Fulton of Fulton Hall

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Foreword by Dean Neuhauser

It is very appropriate to have this profile of Father Fulton appear just as we return to a new and expanded building which bears his name. This man who did so much for this University in its early days is made better known to us through this brief sketch, just as we are coming to know the full possibilities of a wonderful edifice. He understood well the ability of architectural structures to inspire, perhaps particularly in places of learning, and at the same time understood how work itself can be ennobling. In his building we will strive to keep this course so that were he to return, he would immediately recognize his namesake. We who work in his building are glad that now we know him and know what motivated him through his long and productive life.

John J. Neuhauser, Dean
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Father Fulton in the garb that was traditional for Jesuits until the mid-twentieth century: buttonless cassock secured by a cincture to which rosary beads are attached. On his head he wears the Jesuit biretta.
Father Robert Fulton, twice president of Boston College (1870–1880 and 1888–1891), is one of the outstanding leaders in the University’s history, and the Carroll School of Management is privileged to be housed in a building bearing his name. The magnificently reconstructed Fulton Hall is, in fact, a far worthier memorial to the great nineteenth century president than the original building, which was erected just after World War II when Boston College’s finances were in an emaciated state. Its reopening in new splendor happily provides the occasion for a profile of the man so deservedly commemorated.

Robert Fulton was born in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1826.1 His father died when Robert was seven years old. As a teenager, the boy had the rare experience of serving as a page in the United States Senate, where he heard the oratory of men such as Webster, Clay, and Calhoun. When he reached sixteen, the age limit for Senate pages, he ambitioned entrance into the Military Academy at West Point. But first he entered Georgetown College, and there contact with the Jesuits shifted his thoughts from a military to a religious vocation. When he told his widowed mother of his plan to apply for admission to the Society of Jesus, she confided to him her intention to enter the convent of the Visitation at Georgetown, which she subsequently did.

These decisions were made in 1843. It comes as a shock some hundred and fifty years later to realize that one of the matters Mrs. Fulton had to settle as she and her son prepared to begin lives without personal possessions was to free the family’s slaves. To that end, she and Robert served a dinner for the slaves, with freedom papers beside each guest’s plate.

During his period of training for ordination, Fulton spent six years as a teacher of rhetoric and classical and English literature in several Jesuit colleges on the East Coast. After ordination in 1857 he devoted three more years to teaching the same subjects and one year
to teaching theology. He was a brilliant success as a teacher at the college level—erudite, eloquent, and enthusiastic. In the course of those ten years in the classroom he formed the lofty academic standards that he set before teachers and students at Boston College during his nineteen years as dean in the college’s infancy.

When Boston College opened in September 1864, the rector (president) was a gentle and fatherly Swiss, John Bapst, who was undertaking his first administrative post and was preoccupied with reducing the considerable debt outstanding on the college building, the Jesuit residence, and the Church of the Immaculate Conception (all recently completed in 1859). Father Fulton was the first prefect of studies, an office we know today as dean.

When Boston College’s first dean welcomed the first students, most of them were quite young, because like all Jesuit colleges in the United States in the nineteenth century, it embraced a secondary or high school as well as a college. The high school and college shared the same building until the college division moved to Chestnut Hill in 1913. Some of Fulton’s admonitions to the first teachers should be read in the light of the immaturity of most of the students. Here are a few “rules” he gave the early faculty?

... If not in the teacher, in no one else will the scholar have a constant and easy opportunity of viewing the exemplar of virtue.

Exactness and high standards are commended. Yet a teacher whose insistence on exactness discourages lacks an essential quality of the good teacher.

When a fault is committed and should be animadverted on, let punishment be the last resort. He is an unsuccessful teacher who knows of no resource but punishment. General punishments imposed on a whole class are never to be given. Punishments given in moments of anger are likely to be excessive.

At the end of Boston College’s first year in June 1865, Father Fulton wrote in the Register: “Closed the First Year with Forty-Eight (48) Students. Sixty-two entered.” Apparently the dean was not dismayed by the departure (forced or voluntary) of 23 percent of the original students, since he made no comment on the fact. He proved to be stoical in other years when numbers of students declined. He had confidence in the College’s direction and held the course with equanimity.

