in Europe was the primary theme of Carroll’s appeal. Unfortunately, he was no more successful on the Continent than he had been in the British Isles. Cardinal Antonelli made vague promises of future help for the school. Carroll begged that his congregation grant the academy an annual sum of two hundred gold pieces. Eventually in 1792, Propaganda pledged a nominal subsidy of one hundred scudi for three years, about a tenth of what Carroll had sought. Carroll was so desperate for money to sustain the school that he kept pressing Propaganda for the sum, which was finally granted in 1794. At the time of his consecration in England (August 1790) as bishop of Baltimore, Carroll also obtained some benefactions from individuals, which amounted to more than £500, some of which he was able to apply to the school.

For the most part, however, the Americans were left to their own resources. In May 1789, the general chapter authorized a new subscription campaign focused on the clergy, but there is little evidence that this drive attracted any significant aid. The chapter was increasingly dependent on revenues derived from their own lands in order to fund the new institution. At that meeting they authorized that the salary of the still-to-be-named president be paid annually from the income of a certain tract of land held by them.

“For George-Town, Patowmack-River, Maryland”

In 1787 John Carroll had acquired as a site for his school a one-acre plot on a rise overlooking the Potomac River outside the village of “George-Town.” The decision to locate there had been made at the general chapter in 1786. An urban setting for a school was both an American and a Jesuit tradition. This pattern continued throughout the Federal era, but many educational leaders, and especially the Presbyterians, believed that republican education could not take place in the city, and hence located their new colleges in smaller towns, where students presumably would not face the temptations that city life bred.

Georgetown certainly qualified as a small town. In the late 1780s it was a river port of some two-hundred and fifty houses and a number of sheds and shanties and perhaps fifteen hundred persons. Founded in 1751, Georgetown became the leading tobacco port in the region in the last quarter of the century. The town grew rapidly after tobacco commerce revived dramatically following the Treaty of 1783, which officially and successfully ended the War for Independence. Scottish immigrant merchants made fortunes in the flourishing trade as did planter-merchants who increasingly migrated to the area from Southern Maryland. By 1790 it had replaced Annapolis as the commercial and social center of the Maryland tobacco region. A French visitor in that decade found it “a rather pretty, rather crowded, rather commer-
cial little town . . .”81 For the Maryland gentry of Southern Maryland, it became the urban center of their culture.82

Georgetown, however, was not itself the urban center of Maryland. That distinction belonged to the older town, Baltimore, which was the fastest growing urban area in the country. In 1782 its population was 8,000; eight years later Baltimore, with a count of 13,503 inhabitants, was the fifth largest city in the nation. In the next decade the number doubled. The cause of this extraordinary growth was Baltimore’s ideal location in the fall zone between the Piedmont and Tidewater areas. As Europe had developed food shortages that became desperate toward the end of the eighteenth century, the importance of grain increased enormously as a “money crop” on the backcountry farms of Maryland, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Of all the Maryland ports, including Georgetown, Baltimore was by far the closest to this farming region. As one Baltimore merchant advertised in 1767, “The situation of our town to an extensive back country, which is now well cultivated and from which we draw large quantities of wheat, flour and flaxseed, renders it fair for a place of considerable trade.”83 By the 1780s Baltimore had monopolized the grain market and become the flour...
milling center of the Chesapeake region. Since grain, in contrast to tobacco, had a year-long production cycle, required a multitude of ships to transport its loose bulk, and generated secondary industries, Baltimore was, no doubt, “a booster’s delight.”

The American clergy, in electing Carroll as bishop, had unanimously chosen Baltimore as his episcopal see because of its central location in Maryland. But Carroll apparently never gave any thought to locating his academy there. For one thing, six months before the General Chapter approved his plan for the academy, Carroll had chaired a meeting for the purpose of establishing a nonsectarian college in Baltimore. That school, with Carroll’s support as well as that of Episcopalian and Presbyterian clergy in the city, eventually opened, but it had a short history. Georgetown, on the other hand, had no schools. More important, Baltimore had a very small Catholic presence, only about 7 percent of the population. And most of them were working class folk, hardly the group able to support an educational institution, nor the focus of the Jesuit tradition in education.

