

Chapter Five

THE ACQUISITION OF WESTON

Seemingly from the early days of Fr. Norbert de Boynes' arrival in the United States the obviously overcrowded conditions at Woodstock indicated the need of some new scholasticate. It also appears from places considered that the preferential place would be in New England where there was no form of a house of formation. Moreover, in several of Fr. de Boynes' proposals for a division of the united province, New England was an important and even an exclusive area for a new province. Even before the decision of Fr. General to set up New England as a regio or vice-province in May 1921, search had begun in that area for sites not only for a noviceship-juniorate but also for a scholasticate which might be a philosophate or a theologate, but not both as ultimately became the requirement in late 1925. At least two locations in Weston had early been considered -- the Sears estate contiguous to the Unitarian Church and the present location of Regis College on Wellesley Street.

For a long time the preferred property was the Searles estate in Methuen, Massachusetts. Permission had even been obtained from Rome for its purchase if all proved satisfactory. Authorization for establishing a religious house in Methuen had also been obtained from Cardinal O'Connell. In an October 31, 1921 reply to Fr. Provincial Rockwell he granted the request for a change in location from Methuen to Weston. In the middle of the summer of 1921, a group of Woodstock professors examined the Methuen location. They were disillusioned by its quantity of marshland, and at the poor possibilities for drainage. Moreover the elevation was judged to be too low, and the distance from Boston was then estimated as a two hour journey. Fr. Tivnan in a detailed history, which he wrote in 1925 on many aspects of early Weston and which he left for the province archives, considered it a great blessing that Methuen was not the place selected for the house of studies. Most, if not all, would agree.

Within days of the establishment of the regio, knowledge of the availability of the Grant Walker estate in Weston was forthcoming through Boston friends of the Society. Its owner, Mrs. Mabel Shaw Walker, was a grand-niece of Fr. Joseph Coolidge Shaw, S.J., a Brahmin convert who entered the Society at Frederick in 1850 and died in 1851. His diary has been edited by Fr. Walter J. Meagher, S.J., with valuable footnotes including data on the Shaw family. To visit this property of Mrs. Mabel Shaw Walker, a group of fathers went from Boston. Among them was Fr. William J. Conway, former pastor of St. Mary's in the North End, and then the treasurer of Boston College High School and the Immaculate. They liked what they saw. The estate had 120 acres of land on both sides of Concord Road with the

vast majority of it on the right-hand side as one came from the village of Weston. It had a good-sized mansion, about ten years old some 200 feet above sea level. It had replaced an earlier home which had burned down.

There were also three frame buildings suited for dwellings. One faced on Sudbury Road at an extremity of the property. This was the White House of early days, housing many of the first faculty and brothers. It had served as a dwelling for Mr. and Mrs. Walker while the mansion was being constructed. At the top of the hill on the left side of Concord Road coming from Weston was the dwelling then and long after occupied by John Cronin, the farmer of the Walker estate and of the later college. On the opposite side of Concord Road in the space between the south side of the present chapel and the road, was a third and more plain dwelling, once the parsonage of the Baptist church of Weston. This house was destined for the workmen in residence. Later it was moved across the road to a place behind the western end of the present parking space. While the house was still on the college grounds, the workmen's radio was at times listened to by some of the philosophers much to the chagrin of a Father Minister. Fr. Joseph Hurley seemed to miss this place of vantage when he strove earnestly to find where some of the philosophers were on the night of a famous prize fight in the autumn of 1926.

