

Duchesne College & Academy:

A Brief Look at the History of Our Building



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Duchesne Academy of the Sacred Heart

·2017·

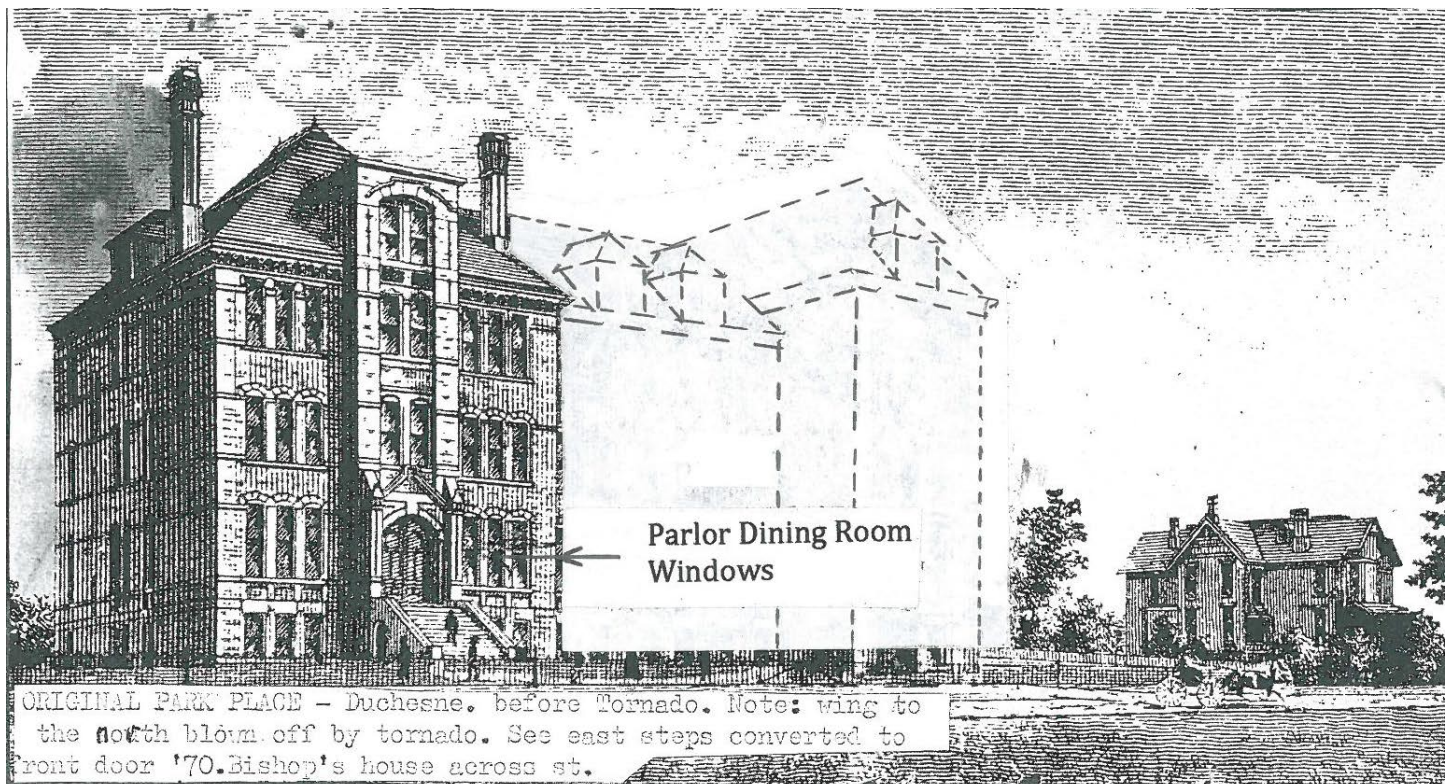
We all are aware that parts of our building were constructed and modified at different periods of time. Unfortunately, architectural drawings that date back over 130 years do not exist. The search for knowledge of the building falls to physical investigation, stories passed on by the women who lived, studied, and worked here, and a few publications and photographs that have been stored in the archives. I will attempt to pull together what I have discovered but always have more questions than I can fully answer.

