

SACRAMENTO DIOCESAN ARCHIVES

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Father John E Boll, Archivist

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A Dominican Heritage, Part III

1850 - 1979

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Saint Dominic Parish,
Benicia, California
March 17, 1979

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.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

Benicia on the Carquinez Strait

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 the 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 José Jimeno in Santa Bárbara:

October 25, 1854

Very Reverend Father:

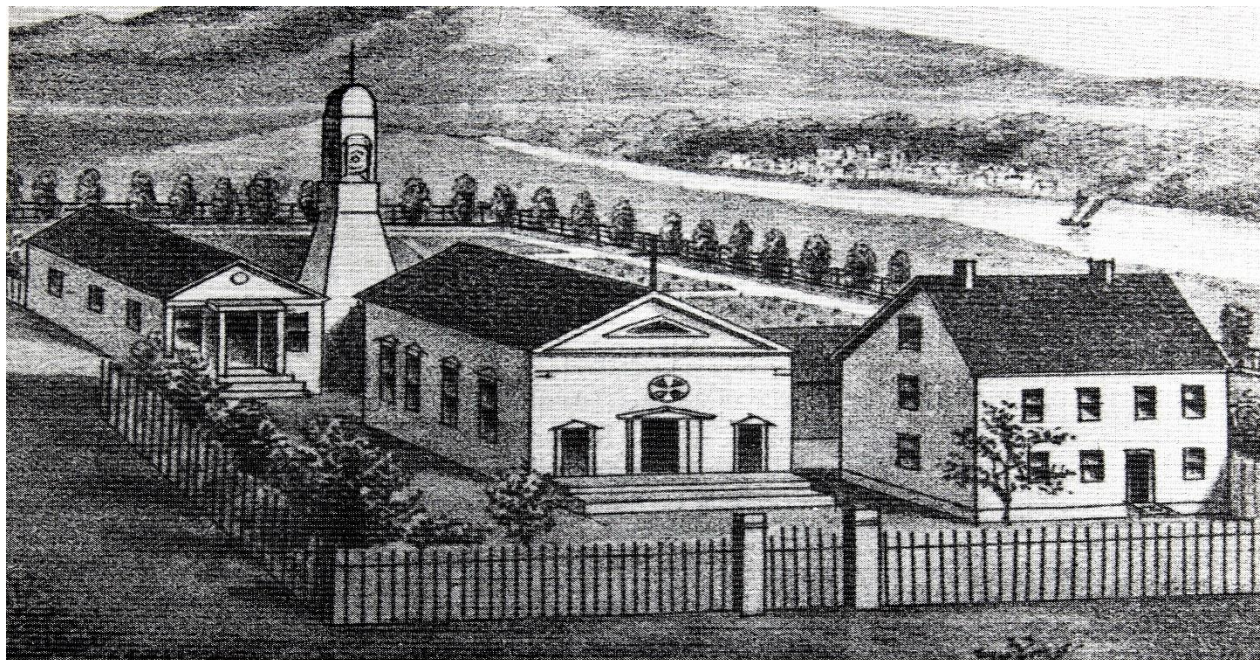
I was looking for a suitable opportunity to write you with security against having the letter go astray, which offers itself to me through Don Pablo de la Guerra. It is superfluous to express the satisfaction we have at seeing the Apostolic College established and the novitiate formally opened . . . 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 it 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.

Q.S.M.B.

(signed) Fr. Sadoc Vilarrasa, O.P.

