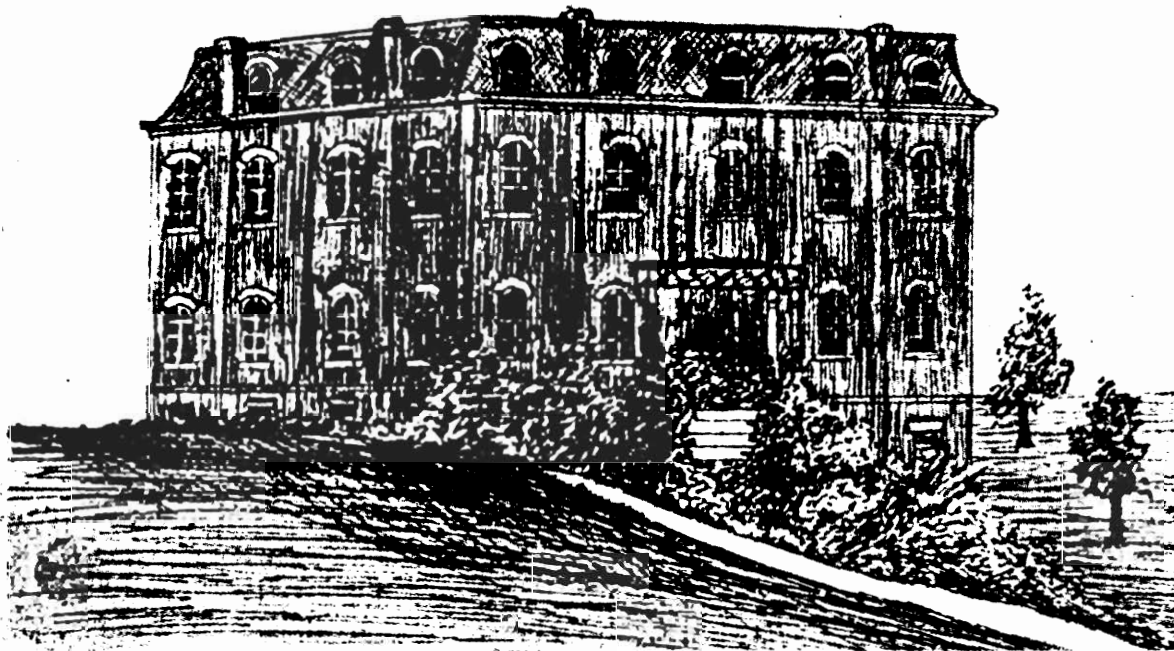


THE EARLY YEARS OF ST. ALOYSIUS ACADEMY
NEW LEXINGTON, OHIO

by
Brother Michael Carlyle, B.G.S.



The above drawing of the first building (1876) is reproduced here through the courtesy of the Archives, Motherhouse, Franciscan Sisters, Stella, N.Y.

(Editor's note: St. Aloysius' Academy, New Lexington, Ohio, was discontinued in the 1960's, and then taken over by the Little Brothers of the Good Shepherd and named Mount Aloysius. It is now a protective institution for boys. The old buildings are being razed and new facilities erected.)

On September 1, 1875, a group of Franciscan Sisters sailed from Antwerp, Belgium, on the Auguste Andre for the United States. The "May Laws" which closed all religious schools in Germany had forced them to leave their convent school in Konitz, West Prussia (1). It had been a hard decision to leave, but there was no alternative. The religious knew that they would never return. They were now to turn westwards toward a country they had only read about.

The following year centennial celebrations in the United States were indeed impressive. The country had expanded from shore to shore - fulfilling the

"manifest destiny" - and crowds were attending the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia where they marvelled at the wondrous expositions displayed. The actual Exposition covered some two hundred thirty-six acres and one hundred sixty buildings housing such wonders as the typewriter, the Corliss engine, the duplex telegraph and the wonder of all wonders - the telephone. Man had indeed reached the zenith of his creativity. Today the wonders of the Exposition are only a memory and for the most part remembered in books. The marvels displayed are now taken for granted in daily living. None of the buildings which so impressed over ten million Americans in the summer of 1876 remain. As significant as they were, they succumbed to the ravages of time.

