, Sr., progenitor of the Rockefeller Dynasty, founded Standard Oil Company, one of the largest corporations in its day, and became one of the wealthiest Americans of his time.⁴ Rockefeller, Sr. who embraced the "American ideal of responsible stewardship"—the idea that with great wealth "comes the duty to serve the public good and improve the conditions of mankind"—has often been praised as "perhaps the most significant philanthropist the United States has ever produced" and that his philanthropy "distinguished him from most other great industrialists."⁵ His son, Rockefeller, Jr., continued his philanthropic work.⁶ Although the Rockefellers chose to support a variety of causes, they contributed much in the area of education. From 1911 onward, the Rockefellers developed a complex relationship with the Sisters of Mercy, who then lived in Tarrytown next to the main Rockefeller estate of Kykuit. While the **Rockefellers' financial support of the Sisters** toward the construction of a new complex in Dobbs Ferry to help develop Mercy University is **modest in comparison to the Rockefellers' other philanthropic endeavors in the field of education, such as the family's support of the University of Chicago** (a total of \$35 million between 1889 and 1910), it represents the most significant support to New York higher education outside of Rockefeller University, which Rockefeller, Sr. founded in 1901 as an institute for medical research.⁷ Rockefeller University, however, only offers advanced, specialized graduate-level programs and is neither a comprehensive nor liberal arts college. The relationship between the Rockefellers and the Sisters of Mercy, especially in connection with the development of Mercy University, has received only minimal scholarly attention.⁸ This article consequently explores the complex relationship between the Rockefellers and the Sisters of Mercy to illuminate a neglected aspect of Rockefeller philanthropy in their home state of New York.

Tarrytown Neighbors: Rockefellers and the Sisters of Mercy

The Sisters of Mercy, after forming in Ireland in the early nineteenth century,

branched out to other parts of the Atlantic world. At a time when most women could not generally own property as individuals because of their subordinate status as wives, Sisters could collectivize wealth, derive business revenue, sign contracts, get loans, and incorporate institutions under female control.⁹ The Sisters began their work in New York City during the mid-1800s with an orphanage. They also started an industrial school for young women to teach them skills like sewing and opened up a Select School for Girls, where daughters of wealthier people in **the community could get “a proper English education.”** Later, they spread to other locations, including Pelham Bay and the Bronx. On December 23, 1892, the Sisters expanded to Tarrytown after acquiring the roughly thirty-acre Kingsland estate. The estate took its name from Ambrose Kingsland, a mid-nineteenth century merchant and former mayor of New York City, who had built a mansion on part of **this land (which became known as “Wilson Park,”** after nineteenth-century New York City merchant William Wilson built a large home in the area). The Sisters later discovered remnants **of colonial slave quarters on their property’s** northern end, dating from its Philipsburg Manor days.¹⁰

The Sisters’ move to Tarrytown coincided with the time when the area was becoming a favorite residence for the many prominent industrialists and business figures of the era. Although John D. Rockefeller, Sr., spent his adolescence and early adult years in Ohio, he was born in Richmond, New York in 1839. In 1884, he finally moved back to New York State when he established a residence in New York City. Tarrytown, however, soon became the **Rockefellers’ New York retreat. In 1893,** Rockefeller, Sr. purchased about 400 acres at Pocantico Hills, including Kykuit Hill (a name **imposed by Dutch colonists, meaning “lookout”**) overlooking the majestic Hudson River. He continued to expand this parcel of land. By the early twentieth century, it reached about 2,000 acres.¹¹ He initially stayed at the Parsons-Wentworth House, near the present-day coach barn, until it burned down in 1902. Rockefeller, Sr. then resided at existing residences on the property.

None of them, however, commanded an impressive view of the Hudson or took **advantage of the property’s full beauty.** Consequently, his son, John D. Rockefeller, Jr., decided to oversee the construction of Kykuit, a **home he intended to be “a house appropriate to his [Rockefeller, Sr.’s] stature as one of the**

country’s leading industrialists and philanthropists.”¹² The lavish mansion, which **became the Rockefeller family’s “principal home,”** was constructed in two phases between 1906 and 1913. Rockefeller, Sr. and his wife, Laura Spelman Rockefeller, spent the fall at Kykuit in 1908. However, the hard-to-please couple was sorely disappointed: the guest rooms were too small, the fireplaces too smoky, and noise from the kitchen area could be heard in the **mansion’s private quarters. Consequently,** Rockefeller, Jr. literally went back to the drawing board to prove himself to his parents. He redesigned and renovated Kykuit during 1911 to 1913.¹³ **The new Kykuit met Rockefeller, Sr.’s** approval and the mansion served as a retreat for him until his death in 1937. It subsequently served as a retreat for Rockefeller, Jr. until his death in 1960, and for his son, Nelson Rockefeller, until his death in 1979.

