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The History of Columba Hall

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## **The History of Columba Hall**

The focus of this paper is intended to have two points: the building, Columba Hall itself, as a structure, and the people who lived in it.

The first Brothers of Holy Cross came from France with Father Sorin in 1841 and went first to southern Indiana, moving to the northern part of the state in 1842, onto property owned by Father Theodore Badin and donated by him to the Diocese of Vincennes. Details of the story are found in many previous accounts.

The first written account we have of a residence for the Brothers of Holy Cross at Notre Dame is a log shanty attached to the first log chapel at Notre Dame on the south side of St. Mary's lake. This original chapel burned down. The present log chapel dates from 1906.

For their next residence the Brothers moved across to the north side of St. Mary's Lake to what became known as the "Island." This was really a hill, which in the early days of the University was surrounded by a swamp uniting the two lakes. The lakes were originally surveyed as one, and this spot was considered an island or peninsula. When the lakes were lowered and the waters receded from the central part, the two lakes were left as they are at present.

The first building on the "island" in what was then one lake was a chapel. This quickly became the Brothers' novitiate, with professed Brothers living in a log shanty attached to the chapel on the southern shore of St. Mary's Lake. Bricks for the chapel and for later structures were made from the marl beds around the lakes. The chapel on the island was called Our Lady of Holy Angels chapel and was blessed on the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1844. Father Sorin wrote of it:

*From this time until 1848, when the new church was dedicated, this little sanctuary became the favorite spot of the whole community. There they assembled in time of distress or rejoicing; there were published the general prescriptions or regulations in regard to the common welfare; . . . there, each year, the retreat of the Brothers was made, and even that of the priests.<sup>1</sup>*

Orphans were admitted to Notre Dame in 1843 and lived in the Brothers' novitiate.

*Once the [the orphans] had become inmates, it was necessary to think of giving them something to do. They were therefore successively placed in the shops already opened and maintained by the Brothers. Soon the idea occurred to teach them a trade which would enable them to secure for themselves an honorable place in society.<sup>2</sup>*

The Brothers also farmed the acres at the Lake, and operated a print shop.

*.....and the first publication that was issued from the press was the Rules and Constitutions of the Brothers, which was printed by Brother Joseph Rother, CSC.*

Brother Joseph was the first novice to be accepted by the Brothers of Holy Cross in the United States.

In 1879 a new building was erected on the "island" for the community and the old Professed House became an infirmary under the care of the Sisters of the Holy Cross. Brothers appointed to study also lived in the new building. By 1895 the Corby Papers tell us that "Usually there are from 75 to 80 members in the Professed House and the infirmary."

Council minutes for September 22, 1899, say that Brother Charles Borromeo Harding was requested to draw up plans for a new building, order stones and brick, and commence to build at once. More than forty years later, when Father Richard Collentine, superior of Columba Hall in 1947, began keeping a Community House Chronicle, he recorded, "From hearsay information, now set down, but to be corrected later if inaccurate, the Community House was erected about 1900." In May 1901, Father Andrew Morrissey, Provincial, approached Mother M. Praxades about getting the Sisters of the Holy Cross to cook for those in the House of Studies, which was located in Columba Hall about 1906, when Dujarie Hall was built.

Because of the political unrest in France in 1905 and following, the then Superior General, the Very Reverend Gilbert Francais, moved the headquarters of the congregation from Le Mans, France, to Notre Dame. He took up residence in Columba Hall. For a short time he lived on the second floor of the Community House. Brother Lawrence Miller, in his notes on the history of the building, says there is no primary source for this conclusion, but it is also recorded in Father Collentine's Chronicle.