In July 1865 Father Fulton’s local superior, Father Bapst, sent a report on the College’s first year to the Provincial, Father Angelo Paresce. After praising the performance of the Jesuit faculty, Bapst
wrote: “But above all my thanks and gratitude are due to the Prefect of Schools [Father Fulton], who has taken a great interest in them and made extraordinary exertions to put the college on such a footing as to insure its successful working. Without him Boston College would not get along. He is the man for Boston College.”

Father Bapst’s encomium on his dean was echoed years later by one who was a student at Boston College under Fulton. J. Havens Richards attended Boston College for three years, from 1869 to 1872; he became a Jesuit and eventually served as president of Georgetown. In a 1913 biography of his father, who was a devoted friend of Fulton’s, he wrote of the early days of Boston College: “In charge of the College, with the title of Prefect of Studies, but virtually in supreme control, was Father Robert Fulton, a Virginian, a genius, an infatuated lover of the classics, a witty and brilliant conversationalist, and yet an energetic and powerful administrator.”

In 1868, when the College had admitted its fifth class, Father Fulton decided there were enough mature students to form a debating society. He showed his concern for the new organization by personally becoming its “moderator,” as faculty members heading student activities in Jesuit colleges were called in those days. He conferred instant prestige upon the debating society by assigning it a special room barred to other students—a privilege granted to no other student activity. Fulton’s emphasis on good speech is illustrated by an incident reported in an account of his life shortly after his death in 1895:

When asked by a young man what he should do to become a good speaker, Father Fulton replied, “Avoid slang, keep good company, read good books, write carefully, speak carefully at all times and in all places. Why bless you,” he continued, good naturedly tapping his snuff box, “from my eleventh year I have formulated every sentence previous to utterance, and as a boy was more scrupulous about grammar than about the commandments.”

The last sentence was a good example of Fulton’s tongue-in-cheek humor, often at his own expense.

In 1869, when the sixth entering class had been admitted, there was some pressure to allow the oldest class to graduate. Father Fulton would not hear of it, saying that as yet the body was too weak to sustain a head. In fact the College was in its fourteenth year of operation before the exacting dean allowed philosophy—the crowning discipline of Jesuit education in those days—to be taught to the top class. Some students dropped out or transferred to other
colleges rather than wait for Father Fulton to declare Boston College full-grown and capable of granting academic degrees. The first graduation was held in 1877.

In 1870 Father Fulton was elevated to the position of rector of Boston College, which meant he was president of the College and religious superior of the Jesuits assigned to the College and the busy collegiate church. He retained the deanship. It was an awkward time to assume the highest office. In 1869 the Maryland Province of the Jesuits, embracing eastern states from Maryland to Canada, opened a school of theology in Woodstock, Maryland, and to fill the classroom, many young unordained Jesuits were taken from their teaching assignments around the province. Boston College lost several teachers, and a greater burden fell on the dean. As a contemporary Jesuit wrote:

Father Fulton was the heart and soul of everything. His animating spirit was everywhere felt. At no time was his zeal for the college shown to more advantage than when the opening of Woodstock necessitated the recall of so many of our scholastics. Father Fulton's presence was well nigh ubiquitous. Every class seemed to be taught by him; the usual weekly report was distributed by his own hand to each student, with a lively running commentary.

Four days after being installed as president, Fulton wrote a forceful appeal to the provincial for replacements, but in vain, so two lay teachers were employed.

One of Father Fulton's first initiatives as president was to establish military drill as a requirement for all students. During the nineteenth century many colleges—and, indeed, many male social clubs—had military units. College athletics had not become a major factor of campus life in the country, and at Boston College there was no playing field for recreation. Consequently, Father Fulton probably saw military drill, which took place on the streets around the College, as a good form of disciplined physical activity. The military body was named the Foster Cadets after Major General John Gray Foster, a popular hero of the Mexican and Civil wars, who in 1870 was engaged in a major engineering project for the Army in Boston harbor. It turned out that the militia venture became something of a test of Father Fulton's resolve and leadership.

