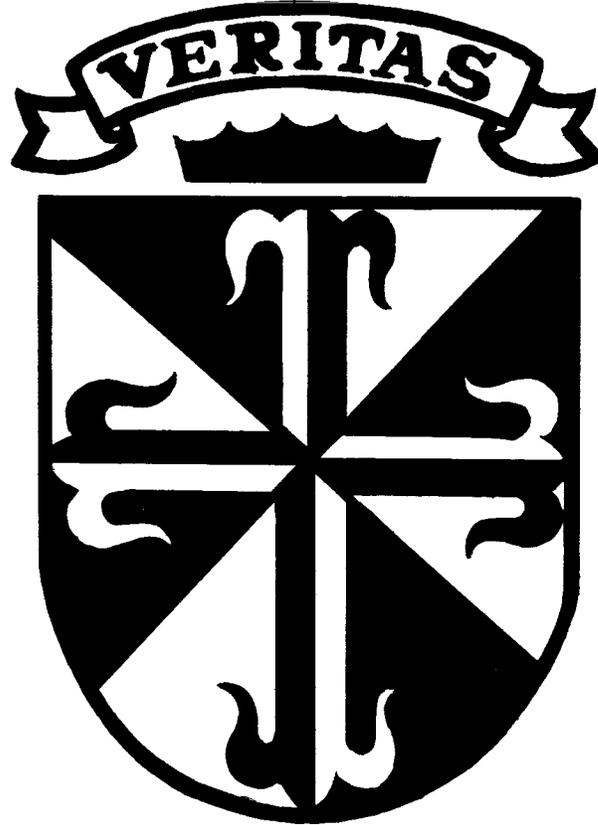
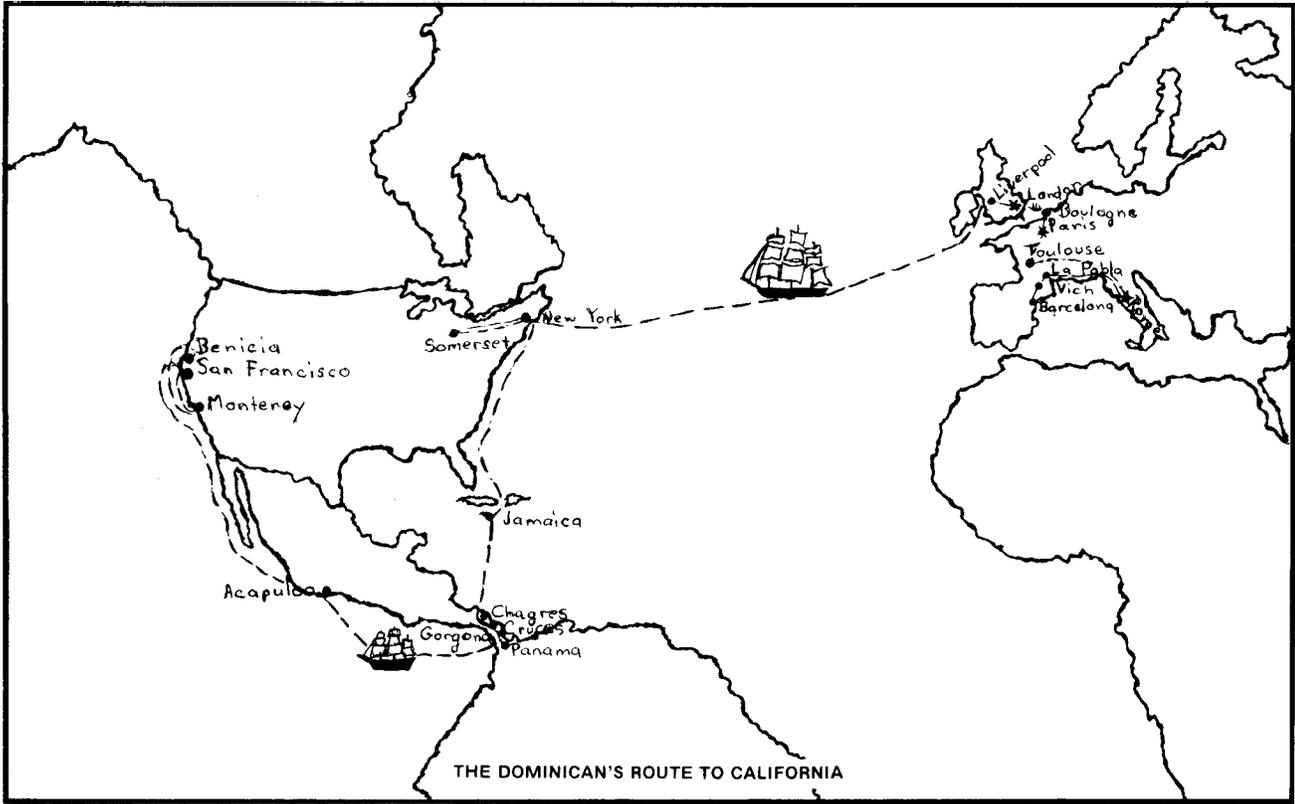


A Dominican Heritage

1850 - 1979





A Dominican Heritage 1850 - 1979



Compiled and Written

by

LeNoir Miller

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Twenty Fifth Anniversary of Saint Dominic's Parish Benicia, California March 17, 1979

WESTERN DOMINICAN PROVINCE

Oakland, California

Reverend Christopher Fritter, O. P. St. Dominic's Church
P.O. Box 756

Benicia, California 94510

Dear Father Fritter:

Your announcement that St. Dominic's Parish will celebrate its 125th anniversary on March 17th evokes many memories and many hopes among the members of the Western Dominican Province. As those familiar with the history of St. Dominic's will know, your history is our history. The Dominican Fathers and Brothers came to California in 1850. Our first foundation in Monterey survived only two years, at which time it was abandoned completely. The community moved to Benicia in 1854 and put down the roots which, throughout the intervening years, serve as the source of our heritage. As we have spread throughout the Western States to more than twenty locations, we continue to look back to Benicia for our origins.

Looking at Northern California today, with its large population centers and industry tied so closely together by modern means of transportation and communication, we find it very difficult to grasp how important the presence of a Dominican community in Benicia was for the Church in our area. Because of the distances, the very rudimentary facilities of the Church at that time, the small number of clergy, schools, parishes and other facilities, Benicia became one of the most important centers of the Church in the West and a source of great influence especially along the river.

The recent growth and new energy evident in today's Benicia gives promise of renewed life and fresh initiations in the life of St. Dominic's Parish. When we reflect upon the challenges being presented to us today, we find that the parish is being asked, in new forms and contemporary style, to awaken many of the activities of the past once again. Are we asked to be evangelizers? St. Dominic's was a center of evangelization in early California. Are we asked to be people of prayer? The choir-stalls in your parish church are a reminder of the long tradition of public prayer that flourished for decades. Are we asked to be preachers? Preachers were trained in Benicia at our House of Studies for service to the entire West. These challenges are old as well as new. Your parish is called to reach back into its history for the vision to meet the needs of today's people.

On behalf of all the Dominican Fathers and Brothers of our Province, I extend warmest congratulations to St. Dominic's Parish on the occasion of the 125th anniversary that we share together. We offer our cooperation, our support and our prayers for the chapters of your history that remain to be written.

Happy Birthday!