There were also two other structures of later importance. One was a carriage shed and, with its conversion into a dormitory in the middle of 1922, it became the Bapst Hall of music and verse. On a slight incline up from Bapst and closer to Concord Road and also roughly parallel to the workmen's house from which it was separated by a road, was a hay barn that became a place of many functions. It was predominantly from the summer of 1922 the philosophers' recreation room. As an auditorium, it had plays, minor logic specimens, disputations, stereoptican lectures by Fr. John Brosnan, and even a movie through the kindness of Fr. M.J. Ahearn and John J. Crowley on Shrove Tuesday, 1925. In its halls, Fr. Stephen Koen trained philosophers' voices with his Te-Ta, Te-Ta sounds. Here Fr. McNiff gave conferences with opening quotations from Gladstone. Around its walls were shelves on which rested the general library books available to the philosophers. Their distinctive philosophy books for supplementary reading (Urraburu, Hickey, De Wolf) were in or near the classrooms. On a large table on one side of this room were placed the selective pages of The Boston Herald, The America of Tierney, Parsons and Blakely, The Catholic World of James M. Gillis, C.S.P., and with its first issue in November, 1924, Commonweal. This structure, as well as Bapst, went down in the early summer of 1925 when construction began on the central, chapel and philosophers' wings. While \$500 was received as salvage money for Bapst, none was received for the recreation hall.

There were also some small barns on the property which in time either burned down or were destroyed. There were also extensive

fields particularly to the right of the mansion and behind it down to the pond. A hill some distance down from the mansion became the location of an early picnic grove. Adjoining the Walker estate and extending to and even across Merriam Street was the John Merriam estate. This property plus a large field across Merriam Street was to become part of the house of studies property in 1928. In addition to barns and an abandoned school house, it had a large red shingled dwelling, long since demolished. When discussion arose as to the appropriate site for the new structure, Fr. Rockwell and Fr. Richards attempted to have Mr. Merriam exchange his property for the Walker property. But his interest in his farm land was too great for Mr. Merriam. After his death his grandson did not have agricultural interest and was prepared to sell in 1928 to satisfy claims of other heirs. The purchase price was \$75,000, a sum which was donated by an anonymous friend. It was this property that supplied most of the spots for the numerous cabins which philosophers and theologians enjoyed on many a holiday for many years. It also contained the rich farm land which served for fruits and vegetables, especially during the years of World War II. It was, however, the sloping ground across Concord Road from the originally-bought property that served for the war-time chicken coops, wells, beehives and honey, plus the old Blue Tower astronomical site and a later faculty cabin.

When the property was first viewed in August, 1921, some drawbacks were noted. There were no connections with town water, perhaps because the house served only as a summer residence, nor was there any connection with a metropolitan sewer system. However, a sanitary engineer from Brookline gave assurance that a septic bed system of drainage could be installed. Fr. Carlin, a province consultant, opposed the purchase because of the swamp land close to Sudbury Road. He favored the purchase of some Baptist Seminary that had been examined as a possible location. Where more than one year of philosophers could be housed, in the event that two years of philosophers should be assigned to Weston, does not seem to have been considered initially. Nor is it clear what initial thought was given to the location of a new and large structure vis-a-vis the mansion. Was it to be retained? Perhaps it might be demolished as Fr. William Walsh had demolished a valuable mansion at Poughkeepsie to have as ideal a building site as possible for the new St. Andrew's. Fr. Cotter in his diary believes that some temporary place should have housed the philosophers while construction of a Scholasticate with its noise and distraction was in process. When St. Andrew's was being constructed, the novices, juniors and tertians and staff remained in their home at Frederick, Maryland. There the noviceship, juniorate and tertianship existed from 1834 to January, 1903 when the trek to St. Andrew's occurred.