Without the prospect of graduating because of the dean's refusal to add the philosophy year, students of the rhetoric and poetry classes, which would be the junior and sophomore classes today,
were reluctant to invest the equivalent of a year's tuition in uniforms they would use only one or two years. Some students dropped out of school or transferred to other colleges, but this did not deflect Father Fulton from his plan. The following year he obtained the services of a noted drill master, Captain George Mullins of the Montgomery Light Guard (Company I, 9th regiment, U.S. Army). The new drill master's enthusiasm, plus the delivery of guns, belts, knapsacks, and bayonet scabbards from the armory in Springfield to complement the smart uniforms, quashed any further rebellion. The Foster Cadets proved to be a colorful part of student life until 1884, when under new presidential leadership and upon the sudden death of a young new drillmaster, military drill was made optional, and soon was dropped. One who served as the highest ranking officer of the Foster Cadets, Patrick H. Callanan, writing his reminiscences for *The Stylus* twenty years later, said he thought the defection of a few students in the early years of the Foster Cadets "pleased Father Fulton rather than otherwise." He did not expand on his observation, but he seemed to imply that Father Fulton was comfortable and firm in his decisions.

We must consider Father Fulton's public image as a factor in winning attention and esteem for the infant Boston College. A Jesuit who taught at the College under Fulton remembered that it was natural that for some time the College lived in the shadow of the church, "The Immaculate," as it was then and still is called. The student enrollment in the first twenty years was small and the majority of the students were in their young teens; it was hard for the College to command attention. With the church it was a different matter: The beautiful edifice attracted people, including non-Catholics, and a goodly supply of Jesuit preachers proved another advantage. In his 1943 autobiography, George Santayana devoted an entire chapter to the Church of the Immaculate Conception, describing his visits from Cambridge as a boy when Father Fulton was in the pulpit. The architecture fascinated the boy more than the preaching, but he did have a positive remembrance of Fulton. The two preachers he mentioned were Father Jeremiah O'Connor, whom he called an oratorical Irishman, and Father Fulton. Twenty years younger than Fulton, O'Connor was his immediate successor as president (1880 to 1884). Of Father Fulton, Santayana wrote: "Father Fulton, of whom I have said something as confessor to my sister, was not eloquent; he was not warm; but he could explore the dialectics not only of doctrine but of sentiment; and it was in unraveling the complexities of our divided allegiance that I found him an instructive guide."
Father John Buckley, a colleague of Fulton's at the College, gave a judgment on his friend's pulpit style not unlike Santayana's:

His sermons, which were usually on the argumentative plan, soon began to attract wide attention even among those not of the faith. Men of refinement and education were pleased with his logical, terse, original, classic expression, judiciously flavored with a dash of grim humor to facilitate the digestion of a hard doctrine that, now and then, had to be swallowed. To one who confounds oratory with loud declamation, animated gesture, and the tearing of a passion to tatters, Father Fulton's calm, deliberate style would, indeed, prove tame and uninteresting.

A measure of the esteem in which Father Fulton was held as a preacher is the fact that although he was not a Bostonian and had been in the city barely fifteen years, in 1877 he was called upon to give the sermon at the funeral of one of the giants of the diocese, Father Manasses Dougherty. Father Dougherty had started several parishes and built four major churches in Cambridge and Arlington. He was called “the builder” by the priests of the diocese. His funeral was attended by 85 priests and 2,000 mourners inside and outside one of the churches he had built, St. Peter's in Cambridge. Though Santayana and Buckley thought Father Fulton not overly emotional, The Pilot's account of the funeral noted: “During the delivery of the sermon many of the congregation were affected to tears, and at one time the sobs were so loud and audible as to render the words of the speaker inaudible.” In his sermon, The Pilot reported, Father Fulton revealed that a few years earlier Father Dougherty came to his office and handed him a sealed envelope with, he said, a slight donation to support Fulton's work at the College. The gift was a thousand dollars, a considerable gift in the 1870s. Father Dougherty

