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FATHER PETER AUGUSTINE ANDERSON, OP How the First Mass Came to Sacramento

By Fr John Dwyer, printed January 1, 1976 in *The Catholic Herald*

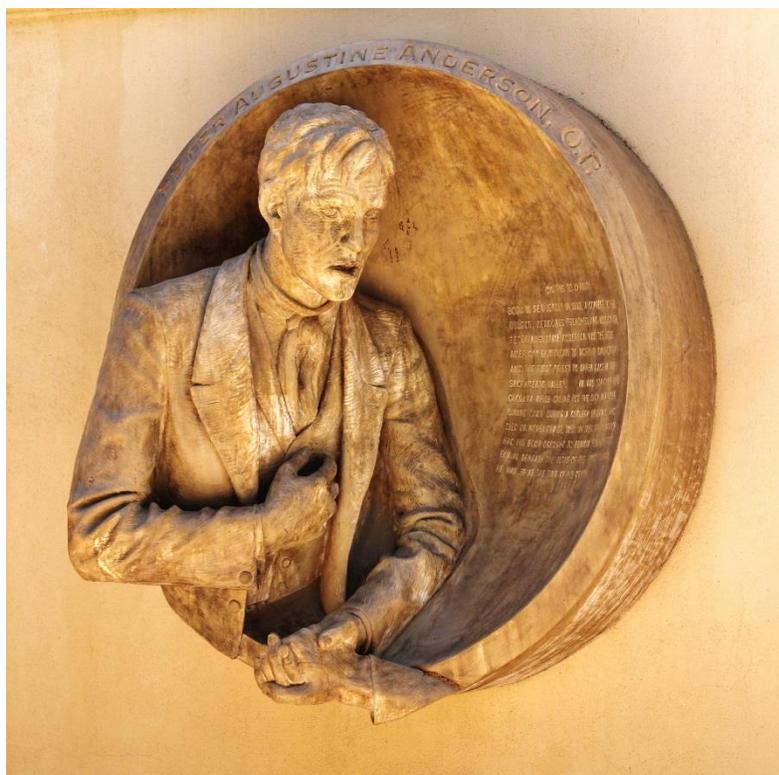


Photo by John E Boll 2014

Statue of Father Anderson at St Dominic Church, Benicia

Whereas the Franciscan Fathers were the missionaries to California during the days when it was Spanish and Mexican territory, it was to be a Dominican who would have the distinction of being the first missionary when it became American territory.

Born in Elizabeth, New Jersey on January 8, 1812, Peter Augustine Anderson was the son of Protestant parents. The Anderson family immigrated to Ohio when Peter was 15. Soon after the move, when his father died, Peter became the sole support of his mother and his brothers and sisters. In 1829 the whole family

became converts to the Catholic Church under the guidance of the Dominican Fathers. Shortly thereafter, presumably because his younger brothers were old enough to assume the financial responsibility, Peter entered the Dominican Order at St Joseph Priory in Somerset, Ohio. In 1831 he was sent to St Rose, outside of Springfield, Kentucky. It was there that he received the Dominican habit in 1832 and made his vows on August 4, 1833. Seven years later, when Peter was ready to be ordained a priest, this ceremony also took place at St Rose on April 5, 1840. He served the missions of the area from St Rose until 1845 when he was transferred back to St Joseph in Sumerset, Ohio. Two years later he was sent to tour the United States to raise money for his community, a project which was evidently quite successful.

At that time Father Joseph Sadoc Alemany was the Dominican Provincial of St Joseph Province. It was he, therefore, who on February 22, 1849 appointed Peter Anderson to go to the missions in California. However there is a seventeen month gap between the appointment and the arrival. It seems in the meanwhile Father Anderson served in Sullivan and Ulster Counties in southeastern New York. He finally left New York by way of the Isthmus of Panama. The rest of the trip is recorded as follows: *Arrived in San Francisco on July 6, 1850 on the steam ship Panama. It left Panama on June 17, 1850 and came to San Francisco in 18 days via Acapulco and San Diego. "Run to S.F. was splendid" There were 283 passengers. Father Anderson is listed among the passengers as Reverend A.P. Anderson.*

Father Anderson reported to Father Anthony Langlois at St Francis Church. It was from him that he received his assignment. There was no bishop in California at that time. The administrator was Father Gonzalez Rubio at Santa Barbara, and the Vicar General for the northern part of the state was Father Langlois. Thus on August 6 Father Langlois wrote a letter to the Catholics of Sacramento in which he introduced Father Anderson as their new pastor, and authorized him to collect funds to build a church and to procure property for the same. That same day Father Anderson took the steamer for Sacramento and arrived there on August 7, 1850. He settled in a frame structure at 5th and S Streets, which was fitted out as a combination chapel and residence. At his first Mass there on Sunday, August 11th the collection was \$25. It had cost him \$52 for his fare from San Francisco to Sacramento on the boat. He was kept busy that first Sunday as he recorded three baptisms. On September 8 to 10 he visited a portion of his vast parish, for he recorded a trip to Marysville and Long Bar. By the middle of October, Father Anderson's work was cut out for him. A terrible epidemic of cholera had broken out in Sacramento. At its height 60 persons died each day. The physician in charge of the hospital wrote of Father Anderson:

"During the course of the dread scourge, I witnessed the untiring, unselfish work of this holy man among the sick and dying. He labored incessantly day in and day out." Finally worn out with fatigue and exposure, Father Anderson caught, not cholera, but typhoid. When he took sick, word was sent to San Francisco and Father Langlois came up to be with his fellow priest. Father Anderson died on Wednesday afternoon, November 27, 1850. As if the forces of evil were bent on wiping out any chances for the survival of Catholicism, one week later a violent wind storm blew down the little church which was then under construction. The only trace left of this effort was the fact that Peter Burnett, the Governor of California, had donated in October a large piece of land for a new church site located between Seventh and Eighth and Jay and Kay Streets.

It was on this site that Father Anderson's successor, Father John Ingoldsby proceeded to build a new church 25 by 50 feet, which Bishop Alemany of Monterey blessed on February 23, 1851. The new church retained the name given by Father Anderson, St Rose, after his old priory in Kentucky. It is interesting too that his former provincial who had assigned him to California, himself arrived as his first bishop just nine days after Father Anderson's death. Bishop Alemany had written to Father Anderson from Paris on August 24, 1850 telling him of the circumstances of his being made Bishop of California.



Photo from the Diocesan Archives

St Rose Church, 7th and K Streets, Sacramento Constructed in 1854 and Served Catholics for 35 Years

Father Anderson then remains the first Dominican to work in California and the founder of St Rose Church in Sacramento, and possibly the first priest to visit the Catholics in Marysville.

Ground was broken in 1854 for the construction of St Rose Church on 7th and K Streets which served Catholics in Sacramento for 35 years. This site was sold by the diocese to the federal government in 1887 where a post office was constructed. The site of the first St Rose Church is marked today as St Rose Square in honor of the first Catholic Church in downtown Sacramento.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

Tomb of Father Peter Anderson, OP, St Dominic Cemetery, Benicia