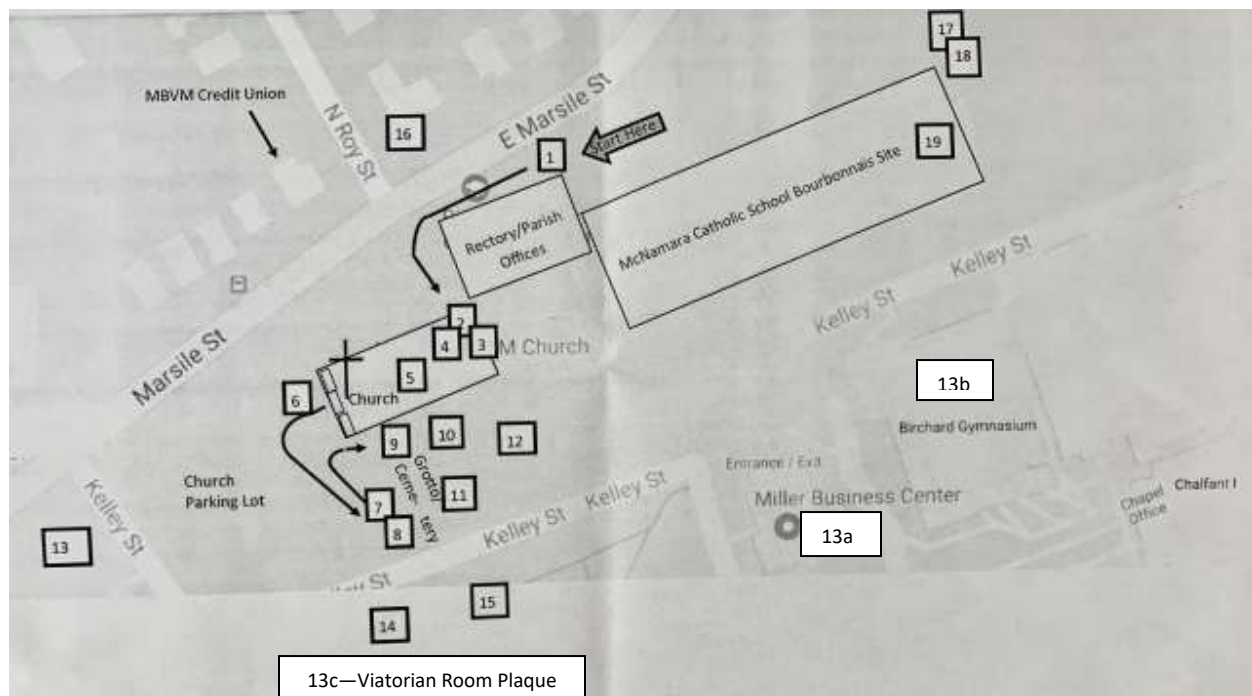


Walking Tour of the Grounds & Church of Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Viator College

By Julie Worby and Jim Paul

Since the mid-1800s, Maternity BVM Church has its roots in a time when Bourbonnais Grove welcomed the arrival of French-Canadian pioneers. These pioneers immigrated in large numbers between the late 1830s and the 1850s, and were looking for a better way of life. This walking tour will guide you through the sacred grounds of a parish, hand-built by a people who put their faith first, as it was taught to them by their predecessors. These first settlers were a determined collection of priests and brothers (the Viatorians), Sisters (the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame), parishioners, and townspeople. For more walking tours in historic Bourbonnais, visit <http://www.bourbonnaishistory.org>, click “For Members”, then click “Resources”, then click “Bourbonnais Walking Tours”.