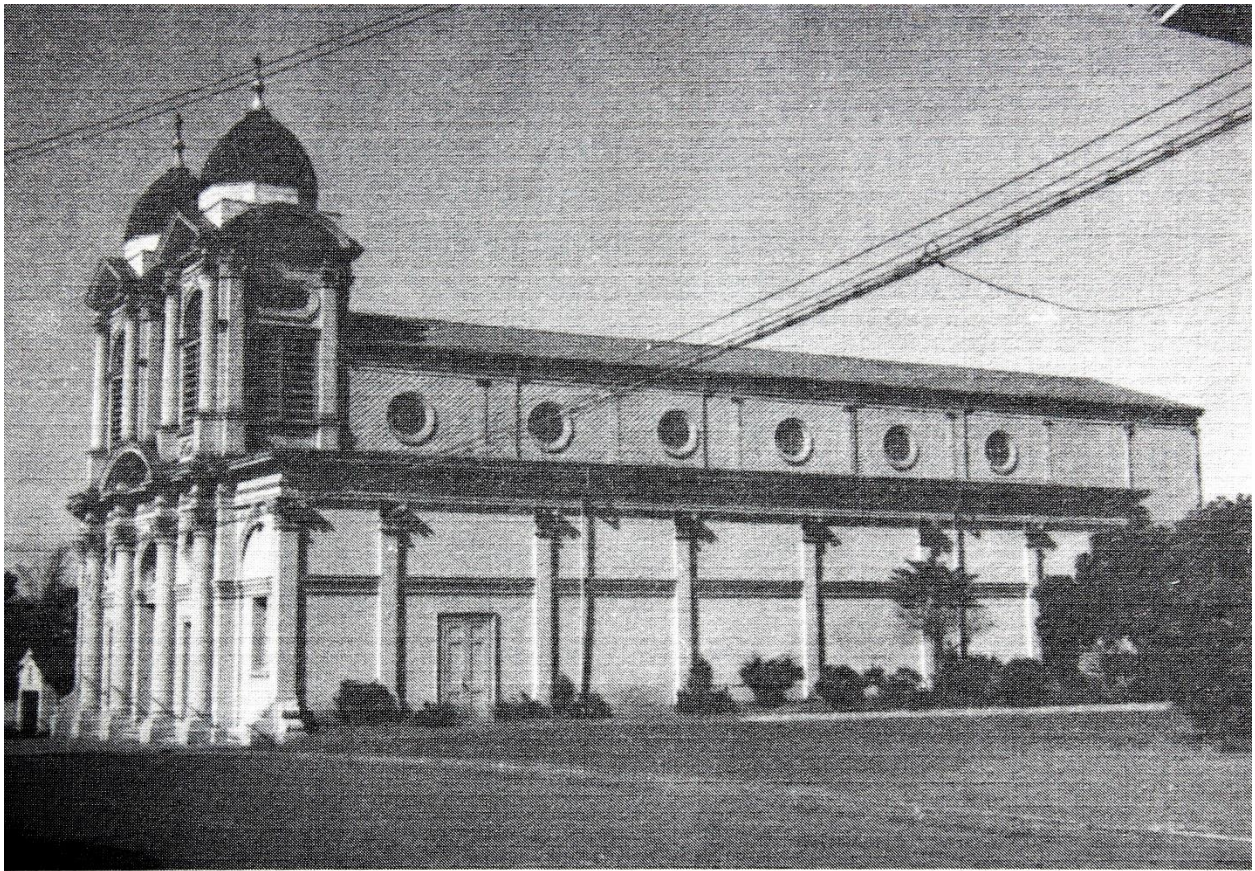


SAINT DOMINIC'S CHURCH AND MONASTERY, BENICIA 1877

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 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.



SAINT DOMINIC'S CHURCH BEFORE THE NEW RECTORY

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 parishioners 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 parishioners the church was finished. Since the Spanish language was not used in Benicia as it was in Monterey, Santo Domingo became Saint Dominic. One June 18, 1854, Archbishop Alemany blessed the church and christened it after the funder 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 of 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 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 toward 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 can't 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.