In the “Proposals for establishing an Academy,” Carroll mentioned the “Choice of Situation, Salubrity of Air, Convenience of Communication, and Cheapness of Living” as the principal reasons for the choice of Georgetown. If the phrase was something of a cliché in college promotional literature, there was, nonetheless, truth to the claims. The town, perhaps in population a third Roman Catholic, was undoubtedly the urban center of the Maryland Catholic gentry. It was well situated enough to afford “convenience of communication” as well as a country setting for the institution. And as Carroll noted, costs in Georgetown were relatively cheap, certainly in comparison to Baltimore or Philadelphia. In anticipating the narrow margin within which the school would perforce operate, this was no mean consideration. As for its salubrious air, the hilltop setting seemed especially healthy in a wooded area cooled by Potomac breezes. Georgetown, in fact, was the first of many schools to choose such an elevated setting. Health may have been the primary reason but image was another. The “College on the Hill” became a common nineteenth-century ideal. For Carroll, the school, like Winthrop’s colony, was to have a life larger than its own.

The selection for the Potomac area as the permanent site of the federal capital was a triumph of the Potomac gentry over the upstart Chesapeake merchants, but this had no substantial influence upon Carroll’s choice of Georgetown. Although Georgetown (as well as Baltimore) was one of the chief players in the bidding contest that had been taking place since 1783, Carroll confessed to Plowden that he had given “little thought of [it] when I recommended that situation for the academy.” Still, he instantly recognized the potential importance this development would have for his school. “Our academy, from its situation,” he allowed, “will prob-
ably be conspicuous. Commissioners under the direction of the President are to determine the particular spot, in a district of about 50 miles, lying on that river. The knowledge, I have of the Country, makes me confident, it will be either at George Town, or, what would answer better for our school, within four miles of it.”92 Carroll was fairly sure that President George Washington would choose a site within the tidewater of the Potomac to allow access by water to the federal capital, which eliminated most of the backcountry area under consideration.93 Of course, his confidence was bolstered by the fact that his brother, Daniel, was one of the commissioners. And, as things turned out, the site they chose matched his wish perfectly.
A Residential College Intended for “Students of Every Religious Profession”

“We shall begin the building of our Academy this summer,” Carroll wrote Plowden in March 1788:

In the beginning we shall confine our plan to a house of 63 to 64 feet by 50, on one of the most lovely situations, that imagination can frame. It will be three stories high exclusive of the offices under the whole. Do not forget to give & procure assistance. On this academy is built all my hope of permanency, & success to our H. Religion in the United States.94

Construction actually began in mid-April 1788. The contractors, five Georgetown laymen, engaged Henry Carlisle, a “carpenter and joiner,” to erect the shell of the three-story, hip-roofed building. They apparently made very clear how little money they had to spend. Carlisle estimated his costs at £493.5 for the materials, “lower By 20 Pr Cent than Ever I Undertook,” and £450 for his labor. The contractors thought they could do better than that and supplied their own materials.95 Carroll was hopeful of having the building “under roof” by the end of that year, but lack of money delayed the finishing of the building for more than three years.96 Not until January of 1789 did Carroll raise the £75 needed to acquire the deed to the one-acre plot of ground on which the first building was rising.97

This first building, which eventually became known as “Old South,” had ten or eleven rooms in which students and faculty held classes, studied, and ate. Its attic served as a dormitory for the students.98 Carroll had initially intended to have the students seek their own lodgings in town, at least until additional buildings could be constructed, but even before formal classes began in 1792, students were living on campus, and as many as possible were soon crammed into the garret of the building.