1. This walking tour begins in 1837...out in front of the current Rectory/Parish Offices. The first mass was celebrated in Bourbonnais Grove in June 1837 at the new home of Noel LeVasseur, just a short distance away. Mass was celebrated intermittently by missionary priests from the Diocese of Vincennes in LeVasseur's home for the next four years. On this spot Father Pontavis, a Canadian missionary of the Diocese of Vincennes, built the 20 x 30 foot log cabin and dedicated it to St. Leo in the year 1841 on a half-acre of land bought from Noel LeVasseur for \$20. LeVasseur completed most of the construction himself. The Catholic Community of Bourbonnais did not have a resident priest at this time, but had circuit priests who

ministered to the local Catholic community when they came through town. Of these were many notable pioneers of the American Catholic Church: Father Theodore Badin and Father Maurice de Saint Palais, who was consecrated Bishop of Vincennes on January 14, 1844. You can find a stained glass window in the current church dedicated to St. Leo. It was in the year 1847 when the first official records of the parish were opened, and a full time pastor was appointed, Fr. Tausaint Cour Jault. Proceed to walk around the Rectory and into the side door of the church that faces Marsile Street. You will enter into the Heritage Museum rooms.

2. Step into the foyer. This first room is dedicated to the Notre Dame Convent and Academy featuring photos of the many Superiors and Principals. In 1860, three Sisters from the Congregation of Notre Dame were asked to come to Bourbonnais from Montreal, by Father Mailloux, to open a girls academy. Several earlier attempts were made at starting a formal education system in Bourbonnais after the first log schoolhouse (1837-48) closed, but had failed. Take a walk around the room and read the museum labels located next to the pictures and artifacts.
3. Next, enter into the room to your left (St. Viator Hall). In this room you will be to see several artifacts specific to St. Viator College. In 1865, Father Jacques Cote believed that the boys of the village should receive a Catholic education as the Sisters of Notre Dame were giving the girls of the village a Catholic education. At that time, one Viatorian priest and two Viatorian brothers came to take the leadership of Maternity BVM parish, as well as take over the teaching in the boys' public school. Following a few years of public school instruction, the Viatorians purchased the public school building for \$3,000. In 1868, the school was fully under the control of the Viatorians and was renamed St. Viator Academy, running classes from grade school to high school. By 1874, the school had built an additional building, and began offering college level courses, and were granted a University Charter. In 1889, Father Marsile (Viatorian) visited other Viatorians in Paris, France. That is where he came into contact with Sisters from the Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary. Upon being impressed by their care of the infirm and children, he was able to bring four Sisters back with him to Bourbonnais to take over the domestic duties of St. Viator College. The Servants of the Holy Heart of Mary still serve in our community today. The university ran successfully from 1874-1938, but experienced great financial difficulty during the Great Depression, and was forced to close its doors in 1939. Soon after its closure, Olivet Nazarene College (whose campus—located in Olivet, Illinois south of Danville—had burned) purchased the 40 acres and 6 buildings, and moved into their new home.

4. The third Heritage Museum room features artifacts and pictures from both Congregation of Notre Dame, and Viatorian Order—St. Viator College and Maternity BVM Catholic Church. Take note of the sketch on the wall of the Church and surrounding St. Viator College. Below that is a picture of the Venerable Fulton Sheen who will be mentioned later in this tour.
5. Now walk into the church. In 1846 this church was all but a piece of grassland containing 14 acres that had been purchased from Noel LeVasseur for the cash price of \$100. The land had earlier been acquired by LeVasseur from Chief Mesheketeno as it was part of the Potawatomi village led by him. This land would be the new site of a much larger church which would replace the log cabin chapel, to be built to accommodate the increasing population of Catholics moving down from Canada. Thus on February 15, 1849 the new frame church was dedicated to Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary on this very site. Unfortunately, on a fall night in September of 1853, this new framed church was consumed in flames, that could be observed for miles.