Electric lights were installed in 1914, but that seems to have been the only major improvement in a long period. A picture of the building as it aged is provided by Father James A. Burns, who was Provincial in 1934 and who wrote after his annual visit:

*There is no doubt that the infirmary ought to be moved away. It occupies the entire second floor of the building; that is, it is right in the middle of the house. The sick come and go along with the well along the corridors and stairways. The entire house is permeated more or less with the atmosphere of the infirmary. There is but one chapel, and this is used by both ill and well. There is an altar on the second floor where priests living in the infirmary may say Mass, but this also is used by both sick and well, there being 14 priests in the house and only four altars including the Sisters' chapel altar. There is no chapel connected with the second floor altar – it is in an angle of the corridor. If we were not building a new novitiate, . . . I would recommend a new infirmary be built without delay.<sup>3</sup>*

During the years Columba Hall had occupants who held various positions, either on the campus of Notre Dame or in South Bend. For example, by 1947 eleven Brothers lived in Columba Hall and taught at Central Catholic High School.<sup>4</sup> There were those who worked in the Ave Maria Press or the University of Notre Dame Press,<sup>5</sup> and those who canvassed for the Ave Maria magazine.<sup>6</sup>

The Brothers who worked in the post office also resided at the Community House. They had their own chapel on the second floor, called “the Post Office chapel,” because these Brothers had to be at work at 6:30 a.m. and could not attend religious exercises with the rest of the community in the main chapel.<sup>7</sup>

Brother Ernest Ryan, who started the Dujarie Press in 1940, also worked in the East Annex of the Community House. From his small office he sent forth thousands of copies of the Dujarie books, written either by Brother Ernest or by Brothers whom he engaged to write them. Many of us can remember the “Boy Who —” series and the “Our Lady Comes to —” series. There are copies of most of these books in the Midwest Province Archives.

Brother Vianny Dillon operated the shoe shop in a lower section of the West Annex, a shop which Brother Flavius Ellison later turned into a credible clerical store. Brother Jerome Francis McConnell was the tailor for the Brothers' habits in a section of the third floor. Mention must also be made of the Associates of St. Joseph that was located in Columba Hall under Brother Eymard Salzman and is now under Brother Flavius Ellison.

Brothers living in Columba Hall have ministered to the sick both at the old infirmary at the west end of St. Joseph and at the new infirmary in Dujarie House.<sup>8</sup>

Brother Ralf Baird gave excellent service in the Midwest Provincial Archives.

In 1946 the General Chapter of the Congregation decreed that there should be separate provinces. Until then all the superiors of Columba Hall had been Holy cross priests.<sup>9</sup> On May 16, 1946, Brother Jacob Epply became the new superior. His assistant was Brother Sabinus Herbert. Brother Ephrem O'Dwyer became the first Brother Provincial, with Brother William Mang as his assistant. The assessed value of Columba Hall at the time of the exchange was \$151, 643.45.

The change to a Brothers' administration had a profound psychological effect on many of the Brothers. The Decrees of the 1945 General Chapter stated that non-teaching Brother who wished to remain in the priests' society could do so, or they could join the Brothers' province. Some Brothers believed that a separate Brothers' Province could not succeed financially and would "just fold up." Others held that active and passive voice in the community was not for working Brothers. Still others felt that by joining the priests' society they would be assured of remaining at Notre Dame. Some members of both societies tried to persuade certain Brothers to join them. Sometimes the arguments got quite heated. Brother Honorius said, "Well, at least we both worship the same God!" It took some time for all the dust to settle after each society found out which Brothers had joined them. The Brothers who elected to go with the priests' society were instructed to go to the East Annex, where Father Joseph McGuire was now the new superior.

Brother Ephrem served two terms, until 1956, when he was named first provincial superior of the newly-formed eastern vice-province of Brothers.

