

The college that Bourbonnais built

by BGHS president
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Three men stare back from the photograph: Father Pierre Beaudoin (left) and Brothers Jean Baptiste Bernard (standing) and Augustin Martel (right). They are Viatorians, members of the Clerics of St. Viator, a French Catholic religious order. In 1865 they arrived here to teach the boys of Bourbonnais.

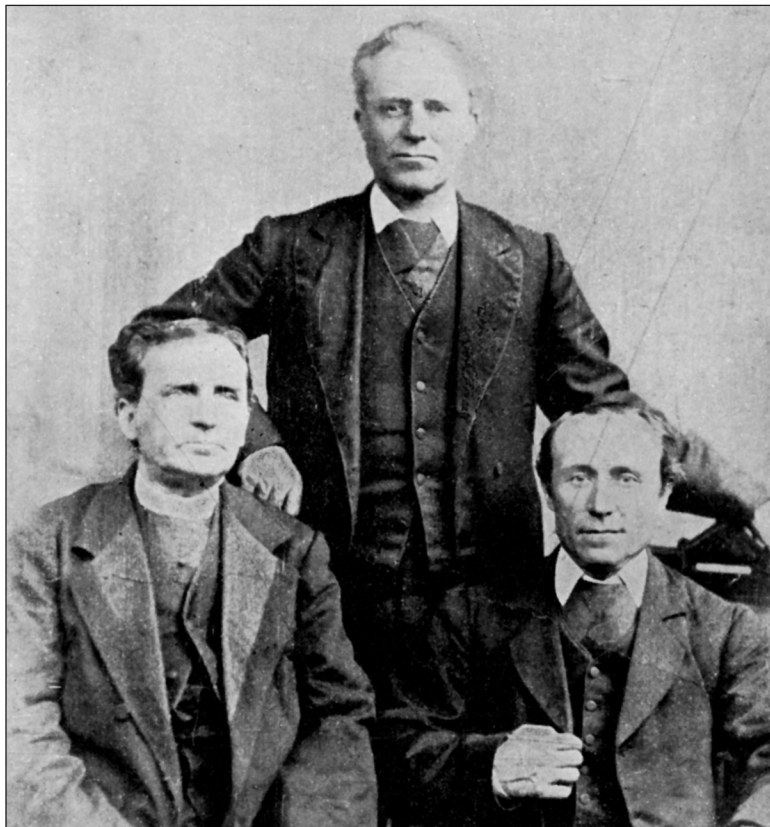
The clerics were summoned by Reverend Jacques Cote, pastor of Maternity BVM Church, who was concerned that his parishioners' sons were not receiving a proper Christian education. (The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame had been educating the daughters of local French families since 1860.)

Father Cote invited the Canadian Viatorians to come to Bourbonnais and start a boys' academy, including in the bargain his resignation as pastor—if the Viatorians sent a priest to take his place.

Enter Father Beaudoin and Brothers Bernard and Martel. Looking into their eyes one can almost feel their sense of purpose and calm confidence. It was an assignment that they no doubt had hoped for, to begin a new school in a new country, in a settlement of devout Catholic French-Canadians, whose children were hungry to learn.

The Viatorians wasted no time, opening St. Viator's Academy in 1865, then moving to a stone building near the Maternity Church in 1868. They continued to teach there until 1891 and, afterwards, taught at the public school building across Marsile Street until 1918. (A rather amazing fact: until 1955, all Bourbonnais children were taught by nuns, brothers and priests in the village's public school system.)

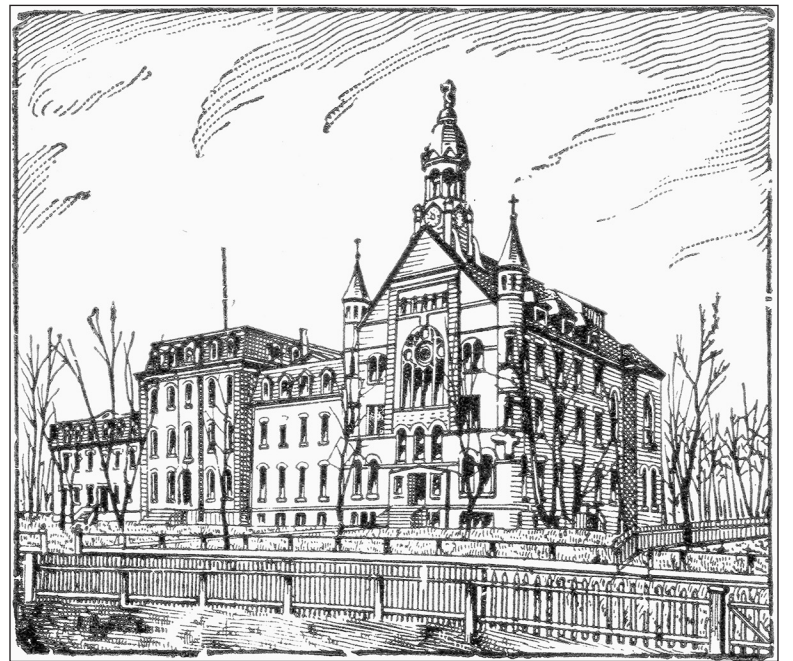
In 1870 ground was broken for a stone building that would become St. Viator's College. Within three years the school was granted a university charter by the state of Illinois. The curriculum offered English literature, French, Latin, science, philosophy, mathematics, music, commerce and theology. Attendance increased and the campus grew to include a chapel,