In 1880 Bishop James O'Conner purchased twelve acres of ground that was between Burt, California, Kennedy (36th), and Pleasant (38th) streets for \$2,533.34. The property was known as "Park Place."

In 1882 the original building was opened for use; its cost was \$62,140.00. It was constructed on the highest hill in Omaha overlooking Creighton College. The 2nd highest hill was the home of the state capital (now Central High). The building was 114 feet long and 81 feet wide and it was 5 stories high (see the detailed section on drawing "A" below). The building had steam heat, fireplaces, running water, telephone, bathrooms on every floor,

and an elevator! Most rooms had gaslights. The main entrance faced east to Kennedy Street (now 36th). I marked the location of the parlor dining room so you can visualize the original building better.

The school started to grow and expand rapidly; two significant additions were made before photo "C" was taken in 1893. The first addition (see dotted lines drawn on photo "A") was probably constructed in 1887. This was called the "north wing"; it ran parallel to Burt Street and was joined to the original building by a 42' wide transition section. This addition would later be destroyed in 1913 by a tornado. At this point, the buildings were shaped in an "L". Photo "B" is a rare photo taken inside the "north wing." This photo is the first location of the library. After the tornado in 1913, the library was moved to the current dance room, located in the second addition. The second addition also housed sleeping quarters on the 3rd and 4th floor. Then the buildings were in the shape of a "U". Close inspection of photo "C" shows the red stone retaining wall and newly planted trees around the grounds.



ORIGINAL PARK PLACE - Duchesne. before Tornado. Note: wing to the north blown off by tornado. See east steps converted to front door '70. Bishop's house across st.

Drawing A: The detailed section is the original 1882 building, where the dotted lines show the north wing and a transition section that was probably constructed in 1887. The parlor dining room windows will help you see the size of the original building.



Photo B: The Academy library prior to the 1913 tornado. This is one of very few pictures taken inside the north wing.

The need for a new coal fired boiler came about in 1908. A new physical plant was constructed close to where our existing cooling tower sits. It contained a remarkable brick chimney, which had to be torn down in 1930. The boiler room was connected to the main building through underground tunnels. One of these, “the bear den” was filled during 2013. Photo “D” shows a happy group of cows on the present soccer field, but the boiler room and large smoke stack are clearly visible to the south of the “U” shaped building. This photo was taken just a year before the construction of the chapel and the plant was probably sized large enough to heat the upcoming addition. If you look close you can also see a horse drawn carriage pulling up to the southeast corner of the building.

In 1909 the chapel and a matching 42’ transition section were added to the south side of the original building. The chapel was designed by Thomas Kimball (who also designed Saint Cecilia Cathedral). It was only half of its present size. At this time the building was in the shape of an “E” facing 36th street with the original building in the center and the chapel on the south end and the north wing on the north side, all in perfect balance. If you stand on the east lawn you can see the amazing detail that was used to balance the original

building with identical transition sections on both sides of it; the corner and keystone blocks above each window, the brick detail under each window, and the stately cornice which defines the roof. The east end of the chapel had a very predominate exterior arch which was removed in 1930. The interior of the chapel had very much the same look as it does today (photo “E”). Noticeable details of this addition are the horizontal stripes of black brick. It is interesting that the black brick on the 1909 building has mostly faded away but the earlier brick is still very clear.

The Easter Tornado in 1913 (Photo “F”) forever changed the look of Duchesne. The north wing was totally destroyed. In this photo you can also see the arch as part of the chapel addition. When the building was rebuilt the “front face” of Duchesne

was moved to the north side where portry and circle drive are currently located. When you dig in the north side of the building you will still find evidence of the old north wing. When the building was rebuilt after the tornado the chapel roof was returned to the “hip” style with a single dormer facing east, there was no 4th floor (photo “G”).