A number of physical improvements were gradually made. An Otis elevator was installed in 1947, the chapel was renovated and the kitchen added to in 1959, and storm windows were purchased in 1953. In 1968 the Fire Department warned the Brothers about hazardous kitchen areas, and the whole kitchen was remodeled. Various Brothers served as chefs during these years.<sup>10</sup>

The changes were certainly needed. Brother Flavius Ellison recalls coming to Columba Hall in 1947. In those days a housekeeper, Brother Armand DeMute at the time, assigned the

rooms to the incoming Brothers. Brother Armand held out two keys, one to Brother Flavius and one to Brother Terence Noden, who came with him. They were told that one key was for a furnished room and the other for an unfurnished room. Brother Flavius got the unfurnished room. It was Brother Duncan Briggman who came to Flavius' rescue, getting sheets for the bed, drapes for the window and furniture for the room. In those days, brothers furnished their rooms by getting whatever was left behind by students who had graduated. Brother Flavian Lambert made desks for all the rooms, using pegs instead of nails, and lockers for the private rooms.

Until the Brothers' Center was created across the highway, Brothers who died were waked in the front parlor just to the left of the entrance to Columba Hall. The scholastics from Dujarie Hall would do the waking during the wee hours of the night known as the "Graveyard Shift."

Brother Gonzaga Day established the mission storehouse after the Brothers' province became autonomous. Located in the West Annex, the storehouse collected thousands of dollars' worth of material to be sent to the Holy Cross Foreign Missions, both on the general and on the provincial level.

In 1954 the name of the Community House was officially changed to Columba Hall by decree of Father Christopher O'Toole, Superior General, at the request of Brother Ephrem. The name honored Brother Columba O'Neil, a humble cobbler at the Notre Dame shoe store. For many years Brother Columba was known for his great devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Father Arthur J. Hope says, in Notre Dame One Hundred Years:

*Brother Columba was said to have worked miracles, real miracles, through the intercession of the Sacred Heart. His simplicity of spirit, his modesty and honesty, his abnegation, seem to confirm the store of his extraordinary powers. He had what was described as a "miraculous" nudge, into the side of the listener. By trade he was a shoemaker, and for years he plied his trade in the Manual Labor School. . . . Brother Columba's intercession was sought in hundreds of instances, and his reputation was widespread. He went wherever the sick called him and in many instances he was said to have worked cures. After his death in December, 1923 (sic), many pilgrims made their way to his grave, and people took handfuls of soft loam from his resting place as so many relics.<sup>11</sup>*



Brother Ernest Ryan wrote a book about Brother Columba called *These Two Hearts*. There is also a chapter on Brother Columba in Brother Kilian Bierne's book *From Sea to Shining Sea*, and a foldout from the March-May issue of the associates of St. Joseph entitled "Of Such is the Kingdom of Heaven." In the 1950's Brother Columbanus Murphy received permission to distribute leaflets with a picture of Brother Columba on one side and a prayer to the Sacred Heart on the reverse. Brother Sabinus Herbert became director of the Apostolate of Brother Columba and the Sacred Heart, and was instrumental in bringing about the name change for the building.

The Brothers' House of Studies, Dujarie Hall (now Carroll Hall), had been built in 1906 to house fifty Brothers, and by 1949 it had become very crowded. Brother Ephrem informed Father Steiner, Provincial of the priests, that the space occupied by some priests in the East Annex of Columba Hall would be needed by the Brothers, especially as they were bringing up 24 Brother scholastics from St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas. The East Annex was renamed Vincent Hall and sixteen scholastics moved in, four who worked at Ave Maria Press, four who did housekeeping at Columba Hall, four who attended classes at the University, and four who were doing practice teaching at Central Catholic, South Bend. Some scholastics were sent to Texas, where Vincent Hall had recently been opened. The one at Notre Dame closed in 1952.

In 1958 Brother Donatus Schmitz, Provincial of the Midwest Province of Brothers, decided to renovate the Columba Hall Chapel of Our Lady of the Seven Dolors. The Columba Hall Chronicles for September 1958 stated:

*The renovation of the chapel has begun and is expected to last more than two months. The estimated cost of \$14,000 may be exceeded in order to meet the situations that have recently arisen, such as the transfer of the air conditioner to the inside chimney space at the Epistle side.*

(In fact, the total cost of renovation came to \$18,000.)