gymnasium, more classrooms and a dormitory.

After a fire in February of 1906 burned the campus to the ground (except for the gymnasium) Father Moses J. Marsile, president of the college, promptly began to rebuild. His ambitious plan included Bedford stone buildings around a central ellipse. The small community enthusiastically raised funds and rebuilt the college, complete with electricity and concrete sidewalks. Four of St. Viator College's buildings still stand as part of Olivet Nazarene University's campus: Marsile Alumni Hall (now Burke Administration Building); Roy Hall (now Chapman Hall); the dining hall, built in 1926 (now Millard Business Center) and the gymnasium, built in 1926 (now Birchard Gymnasium).

Between 1874 and 1938, St. Viator's College was a source of great pride and prestige for Bourbonnais. Alumni included the Venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, author, television and radio host; Bishop Bernard Sheil, auxiliary bishop of Chicago and founder of Catholic Youth Organization; Francis Sheridan, playwright; Rev. Harris A. Darche, the most decorated marine chaplain of World War



Photos courtesy of the BGHS photo collection
Members of the Clerics of St. Viator, a French Catholic religious order, arrived in Bourbonnais in 1865 to teach the boys of Bourbonnais. Pictured is St. Viator's before the 1906 fire (above) and an aerial view of the area in the 1950s (below).



I; and Illinois governor Samuel Shapiro.

Tragically, St. Viator's was forced to close its doors in 1939. The college had incurred a large debt in the late 1920s due to its building program. The Great Depression caused catastrophic decreases in enrollment through the 1930s, from which St. Viator's could not recover.

The loss of the college was a huge blow for the people of the village.

But, as local historian and author Adrien Richard stated in *The Village*, "It remained for the misfortune of one institution to become the good fortune of another, as fate usually doles out its destiny."

And who received fate's good fortune? A historical perspective suggests more than one recipient.

Perhaps it was a small college from Olivet. Having had their campus destroyed by fire, Olivet College officials were on their way to Chicago for an insurance settlement meeting. They passed through Bourbonnais, noticed the St. Viator buildings and for sale sign, and quickly found out Olivet College's insurance company was also St. Viator College's mortgage holder. They soon became the owners of St. Viator's campus.

Perhaps Bourbonnais received

fate's good fortune in acquiring another college, although it would have been difficult to see at the time. This village of 600 French Canadians had just lost its cherished St. Viator's, under humiliating circumstances. Now a Protestant college had purchased its beloved symbol of Catholic culture and faith. It is no wonder some refused to welcome the newcomers, although time reveals the enduring gifts that the Nazarenes from Olivet, Illinois brought to Bourbonnais in 1940.

As Olivet Nazarene University celebrates its 75th anniversary in our community and as we celebrate with them, let's take a few moments to reflect on the remarkable resilience of this college campus in the center of our village.

For more than 150 years Bourbonnais has been a seat of Christian higher education, to not one, but two, nationally renowned universities, educating thousands of young men and women.

A perfect place for this reflection is on Olivet's beautiful campus, of course. Be sure to include a walk through Maternity BVM churchyard as well. There you can find reminders of St. Viator's: the Theologians bench, dated 1918; the Old Home Plate, where "many memorable

games were decided 1885-1906"; and the bronze Sundial mounted on a Bedford stone base by the class of 1917. One can sense the spirit of those long-ago students. Their optimism and grace transcends religious differences in the words of their bequest: "May the future record upon the face of this memorial only sunny hours of prosperity and success for this best of schools."

Sources for this article include *The Village*, by Adrien Richard and *Bourbonnais (Images of America: Illinois)*, by Vic Johnson.

The Bourbonnais Grove Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting local history. Monthly meetings are held at 7 p.m. on the first Thursday of each month March to December. Museum hours are 1-4 p.m. on the first and third Sundays of each month, March to December or by appointment. Visit bourbonnaishistory.org, facebook.com/bourbonnaisgrove or call 1-815-933-6452.

Super Crossword

Answers

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