

Building on Rock

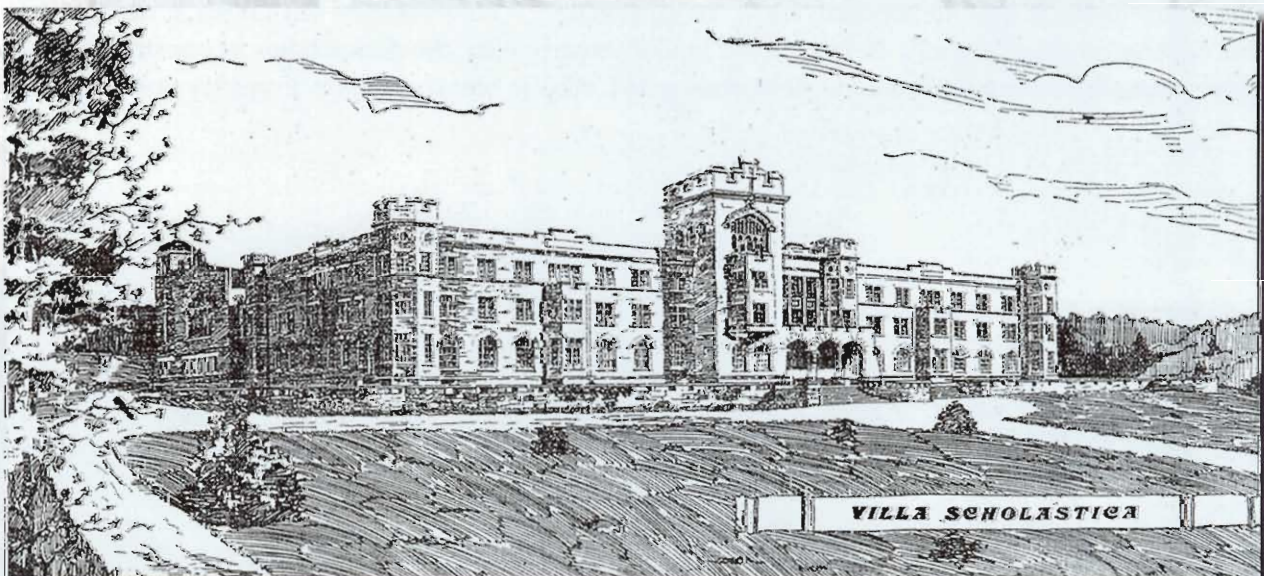
By Sister Margaret Clarke

This is the second in a multi-part history of the construction of Tower Hall and the Sisters' move in 1909 to this site, the former "Daisy Farm."

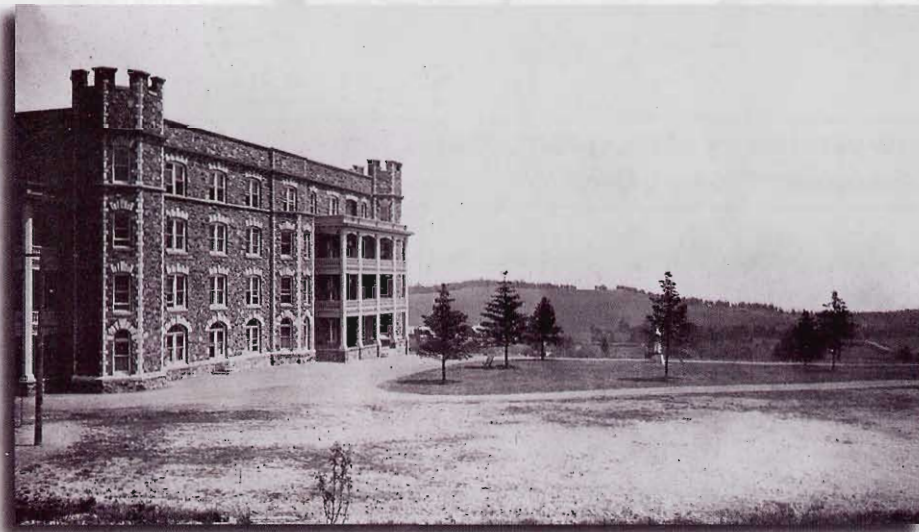
"The rain fell and the floods came and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock." Matt.7:25 NRSB

The farm in Kenwood, purchased in 1900, was a going concern. Milk and vegetables were supplied to Sacred Heart Institute and St. Mary's Hospital. The enrollment at the Institute was growing, however, and more space was needed, so at the Chapter meeting on May 28, 1905, the Sisters agreed to begin building a motherhouse and school on the Kenwood property. In June 1906, at the school picnic, Bishop McGolrick pointed out to Mother Scholastica the ideal site for this building, remarking that "it is sequestered from the public road; its elevation is high; and it commands a splendid view of Lake Superior." It was also in keeping with tradition: since the foundation of Montecassino in 529, Benedictines have always preferred the hilltops to the valleys. In the meantime, funds for building had to be acquired. Fortuitously, two adjoining 40-acre parcels also became available in August 1906 and January 1907, completing the 160 acres. These were purchased, and the last parcel was found to have a quarry of basalt "blue trap" stone.