It is now time to view the mansion as it could be seen by the visiting committee. As one came up the driveway, he saw a three-storied red brick, Georgian house with a wing of two stories to the left. The main house had a variety of attractions including well-

panelled walls and a wide entrance hall extending from the front door to the back porch. This porch overlooked a grassy plot with borders of flowers and a brown-stone fence. The view from this porch had given the estate the name of Fairview. Four rooms on the first floor led off the main foyer. The first on the right had been a living room. For the philosophers it was to serve a variety of purposes in turn: a chapel, a classroom, the front part of a two-room chapel, once again a classroom. Beyond it, separated by a folding door was the mansion music room which became by turn a parlor, the back portion of a chapel, and a fathers' recreation room. On the front left side was the library which served as the faculty library and the original fathers' recreation room. The remaining room, once the dining room with which a pantry was closely connected, was done in mahogany. After its initial use as a classroom, it became the chapel. Due to its small size, two separate community masses were necessary after the arrival of the second group. Hence there was one mass at 5:30, and a second at 6:30. In the fall of 1924, when the chapel was moved to the double room on the right side, this room became a parlor.

The second floor of the mansion was reached by a double pair of oak stairways. The foyer on this floor was less extended since there were rooms across the back of the house. In this section there were four large rooms, one of them having a sun porch, and one smaller one. Philosophers initially lived in the larger rooms. The smaller one was occupied by Fr. McNiff. With the arrival in September of 1924 of Fr. Tivnan as superior, he moved to the first large room on the left. With the simultaneous loss of the downstairs classroom for a portion of a more extended chapel, as well as the allocation of this larger second floor room to the superior, there was added doubling up -- if putting four rather than three, or five rather than four in a room can be termed doubling up. To the small room previously occupied by the superior, were assigned Fr. James J. Dolan, a strong and powerful man who died early in life in Jamaica in the March of 1952. The second occupant was John Courtney Murray, a gracious, erudite and scholarly Jesuit to whom the American church, and indeed, the whole church is indebted for his studies on religious liberty.

The third floor, approached by a staircase in the wing of the house, had five rooms of varying size, and two toilets with tub baths. Commonly, eleven philosophers lived there. With the displacement, three more were added, one extra in each of three rooms. Of the two rooms which could only house two men, one is worthy of mention for its occupants in 1924-25, the last year philosophers occupied this floor. Both men in time left the Society, but both are well-disposed priests and ornaments of the clerical groups which they joined at an early date. Fr. Thomas A. Fox, after completing his bachelor's degree at St. Joseph's in Philadelphia and working for the Curtis Publishing Company, joined the Paulist Fathers in 1929. He had a long career as a member of their mission band, and has for some

years now been stationed as a homilist at the Paulist Center on Park Street in Boston. The second, Fr. Joseph S. Flanagan, is better known as Fr. Raymond, the Trappist or Cistercian of the Gethsemane Monastery which he entered in 1937. From his pen have come religious novels and ascetical treatises. Without indulging in imagination, one can read pages of his ascetical writings and recognize most clearly the tone and tactic of Ignatian spirituality. Only when he discourses lengthily and forcefully on a psalm, such as #79, is there something which his early Jesuit training and mine (for it coincided) did not give us. So much for the top floor of the mansion and its crowded toilets and bathing facilities. It is not surprising that at the back exit from the first floor of the wing, there were set up a series of auxiliary toilets.

Two other parts of the mansion remain to be mentioned. The first floor of the wing had one living room in the former smoking room. Outside of it ran a porch screened by vines. There was also a clothes room, a tailor shop with a bed and desk for its occupant, ultimately the dentist's room moved from the White House, and the series of toilets previously mentioned. The cellar was an important place. In addition to food and beverage storage room, it had the kitchen and the refectory with its stone masonry whitewashed. The kitchen was managed by Brother Francis J. Fehily who on his arrival with Fr. McNiff was pushed in the front door to be the first official member of its community to arrive. Fr. McNiff insisted on white (not the standard red or blue) tablecloths and nicely patterned tableware. No mugs, he would say, served for tea or coffee. The refectory was long presided over by Brother George Mansell.

