

Celebrating 125 Years: How It All Began

by Sister Judine Mayerle OSB (jmayerle@css.edu)

Although the Sisters of St. Scholastica Monastery are celebrating 125 years in the City of Duluth, the story really begins 40 years earlier, in 1852, when two groups of travelers left the German port of Bremerhaven for the United States en route to the Territory of Minnesota, which had been created by an Act of Congress in 1849.

On March 12, 1852, the family of Peter and Anna Kerst (including five-year-old Catherine, three-year-old Margaret, and one-year-old Matthew) left Bremerhaven and began their three-month journey to St. Paul, Minnesota. Relatives and friends also made the voyage across the North Atlantic to the port of New York City on the sailing ship *Columbus*, then by rail to Pittsburg, and by river steamer down the Ohio River to St. Louis, Missouri. There they waited for a Mississippi River boat for the four-day trip to St. Paul, the newly-formed capital city of the Minnesota Territory.

Father Boniface Wimmer, a Bavarian priest who entered a Benedictine monastery several years after his ordination, heard about the loss of faith among German immigrants in the United States and obtained permission to lead a small group of missionaries from Bavaria to establish St. Vincent's Priory at LaTrobe, Pennsylvania. Five years later, in 1851, he went back to Bavaria to the historic Benedictine Convent of St. Walburga in Eichstatt to ask for Sisters to teach the children of German immigrants at St. Marys, Pennsylvania.

The Eichstatt Benedictines were reluctant to leave their life of strict enclosure and their educational work with girls, but Wimmer convinced them that the loss of faith among the German immigrants showed the great need for Catholic schools. Moreover, he promised their enclosure could be kept, they would be given only girls to teach, and the American convent would be a dependent house of St. Walburga Convent. Mother Edwarda reluctantly agreed that three sisters could go. Sister Benedicta Riepp, who would be the Superior, Sister Walburga Dietrich, and lay sister Maura Flieger boarded the steamer *Washington* at Bremerhaven on June 18, 1852, arriving in New York City on July 3 and at St. Vincent's Abbey several days later. After resting for a few days, they made the 116-mile overland journey to St. Marys, Pennsylvania to open a school for 60 girls.

Several more Sisters came from Bavaria, and soon St. Joseph Convent at St. Marys welcomed a number of candidates from the area as novices. Five years after landing in America, some of the Benedictine sisters of St. Marys followed the immigrant migration to the Minnesota frontier, settling first in St. Cloud and then in St. Joseph, the present site of St. Benedict's Monastery. Mother Benedicta Riepp joined the Sisters a year later and remained with them until her death in 1862.

In the Kerst memoirs, Peter Kerst writes, "We arrived at St. Paul on a beautiful June morning. I was immediately impressed by the future value of land ownership on the site of this rapidly growing city. So I purchased a 640-acre section on the present location of Randolph Street and Snelling Avenue." He settled his wife and children with a family of German immigrants while he built a house and three months later brought them home. Although just 32 years old, as the only son of his deceased wealthy parents, his inheritance enabled him to purchase land that increased significantly in value and established him as a successful businessman. The Kersts were among the early settlers in St. Paul and part of a large German Catholic immigrant group who built Assumption Church in 1856, as "the first church that would comfort and give a sense of belonging to people who had left all things familiar to build better lives for themselves and their families."

Peter and Anna Kerst could not know that most of the rest of their lives would be linked with the Eichstatt Benedictines who had sailed from Bremerhaven two months after them in 1852, linked through their capricious, intelligent, oldest



The only photographs of Peter and Anna Kerst are formal sittings. No photographs of the young couple who crossed the Atlantic Ocean with their children have been found.

child, Catherine, who decided at age fifteen that she wanted to be a nun. In 1862 she became the first postulant at St. Gertrude's Convent in Shakopee, a Benedictine house founded by a second group of Sisters from St. Marys, Pennsylvania. Catherine Kerst became Sister Scholastica and made her perpetual monastic profession there on January 6, 1869. The small Community struggled financially despite generous support from Peter and Anna Kerst who were dismayed by the impoverished living conditions of the Sisters. After two years of study at Benedictine houses at St. Marys and then Erie, Pennsylvania, and the experience of a more stable lifestyle, Sister Scholastica asked for a permanent transfer. However, Abbot Alexius Edelbrock of St. John's Abbey, a friend of her parents who knew they did not wish their daughter to live so far away, instead facilitated her transfer to St. Benedict's Convent in St. Joseph on September 17, 1877. Less than three years later, in May 1880, the Abbot appointed her interim prioress of her new Community to serve out the term of the prioress who had resigned after repeatedly asking to be relieved of what she had thought would be a three-year position. He then supported her at the August election, saying if she were not elected by the Community, he would appoint her prioress because he "wanted the Community to grow and extend the work and she was the only one who could do it." During Mother Scholastica's nine years as prioress, the Community greatly increased its membership and expanded its ministries, opening three frontier hospitals, elementary schools, secondary academies, and missions for the area's Sioux and Chippewa Indians.