At left, Father Monan, the spiritual architect of the new Fulton Hall, kneels beside the seal Father Fulton created and had installed in 1889 in the old Boston College building in the South End. The seal is interesting as the first step in the evolution of the Boston College seal as we know it today. Father Fulton introduced a shield in the center of the seal for the first time, with the three hills of Boston at the bottom and an open book, though without the Greek motto that was added in 1914. Two of the three crowns of the city of Botolph in England were introduced at the top, with the simple cross and IHS instead of the full seal of the Society of Jesus, which was also added in 1914. It is fitting that Father Fulton's primitive seal is now located in the building bearing his name.
also made one of the early major gifts to the College library, a large collection of books on Irish history.

Father Fulton’s star status in the pulpit was again demonstrated in 1890. Although in poor health, he accepted the call to preach at the funeral mass of John Boyle O’Reilly, poet, novelist, and editor of *The Pilot*, which then was a Catholic but not diocesan paper, and perhaps the most respected Catholic paper in the country. O’Reilly may have been Boston’s leading Catholic lay figure of his time, but he was admired by many of other faiths. The *Boston Transcript* asked, “Was there one man or woman in all the city whose death would have brought personal grief to so many?” Surely the public acclaim for Father Fulton as greater Boston’s premier Catholic preacher brought favorable attention to his college.

Obviously at this period of his life, from 1864 to 1880, Fulton was blessed with extraordinary health and energy. It is not easy to recount all his initiatives, some of which were peripheral to the College. One was a Sunday afternoon gathering of Catholic intellectuals. Father J. Havens Richards wrote: “In Father Fulton’s room, some of the Catholic gentlemen of Boston were accustomed to gather on Sunday afternoons or evenings to enjoy his talk, sparkling with wit, epigram and literary allusion, yet permeated with a kindly humor and a sincere though informal piety.”

It may have been at one of these sessions that the host made a remark cited by Father Richards: “Father Fulton used to say that the advent of Boston College was marked, in many of the Catholic families of the city, by a line as visible as a geological stratum. The boys who were too old to enter the new institution were in many cases comparatively rude and uncultured and engaged in more or less menial occupations, while their younger brothers were polished and ambitious of professional education and success.” It was, perhaps, Father Fulton’s democratic instinct to do something for the non-college boys of Boston that led him to establish in 1875 the Young Men’s Catholic Association of Boston College. The purpose of the organization was declared to be to offer its members opportunities for physical training, intellectual development, social culture, innocent pleasure, and moral preservation. Its scope embraced a gymnasium with instruction in calisthenics, a library, a reading room, a hall for plays, courses of lectures on literary and economic topics, social and forensic gatherings, and an annual retreat. Father Fulton became president of the society, though its elected vice-president ran the programs. Fulton generously provided space in the College building (which would largely be empty when the YMCA activities occurred, in the evening). When, in his second
presidency, Fulton enlarged the College building, the YMCA was
given a wing of its own. And when the growth of the College
population necessitated the reclaiming of the wing, the working
young men were given quarters in a building on Newton Street owned
by the Jesuits. Some of the College men were not happy about the
attachment of the name Boston College to a non-collegiate group.
But Father Fulton knew that the name gave prestige to his new
society and he refused to compromise. In fact, the annual “College
Ball” was an important event that did not even involve Boston
College students. Rather it was an inner-city outreach by Father
Fulton, demonstrating to the student body that Boston College was
the opposite of elitist or snobbish. ¹⁸ The Young Men's Catholic
Association lasted some 65 years, though in the twentieth century it
became largely educational as an evening school preparing young
men for civil service examinations. It petered out with the drafting
of young men for World War II.
In 1875 Father Fulton undertook an expansion of the College
building, extending it 60 feet toward James Street. The renovation
included a new auditorium capable of seating a thousand people.
The great hall was inaugurated on March 30, 1875, with a
presentation of the play “Richelieu” to an overflow audience. So in
this first—and, as will be seen shortly, in his second—term as
president, Father Fulton was a building renovator, which seems
appropriate for the man whose name is a blessing for the Carroll
School of Management.
Toward the end of Father Fulton's first term of office, a nineteen-
year-old lad wishing to transfer from St. Charles' College in
Maryland to Boston College arrived at the dean's office. The young
man was William Henry O’Connell, future archbishop and cardinal
of the Boston archdiocese. O’Connell wrote details of the interview
to a friend:¹⁰
[Father Fulton] took down some books from a shelf—Ovid,
Virgil and Cicero. One after another he handed them to me.
He asked me to open anywhere and read. I did so from each of
them and then translated and construed. He asked me various
questions, not to embarrass me, but to try my intelligence, I
think, more than my memory . . . . We came to Greek. I read
some Anabasis and some Homer . . . . After that, more as a
conversation than critically, he took me over a fairly large field
of history, and physics. After a full forty minutes of this, he
stood up and putting on his biretta turned to me and said, “I
will bring you to your class and present you to your
professor.”
The class was poetry, the equivalent of our sophomore year. We are fortunate that the future cardinal saved this letter, since it gives a view of the style and standards of Father Fulton, a thorough and exacting academician.

