

Remembering Things Past: St. Gertrude's School of Arts and Crafts

By Sister Margaret Clarke

Thomas Verner Moore (1877-1959) was ordained a Paulist priest in 1901 and received a doctorate in psychology at Catholic University in 1903. He then studied in Munich and Leipzig and returned to D.C. in 1905 to teach at Catholic University. In 1915 he received an M.D. in Psychiatry from Johns Hopkins and served in the Army medical corps in World War I. In 1919 he made a retreat at Downside Abbey in England and found himself attracted to Benedictine life. In 1923 he and four companions entered the novitiate at Fort Augustus, Scotland, with the intention of returning to the U.S. to establish a Benedictine monastery in Washington D.C. In 1924 the American monks with some Scottish companions founded their monastery near Catholic University. This was to become St. Anselm's Abbey. Dom Thomas returned to his teaching position at C.U.

Concurrently with all of this, he continued a lifelong project of providing care and education for (what would now be termed) intellectually disabled Catholic children. By 1924 he had plans for opening a facility for mildly disabled girls. He had been invited to give a retreat at Villa Sancta Scholastica in Duluth and mentioned this project to Mother Agnes Somers, who brought it to the Community as a possible ministry. As a result, several Sisters were sent to the University of Minnesota and Columbia University to prepare.

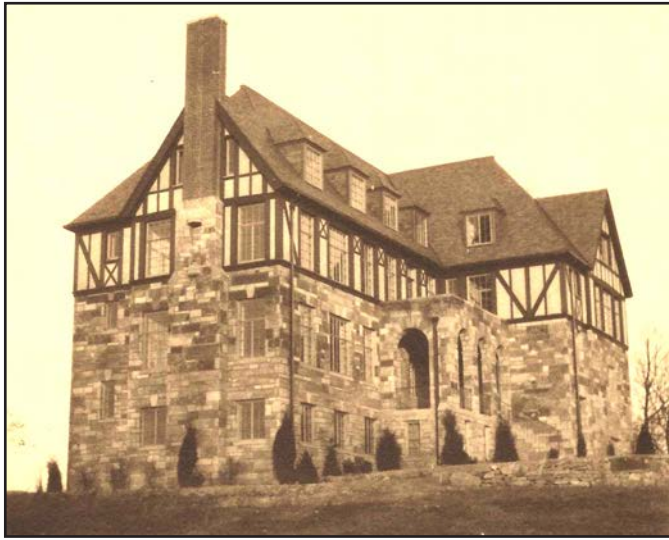


Arrival of Sisters , August 1926. Postulant Kathleen Hayden, Sisters Justina Gruesen, Olivia Gowan and Hedwig Gierdahl, Dom Thomas, another Benedictine, and ladies of what would become St. Gertrude's Guild.



The Sisters' residence in 1926, showing the sleeping porch where boarding students resided.

In August 1926 Sisters Olivia Gowan, Justina Gruesen, Hedwig Gierdahl, and postulant Kathleen (Sister Benita) Hayden arrived at their new mission: St. Gertrude's School of Arts and Crafts. A former farm adjacent to the St. Anselm's property had been purchased by the monks. The farmhouse became the convent and residence for some students, and the barn was refurbished as the school. The school which began with two students was soon overcrowded, and in 1928 a new school building was constructed. The old farmhouse continued to house the Sisters until 1968, when a new classroom and dormitory was constructed, and the Sisters moved into the 1928 school building.



St. Gertrude's school built in 1928, later named "Moore Manor."



Dom Thomas with students dressed for May Crowning in 1942.

Over the nearly 70 years of its existence, St. Gertrude's faculty and staff lovingly cared for and educated up to 40 girls per year, ages six to nineteen, who were classified as educable or mildly emotionally disturbed. One brochure from the 1980s describes the philosophy of the school:

"We believe that each child is an unique individual who should have the opportunity to develop to her fullest potential in a secure homelike atmosphere of beauty, peace and love befitting her as a child of God. The primary goal of St. Gertrude's School [is to provide these opportunities] thereby if possible [enabling her] to become a productive and independent member of our society."

Services offered included academic, pre-vocational and vocational training, physical education, arts and crafts instruction, speech therapy, and self-help skills. Monthly field trips away from campus included museum visits, excursions to historic places in D.C., and programs and plays. These trips often included using public transportation and eating in restaurants. Older girls were given the opportunity to learn office skills, and home economics students went to purchase food at the local grocery stores. There was also an active Girl Scouts troop. One newspaper article published in the 1970s notes:

"The Benedictine tradition is apparent in the way the teachers, both Sisters and lay faculty address the students. According to the *Rule of Benedict*, each guest is to be given the same welcome that would be extended to Christ himself. Warmth and affection are mixed with respect for the dignity of each child. . . . The results of this approach can be seen in the graduates of St. Gertrude's. Many are working in civil service jobs, in private offices, nursing homes and hospitals. Some manage their own apartments."

St. Gertrude's was also respected in political and diplomatic circles. Mother Agnes Somers made the most of her periodic visits in the 1930s, meeting Eleanor Roosevelt who generously donated some items from Theodore Roosevelt's home to the Villa, and the French ambassador, who gave her a Louis XV settee and chair which had been hibernating in the embassy basement. (These items are all still in the Monastery Heritage Room.) Rosemary Kennedy had a brief residence at St. Gertrude's but was over the upper age limit, so was not able to stay, as her family had wished. The proximity of the facility to Catholic University also provided housing for Sisters who were attending that institution, and many of them also helped to work with the children.

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Students and faculty returning by train from an outing, 1950s. Srs. Winifred O'Grady, Teresa Kociancich, Alberta Young in back. Margaret Dwight on right.



Sister Maureen Harney and student.

Many Sisters were assigned to this ministry over the years, some for between ten and thirty years. Sister Maureen Harney was there for more than forty years and was Director for most of that time. She was beloved by all, and eventually the 1968 construction was named for her: Harney Hall. Dom Thomas was actively involved with the school until 1946 when he decided to become a Carthusian monk and moved to Spain to do so. One of the early students, Margaret Dwight, grew up at the school and continued to stay there as part of the St. Gertrude's family for most of her adult life, working in the kitchen and in housekeeping.

An article in the *Catholic Standard* in 1986 quotes Sister Mary Carol Braun, Director for fourteen years: "Before I came here, I never thought I could work with handicapped children, but it doesn't take long to love them. You can't imagine what a thrill just a little bit of progress means and how loving they are." Two parents were also interviewed, and both had nothing but praise. "The teachers are wonderfully dedicated," said one mother. "These children need to learn to do things on their own, and the Sisters make them do what they can do." Another parent, an Episcopalian minister, said, "What I like about the Sisters at St. Gertrude's is that their Christianity isn't the kind that's used to club you over the head. Rather, it quietly radiates out of every pore."

At about this time, a little cloud appeared on the horizon which was to signal the end of the school. In the 1970s the federal government had legislated that parents could request funding for exceptional children if their needs were not being met in the public schools. As time passed the securing of these funds became more and more difficult, so by the late 1980s parents were hiring lawyers to challenge the school districts which were requiring the students to be enrolled in the public schools. This proved to be more costly and less effective as time progressed, so by the early 1990s enrollment had dwindled to a mere handful, and in 1992 St. Gertrude's was closed. The buildings and property were sold to Boys' Town, which established several programs there for disadvantaged boys and girls.

Everyone who ever visited St. Gertrude's was impressed with the atmosphere of love and joy that infused the campus and the care and respect given to each of the residents. This was a truly successful ministry of St. Scholastica Monastery.

Photos from Monastery Archives