

Thomas Merton entered upon his life as a Trappist monk at the Abbey of Gethsemani in Kentucky in December of 1941. For a year and a half before that Merton taught English at St. Bonaventure’s College. Merton was not a Big Man on Campus. His teaching was not memorable and he tended to be a somewhat solitary figure, though he made an impression on those he was closest to. However it was here at St. Bonaventure that he found the way to his life's calling. Merton’s autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, is the source for many of the stories you’ll encounter here.

St. Bonaventure invites you to take a Thomas Merton Walking Tour.

It all began at Friedsam Library

1. Friedsam Memorial Library

Thomas Merton’s original experience of the St. Bonaventure campus was with Robert Lax. Lax, a fellow Columbia University student, was from Olean and brought Merton to the area. Thomas Merton was introduced to Librarian Father Irenaeus Herscher who became a mentor and friend. He was also given ready access to every book in the library. Friendly as he was, Fr. Irenaeus sometimes forgot Merton’s name, calling him Mr. Myrtle. The Thomas Merton Collection, begun by Fr. Irenaeus, is located upstairs in what began as the president’s office and later became the office of the library director.

2. Butler Gymnasium

While intending to enter the Franciscan order, Thomas Merton stayed in the Butler Gymnasium for a short time during the summer of 1940. Butler served as not only a gym but also had offices for athletics and student groups.

3. Devereux Hall

A. During Thomas Merton’s time as a faculty member at St. Bonaventure, he resided in Devereux Hall. At this time Devereux was both a dormitory and monastery. The first floor served as the friary where the Franciscans lived. The second floor housed both faculty and students. His first

room in Devereux was at the southeast corner facing the inner court. Here he would look out his window, past the chapel (now the Garret Theater) to the fields and heavily wooded hills beyond. He was often at prayer while looking out his window, and this peaceful landscape became associated with his prayers.

As mentioned above, St. Bonaventure’s College chapel, which is now The Garret Theater, is located off the east wing of Devereux facing the inner courtyard. The chapel was the primary location for religious observances on campus.

B. Merton occupied a second dorm room in Devereux in the fall of 1941. This time he was on the north side facing Devereux's "beach". Here he "could see the sun shining on the green hillside which was a golf course. All day long you could hear the trains in the Olean freight-yards crying out and calling to one another and ringing their bells." It was during this time that Merton's vocation to join the Trappists was confirmed.

4. Hickey Dining Hall

Turning west one comes to the Hickey Dining Hall. Thomas Merton would often eat here with the rest of the Bonaventure community. The rear extension of the building was a convent for the Franciscan sisters who ran the food service at the time. When Merton took his long walks through the Allegany River Valley and the hills surrounding it, he would start at the Hickey where the sisters would give him a bag lunch. The sisters fed him well. He wondered if they thought he was one of a group because they always gave him enough food for half a dozen.

5. De la Roche Hall

When Thomas Merton taught here at St. Bonaventure, his classroom was in De la Roche Hall. Other than being the classroom building, it also housed the bookstore and post office. Merton recalled that "the Sisters always came back with the right answer, although they sometimes had circles under their eyes. The clerics had the right answers but no circles, because they got the answer from the Sisters."

6. Alumni Hall

During Merton's long walks, he would often pass Alumni Hall on his way to The Shrine of St. Therese of Lisieux and The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes. At the time, Alumni Hall had movie showings where students, nuns, clerics

and friars would file in and leave the rest of the campus deserted. Merton would always enjoy the laughter filled building as he walked by. The building which served many purposes during its lifetime was torn down in 1961.

7. The Shrine of St. Therese of Lisieux

St. Therese's shrine is also known as the shrine of the "Little Flower." It was at this shrine that Thomas Merton prayed for guidance one evening. "You show me what to do. If I get into the monastery, I will be your monk. Now show me what to do." It was then he imagined he heard the Trappist bells of Gethsemani monastery which he had visited the previous Easter. Soon afterward he left St. Bonaventure and joined the Trappists in Louisville, Kentucky.

8. The Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes

The Grotto, built by seminarians in 1928, "wasn't complicated enough to be ugly, the way those artificial grottos are. It was nice to pray out there, in the dark, with the wind sighing in the high pine branches."

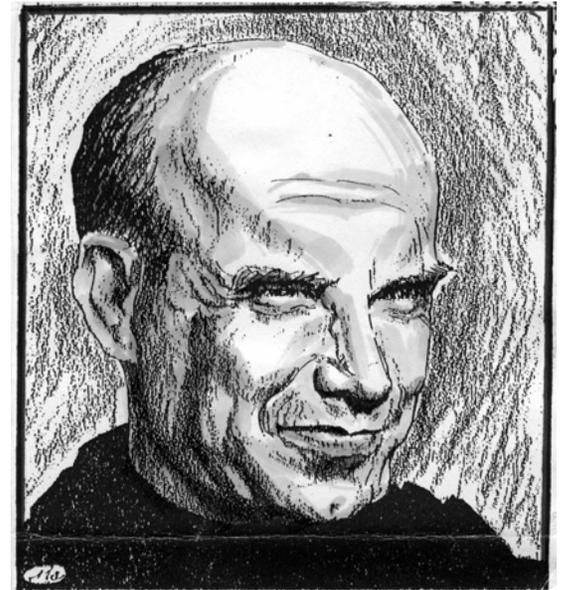
9. Merton's Heart

This large bare spot visible on the hillside when looking across the river from the south side of campus, was originally cleared for the purpose of drilling for oil. While Merton usually walked in another direction, Fr. Irenaeus named it Merton's Heart to commemorate the meditative aspirations of the young Thomas Merton as he found himself at a turning point in his life.

For more information about these places, please visit the Archives, or the Merton Collection web site: <http://web.sbu.edu/friedsam/archives/mertonweb/index.html>

Quotes from *Seven Storey Mountain*, by Thomas Merton.

Cover image by Fred McCarthy.



Thomas Merton at St. Bonaventure: A Walking Tour

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http://web.sbu.edu/friedsam/archives/Guide_page.html