

# Celebrating 125 Years – The Journey Continues

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When Mother Scholastica Kerst died in 1911, she left behind not just a legacy by which she would be remembered, but also a sense of direction for her Community. And at her funeral when Bishop McGolrick said, “She built my diocese,” it was a tribute both to her and to the Sisters who had come with her to Northeastern Minnesota to begin serving in education and health care even before the Diocese of Duluth was established in 1889 or the Monastery founded in 1892. By 1911 the Duluth Benedictines were staffing 18 parish elementary and four secondary schools, an orphanage, and a retirement home; they had built a hospital, which continued to expand; they had built an academy for girls called the Sacred Heart Institute near downtown Duluth and had completed the first section of their motherhouse on Kenwood Avenue. Membership in the Community had increased from 32 to 161 Sisters.

## Ministry of Education

Mother Scholastica Kerst was in her first year as Prioress of St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota, when she was asked by the Vicar Apostolic of Northern Minnesota to begin a school in Sacred Heart Parish in Duluth. She made an overnight trip to Duluth in December 1880 to meet the priest and some parishioners and inspect the ramshackle livery barn that they promised to have renovated as living quarters for the Sisters and classrooms for the school before three Sisters arrived in January. However, the deplorable conditions in which they taught and lived during an extremely cold winter resulted in their return to St. Benedict’s at the end of the school year.

Three years later, when suitable quarters were found, Sisters from St. Benedict’s returned to staff several parish schools including St. Thomas School in the Sacred Heart Parish, which provided a convent and a frame building for classrooms that welcomed children from all over the city. A year later the parish built a new school with ten classrooms that were filled with 350 students. St. Thomas School was the first to pay salaries for its teachers: \$20 a month for teachers and \$25 for the principal, which became the norm for the next 30 years.

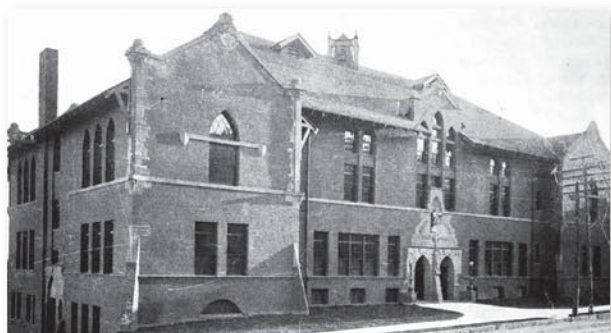
When the Diocese of Duluth was established in 1889, Bishop James T. McGolrick invited Sisters from St. Benedict’s to establish a permanent community in Duluth. Thirty-two Sisters responded, including Sister Scholastica Kerst who had been teaching for three years after completing her term as Prioress at St. Benedict’s. She was appointed Prioress of the Duluth group by the Bishop and then later elected by the Community, which established an independent Benedictine

foundation in 1892. The Sisters rented three large multi-room units in Munger Terrace, two for their own residence and chapel, and opened Sacred Heart Academy for girls in the third unit. When Munger Terrace became inadequate to house the growing school, the Community built the Sacred Heart Institute on the corner of 3rd Street and 3rd Avenue East, the first property owned by the Duluth Benedictines. This was used as a Sisters’ residence and an elementary to secondary girls’ school until they bought land a distance from the city center and built the first section of the building that was to become “Villa Scholastica,” which housed both Sisters and Academy students. It is not possible in these pages to include all the Catholic schools staffed by the Benedictine Sisters in Duluth and elsewhere (from 1892 the Sisters staffed more than 50 schools in seven states from elementary and secondary to college) or to do justice to the determination of



*Mother Scholastica (third row, fourth from the left) and Sisters with some of their students at Munger Terrace, 1893.*





*Sacred Heart Cathedral School and Christian Brothers' School (circa 1914). Sacred Heart Cathedral School became a co-ed elementary to secondary school and the Christian Brothers School became the co-ed Cathedral Senior High School when the Brothers left in 1942.*

parishes to provide Catholic education for their children. Following are just a few examples of the courageous building of schools by parishes in times that were economically difficult, and the cooperation between the parishes and the Benedictine Sisters in the development of parochial education.

When Sacred Heart Church became the Bishop's Cathedral, members of the rapidly growing parish wanted a school open to any Catholic child in the city. In 1904 the parish constructed a much larger building named Sacred Heart Cathedral School with a 1,200-seat auditorium,

offices, and classrooms for both its own parish grade school and high school. During the school's sixty-six-year history (1904-1970) roughly 250 Sisters from the Community served there. In 1907 the diocese invited the four Christian Brothers who had been teaching boys in the high school section to staff a separate boys' high school built on 4th Street across from the Sacred Heart School and Cathedral High School. The Christian Brothers Boys School was open from 1910 to 1942 when the Brothers left Duluth, and the building became a coed Cathedral Senior High School staffed primarily by Benedictine Sisters, along with Diocesan priests and lay people.