A \$40,000 loan was secured from a Catholic institution, and further funds were secured through loans on insurance policies that had been taken out on the Sisters. The architects chosen were Frederick German and A. Werner Lignell of Duluth, who collectively and individually also designed many commercial buildings, residences, and churches. Their original plan shows an impressive three-story structure with a single central tower aligned along a north-south axis with westward-trending wings, with a large chapel building at the west end of the southernmost wing. The building was almost immediately increased to four stories. Economic constraints dictated that only the southern half of the building would be constructed to begin with. A separate three-story building to contain the science laboratories, laundry, and boiler room was constructed adjacent to what would be the center wing.



Original German and Lignell sketch of the proposed Villa Sancta Scholastica, 1907.



The main entrance to the 1909 building faces south. The Saint Scholastica statue can be seen behind a tree in the "Triangle."

Construction progressed on schedule, but in May 1908, a month before the proposed completion of the building, Mr. McLaughlin, Sister Raymond's father, mentioned to the Sisters that in his opinion the walls and ceilings were not sufficiently strong to support the weight of the upper floors. The contractors reassured the Sisters that the building was structurally sound, but shortly afterwards Mr. Beyenka, Sister Eustacia's father and the farm manager, overheard a disturbing conversation between two workmen.

"It's a fine looking building."

"Yes, and big. Nothing bigger in Duluth, I guess."

"Well, it's big enough and fine to look at, but I tell you, when the ceilings fall in a heap on those Sisters and their pupils, there'll be some tragedy in these parts."

Sister Eustacia reported the conversation to Mother Scholastica, who was on the train to St. Paul the next morning to consult with her cousin Peter Kerst.

Peter took Mother Scholastica to the offices of the St. Paul Building Inspector. The Inspector assigned a young consulting engineer, Franklin Ellerbe, to the project. Ellerbe travelled to the site, spent a day looking over the building, and within a few days had recommended to the Sisters that the contractors should be terminated. The architects went with them, "tearing up their plans and specifications" as they left. Mother Agnes Somers in her unpublished history of the Community is kind in her analysis of the contractors: "They seem to have been honest men but lacking in experience." In later years in Community lore, the deficiencies in construction have sometimes been attributed to deliberate anti-Catholic bias, but this is probably not the case.

A view of the 1909 building from what is now the campus segment of College Street. The laundry-boiler room-science lab building is visible in the rear.



Franklin Ellerbe took over the reconstruction project. As Mother Agnes reports, “walls were thickened and reinforced with steel bands. All of the large rooms were further strengthened by iron pillars. . . steel rods were strung below the ceiling in all rooms except those on fourth floor. . . covered with weathered oak,” which gave an English Tudor flavor to the interiors. The building was completed in August 1909.



Left: The students' dining room showing the pillars and enclosed beams added to strengthen the building.

Below: Instant trees! The Sisters dug the holes, and the workmen brought in the transplanted pines by horse and cart.



Franklin Ellerbe went on to bigger things. His son Thomas, in *The Ellerbe Tradition*, says: “He liked being his own boss during the planning for the Villa Saint Scholastica reconstruction. The experience had made him think often of becoming an independent architect.” In spring of 1909 he did precisely this, and his firm (now Ellerbe Becket), over the hundred years of its existence, has been responsible for the planning of many noteworthy buildings throughout Minnesota, the Midwest, and eventually the nation. Ellerbe, and later his son Thomas, was the architect of choice for many of the Duluth Community’s subsequent construction projects: additions to Tower Hall in 1913 and 1921, the gymnasium, and three hospital buildings. The original plan for Tower Hall with its single tower, which was adopted without much change by Ellerbe in 1908, continued to be prominently featured in all of the Villa and College publications until the completion of the building (with two towers) in 1927.

To be continued in the Lenten 2009 Pathways. Quotations are from an unpublished history of the Community by Mother Agnes Somers. Photos from Monastery Archives.