

Celebrating 125 Years

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The story of the Duluth Benedictines is a continuation of the story begun 165 years ago, in 1852, when three Benedictine Sisters left St. Walburg Abbey in Eichstatt, Bavaria, for St. Marys, Pennsylvania, in response to the request of Abbot Boniface Wimmer of St. Vincent's Archabbey of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, for Sisters to serve the needs of German-Catholic immigrants in what was known as the "rural frontier." They first opened a school for immigrant girls, then moved West and established several new foundations, among them St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, in 1863, the founding Motherhouse of St. Scholastica Monastery.



Mother Scholastica often looked for land miles from the center of the city on which to build a monastery.

apostolic of Northern Minnesota that St. Benedict's Convent start a school in the Sacred Heart parish. When she left the next morning, she agreed that Sisters would come to live and teach in an old frame building used in former times as a livery barn and carriage house.

A year later three Sisters opened a school in January 1881 with 200 students enrolled. However, the overcrowded building was very cold in an extremely cold winter, and the deplorable conditions in which the Sisters lived and tried to teach led to the school closing in May and the Sisters returning to St. Benedict's Convent. Three years later,



Mother Scholastica Kerst (r) and Sister Pauline Dunphy surveying the newly-purchased "daisy farm."

Our foremothers had probably expected to continue their cloistered European monastic way of life, but their new ministries created a challenging change of lifestyle for them and for the American women who became Benedictine Sisters. Because of often-difficult living situations and the poverty of both the Sisters and the immigrants, the Sisters had to adapt to their new circumstances in order to both survive and serve. Their crowded buildings often housed both convent and school, and later both convent and hospital.

When Mother Scholastica Kerst, then Prioress of St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, stepped off a train in Duluth on a snowy Wednesday afternoon on December 15, 1880, she was continuing the adventure begun by our European foremothers. Hers was an exploratory trip, an overnight visit in response to a request from the vicar



Sisters enjoyed visiting the new property.

when suitable quarters were found, the Sisters returned to Duluth and by the end of the decade were staffing several parish schools and a hospital. When the Diocese of Duluth was established in 1889, Bishop James T. McGolrick desired a permanent community of Benedictine Sisters for his diocese. Thirty-two Sisters from St. Benedict's Convent established a new independent foundation in 1892 headed by Mother Scholastica Kerst, who had completed her term there as prioress.

Our founders went from rented space in Munger Terrace where two units housed both the Sisters and their academy, to the Sacred Heart Institute (our first Motherhouse) shared with students, to the purchase of 160 acres of land on Kenwood Avenue miles from the city's center. There they built Tower Hall where the Sisters' residence wings mingled with classrooms, offices, and student bedrooms. A major construction project begun in 1936 saw completion of the Chapel/Library complex, the cloister walks, and Stanbrook Hall, a private girls' high school, which included Sisters' residence areas. Construction of Stanbrook West in 1991, the first building designed specifically as a Sisters' residence, resulted in their withdrawing from their residence space in Tower Hall. In the mid-1990s a major renovation of Stanbrook Hall High School, which closed in 1967, converted the former high school building to offices and meeting rooms, guest rooms, a kitchen and dining room, and residence space for the Sisters.

Throughout our history the Sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery have taken on challenges unheard of for women of their time: persistence in starting education in the Diocese of Duluth despite the quality and paucity of housing and classrooms; their purchase of the 160-acre "daisy farm"; the beginning of a college in 1906 with only six students ("Villa Scholastica"); the building in stages of Tower Hall, which today is regarded as an architectural and historical landmark; the huge building project begun in 1936 as World War II was breaking out in Europe (the Chapel/Library, Stanbrook Hall, and the connecting cloister walks); the difficult decision in 1984 to exchange the beautiful three-story space of Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel with that of the halfway below ground single-story library to ensure the continued growth of The College of St. Scholastica and provide a barrier-free chapel for the monastic Community and guests. In 1986, as the Community gathered for the blessing of the baptismal



The first section of Tower Hall which included the South Tower was completed in 1909, followed by the gymnasium (now used as the Little Theatre) built in 1921. The remainder of Tower Hall including the North Tower was completed in 1929.

font during the Rite of Entry to our new Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel, we prayed, "Thank You for the power of a vision, the strength of an idea, the courage of imagination."

When Mother Scholastica first arrived in Duluth to determine whether she should send Sisters here to teach, she couldn't know what she was setting in motion: that she would become Prioress of the Duluth foundation, that the Sisters would build schools, hospitals, a college (which celebrated its Centennial in 2012), and a Benedictine Health Center (known today as "Benedictine Living Community of Duluth") that would become part of the Sisters' own Benedictine Health System (established in 1985), one of the largest Catholic senior care organizations in the country, with more than 40 senior care communities in six states.



View of campus from above College Street (under construction in foreground), c. 1940.

The Sisters who came to Duluth in 1892 might have just smiled had they been told that the Community would respond to the needs of the Church in a variety of ministries—including education, spirituality and retreat centers, pastoral care to the sick in health-care facilities and the homebound, the arts, and advocacy for peace and justice issues through board and committee memberships. It was probably inconceivable that their ministries would expand beyond Minnesota to Phoenix, Washington, D.C., Chicago, Cincinnati, and Antofagasta, Chile. They had no idea when they began as a daughterhouse of St. Benedict's Convent that they would establish two independent foundations (Mount St. Benedict Monastery in Crookston, Minnesota, and St. Benedict's Monastery in Winnipeg).



Novices return from working at Sacred Heart Shrine, 1950s.

Indeed, Mother Scholastica had no idea when she shivered in the cold wind coming off the big lake behind the Duluth train station after her long and tiring trip from St. Joseph, that just over the hill west of Lake Superior lay acres of rocky land covered with trees and daisies where she and her small band of courageous Sisters would build what over 125 years would become a 186-acre campus, home to St. Scholastica Monastery, a coeducational college with undergraduate and graduate degrees, and a health-care complex.

Our Community began in small Duluth neighborhood parishes and then grew and was formed on this beautiful wooded hillside on Kenwood Avenue with its magnificent view of Lake Superior. During our 125-year history the Community was led by the fourteen women pictured below as we responded to the challenges of the times. Although the images selected for this and subsequent articles that will be carried in Pathways and on the Monastery web site (www.duluthbenedictines.org) during the celebration of our 125th anniversary cannot be considered representative of our years in Duluth, we hope they provide a glimpse into the past that began as a dream in a field of daisies. And it all began and has grown by “the power of a vision, the strength of an idea, the courage of imagination.”



Mother
Scholastica Kerst
1892–1911



Mother
Alexia Kerst
1911–1916



Mother
Celestine Sullivan
1916–1919



Mother
Chrysostom Doran
1919–1924



Mother
Agnes Somers
1924–1942



Mother
Athenasius Braegelman
1942–1954 1960–1966



Mother
Martina Hughes
1954–1960 1966–1972



Mother
Verona LaBud
1972–1975



Mother
Grace Marie Braun
1975–1987



Sister
Clare Marie Trettel
1987–1993



Sister
Danile Lynch
1993–1999



Sister
Kathleen Hofer
1999–2005



Sister
Lois Eckes
2005–2015



Sister
Beverly Raway
2015–present