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NUESTRA SEÑORA la REINA de los ANGELES

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## NUESTRA SEÑORA LA REINA DE LOS ANGELES

Standing on the east side of the plaza in Los Angeles, the church, Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, (Our Lady the Queen of the Angels) is the city's oldest surviving landmark of Spanish pueblo days. Both chapel and plaza have been closely linked in the history of Los Angeles since its beginnings. From the city's founding, in 1781, the plaza has been the center of things; and always, the chapel has fronted on the public square. As the latter was the geographical nucleus of the pueblo, so the church was the spiritual and intellectual center for the pobladores. Throughout the Spanish and Mexican periods, and well into the American era, Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles was the only church in the town. The English speaking population, as well as the Spanish people, attended services there and took part in its religious ceremonies and fiestas until 1876. In that year, the parish having outgrown the accommodations of Nuestra Señora, a new church was completed and dedicated, which thereafter was attended by the English population. The plaza church became, as it is today, the worshiping place of the Spanish residents.

For the first few years after the founding of the pueblo in 1781, the people of Los Angeles attended church services at Misión San Gabriel. Nine or ten miles from the



village to the mission, over rough roads, dusty in summer and muddy in winter, the long, slow-going trip in creaking wooden wheeled carretas dampened the religious zeal of some of the pobladores. In 1784, a chapel was added to the other public buildings on the plaza at Los Angeles. A priest from San Gabriel went to the chapel to conduct weekly services. Like all the other structures in the town, the chapel was made of adobe. After a number of years, the building became tumble-down and unfit for use, so that the Reverend Friar Prefect Sarría, on a canonical visitation in 1813, forbade the mission fathers to hold services there until the place was repaired. <sup>1</sup> Again, the people of Los Angeles had to journey to San Gabriel to attend religious services.

About 1811, the citizens of the town applied to the church authorities for a permit to erect a new chapel. Although the request was granted, nothing was done about it for several years until Friar Luis Gil y Taboada was appointed to Misión San Gabriel. Under his leadership, actual work was begun by the townspeople and ground was broken for the foundations. Plans for the laying of the cornerstone were made for August 15, 1814, the date of the celebration of the

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1. Z. Engelhardt, San Gabriel mission and the beginnings of Los Angeles, 125.



titular feast. Friar Gil petitioned the representative of the Bishop of Sonora, Friar President Señan, for permission to lay and bless the cornerstone. Friar Señan assented and in his message of reply said:<sup>2</sup>

The license of the king, our lord, the patron of all the churches in the Indies, being presumed, in virtue of the faculties granted to me as vicar of the right Rev. Bishop of Sonora in the district of this province of Alta California, I concede to Rev. Friar Luis Gil the license he solicits to lay and bless the first stone of the church which they are about to erect in the pueblo of Our Lady of the Angels of Porciuncula. He will proceed in accordance with the Rites which for this solemn blessing the Roman Ritual prescribes. God our Lord keep your Reverence many years. Mission San Buenaventura August 13, 1814  
- Friar José Señan.

Following the laying of the cornerstone, work on the chapel proceeded very slowly. Although the townspeople assembled the necessary building materials, construction came to a standstill in July. According to Engelhardt, quoting from a letter of Friar Nuez of July 19, 1815, to Don José de la Guerra of Santa Barbara, this was because the master builder, José Antonio, went away and there was no other

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2. Z. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 95.



skilled person to oversee the work.<sup>3</sup>

Since last Sunday, the master builder José Antonio has left the mission. I proposed to Sergeant Guillermo (of Los Angeles) that they should procure two other experts for the work on the church. I see, if they do not begin the work, it will not be finished by the crack of Doom. It is a pity, indeed, for there is plenty of material. The master went to the pueblo, and demanded six reales (75 cents) for each day's labor, and a barrel of wine every three months together with board. It seems to me that this is not a high wage. I believe that the large majority of the population failed to recognize the duty of facilitating the work of construction. I do not think an Indian capable of being master builder of such a work as a church, although it seems very simple. Besides, this man is needed to prepare the lumber for the doors, windows, etc.  
- Fr. Joaquín Nuez.

Thus, apparently, there was some difficulty in obtaining an expert workman and in paying the wages he demanded, which caused work on the church to be delayed. Another factor, which probably more than any other deterred the church construction, was the havoc wrought by the heavy rains and floods in the winter of 1815. The lower side of the plaza and the site of the chapel were badly flooded when the river overflowed its banks. Then, the original location of the new church was abandoned and its construction temporarily ceased.

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3. Z. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 123-124.



