

# REMEMBERING THINGS PAST: “LET’S START A COLLEGE!”

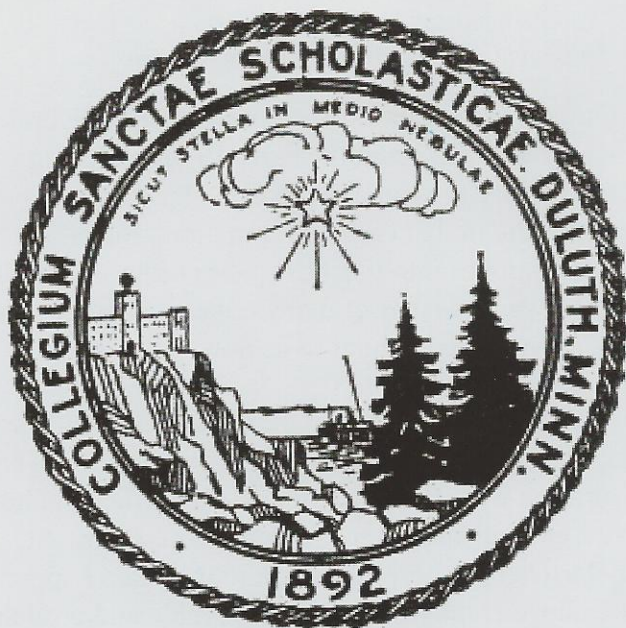
By Sister Margaret Clarke

In the fall of 1911, just short of 20 years after its founding, the Duluth Benedictine Community had 163 professed and novice members and 18 postulants. Following the death of Mother Scholastica Kerst that summer her sister, Sister Alexia, had been elected prioress. In 1909 the Community had built its second motherhouse (or at least the first installment thereof)—Villa Sancta Scholastica in the Kenwood neighborhood. Besides supplying teachers for a number of Duluth parish schools, the Community owned five hospitals and Villa Sancta Scholastica Academy for young women (high school and preparatory divisions.) The Community was deeply in debt from building the Villa and several hospitals. Life insurance policies had been taken out on Sisters to provide collateral for loans. In addition, the new Prioress was involved in acrimonious debate with members of the clergy regarding the Community’s Canadian missions (which would result in a new foundation in Winnipeg) and with Bishop Corbett of Crookston regarding Community missions in his diocese.

Since the early days of the Community, Mother Scholastica had been sending Sisters for higher education to the University of Minnesota and the University of Chicago. In 1911 the Catholic University (Washington, D.C.) opened its doors to women for the first time, and in the ensuing five years Mother Alexia sent seven young Sisters there for graduate work. Sister Agnes Somers and Sister Augustine Blau received the MA there in 1916, and Sister Katharine McCarthy became the first woman to receive the Ph.D. there in the same year.

Shortly after Mother Alexia’s election, two young Sisters came to her with a proposal: to expand the Academy to include a two-year junior college. These two Sisters were Sister Agnes Somers and Sister Katharine McCarthy, speaking for other members of the Academy faculty. They doubtless felt that they were ready for the challenge. Today, if a prioress were to receive such a proposal, she would ultimately bring it to the entire Community in Chapter for a vote. When we look back to the founding of the College, this is what we imagine to have happened. As a matter of fact . . . it did not! Early in the Community’s history, Mother Scholastica had decided that the Chapter, which would make all important decisions, would be limited to a small number of elected and appointed finally-professed Sisters. In Mother Alexia’s time, this was sixteen members. The Prioress would also seek advice from a group of four—the Corporation officers—which eventually came to be known as the Council. Apparently, the request to start a college went only to the Prioress and Council. There is no record in the Chapter minutes of any discussion or decision on this issue.

Mother Alexia was in favor of the plan. The Council was not. They were concerned with the Community debt and did not wish to take on any more financial obligations. Sisters Agnes and Katharine submitted reasons in favor of their plan: the College would become a financial asset after several years; it would draw students from Duluth, being the only other institute of higher education there besides the Duluth Normal School; it would attract Cathedral High and Central High grads to a liberal arts program close to home—the only college north of the Twin Cities; and—most important to the Community—it would enable young Sisters to start their higher education at home, not interfering with convent life. Although only six (four Sisters, two lay) women were probable enrollees for 1912, the Council eventually gave consent.

