

**HERITAGE READING FOR 2<sup>nd</sup> WEEK OF OCTOBER**  
**BRACKENRIDGE VILLA, FIRST MOTHERHOUSE**

The second significant happening (first one was the approval of the Constitutions by Rome) for the Congregation at the turn of the century was the **purchase of a large tract of land on the outskirts of San Antonio to be used as a motherhouse.** The Sisters, particularly Rev. Mother Pierre, had been friendly with [Col. Brackenridge] and had from time to time brought the orphans out to enjoy picnics on his property. ...In 1869, he had purchased the property from James R. Sweet, former mayor of San Antonio. In a very early guide to the City of San Antonio the **setting is described as “without doubt one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful, places in Texas, its woodland grace and park like beauty so heightened by the perpetual mystery of its profound and noble springs. This is the Head of the River.”** Connected to the original one-story ranch house, Brackenridge built an elaborate three-story English-style addition in 1886. Here he lived with his mother and his sister, Mary Eleanor, who like the Colonel had never married. From their worldwide travels the Brackenridge family collected ornate furnishings and decorations for the house—costly chandeliers from Europe, magnificent tiled fireplaces, and even tooled elephant hide ...for the ceiling of the dining room.

The location of the estate at the headwaters of the San Antonio River added not only to the beauty of the surroundings but also to the historical significance of the property. **The Blue Hole, the major spring that feeds the river, was favored campsite for prehistoric tribes of Native Americans. Archeological studies of the area have produced Paleo-Indian projectile points that date back 11,000 years....**

When Brackenridge’s mother died in the latter part of 1886, he was grief-stricken....Now he was determined to sell the land, the house, and everything in it that reminded him of his loss. The Sisters were anxious to secure the property. ... They did not need all of the land, however, and they were not at all interested in the furnishings of the house which were far too decorative and rich for use in a convent. **Neither were they in a position to meet the total cost of the property--\$100,000.** They tried to negotiate with Brackenridge, offering to buy a portion of the land;...He absolutely refused their proposal. After much prayer and deliberation, **the Sisters decided that the ideal location on the banks of the river and the gently rolling grasslands dotted with live oaks, laurels, and pecan trees were so beautiful and so well suited to their needs that they would make every sacrifice to arrive at the cost....**

Shortly after the transaction was confirmed, a disagreement arose between the Sisters and Col. Brackenridge over the terms of the sale. The contract signed by both parties had specified that in addition to Brackenridge’s personal belongings, only one item in the house should be excluded from the sale, the Aeolian Vocalin and Piano. ...Brackenridge had evidently intended to exclude also his extensive library but forgot to insert a statement to this effect in the deed. At the same time, the Sisters had understood that they had purchased the collection...and so informed the colonel when he came to retrieve his fine leather-bound books and multiple-volume sets of classical writings. He was evidently frustrated by the Sisters’ strong stand on the matter as expressed in the following letter: **“I must confess I am very much impressed with my utter inability to take care of myself in dealing with you ladies.”** [The Sisters decided that they would sell back the library contents plus other items that he had included in the sale.] Brackenridge turned to his attorney for help but found that he had no grounds for redress. The Sisters had legal title to the collection, and as long as they met their payments, the house and its contents were theirs. If the colonel did not want to accept the terms for repurchase he would have to withdraw his claim. The outcome of the disagreement was that Brackenridge withdrew his proposal....**Some years later, the books were transferred to the Texana Collection of Incarnate Word College Library (now in the Special Collections room)...on May 29, 1920, twenty-three years after the deed had been signed, the debt was “fully paid off, both principal and interest.”**

...when the Sisters moved in they changed the name to **Brackenridge Villa.** The entire estate was frequently referred to as **Alamo Heights,** which subsequently became the name for the suburb that grew up surrounding it. The novitiate...was transferred to the villa at the end of the summer, and the Sisters found that almost as soon as they moved into their new home they were running out of space....The Sisters realized that **a new motherhouse would have to be built on the property** as soon as possible and engaged **Alfred Giles as architect** to draw up the necessary plans.