Young O’Connell graduated in 1881. Fifty years later, to celebrate the golden anniversary of his graduation, Cardinal O’Connell purchased the Liggett Estate, our upper campus, for Boston College. The original building on the Liggett Estate, now O’Connell House, was the first on-campus home of the College of Business Administration, the early name of The School of Management.

Father Fulton was rector as well as president and dean. The usual practice in the Catholic Church is for the rector of a religious community to serve no more than six years. To avoid frequent replacement of Jesuits who head Jesuit universities, some 25 years ago it became the custom that the Jesuit president would no longer be burdened with the office of rector of the Jesuit community. Father Monan is the first president of Boston College without a limitation of tenure because of the rectorship. But in Fulton’s day it was unusual to have him rector-president beyond six years, and we know from his diary that several times he requested superiors to assign him to another office.†† The fact that superiors in the United States and Rome kept him in office was unusual and complimentary, but he finally was informed in 1880 that he would be replaced.

When word spread through the city of the impending departure of Father Fulton, several banquets and testimonials were attended by a cross-section of citizens. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a friend of Fulton’s, remarked that he hated to see Massachusetts lose one of its brightest men. The mayor of Boston said he felt the city had been robbed of half its sunlight. Probably the feelings of many Bostonians were best expressed in a Pilot editorial by the editor, John Boyle O’Reilly:††

The removal of the Rev. Robert Fulton, S.J., President of Boston College and Rector of the Immaculate Conception Church, creates a common feeling of sorrow among Boston Catholics. His name and his person were everywhere respected and beloved. The remarkable influence he possessed, as a spiritual guide and as a friend, is rarely equaled. Under his wise and temperate direction, Boston College has grown into splendid promise, and the influence of his Order has become respected throughout the city and state. He is necessarily a large figure, socially and intellectually. It seems strange that such a man should ever be removed from a position so well controlled. But the system of his great Order is greater than the
personality of its members . . . . Wherever he may go, Father Fulton carries with him the love and respect of Boston; and whatever may be his future, we say that he has built himself into our wall, we shall claim our share of his honors; and in his own heart we believe he must ever feel that he belongs particularly to Boston.

Father Fulton’s departure involved an incident that revealed a tender side of his personality that people usually did not see, as recorded by his contemporary, Father John Buckley:

Shortly before leaving Boston, Father Fulton started to make the round of classes with Father Jeremiah O’Connor, the incoming rector, for the twofold purpose of bidding adieu to the students and of introducing his successor. He did not go very far however. The strain was too much for him. After a few pleasant remarks to the philosophers [that is, the senior class], his eyes filled up, and finding himself unable to proceed further, he retreated with hasty steps to his room. Someone asked him what was the matter. “Everything is the matter,” he answered. “These rascally boys will never know how much I think of them. Why, I am just after making a great baby of myself.”

From the foregoing we know that Father Fulton’s great body contained a great heart.

