

The way it was: Backer Memorial, 1923-1956

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Back in a time when enrollment was roughly 500 students, tuition was only \$130, soccer was a minor sport, St. Louis U. High had only 12 clubs, and V2K did not yet exist, the SLUH campus was only about 14 acres. Since then, the campus has increased to 30 acres with approximately 111,600 square feet of it covered by the building.

The SLUH building was built in the 1920s, after George H. Backer, a wealthy, devout Catholic and graduate of St. Louis University in 1869, died on Jan. 31, 1919. At that time, SLU operated three high schools: Loyola Hall (located in the old Eads mansion), Gonzaga Hall, and St. Louis Academy.

"They were looking for ways to consolidate those schools and to build a new school," said history teacher Jeff Harrison, S.J., '75, who teaches some of the history of the SLUH building to his juniors. "Well, enter Mrs. Backer."

As the legend goes, George Backer's wife, Anna F. Backer, wanted to purchase an altar at the Student Chapel at St. Louis University in his memory. After meeting with Michael L. O'Connor, S.J., however, she decided instead to donate \$125,000 to build a high school as a memorial, which ended up costing almost three quarters of a million dollars.

St. Louis archbishop John Glennon laid the cornerstone of the building on Apr. 15, 1923, mentioning "that the gift of Mrs. Backer

was the largest ever made to the cause of Catholic education in the archdiocese of St. Louis," according to a history of SLUH in the Midwest Jesuit Archives. Classes first began on Sept. 12, 1924.

Originally, the building's I-shape represented Ignatius, said consultant to the president Robert Bannister, consisting of the current Jesuit wing on the north side, the science and cafeteria wing on the south side, and main hallways and classrooms connecting the two.

"This was supposed to be a three story building all the way across," said Bannister, "but for some reason or other, I guess because of finances, they decided not to."

Towers rose from the J-wing and battlements ran across the top of the entire building, giving the school a gothic look.

"If you look at the building to the west (the Currigan room), you'll see battlements," said Bannister. "They had them all across (the building) as well but that was a problem because of tuckpointing

and moisture getting into them because they were just sort of stuck up in the air. ... So they just took them down and they just leveled this part off."

Tuckpointing is the process of repairing a mortar joint in a brick wall and is a critical maintenance task to keep water from entering the brick wall cavity.

Beneath the towers was the main entrance to the school, actually located off Oakland Ave. in the J-wing.

"(That) was the main entrance because nobody had cars," said Harrison. "You came on streetcars and there was a stop right there."

The J-wing housed nineteen Jesuits in 1924. The first two floors were the residences. The third floor (what is now administration) was the recreation room.

On Sept. 29, 1927 at 12:57 p.m. a tornado hit SLUH. According to the Midwest Jesuit Archives, most of the windows were shattered,

and "particularly hard hit were the gymnasium (located in the current main office and Pastorial office) ... where large portions of the roof collapsed." Some interior walls were flattened and part of the chapel collapsed. The total damage cost about \$150,000. Amazingly, there was no loss of life.

Then, said Harrison, "after the World War, there was a lot more Jesuits and so they built the ... Currigan room."

The expansion was completed on Jan. 19, 1948.

The Jesuits needed more residential area and wanted to move their chapel, so they built the Ignatian Conference room and Currigan room, said Brandy.

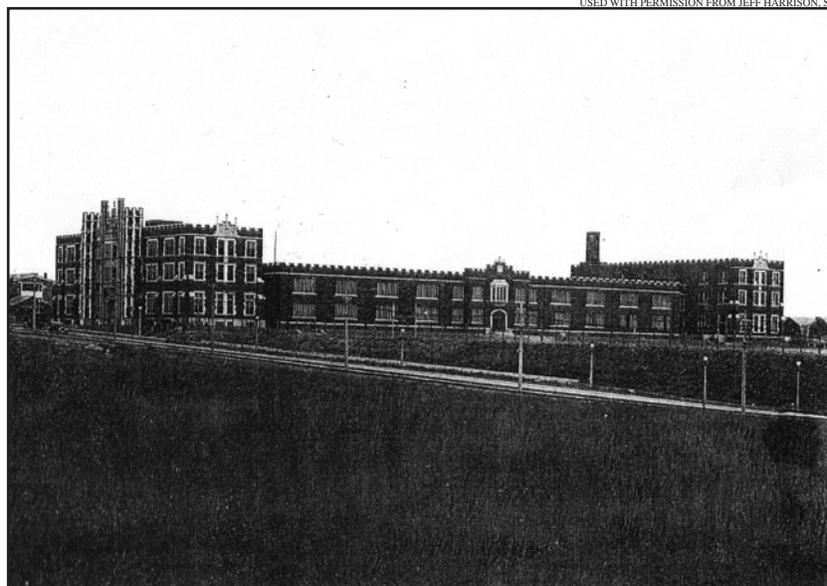
"All the woodwork right here (in the Ignatian Conference room) was built on the spot," said Tom Brandy, a painter for SLUH who has worked here on and off (mostly on) since the mid 1940s.

