2021

Lost Saint John's, Part 1: Earliest Buildings

Peggy L. Roske
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, proske@csbsju.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/archives_history_lessons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/archives_history_lessons/103

This Presentation is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Archives History Lessons by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csbsju.edu.
“Lost” Saint John’s
Part 1
St. Cloud Priory, 1856, the first structure built by the monks on the Mississippi River, drawn by Henry Emmel, one of the first students.
“At that time there lived on two claims near the river and south of St. Cloud two brothers, Louis & Wilhelm Rothkopp, both single and well advanced in years… They had made an offer of their claims (320 acres) to the Fathers, who, …in turn, were required to support the brothers for the rest of their days.”
“Without delay the Fathers proceeded to establish a monastery on one of the claims: a humble makeshift of a monastery [which] consisted of a log hut, destitute of comfort and furniture; a small frame addition, to serve as a kitchen; [and] a small stable for the two horses and the cow, which constituted the entire livestock of the community.”
“Think of the primitive log building about 12x20, then to this an additional structure about 14x20, in height one story and an attic… The whole building contained, besides kitchen and studio, three small rooms, one for the Prior, one for the professor and the third for an occasional guest…”

“Brother Benno enclosed the space between the two log cabins for use as a chapel.”
“Fr. Cornelius Wittmann was the first [and only] professor. He was still in the twenties, nimble of foot, bright in mind, pleasant in company; the children and the young folks were especially fond of him: he was a zealous and amiable gentleman.”
The Rothkopf claims were in sections 23 and 24 of the township, as seen on this plat map from the Land Office.
With the help of Google Maps, over 160 years later, we can place it on the south end of St. Cloud State University, from the Mississippi River over to Clearwater Road in south St. Cloud.

Rothkopf claims
Zooming in on the plat map, you can see the handwritten names of the claimants, Wilhelm (aka William) and Louis Rothkopf.
Using Google again, here's a close-up of it in today's context.
Wilhelm’s piece was the northerly one, including, today, the parking lot for the Beaver Island Trail.
The monks had this portion platted and planned to sell the lots to support their work.
The proposed street names would have reflected their heritage: Boniface Street, and College, St. John’s and Bavaria Streets.
Today’s Beaver Island Trail features an historical plaque relating this history, and the land’s connection to St. John’s.
The cross marks the spot...as far as we know.
But it was not to be their permanent home. The claims were disputed, and when the Rothkopf claims were lost, the monks headed west to “Indianbush.”
Luckily, back in 1856-57, Bruno Riess had already begun to hunt for another place, and monks were laying claim to 160-acre parcels west of Saint Cloud in the so-called “Indianbush”:

Bruno took up residence in his parish at St. Joseph. Under his direction Brothers Vincent, Wolfgang, and Roman began during that first winter to erect their claim cabins and to take up residence in them. With the coming of spring Father Bruno and the three Brothers continued their exploration of the ‘Indianbush’ and the north Watab basin which Brother Wolfgang christened ‘Schoenthal’ or beautiful valley.

Like Benedictines everywhere, seeking to live sustainably, they sought three things:

- Water
- Trees for fuel and building
- Farm land
So when the Rothkopf claims were lost, “…operations were resumed in the heart of the Indian Bush, a short distance from [the future site of] the Collegeville train station.” [That is, by today’s Wobegon Trail, north of I-94].
A claim house had been built there five years before. Alexius Hoffmann – Abbey Chronicler and artist of this sketch – described it as too small for the community. So “a more pretentious frame building, [with] a neat little chapel had been built. A fair piece of land had been placed under cultivation [and] there was water and fuel nearby…” This was the new home of the community.
Feb. 20. The frame buildings on the Rothkopp farm at St. Cloud were burnt to the ground. Part of them had been occupied by an organ-builder (Stoeckling?), and the fire is said to have started in a defective chimney in his shop. The buildings were not insured. Thus the last temptation to return to the farm was removed.