Although 1876 contained many exciting events, yet, as impressive as it was, only a few people were involved in the opening of Saint Aloysius Academy - an event which was to outlast any grandeur of the Exposition year.

The journey from Belgium to the United States was anything but uneventful. After a few days at sea a terrible storm arose causing much anxiety. Passengers were unable to leave their cabins and most of the crew became ill. When the ship did land in New York it ran upon a sandbar and tipped on its side. The Sisters wondered if they had made a right decision in leaving Europe. The Sisters of the Poor of St. Francis welcomed them, and after a few days they were on their way to Buffalo where Mother Aloysia Lenders had only a few years before established a branch of their Sisters (2). Included in the group which sailed from Antwerp were Mother Gonzaga Brexal, Sisters Prudentiana Paessens, Adelgonde Spirckermann and Bibiana Thomas. They were destined for New Lexington, Ohio, and they soon went on to Columbus where they were to spend, so they thought, a few days - in reality, many months (3).

On November 7, 1870, Owen Donnelly, a farmer living in Somerset, Ohio, gave (4) a sizeable farmland he had purchased in 1830 from John Thompson to Bishop Sylvester Rosecrans. Mr. Donnelly hoped the land could be used to erect a school and Bishop Rosecrans approved the idea. Father Francis Moirtrier, pastor of St. Rose church, New Lexington, was asked to begin, as well as supervise, the building of an academy on the site. Although there are no existing records to tell of the builders or cost, events which followed indicate that the enthusiasm of Father Moirtrier was not shared by all. Four years later the eight-room school was far from completed. Lack of money as well as teachers seemingly caused the delay.

In February, 1875, Bishop Rosecrans had asked Mother Aloysia Lenders to take charge of St. Vincent's orphanage in Columbus, and the following year proposed to the Sisters that they take charge of the school being built in New Lexington. At the same time he asked them to assume all the debts incurred by the preceding four years' building operations.

Shortly after her arrival in Columbus, Mother Gonzaga set out to inspect the house and grounds at New Lexington. She was accompanied by Rev. C.J. Goldschmidt (chaplain at the Columbus orphanage) and Mother Euphrasia Edelhoeh. The trip was indeed a revelation. Any illusions which Mother Gonzaga might have cherished were indeed nipped in the bud. She, who had left a flourishing school in a country where roadways were like city streets and even the undergrowth in the forests was cleared, now beheld an ugly brick structure without doors or windows (to say nothing of a roof) surrounded by weeds and brush four to five feet high. Father Moirtrier was a good pastor, but he was far from being an expert business man. The party found that he was engaged in numerous law suits demanding payment to be made for what had been built. A small frame house located on the site was also in wretched condition, and there was not even a road leading to the uncompleted

structure. Sadly they called on Father Schmitt (5) in Lancaster to discuss the undertaking. His opinion, bluntly given, coincided with that of his visitors. He said that there was no use whatever in opening a school in such a God-forsaken spot; no one would ever go there. Moreover, he promised Mother Gonzaga five hundred dollars if after opening the school they registered twenty-five pupils in five years. He also felt that a school might just as well be built on the moon as on the wind-swept, forbidding hill. With such impressions it was voted to give up the entire project. Rev. J. B. Eis, pastor of Sacred Heart church, Columbus, remained determined to see that the school be completed and he felt positive that the undertaking would be a success. He even offered to go down to New Lexington from time to time to supervise matters.

The situation was laid before Bishop Rosecrans who agreed with Father Eis. He felt that the Sisters could make a success of the school (6). The pioneer group of Sisters decided to spend the winter of 1875 at the orphanage in Columbus and Father Eis would see to the completion of the building. Meanwhile, in November four more Sisters arrived in New York: Sisters Isabella Voiss, Cyrilla Pomp, Euphemia Tauchmann and Ladislava Wysocka. The news was most welcome, but where would they spend the winter months? St. Vincent's was overcrowded. It was decided that the new arrivals would spend the winter in Buffalo where all four busied themselves learning English.