So, despite Fr. Carlin's caveat about swampy ground along Sudbury Road, the visiting committee favored the purchase of the Walker estate. The asking price was \$175,000. Some diminution downward was counter-proposed. On October 21, 1921, the property was offered for \$145,000. One day later, Mr. Edward A. McLaughlin, a lawyer of Boston College, through whose trustees the property was to be bought, informed Fr. O'Gorman of a lower price. This was \$110,000 with the proviso that the property be bought by 3:30 that afternoon. A hurried telephone call to Fr. Provincial Rockwell in New York authorized the purchase. The necessary papers were signed on time. It was agreed, however, that no money would pass until November 17 when actual transfer of property would occur. A new corporation entitled the Society of Jesus of New England was quickly formed. Its initial members were Fr. O'Gorman, Fr. Devlin and Fr. Mellyn. At noon on November 17, 1921 the property changed hands. Fr. William J. Conway was appointed to remodel and furnish the main house and to furnish the White House. He was partly aided by the Philomathia Club under Mrs. Vincent Roberts and Fr. Daniel J. Lynch. Brother James O'Sullivan came from St. Andrews to assist Fr. Conway. By the middle of December, Fr. Conway was able to have an open house at the mansion for the friends who had aided him.

At the first vice-province consultors meeting on December 2, 1921, two names were proposed for superior at Weston -- Fr. Gerald A. Dillon, then Minister and Socius at Yonkers, and Fr. Francis J. McNiff. The final choice of a name was made by the Maryland-New York provincial and his consultors. Weston, it was determined, was to have a superior, not a rector. On December 23, 1921, ten days before the formal opening on January 2, 1922, Fr. McNiff was appointed. He had begun his priestly career as a professor of poetry in the juniorate at Frederick and St. Andrew. From 1903 to 1911 he taught literature at Xavier, and for two of these years (1908-1910) he was prefect of studies. At Holy Cross from 1911 to 1917 he taught senior philosophy, initially both psychology and ethics, but finally only ethics plus its allied political economy. For two years (1917-1919) he was Socius to Fr. Peter F. Cusack, the novice master of Poughkeepsie. With this experience he served for one year on loan to the English-speaking (superior) Canadian province at Guelf, as novice master. When appointed in December 1921 to Weston, he was in the midst of a second year as spiritual father at Xavier and assistant editor of the Messenger of the Sacred Heart.

His appearance and mannerisms would give little indication of the varied experience in teaching literature and philosophy plus his administrative work as prefect of studies, socius and novice master. On leaving Weston in September 1924, he became the religious superior of Campion House, the home of the editors of America in New York City. Once while out shopping with his market basket on his arm, it is said that he was stopped to see if he were Fr. John J. Tompkins. This father in a feeble and deranged condition, but in a clerical attire, had escaped from Monroe toward New York City. When Fr. McNiffe replied to an inquiry that he was the President of America (which in some sense he was) the police believed they had their man. The matter was cleared up by a phone call and Fr. McNiff left free to do his shopping. Most of his later years were spent at Wernersville and Brooklyn. He died in 1944. In the diary left by one of the Weston professors, Fr. McNiff is blamed for too easy a handling of the philosophers in study habits and discipline. He seemed to have more interest in the color of the tablecloths and curtains and the size and designs of the tableware. He would not be considered one of Weston's outstanding superiors.

There is a curious incident connected with the purchase of Weston which was first brought out in the early days of the independent province. While it is generally said that knowledge of the Grant Walker estate became known through Boston friends of the Society, it appears that a Mr. Brennan had served to bring the Society and the seller together. This action may have been judged a mere gesture of friendship. However, Mr. Brennan expected a finder's fee and having received none brought suit and was awarded \$8,000 for his services. During the first meeting of the consultors of the province, it was voted not to appeal the judgement, but to pay the award. In the second meeting of the consultors, on October 5, 1926 Mr. Brennan's ack-

nowledgement of his reception of the \$8,000 check was recorded. Should we add that one must be cautious of friends as well as Greeks who bring advantages. In an age when the classics were the common heritage, we would simply write: "timeo Daneos et dona ferentes".



The Mansion, Weston



Bapst Hall, Weston