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Main Hall History and Background

Strength, stability, continuity, tradition. Located on the center of the St. Norbert College campus, Main Hall stands as a recognized symbol of institutional character.

The history of Main Hall is, in fact, the early history of St. Norbert College. Or nearly so. Most people familiar with the institution's roots remember that Father Bernard Pennings informally founded the College on October 10, 1898, when he began teaching Latin to a De Pere boy, Francis Van Dyke. Within days, three others had joined the class.

And so the College was born.

Three years later, when the 1901 term ended, a decision was made to build what was referred to in some of the historic literature of the period as "an up-to-date college."

Construction on Main Hall began later that year. Bishop Sebastian G. Messmer, who had invited the Norbertines of Berne Abbey Holland to the Green Bay Diocese in 1893, laid the cornerstone on March 19, 1902. The students moved in for the fall term before the building was completed. It was finished early in 1903 and dedicated April 22, 1903, with imposing ceremonies presided over by Bishop Messmer. In attendance were Abbot Pennings and about 50 clergymen from all parts of the Green Bay Diocese who marched in procession from the church, followed by the student body.

Main Hall's design has been described as Victorian Romanesque. Specifications on the four-story, red brick building, built at a cost of \$40,000, were 116 feet by 64 feet. The building's foundation, basement, and towers were constructed of Bedford (Indiana) rusticated limestone; the richly detailed red brick used for the remainder of the building's exterior originated in West De Pere.

According to early records, Main Hall fundraising appealed to "free donations from those Catholics who can contribute to such good work." Interest bearing bonds of \$25 at four percent interest were also issued.

Until Boyle Hall was built in 1917, "old Main" was St. Norbert College. Students ate, slept, studied, prayed, and played within the one building which served the institution's academic, administrative, residential and recreational needs. Classrooms, a study hall, a one-floor dormitory and six private rooms for Norbertine faculty, an auditorium, a small one-room library, a large recreation area, a kitchen and dining room were contained in the original building. The 1989-90 restoration included the reinstallation of several classrooms, so the building will continue to be used academically. Predominantly, however, it is the College's chief administration building.

In 1989, the U.S. Secretary of the Interior named Main Hall to the National Register of Historic Places. The second oldest building on campus qualified on the basis of age and architectural significance, and because of its importance to the history of the community and to higher education.

About the renovation

Main Hall renovation was made possible in part through a \$2.2 million low interest loan from the U.S. Department of Education announced in October 1987. The total cost of the improvements was \$2.9 million. Partial cost of upgrading the central utility boiler serving Main Hall was also included in the project's cost estimate. Work on Main Hall began in May 1989 and was completed in August 1990.

Renovation to the red brick exterior included new energy-efficient windows (specially designed to maintain the building's historic integrity), extensive repairs to the foundation as well as to the slate roof, tuck pointing and cleaning, and repainting the wood surfaces. The east entrance and the staircase between the first floor and basement level were eliminated, replaced by a limestone addition on the building's northeast corner.

The interior required complete mechanical upgrading including heating, ventilation, air-conditioning, plumbing and electrical wiring. All major mechanical systems are fully automated, monitored and controlled from another location. An elevator was installed in the northeast entrance making the building handicap accessible. A complete communication system is wired into the building and contains two complete power systems, one to accommodate computer technology, the second one controlling "house" current.

The building's interior reflects a creative, virtually unrecognizable, reconstruction of the original space, effectively combining aesthetics and efficiency. A striking example is the addition of a skylight and mezzanine in what was originally the auditorium. Another focal point, especially on the third floor, are the light and grandeur of windows once covered, partially or completely, by false ceilings installed during earlier efforts to accommodate the building's evolution. Main Hall's once dramatic entry from the front of the campus has been restored by replacing the thermopane glass doors of recent vintage with impressively finished birch doors replicated from the original. The abundant, though not excessive, use of finely finished wood and polished brass creates an ambiance of warmth and character. The original wood of the east staircase has been refinished and its pattern replicated in moldings and doors throughout the building.

Furnishings were designed to accommodate the demands of the specific space, combining aesthetics with the practical considerations of budget and the ability to withstand use.

Art works from the Godschalx Gallery adorn space throughout the building. Especially notable is the northwest "Norbertine turret" between the second and third floor with portraits of four Norbertines who significantly impacted St. Norbert College. A 1914 painting of the College's founder, Abbot Bernard Pennings, by local artist John Kitslaar is displayed on the landing between the second and third floors.