The winter months seemed endless, but contained some joyous events. While they waited, they became acquainted with a German farmer, Mr. Wieser, who was willing to take charge of the farm at New Lexington. In return for his labor he was to have a small salary and use of the farmhouse. He moved to New Lexington in December, 1875.

News reached the Sisters in March, 1876, that a terrible storm had torn off the roof and rain had damaged the plastering. Repairs would take several weeks. By Easter the house would be far enough advanced so that the Sisters could take possession. After so many delays in the project, Mother Gonzaga decided to go down and see what progress had been made. Sisters Prudentiana and Adelgonde left on Wednesday of Easter Week (April 19) while Mother Gonzaga followed the next day with Sisters Bibiana, Euphemia and Ladislava. When they arrived at the train station, they were met with the unwelcome announcement that there was not one complete room in the building. A return to Columbus was out of the question. Where would they stay and when would the work be completed? Finally, they accepted an offer from the Wieser family, and for six weeks lived in a farmhouse room which served as kitchen, dormitory, dining room, and recreation and sewing room. On occasion Father Philip Meschenmoser (Father Mortrier's successor) would take his meals after saying Mass (7).

Their sacrifices were not in vain. Shortly after their arrival, the room(8) which had been selected for the chapel was ready. Father Meschenmoser said Mass and reserved the Blessed Sacrament. (The white carved gothic altar that had been brought from Germany remained for many years at the Academy. It was given to the community of Sisters at Sacred Heart, Charlestown, W. Va., for their use.)

The Sisters moved into the building in June and in August (1876) the workmen were dismissed. Sister Isabella and Sister Clara Doerschel arrived followed by Sister Cyrilla. At long last the opening of school dawned. Instead of the great number of pupils for whom the Sisters had hoped and prayed, there came only four to register on the first day: Lizzie Taggart, Victoria and Martina Johnson and Fanny Hines (9). A few days later Gertrude Saunders enrolled. The Sisters did not

lose courage at the sight of the tiny band and before the end of the semester eight boarders and nineteen day-pupils had registered.

On October 4, 1876 - the feast of St. Francis - Bishop Rosecrans blessed the house. The chapel was placed under the patronage of Mary Immaculate, and the school was dedicated to St. Aloysius (10). The first Christmas the Sisters were not able to have midnight Mass. In fact, they were lucky to have Mass two or three times a week. There were no roads leading from New Lexington and the climb to the top of the hill was difficult. On Christmas day Mass was celebrated at 8 a.m. In the afternoon there was a Christmas tree, complete with all sorts of decorations for the boarders who had remained for the holidays.

The money which the Sisters had brought with them according to contract (\$2,500) to pay the mortgage on the building, was not enough to cover the debt, as well as the expense for equipment for the school. Although a good deal of furniture had been shipped from Germany, a number of things were still needed. There were no chairs in the chapel; on Saturday chairs had to be carried in. They had to be carried out on Monday. There was neither bakery nor laundry, no water was piped into the house, and all drinking water had to be carried in from a spring two hundred feet away. The Sisters were asked to repay the loans which had been made to Fathers Mortrier and Meschenmoser for the building. They had neither knowledge of their original contracts nor the money to repay them.

Father J. B. Eis came from Columbus to St. Rose church where he announced that he would be responsible for the debts demanded from the Sisters. He then asked for and received all the claims.

It was in 1877, while Mother Alphonse Heuben, the Superior General of the Sisters, was visiting St. Aloysius Academy that the first "commencement" took place. Father Alartus, O.F.M., came from Cincinnati that summer to give the first retreat. It must have been a welcome break for everyone. In addition, that summer a harmonium, more pianos and school desks were purchased. The number of enrolling pupils increased to thirty-six.

The normal routine of the 1878 school year was disrupted when it was discovered that one of the boarders was seriously ill with pneumonia. However, with care the student recovered and school continued in its usual routine. The pine and maple trees which now almost hide the entire building were planted that year by Sister Adelgonde. Thirty-five years later, when most of the pioneers had gone to their eternal rest, Sister Euphemia could recall the day they had planted the first gardens and trees. Whenever mention was made of this event, she would say with a beaming smile: "Ach, ja, we planted them everyone." (11)

In just this short time St. Aloysius Academy became known for its high standards and parents became eager to enroll their daughters.

