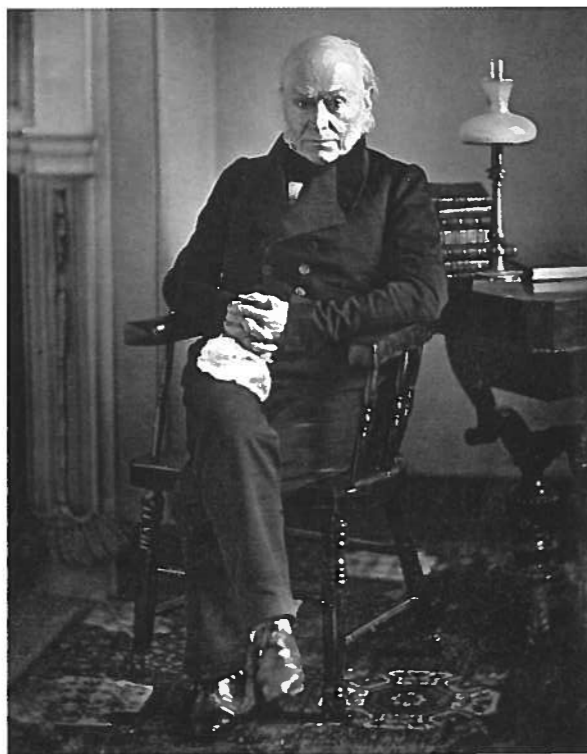


The Triumph of the Cross

President John Quincy Adams, Archbishop John Baptist Purcell, and the Reclamation of Cincinnati's Mount Adams as a Sacred Site

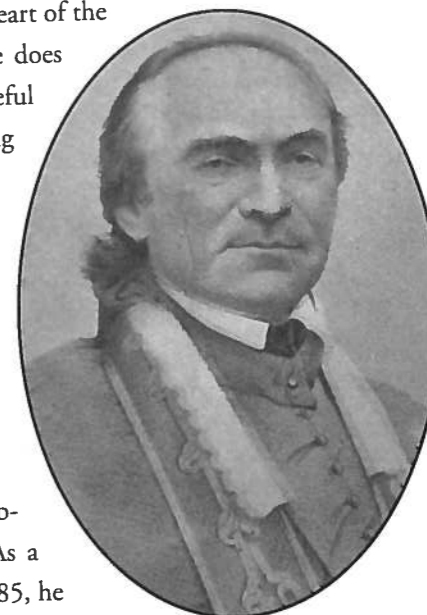
C. Walker Gollar

In 1843, former president John Quincy Adams left Massachusetts to lay the cornerstone for an observatory in Cincinnati, Ohio. Newspapers covered his every move. Adams considered the cornerstone-laying ceremony the most memorable achievement of his life—an astounding claim from someone who had negotiated the 1812 Peace Treaty of Ghent, led the antislavery movement in the United States, and restored free speech in Congress, all the while serving beside George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln. The Cincinnati Astronomical Society published Adams's cornerstone-laying remarks, along with the address Adams had delivered the next day. The society also voted to name the hill on which the observatory was built Mount Adams.



John Quincy Adams (1767-1848).
LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Despite all the coverage of Adams's visit to Cincinnati, some people debated what the man actually had said. A few Catholics specifically charged that Adams had unduly assaulted the Catholic Church. Adams's alleged slurs contributed to the building of Mount Adams's Immaculata Church and inspired one of the oldest Catholic pilgrimages in the country, the Good Friday praying of the steps leading up to Immaculata. The way people remembered his Cincinnati visit often pitted natural against revealed theology. At the heart of the story stands one significant question: what role does God play in everyday human affairs? But a careful review of the entire historical record, beginning with Adams's early thoughts on the Catholic Church, reveals that the conflict played out more as a feud between Adams and the local bishop, John Baptist Purcell; was dependent on various social and cultural developments, many of which occurred well after the actual events of 1843; and was derived more from sectarian prejudice than scientific controversy.¹



John Baptist Purcell (1767-1848).
Fifty Years in a Brown County Convent,
(Anonymous Author), 1895

From an early age, Adams certainly exhibited suspicion toward the Catholic Church. As a boy traveling through Europe from 1778 to 1785, he was extremely curious about many things, especially Catholicism. He blamed the poverty of one Spanish town on the greed of Catholic priests and mocked Catholic piety he observed. In what Adams identified as "one of the most revered ceremonies of the Romish Religion," every person in Paris, including the king, "fell on their knees and began to mutter prayers and cross themselves" after a little bell announced that a priest was carrying through town *le bon dieu*, that is, "the good god," or the Eucharist. Not believing that God was truly present in the Eucharist, Adams remained standing.²

Never much of a churchgoer, as an adult Adams tried to maintain some religious affiliation, especially to the Congregational Church of his New England upbringing. When there was no Congregational Church where he happened to live, he occasionally attended other services, such as the baptism of his children at an Anglican Church. Not until the strain of another difficult pregnancy—his wife, Louisa, suffered numerous miscarriages—did Adams, in about 1801, begin to exhibit much enthusiasm for spiritual matters. In search of consolation, he devoured the simple sermons of Anglican archbishop John Tillotson of Canterbury. Though Tillotson was even more anti-Catholic than Adams, he also encouraged a general spirit of religious tolerance, which undoubtedly contributed to Adams's eventual assertion that there were many ways to be a Christian.