Sincerely yours in St. Dominic,

[signed] Thomas P. Raftery, O. P. Provincial

Answering God's Call To Serve

The languid days of the early Californian were swept aside in the wake of the '49er's wild scramble to reach the "promised land" of gold. In that teeming exodus to the Pacific shore were many Catholics for whom the Holy Father felt a great concern. There had been no Bishop in California since the death in 1846 of the Franciscan Bishop Francisco Garcia Diego y Moreno whose See was San Diego. Father Joseph Alemany, a Dominican, whose See was at Monterey was appointed in 1850 to succeed him. The new Bishop invited Father Francis Vilarrasa to accompany him to California where they established the first Dominican Monastery in the western United States.

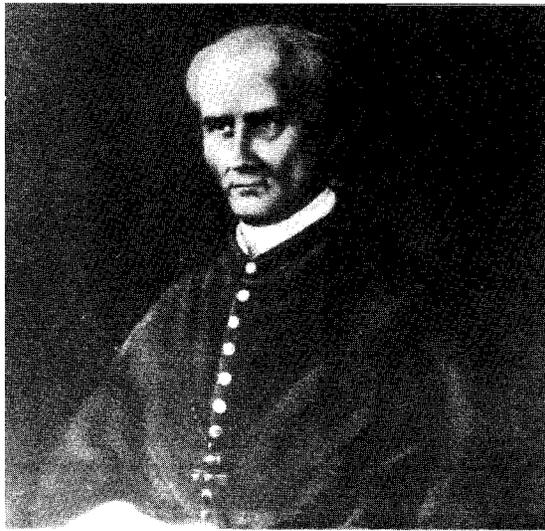
From that humble beginning in Monterey in 1850, parishes, churches and schools were founded. The work of those early Dominicans bore fruit and the results are quite visible but their early history is not so well known; however, they did play an important part in the first years of the new State.

A record of self-sacrificing zeal and labor on the part of the men who wore Saint Dominic's honored habit should be mentioned if only as a reminder of things done for religion by pioneers, men who sought not the wealth of gold in California but the glory of God in the salvation of souls.

To understand more fully the character of those men, one must go back centuries to the Old World when Dominican houses were established. Both great and lowly entered those portals away from the sins and temptations of the world. Inside, they studied, prayed and worshiped God with true humility.

Two 15 year old Spanish boys, Joseph Alemany and Francis Vilarrasa entered that environment when they said goodby to family and friends and dedicated their lives to the service of God as long as they should live. Joseph was born in Vich, Spain, July 13, 1814 and Francis was born a month later the same year in the province of Catalonia.

When the Religious Orders were exiled from Spain, the young men went to Italy to continue their studies. In due time they were concecrated priests and Father Alemany was sent to America to work in the pioneer mission fields. Father Alemany had superior intelligence; he was practical, industrious, and always considerate of his fellow man.



THE MOST REVEREND JOSEPH SADOC ALEMANY, O. P. Bishop of Monterey (1850-1853) First Archbishop of San Francisco (1853-1884)



THE VERY REVEREND FRANCIS SADOC VILARRASA, O.P. Commissary General of the Region of California (1851-1888)

In March of 1840, he arrived in New York and continued his journey by rail and stagecoach to Ohio. Father's destination was Saint Joseph's Convent near Somerset, a little village in a clearing surrounded by forests where rabbits, squirrels, red fox, and deer found a haven.

A few Catholic families mostly Irish and German who had settled in that primitive area were loyal and devoted to their priests and Sisters. Previously, in 1818, men of the settlement had built a small log church and a convent named in honor of Saint Joseph; later, Dominican Sisters founded Saint Mary's Convent in Somerset.

Five years after Father Alemany's arrival he was joined by Father Francis Vilarrasa who had sailed from Europe and arrived in New York, January 3, 1845. He traveled westward by train until the end of the line where he changed to a stagecoach which took him to his destination, Saint Joseph's. He arrived there in the afternoon on the 9th.

He found his new home very different from the convents and imposing cathedrals of the Old World. Life was austere in the little religious community and the two young priests suffered many hardships and privations. They rode horseback through rain, sleet and snow, and cold winter winds to reach the Catholics in that sparsely settled country.

The fact that Father Vilarrasa was a small man, was the cause of some embarrassment to him. He used to tell the following stories about himself: When he arrived on horseback to say Mass at one of the farmhouses, the good natured Irish mother of the house lifted him in her arms in spite of his protests and carried him into the house. She told him to sit by the fire and get warm until the priest arrived, thinking he was the small boy who had come to serve Mass. On a certain Sunday, when he was to preach, the pulpit was high, so he placed a bench in it on which to stand during the sermon. He announced the text: "A little while and you shall not see me and again a little while and you shall see me," at the conclusion of which the bench slipped from under him and he disappeared completely from the view of his congregation. Although he was small of stature what he lacked in size he more than made up for in kindness and a sunny disposition.

Among those early settlers was the Thomas Ewing family who lived twenty miles from Somerset. Mr. and Mrs. Ewing were the foster parents of winsome little Fannie O'Neil and Billy Sherman. Fannie

became Sister Mary Aloysia, O.P., the first American Sister to dedicate her life to serving in the California Mission field. Billy was later known as the famous Civil War General, William T. Sherman.

In 1850, Father Alemany and Father Vilarrasa were called to Italy to attend a General Chapter of their Order. The two priests sailed together and arrived without mishap. After several years spent in the remote American mission fields, Rome's beautiful gardens, palaces, and Saint Peter's grandeur were even more breath-taking than they remembered from their student days.

Before Father Alemany arrived in Europe he did not know he had been appointed to fill the See at Monterey to care for the Catholics and the affairs of the Church in California. Previous to the Gold Rush, California had been a Catholic domain. The greedy, plundering episodes that followed the tranquil days of the Padres' California Mission era were alarming to the Holy Father.

Father Alemany soon learned that he would be sent to California and on June 30, 1850, Joseph Sadoc Alemany was consecrated Bishop of Monterey. While still in Europe he decided to establish Religious houses and schools in his new diocese. Father Vilarrasa accepted his invitation to accompany him to the new mission field.

On his way to the new assignment the Bishop stopped in Paris at the venerable Monastery of the Cross amidst the plane and chestnut trees. He told the Nuns of his plans to establish convents and schools, and asked for volunteers to aid him. Only one, Souer Marie de la Croix Goemaere who was born in Warneton, Belgium on March 20, 1809, but who had not yet made her cloistered profession, accepted his invitation. Sister Mary was well educated and deeply religious. Although the Belgian Sister was past 40, she was as active and as vigorous as a much younger person. Before the month had past Sister Mary made her profession to Bishop Alemany as a Sister of the Third Order of Saint Dominic.

Father Vilarrasa, Sister Mary, and two Sisters from Toulouse who were going to Saint Mary's Convent in Ohio, sailed for London. In Liverpool, the old city on the Mersey estuary, they met Bishop Alemany who bought cabin passage for them on the beautiful ship COLUMBUS.

Water gently lapped the hulls of ships with masts tall and straight, and proud figureheads at the bow pointing the way. The ship's hawsers were cast off and smoke puffing little tugs guided the ship from the dock, the city fading from view as the 1037 ton ship with

Captain Robert McCerran in command, passed through Saint George's Channel. With her sails unfurled to the wind he pointed her bow toward the open sea.

The little band of Religious, five in number, armed with their breveries, rosaries, and the blessings of the Holy Father, set sail for the New World on September 11, 1850. Everyone on board was kind to them. Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa said Mass frequently and on Sundays the Bishop preached a sermon. The COLUMBUS sailed safely across the Atlantic, and docked in New York harbor on the 11th of October, exactly one month after leaving Liverpool.

