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Horses, Trains, and Cars: How Trends in the Broader Economy Affected the Physical Layout of Our Campuses

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Horses, Trains, and Cars: How Trends in the Broader Economy Affected the Physical Layout of Our Campuses

Imagine that you are standing on College Avenue in Saint Joseph, in the middle of the parking lot east of the Main Building. Look straight west, at the middle of the building, and you will see what looks like an entrance. In fact, it was. This was the main entrance to Saint Benedict's Convent and, beginning in 1913, the College of Saint Benedict.

Now, picture yourself in front of the Abbey Church looking straight at the bell banner. Turn 180 degrees and notice how the road comes up to the church from Interstate 94. It was not always this way. Take a look to your left. The front of what is now the Great Hall was the front door to Saint John's Abbey and University.

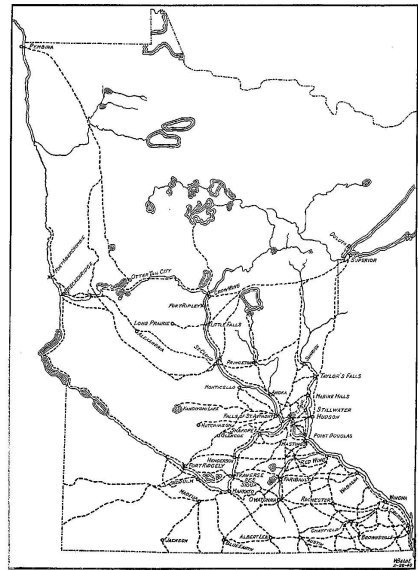
How did this happen? Changes in transportation from horses and railroads to cars and highways altered the physical layout of both campuses. They were originally set out so that people could travel to the campuses by horse and carriage and by rail. With the advent and growth of the automobile, and the construction of highways to carry them, the campuses changed their physical settings in order to accommodate visitors arriving by car.

These changes altered each campus's center of gravity. In Saint Joseph, Saint Benedict's Convent and the College of Saint Benedict changed from being institutions clustered near the corner of Minnesota Street and College Avenue to being spread more and more to the west and south. Saint John's Abbey and University literally turned ninety degrees, changing the main axis of the campus from one that ran east-to-west to one that ran from north to south.

These alterations were ultimately driven by broader trends in the Minnesota and U.S. economies. Railroads were the foundation of the regional and national transportation systems from the 1850s through the 1920s. By the 1920s, however, the car and the truck were quickly taking the places of the passenger railroad and the freight train on short- and medium-distance routes. State and federal governments responded to this by building new systems of roads that moved people along existing routes generally, but changed the points at which it was most convenient for visitors to arrive in Collegeville and Saint Joseph. Our two campuses responded by changing their physical plants to accommodate the needs of cars and trucks.

Horses and Trains

The monks and nuns who came to this area in the late 1850s took advantage of an existing transportation network. Steamboats on rivers and horses (and carriages) on land, along with walking, were the only modes of transportation available. Fortunately, by the time the Benedictines arrived there was already a network of river transport and roads throughout Minnesota generally and in central Minnesota in particular. (See Figure 1.) The women of Saint Benedict's Convent and the men of Saint John's Abbey initially located along these established transportation routes and population centers, settling first in Saint Cloud and later relocating to, respectively, Saint Joseph and "Indianbush" (later known as Collegeville).



THE MINNESOTA ROAD SYSTEM OF 1860

Figure 1: The Minnesota Road Network in 1860

Source: Arthur J. Larsen, "Roads and the Settlement of Minnesota." Minnesota History 21 (September 1940): 236. (Full article: 225-244)

Saint Joseph, the second home of the sisters, was located along the road to Fort Abercrombie and the western frontier. No road led to Saint John's future home, however. "Indianbush," the second home of the monks, was, indeed, in the bush, i.e. the prairies and forested areas northwest of Saint Joseph. Fr. Bruno Riess, one of the five original monks who came to Saint John's, recognized the quality of this "rolling country covered with dense woods and ... a delightful lake about 400 acres in extent" (Hoffmann, *Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of Its History, 1857-1907*, 16). He explored it, on foot or horseback, at every opportunity. In the late 1850s the monks staked claims to its sections, and eventually Abbot Boniface Wimmer took advantage of the opportunity to obtain hundreds of acres for Saint John's monastery, seminary, and college.

