



Villa Maria

LOCATION: 29847 County 2 Boulevard, Old Frontenac, Minnesota

STATUS: Access Restricted – Private Property

TYPE: Historic, Site

HISTORY: Currently the campus is in private ownership and is not associated with the Ursuline Sisters.

1880 the Ursuline Sisters established the Academy of Our Lady of the Lake, a school for girls. Then, 1891 the Academy expanded and built the current buildings on land given to the Ursuline Sisters by General Israel Garrard of Frontenac, the school was renamed to the Villa Maria Academy. In 1969 the Academy building was destroyed by fire. Marian Hall, built in 1946 is the Center's main building. Currently the Ursuline Sisters manage the buildings for a retreat and conference center. Important dates of the Villa Maria Academy: 1891 Official opening, 1930 Alumnae established, 1934 Accredited to University of Minnesota, 1949 Accredited by the North Central Association of Secondary Schools, 1969 Closed.

This narrative provided by the Villa Maria Center.

Villa Maria Convent, a school for girls, under the direction of the Ursuline nuns of the Roman Catholic church, is situated on Lake Pepin, near the village of old Frontenac, the well-known summer resort.

A more beautiful site for a school could not well be found; on a rise of ground, commanding a wide view of lake, valley, hill and plain, surrounded by park-like forests, and arched by the full sweep of the heavens, all the natural influences combine to elevate and instruct the mind. Nor are historical associations lacking, for on this very spot there stood, more than a century and a half ago, St. Michael's, one of the old French missionary forts on the upper Mississippi.

The grounds, consisting of 120 acres, are the gift of General Israel Garrard, who spent a fortune and a great part of his life in improving and beautifying the already naturally beautiful village of Frontenac, to the attractions of which the Villa now contributes in no small degree. Noticing the rapid growth of the school conducted at Lake City by the Ursulines, and appreciating the difficulty for them of accomplishing in crowded quarters the work at which they aimed, the general offered in 1885 a tract of land for more commodious institution. The offer was accepted with gratitude, and, thanks to the noble generosity of Mother Kostha Bowman, the project was soon realized, and the construction of the largest educational building of the time, in the Northwest, was begun. The foundations were laid in 1888, and under the able superintendence of F. J. Evans and the assistance of O. D. Prescott, the work progressed rapidly, the main building being completed and dedicated in 1890.

The building is cruciform in shape, with a length of 301 feet, and a width of 90 feet, exclusive of porches. It is four stories high, and is surmounted at the north end by a tower lifting a golden

cross 150 feet above the ground. The main entrance is at the northeast corner, and opens into a spacious hall, extending to the opposite side, where a broad stairway of polished oak gives access to the floors above. The hall is lighted by large stained glass windows, and is crowned by a dome.

On the left of the hall, on the ground floor, are the parlors, and from the right leads a corridor 200 feet long, out of which open the dormitory, the refectory, and, at the farther end, the kitchen. The convent proper, for the nuns to occupy the entire four stories of the west wing. Besides the many windows, there is a ventilating chimney, and the rooms are noticeably airy and comfortable.

On the second floor are the library, the museum, and the laboratories for physics and chemistry. Above the dormitory are a large, sunny study hall, music rooms and recitation rooms, and adjoining these are the gymnasium and recreation hall.

On the third floor, the art rooms occupy the east end, and the greater part of the remainder of the space is given up to the chapel, a lovely devotional apartment, with high arched ceiling, frescoed walls and stained glass windows. In a vaulted recess at one end is the altar, an artistic piece of workmanship of polished wood, carved and gilded. Framed into it above is a magnificent painting of the Blessed Virgin, the work of one of the old masters, presented to one of the nuns by King Louis II of Bavaria.

The fourth floor contains an immense water tank which supplies the numerous bath and toilet rooms in various parts of the building, and serves as protection against fire. For further protection from this danger there are patent extinguishers on every floor. Artificial heat is supplied by the hot water system, and there is telephone connection.