In 1818, the present site was selected on higher ground, adjoining the old plaza and near the comisionado's house.<sup>4</sup> With the removal of the chapel, the plaza was relocated, and the present one laid out so that Nuestra Señora would still face upon the public square.

Throughout, progress in the building of the church was slowed up for one reason or another. After the new site was chosen in 1818, this was primarily because of a lack of funds. By that time, the townspeople had contributed 500 head of cattle for the project. However, Governor de Sola considered that the money procured by the sale of the animals would be insufficient to complete the edifice "and therefore proposed to take them and include the cost of the chapel in the next year's estimate."<sup>5</sup> These funds were never forthcoming from that source, for the government's treasury always faced a deficit.

In the meantime, the mission fathers of San Gabriel feared that no headway would ever be made in the work if the raising of funds were left to the town. They presented the matter to the higher church officials. Then, the president of the California missions, Friar Payeras, undertook the business of seeing the construction of the church through to a

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4. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, II, 351.

5. Ibid., 351.



finish. On one of his visitations to San Gabriel, he went to the pueblo of Los Angeles and consulted with the citizens. An agreement was reached whereby the Angelenos promised to help as much as they were able with labor and money, and Friar Payeras agreed to secure the remaining necessary means to complete the chapel. Assuming that responsibility, in 1819 Father Payeras appealed to the various California missions and received from them seven barrels of brandy, which, when sold at the presidios, yielded, with some other contributions, about 575 dollars to the building fund.<sup>6</sup>

With the money procured in that manner, a good start was made on the chapel with the aid of the Indian neophytes of Misión San Luis Rey. The friars of the mission agreed to set the wages of their laborers, regardless of classification or skill as master carpenter or mason, at one real, or twelve and one-half cents, a day with board. In partial payment, the mission also accepted cattle at a favorable figure.

In 1821, Friar Payeras issued a circular which he addressed to all of the California missions. In the first portion, speaking of the progress made in the construction of the church and the deposition of the money obtained from the contributions of the missions, he said:<sup>7</sup>

By this arrangement, my dear Fathers,

6. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 126-127.

7. Ibid., 127-128.



the walls rose to the top of the windows. The pueblos then cut and hauled timber and sent some cattle to Mission San Luis Rey. From the aforementioned deposit was paid to the same mission of San Luis Rey, \$100; to Mission San Gabriel, \$155.81; to the master architect, José Antonio Ramírez, \$50; for tools \$70; to assist the pueblo in purchasing a bell for their church, \$100; and for a ciborium, a chalice and other indispensable (sic) articles which the said pueblo still lacked \$110. At present there are in the treasury, remaining in the custody of Mission San Gabriel, \$50 from some matrimonial dispensations. The cost of construction will not be less than \$2,000.

With the donations of 1819, a great deal was accomplished in the church's construction. Nevertheless, much was to be done to complete the structure when the funds gave out again. In his circular of 1821, Father Payeras, after telling what had been done, made a second and even more earnest plea than the first for further contributions to finish the work which had been begun, saying in part:

At this stage then, had the Fathers arrived at my last official visit. They have left nothing to desire in the matter, nor the settlers with their two heads, the comisionado and the alcalde; and he who has the honor to inform your Reverences. Therefore,

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8. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 127-132.



my dear Fathers, as the feast of the Pueblo (August 2) has been ~~transfere~~ transferred to the day of the dedication and blessing of its church, a solemn and general invitation is extended to the Fathers, to the officials, and to all the inhabitants of the territory, in order that they may be worthy witnesses of an act as touching as it is devotional.

However, Rev. Fathers,... the work still to be performed is great and not less costly. The funds on hand to accomplish it amount to \$50. The means of the pueblo that profits by it, consist altogether of some cattle and of one or the other, very little aid, but which will not cover the third part of the cost. Behold then, from what has been explained, my affliction. Will your reverences, my dearly beloved in Christ, leave me therein? I have never thought so low of your Franciscan piety. Nothing is farther from my mind. I am asking not for myself but for God, who demands from us a sanctuary in the place designated, where he may dwell... and it must be a decent one, because it is to be occupied not by some material man like ourselves, but exclusively by the ineffable grandeur and majesty of God....

Therefore, he that is able must give alms. This poor one, the most needy in the world, appeals to the great piety of the neophytes, in order that through the efforts of your Reverences, the worthy administrators of their property, they may give gratuitously, not money indeed, but whatever they can spare, or whatever is not absolutely necessary for them and may be useful to pay the laborers as also articles



necessary for the construction of the building already described.

