

Bailey, Vernon Howe, Ossining—Mary Knoll 1935 (no. 150 in Vol. 1 of Sketches of New York Suburbs, MEM + Bailey)

# How the “Sidewalks of New York” Came to Maryknoll

*Janet Butler Munch*

Set high on a hill just east of Ossining, with sweeping views of the Hudson River, is the headquarters of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America. Better known as Maryknoll, the site is recognized worldwide for its training of missionaries. Maryknoll priests, brothers, sisters and lay missionaries now serve in twenty-seven lands covering Asia and the Pacific Islands, Latin and Central America, Africa and the Middle East.

The Society was founded in 1911 and its earliest missions were in China. This fact inspired the use of Chinese architectural motifs in the construction of Maryknoll’s massive five story main building. With its pagoda-roofed tower, this structure today offers instant recognition of Maryknoll, and, in fact, has an intriguing connection to lower Manhattan and the very streets of New York City. This connection is best understood when explained within the context of the construction of Maryknoll.

## Background on the Maryknoll Site and Construction.

The Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America began operations in a rented frame house in Hawthorne. As the Society’s operations grew, the need for larger quarters became apparent and a new site was sought.



*Allen Street looking north from Hester to Grand Streets. View was taken on April 22, 1924 prior to street widening. Depicted are cars, store signs, and a group of men with Sixth Avenue El overhead. Courtesy of Borough President of Manhattan Collection, no. 238 (3). Municipal Archives, Dept. of Records & Information Services, City of New York.*

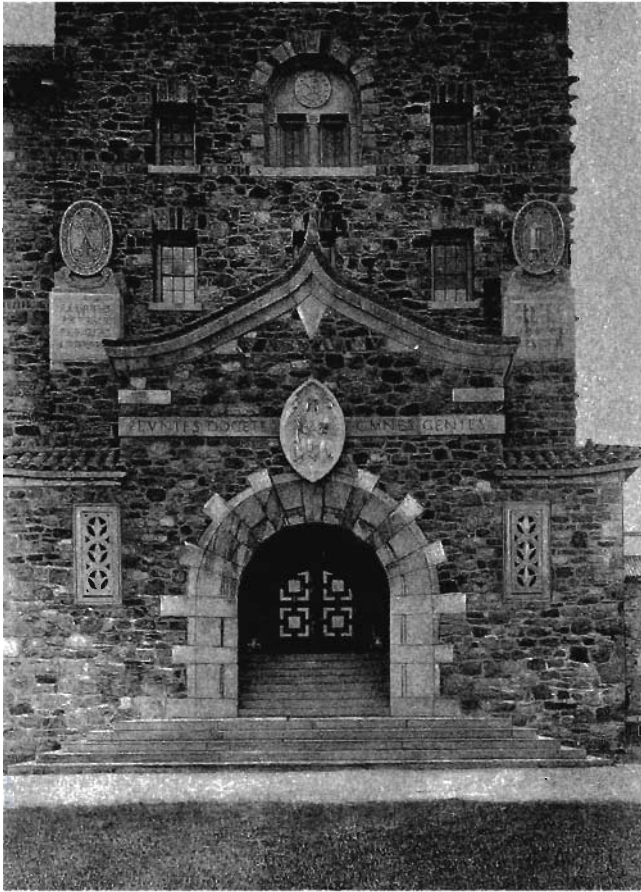
The Society found what it considered a suitable location at River View Manor in today's Pocantico Hills. A contract for the property was subsequently signed on July 12, 1912 between the Society and its owner Mr. Joseph Oussani. The Rockefeller Family, which had its estate just south of Mr. Oussani's property did not want to see the seminary relocate to the area. The Rockefellers' in fact, wanted this very same 52 acre property and contested the Society's claim on the land. Litigation upheld the Society's right to the property. On August, 14, 1912 a satisfactory financial arrangement was reached with the Rockefeller Family and the Society relinquished its claim on the Oussani property. This financial windfall enabled the Society to purchase an even larger parcel of land further up the river. On August 20, 1912, this 93 acre property became the present day headquarters of Maryknoll.



*In the quadrangle surrounded by the stone walls of Maryknoll Seminary, Maryknoll, New York, a young deacon says his Breviary.*

Making minor modifications on existing structures on their new property, the Society was able to continue its functions. New and expanded facilities were badly needed, however. Finally, on February 17, 1920, the Rev. James Anthony Walsh, co-founder of Maryknoll, was empowered by the Society's New York Corporation to spend \$200,000 to construct two buildings on the premises.<sup>1</sup> The architectural firm chosen for the project was Maginnis and Walsh of Boston, Massachusetts, and a contract with them was signed on January 27, 1921.<sup>2</sup> Timothy Walsh, a principal in the firm and brother of Rev. James A. Walsh, drew up the original concept of Maryknoll and was personally involved in the execution of the project.

