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I heard that Main Hall is not the oldest building on campus. Can that be true?

Benjamin Lepak '16

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October 2015

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings,

I heard that Main Hall is not the oldest building on campus. Can that be true?

Benjamin Lepak '16

Answer:

Dearest Benjamin,

Indeed, this is an assumption that is easily made, as the cornerstone of Main Hall bears the date (so early in our history) of 1903. But I must inform you that, contrary to popular belief, this beloved landmark is by no means the oldest building on campus.

Five years before that cornerstone was laid, we erected our first priory. It stood on the current site, although all that remained of that early building was razed in 1962. Old St. Joseph Church was here before even that date, of course. It was our reason for settling here, and so it, too, is often mistaken for the oldest building on campus. In fact, that honor goes to another church, one that was founded by our Baptist brethren in 1874.

The St. John's building on Third Street was first a Baptist church, then home to a Lutheran congregation, before it was purchased by our college in 1961. Since then, it housed in turn classrooms, labs, studios, faculty offices and several college departments before its transformation into the Cassandra Voss Center. It pleases me that, under its new guise, the building



Ask The Abbot

As the founder of St. Norbert College, and having a prime seat in the center of campus throughout the years, I, Abbot Bernard Pennings, hold the answers to many of your burning questions about the college.

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still brings people together in fellowship, understanding and reconciliation; the center is the focus for conversation about “ideas of gender and identity” that seem to me most spiritual in nature. Those terms themselves may be new to me, as I here confess, but such exploration of the human soul as it yearns for *communio* has been the work of Christian peoples for the past two millenia, to be sure.

The St. Boniface Church, once our bookstore and now our Dudley Birder Hall, was constructed nine years after St. John's, in 1883.

If I may, though, I would like to make a case for our own parish church as the most venerable *site* on campus. The present building dates from 1890, but its history truly dates back two further centuries.

Please indulge me in this history lesson:

Originally located on the site where the church now stands was a modest chapel, erected in 1676 by Father Albanal, a building that stood for nearly 200 years. Almost a century later, two Jesuit missionaries were murdered near the site of the present church. (This tragedy forms the basis for the contention that the city of De Pere received its name from the phrase “Deux Peres,” meaning “two fathers.”)

In 1870, Bishop Joseph Melcher of Green Bay established the parish to serve French Canadian settlers who were employed in area lumber mills. The land for the parish was gifted by Jane Dousman and blessed by the bishop on Christmas Day. The first pastor of the parish was Father Vemare.

In 1889, the original building was demolished after being struck by lightning. The current church was dedicated one year later, in September 1890.

Although it has undergone several renovations in the intervening century or more, those who enter this most sacred space know that they are worshiping within the same brick walls that first received their college's founder.

Well, Benjamin, do please forgive this somewhat lengthy disquisition in response to your simple question. I am ever grateful to our dear students whose inquiries so often inspire these turns down memory lane!

Responses to “Ask the Abbot” questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, O.Praem., who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.

St. Norbert College

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