

St. Bernard's Seminary: 'Ghosts' in the corridors su

By Emily Morrison

Time, it is often said, waits for no man — although in matters of the spirit, at least, the tide of human events has a way of subtly sifting things out. St. Bernard's Seminary, established by Bishop Bernard J. McQuaid in 1893 to accommodate the rising number of young men who felt themselves impelled to serve in the priesthood, was sold to Eastman Kodak Company in 1982 because that tide had inexplicably ebbed in a new era. The seminary will no longer be used for religious purposes, yet thanks to the foresight of diocesan archivist Father Robert F. McNamara and the intermediary role of the Landmark Society of Western New York, the venerable exterior architecture of the three central historic buildings will be preserved, as their founder had fervently hoped, well into successive centuries.

The laughter and the prayers of generations of seminarians may never quite die out in the spacious corridors of St. Bernard's, even though the buildings' interior configurations will be dramatically altered to provide space for a modern office and administrative facility complete with elevators, a vending cafeteria, conference rooms, and open office space. Indeed, given the seminary's reputation for benign ghostly visitations (alluded to by Father McNamara in his delightful history of the seminary, as well as by the original prosector, Monsignor James J. Hartley, who wrote his own account of the seminary's origins), workmen employed to complete the renovation may well imagine some summer morning that the founding bishop of the Diocese of Rochester has once again stopped by to make one of his customary inspection tours of the old construction site.

Once Bishop McQuaid had blessed the cornerstone in 1891, wrote Father McNamara in his 1968 chronicle, "the builders went to work with good will, and day by day through spring and early summer the solid walls of ashlar and brick rose. Day by day, also, the bishop was on hand to keep an eye on every phase of the work. We have all heard of the persistence with which the 67-year-old Pope Julius II clambered up the scaffolding in the Sistine Chapel to watch Michelangelo at work. But his persistence was nothing compared to that of the 67-year-old Bishop of Rochester, who daily climbed every ladder and picked his way along every scaffold to inspect every detail of progress."

Bishop McQuaid's determination to erect a major diocesan seminary in Rochester was inspired by a query made by Pope Leo XIII during the bishop's required *ad limina* visit to Rome in 1878. The Council of Trent, moreover, had specified that every diocese should have its own seminary, and although the bishop had founded St. Andrew's Minor Seminary in 1870, he was unable for some time to fulfill the decree of Trent, largely for economic reasons. "But the Roman query had given him pause," wrote Father McNamara. "Maybe it can be done, he thought, at least at long range. And then he decided. Though he was always given to making his own decisions, the bishop was probably never so alone as he was in this one."

No stranger to controversy, the bishop apparently met with some degree of opposition to his plan, since detractors believed that the diocese could never financially support its own seminary. Bishop McQuaid proceeded with remarkable foresight to carefully map out both the physical and intellectual needs of the facility. In 1879, the same year the seminary received its first monetary contribution (a bequest of \$50 from Mrs. Richard Vernam, a convert to Catholicism), the bishop sent his first seminarian, Edward J. Hanna (many years later named Archbishop of San Francisco), to obtain a doctorate in Rome, preparatory to teaching theology in the seminary whenever it should open.

"Church law required that each residential bishop have a theological seminary of his own — if he could afford it," reads an historical statement prepared in 1981 for submission to the New York State Parks and Recreation Agency, during consideration of the seminary's proposed nomination to the National Register of Historic Places. "McQuaid's diocese had only about 75,000 people, so he could have begged off. But both as an educator and an experienced builder, he chose to accept the challenge."

With the impending closing of the Provincial Seminary of St. Joseph in Troy, N.Y., looming on the immediate horizon, the bishop resolved to step up his campaign to build a local seminary to provide for the education of area students who would otherwise have

been sent to Troy to complete their theological degrees. As the result of an annual door-to-door seminary collection campaign in each parish of the then eight-county diocese, Bishop McQuaid ultimately obtained pledges from his 65 diocesan priests of \$41,500, and from the laity, \$34,000.