Due to the loss of classroom space, plans were formulated to build to the west of circle drive. In 1920 a new wing opened that contained an auditorium with a stage and several classrooms. The auditorium was later converted to become what we now call “the old gym.” The top floor of this addition was used as a “open space” college dormitory. There was a spiral stair case that ran from the auditorium to the 2nd and 3rd floors. Sections of the curved walls that enclosed the stairs still remain today. Photo “G” was taken shortly after the completion of the 1920 building.

Ten years later, due to the growth of the college, plans were made to continue to expand to the south. Unfortunately, the 1908 physical plant building was in the wrong location to let that happen. Photo “H” shows the demolition of the 75 foot smokestack.

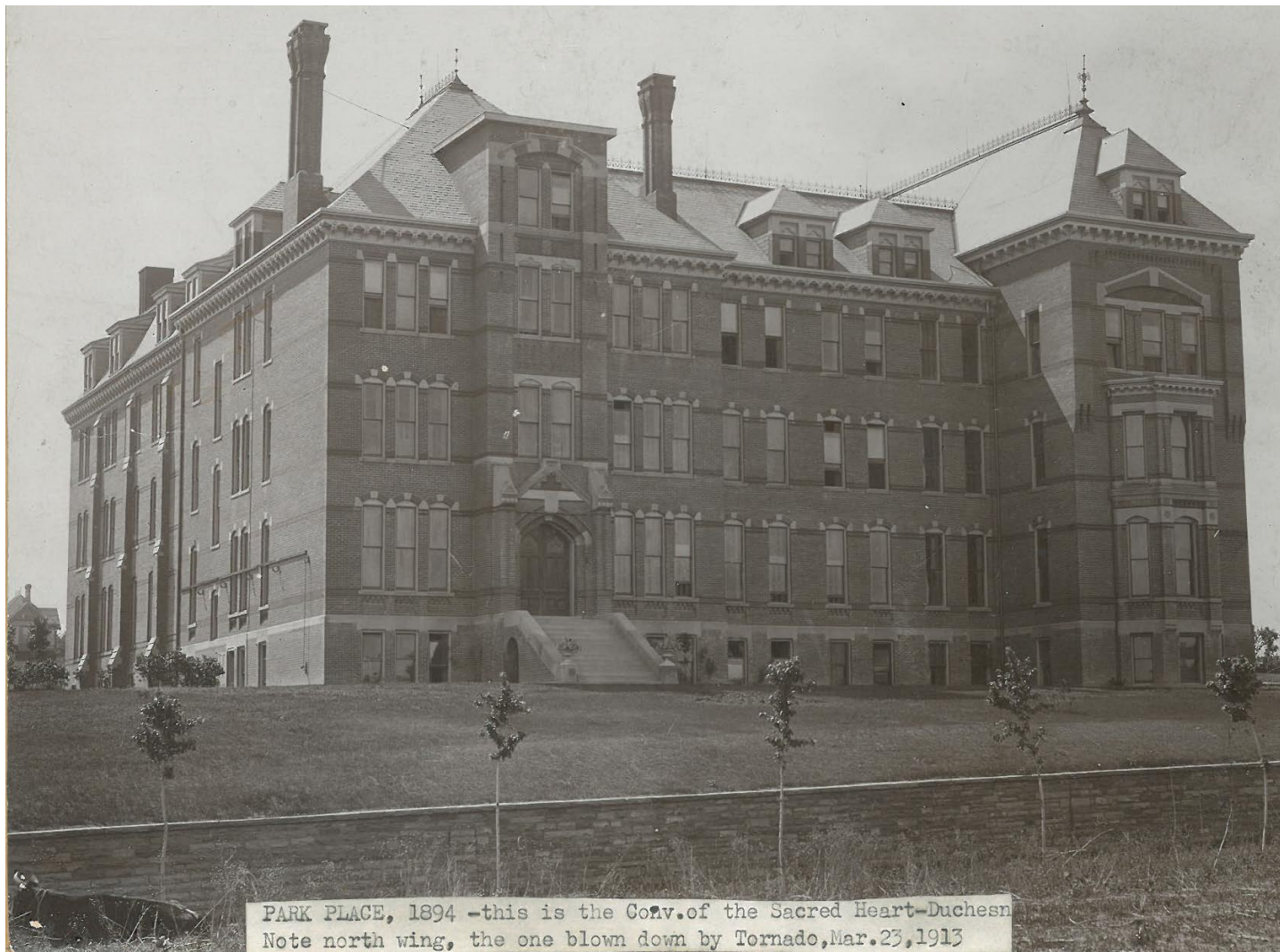


Photo C: This photo was taken in 1894 and shows the north wing and the west wing, which today houses the dance room on 1st floor, study hall on 2nd floor, and art classrooms on 3rd floor. All the building together formed a large "U". This photo is taken at the bottom of the "U".



Photo D: Cows grazing on the current soccer field, the 75' high smoke stack marks the 1908 boiler room.



Photo E: The original chapel, only half the size of our current chapel, featured a curved wall behind the altar, larger arches above Mary and Joseph, and very different windows. Today you can still identify the older pews, which are mixed in with the new ones that were installed in 1930.



Photo F: The Easter Tornado of 1913 destroyed the north wing. In this picture you can also see the damage to the roof above the chapel.