The refurbished chapel was dedicated in January 1959. Again the Chronicles noted:

*Father Mullahey preached a sermon touching on the inspiration handed down (from previous religious who have lived in this house) and the hundreds of religious who have prayed in this house for more than half a century.*

Brother Jacob Eppley, the first Brother Superior of Columba Hall, served from 1946 to 1952, and is described as quiet and hard-working. A veteran of the first World War, Brother

Jacob taught for many years in the Brothers' high schools. He was an accomplished cellist, and a member of the Notre Dame Symphony. He was also a member of a trio, in which two other Brothers played the piano and violin. He gave great attention to the regular discipline of the house, especially attendance at religious exercises. When a member of the house had a birthday, he was called into the superior's office to receive congratulations and a candy bar as a birthday present. The story is told that a certain brother once turned in three bottles of whiskey which he had received from a visitor. Since whiskey was not allowed at table, Brother Jacob asked Brother Ephrem, the Provincial, what he should do with them. Brother Ephrem replied, "Jake, you take one bottle, I'll take another, and the Brother who received the three bottles will get the third."

Brother Jacob was succeeded by Brother Jerard Fit, who was appointed from 1952 to 1958.

The next superior was Brother Lawrence Miller (1958-1962). At this time there were 92 Brothers living in Columba Hall, and the main chapel was so packed that Brothers were climbing over each other getting into the pews, and the custom of receiving Holy Communion in religious rank could not be maintained. Some Brothers were very disturbed when Brother Lawrence suggested that they should just go to Communion in the order in which they happened to be sitting. Eventually the chapel had to be renovated, as mentioned above.

It was under Brother Andrew Sukenik's administration (1968-1971) that the first renovation of the kitchen took place. Cooking was done in a corner of the refectory. The brothers ate off paper plates for three months.

There was also extensive renovation of the recreation rooms of the West Annex. The far north room was made into a lounge. Floor length drapes were put up, and a divider was put in with library shelves on one side and a music room area on the other with a grand piano. This brightened the whole place immensely. The first recreation room was fitted out as a snack bar with popcorn, candy and soft drinks.

Brother Bernard Donahue (1971-1977), unlike other superiors, was chairman of the History Department at Saint Mary's College, teaching a regular schedule at Holy Cross College, and occasionally teaching at Notre Dame as well. He felt he needed two assistants to help him as superior of Columba Hall, and Brothers Thomas Balaz and John LaValle were appointed.



Brother Bernard had office hours for the house from after supper until nine p.m. every night. Among the visitors during Brother Bernard's time were Bishop Alfred Mendez, CSC, who liked to play chess with Brother Francis Maurie, and "Digger" Phelps, the Notre Dame basketball coach.

Brother Thomas Balaz succeeded Brother Bernard as superior, and like Bernard he asked to have two assistants because of his heavy duties as Notre Dame postmaster. Brother John Lavallo remained on as one assistant and Brother Ivan Dolan became the other. Brother Thomas also asked that the whole house become the House Council, so that any decisions made for the house would be made by all. Items that Brother Thomas had to deal with included helping the Brothers get used to a new office book, repainting the chapel (a gift from the sisters—Lucy, Nancy and Florence—of Brother John LaValle), and rearranging the front steps so that the front door would open more easily.

Since Columba Hall has always been considered the "motherhouse" of the Brothers, Brother John LaValle was appointed to care for the guests who frequently arrived. One time a group going to Central America for the cause of human rights was housed in the East Annex for four days. Another time there had been a great downpour of rain – really a deluge – in the South Bend area. Many people were forced out of their homes and were living in tents. To alleviate their plight Brother Thomas invited them to stay at Columba Hall.

Brother Paul Kelly became the first director of Columba Hall in 1980. (The distinction between superior and director is a canonical one, dealing with the length of the term of office.) In Brother Paul's first year there was a great fire at St. Edward's Hall on the campus, and Brother Paul invited thirty students to live in the East Annex until after the renovation.