However, 1879 was marked with a cross. Death knocked twice at the doors of the academy. The first time was for Sister Adelgonde (12), who could not be spared. On April 16th she had a stroke which made her entire left side useless. She died on June 10th. Strangely enough one of her mourners would be the second to be buried in that little plot. She was Elizabeth Ackfeld, Mother Gonzaga's niece, who made her vows September 8, 1881, and died the following November 7th. The body was brought to New Lexington from Buffalo at Mother Gonzaga's request.

September showed an increase in both boarders and day pupils. A new pupil, Dora Miller of Circleville, soon showed symptoms of croup. She was immediately isolated, Mother Gonzaga's own room being given to her, and everything was done

to fight the disease. All was in vain, for she died shortly after the opening of school. Her body was taken back to Circleville for burial.

Before the end of this year the Sodality of the Blessed Virgin was canonically established. The first solemn reception was held in the chapel on Dec. 8, 1878; here was laid the foundation of a remarkable devotion to the Immaculate Mother which was to become the most distinguishing feature in the daily life of St. Aloysius. In 1880 after the Rt. Rev. John A. Watterson became bishop of Columbus, Father Hormisch (13) was appointed to St. Aloysius as chaplain. This was a great consolation and an answer to the Sisters' prayers.

After nearly four years on the "God-forsaken hill" the Sisters were in a position to collect the Lancaster pastor's promise of fine hundred dollars. One wonders if they did!

On the evening of March 17, 1880, the Sister portress discovered a life-size statue of St. Joseph at the front door. Because carpenter's tools had been placed at the base of the statue, it seemed a sign that the much needed barn should be built. This structure was completed before June and was used for the first graduation!

Bishop John Ambrose Watterson paid his first visit to the Academy in June. He seemed impressed with all that he saw. He must have been doubly impressed when the accidental spill of oil from the sanctuary lamp stained his robes. They were left at the Academy and the stain removed with clay.

No commencement exercises could be held until the prescribed course of studies was completed; so the close of school for the first years was marked by an exhibition. Recitation and music made up the program, and handiwork of all kinds was on display. The first graduate was Mary Duffy. The first gold medal was presented at the commencement in 1881 to Annie Mackin.

The second graduating class had six members. That same month, June, 1881, the tornado which struck Perry county cracked the south outside wall of the chapel. This caused great structural damage. This storm was a blessing in disguise, for it made it necessary for the Sisters to build. The first addition to the square house included the entrance and stairway which one sees today, the two reception rooms, and a classroom which served as an auditorium with a stage. The second floor had in infirmary, a guest room and a dormitory; the third, a dormitory and storage rooms. The addition was not completed until July, 1882. However, the auditorium was used for commencement in June, and on October 4th it was blessed by Father Lilly, O.P., Prior of St. Joseph's, Somerset, assisted by Fathers Hormisch and Meschenmoser.

Throughout the building period the financial question remained a burning one; no doubt many a sleepless night was passed on that account. Still, help always came when most needed; kind friends in Europe and America gave most generously, even making it possible to bore a well near the house. Father Hormisch and Mr. Wieser were largely responsible for this great event which must have meant so much to the Sisters and pupils. Now water did not have to be carried up from the spring at the foot of the hill.

The year which had brought so many material blessings ended sadly. On Dec. 28, Sister Valentine who had come from Europe with Mother Alphonsa in 1877, died.

Mr. J. Wieser, who had long been such a good friend of the Sisters, decided to move to Columbus, and the farm was then taken over by the Boor family, relatives of the chaplain. They also purchased more remote property belonging to the Sisters; but two years later they gave it up. This was somewhat embarrassing to the Sisters, since they had paid some of their own expenses from money obtained from the sale of this property and were now expected to refund the money. Aid was sought and the needed cash came soon from the Mother General (15).