After the little band disembarked, Bishop Alemany went to Baltimore while Father Vilarrasa, Sister Mary and the two young Sisters journeyed overland to Saint Mary's Convent in Somerset, Ohio, the destination of Sister Rose and Sister Catherine. The latter part of the trip was made by stagecoach which jerked and rattled over the rough roads. Through the covered bridge, and up the hill the horses ran, until they stopped at the gate of Saint Mary's on the afternoon of Thursday, October 17th.

The four travelers were given a cordial welcome by the Dominican Sisters. Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary told them of their plans for schools in the Bishop's new diocese and of the need of volunteers to assist them. Two Sisters of Saint Mary's community promised to join Sister Mary in the following year.

Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary said their good byes and returned to New York where Bishop Alemany joined them on October 28th to continue their journey to California. Hundreds of impatient passengers were waiting at the dock to embark. As news of the California Gold discovery was still ringing in the ears of the world, relatives, friends, and spectators lined the piers to bid farewell to the gold seekers.

Mining equipment was scattered about the ship's deck where husky seamen were shouting orders to make ready for sailing. Paddle-wheels turned, the steamer CRESENT CITY glided from the dock, bound for Chagres.

Among the passengers were many Catholics. Everyone was especially kind to the Dominicans on the crowded boat. The steamer passed through rough seas until it sailed down the Florida coast into quiet waters where winter temperatures gave way to summer heat. "From the time we left New York", said Father Vilarrasa "the heat increased each day, so that it was almost suffocating ... I never have felt so much heat as then. Since on the first of November we had to

dress in summer clothes." The stokers were often overcome by the sweltering heat as they pitched shovel after shovel of coal into the blazing furnace.

On the third of November, the CRESENT CITY passed between the islands of Cuba and San Domingo, both clearly visible. The following day the ship stopped at Jamaica to pick up passengers and on the sixth, during the night, it dropped anchor off shore from Chagres. An old castle with its fortress stood on the bluff.

On the morning of the seventh, the Dominicans disembarked and entered one of the dugout canoes which the boatmen had rowed out for the passengers. The canoes were made from hollowed out logs and could carry several persons and their baggage. The boatmen were hired to make the trip up the Chagres River, through the jungle to Gorgona and Cruces where the pack roads began. The three boatmen hired by Bishop Alemany went directly to the river instead of going into the village which was almost hidden by the dense foliage. Even in the morning hours the heat was intense.

The Chagres River with the bright green foliage growing down to the edge of the bank was a refreshing sight even with alligators slithering among the water lilies; bolder alligators climbed upon the banks to sun themselves. Palm trees waved their long fronds in the breeze as screeching parrots with brightly colored feathers kept up their incessant noise. Chattering monkeys leaped from branches with butterflies and birds of brilliant hues everywhere.

The river was filled with canoes loaded with California bound travelers. The first stop-over after leaving Chagres was Gatun on the right bank of the river where travelers found lodgings. "At night we slept in an Indian's hut, made of clay and trunks of trees. It was very comfortable in spite of the great heat as the air penetrated through all parts of the hut," said Father Vilarrasa.

Word spread quickly that a Sister and two priests were in the village and in the morning with several Indians assembled, the Bishop gave them a talk in Spanish. After a hasty breakfast, the travelers continued up the river which became narrower and more winding. "The trip on the river was very delightful," said Father Vilarrasa, "it was the month of November, nevertheless both banks were green with trees and grass, so that it resembled spring. There are parrots that fly everywhere and monkeys of all kinds. There is one kind larger than a man and can throw enormous stones; we heard its cries."

On Friday afternoon, November 8th, the three Dominicans arrived

in Gorgona. They made their way up the steep embankment from the boat landing to the town. "We remained in the Inn for the night, here I met a young Catalan . . . he treated us very well and did not want to accept any payment for our meals and lodging." said Father Vilarrasa. At Gorgona, were several houses open all around with high pitched palm-leaf roofs to shed the torrential rains. Hundreds of over night travelers crowded the few stores, saloons and gambling houses.

Saturday night, the three Religious stopped at a little Indian village where they stayed allnight in an Indian's small hut. Sunday morning Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa offered the sacrifice of the Holy Mass which was well attended by several travelers and Indians.

After the customary breakfast of dark bread, black coffee, and beans, the journey was continued up the river to Cruces where they arrived before dinner. They stayed overnight in Cruces where next morning Bishop Alemany secured the only two mules available because of the urgent demand for them by the gold seekers. On November 10th, at ten o'clock in the morning, they mounted their mules and started for Panama over the ancient Spanish trail which was a dangerous one, only a foot wide in some places, and often filled with soft mud. The heavily laden mules were often reluctant to continue their journey. The one that carried Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa balked in his tracks and no amount of coaxing could budge the beast but when everyone's patience had been exhausted, Sister Mary gave him a sound whack with a stick which brought him out of his stubborn stance. At nightfall they stopped along the trail and found lodging in one of the bamboo huts, their sleep disturbed by eerie cries of the jungle beasts.

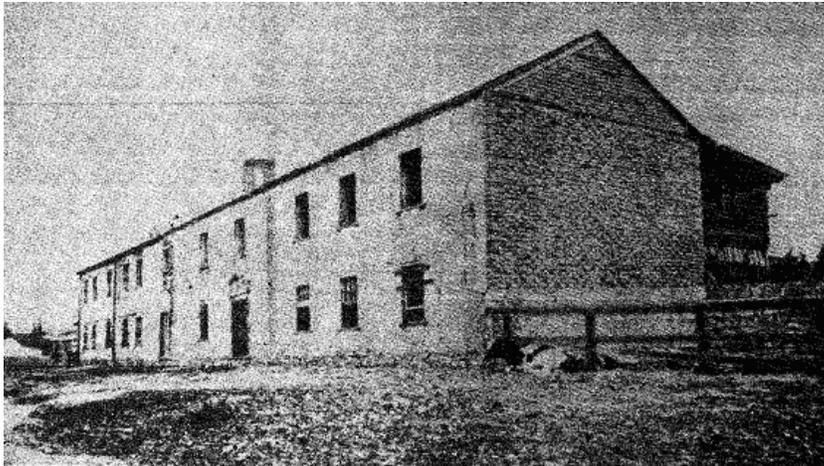
On the morning of November 12th, they saw Panama and the towers of the great Cathedral as they descended the trail. "In Panama we went to the Seminary," said Father Vilarrasa, "there they wished us to celebrate a High Mass in the Chapel of Our Lady of the Rosary which is the only one left of our Convents ... the walls and arches of the old Church are still preserved. I sang Holy Mass with the assistance of the Deacon and subdeacon, and the Bishop preached."

The Panamanian Nuns were surprised to learn that Sister Mary had crossed the Isthmus and was on her way to California to open a school. She could speak only French and Flemish while the Spanish language was used exclusively in Monterey. She was admired by the entire community for her courage and faith in God.

The three travelers remained two days in Panama which was once a



An Artist's Conception SANTO DOMINGO MONASTERY MONTEREY



SANTA CATALINA CONVENT AND SCHOOL., MONTEREY

rich city with many monasteries, convents and churches but the dingy old town appeared as though "no improvements whatever have been made, nor have any buildings been erected since the Spaniards abandoned New Grenada," said Father Vilarrasa, ". . . It is a most unhappy region; and if it were not for the climate which keeps the fields green and cheerful, it would seem that one would die of melancholy. The heat is excessive. The Cathedral is a beautiful and magnificent building, but it appears not to have been touched since it was built."