Soon after the fire, the town's people and the parishioners of Maternity church had begun plans for a new house of worship. Father Isadore Lebel arrived from Chicago and had drawn up plans for a beautiful new stone structure, but efforts at fund raising became progressively difficult. Finally, several parishioners took it upon themselves to begin construction with volunteer labor. The task was difficult. Stone was drawn from neighboring river beds and quarries, and hauling through muddy dirt roads with oxen-drawn carts was daunting. The work continued however, but the plans for luxurious embellishments had to be abandoned, and eventually the structure itself was cut back twenty feet while the apex of the sanctuary was lowered in order to hasten the completion date. This was not accomplished until 1858, five years after the construction began.

This current stone church, in which you stand, was modeled after Cap St. Ignace in Quebec Province Canada, where many early settlers originated. The builders followed a very definite pattern of their mother church. Only the height and embellishments were modified in the Maternity BVM version. You can see a photo online if you Google St. Ignace in Quebec, Canada.

Next, take notice the headstones found to the left and right of the main altar. Following a traditional European custom, there are at least three burials beneath the floor of Maternity BVM Church. The burial of Rev. Isadore Antoine Lebel, who drew up the plans for the church, Sister St. Ignace, a Sister of the Congregation of Notre

Dame, and Fr. Leon Boisvert, a Cleric of St. Viator and a native of Bourbonnais Grove. He is the first Cleric of St. Viator to die in the United States.

Now take a look at the stained glass windows. There is a separate booklet called “Look Around and Meet the Saints” which names each window in what it represents. Take special notice of the names at the bottom of the window as these were the first parishioners who helped fund the construction of the church. You will also notice that one of the windows on the South side of the church looks different from the others. This was due to a damaging storm, and thus a replacement had to be constructed.

On your way out of the church through the main doors, notice the two paintings commissioned by Father Richard Pighini. The picture on the left is of Louis Querbes, founder of the clerics of St. Viator who’s community has been serving at Maternity since 1865. The painting on the right is of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys, foundress of the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame. The Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame have been here at Maternity since 1860. Did you happen to spot the relic of St. Marguerite Bourgeoys in the Heritage Museum Room number one?

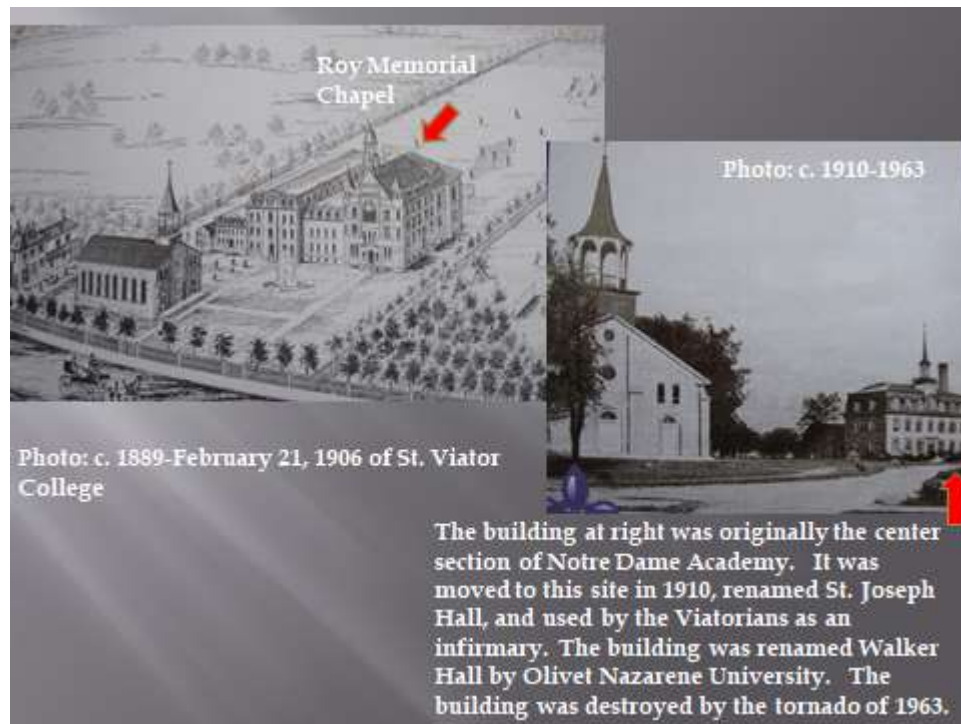
6. Once outside on the steps of the church, look to your right to the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This is the very statue that stood on top of the second Notre Dame Academy building built in the year 1909 that will be mentioned later in this tour and shown on the last page. When the Academy building was demolished in 1971, the statue was gently taken down off the roof, and placed outside the new school building of Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Catholic School. The school name has since changed, and the location of the statue has also changed... to where you see it today.
7. Before you walk into the Grotto/Cemetery, you need to find the memorial/rock dedicated to the “Viatorian Pioneers” Here their names will forever be remembered. Rev. Peter Beaudoin, Brother Bernard and Brother Martel, the original three Viatorians who came here from Canada. This memorial was donated by St. Viator’s high school class of 1921.
8. Next, find the “Home plate” plaque attached to a rock further to the right on the outside of the cemetery/grotto. It will be difficult to find, and you’ll need to hunt for it in the overgrown foliage. It is a treasure if you can find it. This home plate memorial is a gift donated by James G. Gondon class of 1891 given in the year 1918. It originally marked the site of the old St. Viator ball diamond. The construction of Roy Hall and Marsile Alumni Hall, after the fire of 1906 made the location of the ball field unusable. It was remembered that many memorable games were played on the site between 1885 and 1906.

