

Early education in Bourbonnais Grove

by Vic Johnson

Although the Bourbonnais Grove subscription school of the 1840s had both Catholic and non-Catholic students, there is no record of an attempt to establish a Catholic School in Maternity parish prior to 1852.

In February of that year, the first of what two failed attempts to organize a girl's school would be made by the Chicago Diocese and Father Renee Courjault, pastor of Maternity BVM Church.

Four Sisters of Mercy arrived in the village of Bourbonnais Grove.

"Sister Mary Paula was in charge," wrote Father Elder A. Senesac, C.S.V. (Centennial Anniversary of the Church of the Maternity of B.V.M., 1847-1947). "One of the other Sisters being Mother Genevieve" (Sophie Granger of Bourbonnais). The parish was too poor to support the school. The sisters were recalled in 1854, "after two years of hard labor and privation."

A second effort came three years later by the Sisters of the Holy Cross from South Bend, IN. This school also closed after two years. (One of these two schools mentioned might have been named St. Philamina.)

Father Senesac notes that "Mrs. George Lambert" (Labrie) as having kept a "French Catholic school for boys and girls in about 1856, in a house on River St. where formerly lived Mr. Henry Messier."

In his book, "Notre Dame Centennial: Century of Devotion, 1860-1960", Adrien M. Richard described a third attempt to establish a girls school. He wrote of the arrival of three Notre Dame nuns in the village. They were Sisters St. Alexis de St. Joseph, St. Alphonse de Ligouri and Ste. Marie de la Victoire.

Pastor Joseph N. Gingras and Cure Mailloux escorted the three brave nuns to their "home". This was a small stone building located directly across the street from the church, a spot where Roy Ave. originates at Marsile St. This building was owned by Jean Baptist Caron who occupied the residence just next door, where stands the home of Lawrence Regnier.

This "small stone building" had been a village subscription school in 1848. It would become the sisters' school and living quarters until a new two-story building, "just southeast of the church"—built at township expense in 1859—could be made ready.

Of the sisters temporary quarters, Father Senesac remarked: "The stable at Bethlehem, and the early mission huts of Blessed Marguerite Bourgeoys and her devoted followers, must have been far more sanitary and comfortable."

The sisters moved to their new quarters on Jan. 26, 1861. The following September, construction was started on a large frame building to house what would be Notre Dame Convent. By the end of August, 1862 the convent was occupied. Ten boarding students had been admitted.

In 1910 the convent would be moved to a four-story yellow brick building. It stood as a notable landmark for many years northeast of Maternity BVM Church.

A Bourbonnais Grove public grade school remained under the tutelage of Notre Dame sisters. Remarkably, state taxes and an elected local school board continued to support the education of both Catholic and Protestant children for the next 100 years.

A new public school, Robert Frost, opened for the fall semester in 1956. Maternity Parish Catholic students remained as pupils of the Notre Dame nuns and attended classes in the Notre Dame Convent building. A new Maternity BVM Elementary Catholic School opened in 1961.

In 1865 Maternity's parish priest, Father Jacques Cote, persuaded two Viatorian brothers, Jean Baptist Bernard and Augustin Martel, and the Reverend Peter Beaudoin to come down from Canada and take charge of Maternity Parish and open a boys school. They arrived on Sept. 6.

According to Father Senesac, the brothers soon received teaching certificates from the superintendent of schools in Kankakee County and "they began to teach in the village school, which stood on a spot marked by a large stone at the southwest corner of the church grounds." (Although this location seems different then the location of the former girls two-story schoolhouse the Chicago Diocese bought from Bourbonnais Township, it could be the same building.) A third story was added, and the building became a boys school.

The curriculum of St. Viator Academy, as the boys school was first named, grew through the years. In 1869 "the first half of the main building of what is now St. Viator's College was erected," wrote The Reverend E. L. Rivard in the Historical Encyclopedia of Illinois.

Father Thomas Roy, CSV, was placed at the head of the new institution, and courses in business, classics, philosophy and theology were inaugurated. By 1870, a course in vocal and instrumental music was given and a theological department opened. Such had been the success of the college that, in 1874, it was found necessary to build the other half of the main building.

When finished this "stone edifice" was a three story, 186 by 50 foot structure with a mansard roof. It adjoined the earlier built, 30 by 60 foot, three story schoolhouse.

That same year a University Charter was obtained from the Illinois State Legislature. The college "was thereby empowered to grant degrees in arts, sciences and in letters."

