

# REMEMBERING THINGS PAST: GONE BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

By Sister Margaret Clarke

With the recent publication of *Lost Duluth* by Tony Dierckins and Maryanne Norton, an illustrated compendium of notable but no longer existing buildings and neighborhoods, we were inspired to add our own heritage of “lost” buildings once belonging to the Benedictine community of Duluth. We have chosen three for this first installment: there may be more to come!

**The “Old” St. Mary’s Hospital.** The earliest of these to be constructed in 1887 was located at Twentieth Avenue West and Third Street in what is now Duluth’s West End. The Benedictine Sisters in Duluth in the 1880s were missioned from St. Benedict’s Convent in St. Joseph, Minnesota. Mother Scholastica Kerst was prioress there at that time. The independent Duluth community did not yet exist. The Sisters were responsible for teaching in four parish schools. Abbot Alexius Edelbrock of St. John’s, a close friend of Mother Scholastica and the Kerst family, had a dream of establishing an independent abbey of monks in Duluth, and to that end had purchased several lots in the West End. He sent a crew of monks together with the monastic architect from St. John’s, Father Gregory Steil, to construct a church, school, and “seminary,” which he envisioned as becoming the new abbey. Bricks from the St. John’s brickyard were sent to Duluth by the trainload, and by the end of 1887 the construction was nearing completion. Another problem had arisen for Abbot Alexius, however: an ecclesiastical investigation of his abbey and Mother Scholastica’s convent had been mandated. The time was not ripe for a new monastic foundation, so he suggested to Mother Scholastica that the convent take over the seminary building as a hospital. The church and school became the Benedictine parish of St. Clement’s.



*The 1887 St. Clement’s “campus,” including church, elementary school, and “seminary”—later to be St. Mary’s Hospital.*



*The original St. Mary’s Hospital at 20<sup>th</sup> Avenue West and Second Street.*

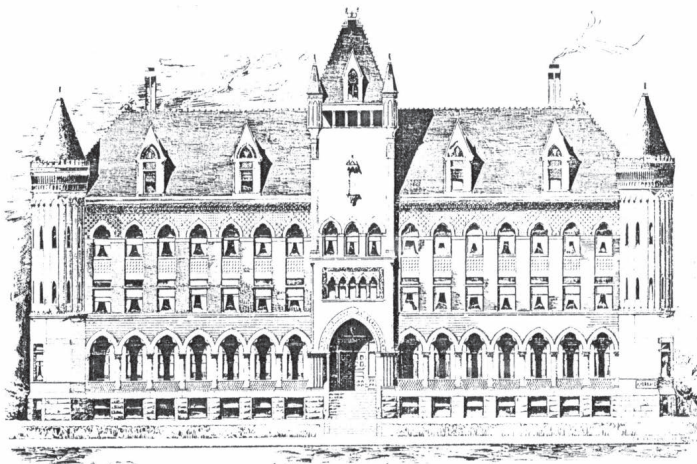
Father Gregory’s plan for the building strongly resembled other structures he had planned: a plain unadorned façade topped by a Mansard roof, no electricity, no running water, not originally intended as a hospital. Sister Alexia Kerst, who had been the hospital administrator in Bismarck, was in charge, with six additional Sisters. They chose to locate surgery on the fourth floor, accessible by a hand-cranked elevator. Dr. William Magie, one of the founders of the Duluth Clinic, was the staff physician. St. Mary’s Hospital was dedicated and blessed on April 3, 1888, by Abbot Alexius, who then checked himself in as the first patient, suffering from what various sources state to be pneumonia, typhoid, or exhaustion from his dealings with his monastic detractors and Roman superiors.

The hospital also served as home for a number of Sisters who taught in the Duluth schools and who hiked all the way downtown daily. In 1898 a new hospital building was constructed in central Duluth, and the building became first an orphanage (the precursor of St. James Orphanage) and then in 1911, St. Ann’s Home for the Aged. The building was demolished in 1958 to make way for a parking lot.