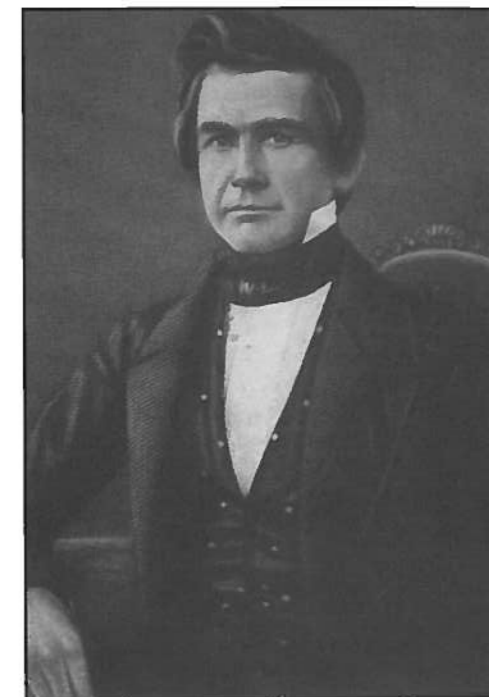
Inspired by Tillotson, Adams adopted the practice of reading the Bible cover to cover every year, which he observed for the rest of his life. He occasionally entertained higher theological questions, such as those concerning heaven and hell, but he generally focused on this world, most often considering Christianity a sound “guide to morality.”³

Adams also grew to believe that the natural world revealed God’s glory better than did pious acts of devotion. While serving as U.S. minister to Russia from 1809 to 1814, he marveled over the stars as he strolled along St. Petersburg’s Neva River accompanied by his new friend Czar Alexander II, a passionate stargazer. Adams similarly encouraged his children to ponder the heavens. He essentially embraced a line of thinking popular at that time, called natural theology, which maintained that God’s agency in the world manifested itself through natural laws rather than through supernatural acts. God, in other words, appeared all the time and not just during miraculous events. To offset the suspicion of some religious leaders against anyone who dismissed miracles, many advocates of natural theology, including Adams, contended that they supported the church. Science did not oppose religion but served it, at least according to natural theologians, and Adams’s exploration of astronomy grew into his religious vocation.⁴

Adams’s stargazing, interpreted through his other scholarly pursuits, bred aspirations for the country that few people understood. In his 1825 first State of the Union Address, references to classical civilizations perplexed many listeners, while his specific recommendation that Congress build a “lighthouse of the skies” to rival Czar Alexander’s observatory, including a warning that failure to do so “would be treachery to the most sacred of trusts,” spurred widespread outrage. Vice President John C. Calhoun openly opposed the observatory; newspapers widely ridiculed the idea; and Adams’s rival, Andrew Jackson, who would have been president had Speaker of the House Henry Clay not allegedly rigged the system in Adams’s favor, mounted a devastating reply. “Instead of building lighthouses in the skies,” Jackson thundered, “pay the national debt.” Though Adams may have been “two centuries ahead of [his] time,” as one historian put it, he clearly was out of touch with the average American. Not only did Congress reject his recommendation for the observatory, the American people also widely denounced Adams’s other proposals for education and world exploration, for example, rendering his presidency largely ineffective. Adams moped around the White House, increased his exercise routine, and extended his early-morning Bible readings. Not completely abandoning his ideals, however, just before leaving office in 1829 he signed a bill to create a national observatory. This bill paved the way for what is now the United States’ oldest still-operational scientific institution, the U.S. Naval Observatory in Washington, D.C., opened in 1830. Adams spent many nights there charting the stars.⁵

