

THE WILLIAM AND ELIZABETH FINN STORY

As is often the case with life stories, a single, seemingly insignificant moment ends up changing the course of history. For the University of St. Thomas, that moment happened on July 9, 1847. It was one of the hottest days that summer at Fort Snelling, less than four miles from today's St. Paul campus. A young infantryman named William Finn completed guard duty and began to unload his musket, as he had done many times. Whether he was fatigued from the heat or simply not paying attention, Finn accidentally discharged the piece and lost the forefinger of his right hand.



Chapel of St. Thomas Aquinas, built on the site of the couple's original farmhouse.

Fortunately, there was a silver lining to Finn's bad luck. As compensation for his disability, the Mexican War veteran was given an honorable discharge and a bounty land warrant for 160 choice acres within the Fort Snelling military reservation. It was part of this property that Finn and his wife, Elizabeth, later would devote to "some purpose of Religion and Charity." That purpose ultimately would become the University of St. Thomas.

Finn took great care in selecting his land. He explored the virgin territory, spade in hand, looking for the finest possible soil for his farm. In the northeast corner of the reservation, he found the perfect spot, which historian Joseph B. Connors described as:

"... a place where the oak-studded plain rose gradually toward low hills flanking the river. The soil he turned over with his spade was a rich loam. A brook meandering from a swamp a mile or so inland flowed through marshy ground below a curving ridge, then made its way into the shadows of a deep, thickly wooded ravine, where it initially fell in a beautiful little cascade to join the Mississippi."

Eventually, Finn would expand this parcel to around 500 acres.

Ever the humble immigrant, Finn did not build a new farmhouse. Instead, he purchased an abandoned home near the present site of the Franklin Avenue bridge, transporting it several miles by ox-team, inch-by-inch, to a foundation that he had prepared. In 1918, when workers were excavating for the sacristy of the college chapel, they came upon the foundation of William and Elizabeth Finn's farmhouse. The location remains a symbol of the foundational gift that they gave so long ago.



Today a statue of Archbishop John Ireland overlooks the campus.

It was during his farming days that Finn developed a friendship with Father John Ireland, a young priest who would later become archbishop. Although Finn had no formal education, the two men had much in common: Both were war veterans and both were Irish. Over the years, one of the topics of conversation was Father Ireland's dream of establishing a Catholic seminary and school. In 1880, after retiring to a residence in downtown St. Paul, Finn contributed a portion of his land for Ireland's dream, in return for an annual annuity of \$500.

The St. Thomas Aquinas Seminary and

St. Thomas College started in the same building in 1885, and Finn lived long enough to see them firmly established. When Finn died in 1889, his will bequeathed all of his property to Archbishop Ireland for the benefit of the new school. Thus, the first gifts ever made for the benefit of St. Thomas were "planned" gifts, in the form of an annuity and a bequest by will.

Elizabeth Finn survived William by 10 years. Both are buried in Calvary Cemetery, about 80 yards west of the grave of their dear friend, Archbishop Ireland. Surely, these three individuals could never have imagined how, together, they would transform that single moment on July 9, 1847, into something that would have such a lasting effect on the lives of so many.



Students enjoy homecoming on the lower quad.