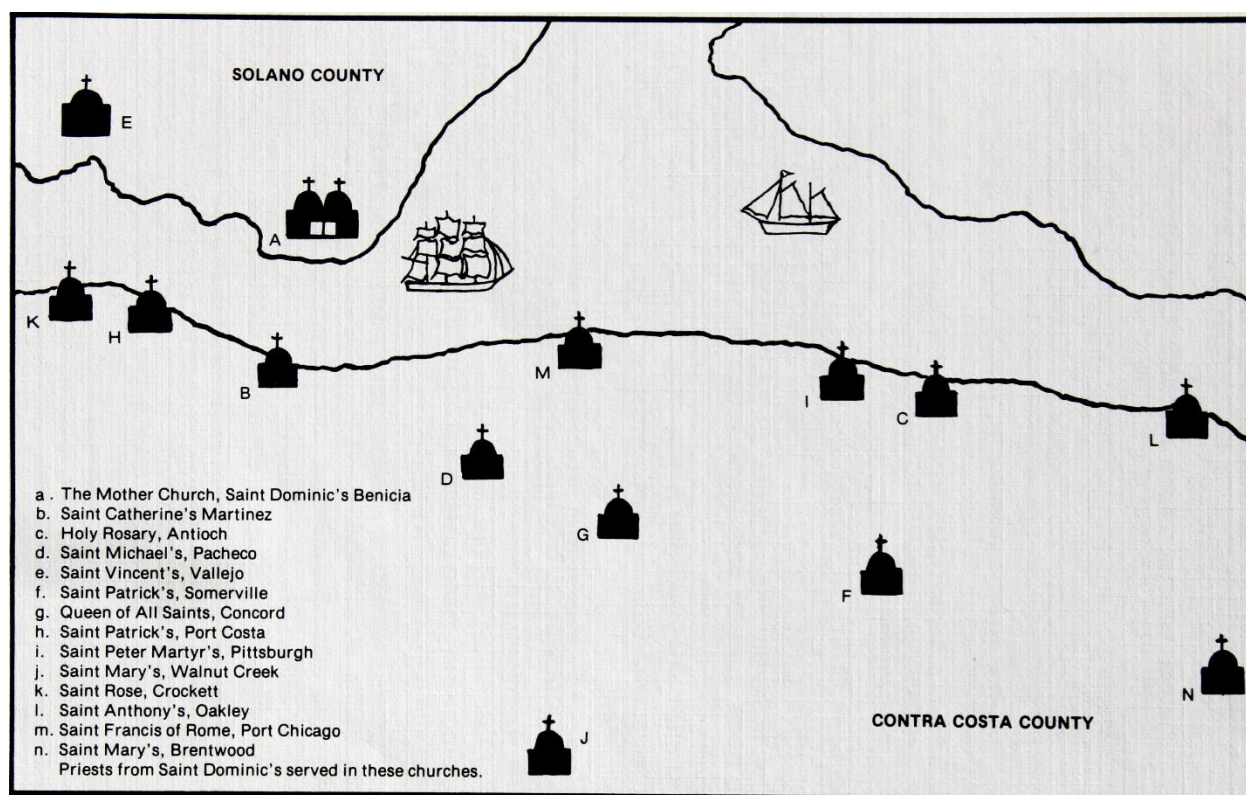
Judge S.C. Hastings, a prominent Benicia citizen, gave the Sisters a portion of the area now known as Solano Square. On September 4, 1859, Archbishop Alemany, assisted by the Fathers and Brothers from Saint Dominic's, laid the cornerstone of a beautiful three story brick building which

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, as well as ordinations and clothing ceremonies at Saint Dominic 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.



Churches Served by the Dominican Fathers in Solano and Contra Costa Counties

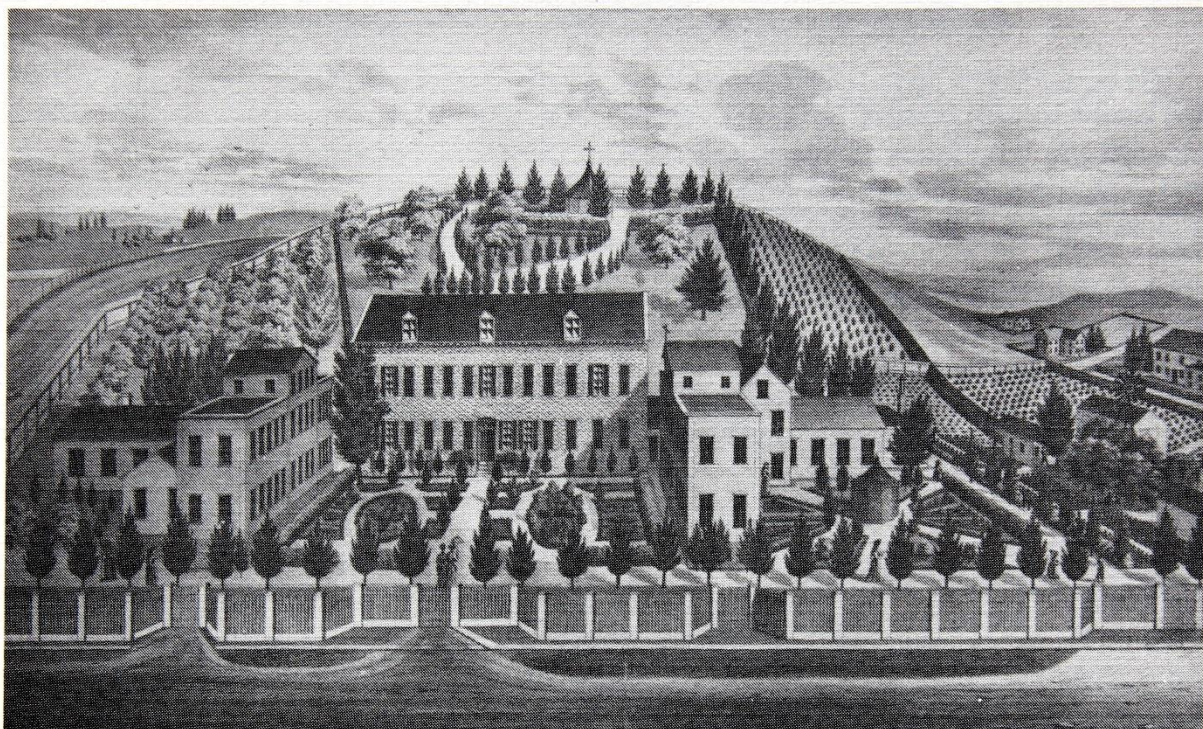
More Dominican students arrived and a larger house was built, also a new Priory facing I Street. Fathers Lawlor, Riley and Wilson were ordained.

