

ST. JOHN BAPTIST SCHOOL—LATER THE SHIRE AND DAYTOP

The first St. John Baptist School was established by the Community of St. John Baptist (originally the Sisterhood of St. John the Baptist) in New York City in 1880. Initially housed in the convent at 233 East 17th Street in the fashionable Stuyvesant Square area of Manhattan, the purpose of the day and boarding school for girls was “to fill a gap in the educational facilities [in the New York area] . . . by making available a church school offering a high type of college preparatory training to students of moderate means.” The original aims of the school were summed up in the motto, “Good scholarship, good discipline, the Catholic faith expressed in Catholic life”—the latter terms clearly being a reflection of the conservative Oxford Movement in the Anglican church that had largely inspired the establishment of the Community in England and in the United States.

In 1883-84 the Community’s first purpose-built school was designed by the prominent New York architect Charles Coolidge Haight and constructed at 231 East 17th Street, next to the convent. The school operated there until 1914, after which it and the convent were sold.

Beginning in 1899 as the Community was planning its move from New York City to open space in New Jersey, it was clear that new accommodations would eventually have to be arranged for the school as well.

For the 1914-15 school year, the Community rented the former James E. and Hattie Hulshizer mansion off Washington Corner Road in Bernardsville that was then owned by Samuel S. Childs, co-founder of the eponymous nation-wide restaurant chain. The mansion, named Stonemere by a subsequent owner, was later operated as a nursing home when it burned down in 1969.

In 1915, with the completion of the Community of St. John Baptist’s new convent at Mendham, the Sisters moved out of St. Anna’s Cottage, a large nineteenth century house on the property, thus providing a new home for the St. John Baptist School. The school remained at St. Anna’s until the new, larger school building was completed on the hill in 1928.

The new three-story school building was designed much earlier, around 1920, by architect William Wade Cordingley. Presumably, the delays in the construction of the new building were related to the need for raising sufficient funds.

Cordingley, in partnership with architect Durr Freedley (born Jesse Jacob Friedley), had previously (1913-15) designed the Community’s new convent at Mendham. Around 1920 Cordingley also designed his own home on West Main Street in Mendham adjacent to the Community’s property. Called St. Hilda’s Lodge, the extant dwelling is in the Tudor Revival style. It was initially shared by Cordingley and the family of the chaplain of the convent.

In 1939, Cordingley allowed part of St. Hilda's Lodge to be used by the St. John Baptist School as accommodations for teachers and for an art studio. In 1941, the Lodge was briefly used as a preschool and primary school, as a lower school for day students.

Cordingley was often described as a colorful, outspoken, and active member of the Mendham community. He served for a time as justice of the peace and later mayor of the borough.

In 1957 a modern gymnasium was added to St. John Baptist School, and in the mid-1960's a steepled chapel was built on the opposite end of the main school building.

St. John Baptist School operated until 1983, when it was closed due to a decline in student enrollment and increasing operational costs.

The next occupant of the building was The Shire, a residential treatment center for adolescents dealing with alcoholism or drug addiction. The name was taken from the region settled by hobbits in J.R.R. Tolkien's work, *The Lord of the Rings*. The name was meant to represent a sense of security and a safe home for the adolescents being treated.

For financial reasons and the need to make upgrades and alterations to the buildings, The Shire did not open until 1986 and closed in 1991.

In January 1992, the St. John Baptist School buildings opened as Daytop / Mendham, a residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation facility, one of what were then some twenty-five recovery residences around the country operated by Daytop Village, which was started in the early 1960's by Monsignor William O'Brien in New York. The facility was dedicated in September 1992 at a ceremony at which the actress Mary Tyler Moore spoke about her own addiction issues.

Daytop / Mendham closed in 2020, and the former St. John Baptist School buildings are now vacant.

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