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Pictures from the Past: Mount St. Joseph, Cincinnati, Ohio

JUDITH METZ, S.C.
When the first four Sisters of Charity arrived from Emmitsburg, Maryland, in Cincinnati, Ohio, in October 1829, they opened St. Peter’s girls’ orphanage and school in a rented house, taking its name from the nearby Cathedral. Within a few years, Bishop John Purcell purchased a mansion just a few blocks from the Ohio River to accommodate the growing enrollment in both the school and orphanage. This building served as the home for the orphanage and school (1836-1854), and later for St. John’s Hospital (1854-1866), the first Catholic hospital in the city.

In March 1852 six sisters on the Cincinnati mission, led by Sister Margaret George, formed an independent diocesan congregation, the Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati. They immediately opened a novitiate, began to expand their ministries, and searched for a suitable motherhouse. Within a year they acquired property on a hillside overlooking the city and named their stately new home Mount St. Vincent. After adding a third story and porches, it became the first motherhouse as well as the location of Mount St. Vincent Academy.
Within a few years the needs of the community and the academy outgrew the capacity of this location. The Sisters sold the property, and another piece of land they owned, in order to purchase the 33-acre estate of Judge Alderson, located just a few miles farther west of the city. English author Mary Howitt, who spent a year visiting relatives there, wrote a description of the property in a memoir, Our Cousins in Ohio. “The house,” she noted, “stood at a little distance from the road,” and “was white, [and] had green Venetian outside shutters to the windows. In front there was a large two-storied porch, up which grew in wild luxuriance a beautiful prairie rose.... On the sunny side of the house... there ran along its whole length a broad piazza; which, like the porch, was two-storied; so that both the upper and lower rooms opened into it.... It was approached from the road by an avenue of locust-trees; and the lawn itself was scattered over and grouped with cedar and
There was a lovely deer park and a nearby clump of willows called Willow Glen. To the south and west of the home were orchards of apple, plum, peach, and pear trees, and beyond, a wonderful meadow and a deep spring.

The estate, dubbed “The Cedars” by the Alderson family, was renamed “Cedar Grove” after Sister Sophia Gilmeyer’s home in Maryland, while the Sisters fondly referred to the home on the estate as “The Cradle.” This beautiful location served as the motherhouse for the Sisters of Charity until 1884. From here sisters left to serve as Civil War nurses, began their journeys over the Santa Fe Trail to open missions in the New Mexico and Colorado Territories, presided over a growing number of new ministries, and welcomed students to Mount St. Vincent Academy.

Within six months of acquiring Mount St. Vincent, Cedar Grove, the cornerstone for a five-story brick academy building was laid. Opening in November 1858, this addition allowed Mount St. Vincent Academy to expand; while the purchase of additional property and the construction of another building in 1874 is testimony to the ongoing growth of the community and success of the academy.

1 Mary Howitt, Our Cousins in Ohio (London: A. W. Bennett, 1866), pp. 2-3.
But changing times helped determine the future of the Sisters of Charity. The growth of Cincinnati and increasing population pressures in the downtown area led to the construction of five inclines, allowing people to reside on the hilltops surrounding the city while commuting to their jobs. Anticipating this development, the Sisters of Charity purchased a farm in 1869 in Delhi Township, about five miles west of Mount St. Vincent. This delightful spot overlooking the Ohio River would provide an ideal future location for a motherhouse, novitiate, and academy. The red-brick farmhouse, re-named “St. Joseph House,” immediately became the novitiate. The Sisters added a frame addition to provide a chapel, dining room, and infirmary.
When the Price Hill Incline opened in 1874 the Sisters were immediately pressured by real estate developers to sell some of the Mount St. Vincent property for residential purposes. A large portion was sold in the early 1880s. The community used the funds to purchase several additional farms in Delhi adjacent to St. Joseph House, with the intent of eventually moving the motherhouse and boarding academy there.

Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse was designed by Cincinnati architect A.C. Nash. The buildings were of blue limestone, quarried on the property, with sandstone trim. Dedicated in June 1884, the Sisters proudly moved into their new home. The fine building featured a beautiful chapel, with exquisite furnishings, including a hand-carved communion railing created by five of the sisters. Gifts in honor of the Golden Jubilees of two of the founding members, Mother Josephine Harvey and Sister Anthony O’Connell, celebrated in the spring of 1885, further enhanced the new motherhouse. Many sisters had their first glimpse of Mount St. Joseph when they came for retreats and classes during the summer of 1885. Around noon on the 16th of July, the day after one of the retreats ended, smoke was seen pouring from the roof of the year-old motherhouse. Because fire engines from the city were not able to navigate the steep hill in front of the property, water from the large cisterns went unused. By evening the charred brick walls and fire-proof vault containing the archives were all that remained of the majestic building. The splendid chapel furnishings were destroyed; the clothing and shoes ready to be distributed to the sisters leaving for their various missions were all in ashes.

The infirm sisters returned to Mount St. Vincent, while Archbishop William Elder offered the temporarily closed St. Mary Seminary for the use of the novices. Merchants and bankers were generous in their dealings as the Sisters made plans to rebuild. Railroad officials, who had already put in a special switch at St. Joseph (Railroad) Station for loading and unloading building materials, now made a more generous offer of reduced freight rates “to do what we can to help rebuild your House.”

Within several days of the fire, work began on a new Mount St. Joseph, using materials already on the grounds. By the summer of 1886, Marian Hall, the west wing of the proposed new motherhouse, was ready for the Sisters to return. The new structures were designed by Adolph Druiding, a German-born architect/builder whose Chicago firm was known throughout the Midwest German-Catholic community for impressive buildings. Work continued on the center and east wings, with the entire complex completed by 1899.