Shortly after being built, the Rockefellers began to have some unexpected problems with their neighbors, the Sisters of Mercy. Many Sisters, who came predominantly from working-class backgrounds, were amazed **by the new “palace” next door. Indeed, it** embraced a degree of extravagance that many of them had neither seen nor imagined. The magnificence of Kykuit, especially its gardens, **proved to be a local “wonder” that particularly** entranced the younger members of the order. Sometimes the Sisters wandered into the garden in amazement and ended up near the main **mansion, much to the Rockefellers’ disapproval.** While the Rockefellers did not necessarily mind **their new neighbors’ admiration, they felt that** the Sisters wandered too close to their private quarters and intruded upon their privacy. A **polite, but firm letter was sent to the Sisters’** superior.¹⁴

However, more pressing annoyances emerged. Rockefeller, Sr., while certainly not **opposed in principle to the Sisters’ not-for-profit** business activities, never truly warmed to the occurrence of these endeavors next to his estate. At times, he expressed his **view that the Sisters’** complex was an eyesore. For example, as tradition has it, Rockefeller, Sr. asked the Sisters if he could arrange to have their roof, which he could see from Kykuit, painted from a distracting red to green to better match the landscape.¹⁵ Yet, he also had to deal with his **wife’s complaints, a bane to any husband’s ears. Rockefeller, Sr.’s wife, Laura, who died in 1915,** was not in good health during her years at Kykuit. In an uncomfortable state, she especially did not enjoy the noise coming from

the Sisters' property, which then housed an orphanage for children committed to the Sisters by the City of New York. As one Rockefeller representative diplomatically phrased it in a 1911 letter, "Mrs. Rockefeller has expressed herself that the noise made by the children at the school was many times heard on their place, and perhaps not always pleasantly."¹⁶ As Rockefeller, Jr. explained more bluntly several years later, the actions on the Sisters' property "detract from our enjoyment of the Kykuit property."¹⁷ As a result, its very existence next to the Rockefeller estate compromised their individual privacy and their property's residential sanctity. In fact, the Rockefellers were so obsessive about the maintenance of this privacy/sanctity that they eventually paid to relocate the noisy New York and Putnam railroad, which they felt traveled too close to their estate. The railroad actually passed through the Sisters' property and made a stop at Pocantico Hills. In 1929, however, Rockefeller, Jr. paid to reroute the New York and Putnam Railroad out of Pocantico Hills. A new right-of-way was built and the railroad ceased running there by 1931, thereby improving the Rockefellers'—and inadvertently the Sisters'—living situations.¹⁸

The Rockefellers had entertained a similar approach to the Sisters, hoping that they could get rid of them by buying their property and helping them move elsewhere. Rockefeller, Sr. approached the Sisters in December 1911 about buying their property, the size of which was estimated at about 33 acres. Negotiations over this possibility ultimately created much ado throughout 1912.¹⁹ The Tarrytown Sisters and their administrators, then located at 1073 Madison Avenue in New York City, were initially surprised at the sudden offer, but nevertheless supported a deal in principle. At the time, the Tarrytown Sisters wanted to be closer to New York City. However, the order needed to locate a suitable replacement location as well as the necessary funds to replicate the Tarrytown facility on this new site. The Sisters also desired approval from the local Church hierarchy, which served as their advisors. In January 1912, after

contemplating what to do, the Sisters set a high asking price of \$600,000 based on what Mother Rose, the Superior, estimated as the cost to purchase (\$300,000) and renovate (\$360,000) a 9-acre site on Aqueduct Avenue, near 177th Street, that the order was interested in acquiring as a substitute.²⁰ Rockefeller, Sr. felt that that price was unreasonable, but the Sisters, prodded by their Church advisors, seemed slow to budge.



Figure 1: This postcard from the Hugh C. Leighton Company, circa 1912, depicts the Tarrytown-on-Hudson home of the Sisters of Mercy. The property was comprised primarily of two buildings: the Sisters' convent, housed in the former Kingsland mansion (located to the right), and the school building (located to the left).

In June, at Rockefeller, Sr.'s bequest, three private appraisers naturally assessed the property for much less than the sum of \$600,000. The estimates, however, ranged widely from \$200,000 to \$450,000. The appraiser for the highest estimate based his value **on the fact that the "buildings on this property are very well built. They have fire-proof stair casings, extra thick walls all the way through."** **Despite the variances, the estimates generally corresponded with the amount of \$300,000 that the Sisters wanted in order to purchase a replacement property, since their intentionally inflated total sum of \$600,000 included the amount necessary to cover**

