

History

The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences of Villanova University was founded by the Augustinian Order in 1842. The College traces its origins to old St. Augustine's Church in Philadelphia, which the Augustinians founded in 1796, and to its parish school, St. Augustine's Academy, established in 1811.

In 1842 the Augustinians purchased "Belle Air," the country estate of John Rudolph, a Revolutionary War officer and Philadelphia merchant. There they established the "Augustinian College of Villanova," under the patronage of St. Thomas of Villanova, a 16th century Augustinian educator and Bishop of Valencia, Spain. Eventually the College came to be known as Villanova and gave its name to the town which grew up around it.

Classes for the new college began on September 18, 1843, when 13 students embarked on a traditional liberal arts curriculum. At the outset, however, difficulties plagued the new college. The anti-Catholic "Know Nothing" riots in Philadelphia in 1844 resulted in the burning of St. Augustine's Church. The need to rebuild the church and maintain the new college created a financial crisis for the Order. As a result, the College closed its doors on February 20, 1845. It was able to reopen in September, 1846, with a student population of 24; the first commencement took place on July 21, 1847. The following year, on March 10, 1848, the Governor of Pennsylvania, Francis R. Shunk, signed the Act of Legislature incorporating the College.

In 1857, Villanova College closed for a second time. Demands on the services of priests through the expansion of parishes in the area created staffing problems for the Augustinians, while the "Panic of 1857" brought on hard economic times. The onslaught of the Civil War in 1860 affected student enrollment, and the College was not reopened until September 1865.

In the years that followed, the College prospered, increasing its student population and adding significantly to its physical facilities. Although in the first 50 years of its existence the College concentrated exclusively on the liberal arts, it nevertheless remained open to the changes in curriculum which were required to meet the needs of the time and the demands for specialization.

Today, the College continues to offer a variety of educational programs that are aimed at the total growth of the individual and which prepare students for viable careers. Graduates of the College have taken their place in almost every field of endeavor, serving in education, business, government, law, medicine, and research, where they make vital contributions to the communities and the world in which they live.