On November 16th, Bishop Alemany, Father Vilarrasa, and Sister Mary embarked on the small steamer COLUMBUS bound for California. The clanking chain and windlass raised the anchor and the ship's gun boomed her parting salute. "The boat was not very large, (less than 150 feet long) the rooms were small and the fire increased the heat. We were obliged to sleep in the middle of a room the greater part of the trip." said Father Vilarrasa. The stokers worked in temperatures of more than 100°.

On November 24th, the steamer dropped anchor in Acapulco Bay and Mexican boatmen rowed out to take passengers ashore. "The city is very clean, and the church, although not very large nor very rich, is well preserved. We ate in the rectory, the priests treated us like princes." said Father Vilarrasa, "We spoke with an old Spanish Andalusian who gave us a great deal of information about California. The people of this city seemed to me much better than those of Panama, and in church they appeared very pious."

The parish priest accompanied the Bishop and Father Vilarrasa to the steamer which sailed at five o'clock that evening; each new day on board brought more trying conditions to the weary passengers but it also brought them nearer their goal. Although the storms on the Pacific Ocean are said to be milder than those of the Atlantic, they too can put fear into a strong heart and many of the passengers suffered sea-sickness. Farther up the coast the cooler weather brought some comfort to the hot and exhausted travelers crammed in the little ship.

Twelve days out from Acapulco, on December 6, 1850, at 11 o'clock that night, the captain brought the COLUMBUS through what is now known as the Golden Gate. Passengers on the steamer disembarked on the morning of the 7th.

Since no news of Bishop Alemany's consecration or his arrival had reached California no one was at the dock to meet him and his co-workers. They went to the rectory at the church of Saint Francis

where Father Anthony Langlois gave them a hearty welcome and a few days later the Catholics of San Francisco gathered in the church to welcome the Dominicans.

Men of all nationalities were in the city as thousands had come by ship on their way to the gold fields. The streets were filled with mud and rubbish; "Rats of all descriptions were everywhere; in the bay, on the streets, and in the lodging houses."

On December 14th, the Bishop left for Santa Barbara where he arrived on Christmas Day at the Mission about a mile from town; Father Gonzalez Rubio, Franciscan Administrator of California, and Fathers Jose Jimeno and Francisco Sanchez welcomed him. Father Rubio accepted his credentials as genuine and proclaimed him to be the new Bishop of Monterey.

Bishop Joseph Alemany said Mass and preached to a large crowd in the elaborately decorated chapel, the finest of the California Missions. Music was furnished by an organ, several instruments and a choir.

Concepcion Arguello was at the Mass and when she learned that a convent would be opened in Monterey, she asked permission to enter. Although she was almost 60 years of age the Bishop granted her request. Concepcion, in her youth, was the 15 year old Senorita who fell in love with the Russian, Nikolai Rezanov. They were betrothed in 1806, and he, with a promise to return, sailed to Russia to get his Czar's permission for the wedding. The days passed into years as Concepcion continued to wait but it was not until 1841, that she learned he had died in the year 1807, without reaching the Czar. Sir George Simpson gave her the tragic news while he was visiting in the home of Mrs. Ramona Wilson, a sister of Senora Benicia Vallejo after whom the City of Benicia was named.

On his return to San Francisco, Bishop Alemany stopped at Monterey to attend to business concerning his vast diocese. In San Francisco, he was joined by Father Vilarrasa and Sister Mary who had awaited his return before leaving by steamer for Monterey.



Religious Pilgrims In The New World

On March 6, 1851, at 7 o'clock in the morning, the sound of the old Presidio cannon heralded the approaching ship. After a twelve hour voyage from San Francisco, the steamer anchored in Monterey Bay where many of the remaining inhabitants who had not been lured away by the cry of GOLD, hurried to the beach near the Old Custom House. Shouts of gladness rang out as the ship's tender drew near and the Californians, recognizing their new Bishop, saw that he was accompanied by a priest and a Sister. Most of the inhabitants of the coastal settlement were Catholics.

Monterey, the former Capital of California, was a quiet little Spanish town in a hollow clearing with crooked streets and white-washed adobe houses. Red and purple flowered vines cascaded over the old adobe garden walls; lumbering oxen pulled creaking carts with wheels made of solid wood as chickens and dogs scurried out of the way.

The Dominicans walked up the sloping hill to their new home loaned to them by William E. P. Hartnell, who had served as an interpreter during the California Constitutional Convention in Monterey in 1849. The house was located on the present site of the Monterey Hospital.

"Monterey is one of the most delightful places that I have ever seen ... The country is very beautiful . . . It would be like an earthly paradise were it not for the frequent fogs." said Father Vilarrasa.

On March 13, 1851, the Hartnell house became the first convent in California for women with Sister Mary appointed Prioress of the new Santa Catalina Convent and henceforth known as Mother Mary Goemaere. That same month she opened her school with twelve boarders and sixty day scholars, taught by herself, Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa.

Concepcion Arguello arrived from Santa Barbara and entered the convent as Mother Mary's first novice. On April 11th, she received the Dominican habit from Father Vilarrasa and was given the name of Sister Mary Dominica. Her companion novice was Sister Rose. The next two sisters to arrive were Sister Frances Stafford and Sister Aloysia from Ohio, having previously promised Mother Mary they would join her.

Father Vilarrasa, on February 4, 1852, established Santo Domingo

Monastery with a novitiate. Six young Catalans from Spain came to join him; Vincent Vinyes, Dominic Costa, Raymond Cervera, Louis Berenguer, Hyacinth Sola, and Thomas Fossas.

In less than two years, after the arrival of the three pioneer Dominicans, Bishop Alemany, Father Vilarrasa and Mother Mary, they had established a convent for Sisters, and one for Fathers and Brothers, making a total at that time in Monterey, of thirteen Religious in the Order.

Mother Mary's first house soon became too small for her growing school, so the Sisters moved their convent and school into a much larger new unfinished two story adobe building at Main and Franklin Streets which Don Manuel Jimeno had built for a hotel next to his house.

"The Dominican Nuns bought the best house in the city. The building was worth eighteen thousand dollars, but the owner, realizing the praiseworthy object for which it would be used, gave it for five thousand dollars payable in five years." said Father Vilarrasa. Following are a few lines from that quaint deed:

... the parcel of land lying and situated in said city of Monterey, commencing at the South East corner of the large, new, two story adobe house adjoining the dwelling of the parties of the first part in Main Street . . . the distance of one hundred and forty-six feet . . . running all along the outside of the adjoining stone wall ... to a spot within four feet of the present small back door which leads into the yard of the Vendor's dwelling house . . .

One hundred and fifty pupils were taught in the new school. Board and tuition in the regular branches was four hundred dollars a year and two dollars a month was charged for day scholars. The faculty consisted of the Bishop, Father Vilarrasa, Brother Vincent Vinyes, Mother Mary, and the Sisters who had entered the Santa Catalina community. Classes taught in the common school branches included French, Latin, music, religion, mathematics, and needlework. The Spanish language was used until all the sisters learned to speak English.

In the early 1850's the land had not been cultivated and all commodities were extremely high priced; flour sold for eighty dollars a barrel. Most every thing the Dominicans needed had to be imported.