With all the heartfelt tributes to the departing president of Boston College and his sad farewell, neither Father Fulton nor his friends and admirers could dream that in eight years he would be back in Boston, once again the College’s president. Those intervening eight years were to bring new responsibilities and burdens, including the top administrative post among eastern Jesuits, provincial of the Maryland—New York province. But before we treat briefly of those busy years, it will be well to examine facets of Father Fulton’s personality as revealed in his correspondence as well as in a Jesuit account of his life written after his death. The Boston College Archives contain 85 letters in Fulton’s hand. In them we see an avid bookman with strong literary opinions, a Virginian who had fallen in love with Boston and its people, a person with a ready sense of humor and ready opinions.

The letters are full of references to reading, as shown by the following examples:

March 1867: “The last book I read was the life of Theodore Parker, and I closed the last volume with the disgust I felt in finishing Margaret Fuller’s. Incomplete characters!”
August 1867: “I have lately read Longfellow’s Tragedies [The
New England Tragedies?]—very unworthy of his reputation
. . . . a couple of lives of William Pitt and a wretched
Southern novel, Patricians and Plebians.”
April 1868: “I am reading sermons of various clergymen of the
Episcopal persuasion.”
1881: “Philadelphia is good enough—Quakerish and there
seem to be no books, no music—nothing but coal. About
books, I was spoiled by Boston facilities.”
1885: “I am losing all secular friends. The Bostonians are for-
getting me at last.”
June 1886: Have you read Cradock’s Tennessee stories? They
are tolerable. Do you notice that some Southerners are
beginning to write?”
When Fulton was reassigned to the presidency of Boston College, his health was failing, and he seemed to accept the assignment with resignation rather than joy. But he wrote (December 1888):

Certainly there are two advantages for me in Boston, books and the kindness of the people. You ask me what books I have been reading. I have always been neglectful of American books but I found in Ireland, where he spent a year and a half while he was provincial as a representative of Father General, many more conversant with American literature than I was. I am obviating that shameful state. Just read James's *Bostonians* and I think it one of the very poorest novels I ever read. I think the literary superiority of New England is past—and the glory of Ichabod! Where are your Longfellows now, your Prescotts, your Ticknors, etc? Look to the horizon of the South if you would witness the uprising of the star to dominate the future.

Was Fulton a little ahead of Van Wyck Brooks' *New England: Indian Summer*?

From Washington, D.C. in October 1892 he wrote: “You ask about books. My chief inconvenience is that we are too poor to supply reading, and there are not such facilities as are found in Boston. I never tire of reading and I have considerable leisure.”

In a sketch of Father Fulton, his colleague Father John Buckley wrote:

Father Fulton was always a very busy man, yet despite his numerous social and scholastic employments, he somehow found time to interrupt the solid day to peruse four or five volumes a week. Being asked how he found leisure for so much reading, he replied, “Well, you don’t suppose I read every line in the book, do you? If the book be one of fiction, I skip the sunsets, small parlor-talk, analyze the leading characters, and following the stage directions of my friend, Horace, rush on to the denouement. By practice, you know, one learns the art of gutting the page. When I need more information, I imitate Balmes, who selected the chapters he did not know, and passed over the rest.

We have seen Father Fulton’s strong literary reaction to places in his description of Philadelphia. Old Albuquerque, N.M. fared worse. Visiting there (no doubt for his health) in February 1892 he wrote:

It is a strange place. Here I am in the great American desert which I read of as a boy. Want of rain is the trouble. The water, for drink and irrigation, comes from the river. No timber for building—therefore mud huts. No trees, no grass,
no house for miles—no animals except the rabbits of the country. Horrible. Most horrible!

Father Fulton had an active sense of humor, often self-deprecating, as when he met Oliver Wendell Holmes at a dinner party. Holmes was a man of considerable girth, as was Fulton. Holmes greeted the priest: “Why, Father Fulton, are you here too?” “Yes, all that is left of me,” was the reply.

