

KENTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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KCHS MEETING

DATE Saturday, October 9
PLACE Madison Avenue
TIME 1 to 3 PM
PROGRAM Covington's Historic
Business

Karl Lietzenmayer will take us on an historic walk between 5th and 7th on Madison explaining the business and civic activity before and around the turn of the century.

Bulletin

October 1999

From the President.....

Congratulations to our new officers and directors! Officers succeeding themselves are Karl Lietzenmayer and John Boh, The new Vice President is Steve McMurty, and Treasurer is Dan Carter. Directors elected were George Gressle and San Juan C. Romero.

While we are thanking people, we must not forget those directors who served the past three year terms, Jim Kelly and Lisa Gilham; and thank you to Dorothy Colwell, who served a two year term as Treasurer.

Incidentally, a correction must be made to last month's letter: Dorothy did not resign because of health reasons; it was the end of her term.

[Editor's note: I guess Karl assumes that all officers love their job so much that they will want to stay on past their term, just as he does. Seriously, we're glad you love the position of President, Karl]

From the Program Coordinator.....

Don't miss the Historic Walk of Covington's Business District given by Karl Lietzenmayer. Meet at 1 PM at the table next to Motch Jewelers where you can pick up your brochure for the day. We will be followed by trumpeters to give us a fanfare for every stop we make. This ought to impress the folks on Madison Avenue! At the end of the walk, meet back at the parking lot at Karl's tailgate soda fountain for a cool sarsaparilla. And oh, yes, you suburbanites will not find parking in town as difficult as you thought. We have permission to park at the Firstar Bank lot at 6th and Scott.

Next month's program will be at the Kenton County Library at 5th and Scott Streets on November 9. Part of the Library's one week series entitled "Portraits of the Past," this program will discuss American Indian activity in this area along with dancers demonstrating the fiery ceremonial dances.

Covington Hillside Once Tilled By Brothers of Benedict: Site of Famous Chapel

by Jo Ann Brown and Carol Wenger

"Out on Madison Rd. and to the right as one goes toward Latonia are the terraced hillsides which lead up to Monte Casino, the home of Benedictine monks for over three-quarters of a century."¹

The 1914 newspaper reporter was impressed with the place. In 1999, he could describe the area this way: "Right at the top of Hanser Road, we find a subdivision of small well-manicured parcels of land with small homes, some with expansive views. Every house has a driveway and a garage; shopping and schools down a very steep hill. Monte Road and Casino Road are street names to remind us of what once was on this hilltop. Francis Road is here where some say "the smallest church in the world" was found long ago. The owners of Monte Casino Benedictine monastery could never have predicted at this land would be in the middle of the city.

Bear with me a little longer as I quote further the impressions of this 1914 reporter.

"If the traveler wishes to hazard a violation of the trespass laws and climbs the steep hillside to the summit of Monte Casino, he will get a view which will well repay his efforts. From this vantage point the beautiful Latonia valley is to be seen as a rare panorama. And as one compares the restful quietude of the Benedictine community house and its environs with the busy scene below—the speeding automobiles and the Latonia race course, the very symbols of worldly pleasure—one is most carried back a thousand years to be reproduced..... and the contemplative air that pervades the place, the numerous hives of droning bees and the grapes growing purple in the kisses of the summer sun, he is most tempted, too, to forsake the world and its temporal pleasures and become a brother of the Benedictine

order."²

This hillside, previously known as Prospect Hill, had been a vineyard long before the Benedictines bought it. It was owned by "the well known wineman" E. A. Thompson.³

At the time Thompson owned the vineyard, in 1862, Cincinnati, Covington and Newport were threatened by Confederate Troops. The hilltop was used by Union Troops to protect the cities. It is said the site was called Ft. Henry and served as headquarters for Union General Lew Wallace, and remained a fortification for the duration of the War.⁴ During this period, troops damaged fencing and trampled grapevines, generally causing much destruction. Thompson put in a claim to the U. S. Government for \$49,000. The U. S. Grand Jury in turn indicted him for a fraudulent claim, contending that damage was no more than \$1,000.⁵