The Fathers and Brothers had to depend almost entirely upon the kindness of the Catholics in Monterey who gave willingly when they

could afford it. Mother Mary helped when she could. As the members of the little Monastery suffered from lack of sufficient food, there was much sickness.

Every two weeks Father Vilarrasa, walked the four miles to the old Mission church in Carmel where he said Mass before a well attended congregation. On his way he often saw bear tracks on the road that had been cut deep by the heavy old wooden cart wheels.

Bishop Alemany and Father Vilarrasa were familiar figures in the little city and were always greeted with the greatest of respect. "We go through the town wearing our habits, without astonishing anyone. The bells are rung at 3 a.m. and no one complains. We celebrate Mass according to the rite of our Order, and in fine do all that a missionary can and ought to do. In our convent, by way of observance, we do not know the taste of meat, though we have good fish and eggs. Every day at 3 a.m. we have Matins; at six meditation, Prime and the Conventual Mass. At 11:30 a.m., we say the rosary, then Terce and Sext; if it is a feast day, None is added. At 2 p.m., we have Vespers; at 6:15 Compline, Salve, meditation, and spiritual reading. This is the life we lead from January first to the feast of Saint Sylvester. The intervening hours are devoted to the schools, studies, and so forth." said Father Vilarrasa.

After the gold discovery, Monterey's population of men was greatly decreased when many left for the gold fields. It was apparent to Father Vilarrasa that few if any young men would be entering the Order if he stayed in Monterey permanently so he too decided to move to Benicia since it was expected to become the metropolis of the Bay Area.

In 1853, the diocese of Monterey was divided and Bishop Alemany transferred to San Francisco as Archbishop, and he gave Father Vilarrasa permission to move Santo Domingo to the new city on Carquinez Strait.

Father uprooted his little community and set sail for Benicia. He was accompanied by Father Anthony Langlois, Brother Thomas O'Neill and the four brothers who had been professed the preceding year. Father Langlois had been the first novice to join the Dominicans in Monterey and Brother Thomas the first English speaking young man to enter the Order in Monterey. With unselfish devotion the priests offered their time and talents to help the Sisters in the Monterey convent. They were sorely missed.

The Sisters labored long and weary hours sometimes enjoying

activities with the children when time permitted; they and the boarding pupils had picnics in the nearby woods. The children loved to climb into the old wooden carts drawn by plodding oxen along the dusty roads.

After Bishop Alemany became Archbishop at San Francisco he invited Mother Mary to move her community and school to Benicia. When she accepted, Father Vilarrasa petitioned for the canonical transference which was signed by him and by Brother Vincent Vinyes in Benicia at Saint Dominic's on August 20, 1854. Mother Mary knew her school had already grown far beyond her expectations but she could not for see what lay ahead; however, she was ready to follow a new path if she felt it was God's will. Busy days were spent packing and making arrangements for the journey. For five hundred dollars she chartered the schooner EDA from Captain Edward S. Josselyn who agreed to sail with the first fair winds to the port of Benicia. The agreement was signed by the Captain in Monterey on August 2, 1854. On the day of departure, the Sisters were given a sad and tearful farewell by the Catholics and many non Catholic friends they had made during their short stay in Monterey.

Along with the Sisters, some of the resident pupils boarded the ship. With wind filled sails, the schooner weighed anchor and glided from the bay into the ocean. Mother Mary saw no more of her school which had been the pride of the little city.

When the ship passed Fort Point in San Francisco Bay, perhaps a certain Sister recalled the day almost fifty years before when she stood on the point and waved farewell to Nikolai Rezanov, her betrothed who sailed away, never to return.

It was the month of August when the little group arrived in Benicia, a small city at the foot of treeless, rolling hills covered with golden brown wild grass shimmering in the tireless breeze.



Benicia Cradle of the Dominican Order in California

Benicia was only seven years old when Father Francis Vilarrasa brought his Santo Domingo community from Monterey on March 16, 1854. In the preceding year, the little city on Carquinez Strait had been selected as the State Capital. Benicia was the Port of Entry and it was here that the Pacific Mail Steamship Company had built immense docks, shops and foundries.

The harbor could accommodate the largest vessels afloat. Clipper ships from 'round the Horn were in port, their seams bulging with cargoes of staples and fancy dry goods, stationery, books, crockery, hardware, furniture, Havana cigars, German clay pipes, casks of whisky and various other items. The local merchants carried large stocks on hand for the pioneer buyers who came from throughout Napa, Solano, and Contra Costa Counties.

Benicia was easily reached by boat from San Francisco, Sacramento and Stockton and overland by stage, and in 1853, was considered a city of great possibilities because of its ideal location. Several brick and frame buildings were scattered in the vicinity of First Street. Benicia was predominantly an English speaking community instead of a Spanish one like the other California coastal cities.

The Dominican priest and his young seminarians on that certain day one hundred and twenty five years ago, were the first Religious community to settle in Benicia. The church property which had been assigned to them by Archbishop Joseph Alemany, consisted of an entire city block at East I and J between Fourth and Fifth Streets.

Previous to their arrival, a small frame church not completely finished had been built by Father Hugh Gallagher on the corner of East 4th and I Streets. In this small church on Saint Patrick's Day, 1854, Father Vilarrasa sang a solemn High Mass which was well attended. In those early times, to light their way to and from church, the people carried lanterns at night.

Father Vilarrasa, Superior of his Congregation, enjoyed writing letters describing events about the early days of the Order in California; thus, much of the history has been preserved that would otherwise have been lost. The cordial feeling between the Dominicans and the Franciscans was expressed in the following

letter to the Very Reverend Father Jose Jimeno in Santa Barbara:

Very Reverend Father:

I was looking for a suitable opportunity to write you with security against having the letter go astray, which offers itself to me through Don Pablo de la Guerra. It is superfluous to express the satisfaction we have at seeing the Apostolic College established and the novitiate formally opened ... The only regret we feel is that the said Apostolic College is located at so great a distance from Benicia; for we had wished that it might be nearer in order that we might more frequently find an occasion to manifest our mutual affection and fraternal concord. However, as that is not possible we shall seize the opportunities that offer themselves for the purpose of preserving, and if possible, of strengthening our union.

The account which Your Reverence sent us was read in the refectory, and on the Sunday immediately following its reception a Te Deum was sung after Vespers, in order to give thanks to God for the beginning of a work so conformable to our desires.

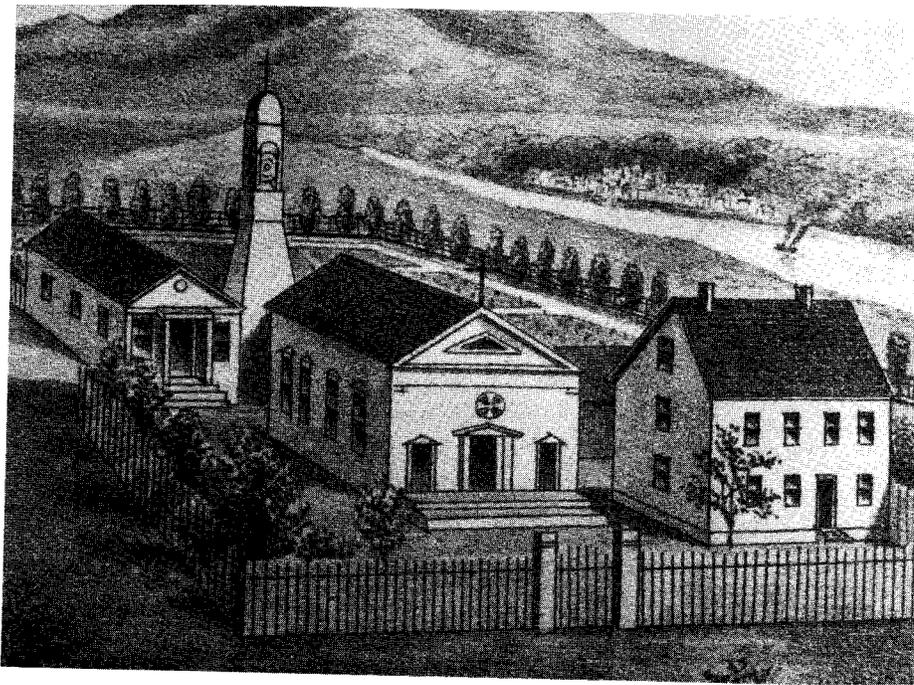
The feast of Saint Francis, October fourth, was celebrated with the same solemnity as that of our Father S. Dominic. After the solemn high Mass, at which our Sisters were also present with all their pupils, Father Augustine Langlois made his solemn profession October 25, 1854

