

# SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

Vol 2

Fr John E Boll, Diocesan Archivist

No 23

## DOMINICAN FATHERS ARRIVE IN 1854

### How Catholicism Came to Benicia

By Father Thomas Hayes, OP printed June 3, 1976 in the *Catholic Herald*

The city of Benicia was founded in 1847 by Dr Robert Semple and Thomas O Larkin on land donated by General Mariano G Vallejo. It had few settlers until after 1849 and 1850. Until after the "Gold Rush," those in need of the services of a priest were required to go to Sonoma or San Francisco.

The first priest to minister to Catholics in Benicia has not been determined absolutely but is said to be either Father Maginnis or Father Hugh Gallagher, both of San Francisco. In 1851, Father Maginnis was the only priest then in San Francisco who preached in the English Language. However, Father Hugh Gallagher and sometimes his brother, Father Joseph Gallagher from Sacramento, said Mass, perhaps only once a month, in Benicia from 1852 until the Dominicans arrived in 1854.

Mass was celebrated first in a building termed "the Hall," which was located on the corner of East I and 6<sup>th</sup> Street. The hall was owned by Judge James Barry who had arrived in Benicia in 1850. Father Hugh Gallagher built the first church in 1852 on East 4<sup>th</sup> Street near the corner of J Street. It was a frame building, quadrangular in shape and seating about 200 persons. This church lasted until 1890 when the new church (the present one) was dedicated. The first church was then torn down in 1892.

In 1854 the Bishop of California, Joseph Sodoc Alemany, OP turned over this church to the Dominican Fathers to administer after their departure from Monterey. The Reverend Francis S Vilarrasa, OP was the first pastor of the church which was named after the founder of the Order of Preachers. The first Mass was celebrated on St Patrick's Day in 1854, commemorating the official beginning of St Dominic parish.

When Father Vilarrasa took over, there was a debt of \$2,000 on the unfinished church and by the end of 1859, the new pastor had cleared the debt and completed the church.

The boundaries of the new parish were not clearly defined but it included all of Solano County and it was the only church on the Benicia side of the Carquinez Straits, the nearest churches being the Sonoma Mission and St Rose Church in Sacramento. Martinez was added to the care of the parish priests as well as a "vast district" from Pinole Creek to Stockton. Later missions under the protection of St Dominic's included Crockett, Port Costa, Bay Point, Oakley, Brentwood and Walnut Creek.

The present church, completed in 1890, was designed by Father Raymond Johns, OP and built by R W Lambley. The foundations are of sandstone from Patrick Mullaney's stone quarry in Benicia. The walls are of brick with concrete facing and the upper structure is of wood.

The first monastery of the priests was built in 1854-55 and set back of the original church on 4<sup>th</sup> Street near 5<sup>th</sup> Street. Since then, that building has been torn down and a new rectory built within the last 20 years.

The parish cemetery in the city burial grounds was purchased by Father Vilarrasa in 1861. A new cemetery was begun in the late 1890's on land once owned by the Barry family. This cemetery is shared by the Fathers and Brothers of the Western Dominican Province, Dominican Sisters of San Rafael, the Third Order of St Dominic and St Dominic parish. Father Peter Anderson, OP, who said the first Mass in Sacramento in 1850, is buried there.

The majority of the first Catholic families were Irish or Irish descent. The population of Benicia in 1870 was 1,656 and at its height was about 3,500, but in 1910, it dropped to 2,360, about 1,000 of whom were Catholics.

During the war years following 1941, the census rose to about 11,000 but declined to 7,600 in 1950. The unofficial estimate of Catholics then was close to 3,000. Today a 45 percent rise in population since 1970 promises a new era in the story of a pioneer California parish.

As of this writing in 1976, Father Hayes was pastor of St Dominic Parish in Benicia.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

**Saint Dominic Church, Benicia  
Established in 1854 by the Dominican Fathers**



Photo by John E Boll 2014

**Interior of St Dominic Church**