Often misunderstood, ridiculed, and rejected, Adams lifted himself out of a deep depression when he surprisingly ran for, and won a vacant seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. His bold defense of free speech and courageous assault on slavery won him the title “Old Man Eloquent” and boosted his reputation to a level above that of the president. Riding high from his successful defense of the rebellious slaves of the *Amistad*, Adams reignited his promotion of observatories and was particularly drawn to certain enlightened communities across the nation. In 1842, a West Point graduate, devout Christian, and charismatic professor of astronomy, Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel mesmerized Cincinnati audiences in a series of lectures that explained the heavens in a fashion they readily understood. Listeners grew especially intrigued by Mitchel’s large transparencies, or visual representations of Saturn. At the end of Mitchel’s last talk, he urged Cincinnatians to erect a great astronomical observatory. “I will go to the people,” he promised, “and by the anvil of the blacksmith, by the work bench of the carpenter, and thus onward to the rich parlor of the wealthy, I will plead the cause of science.” Three hundred persons pledged \$25 each toward purchasing stock in Mitchel’s Cincinnati Astronomical Society. Adams considered Mitchel a bit of a “braggart,” but he also appreciated the man’s ability to reach people. Adams consequently wrote letters of introduction that allowed Mitchel to tour various European observatories. In Munich, Bavaria, Mitchel purchased a telescope, second in size only to the instrument owned by Czar Alexander.⁶

Much to Adams’s delight, Mitchel next invited him to speak at the groundbreaking ceremony for the building that would house Mitchel’s telescope in Cincinnati. Adams’s daughters warned that their seventy-six-year-old father was too feeble to travel from New England, but Adams dismissed this, explaining that God had called him to Cincinnati. He told Mitchel, the “spark of your enthusiasm for the cause of science burns within my bosom [and] shall live until the cornerstone of your observatory shall have been laid.” Before Adams left Massachusetts, he composed a fifty-four-page scholarly address detailing the history of astronomy. A large caravan escorted him to Cincinnati on November 8, 1843, “one of the happiest [days] of my life,” he recalled. Once Adams settled in



Ormsby MacKnight Mitchel (1810-1862).
CINCINNATI OBSERVATORY CENTER ARCHIVES

a Cincinnati hotel, Mitchel informed him that, in addition to the formal address, listeners expected some remarks at the cornerstone-laying ceremony. Despite being worn down with “fatigue [and] anxiety,” and suffering with a headache, fever, chills, hoarseness, a sore throat, and *tussis senilis*, or old man’s cough, Adams stayed up until one o’clock in the morning composing the cornerstone ceremony remarks. He arose three hours later to finish them.⁷

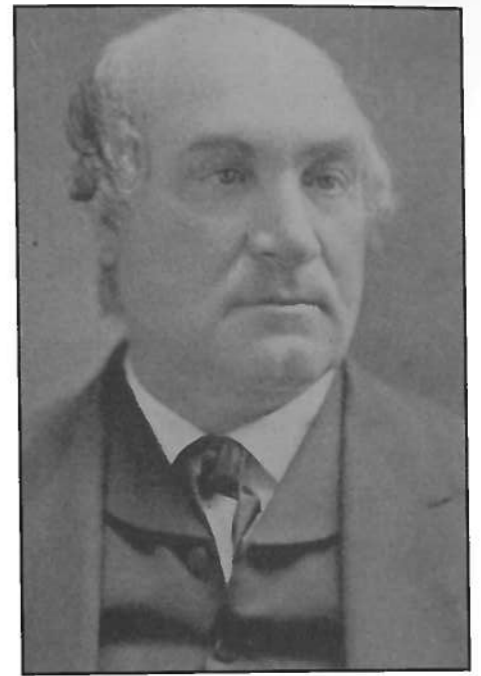
Rain flooded the streets of Cincinnati the morning of November 9, but nothing could dissuade Adams. Hundreds of Cincinnatians led him up to the observatory construction site at the highest point of Mount Ida, a hill overlooking Cincinnati’s east end. Though “it all looked like a sea of mud,” Adams recalled, he laid the cornerstone and quickly read his remarks, “invoking the blessing of Him in whose presence we all stand, upon the building which is here to rise, and upon all the uses to which it will be devoted—upon the observers and other officers who may be employed in it—upon the society by whose will it is constructed; upon the people of the city where it will stand, and the State, to which they belong; and finally, upon the whole North American Union, and the whole brotherhood of *Man!*” Crowds cheered as rain nearly destroyed the paper from which Adams read. The next day at Cincinnati’s largest public structure, the twelve-hundred-seat Wesley Chapel, Adams spoke for nearly two hours, reading about half of his scholarly address, the last formal speech he would ever deliver. Humans instinctively look to the stars, he proclaimed, and the “Heavens declare the glory of God.” Numerous “optical illusions,” including superstition, nonetheless sometimes cloud our view. To advance the science of astronomy was nothing less than to fulfill America’s duty to her forefathers and, above all, to God. The audience again cheered. Mitchel asked for copies of Adams’s address and cornerstone ceremony remarks, and Adams delivered both items two days later. The Cincinnati Astronomical Society soon voted unanimously to rename Mount Ida to Mount Adams. Cincinnati papers followed Adams’s subsequent activity in the area, publishing seemingly everything the man said before he left town on November 13. “*Never* has that demand [for news] been so extensive, and so continuous,” reported the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette*. Such interest reflected most Cincinnatians’ high esteem for Adams. Adams rededicated himself to turning Cincinnati’s enthusiasm for astronomy into a national pursuit. “The hand of God Himself,” he wrote in his diary, “has furnished me this opportunity to do good.”⁸