On my recent journey I appealed to the poor settlers and to the rancheros located outside that pueblo (Los Angeles). Now, I beg by means of this affectionate circular all our Missions, from San Francisco to San Diego, to contribute for the said purpose, let it be money, cattle, tallow, even cloth from the looms, pack mules, brandy (I will search for one who may sell it) or anything else of value, but the missions of San Fernando, San Gabriel, San Luis Rey, and San Diego, will please observe that I hope from the kindness of their Missionary Fathers what they will each allow me, from November on until the work is finished, two carpenters from each of the first four missions named, and six sawyers from the last named; and that, beginning with next spring, the two last-named missions will supply the rest of the laborers needed, all at one real a day for all laborers without distinction. It is to be understood that whatever alms the charity of the neophytes may offer (who I believe are not unwilling) through the hands of Your Reverences, should be received in the respective missions by those that may be commissioned for that purpose.

It would be mortifying to the great moderation and well known modesty of Your Reverences, if I were more effuse in emphasizing the merit of your alms or, let us say rather, the alms of your neophytes; how agreeable they will be to the governor of the territory; how edifying to all its inhabitants; and what a satisfaction and consolation for the one who is your most affectionate servant, companion, and



least brother, and who with the greatest sincerity kisses your hands.- Mission Purisima, November 5, 1821. Fr. Mariano Payeras.

As a result of that appeal, the California missions responded generously with contributions of cattle, brandy and wine, church goods for the interior of the place and the sacristy, or the labor of their Indian neophytes. Work was resumed. This time construction progressed rapidly. The church and the priest's dwellings were completed and ready for use in 1822. Dedication ceremonies took place on December 8th, with José de la Guerra acting as padrino, or royal patron, representing the governor.<sup>9</sup>

Much credit is due the friars and missions of California for making the chapel, Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, a reality. Without the leadership of the padres of Misión San Gabriel and Friar Payeras, the citizens of Los Angeles would probably have been many years later in obtaining a church of their own. Nevertheless, the people of the town and surrounding vicinity also took an active part in the building of their house of worship. They, too, contributed generously with what they could of cattle, money, and labor.

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9. Bancroft, California, II, 562.



Not all of the donations to the church fund were voluntary. Now and then money was received in the form of fines imposed for violations of the law. In the 1820's, smuggling along the California Malibu coast, north of Santa Monica, was a current practice and a criminal offense. Two prominent Spanish residents of Los Angeles, Don Máximo Alanis and Don Antonio Biones, were caught in the traffic. Besides a six months sentence in the plaza jail, the culprits also had to pay a heavy fine, which was given to the church building fund.<sup>10</sup>

An interesting individual who had a prominent part in the erection of the plaza church was Joseph Chapman. The first Englishman to settle in California, he was known among the Angelenos as José, el Inglés. Chapman had been shanghaied in Hawaii and first appeared in California with Bouchard's pirate band which perpetrated a series of raids in the California coast towns. Chapman was finally captured at Monterey. At first Chapman was held as prisoner at Misión San Gabriel, but while there he proved so useful to Friar Zalvidea that he was retained as a helper, and later became one of the respected citizens of Los Angeles.

El Inglés not only made the first water power grist

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10. J. G. Layne, Annals of Los Angeles, 14.



mill in California and a small schooner for the padres to use in otter hunting, but is credited with supervising the work of the Indians in cutting and preparing most of the timbers used in the building of the church of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles. During the construction of the chapel, the padres of San Gabriel were often in need of a master builder to direct the work of the Indians, and the lack of such a person was one of the reasons why the work halted for a time. Indeed, El Inglés must have been invaluable to the padres, so great was the need of his skill and assistance.<sup>11</sup>

After the dedication of Nuestra Señora in 1822, the people of the parish petitioned to have as their pastor Friar Luis Gil y Toboada, who had officiated when the cornerstone was laid in 1814 on the original site of the chapel on the old plaza. Friar Luis Gil, however, already engaged at Misión Santa Cruz, was unable to leave, due to the illness of his colleague there. For four years, the plaza church remained an asistencia, and did not become a full-fledged parish until 1826. It did not have a pastor of its own or a baptismal font. Baptisms took place at Misión San Gabriel and the padres conducted mass in the new chapel at Los Angeles

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11. C. D. Willard, History of Los Angeles, 158.



on Sundays and holy days. In 1826, however, Nuestra Señora was allowed its own baptismal, marriage and burial registers, and was considered a parish, independent of Misión San Gabriel. Still, it had no priest of its own, and the padres of San Gabriel, Friar Sánchez and Friar Boscana, continued to conduct the services.<sup>12</sup>

The first resident priest of the parish of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles was Reverend Bachelot, apostolic prefect of the Sandwich Islands, who resided at Los Angeles from April 15, 1832, until March 22, 1837. The Reverend Bachelot was not a Franciscan, but one of the Picpus fathers. He had been forced to leave Hawaii because of denominational quarrels with the reigning authority of the islands. Temporarily marooned in California, he was well received by the padres of San Gabriel, and during his sojourn was permitted to act as resident priest at Los Angeles, where he was much loved and respected by the parish of Nuestra Señora.