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 Church.

The present church was built from plans drawn by Father Raymond John, OP. 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 3 in Benicia.



SAINT CATHERINE'S ACADEMY, BENICIA 1877

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. Catholics, 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 N.D.G.W., unveiled their gift, the bronze plaque on the front of Saint Dominic 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 parishioners were called upon financially to support the construction of a parochial school. In Marcy of 1961, Saint Dominic 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 Sisters' 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.



Photo by John E Boll 2014

Saint Dominic Church, Benicia in 2015

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 Cor 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

	6373	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	Priests and brothers
	5	Pories
	21	Houses (9 parishes, 5 Newman Centers)
	1	College
	2	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
	1	College
	5	High schools
	19	Elementary schools
	1	Retreat house



Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany

PASTORS OF SAINT DOMINIC CHURCH

Very Reverend Fr. Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa, OP, 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 Pius 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.	1978-1884

Reverend Fr. Eugene W. Sousa, O.P.	1984-1990
Reverend Fr. David K. O'Rourke, O.P.	1990-1995
Reverend Fr. Anthony Petrarca, O.P.	1995-1997
Reverend Fr. Victor V. Cavalli, O.P.	1997-1998
Reverend Fr. David Farrugia, O.P.	1998-2005
Reverend Fr. Dominic Briese, O.P.	2005-2008
Reverend Fr. Denis Reilly, O.P.	2008-2009
Reverend Fr. Mark Padrez, O.P.	2009-2010
Reverend Fr. Michael Hurley, O.P.	2010-2015