After building their second home in the Indianbush (and after another interim stay in Saint Cloud), ultimately another site two miles to the southwest, on the shore of the lake, was chosen as their final home. The earliest travelers to either campus had arrived on foot, on horseback, or by wagon. To bring students to the more remote Saint John's, for years Brother Thaddeus Hoermann, wagon driver—Brother "Taddy" he was familiarly called—made the trip with "his slow, lumbering conveyance" to Saint Cloud and Saint Joseph (Hoffmann, *Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of Its History, 1857-1907*, 116). The route to Saint Joseph and Saint John's was described thus in 1873-1874:

It is a fine road leading to Saint Joseph (from Saint Cloud), through fine farms. White houses with green blinds have taken the place of many a primitive shanty and log-house. Leaving Saint Joe, you take the college road which is up and down hill through a magnificent forest. The way does not seem so long, because it is so unusual a one for our State. You admire the tall, graceful trees, as do evidently also the squirrels and birds, whose twitter and music fill the air. There is a long line of carriages winding over hills in front of you and a stream behind as far as you can see. Carriages? Most of them are farm wagons, loaded to the brim with whole families ... When, however, the blue lake is discerned through the trees ... and the College buildings meet the view, one is but glad to alight and look around. (Hoffmann, *Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota: A Sketch of Its History, 1857-1907*, 41-42, quoting the articles of "Minnie Mary Lee," aka Julia A. Wood, in the *Northwest Chronicle*)

Over time, the road by which Brother Taddy and others approached the Saint John's campus evolved. The first road connected Saint John's to Saint Joseph. It went out of use years ago, but still exists as part of the network of trails through Saint John's Arboretum. (Amusingly, its route can be difficult to find on the earliest, oldest maps because of their poor quality, but part of it is plainly marked on campus trail maps currently used by the Arboretum. See the "Old Saint Joe Road" marked in Figure 2.)



Figure 2: Saint John's Arboretum Trail Map, 2011

By the late 1860s, a faster form of transportation was available nearby: railroads. The Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba Railway was pushed to completion in the early 1870s by its president, James J. Hill, and by 1874 the line ran past both Collegeville and Saint Joseph. (See Figure 3.)

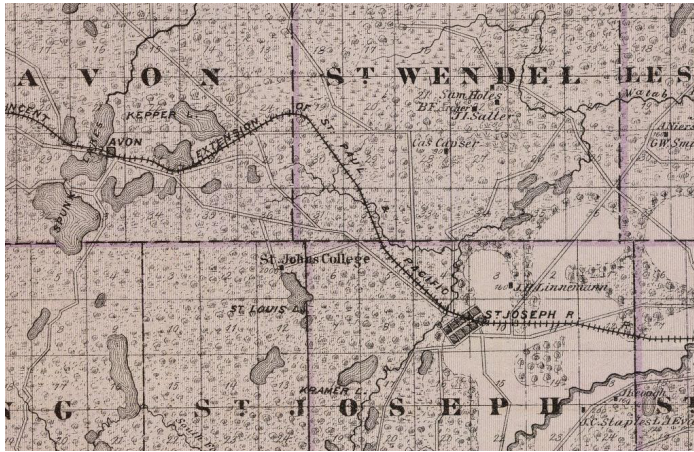


Figure 3: Roads and Railroads, 1874

Source: David Rumsey Historical Map Collection, www.davidrumsey.com

Later, a second road was built, to the Collegetteville railroad station, once the monks were successful in establishing a station near their old Indianbush in 1879. (See the “Old Entrance Road” marked in Figure 2.) After that, Brother Taddy’s trips were thus much quicker.

In the course of the summer arrangements were completed for the establishment of Collegetteville station on the Saint Paul, Minneapolis and Manitoba railway line. A passenger and freight station house was built in June 1879 and ... a new wagon road was cut through the woods and thus good old Brother ‘Taddy’s’ daily stage trip was shortened five miles. (Hoffmann, *Saint John’s University, Collegetteville, Minnesota: A Sketch of Its History, 1857-1907*, 58.)

The road and railroads were important in determining how the two campuses developed. For example, Figure 3 shows “St. John’s College” at one corner of a triangle consisting of three roads. The east-west road led from Saint Cloud through Saint Joseph and on to Collegetteville. The railroad station was located near the northeast corner of the triangle and passengers could be picked up or dropped off using the road running from southwest to northeast. This road became the main route in to Saint John’s.

Pine trees were planted in the 1880s and grew over the succeeding years so that the route became known as the “Pine Curtain.”

Figures 4, 5, and 6 illustrate how the transportation network affected the development of the Quadrangle.

