

Grand Coteau Revisited

BY

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The Connellys' second White House, at Grand Coteau, Louisiana.

In October 1950, there appeared in *The Southern Jesuit*¹ an article entitled *The White House and Grand Coteau* — a recapitulation of the history of St. Charles' the first Jesuit College in the deep South, established in 1837. The author, who identifies the history of the College with that of the *White House*, says:

The White House, has so many names in the pages of the record of Grand Coteau, that it might be well to clarify them. In the opening days of the college, it was the faculty residence. Not many years later, it became the residence of one of the professors, Pierce Connelly and his wife, Cornelia, who was to become the foundress of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus; thus it became "Mother Connelly's House". Later it returned to clerical use as the Sacred Heart rectory; so it was naturally "The Priests' House". About a year after the new rectory was built beside the church, the White House was moved to the cor-

ner where the drive to the church and the macadam road to the Sacred Heart convent join. In the transit it lost the high-stilting basement that had lent it so much dignity . . . Finally, this year, it has moved back from the main drive to give place to a modern brick gymnasium for the school. It has moved and with over a hundred and fifteen years of use, it has become a little shaky. It gives warning that the Era of The White House is coming to a close."

Today, the White House — "Grace-mere", as the Connellys rechristened it — no longer exists. All that remains is a small plaque, set over the graves of the two Connelly children in the Grand Coteau cemetery, which informs us that the timbers of the house were used in the building of the nearby parochial school for negro children. But because "the era of the White House" is so definitely over, those who, like myself, visit Grand Coteau with the hope of recapturing the atmosphere of the past, inevitably meet with disappointment. It is true that the azaleas and magnolias

¹ The Seminary Bulletin of the New Orleans Province of the Society of Jesus.

still bloom in profusion; and there is something shrine-like about the two tiny rooms, which now form part of the extended buildings of the Sacred Heart Convent, where Cornelia lived with her babies, Adeline and Frank, from April 1842 to July 1843, whilst Pierce was in Europe¹.

But the town of Grand Coteau has grown, and the estates of College and Convent are no longer so isolated as in the past. The College is almost entirely rebuilt after two fires. Two new churches, four schools, and a large house of retreats have completely changed the face of the landscape. Even were one sure of the exact location and structure of Gracemere in Cornelia's time, one can no longer see what she saw on that spring day in January 1840: "O my God! If all this happiness is not to Thy greater glory and the good of my soul, take it from me. I make the sacrifice."

It is still possible, however, to reconstruct in fair detail those years in the life of Mother Connelly from the old records in the archives of St. Charles' College — records which have providentially survived otherwise disastrous fires, from the contemporary journal of the Sacred Heart Convent, and from the many letters written by Pierce during the years 1838 — 42 to Archbishop Blanc of New Orleans².

These records are eloquent witness of how the Connellys lived at Grand Coteau, the precise dates and circumstances of their arrival and

¹ As one stands in these rooms and reflects on Cornelia's literally straitened circumstances during these long months, after the spaciousness of Gracemere, it is with something of a shock that one recalls Pierce's blithe reference to having left Cornelia "delightfully fixed" at the Convent.

² These letters are preserved in the Archives of Notre Dame University, South Bend, Indiana.

departure, their importance in the life of the place, the high esteem in which they were held. The Archbishop of New Orleans envisaged Grand Coteau as the cultural and educational centre of his Diocese. The Jesuit Fathers and the great majority of the Sacred Heart nuns were French in origin and outlook. The Bishop seems to have looked to the Connellys to introduce that native element which would temper the dominating French influence. On the practical level, the Rector of the new college, Père Nicholas Point, was in desperate need of a teacher of English. He had made a special journey to Natchez in March 1838 with the single object of persuading Pierce to come to Grand Coteau. He offered Pierce a salary of \$ 600, arranged for him and the boy Merty to live at the College, sought employment for Cornelia at the Convent, and a lodging there for her and Adeline³, until such time as they found a suitable house. The Connellys arrived at Grand Coteau on the Feast of the Jesuit Saint John Francis Regis, June 16th, 1838.

Bishop Blanc's first encounter with the Connellys had been at his own Episcopal consecration in New Orleans on November 21st, 1835⁴; it was possibly his admiration of and affection for Cornelia which soon changed acquaintance into warm friendship. So he wrote to Bishop Purcell of Cincinnati on February 13th, 1836 in quaint French:

"... 16 jours après votre départ Madame Connelly fut recue dans l'Eglise par Mgr. Rosati, et fit sa 1ère Communion l'avant-veille de son embarquement. Ses adieux

³ Letter of P. Point to Pierce Connelly, May 24th 1838. And cf. Ms. history of the College — St. Charles' College Archives, Grand Coteau.

⁴ Harry Connelly, Pierce's brother, in a letter of this date to his wife, mentions that he and Pierce were guests at the dinner which was given to celebrate the event.

qu'ils nous firent furent attendris — sont pour nous tous. Mme Con. est une personne admirable, sa bonheur fut grand, le jour de sa Comm¹.”

The White House belonged to Bishop Blanc, and he gladly made it available to the Connellys². They took possession early in March 1839, and soon were entertaining all the distinguished visitors to College and Convent alike. When their fourth child, Mary Magdalen, was born in July 1839, her godfather was the Bishop himself, and her godmother, Mother Bazire, the Superior of the Convent³. The contemporary diary of the Fr. Minister of the College reveals to us the exact circumstances of Pierce's revelation to his wife about his vocation. The date fixed itself in Mother Connelly's mind — the Feast of St. Edward, October 13th, 1840. The entries in the diary are as follows:

“1840. Oct. 9. Frs. du Lecurr and Walsh begin the retreat... Mr. Connelly had made practically the whole retreat with us. He slept and took his meals at the College. Oct. 17. End of the retreat.”