Carroll was particularly concerned with student discipline. He found American colleges notoriously deficient in this regard. A tendency for students to fend for themselves in town lodgings rather than live in a dormitory under strict rules was a growing feature of college life in the period.99 Republican educators, like Benjamin Rush, the Presbyterian president of Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, typically regarded dormitories as relics of “monkish ignorance” and totally incompatible with enlightened institutions of learning where individual responsibility, not group herding, was the key to the formation of moral character.100 Carroll was all for moral formation, but had no prejudice against boarding schools. On the contrary, he seemed to feel that the current laissez-faire attitude toward student living was a large part of the scandal he found in much of the American collegiate scene.
The Jesuit schools that Carroll had known in the Lowlands—St. Omers, Liège, Bruges—unlike most European colleges of the Society, had been boarding institutions with strict discipline, which included the wearing of uniforms (modified cassocks) by their students. Carroll intended, mutatis mutandis, to achieve a similar environment at Georgetown. “The students of the academy are to be distinguished by some peculiar badge in their dress,” he wrote in his plan, “without which they are never to appear in publick. . . .” They were to avoid profanity as well as “disorderly [behavior]or publick houses, or gaming tables.” Hazardous games and drunkenness were also to be strictly forbidden. Still, he had no intention of imposing a monastic regime upon students who were being educated for life in a republic.

Nor did he intend to secure discipline by requiring a religious test for entrance. Not only was it to be open to all Catholics who qualified but also to “Students of Every Religious Profession.” This was again a part of the Jesuit continental tradition, as well as a growing practice in American schools. Virtually all schools in the young republic, both nonsectarian and denominational, were becoming more pluralistic in the religious affiliations of their students. Most actually barred religious qualifications for admission. Carroll’s correspondents in England, notably Plowden and Strickland, had reservations about the compatibility of such religious toleration with the effective discipline and piety that were the soil for the seed of vocations. But Carroll never wavered in this regard. His Catholic institution was not going to be a Catholic ghetto. Since Catholic schools in Europe were open to Protestants, it was all the more fitting in America, with its unprecedented provision for religious liberty, that Catholic schools be ecumenical. That religious liberty
was the prerequisite for both enlightened inquiry and discussion, and those in turn were the best hope for Christian reunification.

Nor was social status to be a criterion. “Thus it will be calculated,” the initial prospectus declared, “for every Class of Citizens.”

John Carroll’s Vision

As 1788 passed into 1789, George Washington was elected first president (in January) and took the oath of office on April 30 in New York City, the nation’s first capital. (Twelve of the original thirteen states had ratified the Constitution by November 1789.) Still the building on Georgetown’s heights remained unfinished. “I think we shall get enough of [the Academy] completed this summer to make a beginning of teaching,” John Carroll wrote Plowden in the late winter of 1790; “but our great difficulty will be to get a proper President or Superintendent.” Plowden had already resisted Carroll’s repeated invitations to become the first president, as had several other acquaintances in Europe, including John Mattingly. The qualifications for admission declared in the prospectus were high:

**THE Object of the proposed Institution is, to unite the Means of communicating Science with an effectual Provision for guarding and improving the Morals of YOUTH. With this View, the SEMINARY will be superintended by those, who, having had Experience in similar Institutions, know that an undivided Attention may be given to the Cultivation of Virtue, and literary Improvement; and that a System of Discipline may be introduced and preferred, incompatible with Indolence and Inattention in the Professor, or with incorrigible Habits of Immorality in the Student.

The Benefit of this Establishment should be as general as the Attainment of its Object is desirable. It will, therefore, receive Pupils as soon as they have learned the first Elements of Letters, and will conduct them, through the several Branches of classical Learning, to that Stage of Education, from which they may proceed, with Advantage, to the Study of the higher Sciences, in the University of this, or those of the neighbouring States. Thus it will be calculated for every Class of Citizens—as Reading, Writing, Arithmetic, the easier Branches of the Mathematics, and the Grammar of our native Tongue will be attended to, no less than the learned Languages.

Agreeably to the liberal Principle of our Constitution, the SEMINARY will be open to Students of EVERY RELIGIOUS PROFESSION. They, who in this Respect differ from the SUPERINTENDENTS of the Academy, will be at Liberty to frequent the Places of Worship and Instruction appointed by their Parents; but, with Respect to their moral Conduct, all must be subject to general and uniform Discipline.