9. Now walk into the entrance of the Grotto Cemetery. There you will see a moment/plaque which will give you a brief history of Maternity BVM parish, the cemetery, and the special artifacts that can be found there. In addition, you will find that it is a memorial dedicated to the men of our parish who fought bravely in World War I.
10. Next locate the Sundial not far from where you're standing. This sundial is a gift from the St. Viator College Class of 1917. Notice the plaque on the sundial with the names of the class graduates. There you will find the very famous and now venerated Fulton J. Sheen, who was class treasurer at St. Viator College. Archbishop Fulton Sheen (1895-1979) was best known for his work on television and radio.

For 20 years as Father Sheen, later Monsignor, he hosted the night-time radio program *The Catholic Hour* (1930–1950) before moving to television and presenting *Life Is Worth Living* (1951–1957). Sheen's final presenting role was on the syndicated *The Fulton Sheen Program* (1961–1968) with a format very similar to that of the earlier *Life is Worth Living* show. For this work, Sheen twice won an Emmy Award for Most Outstanding Television Personality, and was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine*. Starting in 2009, his shows have been re-broadcast on the EWTN and the Trinity Broadcasting Network's Church Channel cable.

11. Now locate the Theologians bench, donated by the St. Viator College class of 1918. This is truly a treasure, and is in beautiful shape for being almost 100 years old. Go ahead and take a seat, and ponder for a moment the many souls who sat and prayed on this very bench.
12. Now take a look around the cemetery/grotto and you will also notice several headstones scattered throughout the space. The cemetery was opened near St. Leo's Chapel in 1842. By 1884, the old graveyard had no more empty spaces as hundreds are buried here. Many of the grave markers have deteriorated over the years, but there are approximately 30 headstones that still exist and have legible engravings. The earliest legible burial was David Spink, 1848. The centerpiece of the Cemetery/Grotto is the shrine built to Our Lady of Lourdes, which is a Roman Catholic title of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This shrine honors the Marian apparitions that reportedly occurred in 1858 in the vicinity of Lourdes in France. Br. John Koelzer, a Viatorian brother, began building the grotto just over 100 years ago, in 1915. It took three years to complete is fashioned (using stones carved by local residents) in the image of Our Lady of Lourdes, when she appeared to young Bernadette. Over the years, she has interceded for the safety of soldiers as far back as World War I, as well as countless

school children, bridal couples, rosary groups and worshippers of all ages who have sought her protection. The grotto is a favorite place to come pray the rosary, or to just sit quietly to listen to the voice of God.