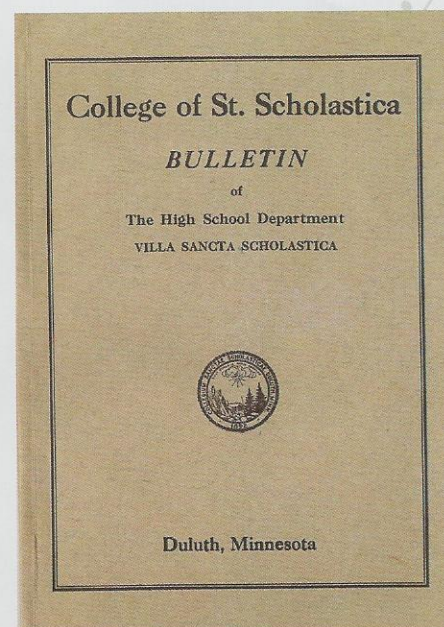
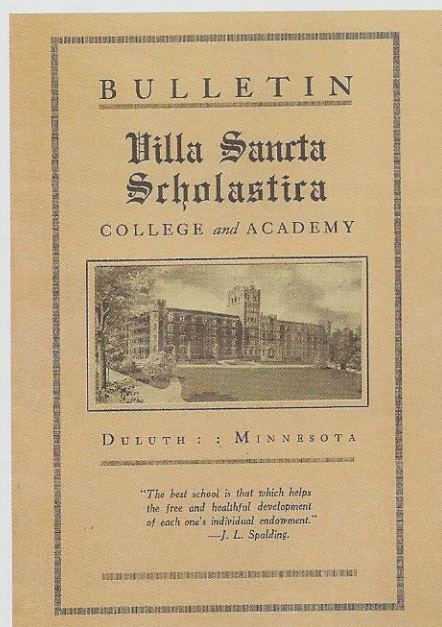
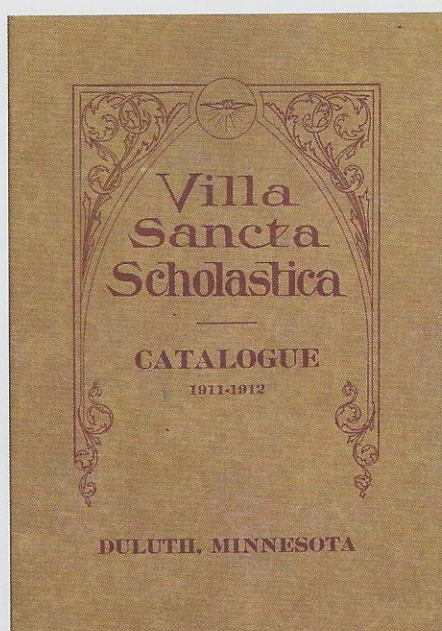


*College original logo in use until the 1930s*



In November of 1911, planning began. Sister Paul Ketter set out to increase the number of college-level books in the library. Sisters Agnes and Katharine planned a course sequence. They identified 52 courses in Religion, Philosophy, Psychology, Education, English, History, Mathematics, Natural Science, Ancient and Modern Languages, and Fine Arts. Within a short time they had also identified upper division courses offered for Sisters only. The course offerings were published in the December 1911 *Villa Quarterly*, which continued to be used for College announcements for several years, culminating in the June 1917 issue which was devoted almost entirely to College and Academy information. In the early years there seems to have been little distinction made between the College and the Academy (High School.) The College women were apparently held to the same regulations for dress and behavior as the younger students. At its beginning the College seems to have been just another department of VSS Academy. By 1917 this had been reversed, and the Academy programs were now listed as departments under the general title of the College of St. Scholastica. In 1916 the College was accredited by the University of Minnesota, and from then onward was advertised as “incorporated under the laws of the State of Minnesota and empowered to grant all College Degrees,” specifically, the Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science. Because there was no “Associate of Arts” degree as there is today for junior college graduates, those women who completed the two-year program had no official recognition at commencement. At the 1917 Commencement program, however, Sister Mary Agatha (from Dubuque, Iowa) and Miss Alice Lamb (later Sister Alice) received the B.A. degree—Sister Agnes’s plan to offer upper division courses for Sisters apparently had been implemented.

The College of St. Scholastica, which today offers programs leading not only to the Bachelor’s degrees, but to Masters and Doctoral degrees as well, celebrates the centennial of its founding in 2012. For a description of its current status and a list of its centennial programs, see its website at <http://www.css.edu/About.html>. It has gone from a two-year department of the Villa Sancta Scholastica Academy with six students in 1912 to the primary entity of which the Academy was only a department in 1917, to a four-year college in 1924. For its first fifty years its faculty, staff, and administration were mostly Sisters. And though the Monastery and the College are now separate entities, the College still remains a sponsored institution of St. Scholastica Monastery, sharing our campus and infused with the Benedictine values of its founders. We celebrate with the College, and wish it many more centuries to come!



*In 1911-12 the College (six students: four Sisters and two laywomen) was designated as a department of Villa Sancta Scholastica Academy. By 1915 the College and Academy had equal billing, but within a few years the Academy had become a “high school department” of the College of St. Scholastica.”*