Figure 4: Saint John's in 1873
Source: Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (PF 116065)

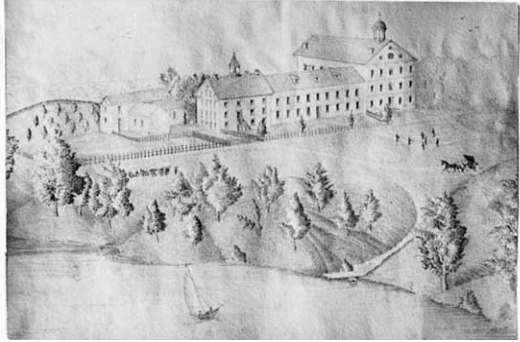


Figure 5: Saint John's in 1880
Source: Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (PF 111239)



Figure 6: Saint John's in 1890
Source: Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (PF 036285)



Figure 4 shows the road from Collegeville Station approaching the original Saint John's buildings in 1873. Note that they were built facing the east and offered an entrance to the campus for those coming up the road from the railroad station. By 1880, the original Abbey Church was under construction to the north of the original buildings and, as Figure 5 shows, the entrance faced the same direction—east—as the older structures. The completed Abbey Church (Figure 6) provided a grand “front door” for the Abbey and the University.

Saint John's continued to develop along this axis for the next eighty years. An aerial photograph of the campus in 1924 shows this clearly (Figure 7). The main entrance road from the Collegeville railroad station and from the road north of campus that had developed into U.S. Highway 52 is visible in the lower right of the photo. The campus was growing to the west and north, but the main entrance continued to be the east side of the Quadrangle.



Figure 7: An Aerial View of Saint John's, 1924

Source: Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (PF 111209)

Something else the photo in Figure 7 shows is that there was no road circumnavigating the campus. Saint John's was the arrival point, not something one needed to drive around rather than up to or through. People took direct routes to get somewhere; why make your horse haul you the long way around? And the car, once having arrived on the scene, wasn't something to keep out of the heart of campus: it delivered people, goods and cargo right to the door.

It was only much later, when safety, congestion, pollution, and aesthetic concerns became stronger considerations, that vehicles were largely banned from the inner campus. And, for some of the same reasons, the Wobegon Trail opened in 2003 where the railroad tracks had been—an old form of transportation superseding a newer one.

Saint Benedict's Convent and, later, the College of Saint Benedict, developed in a similar fashion. In Figure 3, note where in Saint Joseph the railroad and the road from Saint Cloud intersect. The road leading directly south from this point is now College Avenue, and the sisters built their building to face this road. In fact, in 1911 the sisters petitioned to have College Avenue—then called Wisconsin Street—moved half a block to the east so they could add their new chapel onto their buildings' eastern façade, but when the Saint Joseph village council objected, the Sacred Heart Chapel was built to the west instead. Figure 8 illustrates this effect in 1912, while Figure 9 shows that this continued into the 1940s.



Figure 8: Saint Benedict's Convent and the College of Saint Benedict, 1912

Source: Minnesota Historical Society Visual Resources Database (PF053395)



Figure 9: Saint Benedict's Convent and the College of Saint Benedict, 1940

Source: Saint Benedict's Monastery Archives

Note, in Figure 8, the walkways are all leading from College Avenue up to the east side of the building, with the rest of the campus built to the west.

Cars, Trucks, and Highways

By the 1940s, the days of the horse-drawn carriage were over and the days of the passenger railroad were numbered. Americans embraced the automobile, and every level of government (local, state, and federal) was improving existing roads and building new highways to make it easier to move people and goods by car and truck. Central Minnesota had already seen the road from Saint Cloud through Saint Joseph and on to Collegeville designated as U.S. Highway 52 in the 1920s. Highway 52 was part of a network of federal highways funded by gasoline taxes collected by the federal government and connected central Minnesota directly to the Twin Cities to the southeast and Fargo-Moorhead to the northwest. It thus made sense for more and more people coming to Saint Benedict's and Saint John's to come by car rather than by rail.

It was clear, however, by the late 1940s, that the existing system of highways was not sufficient to carry the volume of traffic that Americans were generating. In 1956, President Eisenhower signed the Interstate and Defense Highway Act, creating a nationwide network of limited-access, divided highways that would link together major metropolitan areas. The general route of U.S. 52 was chosen to connect Minneapolis-Saint Paul with Fargo-Moorhead; however, the new Interstate 94 did not always follow the existing route of U.S. 52. This was because a key factor in constructing

the Interstate Highway system was that cities between major metropolitan areas should be bypassed whenever possible. This meant that rather than going directly through Saint Cloud and then west through Saint Joseph, the new Interstate Highway 94 went south of both cities and linked up with the existing U.S. 52 route west of Saint Joseph.