A lady had been bothering the Jesuit on what he considered a trivial matter. Wishing him to call on her to discuss the subject, she sent a messenger with a note saying she would be home at four o’clock. Fulton’s laconic reply, “Dear madam, so will I.”

A Protestant gentleman of some standing who visited him said with what his host felt was an air of condescension, “Father Fulton, I begin to like your Catholics very much.” “Indeed,” said Father Fulton. “Permit me to thank you in the name of the universal church.”

Fulton liked youngsters and joshed with them. One day a self-confident newsboy offered the priest a copy of Harper’s Illustrated Weekly. “Well, son what do you want?” Fulton asked. “Buy a paper, Father,” was the reply. “Ah yes, but how do you know I can read?” “Well,” was the retort, “you probably can’t, but I thought you might like to look over the pictures.” Fulton bought the paper and said to the cheeky lad, “See here, if you want to go to school come to Boston College and I will gladly educate you for nothing.”

When he was provincial, after leaving Boston College, Father Fulton had to pay several visits to Rome, and he then was assigned for a year and a half as a special visitor to the Irish province. The young Jesuit students at Woodstock College asked him to write a letter concerning his experiences traveling in Europe for publication in the new journal, Woodstock Letters. The provincial complied with a five-page letter describing items of special interest to Jesuits. As a native American who had not been abroad before, he found coping with other languages a problem. On this topic he wrote:

There is no department of learning in which I regret my deficiency so much as that of modern languages: which I say for the benefit of my dear Woodstockings. [The term of address was a humorous, fatherly play on the name of the theologate, Woodstock, but his message about mastering modern languages was serious. However, he made light of his deficiencies.] I give you a serviceable rule: In France, speak Italian steadily, in Italy hold to French unflinchingly. The reason is obvious. The chances are the hearer will not be able to criticize the speaker. In both countries abuse beggars
soundly in English. It perplexes them, and you may escape in the confusion.

In England there’s not much difficulty. You can generally understand the English, and then they begin to talk American.

When he was assigned to Boston College in 1888, Father Fulton had a number of ailments. He complained most of rheumatism, which he made light of in a letter in December 1888:

What time Cardinal Gibbons laid the foundation of the Catholic University, I laid the foundation of the rheumatism, which apparently is to continue so long as I have limbs to ache. [The reference to Cardinal Gibbons and Catholic University may be significant. As provincial, Father Fulton objected to the proposed charter statement for a national Catholic University that said that such an institution should never be conducted by a religious order. That seemed to Fulton to be a direct attack on the Jesuits, especially with America’s oldest Catholic university, Georgetown, in Washington. He took some criticism from bishops and even some Jesuits for his stand.26] So I was sent to Boston, a sort of health resort, the dryness of the atmosphere, the freedom from east winds recommending it, and I was inaugurated as Rector [of Boston College] on the day when we celebrate the exchange of British for Yankee tyranny, July 4th.

We know that Fulton loved Boston and was glad to be back. He just couldn’t resist questioning the aptness of Boston weather as a cure for rheumatism.

When Father Fulton left Boston in 1880, after his first presidency, he became rector of the Jesuit parish in New York City, St. Laurence’s (now St. Ignatius). Next he had a short stay in a parish in Philadelphia, followed by another rectorship-presidency at Gonzaga College in Washington, D.C. But in May 1882 he became provincial of the Maryland–New York province, and six years later he was reassigned to the rectorship at Boston College. He confided in a letter to a friend about his return to Boston (December 1888), “I am under instructions to enlarge the building to the tune of $120,000 and I begin my beggary in the new year.” His “beggary” must have been successful, because the new construction got under way and had made such progress that when he returned from a brief vacation, he complained (September 1889), “The building is not yet finished, and we are striving to teach amid noise, dust, crowding, carpenters, masons, plasterers, plumbers, etc. . . . but besides all the building and teaching and evangelizing, there’s the money getting, which takes time and, much more, humility.”
If the automobile in front of Fulton Hall fails to date this photo as belonging to the 1950s, the structure to the left of the new building does. It was a war surplus building used for athletics, dramatics, and other functions until it was razed in 1958 to make way for the School of Nursing building, Cushing Hall.
This photo taken in early January 1995 shows the as yet unfinished new central entrance to Fulton Hall. The pitched roof indicates an upward extension adding a whole floor to the east, west, and south sides of the building.
A south view of a nearly completed Fulton Hall renovation. The pitched roof, dormer windows, the fenestration, and the triple-arch entrance echo a nearby neo-Gothic gem, Lyons Hall.
But seven months later he was able to write a friend (March 1890):