That the names of their generous benefactors may not be forgotten, the nuns caused to be inserted into the northeast corner of the building a stone bearing the inscription, "Israel Garrard, noblis Benefacientis Gratulantes, Soc. Urs. Felice," while over the door, in the chapel, a tablet is inscribed: "In memorium – Hon. J. B. Bowman – nostril benefactoris mortui." In the hearts of the nuns these names are held in perpetual grateful memory.

The course of study embraces all the branches of a thorough English education, combined with the culture of art, music, and languages, and extends from the lowest primary through the grammar and high school grades. Successful steps have been taken to have the school accredited to the University of Minnesota, so graduates from the Villa who wish to continue their education in the University may be admitted to its courses without examinations. Lessons are also given in music, the arts and languages, as well as in the various branches of handiwork, for which the Ursuline nuns have a high reputation.

The physical development of the pupils is provided for in gymnasium and playground, and in the extraordinary opportunities for the natural out-of-door exercises of walking, driving, boating, and bathing, under the supervision of the ever-watchful nuns.

Above all do the nuns regard the moral development of the child, and broad and deep do they lay the foundations of character. Religious instruction is given to the Catholic children, while all their pupils are trained daily and hourly in the precepts and practices calculated to foster those noble qualities of head, heart, and soul that go to the formation of true womanhood. The character and accomplishments of the graduates who have gone out from Villa Maria during these past thirty years give ample testimony to the devotion of the nuns, and the thoroughness of their training.

OTHER RESOURCES:

Lorry Wendland, "19th Century Frontenac, Minnesota – The Rest of the Story" (2018)

Ken Allsen, "Old Frontenac Minnesota, Its History and Architecture", The History Press (2011)

[Villa Maria School by Franklyn Curtiss-Wedge, *History of Goodhue County, Minnesota*, \(Chicago: H. C. Cooper, Jr. & Co., 1909\), p. 292 – 294](#)

PROPERTY PICTURES:



Villa Maria, 1950's

Goodhue County Historical Society Picture



Academy building, 1890

Goodhue County Historical Society Picture



Academy building, reception room, 1890

Goodhue County Historical Society Picture



Marian Hall, chapel, 1940's

Goodhue County Historical Society Picture



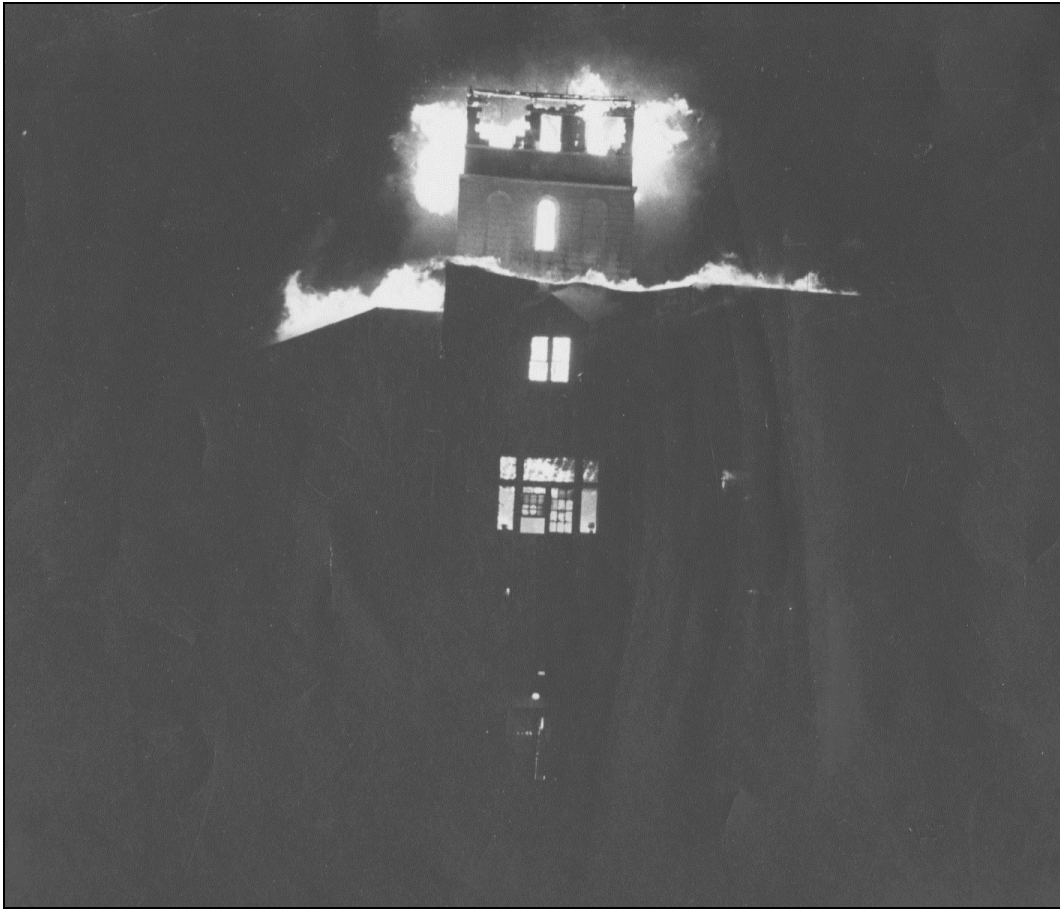
Marian Hall, chapel, 2014

Goodhue County Picture



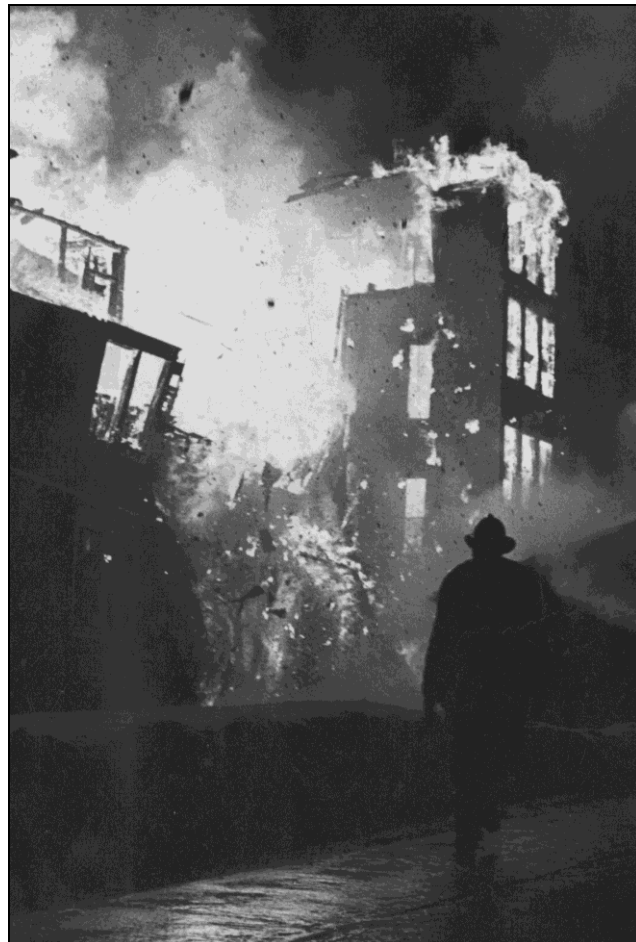
Marian Hall, chapel, 2014

Goodhue County Picture



Academy building fire, bell tower, 1969

Picture courtesy of Villa Maria Center



Academy building fire, 1969

Picture courtesy of Villa Maria Center



Academy building fire, 1969

Picture courtesy of Villa Maria Center



Marian Hall construction, 1945

Goodhue County Historical Society Picture



Marian Hall

Goodhue County Picture, 2003



Marian Hall, Christmas luminary, 2010

Picture courtesy of Villa Maria Center