Photo G: This photo shows the 1920 building (far right) and how the North Face of Duchesne and circle drive was changed to its present look. Notice the hip roof over the 3 story chapel. The 4th floor was added in 1930.

1930 was a busy year for Duchesne with the construction of the “college wing”. Photos “I” and “J” show the construction underway; you can also notice the new brick where the 4th floor was added above the chapel wing. This is also when the chapel was expanded to its current size and the arch and entrance on the east end was closed off with brick. The new and current boiler room was added to the west of the chapel and “state of the art” oil fired steam boilers were installed.

At this same time the Sacred Heart School on Pine Street in Chicago was closing and being torn down. We were fortunate to receive the large stained glass windows that were originally made in Germany. Modifications were made in the brick to accept these beautiful windows. When this building was complete, the chapel became the center, or the

“heart”, of the combined buildings. From that day forward it became the focus of the campus. The elegance of the combined buildings is clear in photo “K” which was taken shortly after the completion of the college wing and chapel in the early 1930s.

Our current Stuart Art Gallery was newly furnished in the mid 50s with furniture still in use today (photo “L”). Inspection of the aerial photo “N” shows the Regan Elementary building that was constructed in 1959 along with the connecting bridge to the main building. Then in the early 60s, the Foxley Humanities Building and the Frances P. Matthews Residence Hall were constructed. Photo “M” shows Mother Catherine Henry inspecting the construction of Matthews Hall. The contractors agreed to call her “Hank” on the job site.