I think you will be surprised to see my work. Considering my age [64] and sickness and growing infirmities, I really think I have done a good deal. The [Jesuit] house and College are more than double in size. The exterior appearance is not artistic because I had to patch; but the accommodations are ample, and I shall, after spending about $150,000, have a debt of only $50,000. If I were a young man and prospects of many years before me, I think I could get an endowment, so as to make the education free, and if that were done, could revolutionize New England.

What a vision he had for Boston College in the twilight of his career! And he was feisty to the end. The Church of the Immaculate Conception opened in 1858; the Archdiocese opened the Cathedral of the Holy Cross in 1875 only a half mile or so away. In October 1890, reviewing recent months in a letter, Fulton remarked, “Our Easter was as splendid as ever. Hundreds of people, unable to enter the church, had to go to the Cathedral for Mass. There is the advantage of having the Cathedral so near, to receive our overflow—which is an impudent thing to say.” It was impudent, but that was Father Fulton.

Ill health cut short Father Fulton’s second presidency. He retired in January 1891. Although he had several further responsible appointments, he spent a good part of the next four years trying to regain health. His last abode was at sunny Santa Clara College in California, where he died in 1895.

A fitting close to this profile of Father Fulton is an observation in Father Buckley’s 1896 sketch in Woodstock Letters—a tribute from an alumnus:

“We still remember,” writes one of his old boys, “how unsparingly he execrated the golden mean, so extolled by the Roman poet. ‘I would have you aim, young gentlemen,’ was his daily strain, ‘at the highest in everything, in gentlemanly deportment, in splendid scholarship. I love the young man whose banner bore that strange device Excelsior. Oh, that it be said of each and every one of you, that though the world should fall, you will never descend one jot or tittle from the highest perfection attainable. Truth, duty, consummate scholarship, by these shall all men know you are students of Boston College.’”

What an inspiring maxim for all Boston College students forever: Truth, duty, consummate scholarship. Fulton’s charge for the ages.
How right it is that an imposing new building on the Boston College campus bears the name of Father Robert Fulton—a great blustery, versatile, good-natured, noble person who played such a significant role in the development of the University.

Endnotes

1. For much of the biographical data in the paper the author is indebted to a 23-page article that appeared in the Woodstock Letters, vol. 25, 1896, titled “Father Robert Fulton: A Sketch.” No author’s name was given, but the Woodstock Letters later identified the author as Father John A. Buckley. Father Buckley taught at Boston College during the last three years of Father Fulton’s first presidency and during the last two years of Fulton’s second presidency, so he had the opportunity to observe the great Virginian during the peak of his presidential prowess in the College and in the Boston area as well as his still dynamic leadership in his waning years. Father Buckley died in 1898, three years after Fulton. The Buckley article will hereafter be noted simply as Buckley, with a page reference.
2. Boston College Archives.
3. Boston College Archives.
4. Bapst to Paresce, July 7, 1865, Maryland S.J. Provincial Archives, Georgetown University.
7. Buckley, p. 103.
11. The Pilot, August 4, 1877.
14. Ibid.
17. “Diary of Father Fulton” (manuscript) located in the archives of Georgetown University.
22. Buckley, p. 103.
23. Buckley, p. 105.
24. Buckley, p. 106.
27. Buckley, p. 98.

Father Fulton’s sketch on the cover was drawn by Dermott O’Toole for the *Sub Turri* of his class, 1959. The photos of Father Fulton and of Fulton Hall in the 1950s were provided by the Boston College Archives. Contemporary photos were made by Gary Gilbert.