Despite Adams’s rich theological affirmations, the priest-editor of Cincinnati’s *Catholic Telegraph*, Edward Purcell, focused on few critical lines from his Wesley Chapel address. Purcell charged that Adams vilified, misrepresented, and “bespatter[ed]” the Catholic Church, especially when he declared that Ignatius Loyola was “the founder of the Inquisition.” Purcell correctly proclaimed that the founder of the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits, Ignatius Loyola was born some three hundred years after the Inquisition had begun! “This is not the first, nor

the second, nor the third time on which [Adams] has misrepresented Catholic history and Catholic doctrine,” bemoaned Purcell. He surely felt obliged to defend the Catholic community. Waves of Irish and German Catholic immigrants had begun to flood into the United States. Catholics quickly rose from a tiny minority into a significant force, climbing from about 1 percent of the total U.S. population at the time of the American Revolution to around 25 percent at the beginning of the Civil War. Within a decade, the number of American-born citizens of Cincinnati, who early on were the only inhabitants in town, fell to just under half of the population, unseated by foreign-born persons, about half of whom were German. And many of these Germans were Catholic. In response to this incredible growth, through the 1830 and ’40s anti-

Catholic sentiment rose. Across the country diocesan newspapers, such as the New York *Truth Teller*, the Louisville *Catholic Advocate*, the Philadelphia *Catholic Herald*, and Purcell’s Cincinnati *Catholic Telegraph* defended Catholic teaching against various attacks. Some Catholics privately expressed and occasionally proclaimed aloud their hope that the Catholic Church triumph over all other religious groups in the United States. Purcell, moreover, predicted that within a decade or so Cincinnati would grow into “a little Rome in the West.” May Catholic crosses dominate every skyline, pious Catholics like Purcell prayed.⁹

Local papers fueled the flames of religious controversy concerning Adams’s visit, with at least one contributor willing to bend the truth in Adams’s favor. To Purcell’s charge that Adams had misrepresented Catholic teaching, Cincinnati’s *Atlas* shot back that if the Irish-born Purcell “wishes to secure the good opinion of the world...he must not indulge while representing Roman Catholicism...in slanderously detracting from the long and well earned reputation of the fathers of our land, at the expense of truth.” Purcell had insulted “the venerable Adams” even though Adams only repeated historical fact: the *Atlas* claimed he asserted that Ignatius Loyola founded not the Inquisition but the institution (that is, the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits) that enforced the Inquisition. Appalled by this claim, Purcell offered \$500 to anyone who could prove Adams had *not* said that Ignatius Loyola was the founder of the Inquisition. An anonymous contributor to the *Atlas* then asserted that even if Adams had made some factual errors, the “thin skinned”



Edward Purcell (1808-1881).
Fifty Years in a Brown County Convent,
(Anonymous Author), 1895

Purcell was wrong to have insulted such an esteemed guest of the city. The attack “was not only unprovoked, but too personal, abusive and arrogant, to be tolerated in such a community as ours.” A couple weeks later, the Cincinnati Astronomical Society published Adams’s cornerstone ceremony remarks and lecture, including his clear claim that Ignatius had founded the Inquisition. Local papers did not discuss the matter further.¹⁰

It may have been fortuitous that Edward Purcell’s older brother, the combative Cincinnati bishop John Baptist Purcell, traveled through Europe during Adams’s Cincinnati visit, especially in light of what happened to Bishop Purcell upon his return to the United States. In late 1843, he boarded the *Vesta*, a sailing vessel that was caught in a violent storm in the English Channel. For centuries, people had believed that the Devil caused storms. Christians often rang church bells during tempests to ward off evil forces. Purcell supposedly promised Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to build her a shrine if she saved his ship. The storm subsided, and Purcell made it home, though not on the *Vesta* but on a more stable, speedy, comfortable, and expensive steamer onto which he had transferred at Liverpool. The former president of Mount Saint Mary’s Seminary in Emmitsburg, Maryland, who had debated some of the greatest minds of his time, Purcell left room in his worldview for miracles. In contrast to the natural theology that Adams upheld, Purcell’s revealed theology promoted belief in the miraculous intervention of God through the invocation of the saints and especially through Mary.¹¹