By the time this indictment was made, as reported in 1873, Thompson had already sold 64 acres to the Cincinnati Wine Company, for \$90,000.⁶ This is quite a large sum for this period of history. But the ownership of the property was still tied up in the courts as of 1875.⁷

In March 1877, a fire is reported to have occurred, destroying a "fine two-story brick dwelling" on the vineyard property. An arsonist was suspected to have started it while the family was absent.⁸ In December, 1877, the same year, the property (a 76 acre tract) was purchased from the Philadelphia Insurance Company by the Benedictine Fathers of St. Vincent Archabbey of Latrobe, Pennsylvania,⁹ for \$21,500.¹⁰ The Benedictine Fathers had been introduced into the Diocese of Covington in 1858 under the auspices of St. Joseph Church of Covington. An Altar Building Stock Company of Bush Street was formed.¹¹

The assignment in 1877 for the

Covington Benedictine Fathers was to produce sacramental wines of the required purity. A number of Benedictine Brothers were brought to Covington to work 30 acres of the land. The new Covington Monastery was named Monte Casino after the old historic Benedictine Order in Italy which also grew wine grapes.

"The upper slopes of the surrounding hills were terraced with retaining walls. The grape vines were trained to run on wires strung from wooden posts. The annual output for commercial purposes averaged 5,000 gallons. The wine made from the first pressing of the grapes was sold as sacramental wine. The second and third pressings made wine which was sold under the name of Red Rose Wine."¹²

A newspaper account in 1894 stated that the regular supply of 50,000 gallons of wine was stored in 1,000 gallon and 500 gallon casks at the monastery, a great deal of it 11 to 17 years old. All churches of the Diocese were supplied from it as well as churches in Ohio, Indiana, and the southern states.¹³

"The grape culture is patterned after the plan followed in Germany. Experts estimate that from \$500 to \$600 can be earned off an acre of grapes made into wine. But Father Sebastian says it is not so profitable in this country as in foreign lands, for wine is valued so much more highly there."¹⁴

This monastery was planned to be as large as the Allegheny City Monastery. However, they could not convince the owner of the adjacent tract of land, John D. Park, medicine manufacturer and broker on Sycamore, to sell. As the work increased, the size of the monastery grew.¹⁵

The "U" shaped arrangement of buildings, the main building three stories, were designed after the 1400-year old Italian version three and a half miles from Cassino, Italy, half-way

the monastery by one faithful monk. Brother Albert Soltis, a stonecutter, after his work was done. Limestone quarried on the monastery grounds was used for the exterior. The interior of the little shrine, dedicated to the Sorrowful Mother, measured approximately 6 by 9 feet. Small stained glass windows are in the 8 foot side walls. Above the altar in the arched front is a Pieta, the image of the Sorrowful Mother holding Christ in her arms after He was taken down from the cross. Over the door is an inscription in German, "There is no sorrow like my sorrow."³⁵

Notes

1. Kentucky Post, 9-2-1914, p. 2.
2. KP Ibid.
3. Covington Journal, 11-1-1873, p. 3.
4. KP 12-28-1987 p. 4K, Jim Ries.
5. Covington Journal, 11-1-1873, p. 3.
6. Covington Journal, 4-1-1871, p. 3.
7. KP (Reis)
8. Newport Local, 3-29-1877, p. 2.
9. Institutions In The Diocese of Covington, p. 377.
10. KP, (Reis).
11. Institutions, p. 376.
12. Institutions, p. 377.
13. KP, 4-14-1894, p. 4.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid, P. 4.
16. Institutions, p. 377.
17. KP, 4-14-1894, p.4.
18. Institutions, p. 378.
19. KP, (Ries).
20. KP, 3-11-1896, p. 8.
21. KP, (Ries).
22. KP, 11-13-1910, p. 11.
23. KP, (Ries).
24. Institutions, p. 377.
25. KP, 7-12-1930.
26. KP, 12-2-1928, p. 1.
27. KP, (Ries).
28. Cincinnati Enquirer, 6-25-56.
29. Ky. Times Star, 4-17-1957, p. 1.
30. KTS, 7-1-1957.
31. KP, (Ries).
32. KTS, 7-1-57.
33. KP, (Ries).
34. KP, 2-13-29.
35. Institutions, p. 377.