In addition, the bishop made an appeal every year from 1883 on for the establishment of endowments to support his prospective professors, according to Father McNamara, in the first such approach in the history of higher Catholic education. Among the more prosperous local Catholics responding to his appeal were horticulturalist Patrick Barry, department store magnate Charles J. Burke and carriage maker James Cunningham.

"Yet for all the worldly wisdom he showed in his preparations," wrote Father McNamara in his 1968 history, "Bishop McQuaid did not for a moment forget that it was a spiritual task that he was engaged in. Prayers had preceded his first plans; and that order was always observed later, too, whenever the way seemed open for new developments in the seminary." His prayers were evidently answered, for the seminary collection continued to grow rapidly, and the bishop was finally able, in 1887, to purchase for approximately \$10,000 the site of the future seminary, a 24-acre plot of land adjoining Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, on the east side of Lake Avenue Boulevard.

With a pensive smile at the beginning of his last illness," wrote Monsignor Hartley in 1940, "(Bishop McQuaid) explained that when he was a young bishop he had, with the superintendent of Holy Sepulchre, explored the river bank for miles at nighttime, using only matches for light so as not to attract attention. He noticed the sand oozing out on the bank opposite the large deposit the proprietor was unaware of, (and) further south the abundant water supply from living springs and brown stone cropping out of the bank."

Bishop McQuaid chose the Lake Avenue Boulevard property for several reasons, according to Father McNamara's 1981 proposal to the state review board. "It was a protected property, with the river bank on the east, and Holy Sepulchre Cemetery to the north and across the road. This gave it a sort of monastic seclusion and quiet," reads the proposal. "Though to all intents rural, it was on a trolley line that could convey faculty and students downtown to the diocesan cathedral, St. Patrick's ..." (demolished in 1937-38 when the parish fell on hard times and Eastman Kodak agreed to buy the property to erect the firm's new Camera Works, which stood on the site for the next 25 years until its own eventual remodeling into office space).

The topography on the site of the future seminary was excellent, since a rise of ground near the roadside provided a natural locale for the main building, and the slope behind allowed for the construction of a chapel/dining room three stories high at its easternmost end. A terrace on the river bank became the future site of a picturesque spring-fed pond for overflow water. Bishop McQuaid had hoped that the Medina sandstone that lay beneath the property would be a good source of building stone, as it had in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, yet he was disappointed to learn that the quality of the stone found on the seminary property was inadequate. He was able, however, to obtain the same mottled, fossiliferous red sandstone in a quarry south of the seminary grounds, and the architectural firm of Andrew Jackson Warner was subsequently engaged to draw up concrete plans for the proposed Victorian Gothic edifices.

The choice of the eminent area architect was a wise one, since Warner had already designed the Chapel of All Souls in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in 1875. A hammer-beam ceiling patterned after the one in the Holy Sepulchre chapel was repeated on a grander scale in the seminary's central chapel/dining room building. This impressive focal point features intricately designed yet functional trefoils and quatrefoils in the large open spaces that flank the ceiling's pointed Gothic arches.

Once a builder had been hired — the Hiram Edgerton Company, at that time the largest construction company in the city of Rochester — the new project was officially incorporated on March 31, 1891. "Perhaps the next day, April first, would have been more convenient, but it certainly would have been less auspicious," wrote Father McNamara. "There were doubtless still some who consid-

ered the seminary to be 'McQuaid's Folly,' and it would not do to furnish them with another omen."

So the foundation stone was laid on March 31, on a spot that lies beneath the present cornerstone. Bishop McQuaid read a brief statement to the trustees, a few of the laborers at the building site, and two or three onlookers. "For the glory and honor of God and the increment of our holy religion in the Diocese of Rochester," the bishop intoned, "we shall now bless the foundation stone of St. Bernard's Seminary." The trenches were sprinkled with holy water, and the work began in earnest.