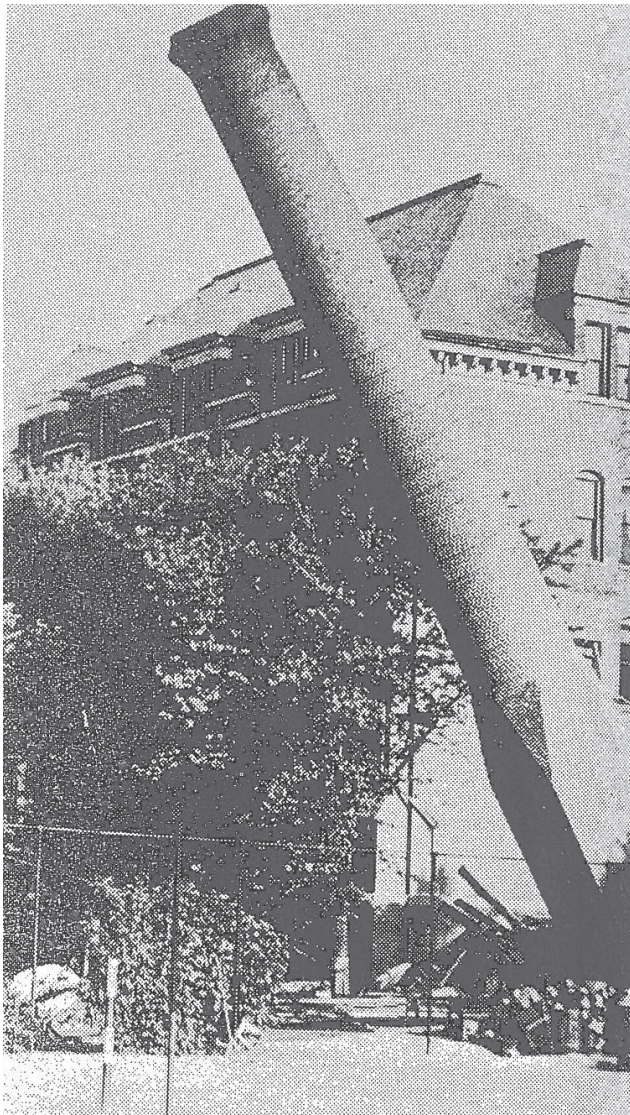


Photo H: The 1908 boiler room had to be torn down for the expansion of the chapel in 1930.

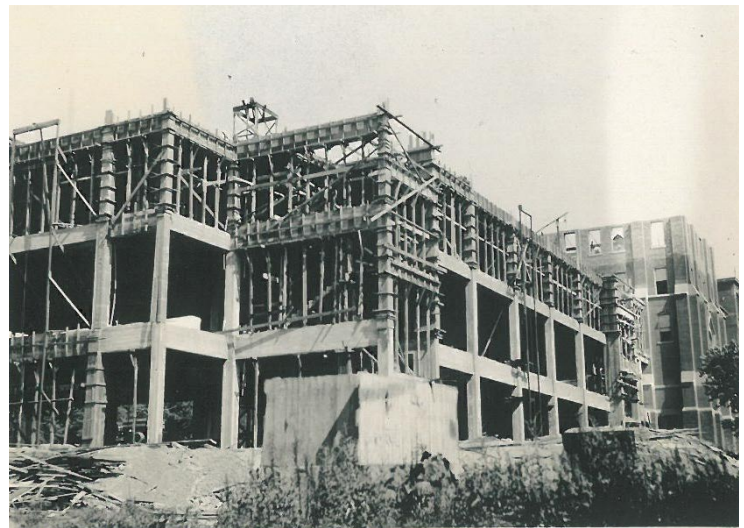


Photo I: College Wing construction viewed from 36th Street.

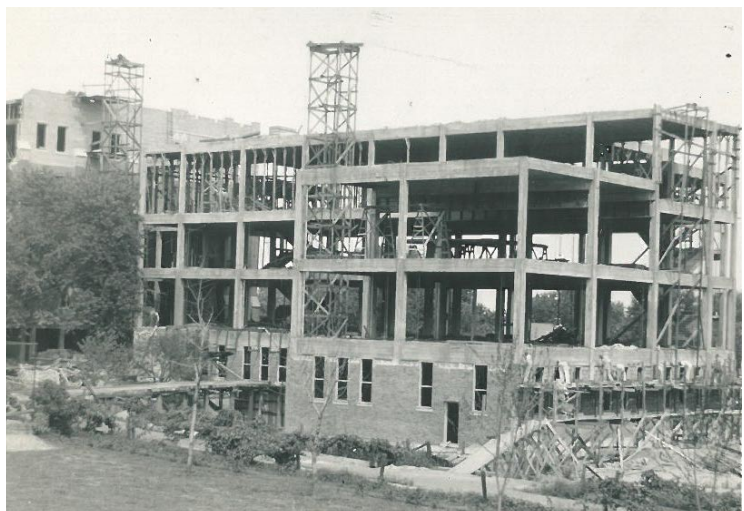


Photo J: The college wing construction as viewed from our current soccer field. Notice the work on the chapel 4th floor and roof.



