



# LHS

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## *Farewell to the YWCA*

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The story of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and The University of Scranton parallels the foundations of the City of Scranton and its Christian traditions. Coal and iron brought wealth to the city, and the Progressive movement provided the activism to help others. In April 1888, a group of philanthropic women met at the home of Mrs. L. M. Gates to hear her sister, Miss Nettie Dunn, national secretary of the YWCA, speak. The women established the Scranton chapter of the YWCA for the purpose of "[building] a fellowship of women and girls devoted to the task of realizing in our common life those ideals of personal and social living to which we are committed by our faith as Christians". Scranton's chapter became part of a nationwide movement begun in 1858.

Early board members used their status as wives of prominent men to bring the new organization to realization. The women believed, "if we have put one touch of a rosy sunset into the life of any woman, we shall feel that we have worked with God." From rented offices in the 200 block of North Washington Avenue, the YWCA provided classes in physical culture, sewing, music and singing, arithmetic, grammar, Bible study, and English. At the same time, the large number of German and Irish immigrants coming to Scranton for work in the mines and iron works brought their ardent Catholic faith with them. In 1868, the Diocese of

Scranton was established to serve the many neighborhood churches they built. Bishop William O'Hara, the first bishop of Scranton, created the infrastructure of the new Diocese. Himself a teacher, O'Hara understood the importance of teaching

young men in a rapidly changing world. On Sunday, August 12, 1888, he blessed the stone block that became the cornerstone for St. Thomas College. The first high-school age students were accepted in 1892. "Old Main", the original school building, was adjacent to the Bishop's residence on Wyoming Avenue. The

school was first managed by Diocesan priests. The Xavierian Brothers administered the school for one year before the Christian Brothers took over St. Thomas College in 1897.

As St. Thomas College was starting, the YWCA was growing. Branch offices were established in South Scranton, West Scranton, and Providence. In 1891, a public cafeteria opened in their Downtown headquarters, serving more than 500 lunches the first month. Debate clubs, cooking classes, and a library were set up for members. YWCA volunteers went to factories during the noon lunch break to conduct programs.

Planning began for a permanent home in 1906, when C.D. Simpson donated the Hotel Linden, at 809 Linden Street, to use as a boardinghouse for young women working away from home. A public



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subscription was undertaken to build a permanent home at the corner of Linden Street and Jefferson Avenue. The three-story, red brick Colonial Revival structure was dedicated in 1907. Scranton architect Edward Langley designed the building. It contained offices, lounges, meeting rooms, a gymnasium and a cafeteria.

The YWCA wasn't just a place for domestic arts. Sessions of the 1914 Pennsylvania State Suffrage Convention were held at the YWCA, thanks to the efforts of Kate Chapman, a local suffragette who worked to ensure the state legislature would support a public referendum on votes for women. Other women's civic organization held meetings in the YWCA as well, including the Century Club, the Florence Crittenton Home for Wayward Girls, and St. Joseph's Foundling Home, among others.

After World War I, an increase in young women coming to work in Scranton led the YWCA to increase their physical space. Frederick J. Platt and C.S. Woolworth donated funds to build the Platt-Woolworth House, an extension onto the YWCA headquarters. The residence, dedicated in 1927, provided a safe place for 106 women to stay, either long-term or just for a few days. Weekly gatherings and socials helped the women feel at home. Facilities included laundry and kitchens, as well as an auditorium and a pool. The pool was exclusively for women.

As the YWCA was expanding, so was St. Thomas College. Bachelor's degrees were awarded beginning in 1901. However, since the college did not have a charter, degrees were awarded from other Christian Brothers schools, such as LaSalle University in Philadelphia. Finally in 1925 a charter was secured, conferring degrees from St. Thomas College.

Enrollment expanded to more than 1,000 students by the late 1930s, including women, who were admitted to only evening classes in 1937. In 1938, Brother Dennis Edward, president of the college, changed the name from St. Thomas College to The University of Scranton.

