

The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended, and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See the Boston Herald, (The Columbian) Dec. XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and

Annals from the Archives

Academy of Notre Dame, Tyngsboro



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Aerial View of Academy, c. 1930

SND New England Archives

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—On November 28, 2017, the Academy of Notre Dame in Tyngsboro, MA celebrated the 90th anniversary of its opening. The seeds for this Academy can be traced back to May of 1904. That was when famous stage actress, Nance O'Neil bought a property in Tyngsboro that had been known as the Brinley Estate. The Boston Globe reported she paid somewhere between \$15,000 and \$20,000.

The Brinley Estate was built sometime in the mid 18th century by members of the Tyng family, for which Tyngsboro was later named. In 1779, Nathaniel Brinley, a loyalist, bought the property from the Tyngs. It remained in his family until the early 1860s. After the Brinleys sold the estate, there were 3 successive owners. Various renovations were done to the house; barns and other outbuildings were added, and even a racetrack was built for trotting horses. During those years, the house was also used as a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients. When Nance O'Neil bought the estate, the Boston Globe reported that the property had 194 acres, which included the racetrack, a trout pond, several outbuildings and an estate that boasted 22 rooms and 5 bathrooms. Water was obtained for the house from the local spring. Nance O'Neil used the house to host many parties for her friends and acquaintances, one of whom included the infamous Lizzie Borden. Unfortunately Nance O'Neil was in constant financial trouble. Because of that, she had to spend a lot of time on the road performing. In the four months leading up to her buying the Brinley Estate, she performed in more than six plays just in Boston. She began her movie career in 1913 and eventually appeared in more than 30 films. Being away so much forced her to hire a staff to care for the property and her menagerie, which included cats and dogs, sheep and cows, cockatoos and even an orangutan, who soon became too much for anyone to handle and was eventually given to a zoo. Despite her constant work schedule, she continued to struggle with money and in 1907 realized she would have to sell the property.

In nearby Lowell, Dr. James Sullivan was urging Sister Constantine, the Superior of the Notre Dame Academy, to find a place for her sisters to rest during the summer. The Brinley Estate was well known in the area and because it had once been used as a sanitarium, Dr. Sullivan would no doubt have been aware of it. Word soon spread that Nance O'Neil planned to sell her estate and he immediately informed Sr. Constantine about the property. The Annalist in Lowell wrote in 1907 that "*On July 27, Sister Superior Constantine . . ., and 2 sisters, saw the estate in Tyngsboro for the first time, then known as the Nance O'Neill estate. . . The beauty of the place and surroundings so charmed Sister Superior that she telephoned to Waltham on her return home and asked Sister Superior Agnes Aloysia to visit the estate. On July 29, Sister Superior came as requested and was surprised and delighted with the beauty of the scenery. A telegram was sent at once to Sister Superior Agnes Mary [in Philadelphia] for permission to buy it. The answer came in the afternoon. "Yes!"*

It took another two years for the sale to be completed and the Sisters to take over the property. In 1909, the Lowell Annalist wrote that, "*July 21st was the day for the great exit, Sister Superior and 21 sisters left about 10 o'clock in different bands . . .*

Sister Superior and the sisters arrived [in Tyngsboro] in time for dinner.” The first entry made by the Annalist in Tyngsboro was that “After dinner, as wagons bearing our bedding etc., had arrived, we carried our belongings to the places where we were to sleep. All who desire to do so received permission to occupy small rooms on the 3rd floor. There are 14 rooms, 8 of which were selected by nuns not afraid of ghosts or more substantial beings.”

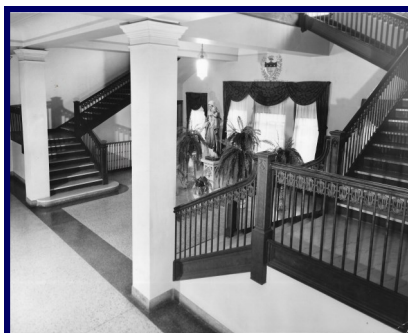
That first summer, the sisters spent their time cleaning the house, and preparing the property for future retreats. One of their greatest problems was obtaining water. They wrote that “We have been trying to recall the lines in the Ancient Mariner that run somewhat as follows: “Water, Water everywhere and never a drop to drink.” We could express the chief and probably only source of discomfort in Tyngsboro by a slight change in the wording. Our plaint would be: “Faucets, Faucets everywhere and never a drop to drink.” The sisters were forced to use the well which was near the house. They recorded that “This well which is a typical illustration of “The Old Oaken Bucket” yields us a plentiful supply of sparkling spring water and is used for all culinary purposes.”

Despite the fact that the estate was to be a retreat for sisters, they had other plans as well, from that very first summer. In August, one of their visitors was a local priest, Father O’Brien. “He was carried away with what he saw and urged the immediate undertaking of our plans. ‘Begin to build and success will follow,’ he said. ‘This is the right place for an Academy and you will have boarders from near and far I venture to predict.’”

The promise of an Academy was almost 2 decades away so for the next several years, the estate continued to be used as a retreat for Notre Dame, as well as for other religious orders. Finally, on April 25, 1925, the sisters in Lowell hired Boston architect Maurice P. Meade (1882-1954) to design and build the Academy. He had designed the Sacred Heart Church in Quincy in 1924, the Lincoln School in Brookline, several area churches as well as post offices in Arlington, Somerville, Brookline and Worcester. On June 13th, 1925, during a Federation of Notre Dame Alumnae Picnic at Tyngsboro, the sisters held the groundbreaking ceremony. Digging for the foundation began on October 1st of 1925. The sisters wrote that, “the steam shovel began eating out the hearts of the hills we have so often climbed. A few days later, on the 9th, a second steam shovel was brought by Mr. Coggers’ men to hasten the work that the foundation might be laid before severe frost would set in.”

On November 6th, 1925, the Lowell Annalist wrote that, “the machine for mixing and pouring concrete arrived in Tyngsboro and on the 9th it began to pour the concrete into the foundation. Sister Superior and another sister were present and cast a miraculous medal likewise, one of Blessed Mother Julia into the mixture. This act of devotion and confidence was repeated by Sister Superior whenever she was present. . .” The following March of 1926, they wrote that, “On Saturday the 27th the “Steel” contract for the framework and flooring of the Tyngsboro Academy was signed and awarded to Lyons Iron and Steel Company of Manchester New Hampshire. . .”

Construction of the school continued into 1927. As with all construction, there were problems but on September 8th the cross was hoisted to the tower. The altar for the chapel came from the original chapel of the Plantation Street convent in Worcester and was installed on September 17th. The building was mostly completed by September of 1927 but workers continued painting the inside while the sisters began washing the windows, cleaning the rooms and chapel. At last not long before Thanksgiving, the school was ready. The first boarders slept in the new dormitories on Nov. 22, 1927 and classes began on Monday Nov. 28, 1927 for grades 1, 5 to 8 and for the first year of high school.



Above, From Left to Right
Tyngsboro Chapel, c. 1930
Academy Foyer, c. 1930
Art Classroom, c. 1930
2017.26

Sisters of Notre Dame New England Archives

Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Tyngsboro Convent Journals, 1909, July-August; 1910, July-August; 1913, Summer; 1914, July-August; 1927-1931.
- ◆ Lowell Convent Annals, 1905-1917; 1917-1937.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1872-2017.