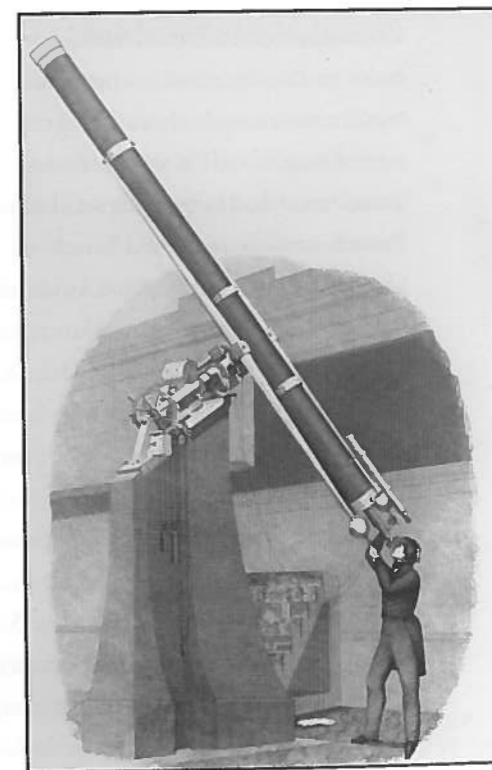
About the time Purcell was caught in the storm, Adams described the laying of the observatory cornerstone as the most memorable achievement of his life, which, nonetheless, required other persons to fulfill. Building on Adams’s achievement, Ormsby Mitchel began another series of lectures, in which he rendered the “abstruse and sublime science of Astronomy, popular and entertaining.” A few listeners nevertheless considered Mitchel “wild and visionary.” He would never receive the \$7,500 pledged to build the observatory and would not be able to maintain the institution. Mitchel actually brought in more money than donors originally had promised, personally oversaw the construction of the building, planned to sustain the institution by charging visitors a fee, and ultimately hoped to turn the institution over to some university. He only wanted to make himself a lot of money, the malcontents barked back.¹²

With Adams’s full support, in the spring of 1845 Mitchel opened the observatory as the country’s first public institution of its kind. Given the rejection of his proposal for the country during his presidency, Adams must have felt some sort of redemption. Mitchel allowed shareholders in the Cincinnati Astronomical Society to stargaze one night a week. A number of persons who had not invested in the project also climbed the hill and demanded a look. Mitchel turned them away. (Despite his original plans, he never charged admission.) Those turned away retaliated. As Mitchel tried to explain to Adams, “we have been assailed

in the most vindictive manner.... Malicious persons have been endeavoring to excite popular feeling hostile to the interests of the Society.” Despite the malcontents, Mitchel conducted significant research at the observatory, cataloguing double stars—that is, stars in the same orbit that appear to the naked eye to be one star—and discovering on Mars’s South Pole the Mountains of Mitchel, a formation later deemed an optical illusion.¹³

A small but growing number of thinkers, meanwhile, took Adams’s scientific focus to the extreme, insisting that the world be judged by empirical evidence alone. Charles Lyell, for instance, argued that geology should disentangle itself from the Bible and certainly not speculate about origins, purposes, and ultimate meanings. Lyell’s friend Charles Darwin shared this view. Adams did not. He advanced the congressional debate that established the country’s premier scientific museum, the Smithsonian Institution, in 1846, and proved quite progressive in many areas, such as in educational theory, but “in matters of custom and religion,” as a recent biographer noted, Adams “was highly conventional.” The onetime president of the American Bible Society, Adams essentially served as a bridge between the extreme scientific worldview that soon would be associated with Darwin and the more God-friendly approach of the Catholic Church.¹⁴

The belief that God could intervene in the natural world soon gained in Cincinnati a tangible reminder, which, ironically, came to life as an unexpected byproduct of the Industrial Revolution. On July 25, 1848, five months after Adams passed away, Bishop Purcell purchased land in Mount Adams two blocks from the Cincinnati observatory. He planned to use this property for the shrine he had promised to Mary, but the land sat vacant for over a decade, that is, until the soft coal of Cincinnati’s growing industry spewed oily, sooty haze up to Mount Adams, consistently blocking Mitchel’s telescope. In early 1859, Mitchel left Cincinnati for the Dudley Observatory, in the still unobscured skies outside Albany, New York. Mitchel’s departure effectively provided an opportunity for Catholic growth. On August 21, 1859, Purcell laid the cornerstone for his Mount Adams Marian shrine two blocks away from the observatory. Offsetting Adams’s beacon of science, Purcell’s church would shine,



Ormsby Mitchel at his telescope.
CINCINATI OBSERVATORY CENTER ARCHIVES

at least as he proclaimed at its cornerstone laying, as the “Beacon Star” for all of Catholic Cincinnati. Purcell asked Cincinnati Catholics to pay construction costs, but immigrants to the United States, including a huge number of German Catholics making it to Cincinnati, did not have much money. They raised only \$62. Purcell consequently donated land, stones, and \$10,000 to build the church. While the shrine was intended to fulfill a promise to Mary, it also rose as Purcell’s personal investment in Catholicism. Purcell routinely climbed Mount Adams to oversee construction. Other Catholics similarly began to wear a path up to the large wooden cross he had erected on the construction site.¹⁵