13. As you exit back out the Grotto/cemetery, you can look across the parking lot toward what is now known as the Burke Administration (built in 1906) building of Olivet Nazarene University. This is near the original site of St. Viator's College. The Burke Building is one of the 4 original buildings still standing from St. Viator College. The rest of the buildings from St. Viator's college were demolished and replaced. The Burke Administration Building was formerly known as Marsile Alumni Hall at St. Viator College. After fire destroyed most of St. Viator College campus on February 21, 1906, a new four story administrative building, constructed of limestone, was built in honor of the college president Rev. Moses J. Marsile and dedicated as Marsile Alumni Hall.

Until 1938, the building housed administration offices and classrooms, including dormitory space on the second floor. The college was forced to close in 1938 due to financial difficulties. In 1940, the campus buildings were purchased by Olivet Nazarene College. The building was then renamed Burke Administrative Building for Edwin Burke, a longtime chairman of the Olivet Nazarene College board of trustees. The fourth floor was almost completely demolished by a tornado in 1963. The lighter colored brick on the renovated fourth floor testify to the tornado damage.

Just south of number 13 is the site of Noel LeVasseur's fur trading post of 1834 (where the ONU Larson Fine Arts Center is located today). The trading house is aptly depicted in this 1992 sketch by Vic Johnson. It was a 24 foot wide by 32 foot long one and one-half story timber or post and girt frame with plank—split from logs—sheeting and chinking. LeVasseur purchased land from the Potawatomie chief Mesheketeno in 1834. While LeVasseur was working at his trading post on the Iroquois River, he probably instructed his American Fur Company associates, Henry Boucher and Dominick Bray, to build the Bourbonnais Grove trading house in 1834.



If you look south-east, you can still see several structures on the ONU campus which originally belonged to St. Viator College. The other three buildings include the following.

- 13a. This one story brick building was built in 1926 as the St. Viator College Dining Hall. Prior to the completion of Ludwig Center in January 1966, it was also Olivet Nazarene College's dining hall and cafeteria. Historian Ronald Shank noted in a May 2016 e-mail, "I can remember eating there my Freshman year. When they opened Ludwig Center in January of 1966 we felt like we were eating in a palace compared to eating at Miller." In 1968, the college remodeled the former dining hall and it became the Miller Business Center. Dr. Howard V. Miller was an early Nazarene church leader. This building is located on the campus of Olivet Nazarene University on the southwest side of Kelly and Bradley Streets.
- 13b. This two story brick building was built in 1926 as the St. Viator College Field House (gymnasium). One possible reason that St. Viator College built the field house was to compete with Notre Dame College for students who were athletes. The college administrators felt they could not compete with Notre Dame in football, but could compete in basketball. As historian Ronald Shank noted in a May 2016 e-mail, "... so they built what at that time was a state of the art gym in order to lure students who were basketball players and they wanted to make St. Viator into a basketball powerhouse. Unfortunately that did not happen for them." The field house became Olivet Nazarene College's Birchard Gymnasium, named after Clayton Birchard, a former student athlete and later professor at the college. In 2006, Olivet Nazarene

University renovated the gymnasium. This building is located on the campus of the university just east of the Miller Business Center.

- 13c. In 1984, the Olivet Nazarene University board of trustees dedicated The Viatorian Room “. . . in recognition of the people who operated St. Viator College on this location from 1868 to 1938.” In the past, the room featured photographs and displays of St. Viator College. In 2016, those items were transferred to St. Viator’s Hall in Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church (see number 3 above). Four buildings of the current university were originally part of St. Viator College’s 39-acre campus. The Viatorian Room plaque is now located in the basement of the Ludwig Center and is now the name of one of the conference rooms there.