Q. S. M. B. [signed] Fr. Sadoc Vilarrasa, O.P.

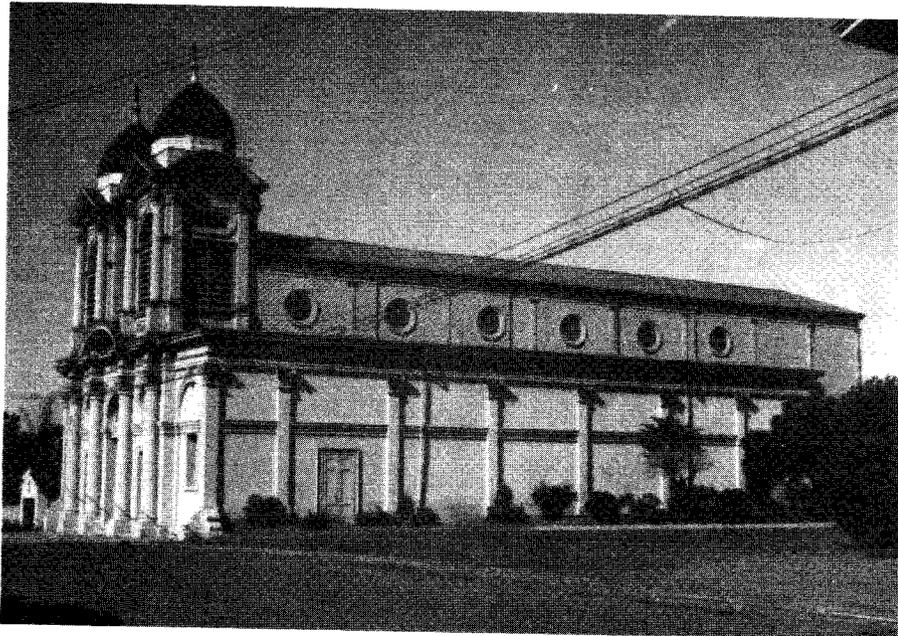
The early years in Benicia were difficult because of the heavy debt that was on the church property when Father Vilarrasa arrived and the Fathers had no income and had to rely almost entirely upon the generosity of the local Catholics.

The austere conditions in the new community did not prevent volunteers from offering their services. In 1856, four priests arrived: Fathers Caldwell, Daniel, Derham, and Dugan. In Saint Dominic's Church on December 19, 1857, Brothers Vincent Vinyes and Dominic Costa were the first priests of the Order ordained in California. In that same year Father James Aerden, a native of Belgium, arrived. He spoke five languages and had the reputation of being a mechanical genius. One of his projects was the construction of a private telegraph and telephone system which he personally operated at a later date between the church and the railway station. He was also an accomplished musician and often composed music for the church.

The Pacific Mail Steamship Company gave the Fathers a bell that hung in a tower separate from the church. Its fine tone could be heard at a great distance, especially in the early morning hours when



SAINT DOMINIC'S CHURCH AND MONASTERY, BENICIA 1877



SAINT DOMINIC'S CHURCH BEFORE THE NEW RECTORY

its melodious sound was the signal for the Dominican household to arise. John Heenan, the famous boxer, called the "Benicia Boy", hung the bell; before his fighting career he was a blacksmith at the Steamship Company.

The Fathers and the Brothers were on friendly terms with the military men at Benicia Barracks and the Arsenal. The army cooks taught the Dominicans how to bake bread.

A huge black iron safe that was still in the Monastery building before it was demolished was the one in which Father Vilarassa kept the money entrusted to his care by the parishoners in those early days.

In the yard at Saint Dominic's there is an orange tree, which according to early Benicia priests, grew from the seedling of a tree planted by Saint Dominic at Santa Sabina, Rome more than seven hundred years ago. There is a tradition that wherever the tree grows the Dominican Order will flourish.

With some financial help from the Archbishop a small house was built and through the kindness of the parishoners the church was finished. Since the Spanish language was not used in Benicia as it was in Monterey, Santo Domingo became Saint Dominic. On June 18, 1854, Archbishop Alemany blessed the church and christened it after the founder of the Dominican Order.

Father Vilarrasa and the Brothers had been in Benicia only five months when Mother Mary and her community of Santa Catalina arrived from Monterey. The beautiful schooner EDA under command of Captain Edward S. Josellyn put into port on August 20, 1854. The Mother Superior, with her Sisters and a few resident pupils hurried down the gangplank and up the dusty street.

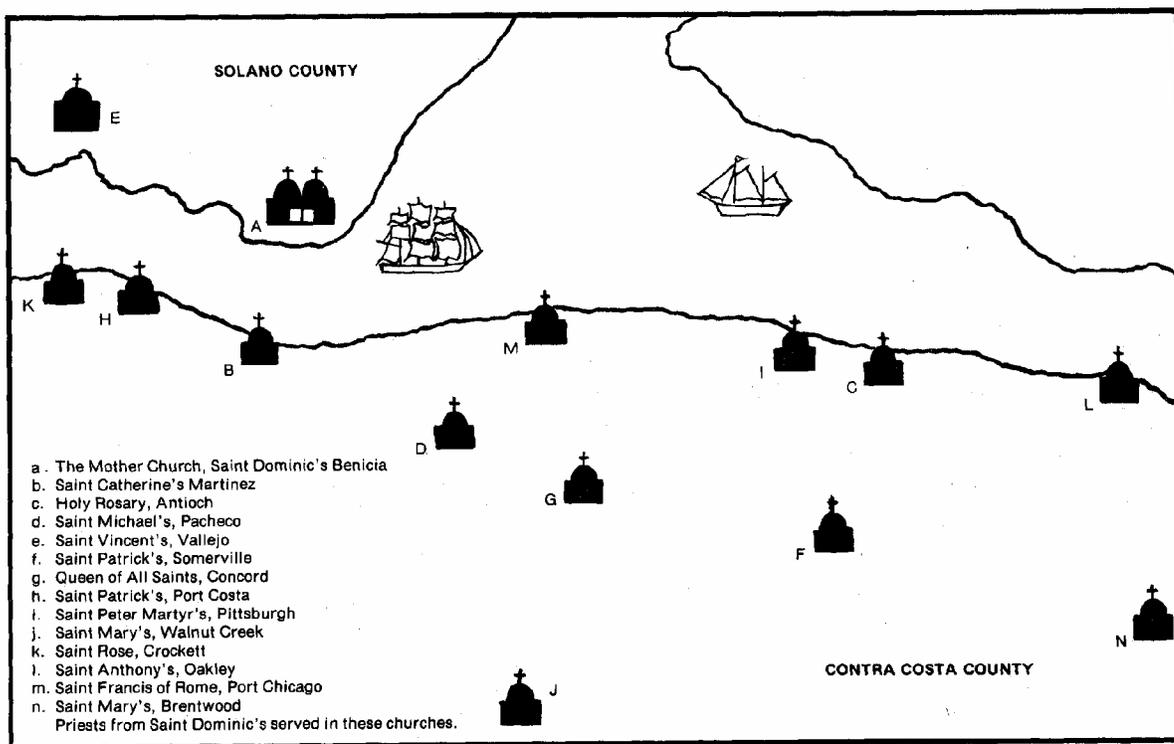
The loungers and the curious stared at the little party for it was the first time a Catholic Sister had been seen in Benicia. Mother Mary bought several frame buildings in a hollow at the upper end of First Street and within a few days the Sisters and pupils were comfortably settled, everyone busy preparing for the opening of the new school.