In August, 1852, Father Joaquín Junino and Friar Sánchez retired from Misión San Gabriel and the parish of Nuestra Señora. They withdrew to the Franciscan headquarters at Misión Santa Barbara. Their departure marked the wane of the mission period of San Gabriel. The fathers of the Congre-

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12. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 137-138.



gation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, in Europe, called the Picpus Fathers, succeeded the Franciscans at San Gabriel and Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles. The Reverend Lestrade and the Reverend Migorel were the first of that order in charge at the plaza church. They were at Los Angeles until 1856. For the first two years, 1852 and 1853, the fathers also conducted a boarding and day school in the town. In 1856, the parish was surrendered to the bishop of the territory, who appointed the Reverend Bernard Raho, C. M., as pastor.<sup>13</sup>

In 1853, Pope Pius IX divided the diocese which constituted the whole of California. The southern district, known as the Diocese of Monterey, included all of the territory south of San Jose. The Reverend Thaddeus Amat, D. D., named second Bishop of Monterey in 1855, at first resided at Santa Barbara, but in 1859 transferred the seat of the diocese to Los Angeles. He remained with the clergy of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles for more than twenty-five years, until his death in 1878. Bishop Amat was in poor health for several years, so that Reverend Francis Mora was appointed coadjutor, with the right of succession. He was consecrated on August 3, 1873, succeeding Bishop Amat at Nuestra Señora.<sup>14</sup>

13. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 311-313.

14. Ibid., 313-315.



Until the last of the 1870's, the plaza church was the only Catholic church, and for many years it was the only place of worship, in Los Angeles. Attended by the English as well as the Spanish people, it was one of the revered and admired institutions of the town. It was not merely a religious center on Sundays and holy days, but from its place on the plaza lent a constant benign and spiritual atmosphere to the town. One of the pioneer residents wrote: "For many years the bells of the honored old pile ringing daily at six in the morning and at eight in the evening served as a curfew to regulate the daily activities of the town."<sup>15</sup>

In connection with the church bells, a romantic tale is commonly told. According to one story, a bell was given in penance for a minor offense of a gringo, Henry Fitch. A dashing American sailor, he eloped with the daughter of Joaquín Carrillo of San Diego, Señorita Josefa. Although the girl's parents had given their consent, an uncle objected so strenuously that the couple eloped to South America. Another uncle, Pío Pico, and the local priest assisted them. A year later, Doña Josefa and her husband returned to California with their young son. Immediately, an ecclesiastical court was called at San Gabriel. Don Enrique was tried for

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15. H. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 100.



violation of church and territorial laws. The court demanded as a penalty that he give the church of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles "a bell of not less than fifty pounds weight, as the church had but a borrowed bell."<sup>16</sup>

Whether or not Henry Fitch supplied the bell is a matter of disagreement between narrators of the episode. In 1843, the bells in the tower of Nuestra Señora must still have been the borrowed ones, for on November 21st Friar Estenaga of San Gabriel wrote to Antonio Coronel of Los Angeles:<sup>17</sup>

In your church of Our Lady of the Angels are three bells from this Mission (San Gabriel), which have not as yet been paid. The first bell was supplied to the church by the late Friar Nuez, in the year 1821. For the other two, permission was obtained in 1827, in which year they were appraised according to weight and the sale of the first bell included. At that time, payment was not made on account of the political happenings. On the first bell was placed the figure of San Vicente Ferrer. It was set up in the temple of your city (Los Angeles), where it is to this date.

The late Rev. Friar Jose Sanchez was willing to accept all kinds of goods in payment for said bells; but for reasons stated before, they have remained unpaid. Under the circumstances in which I am placed as

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16. H. R. P. Forbes, California missions and landmarks, 112-113.

17. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 213.



guardian of the property of this Mission, in the name of this community I ask seventy head of fat cattle, which may be two years old, in payment for the three bells, in consideration of the good services they did during all this time, and for the image of San Vicente Ferrer.

