When Lafayette was Vermilionville and clung quietly to its winding, muddy namesake, it was here, steadfast, that the Civil War raged, through the rise and fall of empire, the coming age of a nation, and two world wars — it remained a constant, fulfilling its mission of providing a quality education, both academic and moral.

This year, Cathedral-Carmel School celebrates its 150th anniversary. For a century and a half the school has been nestled in the shadow of the beautiful Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist at the edge of Lafayette's historic downtown district, has educated our sons and daughters. On Oct. 31, the Cathedral-Carmel family, alumni, friends, and those currently involved with the school, will gather to mark its sesquicentennial.

The school in its various forms has remained a constant in Lafayette, and its history is saturated with the fortunes of our city. Connie Gatlin, director of public relations at Cathedral-Carmel, has helped chronicle and preserve the school's rich history, and shared with The Daily Advertiser some of Cathedral-Carmel's storied past.

The school, explained Gatlin, began back in 1845 when Abbé Antoine Magret, pastor of the little Catholic chapel at Vermilionville, put out a request for religious teachers to come and educate the parish's children. In 1846, the Sisters of Mount Carmel arrived and established a school for girls. Mount Carmel Academy, as it was later called, was located in a wooden building on Lafayette St., said Gatlin.

The first graduating class of Mount Carmel Academy didn't come along until 1880. Gatlin has some ideas regarding the lapse of 34 years. "There were all kinds of things that interrupted the schoolings," she said, referring specifically to the Civil War and Reconstruction, as well as frequent outbreaks of malaria, yellow fever, and other ailments common to the era. "It's so sketchy," said Gatlin, "we almost have to go to city records" to discover particulars of the school's earliest days.

The story leaps forward to 1918, when Bishop Jules B. Jeannard asked Father William Tuering, pastor of St. John's Cathedral, to enlist the Christian Brothers in establishing a school for boys. Cathedral School opened its doors in September, 1919. The building for this school, noted Gatlin, is the stately brick structure on St. John Street most closely identified with Cathedral-Carmel.

According to Gatlin, the two schools maintained separate but closely intertwined identities until 1978, when problems such as large enrollments and increased costs forced the two to make a difficult choice: lower standards or merge. The two schools opted for merger. The new co-educational Cathedral-Carmel School maintained the original two campuses on Lafayette St. and St. John St. In 1978, the Lafayette St. property was sold and kindergarten through the sixth grade moved to the remaining campus. In 1982, Cathedral-Carmel eliminated its high school.

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