By this time the average age of the Brothers was going up with many in their eighties, and Brother Paul decided that it was time to get some students to help in the kitchen. Five young men who were living in the East Annex agreed to take the jobs. Four of this group, including John Eckel, worked all four of their college years in Columba kitchen. Other students joined them from time to time including Nancy DeLuca. A romance developed from this Kitchen Cabinet, and John and Nancy became engaged. The October after their graduation they were married in Our Lady of Seven Dolors chapel in Columba Hall. Their wedding dinner and reception took place in

the Brothers' dining room. Brother Paul has said that it was the first and only occasion of its kind. Many of the former helpers in the kitchen came back for the event. John and Nancy now live in Texas and have four beautiful children.

Brother Paul worked in the Religious Leaders' Program at Notre Dame with Bishop William McManus, former Bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend. Brother Paul says that he spent a year working out how the men of this program could reside at Columba Hall. In the fall of 1983, the Brothers welcomed the group to the second floor of the East Annex. Brother Paul says the group helped energize conversation and community life at Columba, besides being a good source of income.

The Solitude of St. Joseph was begun in the East Annex in the fall of 1981 by Brother Thomas Maddix. The purpose was to provide private or directed retreats for those who wanted them. The fee was nominal, depending upon the length of stay. Brothers John Kuhn and Carl Sternberg joined Brother Thomas as retreat directors.

Scholars in the Joan B. Kroc Peace Program moved into the West Annex during the term of Brother James Reddy (1985-88). This was an important project to Father Theodore Hesburgh, former president of the university. Participants come from all over the world, and those who complete the studies receive a Masters degree in Peace from the University.

Reflecting on his term of office, Brother James especially mentioned Brother John LaValle, who was "low-keyed, quiet, and kind. . . He was in charge of the rosary that was daily prayed at the grotto in the early evening."

Brother Robert Siegal (1985-88) supervised the Great Renovation that took place under his administration. This changed the size and shape of some of the rooms, added bathrooms, and put carpeting in the corridors.

At present there is a frequent turnover among the residents of Columba Hall. Some Brothers have taken the occasion to move across the highway to the new Schubert Village on the grounds of Holy Cross College. As the average age rises, the superior's job, said Brother James, becomes one of "instant happenings." Brothers get sick and need immediate transportation to the hospital. The superior is also the facilitator for the house, taking care of the Brothers by providing for their needs. He is responsible for their basic spiritual well-being by providing a

priest for the liturgy. Brother James has also provided lecturers in Lent and Advent.

The old hall has been many things – a residence, a guest house, an administration center, a training center, a point of departure to other ministries, a retreat house, a house of studies, a prayer center, a retirement home, an infirmary, a classroom, a financial center, and above all a home. It has contributed its own spirit to those who were formed there, its strength to those who worked there, its peace to those who came back there. Possibly no other single building except the Solitude in LeMans has done so much to spread the spirit of Holy Cross around the world.

1. Edward Sorin, CSC, Chronicles of Notre Dame du Lac, (Notre Dame, IN, 1992), 39. Trans. William Toohey, CSC; ed. & annotated James T. Connelly, CSC. Hereafter Chronicles.
2. Chronicles, 43.
3. Minutes of Provincial Visit, April 19-May 2, 1934. Archives, Indiana Province of Priests.
4. Brother Gerard Fitz was principal of this group.
5. Brothers Alquin Ness, Sabinus Herbert, Finnbar Buckley, and MFitnus Bonbardier among others.
6. Brothers Raymond Ott, Alan McNeil, Brendan Luby, Christopher Bauer, Luke Bauer, Benjamin McNulty, Philbert Cook, Samuel Englert, Maurice Wertzberger, Otto Hayden, Kenneth Hopkinson, Vitus Schwartz, and others.
7. Brothers Marcellinus Fahey, Eli Pelchat, Roman Purzycki, Ives Kilroy, and Francis Meduri, among others.