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## Foundations

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**Syon Abbey**  
**Copper Hill, Virginia**  
*By Jennifer Walker-Journey*

In the fall of 2000, shortly after Ethan Anthony took over the helm at HDB/Cram and Ferguson Architects in Boston, he received an unusual call. Father John Sebastian simply wanted to know if the ambitious architect followed the acclaimed gothic design style that his firm's namesake, Ralph Adams Cram, had held so dear. A century earlier, Cram, with his partner Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, produced the design for All Saints Church in Ashmont, Massachusetts, which became the leading template for the village church in America.

This wasn't the first call Father Sebastian had made to the firm. Years earlier, he had talked to another architect at HDB/Cram and Ferguson, but got the impression that the firm was more interested in building modern designs rather than being inspired by beautiful structures from centuries ago. As years passed, and the need and desire for a monastery grew, Father Sebastian decided to give the firm another try.

It was 2000, and Anthony had since become the firm's president and principal architect. He was armed with many honors, including a recent award from the Institute for Religious Art and Architecture. When he got Father Sebastian's call, he immediately lit up. The father explained that the monks had moved to a farm near Charlottesville, Virginia, from Oregon. The community was originally founded in Kentucky in 1962 to teach the full and integral Catholic and Roman faith. The monks were hoping to build a monastery where they could worship, live, and work to preserve old religious texts and maps. They wanted the monastery to be designed to reflect the gothic style of churches, but with modern amenities that would make it more energy efficient and able to last for many years with little maintenance.

Anthony readily accepted an invitation to visit the monks on their farm and discuss the project. The men knew their vision would come at a steep price, but they were willing to do what they could to gradually build the monastery they would call Syon Abbey that would inspire awe and reverence to God.

As a way to hold down building costs, Father Sebastian took on the role of general contractor. The monks would appeal to companies for discounts on building products. They also would provide the labor for some projects.

The monks originally wanted to stay close to the farm where they were residing, but property was expensive. As they broadened their search for a location, Father Sebastian asked Anthony to begin working on the design of a traditional monastery. There needed to be a church, a bell tower, cloister, refectory, dormitories, and space for the men to work. The design, gothic with dramatic arches and a rising bell tower made of striking stonework, should not be showy or ornamental but uplifting and glorifying to God, Father Sebastian explained.

In the meantime, the monks' search for property brought them to Copper Hill, Virginia, to several acres along the scenic Blue Ridge Parkway. The land was originally planned for development, but it recently had been placed on the market after the landowner's death. The land was beautiful and offered a clean setting for the monastery Anthony had already begun to design.

Anthony suggested moving the building deeper into the property near a 900-foot drop, where the church could take full advantage of the breathtaking panoramic view. It would cost more to add a long, paved road to the new location on the land, but the monks agreed it would be worth it.

Early in the construction phase, the terrorist attacks on September 11 that devastated the nation also shook the finances of the monks. Again, they vowed to move forward with construction and cut back, even if it meant eliminating the bell tower.

As construction began, Father Sebastian and the monks moved into trailers on the new property to keep tabs on the construction progress, as they now were serving as the general contractor. Construction was slow at times as the men waited for subcontractors or shipments of materials. It was worth the wait, as many of the materials were donated or heavily discounted. Among the items donated or discounted was Spanish limestone that was used on the exterior of the church and bell tower. The church floor is covered in stone tiles, called Jerusalem Gold, from a Palestinian quarry near Bethlehem.

In the seven years since construction began, the community has now moved out of the trailers and into the



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monastery, and the monks are now able to work. They have the essentials, but are still finishing up the extras. Shelving is still needed in the library, and the tile on the church floors is almost completed. Soon, the monks will be able to hold mass in the church.

While the monastery may appear traditional in its design, it is equipped with modern technologies, such as heating, air conditioning, and heated floors. The building is highly insulated for energy efficiency and sustainability. Built a half-mile above sea level and receiving regular gale-force winds, the monastery's use of stone and concrete masonry make it better able to withstand nature's elements and last over time.

The monks already have had much interest from the public, which is not surprising, as the monastery stands out in the distance like a magnificent monument, able to be viewed from miles away. Though only 13,000 square feet in total, its sleek, traditional architecture make it appear massive.

"As you drive down the parkway, around the bend, it appears," Anthony says of the monastery. "It is... well, there is just no other way to say it...wow!"

Father Sebastian has another word for it. He calls it God's plan. Every long step of the way, the monks worked extremely hard and were humbled by the generosity of others. They were ready to make sacrifices along the way, but ultimately, nothing – not even the bell tower – had to be sacrificed. And that, he says, could only be God's work.

*HDB/Cram and Ferguson Architects, based in Boston, has been designing buildings for more than a century. Today, HDB/Cram & Ferguson exists as a professional firm engaged in the general practice of architecture, historic preservation, interior design, and construction, [www.hdb.com](http://www.hdb.com).*

**In a Nutshell**

**Church:** Syon Abbey

**Location:** Copper Hill, Virginia

**Project Goal:** Build a monastery where the monks could worship, live, and work to restore old religious texts and maps

**Size:** 13,000 square feet

**Cost:** \$3 million

**Challenge:** Designing and building a gothic-style monastery while staying on a tight and often challenged budget

**Solution:** The monks resumed the role of general contractor. They provided some of the labor. They also solicited in-kind donations or discounts for many of the building materials.