In 1941 the University's physical footprint increased when the Diocese purchased the former Thompson Hospital at the corner of Mulberry and Wyoming. The donation of the Scranton family's estate in the Lower Hill, which included the mansion now known simply as "The Estate", soon followed.

Increased costs and decreased enrollments during World War II led to a change in administration. As the Christian Brothers departed in 1942, Bishop William Hafey invited the Jesuits to take ownership of the college. The Jesuits used the Scranton Estate as their residence and the Thompson Hospital building as the home of their high school, the Scranton Preparatory School, opened in 1944.

The school saw an influx of students at the end of WWII. Surplus military barracks were built as temporary classroom spaces along Linden Street: "A" for Arts, "B" for Business, and "E" for Physics and Engineering. The campus was split between the barracks and Old Main five blocks away until 1953, when University president Rev. John J. Long, S.J. started a building campaign. Loyola Hall of Science, Alumni Memorial Library, Gunster Student Center, St. Thomas Hall, the Long Center, and eight dormitories were built between 1956 and 1967.

Steadily increasing enrollment, due in part to full coeducation in February 1972, was met by the purchase of the offices of the Glen Alden Coal Company, which became O'Hara Hall in 1970. University expansion continued in the following decades-- the Weinberg Memorial Library, DeNaples Student Center, Loyola Science Center, and additional residence halls.

The YWCA continued to offer popular programs for members of all ages until near the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One popular program was the "Ladies' Day Out," later known as the "Woman's World Program". This day-long program included exercise classes, lectures, sewing or cooking classes and a luncheon for stay-at-home mothers, as well as childcare and fun activities for their children. The YWCA offered adult courses in psychology, tennis, sewing, millinery, dance, guitar, and even an obedience class for dogs. A popular aerobics course called "Goodbye Mrs. Hips" was held in the gym in the late 1950s. Children's classes were given in roller skating, arts & crafts, gymnastics, martial arts, and drama.

The Platt-Woolworth House continued to provide safe, friendly accommodations to young women on their own away from home, including University students. In 1964, a South Korean student named Jeongok Moon lived at the Platt-Woolworth House while enrolled in the University of Scranton's



graduate program in counseling.

In the 1970s, however, financial issues made it increasingly hard to maintain the large YWCA headquarters and Platt-Woolworth House. The buildings were sold to The University of Scranton in 1977. Initially called Jefferson Hall, the building was renamed Leahy Hall in 1995 in appreciation for the Leahy family's endowment benefiting health care education. The building contained University classrooms until 1978, when it was converted into a residence hall. The YWCA continued to hold programs in the building until moving into a new space on Stafford Avenue in South Scranton in 1979. Financial troubles continued at the YWCA forcing more reorganization. After moving to 7<sup>th</sup> Avenue in West Scranton, the YWCA closed its doors in Scranton in 1988. However, worldwide the YWCA remains the oldest and largest multicultural women's organization, with more than 25 million members in 122 countries, including 2 million women in 300 local associations in the United States.

The Panuska College of Professional Studies at The University of Scranton fulfills the role initially set by the founders of the YWCA. The college strives to create an inclusive space to connect with and help everyone, including underserved popula-

tions of the elderly, immigrants, and children.

The Center for Rehabilitation Education, which replaced the YWCA headquarters building in 2014, houses the departments of Exercise Science and Sport, Physical Therapy, and Occupational Therapy. The college continues the work begun by Jane Addams and other early settlement house proponents, who worked to help low-income immigrant peoples integrate into their new communities. Similarly, today's students of the "helping professions" are fulfilling the University's Jesuit mission of being "men and women for others". Undergraduate and graduate students work together across different disciplines in the Leahy Community Health and Family Center, which includes a clinic for the uninsured, a food and clothing pantry, physical and occupational therapy services, and a counseling clinic.

More than 125 years after the founding of the both the YWCA and St. Thomas College, the act of faith that led Bishop O'Hara to establish a Catholic college has grown into The University of Scranton, while the compassionate, reform-minded impulses that led to the foundation of the YWCA remain in a new generation of students, women and men, who continue to "work with God."