additional renovation costs. By August, Eugene Quin, who represented the Sisters in the negotiations, sought to break the impasse by suggesting a sale price of \$350,000.²¹ Quin knew that Rockefeller, Sr. would grumble at this offer. He consequently sought to frame the price as a cumulative sum for the property and a charitable “gift.” **As he wrote in a letter to Rockefeller, Sr.: “when I think of the unstinted liberality you have so readily extended to other philanthropic institutions throughout this entire country, I cannot but hope that you may feel inclined to extend the same liberality to the good Sisters whose appreciation would be so deep, and which I am sure would return a reward of a thousand fold in the feelings of satisfaction that would surely come to you for your magnanimity.”**²² Rockefeller, Sr. was receptive to the ploy and warmed to the idea of giving the Sisters a donation in addition to a sum for their property. But the crux of the problem was that in his mind the property was only worth about \$75,000. He therefore wanted to pay about \$125,000, an **amount that included a \$50,000 “gift.”** To Rockefeller, Sr., the buildings on the property were utterly worthless; he wanted to demolish them. After all, the purpose for acquiring the **property was for it to buttress his estate’s** privacy. In addition, he argued that the New York and Putnam Railroad, which then still cut through the property, greatly reduced its value. Despite all of his money, despite how much he wanted the Sisters to relocate, he refused (in his mind) to overpay.²³ By the end of the summer, negotiations cooled off and the Tarrytown Sisters received some news from their administrators about the future of the site. As Quin revealed in a November 1912 letter to **Rockefeller Sr., the Sisters were “preparing to convert their Tarrytown institution into one of a different nature [a school for girls] than now conducted, and that this will involve the withdrawing of the property from further consideration of selling.”**²⁴ Nevertheless, negotiations lingered on for years. The Sisters, however, held firm on a high asking price, which still remained at \$500,000 in March 1921.²⁵

During the late 1920s, discussions to purchase the property regained traction, this time with Rockefeller, Jr.²⁶ Negotiations followed the same general terms as had existed **between the Sisters and his father: a “fair market value” for the property along with a donation to help cover the costs of reconstructing the Tarrytown facility elsewhere.** Naturally, problems arose during attempts to set a specific sum for the two components. In 1928,

Rockefeller, Jr. finally decided that he was willing to pay an amount closer to what the Sisters desired.²⁷ But to religious officials, it seemed that he was too late. Mother Mathilde, **the Sisters’ new Mother Provincial in New York City,** supported the sale. However, she did not **feel optimistic about its success because “the Sisters [at Tarrytown] did not care to sell.”** **Consequently, Rockefeller, Jr. “would have to wait for a change of administration [there] to get a change of attitude.”**²⁸ Church officials were also eager to sanction the transaction. Still, they **too revealed their conviction that “sentimental reasons” would delay the Sisters from** acquiescing to a deal. By this time, the Sisters had grown accustomed to life in Westchester and no longer wished to relocate out of the county, as they feared religious officials would decree.²⁹

Nevertheless, October seemed to be the month of miracles. A deal was nearly struck to purchase the roughly 20-acre property—about nine acres of which had been previously sold—for \$100,000, with an additional \$200,000 gift based on the condition that the Sisters could secure a suitable new site. Rockefeller, Jr. even **offered to let the Sisters remain on “the premises for a period of two years from the date of the deed” to help them with their move.**³⁰ The Sisters, however, were still reluctant and discussions crawled into 1929. In January, the contrary Sisters again set a high price of around \$500,000, but began the hunt for a new location.³¹ By November, Rockefeller, Jr. began to tire of these negotiations and made the Sisters, who had recently secured permission to re-locate in Westchester County, his **“best and last offer” of \$600,000: \$100,000 for the property and a \$500,000 gift.** Yet, the Sisters then decided that they wanted Rockefeller, Jr. to cover the full, specific construction costs for relocating to a new site. Consequently, negotiations once again cooled off.³² During the 1930s, sporadic talk of buying the property occurred, but the Rockefellers had become **frustrated with the “Tarrytown situation,”** as lawyer Franklin Brooks liked to term it.³³

As the Rockefellers generally abandoned **efforts to purchase the Sisters’ property,** they began to enjoy increased cordial relations with their neighbors, often assisting them financially with their school and maintenance repairs. The Rockefellers generally gave friendly waves and engaged in brief social interactions with the Sisters as they passed each other. Nevertheless, the Rockefellers were not always quite sure of **the Sisters’ individual names or proper etiquette**

in terms of how to address the order's superiors for formal matters (such as in a letter). Meanwhile, the Sisters often took advantage of **the Rockefeller family's desires to have their property well-maintained to get them to pay for various maintenance and service needs.** The Rockefellers thus took various short-term measures to improve the appearance of the complex, often taking the view that if the most offensive objects on the property were out of site, they were out of mind. Over the course of decades, the Rockefellers, somewhat **begudgingly, became one of the Sisters' largest and most consistent benefactors.** The Sisters tended to go to them whenever they were soliciting donations or organizing fund raisers for their non-profit business activities. The Rockefellers sent donations, usually modest ones, on a case by case basis. They generally donated simply to maintain good neighborly relations, but avoided sending a response and/or a donation if they felt that they could do so. Nevertheless, the Rockefellers' **financial support** was both needed and appreciated. Since most Sisters and Catholics of the era hailed from relatively recent immigrant stock, the constituents of Catholic parishes during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did not have vast financial resources to fund initiatives in the areas of charity work and education.³⁴ Sisters faced constant pressure to find revenue to support their order, their institutions, and work. Consequently, money was often tight and the Sisters ironically came to view the (Protestant) Rockefellers as their patrons.