Records state that the year 1885 was uneventful. Some upset, however, was caused when Sister Clara, the music teacher, became ill and Mother Gonzaga took over her teaching duties. Sister Clara returned to Buffalo and died there. This year Bishop Watterson had promised a gold medal for the one who should have the highest mark for conduct and studies. Four merited the distinction; it was awarded to Clara Kintz, who was later to become the mother of Sister Irma Dunn, a member of the Community. (16)

In December, 1888, Sister Hildegarde Hardy died. Professed but one year, she had worked in the infirmary and was a favorite of all the students. Two years earlier she had worked on the erection of the Lourdes shrine, near the present pond. The pond had a small island which was reached by a wood bridge. It was decided to build the grotto here. Both Sisters and pupils worked side by side hauling the stones needed. Appropriate statues were ordered (17).

In 1890 plans were under way for the second addition. The chapel had become too small. The pupils needed a study hall and more dormitories as well as a music room. All this was to be incorporated in the new addition at the north end of the building. Sister Bibiana surpassed all in her enthusiasm. The architect made the plans. There were many delays in the actual building. Finally, in January, 1891, the addition was under roof. The carpenters, plumbers and plasterers began a gallant attempt on the interior. They went ahead with such speed that the commencement exercises could be held in the new study hall that June and the chapel was ready for use in September. The gothic chapel was like a small church; the windows were all gifts of friends (18). The new altar, of carved oak, had been executed at the Josephinum in Columbus. In May, 1892, Bishop Watterson dedicated the chapel. Assisting were Fathers F. X. Specht, vicar general; Goldschmidt, Meeschenmoser, Mayrose and two Dominican Fathers. Father Goldschmidt was celebrant of the High Mass, while the Bishop preached. In the evening the Bishop conducted May devotions.

The coming to America of Mother Camilla Schweden in 1892 was an eagerly anticipated event. Mother thoroughly enjoyed every nook of the beautiful woods surrounding the house and was delighted with the grounds, and deeply touched by all the good accomplished. Returning to Europe she remarked: "By far the most beautiful spot they have in America is St. Aloysius Academy. I would place the novitiate there." (19)

Before 1892 ended news of the death of Father Hormisch, who had returned to Germany four years earlier, reached the Academy. Early in 1893 Father Mayrose's health failed and he left for St. Anthony hospital in Columbus. The Sisters were without a chaoplain until November, 1892, when Bishop Watterson appointed Father Francis Schmidt who was to remain for eight years.

On October 22, 1893, Father Meschenmoser, pastor of St. Rose's, was found dead by his housekeeper, Frances Lerner. She had no home and came to stay with the Sisters until her death in 1924. (20)

Sister Valentine Phiesel had died at the close of 1892, bringing to four the number of graves in the little cemetery. And in August, 1895, Sister Antonia Schmidt died.

In July, 1895, came the occasion known as "The Farmhouse Moving." The old farmhouse had been torn down and it was decided to put on its site the little frame house which had been Father Mortrier's place of observation. There were only two farm workers at the time, so the Sisters offered to do a "little pushing", and the chronicle states that the transfer began on July 16. By degrees the house reached its destination. It must have been a summer's work for all.

In September, 1896, a double jubilee was observed. Sister Isabella, prefect of studies, and Sister Ladislava, one of the pioneers, were honored. New pews for the Sodality chapel were given in their honor.

In 1897 a third addition was made to the building. It was an annex at the west end and contained laundry, class rooms, dining room and storage. The work was completed in 1898. During the year one of the marvels of man's creativity made its appearance at the Academy - a telephone was installed.

In the early part of 1898 the elements were at war against the Academy. On January 22 a storm came and lasted all night. The next day, Sunday, it still raged and the chaplain could not make himself heard - the tornado did the preaching. When the storm passed it was discovered that part of the roof had been torn off, chimneys had been knocked down and some heavy washstands had been lifted from the exposed floor dormitory and thrown to the ground. The repair work lasted over a month.

As the century drew to a close, the winter was the coldest that the Sisters had ever experienced. Many a prayer of thanksgiving must have been said for in the summer of 1899 a central heating system had been installed. Gone were the portable wood-burning stoves which required day and night care, to say nothing of the disposal of ashes. Sorrow again visited the house when Mother Gonzaga contracted a severe illness. She was so ill that when news of Bishop Watterson's death reached the Academy, it was decided that she should not be told. She gradually improved. However, on June 19th, Sister Anastasia Graham died of consumption.