In the 1850's, there were no pews in the church and according to the pioneer, Harris Newmark, the churchgoers "either knelt on the floor or stood while worshipping."<sup>18</sup> In 1854, evidently, pews were built in the chapel. However, the new addition did not meet with equal enthusiasm from all the parishioners to judge by a small news item in the Alta California<sup>19</sup> of March 25, 1854.

Some excitement has been caused by the speculative spirit of Father Anacleto, who has erected pews in the old church, and sold them out, thereby excluding the poor from the front part of the church. Several sharp communications on the subject have appeared in the Spanish portion of the Star, and the Padre has answered as sharply from the pulpit.

Much hilarity and fun accompanied the religious devotion displayed at the celebrations of the various holy days. The entire town, Spanish and gringo population alike, turned out to take part in the fiestas. The feast day of

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18. Newmark, Sixty years in Southern California, 100.  
19. Alta California, March 25, 1854.



Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, the Corpus Christi, and the Christmas ceremonies were among the most popular and prominent celebrations. The chapel, the plaza and the homes of the prominent families who lived on the plaza were always gayly decorated for these events, in which Nuestra Señora figured prominently. Recounting the celebration of the feast of Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles, the <sup>20</sup>  
Alta California of October 15, 1854, says:

The feast of Our Lady of the Angels was generally observed in that city by the Catholic population. The church was newly white washed and illuminated, and the services unusually impressive. The bull fights commenced on Sunday afternoon, and were continued for three days without serious accident. Two or three horses were gored to death, one man tossed up in the air fifteen or twenty feet, and on the whole the bulls got the best of it. The balls, public and private, were well attended, and gotten up with good taste.

In 1859, heavy rains damaged the church. The roof began to leak. The adobe front gave way and fell into the street. Restoration of the place was begun in 1861 and the church was rebuilt. Most of the original timber and materials were used in the remodeled structure. The front of the chapel, which had jugged out into the street, was recon-

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20. Alta California, October 15, 1854.



structed of bricks and set back in line with the sidewalk. The colorful old red tile roof was replaced with a shingle one. Trees, shrubs and flowers were planted, and the grounds enclosed.<sup>21</sup>

By 1870, the population of Los Angeles had increased so that Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles was not large enough to accommodate all of its parishioners. Plans for a new church were drawn up. In 1871, Bishop Amat laid the cornerstone for another church, which was dedicated on April 31, 1876, in honor of St. Vibiana. From that date, St. Vibiana's cathedral was attended by the English-speaking Catholics of Los Angeles, and Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles by the Spanish-speaking people.

In 1910, Nuestra Señora was placed in the charge of the Claretian fathers, under whose care it is at the present time. The church was not large enough to accommodate the congregation, even though more frequent masses were held. In 1912, the chapel was rebuilt and enlarged. A transept was built which gave more space and made the building cruciform in shape. The large memorial window was also installed.<sup>22</sup>

The church and its patios follow the Franciscan

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21. J. M. Guinn, "Historic houses of Los Angeles," in Historical Society of Southern California, Publications, III, 64-65.  
 22. Engelhardt, San Gabriel, 321.



mission style of architecture, revealing also Moorish influence. In the church museum remain many interesting old relics from the pueblo days such as statues, pictures, altar pieces - the first altar lamp and censer, and the first cross used on the altar, as well as the first book used in mass, and a church bench made by the Indians. Especially interesting are the paintings done by the Indians in 1814 with vegetable colors - crude but painstaking works, and good examples of the art taught the neophytes by the mission fathers. The frescoes on the interior and exterior of the church were done by Henri Penelon, a French artist, the first photographer of Los Angeles.<sup>23</sup>

After the erection of St. Vibiana's cathedral in 1876, Nuestra Señora la-Reina de los Angeles was no longer the only Catholic church in the town. However, it remained the oldest and best known and loved landmark of the city. Indeed, its distinction and prestige increased with the passage of the years, as much of the Spanish atmosphere of the old pueblo disappeared, engulfed by the modernity of the thriving American city. Today, Nuestra Señora is the church of the Spanish people, as it was in the early days before the gringo came. Much altered, the original timbers remain

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23. F. T. Cooper, Rider's California; a guidebook for travelers, 431-432.



in the remodeled structure. Henri Penelon's angels, although vague now under several coats of paint, still look down on the plaza from the front facade. Robed priests conduct the masses, and Spanish worshipers kneel in prayer before the images of the saints as in those first pueblo days. In the inner patio, a stately palm planted by the padres bends its leafy fronds, completing the Spanish atmosphere of the venerable old place. With the historic plaza as its background, Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles is one of California's most authentic and picturesque remnants of the early Spanish pueblo.



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