It is interesting to note that each subsequent generation of the Rockefellers that occupied Kykuit developed a more sympathetic attitude toward the Sisters. Nelson Rockefeller, who was born in 1908, grew up with the Sisters as his neighbors. He had a fondness for them that surpassed that of both his father, Rockefeller, Jr., and certainly his grandfather, **Rockefeller, Sr. As an adult, Nelson's home, located away from the main Rockefeller estate, was situated directly across from the Sisters' property.** As a result, he took a greater interest **than his father in taking care of the Sisters' property's maintenance needs.** However, his father often reimbursed him in part or in full for **expenses incurred on the Sisters' behalf.** For example, he was so pleased with the relocation of a playground to reduce noise that he decided to reimburse Nelson in full. In a letter to his son, **he wrote: "I am realizing...what a great advantage it is to the entire place. Not only is the view as one drives up the County House Road to**

the Sisters' Gate much more attractive, but the noise is practically eliminated."³⁵ Over time, Nelson spent thousands of dollars to cover the **costs of improvements for the Sisters' property.** During the mid-1930s, for example, he bought them a tractor to replace their horse and helped turn their barn into a gymnasium. In 1939, he paid around \$2,000 to pave the driveway **running through the Sisters' property. He also frequently paid to have it plowed during the winter. Later, in 1952, Nelson sent "Sister Superior" Mary Gratia Maher 130 shares of stock valued at \$5,000 to help cover building renovations.**³⁶

Establishing Mercy College

By the 1940s, the Sisters of Mercy became involved in the management of various hospitals and schools throughout New York. However, to be qualified to staff these institutions, young Sisters needed an education. They often studied for credit granted from local **Catholic colleges. A 1938 "thank you" letter from Sister Mary Gertrude, Supervisor of Schools, to their neighbor, Rockefeller, Jr., for a recent library donation described this arrangement in detail.** After explaining that the new books would aid Sisters in training, she informed **Rockefeller, Jr.: "It may interest you to know that our future teachers spend at least two and one-half years at Tarrytown. During that time, in addition to their religious training, the potential teachers receive training in secular subjects. Each Sister destined for the schools completes two years of college work. This...includes courses that are usually given at Normal Training Schools. However, the work done here is accredited college work. After leaving Tarrytown, the Sister who continues study does so on the third year level at college."**³⁷ Supplying external educations to all Sisters proved to be a costly commitment. As a result, the Sisters decided to establish their own private junior **college to educate their order's younger members. The province's superior ultimately charged Sister Mary Gratia Maher, who was still completing her doctoral dissertation examining religious instruction at women's Catholic colleges, with making this institution a reality.** She had substantial educational administrative experience, having been a school teacher as well as a former principal of Saint Catharine Academy in New York City.³⁸ As Sister Mary Agnes Parrell, who worked with Sister Gratia, **recalled, "leaders somehow always rise from out**

[of] their time. In fact, they stand above time. **Such a scholar was Sister Mary Gratia,” who quickly developed the new college’s curriculum,** established its organization, and selected its faculty.³⁹ **The Sisters’ efforts in New York,** however, were not unique. Other Mercy convents across the US faced similar circumstances and a movement developed that placed educating Sisters a priority before **sending them into the field. As a result, “Mercy Junior College,” as it was initially known, was among the five “Sister Formation Colleges” that** opened during the 1950s.⁴⁰

Of course, Mercy Junior College needed a state charter in order to have the authority to confer degrees. The Sisters, however, were in a hurry. Time is money, as the adage goes. As a result, they negotiated a temporary credit agreement in August 1950 with the Catholic University of **America. The College’s** first classes began during the following **month at the Sisters’** site in Tarrytown. In 1952, the New York State Board of Regents finally granted the College a charter authorizing its associate degree programs of studies for **members of the Sisters’** order. To retain a degree of its former student constituency, many local Catholic colleges, such as Manhattan College and **St. John’s University,** offered **Mercy Junior College’s seniors** scholarships to continue their studies.⁴¹

Over the course of the 1950s, the Sisters developed plans to expand Mercy Junior College. The expansion of this college came to hold special meaning for the Sisters. Indeed, it came to embody the heart of their mission. During these early years, however, the Rockefellers seem to have been oblivious to the **College’s existence, likely because it served only** Sisters. As a result, they did not notice any additional personnel, students, traffic, or noise. Sometime during the mid-1950s, the Sisters

made the monumental decision to expand the College to lay women. Naturally, they petitioned their neighbor, Nelson Rockefeller, in 1956 for a donation to support their efforts. The New York Board of Regents had approved the proposed **College “in principle” and gave the Sisters “a time limit,” soon to expire, to meet their** requirements, one of the most significant of which was an expanded physical facility. Nelson, however, was not interested.⁴² When his father **heard about the Sisters’ plans, he predictably became concerned over his property’s privacy** and even considered making the Sisters an offer of over \$1 million to build the College elsewhere.⁴³



Figure Two: Sister Hilda, librarian, stands in the early Mercy library.