The new academy for young ladies was a success from the beginning. The strict rules of the school in 1854, did not keep the parents from enrolling their daughters. The rules were handwritten in a style used centuries ago.

GENERAL RULES

Rising

The pupils will rise at 5 o'clock in Summer and 6 o'clock in Winter.



Silence

Silence is to be observed from night prayers until breakfast. It is always silence in the study hall, class rooms, in going to and from class in the dormitory and refectory.

The pupils must not go into other parts of the premises, but keep strictly within the limits of the school yard.

The pupils in their behavior towards each other must be polite and gentle. Quarrelling and dissensions must be avoided. The discussion of politics and religion is forbidden. Rude behavior and the use of cant phrases will not be tolerated.

Mischief making, stubbornness, impertinence and disrespect to teachers will be severely punished.

Pupils offending against any of the above rules will be punished according to the discretion of superiors, extending to expulsion from the Institution.

In the rainy season, the water cut deep crevices in the banks near the convent and a long creek nearby overflowed. One time the water not only caused much damage in the building but had it not been for the quick thinking and heroic action of one of the Sisters, a pupil would have drowned.

Mother Mary decided it was time to find a better location as a larger school building was needed with the enrollment increasing each year.

Judge S.C. Hastings, a prominent Benicia citizen, gave the Sisters a portion of the area now known as Solano Square. On September 4, 1859, Archbishop Alemany assisted by the Fathers and Brothers from Saint Dominic's laid the cornerstone of a beautiful three story brick building which faced L Street between First and West Second Streets. Trees and gardens were planted and other improvements were made.

Large crowds came to Benicia on the paddle-wheel steamer, Chrysopolis, to attend Professions, and graduation exercises at the academy, also Ordinations and Clothing ceremonies at Saint Dominic's Church.

The following lines are from an old stained and tattered page:

In the presence of a vast congregation which thronged the beautiful Dominican Church of this city, with all the splendor and impressive ceremonies of the Dominican rite, five young men were clothed in the white habit of Saint Dominic and dedicated to the service of God. The reception of a novice is always an extraordinary event, for it is the supreme moment when the young postulant crosses the threshold which stands between the religious life and the outer world ... It was a day which will be a memorable one in history of the Dominican Order in California.

More Dominican students arrived and a larger house was built, also a new Priory facing I Street. Fathers Lawlor, Riley and Wilson were ordained.

Father Vincent Vinyes who had joined the Order in Monterey and was one of the group who came from Spain celebrated his first Mass on Christmas Day in Benicia. His boyhood had been a sad one. His father, an officer in the army of Don Carlos, had been killed in battle. When Vincent was only four years old, he and his mother were forced to walk over rough roads for many miles at the point of a bayonet. He grew to young manhood with a brilliant mind and a fine physique.

Bishop Joseph Alemany returned to Spain when he retired and died there in 1888; in 1965, his remains were returned to San Francisco and buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. Father Francis Vilarrasa died in Benicia, March 17, 1888. Father Vinyes succeeded him as pastor of Saint Dominic's Church.

The present church was built from plans drawn by Father Raymond John, O.P. Sandstone for the foundation came from the local quarry of Patrick Mullaney; the walls were constructed of brick faced with concrete, while the upper portions were of wood. Inside, each pew had its own little wooden gate. The handsome church was dedicated in 1890. One year later, Mother Mary Goemaere the last of the three pioneer Dominicans died on October 3rd in Benicia.

Members of the Order came from Europe and throughout the United States to study under the wise and capable teachers. Among those early arrivals were Father Martin and Brother Raymond, from Dominican College, Tallaght, Ireland, Brothers Hyacinth, James, and Wilfred, from Dominican University, Freiburg, Switzerland, and Brother Robert from the Collegio Angelico, Rome. It has been said many of the Fathers were exceptionally brilliant. Their library contained more than 3000 volumes, some from the 15th century. One particular book with a wooden binding contained over three hundred pages and each capital letter was hand-colored.

It was not all serious study for the young seminarians. One of the recreations they enjoyed was baseball; several of the young men were considered fine players and a big event was the annual game between Saint Mary's College of Oakland and Saint Dominic's Monastery.

With the future of Benicia not progressing as had been anticipated the House of Studies was moved to Oakland in 1932 and the Novitiate to Ross in 1934. Some of the buildings were demolished and property on the West side of the church sold for home sites. The old Priory building was removed and became a store on East M Street.

During World War II, a thirty five bed ward, Benicia Emergency Hospital was established in one of the old Monastery buildings which was renovated and fully equipped. The Fathers donated the use of the building while city organizations and individuals made donations of equipment.

One of the old stone buildings at Benicia Arsenal was turned into a chapel during World War II, where the Italian prisoners of war and the California Youth Authority boys could attend services. Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish services were held in the "Little Chapel on the Hill". Father Albert Muller, O.P., of Saint Dominic's said the Masses.

In 1954, at the Centennial Celebration of the Dominicans in Benicia, the Historic Landmarks Committee, Grand Parlor N.S.G.W., and Benicia Parlors N.S.G.W. and N.D.G.W., unveiled their gift, the bronze plaque on the front of Saint Dominic's Church.

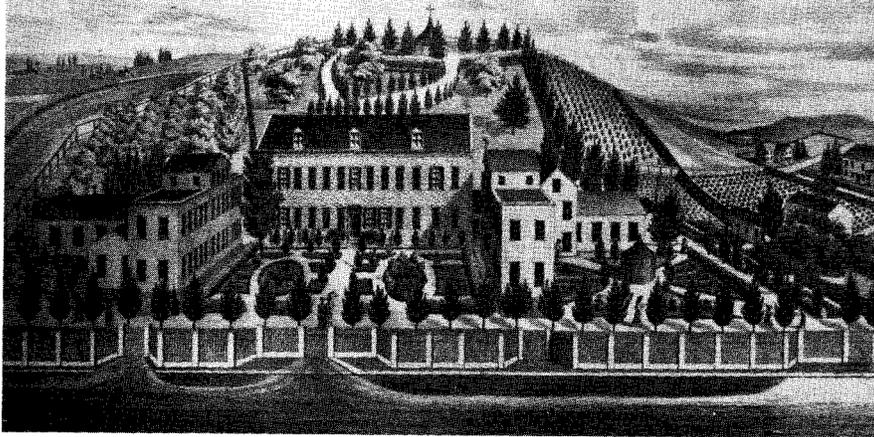
A drive was held throughout the parish for a much needed new Rectory which was completed in 1956, after which the old Monastery was dismantled.