Bannister pointed out that the bricks of the walls of the new stairwell between the Currigan Room and the original J-wing show the difference between the old and new buildings, the old wing having been built with smaller bricks than the new one. The old windows were taken out and filled with concrete.

Around 1948, parlors that were used for meeting areas were located by the current theology offices and rooms J121 and J123. The president's office and switchboard were located across the hall, by rooms J124, J127, and J128,

"Now where the switchboard is was the entrance to the main

see **BACKER, 8**



The St. Louis U. High campus in its early days. Notice the battlements and towers no longer present on the roofline.

BACKER

(from 7)

chapel,” said Harrison. “So from the front door you looked right through to the Blessed Sacrament on the altar.”

“(The main entrance has) been kind of camouflaged with wood,” said Brandy.

The chapel then was not only for student use, but for the public. It has been upgraded many times over the years.

“There used to be windows,” said Bannister. “So if you’re walking along the hall (outside the chapel) and you go like this,” he said, making a tapping gesture with his hand, “you can hear (the hollow spaces) where the windows were.”

No part of the school was air conditioned, so transom windows were used. Air would move into the chapel through the windows and up to the skylights. Continued Bannister, “you had sort of an up movement of air.”

The chapel also had a choir loft, located in the back where the English office is now.

The walls were white and the skylight ceiling held small chandeliers, unlike the purple tapestries hanging around the lights today.

The library, originally located in the current foreign language department, moved to current classrooms M201 to M209 during the Great Depression.

“The classrooms themselves, ... they haven’t really changed,” said Brandy. “The only (big) difference is the windows were taken out. They had glass block windows on both sides, the alley and the field side.” Also, the doorways used to run straight across with the walls instead of being indented as they are now.

Across from the chapel, where the current main office is located, was the two-story gymnasium. The locker room was located where the pastoral office is now located.

With the same windows and skylights as the chapel, there were six hoops and no bleachers.

During recreation time, students used the gym, the handball courts, located where the current gym is, and the upper field.

Said Brandy, “Originally, (the upper field) was just ... a bunch of trees. ... Then, a bunch of us guys ... got together and went out there and just cleared it because it was all just a bunch of woods and stuff.”

The administration, however, believed that the students needed more recreational area than the upper field and gym provided.

“The first major change to the building was actually not visible from the outside,” said Harrison. “It was the Rec Room in 1946.”

Construction began in 1944 on the grounds that the cost would be limited to \$25,000 and benefactors pay for at least \$12,000.

There was originally no basement to the building, but “instead of making a slab (to support the school building) they had sunk pillars through the bedrock,” said Harrison. “That’s why those pillars in the Rec Room are so (ugly), they were never meant to be seen. ... All they had to do was dig the dirt out.”

The Rec Room extended from where the computer labs are now to the rifle range.

“They had track and field practice down there,” said Brandy. “They had a shuffleboard field on the floor. They also had the pool tables. ... They had a boxing ring — they had a boxing team. And they

didn’t have weights during those days, they just had exercise equipment.”

As more time passed, the school needed a new gymnasium. Ground was broken in the fall of 1954 and the current gym opened on Jan. 8, 1956.

According to the SLUH 50th Anniversary blue booklet, “the addition provided space for four counseling rooms, three publi-

cations offices, an athletic office, locker rooms, a common room for lay teachers, and one of the finest high school gymnasiums in the St. Louis area.”

“But the neat thing (about the new wing) was that ... a second floor corridor that had coach’s offices,” said Harrison. “You know, the librarians’ offices where the computers are was actually part of that structure. Now if you go down to the gym and look up behind the east basketball hoop, you can see the brick is different, there was a window. The old Jesuits used to come and watch the basketball games and while the other team was making their free throws they’d go ‘Oooh. Oh.’ And stuff like this,” he said sticking out his tongue waving his hands on either side of his face.

The cafeteria seems to be the only thing that has remained constant, at least in its essential structure. The details, however, have changed immensely.

“When I came in here they had ... regular old hardwood tables. And they had bottle soda at the time, real china, and they had their own cooks back there in the kitchen. ... Everything was cooked up fresh from scratch, which I thought was a good thing,” said Brandy.

“But as I say,” said Brandy, “there’s nothing here (in SLUH) that has changed a great deal. It’s just been upgraded.”

Continue to learn more about SLUH’s campus upgrades from 1956 up to the present in Part II of the feature on Jan. 19, 2007.



The original student chapel. Notice the white walls, pews, lighting fixtures, and windows on the upper walls.