(Hopefully, Abbey Woodworking’s upcoming establishment of an organ-building shop will not involve defective chimneys!)
It wasn’t long before the monks realized the “worth and advantage” of moving to the shore of the beautiful lake to the south.
... they were so convinced of the worth and advantage of their cherished holdings, that they came upon and claimed the present site of St. John’s. In St. John’s literary lore its beauties have been the object of tributes in prose, verse and song. The qualities of this location for monastic and educational life have been acclaimed with undiminished enthusiasm for one hundred years.
So, for the first time, and certainly not the last, they moved a building.
The Frame House was taken apart and reassembled overlooking the lake. The chapel… [was] used for public services until the erection of the new Abbey Church” which we know as The Great Hall.
Here's a rather ghostly old photo of the Frame House (perhaps a reject from Peter Engel's photo studio?)
“The transplanted frame house…[contained] the chapel, Brothers' quarters, three private rooms, and the carpenter and tailor shops.”
Here’s yet another wonderful old photo, this time of the east side, showing the Chapel.
This photo was used in a December 1924 issue of The Record and accompanied an informative article about the building.
Here’s an early sketch of the first two buildings on campus, as seen from the lake.
That *Record* article noted that, “in the rear of the chapel was a platform about 12 ft. square, for the singers, and in a corner was a braying, squeaking reed organ, made in Paris, and pitifully unreliable...yet it did serve, and even stood in the organ loft of the new church for some years.”
Next up: the Old Stone House.
“The 'Old Stone House' was 46x50 feet, with basement, two levels and attic. Facing east, and two hundred feet from the lake, this Old Stone House was a frontier adaptation of the simple colonial stone houses and Pennsylvania Dutch gabled structures which the Minnesota monks had known around St. Vincent in the foothills of the Alleghenies.”

Worship & Work, p. 83
“The basement was used for a kitchen and dining rooms; the first floor was divided into study halls and classrooms; on the second floor the monks had their rooms, and the attic was used as a dormitory.”

*Scriptorium* Dec. 1953, p. 71
“Father Valentine painted a picturesque sundial with baroque corona in bright Bavarian colors on the south wall. It soon became a favorite target for stones…by students.”

*Worship & Work*, p. 83
Years later, from 1884-1896, the Old Stone House was the site of the Indian Industrial School, recognized today as the Abbey’s ill-advised attempt to bring Christianity and vocational education to the indigenous children, in part by suppressing their culture and practices, all with the sponsorship and remuneration of the U.S. government.
“On the ridge of the roof was an open stylized turret in which Brother Benno's bell was hung. This bell, a gift from relatives in Germany, had arrived at the St. Cloud Priory in 1857.”

It was the first bell in Stearns County.

“It accompanied the community in all its wanderings, and now announced, in the key of C, the hours of [prayer] and the school schedule.”

_Worship & Work, p. 83_
“Later Brother Benno's bell was hung in the north[west] turret [what we know as “Devil’s Tower”]… and served as the class bell for years….  

With the advent of the first electric bell system, it was stored in the [St. John’s] museum…

In 1948 Abbot Alcuin gave it to St. John's priory in Puerto Rico. There today it rings forth again as of old.”

_Worship & Work_, p. 83
In January, 1883, the old college buildings on the farm near Collegeville station were destroyed by fire. This was no appreciable material loss, yet it was a matter for regret that the venerable landmark disappeared, leaving not a trace of buildings of any kind.
This photo, also from 1883, shows the Frame House and the Old Stone House still in place, with the beginnings of the Quad and the new Abbey Church.
“The last services were held in the chapel on July 16, 1881, on which day a chapel in the new church’s basement was blessed. The old chapel was empty for a while, then converted into a lumber room... In 1886 the Frame House was taken down.”
The Old Stone House suffered a fire in 1877, but was repaired. But in 1893 “the weak condition of its walls necessitated its removal.” Its beams were also rotting.
Thus history repeats itself. The old makes way for the new; out of the ashes the phenix arises anew. We deplore the ravages of time on objects near which so many pleasant associations cluster. In a few years the pioneer student who recollects the day when the brass band played "Home, Sweet Home" from the cupola of the edifice will return to find not the slightest trace of St. John's as it then was, save the majestic forests, the silvery lake whose gentle waves lap the sandy shores, and, above all, the cordial welcome and hospitality it ever extends, which forms the ground work of an edifice against which the tooth of time is powerless.
To be continued…