News
Religious Life

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Despite months of prayers, vigils and public protest, the Sisters of St. Joseph motherhouse was laid to rest.

A string of cars recently slowed down to take in the view of the historic motherhouse in pieces earlier this month, MLive.com reported.

The motherhouse and four other buildings on the former Nazareth College campus have been slated for demolition since April. The plan encompassed more than 394,000 square feet and 18 total floors.

Demolition plans elicited an emotional response from the community over the past year.

The city of Kalamazoo Historic Preservation Commission had a failed campaign to create a new local historic district covering buildings on the former Nazareth College campus.

A vocal group of opponents formed the Save Nazareth campaign of peaceful protests, monthly prayer vigils and lawn signs that dotted the community. A change.org petition to preserve the building's history amassed nearly 3,000 signatures.

The cupola dome atop the former Nazareth motherhouse in Kalamazoo was removed Dec. 19, and remains wrapped up in front of the debris.

While other religious relics went to the Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo and Kalamazoo Valley Museum, the cupola was not claimed or re-homed, said Eileen M. Biehl, communications specialist for the Congregation of St. Joseph in Cleveland.

The deconstruction company, Melching Demolition from Muskegon, has assumed responsibility for everything left in the building, Biehl said.

"Everything in and on and about the buildings is theirs to re-purpose and reuse as they determine," she said. "We removed everything we could re-purpose on our own out of the building."

Melching Demolition did not return phone calls about where the cupola will go prior to publishing.

Neither the museum nor the diocese were offered the cupola, according to each of their respective spokespeople.

Among the sacred items transferred to the Catholic Diocese of Kalamazoo were the Holy Stairs, spokesperson Vicki Cessna said.

The 28 stairs — a replica of a similar staircase in Rome known in Italian as the Scala Sancta, or Holy Stairs — represent the stairs Jesus ascended and descended before his crucifixion. Just like the ones in Rome, Nazareth's Holy Stairs contain relics preserved in each step.

The diocese does not have any immediate plans for the stairs, Cessna said.

The Kalamazoo Valley Museum accepted a number of objects from Nazareth's history room including Nazareth Academy memorabilia and medical instruments from the Saint Camillus School of Nursing, Ascension Borgess Hospital and Borgess School of Nursing.

The original 11 sisters came from Watertown, N.Y., in 1889 to launch what is now Borgess Medical Center, the area's first hospital, in a two-story mansion on Portage Street, according to Kalamazoo Gazette archives.

When more sisters joined the hospital added an orphanage and a school. Nazareth Academy opened in 1897 and Nazareth College opened in 1913.

By the early 1960s nearly 1,000 nuns served more than 30 communities in Michigan, operating a college from the grounds of their massive, 237,000-square-foot motherhouse.

Crews tore into the dormitories of the former Nazareth College in October. Previously, the buildings were used as office space for the Kalamazoo County Community Action Agency.

The Dillon Hall apartments, still operating and sponsored by the ministry of the Congregation of St. Joseph, will not be demolished, Dillon Hall property manager Michele McCurdie told the newspaper in October.

"We will be the last building standing," McCurdie said.

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