14. St. Viator College’s Roy Memorial Hall was in very close proximity to the original home of Noel LeVasseur (1799- 1879)—see above sketch. This home was built from native red clay bricks—several of these original bricks are on display at the Letourneau House/Museum. Before St. Leo’s Chapel was built in 1841, the LeVasseur home served as the community church. The first Mass was said in the LeVasseur Home in June 1837. Noel LeVasseur died in 1879, and his widow sold off most of the estate to St. Viator College. Their house was demolished in 1885. On the house site in 1889, the college built a large Byzantine style chapel as a memorial to the first college president Fr. Thomas Roy. The Roy Memorial Chapel was destroyed in the fire of February 21, 1906. A new Roy Memorial Hall (now ONU’s Chapman Hall), was built on the ruins of the Roy Memorial Chapel. Roy Memorial Hall/Chapman Hall is a four and one-half story limestone dormitory built in 1906, the same year that the Marsile Alumni Hall/Burke Administration Building was built. It is one of the four original St. Viator College campus buildings that still stand at Olivet Nazarene University’s campus. Roy Memorial Hall was later renamed Chapman Hall after Dr. James B. Chapman, an early leader of the Nazarene Church. Chapman Hall is located in the center of campus, and is home for approximately 200 freshman male students during the school year.

15. Near this spot is where on October 1, 1860, three Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame opened classes for 50 girl students in a small stone house thought to be just south of the church. The village owned the stone house, and the Viatorian's would later purchase that stone house. Sister St. Alexis taught French classes and Sister St. Alphonse de Ligouri was in charge of English classes with the assistance of Sister Marie de a Victoire.
16. The Sisters moved into a new location in 1861 which was a two-story framed building built at the expense of the Bourbonnais Grove townspeople. If you walk toward Marsile Street and look across the road to the corner of Marsile and Roy you will see where the schoolhouse once sat. Because the school grew so rapidly, the Sisters would quickly need more room, thus construction was begun on the first Notre Dame Convent to be built on the grounds of Maternity. Using the same two-story stone building that was vacated as a school by the Sisters in 1861, the Viatorian Order (who now served the Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church) bought the building from the Bourbonnais Grove school board in 1868 and added a third story—to be called St. Viator Academy.
17. In 1862, Father Gingras, who assisted Father Mallioux in bringing the Sisters of the Congregation of Notre Dame of Montreal to Bourbonnais, returned from a brief trip to Canada to announce plans to construct a new convent for the sisters. Completed August 1, 1862, the new wood frame building could accommodate female students from grade school through high school, including a small number of boarding students, some of which were from the local orphanage. On August 16, 1862, the sisters officially moved into the new building as did their first ten boarding students. Here you will find a memorial/rock dedicated to the Sisters who moved here from Canada to start the school.
18. Almost 50 years later the wood framed convent was in disrepair. The decision was made to replace the old Convent building with a modern building which was built in 1909. In October 1910, workers demolished the wings of the original building, and moved the center of the building to St. Viator College to a site just south/east of the Maternity BVM Grotto/Cemetery. The building became an infirmary (known as St. Joseph's Hall—later Olivet Nazarene College's Walker Hall). St. Joseph Hall/Walker Hall was later destroyed by the tornado of 1963.
19. In July of 1955, Bourbonnais residents voted in an overwhelming majority for a new public school in the village. The mandate meant the end of Notre Dame sisters teaching public school children. Up to that time, all children, regardless of religious affiliation, were in a tax-supported school taught by Sisters, Brothers and Priests.

Now for the first time, the clergy would teach in a Bourbonnais parochial school. In 1962, a new building was built for the new school named Maternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which is the site of the current McNamara Catholic School (Bourbonnais site). In 2016, the Catholic Schools of Kankakee County decided to consolidate (Maternity BVM Grade School, St. Joseph Grade School, St. Aquinas Grade School and Bishop McNamara Catholic High School, which is as it is today, one consolidated Catholic School System.