In the late 19th century families of the same nationality who lived close together wished to form their own ethnic parishes and received support from the Vicar Apostolic in Duluth to do so. St. Mary Star of the Sea parish was created in 1884, followed by construction of its parish school, St. Stanislaus, a year later with children taught by Polish-speaking Benedictine Sisters. Other ethnic parishes followed, including St. Jean Batiste (French) and St. Anthony (German), to name just a few.

Another school and housing for teachers came about with help from the monks of St. John's Abbey. In 1887 Abbot Alexis Edelbrock of St. John's Abbey decided to create a new Benedictine abbey in Duluth. A group of his monks were sent to build a church, rectory, school, and monastic seminary on land purchased by the Abbey. However in 1888, when the Abbot abandoned the idea of a Duluth foundation, he persuaded Mother Scholastica to rent the brick seminary building as a hospital. Sisters staffed St. Clement's School, and the hospital provided housing for many Sisters who taught in what was called the "West End."

St. James School opened in the West End in August 1894 in a structure first built as a church and then used as a school. Like the original "renovated" livery stable that housed the first Benedictine convent and school in 1881, the deplorable condition of the drafty structure was ill-suited for classrooms and the Sisters' residence, and the four Sisters left at the end of the first year. When a new school was built in 1913, the Sisters returned and were on the staff until 1982. Of the "early" schools, St. James School has remained in operation to the present day, with lay faculty and staff replacing the Sisters in most recent years.

As the desire for parochial education continued to expand, it wasn't long before the Sacred Heart Institute became too small for the number of young girls who wished to attend, and Mother Scholastica and the Community knew they needed a larger



*During construction of the first building on the Kenwood site, there was concern that the interior walls would not support the upper floors. Student dining room showing the pillars and enclosed beams that were added to strengthen the building. Steel rods were strung below the ceiling in all rooms, except those of the fourth floor. The rods, covered by weathered oak, were artistically molded at the edges, giving them a look characteristic of the late Tudor style.*



building to house the growing number of both students and Sisters. The site they found on Kenwood Avenue was, they said, an answer to prayer.

## ***The Daisy Farm***

The 80 acres of farmland purchased for \$8,000 in 1900 was about two miles from the center of Duluth. Its location on one of the highest terrains in the city with an elevation of 680 feet provided an amazing view of Lake Superior. Archive records of the time do not indicate when the Sisters began calling their property the “Daisy Farm,” but much of the acreage was covered with wild daisies, which flourish in parts of the campus to the present day. The Daisy Farm became a popular picnic destination for Sisters and their students, and it was during one of these outings that Sisters remember Mother Scholastica saying what has become part of her vision and legacy:

“My dream is that someday there will rise upon these grounds a fine building, like the great Benedictine abbeys of Europe. It will be built of stone; within its walls, higher education will flourish; the Divine Office will be chanted, and the beautiful ceremonies of the liturgy will be carried out.”

The Community borrowed funds to purchase two additional 40-acre parcels of land adjoining the Daisy Farm when they became available in 1906 and 1907, and architects Frederick German and A. Werner Lignell of Duluth were hired to plan a motherhouse and school on the 160-acre property. Construction began in 1907, but before completion of the first section there were “whispered rumors” among the workers about defects in the walls that might not hold the considerable weight of the higher floors. Despite the contractor’s reassurance that the building was structurally sound, rumors continued.

When Mother Scholastica became increasingly concerned about the quality of construction, she stopped the work and went to St. Paul to consult with her cousin, Peter Michael Kerst. He took her to the office of the St. Paul Building Inspector, which assigned Franklin Ellerbe, a young engineer, to the project. After examining the new building’s first wing, Ellerbe advised that the construction company be terminated. He thought they were honest men but lacked the kind of experience required for the project. Franklin Ellerbe took over the reconstruction and under his direction, according to Mother Agnes Somers’ account in her unpublished history of the Community, “the walls and ceilings were thickened and reinforced with steel bands, then concealed with weathered oak.” This was a considerable financial blow to the Community, which had to borrow funds to finish reconstruction. The building was completed in August 1909, and a month later Sisters and boarding students from the Sacred Heart Institute moved in.

## ***The Beginning of the College***

When Mother Alexia Kerst became Prioress of the Duluth Benedictines in July 1911, she inherited a huge debt for construction of the first section of “the Villa.” Nevertheless, she understood the need to educate Sisters. Mother Scholastica had been sending Sisters for higher education to the University of Chicago and the University of Minnesota since the early years of the Community. In 1911 Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C. began accepting women, and during the next five years Mother Alexia sent seven young Sisters there for graduate study.

It was not surprising, then, that shortly after Mother Alexia’s election as Prioress, Sisters from the Academy faculty proposed to expand the curriculum to include a two-year junior college with upper-division courses for Sisters only.