At this time, it seems that the Sisters contemplated opening their junior college to women as a way to extend their secondary school programs offered on their Tarrytown site at Our Lady of Victory Academy. Ultimately, the Sisters decided to change course: Mercy College was to be re-launched as a private four-year institution for women. Sister Gratia worked with

state officials during the late 1950s to change the **College's name to "Mercy College"** (accomplished in 1956) as well as to establish the institution as a four-year college. According to Sister Agnes, a member of the founding faculty, the decision to become a four-year college was based on the following factors: 1) the need to equip Sister students to teach in Mercy grammar and high schools; 2) the cost of sending all juniors, novices, and postulants to other colleges was too expensive; and 3) a desire to not **"impose on local college's generosity" in supplying further scholarships.** Furthermore, "as the community was founded to equip young women to take their places in society with the necessary skills and knowledge to be successful persons," the new College decided to admit female lay students.⁴⁴ The Board of Regents approved an amendment granting the Sisters' desired changes by 1960.



Figure Three: Sisters studying at "Mercy College" in Tarrytown during the 1950s.

Meanwhile, the Sisters began a serious hunt to find a new location to support their educational initiatives. As Sister Mary Jeanne Ferrier, Provincial of the Mercy Community, conveyed in a private letter, the Sisters

recognized that their Tarrytown property was **inadequate "because of size, character of land and obsolescence of the buildings.** The present structures do not lend themselves to either modernizing or expansion of facilities. There is not enough land available near the present site for further expansion and after investigation we have discovered that economically we could not **provide for our needs if we remain here."**⁴⁵ During 1956 and 1957, the Sisters explored about 10 different options and came close to purchasing sites in Cortlandt and Scarborough.⁴⁶

A Dream Realized

News that the Sisters were finally seeking to relocate reached Rockefeller, Jr. His representatives had never believed that the Rockefellers had fully abandoned the dream of **acquiring the Sisters' property and, like faithful**

watchdogs, had kept an eye **on the property's status.**

Rockefeller, Jr. confirmed to his agent that he was interested in resuming negotiations to purchase the **Sisters' Tarrytown property if** the opportunity arose. His agent suggested that he make a large gift in excess of the **"fair market value" to assure the Sisters' move.**⁴⁷

Rockefeller, Jr. was, therefore, prepared to revisit the terms of the previous negotiations between his family and the Sisters. He estimated that the current cost for duplicating the **Sisters' facility was around \$1.5 million.** This estimate served as the guide for his **"gift."**⁴⁸

During the summer of 1957, the Sisters made a successful bid of \$350,000

for the 85-acre former estate of Edwin Gould, son of robber baron Jay Gould, in Dobbs Ferry.⁴⁹ Despite years of Rockefeller prodding, the Sisters were now finally moving on their own **terms. The sale of the Sisters' Tarrytown property was imminent and Rockefeller, Jr. authorized his representatives to negotiate with the Sisters on his behalf.** He capped his price at \$1.75 million, an amount based on his estimate **to reconstruct the Sisters' facility and the**

property's \$150,000 "fair market value." The Sisters, however, were reluctant to let go of their Tarrytown property and felt that they had much to lose if either end of the deal fell through. Consequently, the Sisters wanted Rockefeller, Jr.'s **personal commitment** before proceeding to purchase the Gould estate.⁵⁰ In March 1958, Sister Mary Jeanne wrote him a heartfelt letter:

During the years since the Sisters of Mercy have been located on the property at Wilson Park, the organization has grown tremendously. For a long period of time it has been realized that the property is inadequate for our **use...Therefore, it is our decision to** relocate. We have been searching for a suitable site for over a two-year period, and since the Gould property in Dobbs Ferry appears to meet our requirements, it seems very desirable. In order to pursue this further with a view to negotiating for its purchase, we are appealing to you, our good neighbor of many years, to assist us that we may continue our charitable endeavors for humanity. The expansion program that we are considering will involve a huge expenditure far beyond our normal capacity. The accomplishment of this will not be possible unless we can secure the market sale price for our Tarrytown site and a substantial donation over and above. Aware of your manifold charities and your genuinely sincere interest in education and social welfare agencies, it is with confident hope that I present our needs to you.⁵¹

Rockefeller, Jr. drafted several versions of a response, contemplating how much detail to provide in sections concerning the history between the Sisters and his family and his intentions to buy the property. In April, he finally sent Sister Mary Jeanne the following letter of pledge:

I have received your very kind and gracious letter of March 25 relative to the expansion program of the Sisters of Mercy. You say that due to your tremendous growth and the limitations of your present property you have been **forced to look elsewhere... and you have** found in the Gould property at Dobbs Ferry the suitable site that will answer

your requirements. In view of the pleasant and neighborly relations which have existed for so many years between the Sisters and the members of our **family, I...am now confirming...[my representative, Mr. William Yates's]** verbal commitment to you on my behalf—namely, that on your assurance that you have acquired title to the Gould **property...and that you will immediately** proceed with the erection thereon of buildings required by your institution, I agree to contribute to the Institution of Mercy securities having a market value of \$1,600,000 at the time of delivery.⁵²

The Sisters heaved a sigh of relief, but only temporarily. New difficulties emerged on the horizon in 1958 as the result of a dispute between the Catholic Church and the local **Board of Education over the Sisters' desired property in** Dobbs Ferry. The board was contemplating the erection of a new school to alleviate overcrowding issues and had its eye on the former Edwin Gould estate as the potential site for a new school. The board therefore wanted the Sisters to refrain from purchasing the entire estate to leave room for a school. However, the Sisters had already planned on selling the part of the estate that the board wanted to Sacred Heart Catholic Church for the building of a parochial school. The Sisters intended to use this sum to help offset the costs for acquiring and constructing their new complex in Dobbs Ferry. Cardinal Spellman carried the dispute into the local press, arguing that a parochial school would remedy the overcrowding issue.⁵³ **Rockefeller, Jr.'s counsel suggested that he abort his plans to acquire the Sisters' property if they** did not secure the Gould property by the end of the year. However, the Sisters decided that they would not sell their Tarrytown property until they had the property in Dobbs Ferry first. Consequently, Rockefeller, Jr., so close to realizing the Rockefeller acquisition of the **Sisters' property after 47 years of effort, paid** close personal attention to developments.⁵⁴

For their part, the Sisters quickly grew impatient with the school board, which forced the issue to be resolved through a public referendum. The village had already rezoned the **Gould property for the Sisters' use without any** objections (although there was one abstention).⁵⁵ The Sisters felt that the school board had demonstrated no interest in the Gould property until they wished to acquire it. Nevertheless, the Sisters had decided early on

that they would relinquish their expansion plans and allow the district to have the property if the public referendum results supported it. However, after the school board failed to obtain **residents' approval in the first referendum, the Sisters** felt that there should have been no further interference.⁵⁶ Yet, the school board pressed for additional referendums, each time making a claim for why the previous results should be invalidated. The Sisters, in the midst of leading a drive to raise \$500,000 for the site, became frustrated with local officials. Apparently, even the patience of Sisters has limits. The executors of the Gould estate had **also opposed the school board's plan since they** wanted to sell the property en masse. However, all parties involved played along with village officials to avoid the possible usage of eminent domain to seize the property. After four referendums, local residents repeatedly voted **against the school board's expansion plan and** the matter was put to rest.⁵⁷

The agreement of sale between Rockefeller, Jr. and the Sisters for their Tarrytown property (about ten percent of which technically resided in Sleepy Hollow) was signed in May 1958. The Sisters received 32,200 shares of Standard Oil valued at \$1.75 million. Rockefeller, Jr. received the title on August 19, during which time he was in Maine.⁵⁸ That same month, the Sisters completed their transaction to acquire the Gould property.⁵⁹ However, Rockefeller, Jr. made an unusual request. He asked the Sisters to refrain from publicly announcing his \$1.6 million gift until later in the **year, in part to help boost Nelson Rockefeller's** campaign for governor with positive press.⁶⁰ The Sisters, happy to oblige, did not announce the gift until October. The pretense created the public perception that the gift was a purely magnanimous act on the part of the Rockefellers **unrelated to the purchasing of the Sisters' Tarrytown property.**⁶¹ The ploy worked. Not only did the gift receive wide media coverage, the Rockefellers received several thank you letters from Catholics for supporting the Sisters and their educational pursuits with such a gift, especially since he was not a Catholic.⁶² Within the broader context of conflicts between Catholic and Protestant reformers that had plagued the early twentieth century, this act was indeed noteworthy.⁶³

That same month, the Sisters, no longer forced to conceal their abundant gratitude, sent **their "esteemed benefactor" a framed** manuscript as a token of their appreciation. The Sisters had long perceived the Rockefellers as

their patrons, and this gift was viewed as the culmination of their financial support. As the **manuscript said, "Each of the four hundred Sisters of Mercy of the Province of New York, in deep and sincere gratitude, has offered to God one day of Prayer Labor Sacrifice in the spiritual and corporal works of mercy." It concluded with** a quote from Ephesians 3:6-19.⁶⁴