On August 20, the feast day of St. Bernard, the cornerstone was laid with great ceremony, and although the bishop made his address in honor of St. Bernard in the clearest possible English, according to Monsignor Hartley, the newspaper reporters sent to cover the event apparently failed to grasp the bishop's intent. One headline ran, "The bishop named the seminary St. Bernard's after himself," and other accounts of the generosity of contributors, from the time the bishop first began saying masses for the souls in purgatory, were comparably botched. "He obtained the funds for building by saving the money received for requiem masses for the souls in purgatory," quoted Monsignor Hartley from one of the dailies. "They did not reflect how he could say so many thousands and hundreds of thousands of masses. He accepted no stipend for his masses."

One remark of the bishop received notable attention: "A million of dollars would not buy this building with river back of it and parks in front of it, and dearest of all, the home of our dead nearby. Not for a million dollars would I part with this site and building; but far above the value of this property, infinitely more important, is the course of instruction and priestly discipline the young men will receive within its walls to form them for the work of saving immortal souls."

Little did the bishop know that his beloved seminary would one day prematurely reach the end of its mission, and be sold for twice the sum for which he insisted he would never part with it. In its day, St. Bernard's prepared some 2900 priests, the majority of whom went on to join the diocesan clergy of more than 100 dioceses in the United States, Puerto Rico, Cuba, Venezuela, the Philippines, Canada and Ghana. Twenty-one alumni later became bishops, and three were named archbishops. The faculty also included many distinguished professors, among them Father McNamara, who lived at the seminary from 1938 until 1981, the year Bishop Clark was forced by circumstances to close the venerable site forever as an institution of Catholic education.

For the first four years or so, I was on the top floor of the north building, Theology Hall," relates Father McNamara, who taught Church history, liturgy, religious art and Italian. "Then I came down and lived in the main building, in a suite built there about 1942. My room was on the northwest corner, looking out across the cemetery, subjected to the drafts that blew in through the rather warped window. But I was afforded a beautiful view of the sunsets."

Father McNamara was instrumental in acquiring city landmark status for the three Warner-designed buildings at St. Bernard's in 1979, when declining enrollment, decreasing tuition revenues and skyrocketing costs began to threaten the future of the seminary. Even though Bishop Fulton J. Sheen had devoted a great deal of his post-Vatican II energies to bringing in lay and religious teachers, opening the seminary to other than priestly candidates, laying the groundwork for accreditation with the Association of Theological Schools and developing a graduate department that was later to become St. Bernard's Institute, his efforts made little headway against the fundamental quandary of a critical shortage of students.

Fearing that one day St. Bernard's might be razed to make way for some type of new residential or commercial development, its directors set in motion the complicated machinery of application for landmark status. They reasoned that designation as an historic site should in no way impede the sale of the building, should it become necessary, since, as Father McNamara pointed out in a 1978 memorandum on application for such a distinction, "(i)n the days of 'bulldoze and rebuild,' this might have deterred prospective (commercial) purchasers. Today the presence



This view of the chapel in St. Bernard's Chapel/Dining Hall as an era permanently consigned to history. After building may be used as a dining room or conference room

of well-constructed landmark buildings might be an incentive rather than a deterrent.

"Today," the memo went on, "building costs are so high that commercial firms are happy to renovate the interiors of older, well-built structures, and thus save much money ... The state and federal governments are offering increasing ... tax benefits to those who renovate the exteriors of landmark buildings ... The fact that St. Bernard's is not, *per se*, a church, would probably make its purchase less problematic to a prospective buyer who might find a church building less promising as a subject of interior remodeling for commercial use. Landmark status might serve as a fortunate argument to a commercial purchaser to retain as much as possible the 'green area' character of St. Bernard's acreage. There is no question," Father McNamara concluded, "that the local public appreciates this green area comprising the seminary grounds of the two cemeteries to the north. It is the

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