Photo K: Photo taken shortly after the college wing and chapel renovations were completed.



Photo L: The current "Stuart Art Gallery" taken in the 1950's with the "new" furniture, which we still use today.



Photo M: Mother Catherine Henry inspecting the construction of Matthews Hall.

The gymnasium addition was added in 1984 and merged with the Regan building. In 1998, the top floor was converted for the preschool. The ground floor was remodeled for athletics in 2008.

The formation of our current campus started in 1994 when Matthews Hall was torn down and work continued until 1996 where the tennis courts, soccer field, court yard, and student steps were completely redone. The campus map shows the location of all the buildings and how they relate to one another.

In 2003, there was a great need for additional classroom space, a new elevator, new restrooms, handicapped provisions and major improvements in the HVAC systems in the building. The Fire Marshal shut down access to all the rooms above the old gym due to lack of egress. The west stairs

were caving in due to loss of support. To address all of these issues a building project of a “connector building” between poetry and the 1920 building answered all of those goals. The drawing below (Photo “O”) shows how that structure nested in between existing buildings.

Since that time other building projects were completed. In 2006, the complete renovation of the 3rd floor was done; this project also included the installation of a “California Loop” heat pump HVAC system that will eventually heat and cool the whole campus. In 2007 and 2008, major renovation for the gym lobby and the preschool were completed. None of these projects made a significant change to the exterior look of the buildings, however.