Finished in the late 1970s, the results of this routing were profound. First, the College of Saint Benedict and Saint Benedict's Convent started sprawling towards the west and southwest with a new entrance to the campus on Minnesota Street. Minnesota Street, unlike College Avenue, connected directly with the Saint Joseph exit from Interstate 94. The spread of the campus is evident at the bottom center of Figure 10. At this point, the entrance to the college ran from Minnesota Street to the new Mary Commons and the dormitories constructed in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The east side of the Main Building became the "back" of the Monastery rather than the front entrance for both Monastery and College.

Recognizing the need for a better and more accessible front entrance as they planned to renovate their worship space, in 1983 the Monastery also re-oriented its welcoming façade toward the west, building its Gathering Place onto the west end of the Sacred Heart Chapel. Visitors could now use the newly-named "Chapel Lane" to drive up to the sisters' reception area, with its handicapped-accessible ramps, and find, upon entering the Chapel, that its altar was now in the center, beneath the dome. Thus the interior and exterior of the Chapel were re-oriented to be more welcoming and inclusive.

Figure 11 shows what Saint Benedict's Monastery and the College of Saint Benedict campus looked like in the mid-1990s. There were now two axes along which the campus operated. One, on the north-south direction, ran from Minnesota Street (at the top of the photo) down Chapel Lane, through Mary Commons, and past the new Clemens Library and Haehn Campus Center. The second was a new formal entrance to the college from College Avenue. Instead of being near the intersection with Minnesota Street, however, it was designed as an entrance to the college for cars, with ample parking lots visible near where the two axes intersect.

Figure 10: Saint Benedict's Convent and the College of Saint Benedict, Aerial Photo ca. 1972

Source: College of Saint Benedict Archives

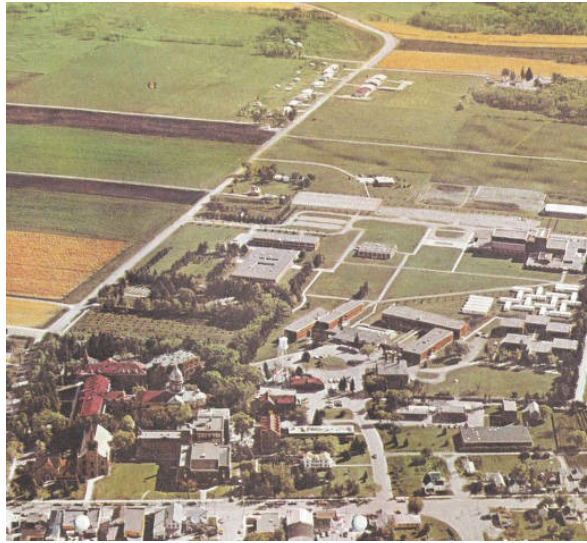


Figure 11: Saint Benedict's Monastery and the College of Saint Benedict, mid-1990s

Source: College of Saint Benedict Archives

The effect of Interstate 94 on the Saint John's campus was even more profound. Its designated path to the north of the campus dictated the closure of the entrance road through the "Pine Curtain," and established the formerly little-used west access road as the new approach to the campus. In a happy coincidence, architect Marcel Breuer's 1950s design for the new Abbey Church had placed it in front of the old one, with the lake behind, and with its stunning and distinctive concrete bell banner facing north—now the direction from which visitors would approach the campus from

the freeway. The welcoming façade of the former church, now the Great Hall, was largely superseded; Breuer even had its steeples—the “Twin Towers”—removed to give the new church pre-eminence. The face of the church is to the north, toward the new Alcuin Library and the access road to Interstate 94. The Pine Curtain thus no longer lines the entrance into campus, and the grand bell banner, signifying a house of worship, can be seen from miles away.



Figure 12: Aerial View of Saint John's, ca. 1960

Source: Saint John's University Archives

Concluding Thoughts

Understanding our homes in Central Minnesota involves more than the natural environment in which they are situated. The human-created economy in which our institutions have operated have affected the physical structure of our campuses for all of our 150+ years, and will continue to do so in the future. The questions we should ask as a community are thus not whether changes in transportation and the economy will change our campus, but rather what trends are visible today, and how will our campuses evolve in response to them.

References

- All of the following can be found on the websites of the SJU or CSB Archives: <http://www.csbsju.edu/sju-archives> or <http://www.csbsju.edu/csb-archives>
- Aerial photos and campus maps for Saint Benedict's: <http://www.csbsju.edu/csb-archives/photosandmaps>
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