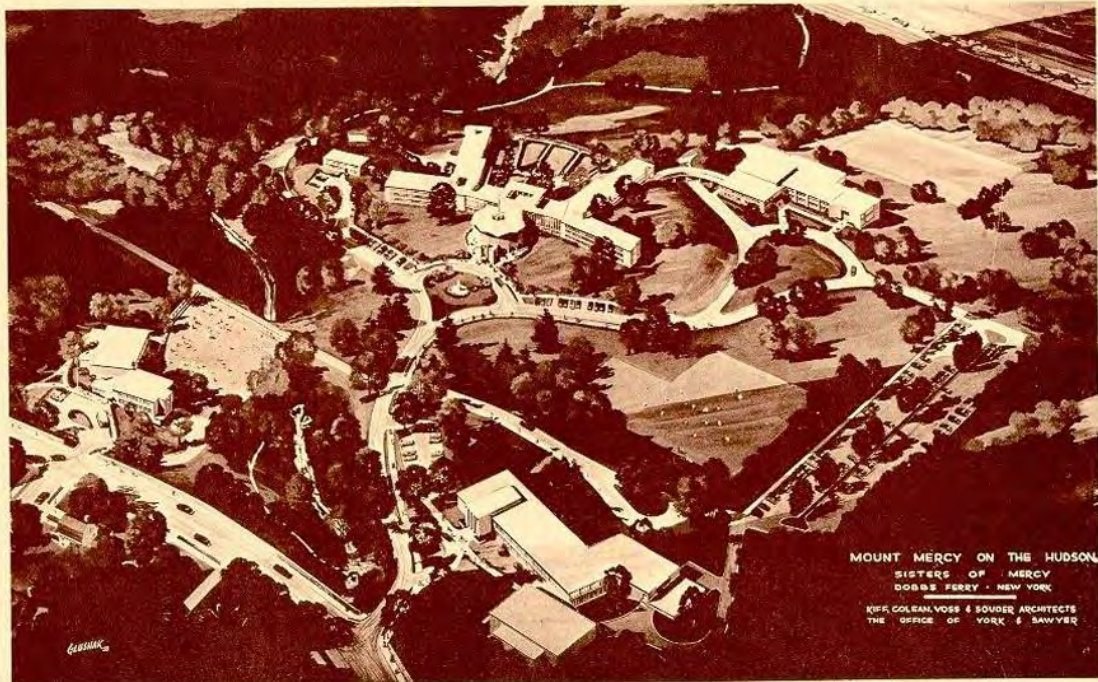
Meanwhile, Rockefeller, Jr. and his **associates expressed relief that this "long drawn-out and at times very trying transaction" was** over.⁶⁵ However, they were sadly mistaken, for the drama continued as a bitter and drawn-out tax dispute developed between the village of Tarrytown and Rockefeller, Jr. over the **valuation of the property. Rockefeller, Jr.'s gift** to the Sisters was tax deductible. As a result, he believed that the property could not be assessed **for much higher than the "fair market value" he** paid for it: \$150,000. Tarrytown, perhaps too **eager to have the Sisters' former property back** on the tax rolls, since religious property was exempt from civil property tax, estimated its worth at over \$250,000. Rockefeller thus sued to lower the valuation.⁶⁶

The Sisters, although they now owned the former Gould estate, could not live there until they finished the construction of their new complex. Rockefeller, Jr. therefore leased to the Sisters their former Tarrytown property for \$1. The two-year lease called for the Sisters to acquire insurance to protect two cottages on the property that he wanted to keep. It also contained a provision allowing for an extension on a month-to-**month basis, "if, after...due** diligence, the tenant is unable to complete the **construction of such new buildings."**⁶⁷ The Sisters continued to seek donations for the Mercy Building Fund and even secured an anonymous \$1,000 donation from Nelson Rockefeller.⁶⁸ The Sisters even unsuccessfully asked Rockefeller, Jr. if he would grant them a low-interest loan for the remaining amount necessary to complete their Dobbs Ferry complex, Mount Mercy-on-the-Hudson.⁶⁹

In December 1959, the Sisters signed a **contract to begin the complex's construction,** which was scheduled to be completed in 550 days. Sister Mary Jeanne promptly informed Rockefeller, Jr. that the Sisters intended to move in 1961.⁷⁰ **As the complex's construction was** underway, Sister Mary Jeanne continued to correspond with Rockefeller, Jr. During the **negotiations to sell the Sisters' Tarrytown property,** she made a favorable impression on Rockefeller, Jr.—who described her in private as **"wise, able and gracious"**—and with his

associates, one of whom perceived her as “quite a business lady.”⁷¹ Consequently, she and Rockefeller, Jr. developed a sense of mutual respect. As she confided to him in one letter, “the plans for our new Mount Mercy [complex]... are rapidly approaching completion...Eight buildings present a challenge to one’s mental efforts as the endeavor is made to avoid any and all mistakes which might arise from insufficient consideration. This is a tremendous project and we shall always be grateful to you. It embodies our prayers, hopes and dreams for an expansion of our facilities that will enable us to work ever more effectively for...the underprivileged of our country and in particular of our eastern area.”⁷² In April 1960, shortly before his death, she sent him an Easter card, addressing him as the Sisters’ “friend and benefactor,” and urging his recovery.⁷³