Munger Terrace was designed by architects Oliver G. Traphagen and Francis W. Fitzpatrick and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

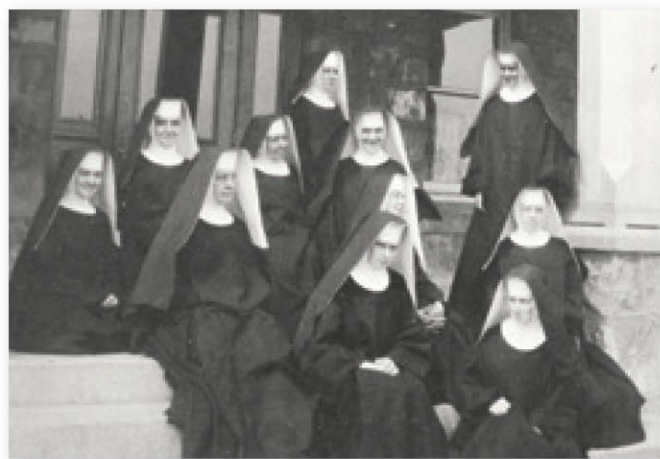
Mother Scholastica made an overnight trip to Duluth in December 1880 in response to a request from the vicar apostolic of Northern Minnesota that her Community start a school in Sacred Heart Parish. Before leaving the next morning, she agreed that Sisters could come the following year to live and teach in an old frame building previously used as a livery barn and carriage house. However, an extremely cold winter and the deplorable conditions in which the Sisters lived and tried to teach 200 students led to their returning to St. Benedict's Convent. When suitable quarters were found three years later, the Sisters returned to staff 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, including

Sister Scholastica who had been teaching for three years after completing her term as prioress and her younger sister, Sister Alexia, established a new independent foundation in 1892. Mother Scholastica Kerst was first appointed prioress by the Bishop and then later elected by the Community, a position she held until her death in 1911.

When the first Benedictines began ministries in education and health care in Duluth, the "Zenith City" had overcome a rather shaky start, having survived a scarlet fever epidemic and two economic crashes that almost wiped the town from the map. A newspaper of the time encouraged people to settle in Duluth, but cautioned, "Newcomers should comprehend that Duluth is at present a small place, and hotel and boarding room accommodation is extremely limited. However, lumber is cheap and shanties can be built. Everyone should bring blankets and come prepared to rough it."

By the mid-1880s Duluth was growing rapidly because of northeastern Minnesota's fur trade, its resources of copper, iron ore, and lumber, and its ability to transport goods by rail from the Minnesota wilderness to Duluth and by boat from its port on the western tip of Lake Superior. The 1880 census listed 3,483 people in Duluth, of which there were approximately 150 Catholic families, not enough to support a parochial school. Four years later the population was close to 18,000, and in 1890 it was estimated there were 33,150 residents, including hundreds of German Catholics with school-age children.

The new Community first settled in Munger Terrace, a large brownstone building with eight townhouses overlooking the city.



Mother Scholastica (4th from left) sitting on the stairs of the front entrance of the first building of Villa Sancta Scholastica.

The Sisters rented three units, using two large rooms in one unit as a chapel, others as living quarters for the Sisters, and two full units as classrooms. However, Munger Terrace soon proved to be inadequate to house the Sisters and their expanding educational ministry, so they built the Sacred Heart Academy at 3rd Street and 3rd Avenue East, the first property in Duluth owned by the Sisters. They used the property for educational purposes from 1894-1910. As the Benedictine Community grew in membership and enrollment at the Academy increased, it became obvious that a more spacious building would be needed. Mother Scholastica had been looking for land on which to build a motherhouse



Early photo of the first section of the first building of Villa Sancta Scholastica.

and outright gifts. The work of the Benedictine Sisters of Duluth was very important to Peter and Anna Kerst, as were the needs of other Catholic institutions over the years, and their generosity was recognized through apostolic blessings from both Pope Leo XIII and Pope Pius X.

Peter Kerst never lived to applaud the purchase of the land called the “daisy farm” or see the first section of the new motherhouse built. He died of meningitis at the first St. Mary’s Hospital in West Duluth on March 22, 1900. His death was reported in the *Duluth Evening Herald* on Friday, March 23, 1900. The headline AN AGED MAN DIES was followed by “Peter Joseph Kerst, age 80 years, died yesterday at St. Marys. He was the father of Mother Superior Scholastica of The Villa and was formerly of St. Paul. He was well-known throughout the state and has many friends and acquaintances who mourn his death. There will be a short funeral service at the German Catholic Church this evening and the remains will then be taken by train to St. Paul for burial. Tomorrow morning there will be a service in the Church of the Assumption in St. Paul.” The *Saint Paul Globe* for March 23, 1900, described him as “an old St. Paul Pioneer, well-known to all old residents, especially in the Fifth Ward, and very prominent in Catholic circles.”

