Archivist saves murals from destruction

By Carol C. Bradley

When the Main Building was renovated in 1997, it looked as though historic murals of two Notre Dame presidents—Rev. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., and Rev. William Corby, C.S.C.—and pre-Notre Dame missionary priest Rev. Stephen Badin would be reduced to rubble in a landfall.

Over the years, the murals—painted by unknown artists—had been painted over and painted over and partially covered by a drop ceiling. “They hadn’t been part of the décor of the room for a long time,” says Wendy Clauson Schiferth, director of the Notre Dame Archives.

The murals were in a room, now part of the third-floor offices of News and Information, which had once been home to the Columbian Literary and Dramatic Society and other student literary and debating groups. In the late 19th century, the four walls of the room were decorated with portraits of Notre Dame presidents and other historical figures such as Washington, Lincoln, Henry Clay and Napoleon III.

The portrait of Rev. Auguste Lemonnier, C.S.C., Notre Dame’s fourth president, couldn’t be salvaged. But there were still the portraits of Fathers Sorin, Corby and Badin, which archivists felt were of potential historical significance to the University.

Could the murals possibly be saved and restored? The hunch was that the portraits weren’t painted on canvas—they were painted directly on the plaster.

“And the plaster had to come down,” Schiferth says.

Senior archivist Peter Lyons had an inspiration.

It helped that he’s something of an expert on old houses—he’s been working on restoring his own Greek Revival house for the past 17 years. “I was curious about how the lathe and plaster were attached to the brick wall,” he says. “I realized the plaster was connected, but not real securely. The lathe was nailed to small blocks of wood set at regular intervals in the brick.”

If the plaster wall was bruised, he realized, the murals could—indeed they could—be pulled away from the brick in one piece.

His plan involved stabilizing the plaster with a wooden box, cutting around the mural, and gently pulling the plaster away from the outside wall. The carpenters who handled the job added some innovations of their own—for example, the box was hung at the bottom, so the murals—each of which weighs over 300 pounds—could be gently levered off the wall and onto a table. “It was a little easier because we had nothing to lose,” Lyons says.

“We started with the portrait of Father Sorin,” Schiferth recalls. “It was just beautiful. The box Peter designed worked perfectly.”

Art conservator Monica Radecki has since restored two of the murals. The portrait of Father Sorin is on display at the Northern Indiana Center for History. The portrait of Father Corby, which was restored in late 2007 with a gift from Ursula and Dr. Chris Bodding (’75), was recently installed in the Eich Visitors Center and is once again on public display—144 years after the painting was originally unveiled.

The final painting of the three, a portrait of Father Badin, is yet to be restored. At some point, the Badin portrait was painted over with latex paint. “We’re assure to see if the portrait is interesting enough and salvageable enough to worth a restoration,” says Schiferth. There are no exact photographs of Father Badin, and the few portraits that exist are head and shoulders only. The mural, if it is restored, would represent the first known full-length portrait of Father Badin.

The role of the Archives, Schiferth notes, is to preserve institutional memory. Most of the records of the University are papers put into boxes and kept for the informational value of the record, she says. “This is a piece of history that is far more public and visible,” she says. “It goes into the visitor center and think, ‘That’s a job well done.’ I’m glad we saved it. I’m glad it all worked.”

Photos provided by Charles Lamb, Notre Dame Archives.

Far left: A wooden box was built around the mural and the lathe and plaster cut, allowing worker to pull the mural from the outside wall. Workers hinged the box at the bottom and gently lowered the 300-pound mural from the wall.

Center: Art conservation expert Monica Radecki spent more than five months restoring the painting of Father Corby.

Below: Senior archivist Peter Lyons was instrumental in saving the murals from destruction.