Announcements Kenton County Public Library Presents

The First Annual Genealogy and Local
History Fair

Monday Nov. 8

Finding Missing Persons/Adoptions

Presented by Mike Sweeney, experienced genealogist. Techniques for finding missing persons and birth parents will be discussed.

Tuesday Nov. 9

Found: Indians in Kenton County!

Raye McDonald, a Cherokee descendant, will talk about the history of Indians in Kenton County. Dancers in costume will demonstrate a "jingle" dance and fiery ceremonial dance. This is in conjunction with the monthly program of the Kenton County Historical Society. Refreshments provided.

Wednesday, Nov. 10

Genealogy ONLINE!

Pam Cary Durstock, expert genealogist and genealogy webmaster, will demonstrate Web tools used in doing genealogical research. This presentation has been extremely popular and well-attended in the past.

Thursday, Nov. 11

**A History of the Fort Thomas
Military Installation**

As part of a celebration of Veteran's Day and in conjunction with the monthly meeting of the Campbell County Historical Society, local history author Betty Daniels will describe the development and history of the military installation in Fort Thomas.

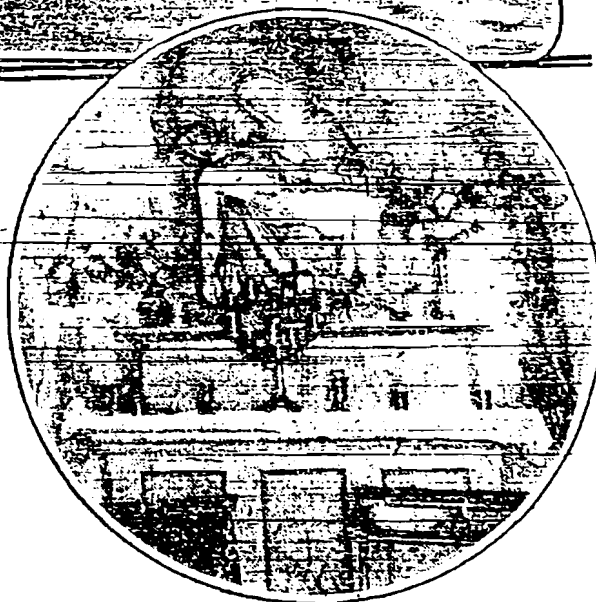
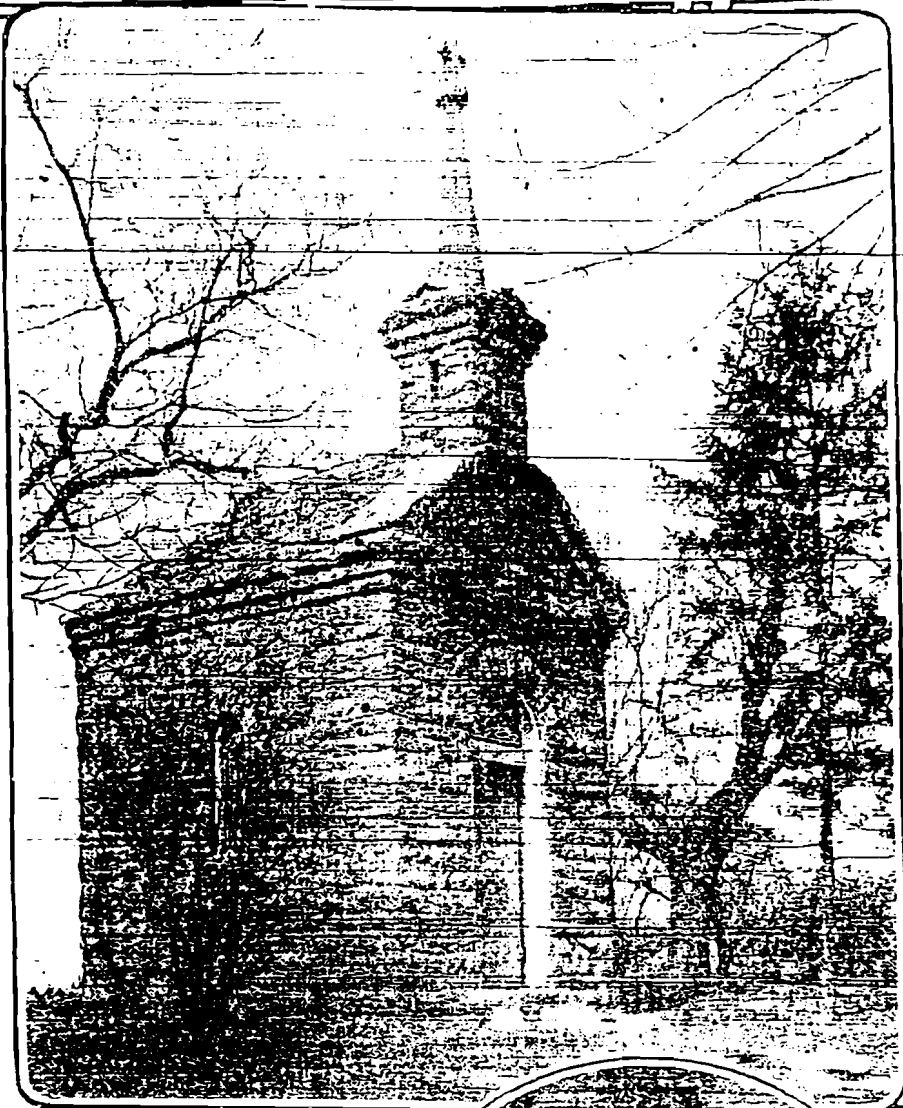
Letter to the Editor:

The Newport Barracks book which I am enjoying right now is very informative and contains everything I was searching for in other ways about the Barracks. It is a real wealth of information and I wish to thank the Society for their decision to publish this book.. I discovered that my ancestor died just prior to the construction of the Newport Barracks but I am sure there are others who's ancestors served there or were in some way attached to this historic site.

I thank you for following up on my request.

Sincerely, Marilyn Schmidt

Shrine of Monte Cassino Not a Church



**MINIATURE CHAPEL ONLY
A PLACE OF PRAYER**

Structure Erected by Benedictine Monk After Superiors Turned Down Request for Larger Edifice

between Rome and Naples.¹⁶

Being outside city limits, the air was clean, fresh, and cool at night. "Those at the city institutions who become weak and sick are sent to recuperate on Casino's summit."¹⁷

A monastery cemetery stood on the slope south of the monastery buildings. Within its fenced boundary, simple crosses marked the graves of the Benedictine Brothers who had died in Kentucky between 1880 and 1914. In later years, the remains of the Religious were removed to the Archabbey at Latrobe.¹⁸

The Monte Casino complex was mostly in an unincorporated part of the county south of the Covington City limits. Central Covington annexed only 11 acres of the property, the part that included the profitable monastery and its wine-making operation.¹⁹ The courts in 1896 stated that a "central officer of the monastery was active in having the town of Central Covington laid off and incorporated." The Brothers had resisted paying taxes claiming that they received no benefits of a city resident, that the land was used principally for "farming purposes." In 1896, the state Court of Appeals ruled that the Brothers of Monte Casino must pay their property taxes including back taxes amounting to 4 or 5 years. The Monastery was part of the city of Central Covington, "a sixth class town, with no population or wealth to justify a taxation for such conveniences as are incidental to a city of the first or second class."²⁰

Other problems plagued the Brothers in connection to being next to the city. Vandals and trespassers damaged property. Hunters used the grounds to pursue game. In a history of Monte Casino, Sister Deborah Harmeling quotes a letter written by Father Modestur Wirtner: "When we bought in 1877, the place was in the country. Now a part of it is within the city limits. Yet we have no city protection—no police, nor fire protection, no city light, no city water—only city tax

and a lot of city thieves."²¹ Finally in 1910, the Benedictines were granted special protection.²²

Prohibition made winemaking even more difficult for Monte Casino. They were only allowed to make 1,000 gallons a year as opposed to making their usual 5,000 gallons. And they were prohibited from selling to anyone except the churches for ceremonial purposes.²³ The winemakers attempted to operate under the supervision of the United States, designating their wine as United States Bonded Winery No. 1, Sixth District of Kentucky. Father Celestine Huber of St. Joseph Church was designated the official government registrar in charge of sales. The project proved to be unprofitable, and the Benedictine Brothers were called back to Latrobe, Pennsylvania.²⁴