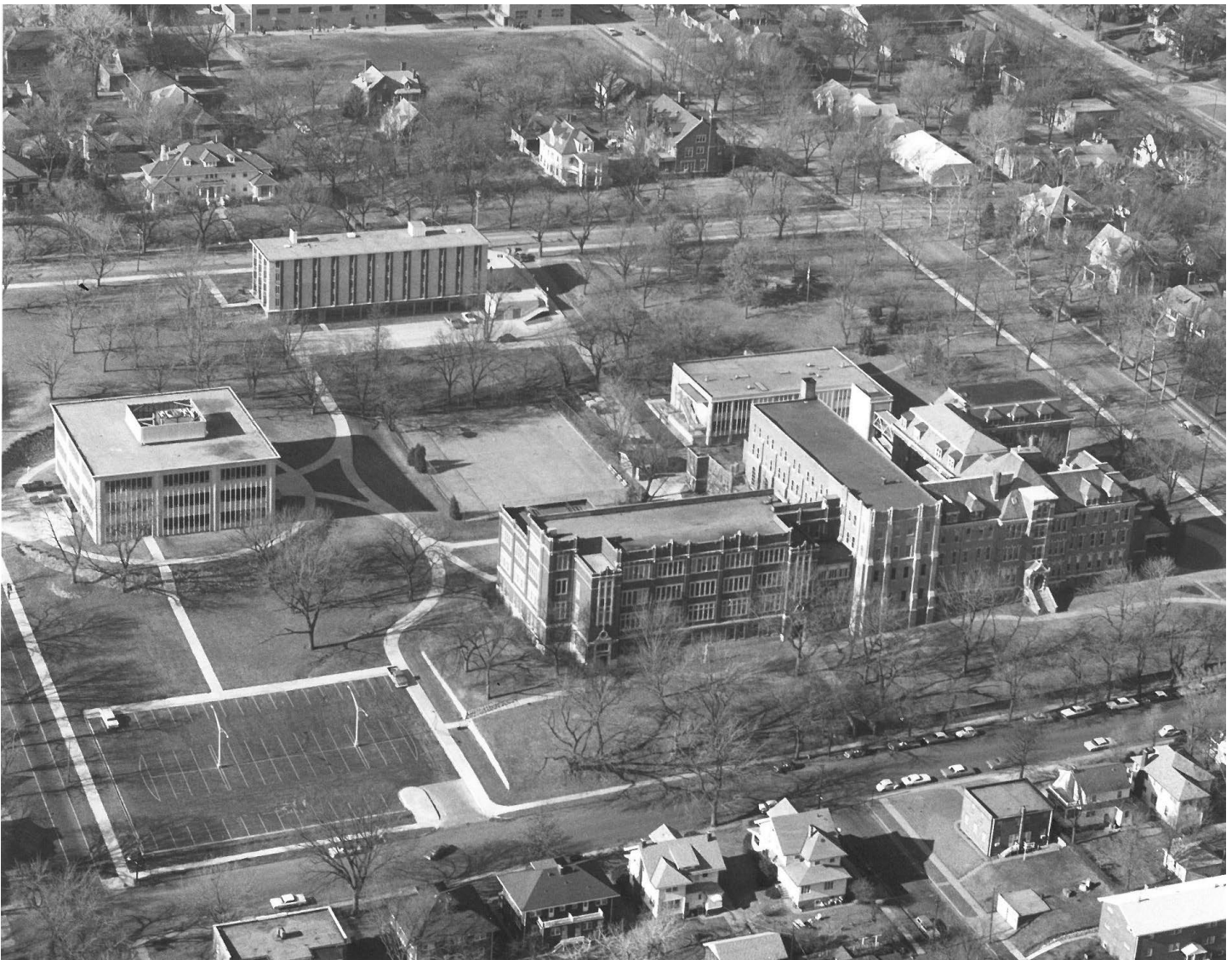


Photo N: Aerial photo taken in the early 1960s before the construction of the gymnasium.



Photo O: The location of the 2003 “connector” building provided a new elevator and re-opened all the classrooms in the 1920 addition.

In 2013, a major project was completed to add an additional elevator at the south end of campus and provide handicapped accessibility to the auditorium. The building was also designed to provide first-class accessible meeting space for groups like Children Of Mary. Because of the historical preservation for the exterior of the 1930 building (east facade), this new addition was tucked into the west side of the college wing and south side of the chapel.

Over the years, each new building addition was blended to work with the existing structure. One distinctive feature that has carried this bond is that a new arch was created to control the expansion and contraction of the buildings as they nest with each other. The architects and builders of Duchesne were very concerned with the elegance of the building and the purpose of making it useful over time. Duchesne has a historical significance in Omaha and we can be very proud of the way it has been maintained and cared for over so many years. Duchesne feels like “home” to so many generations

of students. That, too, is by no accident. The artwork in the halls, the shine of the floors, even the smell of food cooking, welcome us home. The spiritual center of the chapel with the beautiful windows, the architecture that has been maintained, and the quite peace it offers have remained throughout all of the changes.

It is important to note that even though the building is old and has offered her challenges, from internet connections to heating and air conditioning efficiency, she remains the “grand dame” we all love. The history contained here hopefully gives the reader an idea of how important Duchesne has been to the many generations who have cared for the building and how it stands strong and ready to welcome students for many years to come.



A exterior view of the completed "connector" building constructed in 2003.



An exterior view of the completed 2013 performing arts center addition and handicapped accessible entrance located on the south side of the building facing California Street.