During the fall of 1961, the Sisters moved from Tarrytown to Mount Mercy. Meanwhile, the main buildings on their former Tarrytown property were razed. During the early twenty-first century, construction companies purchased the site of Mercy College’s original campus and, despite local opposition, built luxury homes on the property near the intersection of Wilson Park Drive and County House Road.⁷⁴ In 1969, Mercy College became a non-sectarian and co-educational institution. During a period of unprecedented expansion during the 1970s and 1980s, Mercy College began to establish branch campuses and extension centers throughout the New York metropolitan region, diversified its academic programs, and first achieved national recognition as one of the most innovative institutions of higher education in the United



Let us pray: O God, from whom everything good takes its origin and receives its steady and full growth, grant, we beseech Thee, that what we are starting to build for the glory of Thy Name, may, by the ever present aid of Thy fatherly wisdom, be brought to completion. Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Figure 4: A sketch of Mount Mercy-on-the-Hudson from the program for the December 1959 ground-breaking ceremony.

States. Mercy College, comprised of only the “College Building” (now Main Hall) in 1961, soon absorbed the other buildings within the Mount Mercy complex into its main campus as the Sisters sold off their complex piece by piece. By 2013, it had united six of the eight buildings built with Rockefeller money under its

auspices.⁷⁵ Ten years later, it was granted university status. Throughout its history, Mercy University, literally a “house that the Rockefellers built,” has retained a deep commitment to community service and to providing motivated students innovative programs that provide the opportunity to transform their lives through higher education.

Acknowledgements

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³ Malcolm Wilson, Address, Commencement Exercises, January 1982, in Parrell, *Mercy*, 65.

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⁶ Joyce, *Kykuit*, 7.

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⁸ The topic is addressed briefly in Sister Mary Agnes Parrell’s early history of Mercy University, which was limited to 20 spiral-bound copies. See: Parrell, *Mercy*, 4, 8.

⁹ Maureen Fitzgerald, “Habits of Compassion: Irish American Nuns in New York City,” in *Women’s America: Refocusing the Past*, eds. Linda Kerber, Jane Sherron De Hart, and Cornelia Hughes Dayton, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 219.

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³⁸ Although the school is still open today in the Bronx, Sister Gratia was principal when the school was located at a former location.

³⁹ Parrell, *Mercy*, 6.

⁴⁰ Sister Mary Jeremy Daigler, *Through the Windows: A History of the Work of Higher Education among the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas* (Scranton: University of Scranton Press, 2001), 131; Sister Mary Gratia Maher, *The Organization of Religious Instruction in Catholic Colleges for Women* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1951).

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⁴² Dana Creel to Nelson Rockefeller, February 8, 1956, folder 233, box 35, Educational Interests series, RG 2 OMR, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC; Public memory also ignores the fact that Mercy University operated on the site. In a 2011, articles covering local opposition to the construction of luxury homes on the **Sisters' former Tarrytown property fail to mention** that Mercy University opened and operated there for 10 years, instead focusing on only Our Lady of Victory **Academy. See: Elaine Marranzano, "Mansions' Return to Tarrytown's Wilson Park,"** *Tarrytown-Sleepy Hollow Patch*, July 26, 2011. <<http://tarrytown.patch.com/articles/mansions-return-to-tarrytowns-wilson-park-but-pale-in-comparison-to-majestic-estates-of-past>>

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⁶¹ The event received wide media coverage. Examples: *Catholic News*, October 25, 1958; *New York Times*, October 22, 1958; *Daily News* (Tarrytown), October 21, 1958.

⁶² The letters are contained in: Folder 234, box 35, Educational Interests series, RG 2 OMR, Rockefeller Family Archives, RAC.

⁶³ Protestant reformers, often from the middle and upper classes, had perceived poverty as a moral problem rooted in particular cultures. Thus, in Protestant logic, it was the immigrant cultures (a part of which was the Catholic religion) that posed the root of the problem. Consequently, Protestant Progressives had generally opposed the formation of Catholic schools, which they perceived as institutions that would perpetuate conditions of dependency. See: **Fitzgerald, "Habits of Compassion," 215.**

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⁷⁴ **Marranzano, “Mansions’ Return to Tarrytown’s Wilson Park.”**

⁷⁵ The two buildings built with Rockefeller assistance **that are not currently part of Mercy University’s** Dobbs Ferry Campus are the provincial house (also known as Christie Hall), which was demolished

during the late 1980s to make room for what became The Landing at Dobbs Ferry, a townhouse **development; and the Sacred Heart Catholic Church’s** parochial school, which is now the Alcott Montessori School.