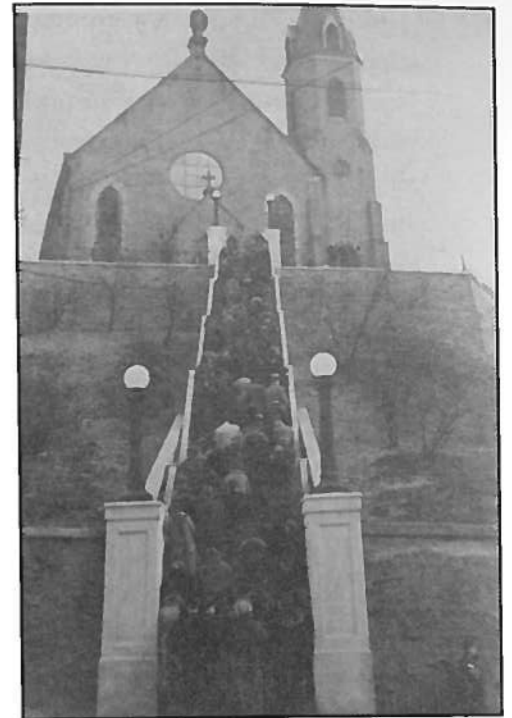
Meanwhile, the growing divide between a narrow scientific worldview and a defensive religious approach gained sharper clarity from the scientific side. On November 24, 1859, Darwin published *The Origin of Species*, in which he argued that species evolved somewhat randomly, mostly governed by the survival of the fittest. Many religious thinkers, including the prominent English Catholic John Henry Newman saw nothing in Darwin’s theory that conflicted with divine revelation and belief in an almighty God. Other reviewers, nonetheless, grew convinced that science had become, as one person put it, “the Armageddon—the final battle-field—in the conflict with infidelity.” As Darwin’s sharpest critics pointed out, Darwin surely had reported no evidence to suggest that God had any kind of overall divine plan or that God occasionally intervened in this world. In 1860, insisting that God could intervene (and in fact had saved his life during the English Channel storm!), Purcell built wooden steps to his Mount Adams property in order to ease the climb of persons wishing to visit the construction site. As the building took shape, Catholics started to refer to it as the archbishop’s church. (By this time, Purcell had been made archbishop of Cincinnati.) Purcell consecrated the Church of the Immaculate Conception, or Immaculata, as he liked to call it, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 9, 1860. Four years earlier, Pope Pius IX had proclaimed the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which professed that Mary was born without the stain of original sin.¹⁶

Immaculata’s architecture proclaimed Purcell’s triumph. According to Purcell’s design, the cross atop the church’s bell tower reached 125 feet, making it higher than the roof of the observatory. Made of hammered limestone in simple Gothic style, which mirrored the churches Purcell knew in his native Ireland, Immaculata stood 125 feet long by 54 feet wide. As in many European churches, a rose window hung above



Earliest known photograph of Immaculata Church. *Catholic Telegraph*, August 26, 1909

the entrance, a smaller *quatrefoil*, or four-leafed window hovered over Immaculata’s altar, and the groins of the ceiling terminated in carved pendants. Cincinnatians Johann Heinrich Koehnken and Gallus Grim manufactured and installed an organ (as they would do in most other Catholic churches in the area over the next thirty-five years). Original decorations otherwise were few, undoubtedly limited by the depth of Purcell’s pocketbook. The wooden cross Purcell had erected for pilgrims on the construction site nonetheless was affixed to the front outside wall. Underscoring that Immaculata was not a parish church as much as the archbishop’s shrine, the *Cincinnati Daily Commercial* noted, “Attending services at this church will be a pious labor of love[as] the hill is one of the most rugged, and the mud the



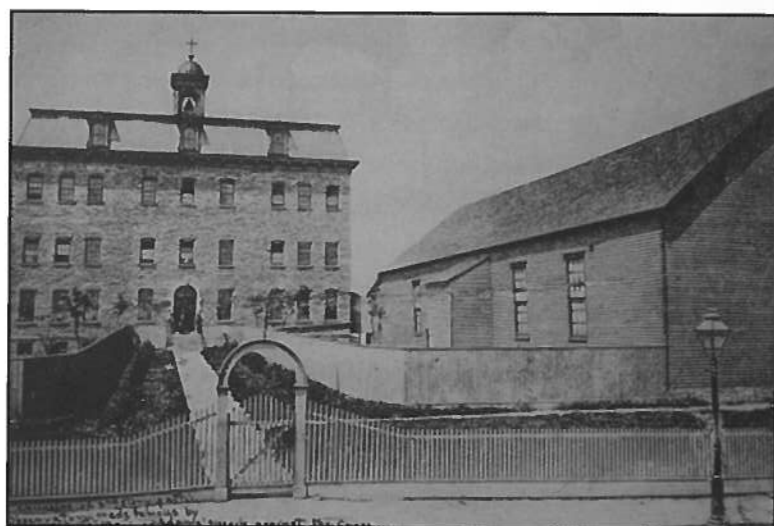
Praying the Steps. *Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 27, 1937