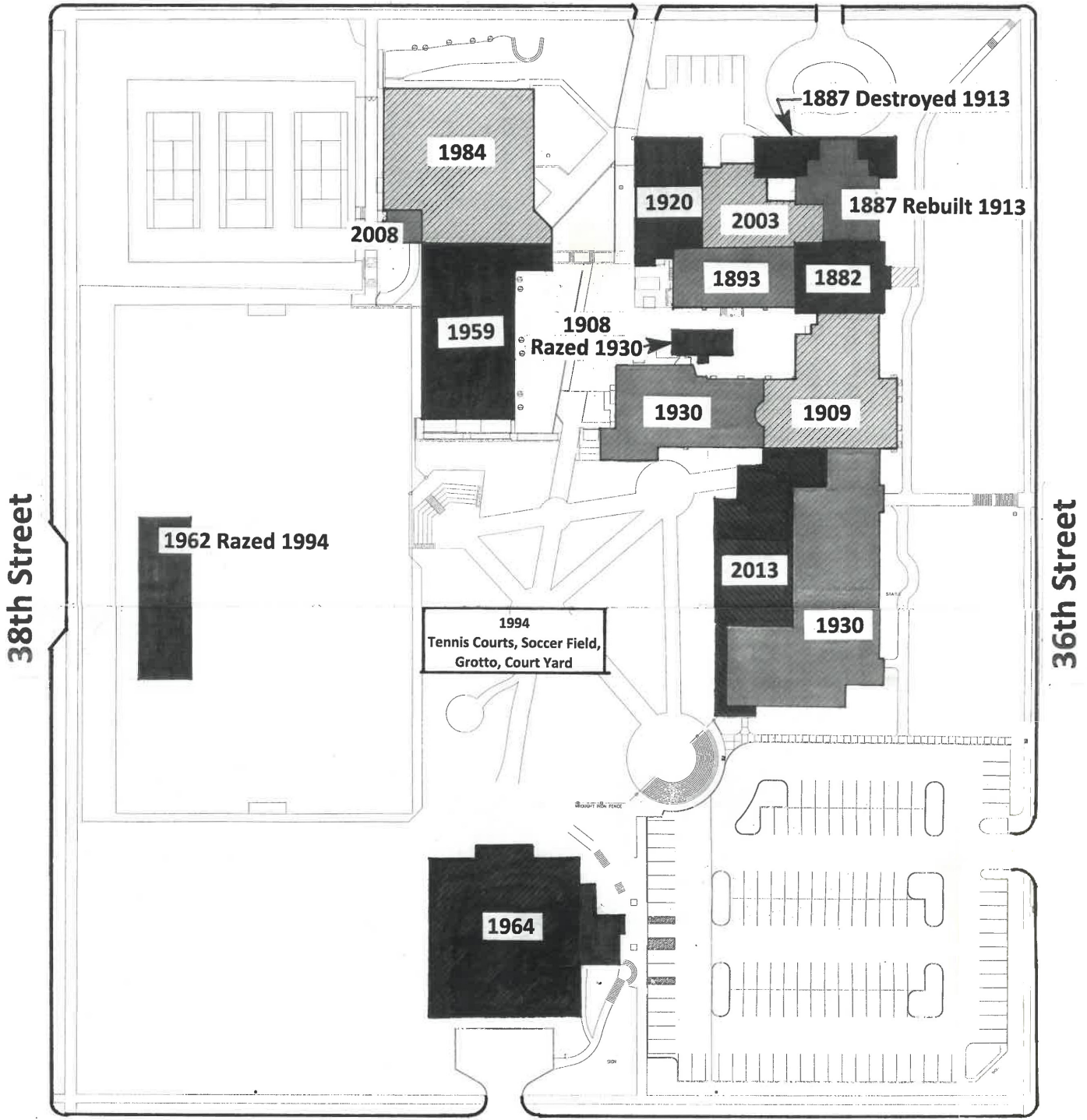


The roof of the performing arts center completed in 2013, allowed for a rooftop terrace to be added. The entrance sits off of the Stuart Art Gallery.



While the 2013 renovation was taking place, a brick enclosure for a statue of St. Rose Philippine Duchesne was erected in the courtyard. This photo was taken from the rooftop terrace.

Burt Street



California Street





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