The primary purpose of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius is to help the retreatant, if circumstances call for it, to make an election,

¹ “Sixteen days after your departure. Mrs. Connelly was received into the Church by Mgr. Rosati [Bishop of St. Louis, and co-consecrator of Bishop Blanc] and made her first Communion two days before sailing. It was a sad parting for us all. Mrs. Connelly is a wonderful person — her joy on the day of her first Communion was very great.” *Archives of Notre Dame University*. This letter enables us to date exactly the occasion of Mother Connelly's first Communion — the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8th, 1835.

² Cf. the *Liber Consultationum* — the records of the administration of St. Charles College.

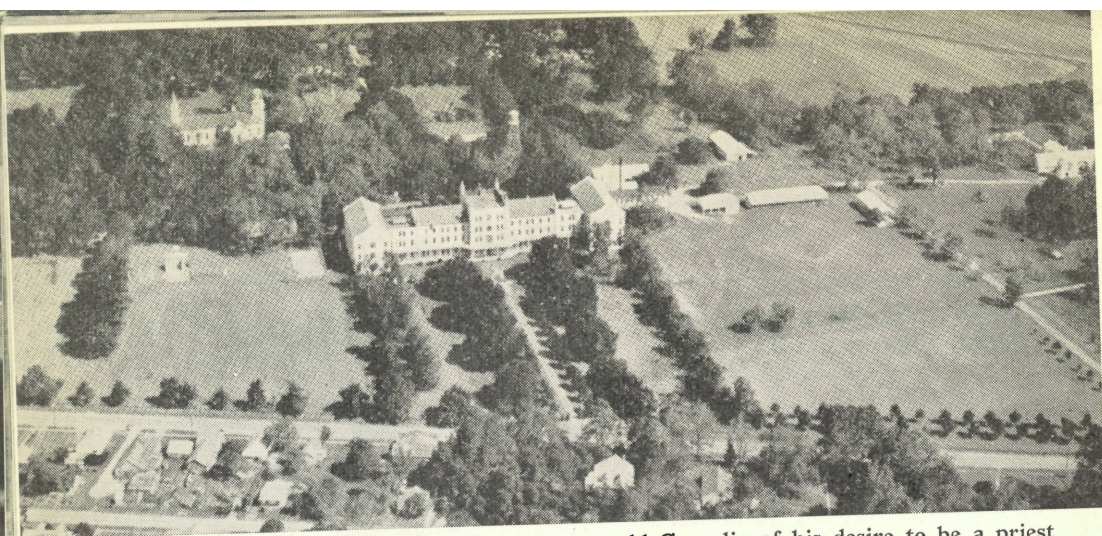
³ Baptismal registers — Archives of St. Charles College. The same records indicate that Pierce and Cornelia frequently acted as godparents, particularly for the occasional converts at the Convent.



This pencil sketch of Cornelia Connelly, made shortly after the events recorded here, is in the possession of her grand-daughter, Princess Marina Borghese.

a choice regarding state of life. In a retreat of eight days, the election would normally be made on the fourth day — for Pierce, October 13th.

The records also show that the end of the year 1840 was the end of an idyll in more ways than one. The College of St. Charles was in dire financial straits — and the largest drain on its slender resources was Pierce Connelly's salary. In January, it was pointed out by the Fr. Rector's consultor that if Pierce were given his congé, it would be possible to pay the interest on the College debt; but it was decided that the Fr. Provincial's advice be sought before taking such a step. It was almost a year to the day, January 24th, 1842, that Pierce may have anticipated his dismissal by announcing that he would be leaving the College staff in the following



The grounds of St. Charles' College, where Pierce told Cornelia of his desire to be a priest on October 13, 1840.

July. We know from other sources, Pierce left for England at the beginning of May, after having sold his house to the College. But the Grand Coteau records inform us that the College decided to buy his house principally because he could not afford to leave until he had sold it; the Fathers thought that it would be more immediately economical to pay interest on the debt incurred in buying the house rather than to continue paying Pierce's salary.

These documents help considerably in filling out the picture of Mother Connelly's years at Grand Coteau. They throw a brighter light on her spiritual diary of these days — setting her interior life more firmly in its external context. They illustrate more profoundly the precise nature of the sacrifice which God demanded of her¹.

Though 1839-40 were years shot through with sorrow for Cornelia through the deaths of her children, yet popularity and affection, a sense of purpose and a comfortable home

¹ A letter to Pierce from Madame Garesché of St. Louis, written probably in 1841 is worthy of notice here. She had just visited the Connelys at Gracemere, and remarks in what perfect terms Cornelia has spoken to her concerning union with God and conformity with His will.

were all hers. When Pierce and her eldest son left her in May 1842, she never thought to see her husband again. And she had the added pain of knowing that her husband was now an embarrassment to the St. Charles' establishment, and no longer an asset. House, library, furniture — all were sold in order to defray the expenses of Pierce's journey.

It is not perhaps too fanciful to see a parallel between her purification and that of another servant of the Lord, Job, whose house and family and possessions were reft from him. And it was Job's words that were to be on her lips — his cry of faith and trust — as she lay suffering, at the end of her life, from a disfiguring disease: "In this flesh I shall see God."

"I believe in God... the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting." God's servants, God's saints are raised up in the Church to explain to us, in the concrete, the meaning of our *Credo*. The words of St. Paul: "It was faith they lived by, all of them and in faith they died." find full illustration in the life and death of Mother Cornelia Connelly.

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