In 1922, the land was leased to Frank Burkard, a former Covington merchant who announced plans to farm the land and use the grapes to make grape juice.²⁵

In 1928, a brick barn caught fire, due, it was believed, to spontaneous combustion in the loft where 160 tons of hay was stored. The majority of livestock in the barn, cows, geese, and chickens were saved. Lack of water made extinguishing the flames more difficult. In 1930, another fire started, burning about 20 acres of grass and vineyards. Burkard and several neighbors fought the blaze for some time before the fire company was called. Again lack of water hampered their work, along with high winds. Three fire companies were called.²⁶

The Frank Burkard's Family moved from the Monte Casino grounds soon after Mr. Burkard's death in 1953.²⁷ In 1956, "a spectacular fire" destroyed a wine storage building at the abandoned monastery. The loss was not large because the building was already partly ruined. Again lack of water hampered the firemen, as they fought to protect the Ida Spence Housing Project nearby.²⁸

On April 13, 1957, Barret D.

White, building contractor showed up at the Planning and Zoning Commission meeting to get information about sewers, electricity, and water for the area. He was considering building 250 homes in the area. On April 17, 1957, it was reported that Frederick D. Riedinger, of Lookout Heights, a plumbing contractor, made an offer of \$30,000.²⁹ In July, the sale was made to Mr. Riedinger.³⁰

In 1960, Hanser Homes, Inc. bought all of the Monastery property except for the chapel. They planned to build homes ranging from \$16,500 to \$25,000. Those homes were built; two streets, Monte and Casino, commemorate the old monastery and vineyard. The chapel stayed in its place in the backyard of Francis Lane for five more years.³¹

The chapel is the only remnant left from the Monte Casino Monastery. You will find it serenely overlooking a lake on the campus of Thomas More College where ducks and geese glide over the water and fathers teach their children to fish.

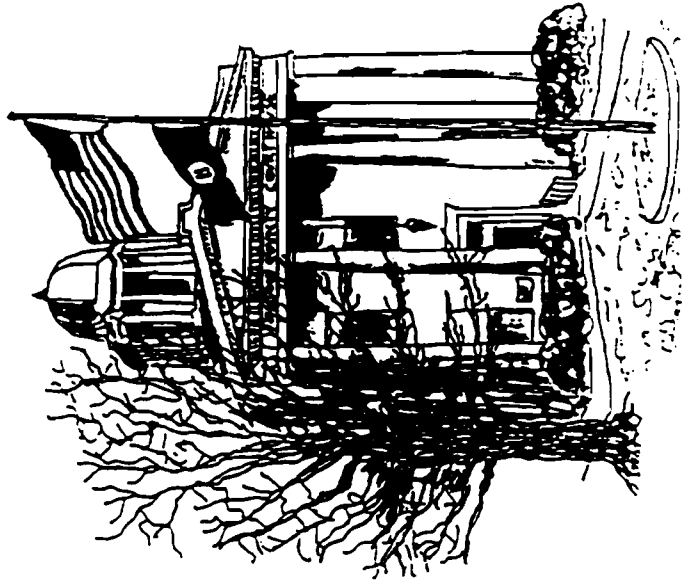
Mr. Riedinger held title to the chapel after the monastery property was sold. When Thomas More College was built in 1965, he donated it in memory of his mother who had died that year.³²

The chapel was sometimes called "the smallest church in the world," and indeed, it was published as such in an edition of Ripley's Believe It Or Not.³³ It was noted as a Northern Kentucky landmark for many years. A movie company in 1929 even included it in a state promotion movie during the governorship of Clem D. Samson.³⁴

The Monte Casino Chapel was built through the vision of Father Otto (Kopf) O.S.B. In 1878, his desire was to build a chapel for the small community of six brothers. Father Otto's superiors, however, decided that the community was too small to justify the expense of a chapel. Father Otto submitted to the decree of his superiors, but was not held back by his quest.¹⁷ The tiny chapel was built in the front of

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Brothers of Benedict

Kenton County Historical Society
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dedicated to preserving our heritage as the "Gateway to the South"