The parishoners were called upon financially to support the construction of a parochial school. In March of 1961, Saint Dominic's School was opened on the corner of 5th and East J Streets with Sister M. Frances Raphael, O.P. as the first principal, and a faculty consisting of a few Dominican Sisters and some lay teachers. A private dwelling on the South side of East J, between 4th and 5th Streets was remodeled for the Sister's convent with Sister M. Bartholomew, O.P. as the first superior.

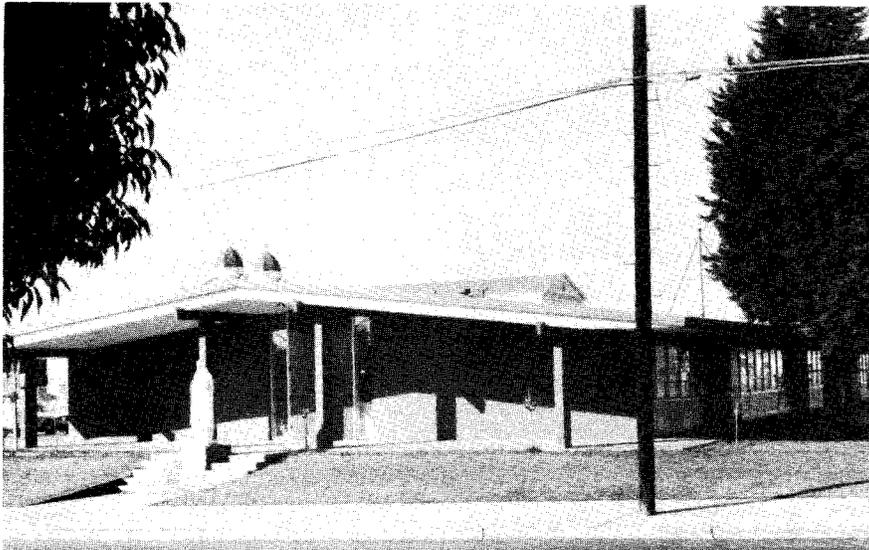
The Sisters in Benicia, received the greatest of respect just as they had in Monterey and the high esteem with which the Sisters had always been held in the little community was more than evident by the number of people who signed petitions urging the continuation of Saint Catherine's Academy. In 1966, after more than one hundred years of operation in Benicia the doors were closed permanently and the school was demolished.

The Solano Square shopping center is on the site of that beautiful school, convent, and chapel which were the show places of Benicia. The 125th anniversary of the arrival of the Dominican Fathers and the Dominican Sisters in Benicia also marks the departure of the Dominican Sisters of the Congregation of the Most Holy Name.





SAINT CATHERINE'S ACADEMY, BENICIA 1877



SAINT DOMINIC'S SCHOOL, BENICIA 1979

EPILOGUE

The three Dominican missionaries came to the new State of California to nurture the seeds of faith planted by the Franciscan Fathers nearly 81 years ago, when they secured the foundation of the infant Church. The great missionary, Paul of Tarsus had said, "According to the commission of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and another man is building upon it." 1 Corth., 3: 10.

1. Bishop Joseph Alemany, O.P., 34 years of missionary labor.

1850	40,000 Catholics 12 Diocesan priests 20 Religious Order priests 26 Churches 0 Sisters
1979	4,726,000 Catholics 2,098 Diocesan priests 1,922 Religious Order priests 1,019 Parishes 6,373 Sisters 2 Archdioceses 8 Dioceses 7 Diocesan Seminaries

2. Father Francis Vilarrasa, O.P., 38 years of missionary labor.

1850	1 Dominican priest (joined by 6 Spanish novices within 2 years) No Religious houses No Pories
1979	201 Fathers and Brothers 5 Pories 21 Houses (9 parishes, 5 Newman centers) 1 College 1 High School

3. Mother Mary Goemaere, O.P., 40 years of missionary labor.

1850	No Sisters but herself (joined by 4 Sisters later) No Schools
1979	228 Sisters of the Congregation of the Most Holy Name, San Rafael, CA. 1 College 5 High Schools 19 Elementary Schools 1 Retreat House

PASTORS OF SAINT DOMINIC'S CHURCH

Very Reverend Fr. Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa, O.P., S.T.L.	1854-1888
Very Reverend Fr. Vincent Vinyes, O.P., S.T.L.	1888
Very Reverend Fr. James R. Newell, O.P., S.T.L.	1888-1891
Very Reverend Fr. John Plus Murphy, O.P., P.G.	1891-1892
Very Reverend Fr. Ambrose Wilson, O. P.	1892-1893
Very Reverend Fr. John S. Shaw, O.P.	1893-1896
Very Reverend Fr. Thomas Dyson, O. P.	1896-1898
Very Reverend Fr. John B. O'Connor, O.P.	1898-1901
Very Reverend Fr. Peter A. Riley, O. P.	1901-1902
Very Reverend Fr. John B. O'Connor, O.P.	1902-1905
Very Reverend Fr. Ambrose Wilson, O.P.	1905-1908
Very Reverend Fr. J.G. Rouke, O.P.	1908-1911
Very Reverend Fr. Edward S. Olsen, O.P., S.T.L.	1911-1914
Very Reverend Fr. James B. McGovern, O.P.	1914-1915
Very Reverend Fr. Christopher V. Lamb, O. P.	1915-1921
Very Reverend Fr. Joseph D. O'Brien, O.P.	1921-1927
Very Reverend Fr. Christopher V. Lamb, O. P.	1927-1930
Very Reverend Fr. J.J. Walsh, O.P., S.T.L.	1930-1932
Very Reverend Fr. Christopher V. Lamb, O. P.	1932-1935
Reverend Fr. Albert T. Muller, O.P., J.C.L.	1935-1938
Reverend Fr. Frederick B. Clyne, O.P.	1938-1944
Reverend Fr. Thomas C.Gabisch, O.P., S.T.L., Dr. Philos.	1944-1948
Reverend Fr. Albert T. Muller, O.P., J.C.L.	1948-1954
Reverend Fr. Daniel J. Ward, O.P.	1954-1960
Reverend Fr. John Klaia, O.P.	1960-1964
Reverend Fr. Vincent McEachen, O.P.	1964-1968
Reverend Fr. Urban Bates, O.P.	1968-1971
Reverend Fr. Francis Ward, O. P.	1971-1972
Reverend Fr. Thomas Hayes, O.P.	1972-1978
Reverend Fr. Christopher Fritter, O.P.	1978



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INDIVIDUALS WHO FURNISHED MATERIAL Reverend Mother Bernardine, O.P.

Reverend Christopher Fritter, O.P. Sister Mary George, O. P. Reverend Charles R. Hess, O.P. Mrs.

William E. Kneass Jr. Reverend Mother Maria Pia, O. P. Reverend Paul M. Starrs, O.P. Sister Mary

Veronica, O.P.

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Pastor, Saint Dominic's Church, Benicia, CA
Holy Trinity Convent, Somerset, Ohio Provincial Archivist, Saint Dominic's, San Francisco, CA
Curator, Old Custom House, Monterey, CA
Corpus Christi Monastery, Menlo Park, CA
Saint Dominic's, Benicia, CA
Saint Elizabeth's Convent, Oakland, CA
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