There was a strong rationale for the proposal: there was room for more students in the new Motherhouse/Academy building; a college could become a financial asset; it would



*The Community, including five postulants, enjoying an outing at the creek that ran through their new Kenwood property (c. 1903)*



*The 1920-21 additions (the theatre/gym and the first tower)*

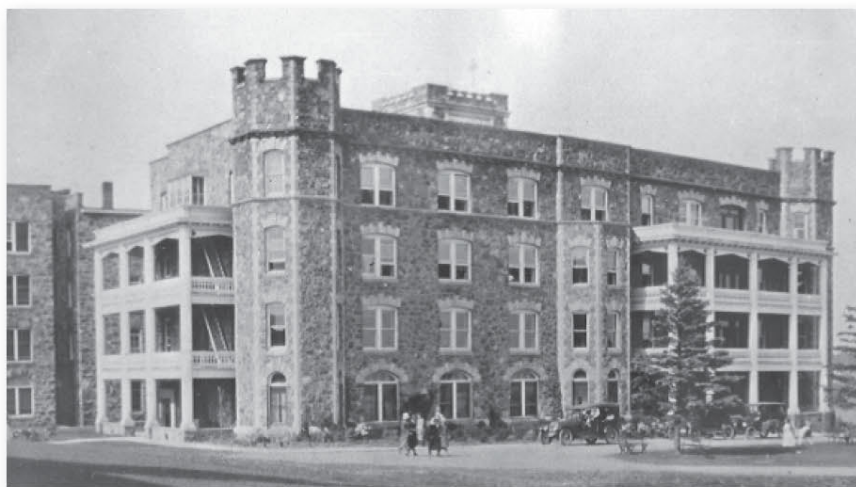


draw students from Duluth because the only other institute of higher education in the city was the Duluth Normal School; and it was the only private college in Northeastern Minnesota. Moreover, it would enable young Sisters to start their higher education at home. The Community decided to move ahead.

The curriculum included a variety of courses that would fulfill requirements for a two-year program. There was little distinction between the college and the academy until the college was accredited in 1917 and able to grant the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science degrees.

### ***Construction Continues***

When Mother Alexia Kerst died in 1916, Mother Celestine Sullivan was elected as her successor. An able administrator with a good business head, she managed to retire much of the debt that had accrued through purchase of land, construction of the first section of the motherhouse, and other costly projects. When World War I ended in 1918 and restrictions on construction were lifted, the Community again began to discuss how to realize their initial dream for the Kenwood campus. Mother Chrysostom Doran replaced Mother Celestine in August 1919, with life in both the Community and the city enjoying a period of normalcy after the devastating Cloquet fire of 1918 and the widespread influenza epidemic. Architect Thomas Ellerbe (son of Franklin who had overseen the reconstruction of the first section of Tower Hall) developed the plans, and construction began. An east/west wing was completed by Fall 1920 with a 120-seat Chapel on the third floor.



*Students arrive at Villa Sancta Scholastica. A circular driveway at the south end of Tower Hall permitted first horse-and-buggy transport and then automobiles. The wide expanse of the first floor porch was a welcoming entrance to the building.*



*The 1928 addition to Tower Hall under construction, including completion of the north/south axis, a second east/west wing, and the north tower.*



After the first tower was completed in 1921 and its new bell installed, construction began on a gymnasium/auditorium. This building would meet the needs of music and drama courses that were popular despite the fact that there was no appropriate space to practice or perform. The building had a stage, dressing rooms, and audience seating, as well as basketball and badminton courts. Because off-campus social life was virtually non-existent, the gym/theatre building was transformed at times for dancing and parties to which off-campus friends were invited. The building was deemed perfect for a growing student enrollment and an expanding membership in the Benedictine Community, with the Sisters sometimes using the space for their own recreation. Over the years many students have commented on how this close proximity to the Sisters was a treasured part of their time at the Villa, including the blessing of lifelong friendships. An unanticipated but most welcome blessing from the interaction of Sisters and students was the number of young women who became members of the Benedictine Community.

### ***Expansion of the Villa***

Mother Agnes Somers succeeded Mother Chrysostom Doran in June 1924, and two years later presented preliminary architectural plans for enlarging the Villa. Recognizing the need for more space for the growing college as well as the increasing membership of the Community, the Chapter voted unanimously to proceed with the estimated \$200,000 cost. Rather than hiring architects from Ellerbe & Co., whose father/son team had done significant architectural work for the Community, Mother Agnes had instead chosen architects from a St. Louis firm whose design differed from the original 1906 design in that the central front section had two towers rather than one and a north/south axis twice the length of the original plan. The greatly enlarged building, completed in 1928, met the needs of the growing student body of the college, which included “day hop” students as well as residents.

In subsequent years, more challenges would face the Community as they began a huge construction project just as World War II was breaking out in Europe, built their health-care presence in Duluth and throughout Minnesota and beyond, expanded their ministry of education and parish work in Duluth and throughout Minnesota and in places as far from the Villa as Phoenix, Cincinnati, Chicago, Washington, D.C., and eventually Chile. Our Community began in rented space in Munger Terrace in 1892 and within 35 years had built magnificent stone buildings on 160 acres of former farmland overlooking Lake Superior. And it all began, as we prayed years later during the Rite of Entry to what would become our new Our Lady Queen of Peace Chapel, “Thank You for the power of a vision, the strength of an idea, the courage of imagination.”



*Tower Hall as completed in Spring 1928.  
Note the porches on the south end (left side of photo), the original entrance,  
where the enclosed cloister walk and other buildings would be added ten years later.*