Money for construction was always in short supply and work on Maryknoll proceeded in fits and starts. Sometimes work even stalled until the building reserve fund could be replenished. The seminarians helped build their new home and performed such manual labor as sawing lumber, digging, hauling, and cutting fieldstone native to the property.



*Entrance to Maryknoll Seminary, the carving of Christ the King is the gift of the Catholic Women's Benevolent Legion*

Seminarians typically worked a schedule of one hour each weekday and two hours on Saturday and holidays. By 1922 the main building was occupied, but most interior walls were not plastered and the floors were unfinished. It was 1926 before most plastering was completed and permanent floors were fitted at Maryknoll.<sup>3</sup>

The builders W. H. Fissell & Co. of New York City were contracted by architects Maginnis and Walsh to select and install flooring at Maryknoll. A durable, economical paving was needed. W. H. Fissell & Co had seen the slate removed from lower Manhattan sidewalks lining the city's waterfront, ready for disposal. The builders reasoned that this bluestone would supply excellent flooring for the Maryknoll project. They thereupon purchased in excess of 2,400 square feet of blue gray slate stone from New York City at an economical

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price.<sup>4</sup> This slate was used to pave Maryknoll's upper and lower cloisters, the main building's rotunda, recreation rooms, corridors, terrace walks and the seminary's garage.

It is unclear exactly when the old New York City slate was purchased for Maryknoll. We know, however, that the bluestone was installed in the cloisters between February, 1923, and February, 1924; and that the rotunda's bluestone slate flooring was installed on October 21, 1925.<sup>5</sup>

The actual city streets that supplied the bluestone slate which was installed at Maryknoll cannot be determined. We do know, however, that removal of the slate sidewalks in lower Manhattan in the 1920s was part of a comprehensive city modernization plan. Manhattan Borough President Julius Miller and the city fathers hoped that street improvements in the most densely populated section of the city would widen narrow streets, alleviate traffic congestion, clear slums, encourage new building construction, and work to increase property values. One major artery, Canal Street was widened in 1923, when five feet of sidewalk were cut off on both sides of the thoroughfare. Allen Street also underwent a major renovation in 1924, when the entire length of its eastern side was condemned by the city. The roadway was thus extended from twenty-four to fifty-four feet across.<sup>6</sup>

While the New York City connection with Maryknoll is intriguing, another aspect of the origin of the bluestone is just as fascinating. The bluestone slabs were quarried by Asa Bigelow (1779–1849).<sup>7</sup> Mr. Bigelow was a general shipping and commission merchant, who operated the business Bigelow Blue Stone Co. in Bristol, now called Malden, in Ulster County, New York. His company quarried the bluestone from the nearby Catskill Mountains and shipped it on his own fleet of ships down the Hudson River to New York City.

Much of the original bluestone slate purchased from the City of New York for Maryknoll is today paved over. Inside, serving carts rattling over the stones in the refectory were simply found to be too noisy, and the floor had to be tiled over. Outside, the harsh weather eventually cracked many of the old stones, particularly in the upper cloister. The stones also proved slippery for walking in many other areas.

One can, however, still find the original bluestones in the rotunda, lower cloister, and the parapet at Maryknoll.

# Endnotes

1. *New York Corporation Minutes and Bylaws 1913–1940*. Maryknoll Mission Archives (Maryknoll, New York).
2. "Specifications for Seminary Building for the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America—Maryknoll, Ossining: General Specifications." January 27, 1921. Commission # 456. Maginnis and Walsh, Architects. Boston, Mass. Maryknoll Mission Archives (Maryknoll, New York).
3. *Report of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America*, 15th Annual Report by the Board of Directors, February 1, 1926-February 1, 1927. Maryknoll Mission Archives (Maryknoll, New York).
4. "City's Flagstones Pave A Seminary," *The New York Times* August 21, 1950, 8:2+ (includes photograph); *A Visit to Maryknoll* (Maryknoll, New York: Maryknoll Publications, 1965.) p. 44.
5. For the cloisters, see *Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America*, Twelfth Annual Report of the Board of Directors. February, 1923- February, 1924. For the rotunda, see letter from Maginnis & Walsh to W. H. Fissell & Co. dated October 15, 1925. Note pencil note on the verso of the letter referring to the date of installation and the number of workers (4 masons and 3 laborers) needed to place the stone floor.
6. "Will Widen Canal Street," *The New York Times* November 5, 1922, XI, 14: 7; "New Traffic Routes to Relieve Congestion," *The New York Times* May 18, 1924, VIII, 4: 1; "Planned to Rebuild Much of the East Side," *The New York Times* May 5, 1924, 17:1.
7. Letter from Mrs. Ruth Bigelow Sweet to Maryknoll dated November 26, 1977. Maryknoll Mission Archives, (Maryknoll, New York).