In the Choice of Situation, Salubrity of Air, Convenience of Communication, and Cheapness of living, have been principally consulted; and GEORGE-TOWN offers these united Advantages.
that Carroll mandated assured the virtual impossibility of finding someone for the position. He had earlier explained these to his English friend:

You see, he must be a person old enough to carry a considerable weight of authority & respect; experienced in the detail of government for such a place of education; & capable of embracing in his mind a general & indeed universal plan of studies, of which the academical institution is only a part. He should have considerable knowledge of the world, as he will be obliged to converse with many different persons: and he should be capable of abstracting his mind from the methods used in the colleges, where he has lived, so as to adopt only as much of them as is suited to the circumstances of this country; and of substituting such others, as are better adapted to the views and inclinations of those with whom he has to deal. You see I require a good deal; but all I mention, is necessary to give reputation & permanency to the plan; for you may be assured, that in the Institutions of other professions, they have procured from Europe some literary [sic] characters of the first class: and this likewise makes me desirous of not falling behind hand with them . . . 104

Some of Carroll's English friends found his presidential description absolutely quixotic. There were few priests who approached the ideal president he depicted, and they were already engaged. William Strickland wondered why Carroll thought he needed a man of such “universal knowledge & brilliant talents.” This kind of president was fitting for a college offering philosophy and belles-lettres but hardly necessary for a grammar school. If he was concerned about building a reputation, let him make sure he secured “diligent and vertuous Masters . . . with proper Regulations.” The school would establish its own character, no matter what the president’s credentials. If Carroll wanted to develop the academy into something greater later on, he could easily do so. Far better to start modestly and grow gradually than to reach for the sky with grand plans that could only end in the collapse of the institution. “Permanancy,” he counseled, “is an object of higher Consideration than the temporary honor of the day.”

Carroll does seem to have been thinking on a grander scale than an academy. John Witherspoon and William Smith, two “litterary characters of the first class” whom Carroll likely had in mind, were hardly presiding over mere academies at Princeton and Chestertown. Indeed, virtually as soon as the school opened “at George-Town, Patowmack-River,” all references to the “academy” disappeared.

In Carroll’s plan for the school, drawn up apparently in 1788 or 1789, when he was expecting the school to begin, it is clear that he envisioned a very comprehensive course of studies. The curriculum would be both classical and practical. Latin and Greek (“the Learned Languages”) would be emphasized no more than reading, writing, arithmetic, English grammar, and geography. If there was a demand for it, French would also be offered. (Given the popularity of France in the mid-1780s, Carroll no doubt expected that there would be such a demand.) At St. Omers, as at most
American colleges, the minimal age, “as a rule,” had been fourteen. At Georgetown, it was set at eight, putting it slightly below the average minimal age of admission at other American academies.108 St. Omers expected boys to have an elementary knowledge of Latin. Georgetown required that entrants have the ability to read their own language. St. Omers set out a five- or six-year curriculum, from “Rudiments” to “Rhetoric,” that constituted the core of Jesuit humanistic education. Carroll was proposing a curriculum that would range from preparatory studies for the traditional Jesuit education to the higher level of rhetoric. Having completed the course of studies, such a student might then proceed, “with Advantage, to the Study of the higher Sciences,” in one of the universities of the nearby states or in the seminary Carroll intended to open in a few years.109 In fact, it replicated in intention the course of studies offered at St. Omers College and its preparatory school at Boulogne when Carroll had been a student in Flanders in the 1740s.110 The education that colonial American Catholics had been able to obtain at Newtown or Bohemia and St. Omers, Carroll now wanted to provide at Georgetown. As the English Jesuits had discovered a generation before, there was no local church or community to provide the elementary education necessary as a foundation for the liberal arts of the college curriculum. But it was this combining of grammar school and college that Strickland found unrealistic.

