

A short history of the Mount

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Here is a map to a century of peaks and valleys at the Mount.

■ Thanksgiving Day 1883. The Rev. John Christopher Drumgoole, an Irish immigrant ordained at 53, opens a boys' orphanage on a 524-acre rolling seaside meadow in Pleasant Plains. The mission on the old Bennett farm is an outgrowth of the St. Vincent DePaul Society Newsboys Home in Manhattan, an orphanage for the new wave of homeless immigrant boys who survive by hawking newspapers.

■ March 11, 1888. "Father John" finds himself trapped in the worst blizzard in city history while trying to visit the sister mission in Manhattan. The priest is turned back in St. George for the long carriage ride back to Pleasant Plains. He dies two weeks later of pneumonia.

■ 1888. Father Drumgoole's successor, the Rev. James Dougherty, opens the mission to girls, housing them in an abandoned fisherman's hotel on the ocean side of the property. He also embarks on a building program that adds the four-story St. Elizabeth building, a dining hall and residential cottages.

■ 1891. The Church of Sts. Joaquin and Ann, the Mount's spectacular steeped centerpiece, is completed, built from a design chosen by Pope Leo XIII. The pews and much of the woodwork are crafted by the orphans, who comprise the workforce in what has grown into a small, self-sufficient city. They grow food, raise poultry and livestock and make their own clothing and shoes.

■ 1930s. The Mount continues to grow, its population peaking at about 1,500 during the Great Depression, when many New Yorkers are thrown into poverty.

■ World War II. More than 3,000 alumni serve, some returning to a small graveyard on the mission's grounds.

■ 1961. The dairy closes, symbolizing for many the end of the Mount's rural roots. At this point, however, the Mount has already changed. It is less an orphanage than a temporary shelter for about 700 children from broken homes.

■ 1971. The church is filmed for a scene in the movie, "The Godfather."

■ 1973. The church, save its stone facade and steeple, burns to the ground in a spectacular blaze that ignites in the boiler room.

■ 1976. The church is rebuilt, thanks in large part to a \$140,000 Island fund-raising drive led by the Advance.

■ 1979. The mission, forever adapting to the needs of the day's children, opens its doors to 100 Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, who are placed in foster homes and a group home in Clifton.

■ 1980s. The Mount is significantly smaller, both physically

and operationally. In 1979 it cedes a large parcel of land for the building of Resurrection Cemetery the following year. The number of on-campus residents shrinks to 300. The type of resident also changes. Most are now minorities, many abused or neglected, and some have developmental disabilities that require around-the-clock supervision.

■ 1990. Controversy erupts when charges of a gang-sex incident, later determined to be unfounded, land on the front page of a Manhattan tabloid. The Mount, the Archdiocese and the city are spurred to overhaul security, maintenance, staffing and programming.

■ 1993. A Board of Education report shows South Richmond High School, a special-education facility on Mount grounds where Mount residents comprise 50 percent of the students, has the highest number of serious incidents of any Island school, including 27 assaults. Police reports of students assaulting kids from other South Shore high schools on city buses also surface.

■ June 1994. After 111 years of service to the Mount, the Sisters of St. Francis of the Mission of the Immaculate Virgin leave. Their presence at the Mount has de-

clined steadily since the 1930s, when more than 80 nuns cared for Mount children.

■ Sept. 26, 1994. The Mount officially announces it will no longer take referrals from the city's Child Welfare Administration and its intention to phase out or transfer to other agencies more than 350 on-campus and off-campus residents to focus on educational, recreational and developmental programs.

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