most slippery that we have recently found.” A few immigrants, mostly Irish, lived on Mount Adams at this time. After Immaculata opened, Germans started to settle on the hill, and German soon became the most common language spoken there. Purcell nonetheless encouraged all Catholics to climb the stairs, especially on Good Friday in commemoration of Jesus carrying his cross up the hill of Golgotha.¹⁷

As the Cincinnati Catholic immigrant community settled in and even started to save some money, its members began to contribute more to Immaculata. In 1862, the third pastor of Immaculata, Bernard Mary Gels commissioned Covington, Kentucky, artist Johann Schmitt to create seven large oil paintings for the church, each portraying an event in Mary’s life. Schmitt’s centerpiece captured Purcell’s aspirations when it depicted the Immaculate Conception with an angel holding a banner that read in German, “*O Maria, Ohne Sünde empfangen, bitte für die bekehrung dieses lands, America!*” (“Oh Mary, conceived without sin, pray for the conversion of this country, America!”) Lay teachers soon opened Immaculata School, first in the choir loft, then in the pews, next in the sacristy, and finally in a freestanding building on the northwest corner of the church property. But “when the wind blew in a certain direction,” as one student recalled, “the room would fill with smoke, so that school would have to be dismissed until the wind had changed.” Cincinnati’s soft coal industry affected both the observatory and the school.¹⁸

With the Cincinnati skies covered with smoke, the Mount Adams observatory found another way to survive. Astronomer Cleveland Abbe moved into the observatory but focused on his other interest, meteorology, using the telegraph to track weather conditions moving west to east across the country. Abbe thus became the first American to predict the weather. His predictions led to the formation of the U.S. Weather Bureau, the forerunner of the National Weather Service. For a variety of reasons, however, Abbe's Cincinnati contributions were short-lived. In 1871, he resigned from the observatory. The Cincinnati Astronomical Society next donated the telescope to the University of Cincinnati.

With the Mount Adams observatory shuttered, a window of opportunity opened for Archbishop Purcell. The same year that the University of Cincinnati took possession of the telescope, Catholic philanthropist Sarah Peter encouraged a small community of Passionist brothers and priests, led by Fr. Guido Marassi, to move to Cincinnati. Archbishop Purcell offered the Passionists a house in town and then changed his mind. He rose to his feet and exclaimed, "Now I have a place for you." Purcell escorted the community members to Immaculata Church. They settled in Immaculata's rectory but from the start looked for a larger residence. In spring 1872 Archbishop Purcell announced that the Passionists "had purchased... with the hope of doing much for the glory of God and the salvation of souls, the [Mount Adams] property known as the Observatory Hill." The Passionists removed the observatory's front facade, including the cornerstone Adams had laid, reoriented the main entrance to the opposite side, facing away from the city, added a third story, remodeled the interior to suit monastic life, and placed atop a new belfry a cross that reportedly "towers high above every elevation surrounding the city." As one report put it, "the change was so complete that nothing remained to tell of the old observatory except the four stone walls." The cross had triumphed, at least in Cincinnati.¹⁹



Holy Cross Retreat (remodeled Observatory) and 1873 Holy Cross Church.

MONASTERY EVENT CENTER

The transformation of the old observatory inspired a new way of talking about events from three decades before. When the Passionists moved into the remodeled building in late 1872, the *Catholic Telegraph*, still edited by Edward Purcell, republished Purcell's 1843 account of Adams's visit to Cincinnati. Under the title "*In Hoc Signo Vinces*" ("In this sign victory"), Purcell also revealed what may have been for some time part of the previously unpublished oral tradition. He asserted, "The words of cheering promise and prophecy spoken by the Most Reverend Archbishop twenty-nine years ago have been more literally fulfilled by the gracious providence of God." Edward Purcell apparently believed that sometime in 1843 his brother Archbishop Purcell had predicted God and the Catholic Church would somehow defeat the advances of science as represented by the Cincinnati observatory.²⁰