**The Motherhouse that wasn't.** In 1892, when the Duluth community became independent, Mother Scholastica rented two 16-room townhouses in the newly constructed Munger Terrace for a Sisters' residence and girls' academy. A significant number of Sisters still lived at the hospital as well. Mother Scholastica, who had unerring taste, had chosen one of the premier addresses in Duluth, and it soon became evident that the rent was a bit more than the fledgling Community could afford. Her parents, Peter and Anna Kerst, purchased two lots for the Community on Third Street at Fifth Avenue East, and plans were made to build a motherhouse at that location. Bishop McGolrick, who had also been living in Munger Terrace since his church and rectory had burned, had hired a notable Duluth architect, Gearhard Tenbusch, to design his new Sacred Heart Cathedral in 1893. It was doubtless the Bishop who recommended Tenbusch to Mother Scholastica, and plans were drawn up for an elaborate structure with towers, turrets, balconies and elaborate brickwork very much in keeping with the Victorian taste of Duluth architecture at that time. Construction began on the foundations in 1893, but lack of funds and a severe economic downturn in Duluth prevented anything but the basement to be completed. After a skirmish with the community in St. Joseph, who still owned property in Duluth, Mother Scholastica managed to gain title to two lots on Third Avenue East and Third Street and was able to put up a simple brick building there to house the Sisters and Academy: Sacred Heart Institute.



*Munger Terrace as it appeared in 1892.*



*Gearhard Tenbusch's plans for the new motherhouse at 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue East and Third Street.*



*Sacred Heart Institute on 3<sup>rd</sup> Avenue East and Third Street, constructed 1894.*

Around the turn of the century, Duluth still harbored a number of anti-Catholic groups who were fearful that the Catholics, in the form of the Benedictine Sisters, were infiltrating the area along with Polish, Irish, Italian, and German immigrants. One account says that the Sisters were afraid to walk in certain parts of Duluth lest they be attacked by Nativists. Another recounts that some well-meaning businessmen visited St. Mary's Hospital ready to rescue the nuns who were being held there against their wills. The abandoned foundations of the unbuilt motherhouse proved to be what would now be designated an attractive nuisance in that regard. Various groups were giving guided tours of the "dark cells, dungeons and cubilettes" in which the nuns would be immured. In 1896 Bishop McGolrick wrote a scathing letter to the *Duluth Herald* stating "To allay the fears of these poor people, we invite them to visit all our institutions. . . . They are at full liberty to examine every nook and corner for skeletons, walled-up nuns and buried babies. . . . We have no desire for boiled Baptist, nor do we long for Unitarian on toast."

**The “New” St. Mary’s Hospital.** By 1897 the financial problems of both the civic community and the religious community had eased, and Bishop McGolrick suggested to Mother Scholastica that the abandoned Fifth Avenue site be completed as a new hospital as the West End St. Mary’s was now overcrowded and far from the main business district. Mother Scholastica and the Chapter agreed, and construction began. Mother Scholastica’s correspondence with the previous architect, Mr. Tenbusch, seems to indicate that they had fallen out over some fees, and she therefore chose to go with a new architect for the hospital building. This time she went to St. Paul for Clarence H. Johnston, who would ten years later build Glensheen in Duluth as well. The yellow-brick building seems to have been modeled on the original motherhouse plan, but less flamboyantly decorated. It could house 200 patients—twice as many as the original St. Mary’s. Even so, the demand for services became even greater, and in 1912, an extension with an additional 75 beds was added. Over the decades, additions were made along the Third Street axis in 1921 and 1957, and in 1967 the yellow-brick east wing was razed to make way for a new east wing, opened in 1969.



*The “new” St. Mary’s Hospital at  
5<sup>th</sup> Avenue East and Third Street in 1898*

**Forgotten but not gone.** Although we have concentrated here on buildings no longer present, there are still places existing in Duluth where the Sisters lived and worked, but which no longer have any connection with the Benedictines. Munger Terrace, visible as one drives up Mesaba Avenue, has been converted into 32 low-income apartments. Sacred Heart Institute on Third Avenue East and Third Street, the original motherhouse, became first a residence for St. Mary’s Nursing students and eventually a retirement home for older Sisters. It was sold in 1972 and has also been converted to low-cost housing.