Funeral arrangements were made by Peter Kerst’s nephew, Peter M. Kerst of St. Paul. Archival records show that Mother Scholastica gave him \$40 to pay for the church services (\$33 for the church, \$7 for the priest), as well as \$54 for seven carriages to go from the church to Calvary Cemetery: one for Mother Scholastica, two for pall bearers, one for the priest, and three carriages for guests. The undertaker agreed to wait 60 days for payment. Certainly Mother Scholastica did not make the trip to St. Paul by herself, but there is no indication in archival records of any companions, including her mother or her sister, Sister Alexia.

Peter and Anna Kerst had purchased a large plot in Calvary Cemetery in 1854, just two years after arriving in St. Paul. Their infant son, Mathias, died and was buried a few days before they reached Minnesota. The first family members to be buried in the Kerst plot died of cholera: Nicholas Kerst, age 15 months, and one-year-old John Kerst. Margaretha Kerst died of small pox at age 23 a year after her marriage to Charles Rapp in 1871. Conrad Kerst, who had attended St. John’s University in Collegeville, died of gangrene in February 1881, and was the fourth child buried in the Kerst family plot.

and academic buildings, and in 1899 learned that 80 acres of farmland two miles from the city’s center were for sale. The Sisters took possession in 1900 and in 1905 began to build the first section of what became known as “Villa Sancta Scholastica”.

Building the Sacred Heart Academy and purchasing land for further construction was a huge undertaking for the Sisters who had only been in Duluth for eight years. The strong-willed and innovative leadership of Mother Scholastica Kerst, both as prioress of St. Benedict’s Convent and then at St. Scholastica Convent in Duluth, was clearly influenced by her father, a successful businessman who had expanded his holdings over the years through sophisticated financing techniques. He encouraged his daughter’s efforts through wise counsel and generous financial support through loans



Margaretha Kerst



Conrad Kerst



The Kerst family plot's tall granite marker has a Benedictine cross carved into the stone and the name Peter Joseph Kerst at the base. The large center section is inscribed in German: Here lies the family of Peter Joseph Kerst.

Villa were present. A choir of fifty priests of the diocese chanted the Office of the Dead prior to the Solemn Requiem Mass." During his sermon, Bishop McGolrick said, "She built my diocese! May her good work grow and prosper." She is buried at Gethsemane Cemetery, next to her mother. She only saw completion of the first section of Tower Hall in 1909, before her death, but often spoke of her vision of what should follow: "My dream is that someday there will rise upon these grounds fine buildings like the great Benedictine abbeys. They will be built of stone; within their walls higher education will flourish..."

On July 11, 1911, one month after the death of Mother Scholastica, the Community held an election of a new Prioress. Sister Alexia Kerst, sister of Mother Scholastica, was elected on a first ballot by 130 capitulars to continue the work begun by her sister and the pioneer Benedictine Community.

Peter and Anna Kerst never knew how their lives were caught up in the mission of the Eichstatt Benedictines, who crossed the North Atlantic from Bremerhaven two months after the Kerst family and formed the communities that attracted their daughters and called them forth to leadership. And the Eichstatt Benedictines who began their voyage from Bremerhaven had no idea that their future leadership was a young child travelling just ahead of them who was caught up in the excitement of an ocean voyage. The line of Peter and Anna Kerst ended with their two Benedictine daughters, their other children having died without progeny. But their exemplary lives of service shaped the character of the Duluth Benedictine's first two leaders, and their generous support over the years played a significant role in furthering the dreams of Minnesota pioneer Benedictine women.

Although the Kersts had spent considerable time in Duluth after the founding of the new Benedictine Community, Peter Kerst wondered whether he should be considered a resident of St. Louis County, Duluth, or Ramsey County, St. Paul. His lawyer advised that it would be better for him to remain a resident of Ramsey County since he would be buried there and probate of his will would be easier. Peter Kerst had left everything to his wife, Anna, who in turn left everything to her daughters, Mother Scholastica and Sister Alexia, when she died ten years later, age 96, on December 29, 1910. In the last years of her life, Anna Kerst expressed a desire to be "buried near her daughters' home." She is buried in the Sisters' Gethsemane Cemetery on a hill behind Tower Hall rather than in the Kerst family plot at Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul.

During Mother Scholastica's nineteen years as prioress the Community grew from 32 to 161 members, and by the time of her death in 1911, was staffing 18 elementary parish schools, four secondary schools, five hospitals, an orphanage, a retirement home, and a School of Nursing.

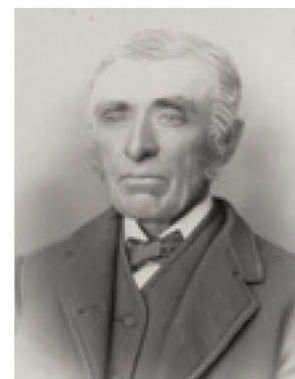
Mother Scholastica died in the early evening of June 11, 1911, the Feast of the Holy Trinity, after a long struggle with cancer. At Bishop James McGolrick's request, her funeral was held at Sacred Heart Cathedral, where "hundreds of clergy, religious of other communities, her relatives, and the Sisters of the



The funeral procession near Gethsemane Cemetery. The horse-drawn hearse and entourage came from Sacred Heart Cathedral.



Anna Margaret Kerst



Peter Kerst