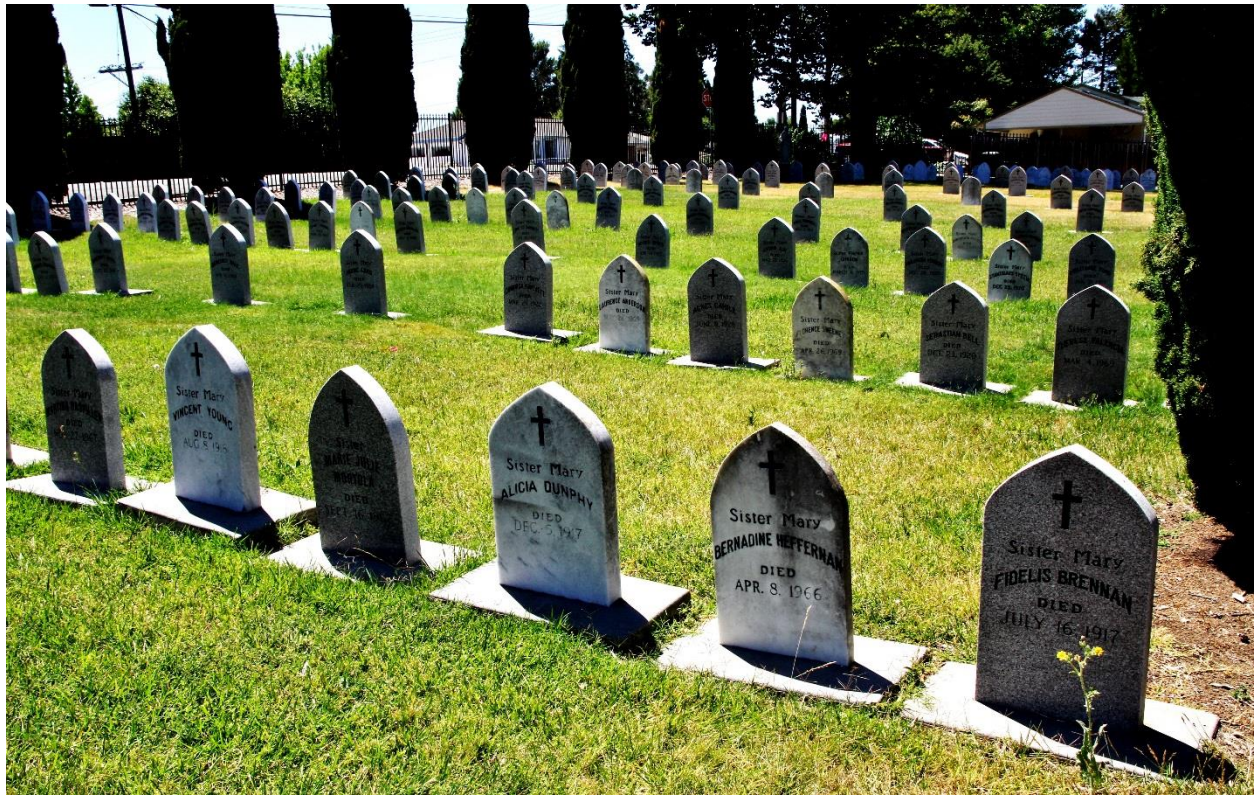


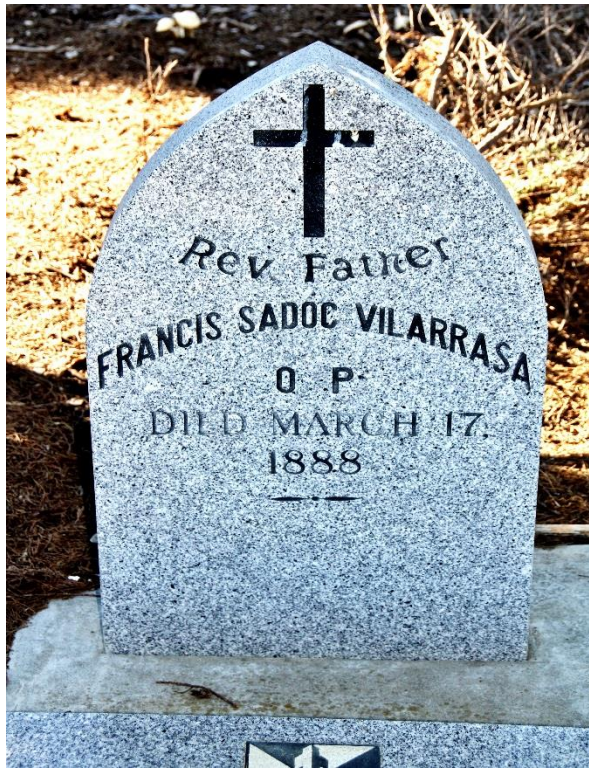
Photo by John E Boll 2014

**Graves of Hundreds of Dominican Priests, Brothers and Sisters
Who Served the California Church are Buried in the Parish Cemetery in Benicia**

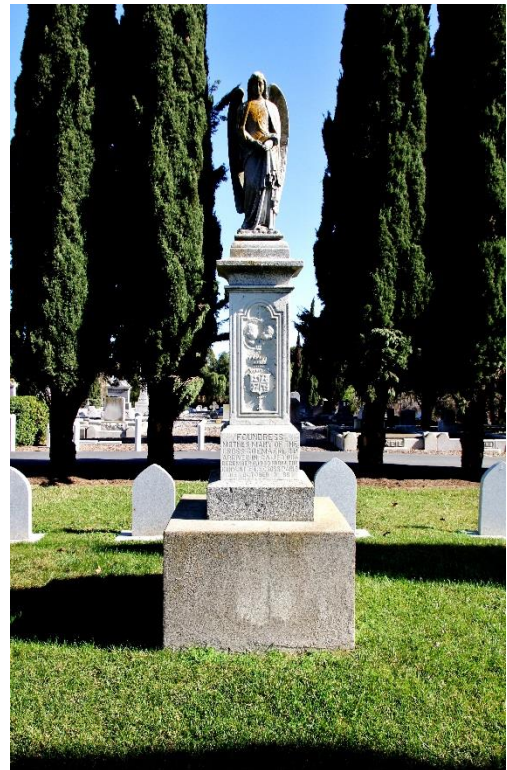


Photo by John E Boll

Relief of Father Peter Augustine Anderson, OP, First Priest in Sacramento in 1850



Grave of Father Francis Sadoc Vilarrasa's, OP
Benicia Catholic Cemetery



Grave of Mother Mary Goemaere, OP
Benicia Catholic Cemetery

Marker Stone at Mother Mary's Grave