Two events of the year which were a great delight to all were the mending and repairing of the present Tile Plant road, and the solidifying of the Academy road. The road crossing the property had been voted a public responsibility. Much had been done to the seemingly hopeless mud-paths of 1875.

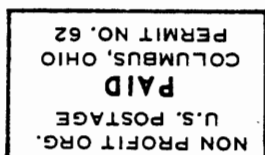
The second event of the year is not in the records; it was the visit of the Apostolic Delegate, Monsignor Martinelli. The coming of the representative of Pope Leo XIII must have been one of high interest and excitement to both Sisters and pupils. Perhaps such excitement was the cause of the neglect of the chronicler to write of it.

On the eve of 1900 Mother Gonzaga could look back on 24 years of fruitful labor and could count many accomplishments. She who had seen an ugly brick structure two decades before, could now behold a flourishing academy whose reputation for academic excellence had become known to many. She had been well recompensed for leaving her homeland, but she had also experienced many hours of labor and undoubtedly a mixture of tears in her prayers. The little cemetery was now the final resting place for six of her religious Sisters. As a new century

was dawning, she must have felt a great sense of accomplishment; but being a true daughter of Saint Francis, surely she knew that, "The weakness of the instrument does indeed show the power of God."

- 1) In 1867 a resident and day school was opened by the Sisters in Konitz, West Prussia, With the exception of the Bismarck years, 1875-1888, the Sisters have continued to work in that area which today is Conjnice, Poland.
- 2) In 1875 the Sisters were teaching at St. Michael's and St. Ann's, Buffalo, N.Y.
- 3) Mother Gonzage is the only one of the original group not buried at Mt. Aloysius. She died June 28, 1913, and is buried at the Motherhouse, Stella Niagara, N.Y. The rgoup went to St. Vicent's orphanage, Columbus, to await the completion of the academy. Father Mortrier died Sept. 24, 1906.
- 4) Perry County Deed Books, Vol. 12, p. 583.
- 5) Rev. J. B. Schmitt, pastor at Lancaster, 1874-1884.
- 6) Although the Sisters had agreed to the conditions of paying the debts, their means were not such and they were to fall far short in funds. Father Eis died in 1922, four years before the golden year of the Academy. He had lived to see it become the success he had visioned.
- 7) Father Philip Meschenmoser' died October 22, 1893.
- 8) This room was located to the right of the second entrance door. It now forms part of the main hallway to the chapel.
- 9) Lizzie Taggert became Mrs. McShane and moved to Omaha, Neb., dying in 1925. Victoria Johnson married Tom Bennet of New Lexington. The actual date of the school's opening was Sept. 4, 1876.
- 10) Old maps of the county published in 1875 show the school was to be called St. Eugenies Academy. This was the saint's name for Owen, the first name of Mr. Donnelly. Mother Gonzaga probably changed the name out of respect for Mother Aloysia Lenders.
- 11) Mason, Sister Liguori: "Mother Magdalen Daeman and her Congregation," Rauch & Stoeckel Printing, Buffalo, N.Y., p. 350. Sister Euphemia was professed at Capellen, Germany, May 17, 1866. She died at St. Aloysius in November, 1916.
- 12) Sister Adelgonde was the first Sister to die in the U.S. In May, 1981, a monument was erected in the cemetery to commemorate this.
- 13) Rev. G. Hormisch was at St. Aloysius from 1879 to 1888. He died in Germany in 1892.
- 14) Rev. Hugh F. Lilly, O.P., prior at Somerset, 1879-1883.
- 15) This property located at the end of the present Tile Plant road, was owned by the Sisters. It became known as "The Old Farm" on which the "Old Farm Day" celebrations were held.
- 16) Sister Irma spent over 40 years at the Academy, and again later was on the faculty of the present Mt. Aloysius. She is now at the Motherhouse.
- 17) By 1970 this grotto was in such disrepair that it was taken down.
- 18) Four windows of the original chapel are in the preent hallway connecting the two sacristy rooms.
- 19) Sister L. Mason, manuscript notes, Stella Niagara, N.Y.
- 20) Her garve is in the cemetery at Mount Aloysius.

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