In the events that followed, Archbishop Purcell seemed to confirm his brother's revelation. On the afternoon of June 22, 1873, the archbishop led a procession of maybe six thousand people from St. Peter in Chains Cathedral through downtown Cincinnati up Observatory Hill, which was soon renamed Monastery Hill. He consecrated what was called the Holy Cross Retreat, or Monastery; blessed the newly built Holy Cross Church, ninety feet long by forty feet wide, on the monastery's northeast lawn; and preached on "The Triumph of the Cross." "It was the will of God," he proclaimed, "that a monument to the Cross should be erected here.... This Church of the Holy Cross should be our astronomical instrument [to] give us knowledge of Heaven not attainable by human science." Archbishop Purcell did not explicitly refer to Adams and the Cincinnati Observatory, though the implication was clear. Moreover, he asserted an important theological distinction: whereas the pursuit of science may touch on some aspects of God, religion opened doors accessible by no other means. Expanding on what Edward Purcell had reported concerning the oral tradition, the *Cincinnati Gazette* next reported that "when the Observatory on Mount Adams was dedicated, Mr. John Quincy Adams in an address delivered on the occasion, prophesied that no cross should ever be planted on the hill. Upon hearing this the Archbishop registered an oath that this prophesy should fail."²¹

Despite these recollections of words supposedly uttered in 1843, other sources raised doubts about what actually had been said. Archbishop Purcell never commented on—either denied or confirmed in any surviving public or private record—what he and Adams allegedly had said in 1843. Adams had never spoken about the matter either. But three days after the *Cincinnati Gazette* first printed the rumors in 1873, in an about-face from what Edward Purcell had declared and in contrast to what Archbishop Purcell had implied, if not confirmed, an unnamed contributor to the *Catholic Telegraph* denied that such words had been uttered: "We think it is utterly false that John Q. Adams prophesied that no cross should ever be placed on that Hill. We know it is utterly

false that Archbishop Purcell registered an oath that this prophecy should fail.” Adams’s published remarks certainly did not include any prophecy concerning a cross, and no surviving document from Archbishop Purcell recorded his supposed oath. At the same time, Adams’s alleged prophecy and Archbishop Purcell’s purported oath surely were not out of character for either man! Both leaders were intellectual giants who did not shy away from controversy and who often alienated foes with their brash personalities. Perhaps the inauspicious failure of the Mount Adams Observatory—especially understood in light of discussions around Darwin’s theory of evolution—not only helped to solidify, if not fabricate, battle lines between science and religion but also created an environment where streams of the oral tradition found new life. The anti-Catholic rhetoric of John William Draper’s 1874 wildly popular *History of Conflict between Religion and Science* galvanized the divide.²²

Scientific pursuit was nonetheless far from dead in Cincinnati. Two months after Purcell consecrated Holy Cross, the University of Cincinnati relaid the Adams cornerstone (with a published copy of Adams’s 1843 address tucked inside) at Mount Lookout, five miles northeast of Mount Adams on rural property donated by John Kilgour. Astronomers conducted research at this facility over the next fifty years, until light from the city invaded the surrounding sky. Thanks to ongoing support from the University of Cincinnati, the observatory nonetheless stayed open (and to this day remains a popular destination), though no serious research is conducted there anymore. Many visitors, including countless schoolchildren, routinely gaze through Mitchel’s original telescope.



The Cincinnati Observatory (1873).

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR



The Cincinnati Observatory (2017).

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

The piety of Cincinnati’s Catholic immigrants also blossomed, though not always in such stark opposition to science. Mount Adams’s German Catholic community continued to worship at Immaculata, while the growing number of English-speaking Catholics (mostly Irish but a handful of Italians, as well) prayed at Holy Cross. Holy Cross parishioners revered holy relics, remains of Catholic saints, placed in a small chapel built in the summer of 1874 on the south side of the church. The philanthropist Sarah Peter obtained from Cardinal Joachim Pecci (later Pope Leo XIII) the head, arms, legs, and other fragments of St. Constance, a fourth-century martyr. At Immaculata Church, “devout admirers of the holy Virgin” continued to “bring their concerns and matters of the heart to the loving mother of our Savior[, placing] them at her feet in this place of pilgrimage.” The Mount Adams Inclined Plane Railroad, more commonly called the Mount Adams Incline, linked downtown to the top of the hill in 1876, and the English-speaking Catholic community on Mount Adams increased. While across the country, the late-nineteenth-century American Catholic Church solidified as an institution of pious immigrants, some important Catholic leaders nonetheless still insisted that Catholicism did not stand against science. In a deliberate attempt to counteract accusations that the church opposed science, in 1891 Pope Leo XII formally refounded the Vatican Observatory on a hillside behind St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. The roots of this institution, now one of the oldest astronomical foundations in the world, dated back some two hundred years. Many other Catholic institutions, such as the newly opened Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., suggested that the late nineteenth-century American Catholic Church embraced an intelligent, even scientific worldview, and some Catholic leaders continued to reconcile Darwin’s theory of evolution with faith in God.²³