Carroll, of course, could point to other American schools that were as comprehensive. William and Mary had abolished its lower school only a few years before Carroll first proposed his academy. Other institutions, such as Washington College in Virginia and Dickinson in Pennsylvania, were evolving from grammar school/academies into colleges. At any rate, Strickland’s criticism did not deter Carroll from his aim—to found a school that in quality and reputation would rank with any that were springing up in the new country.

Foregoing a Charter for the School

If Carroll was so concerned with reputation and public stature, one has to ask why he made no attempt to have his school chartered, at a time when a dozen new or old schools from Maine to Georgia were receiving charters.111 Despite his family’s political connections (his cousin, Charles, was the president of the Maryland Senate until 1789; his brother, Daniel, was a delegate to the Constitutional Convention of 1787), it was no simple matter for him to obtain a charter for Georgetown. To possess a charter, of course, was to be protected from the unlimited liability that owners of institutions risked. On the other hand, charters in the late eighteenth century carried a liability of their own. To receive a charter was to give a public character to an institution and thus make it dependent on the chartering authority.
Americans had inherited the European concept of the college or university as a civil corporation. Education was regarded as a civic value; hence the necessity of government to be able to influence, if not control, the schools it authorized to grant degrees, even those with religious affiliations. (In most colonies, of course, there had been a formal connection between church and state; the colleges had been conducted by the established church.) In a republic without an established church, the awareness of the civic role of colleges was even stronger since an educated citizenry was considered essential to the preservation of a society in which the people were declared sovereign.

Carroll did not need to look far to see how intrusive government could be in attempting to control colleges. In 1779 the Pennsylvania legislature had converted the private College of Philadelphia into the public University of the State of Pennsylvania by virtually forcing upon the institution a new set of trustees. When William Smith and the old trustees attempted to regain their charter rights as founded in 1740, they were told that such “corporations, which are the creatures of society, can, under the bill of rights, plead [no] . . . exemption from legislative regulation.”¹¹² That is, Pennsylvania could not afford to have a college become a kingdom unto itself. Subsequently, the Presbyterians were very circumspect in seeking charters for their other academies or colleges in order to avoid state interference. Even though Benjamin Rush intended Dickinson to be a Presbyterian counterforce to the radical University of the State of Pennsylvania, he was careful to disguise its denominational character.¹¹³ At Liberty Hall in western Virginia, the Presbyterians deliberately sought incorporation as an academy rather than as a college, to minimize the threat of legislative interposition. Even so, a decade later the legislature attempted to change the academy into a college under its control.¹¹⁴ In Tennessee, the Presbyterian schools were legally not denominational but independent institutions accountable to the legislature.

Jurgen Herbst has suggested that Carroll, shrewdly reading the signs of the times that showed a growing backlash against higher education and all too aware of the atavistic distrust of Catholics in American society, decided to found an academy that would not require a state charter to grant degrees and hence would elude state interference. By this strategy Carroll “kept to himself” his real intention to found a seminary for future priests and kept the control of the institution within the church. When the school finally received a federal charter a generation later, it lost none of its independence because its governing structure remained intact. In this way Georgetown arose as “the most private” of the private colleges that came to characterize American education in the new nation.¹¹⁵

How much of this “strategy” Carroll consciously pursued, the record does not resolve. It is true that there is no mention of “Catholic,” much less anything hinting of “seminary for future clergymen,” in the prospectus. Not until 1814 would the college publicly advertise that “the object of this institution is...
principally for the education of those who profess the Catholic religion.”¹¹⁶ But it was hardly a secret who was behind the enterprise. For the first time Catholics were beginning a college in America—with no charter, little or no money, no president or faculty. What they had was Carroll’s vision, a remarkably serendipitous location, and a future that was anybody’s guess. “The academy will be opened in a few days,” Carroll was finally able to report to Plowden in October 1791. But he had to add that it was opening “not so advantagiously, as I hoped. No president pro dignitate loci. I can hardly forgive my friends at Liège. Here was an opportunity for infinite services to the cause of God and his church.”¹¹⁷ It was scarcely an auspicious start.