The new Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse is in the Romanesque-revival style, constructed of red brick with white, rough-cut stones along the first story, in the keystones, and in horizontal bands. The roof is made up of a series of peaks with one squared central bell tower. At the main entrance, huge wooden doors swing open to a second set of doors graced with etched glass. Stained glass windows in nearby parlor transoms, and a richly carved wooden staircase create a sense of strength and groundedness. The long hallways extending on either side of the entrance have high ceilings with wooden arches placed
periodically along the expanse. The use of quartered oak throughout the building is one of the most dramatic features, evident in arches, circular stairwells, abundant wainscoting, and wooden blinds.

Immaculate Conception Chapel was dedicated in 1901 and consecrated two years later. Built in the shape of a Latin cross, this magnificent four-story design is an expression of Renaissance/Romanesque architecture. Vaulted ceilings coalesce to form a central dome, which is enhanced with a fresco celebrating the Blessed Sacrament painted by Richard Bachman. A second large fresco in the sanctuary dome is by German-born artist, Wilhelm Lamprecht. Eleven months in its execution, it depicts the passage from the book of Revelations: “A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.” God the Father and the Holy Spirit appear above her head and the entire painting is surrounded by angels and cherubs. The chapel was renovated in 2000 to create a more contemporary worship space. A new octagonal altar was placed on a circular peninsula at the center of the architectural cruciform of the chapel. The white marble of the original altar was used in a pedestal on

2 Rev. 12:1.
which the tabernacle rests and a Baptismal font. The painted glass windows and frescoes were restored, the lighting was improved, and new seating included a combination of chairs and pews.

A second remarkable location at Mount St. Joseph is the Art Gallery. Its ornate woodwork balcony including decorative haunches, wrought iron railings on the circular staircase and the second floor balcony, and ceiling medallions, make it one of the most beautiful rooms in the building. A rosette theme is carried throughout the woodwork on the underside of the balcony, along its outer edge, and in the wrought iron railing. The stained glass windows in the doors were created by art students at the College of Mount St. Joseph. Although pressed into service for other uses through the years, it currently displays paintings, furniture, pottery and other pieces of art belonging to the Sisters of Charity.

Besides serving as the motherhouse of the Sisters of Charity, Mount St. Joseph served for several years as the home of St. Aloysius Academy for boys before it moved to another location. In 1906 Mount St. Joseph Academy for Girls opened. The Sisters closed the boarding academy at Mount St. Vincent, Cedar Grove, at that time, but continued to operate a day academy there.
Through the years the Academy expanded its curriculum, offering “post-graduate” courses as women began to seek further education. Flowing from this, the College of Mount St. Joseph opened in 1920. It soon outgrew the space available, and in 1927 Seton Hall, containing offices, a library, classrooms and bedrooms, was opened. As college enrollment continued to expand, the Sisters closed Mount St. Joseph Academy in 1947 to devote all available space to the college.

With the use of the motherhouse extending more than a century, changes, retooling, relocations, and renovations have been the order of the day. This became especially true when the College of Mount St. Joseph relocated to a new facility in 1962. Former dormitories became bedrooms; classrooms became offices and meeting rooms. For a time the Mount Campus School and Eldermount, an adult day center, were located at the motherhouse. But over the many years and through the many changes, every effort has been made to retain its original beauty and architectural integrity.

Other notable features of the campus include:

• A cemetery at the rear of the property was created in 1884, even before the first Mount St. Joseph was completed. The original burials were laid out in a circular fashion around a smaller inner circle surrounded by stately oak trees. By terracing hillsides to the north...
of the original plots, additional space for burials was created in 1930. In recent years a further addition was made.

- In the days before electricity, a pond and ice house was built. When this became obsolete, the ice house was transformed into a grotto honoring Our Lady of Lourdes. Around 1950 these statues were moved to a more prominent place on the campus and a new shrine was built.

- In the late 1940s, Mother Margaret Hall, a home for aged and infirm sisters, was built. A six-story structure, it has been extensively renovated through the years to meet changing needs.

- Fine outdoor statuary graces the grounds. Some, such as the statue of St. Joseph, have historic significance. This statue was located near the edge of the hill on which Mount St. Joseph stands with the express intent of placing this protector-saint in charge of making sure the hill did not slide! So far he has lived up to his responsibility.

In addition to the Motherhouse buildings, the extensive property owned by the Sisters of Charity is now occupied by two sponsored ministries: The College of Mount Saint Joseph; and Bayley, a continuing care retirement community. What used to be farmlands and orchards is now home to seniors, and what was once a turkey farm now educates students to become mature and responsible citizens of the world.
Cincinnati riverfront, 1829.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
The first Mount St. Vincent, 1854.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
Mount St. Vincent, Cedar Grove, 1857.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
Mount St. Vincent Academy, sister with students.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
The Mt. Adams, Cincinnati, incline; and St. Joseph House novitiate, 1869.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
An architect’s drawing of Mount St. Joseph, ca. 1883; the ruins of the 1885 fire that burned down the first Mount St. Joseph.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
St. Joseph Railroad Station.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
The front entrance; and the new Mount St. Joseph Motherhouse.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
The circular main staircase constructed of oak.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
1) The chapel, ca. 1908; 2) The chapel’s organ and choir loft

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
3) The present-day chapel.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
The Art Gallery at Mount St. Joseph.

Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH
Students on lawn of Mount St. Joseph Academy.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*

The College of Mount St. Joseph class of 1921-1922.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
1) The cemetery, ca. 1890; 2) The cemetery cross; 3) Terracing in the cemetery.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
The grotto; and the grotto building converted from an ice house.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*
Mother Margaret Hall Infirmary, ca. 1947.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*

The academy building, Mount St. Vincent, Cedar Grove.

*Courtesy Sisters of Charity of Cincinnati, Mount St. Joseph, OH*