Father Rivard summed up the contributions of St. Viator College and Notre Dame Academy as follows:

From its humble beginnings in the '60s Notre Dame academy has grown into a noted school of music, of domestic economy and the various



Photos courtesy of BGHS

An 1890s view of Marsile Street, Maternity BVM Church and St. Viator College as it was in 1890 (above) and a 1890s bird's eye view of the St. Viator Campus.

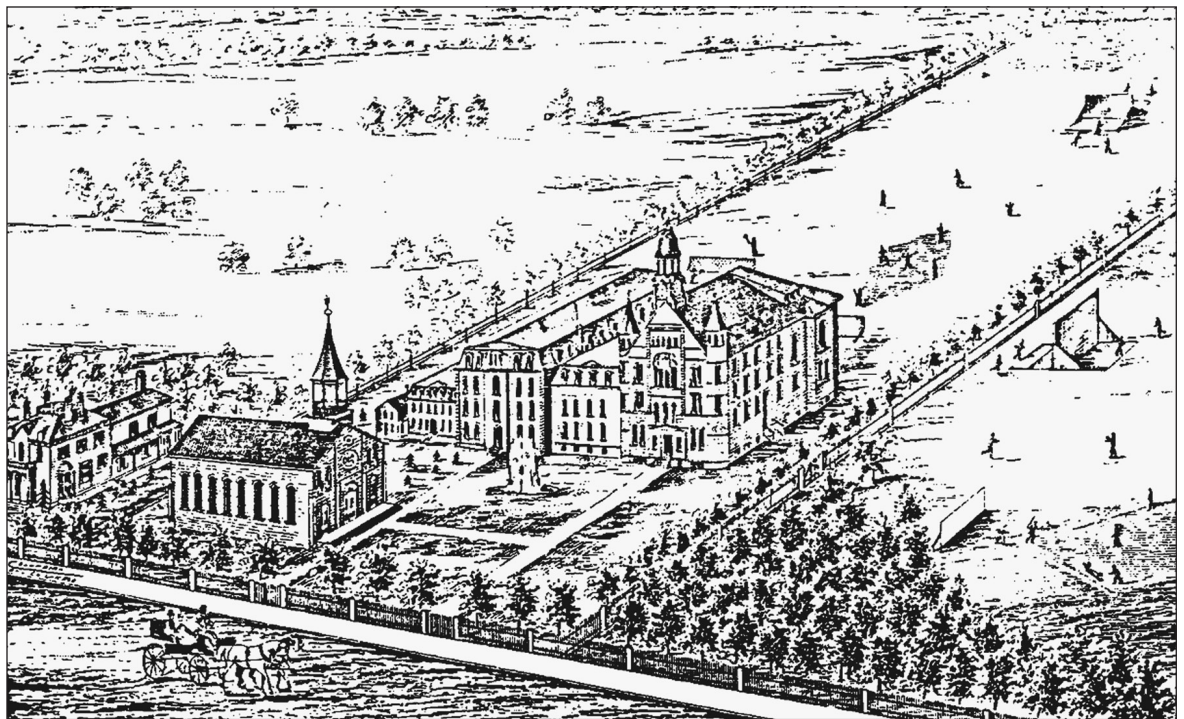


Photo courtesy of Olivet Nazarene University

Ste. Alphonse de Ligouri, Ste. Alexis de St. Joseph and Ste. Marie de la Victoire were the first Congregation of Notre Dame nuns to establish a permanent girls school in Bourbonnais Grove.



branches of academic courses. In the last few years there has been an average attendance of eighty-five pupils yearly at Notre Dame of Bourbonnais. Besides these two educational institutions of higher learning, Bourbonnais has two parochial schools taught by Brothers and Sisters, having an average attendance of 110 children.

In 1910 a four-story yellow brick building replaced the old frame Notre Dame Convent. The original part of the frame building was moved to St. Viator College campus where the Viatorians renamed it "St. Joseph Hall" and used it as an infirmary. Patients were attended by the Sister Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary. The building—called Walker Hall by Olivet Nazarene College faculty—was demolished after a tornado severely damaged it in 1963.

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 to 4 p.m. on the first and third Sundays of each month, March to December or by appointment. Do you have a topic or story related to local or French Canadian history? Contact the BGHS at /bourbonnaishistory.org, on Facebook at facebook.com/bourbonnaisgrove or call 1-815-933-6452.