

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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The Old Convent

The story of the old convent that has long since faded away still makes for fascinating reading in Old Monterey. To most Montereyans who have come here during the last two or three decades, the Old Convent seems more or less of a myth. Once in a while some old-timer mentions it or some historical allusion is run across concerning this one famous building in our historic city.

The majority of our people know nothing of its exact location, and little or nothing of its history.

On Oct. 9, 1916, the Monterey American published an article written by the late Mrs. Anna Gell Andresen, who was then historian of the Grand Parlor of the Native Daughters of the Golden West. In this article, loaned "to me by Mrs. Josephine M. Fussell, a pioneer of Old Monterey, I have found interesting material which I will add to the archives already collected.

The old convent was located on the northeast corner of Calle Principal and Franklin streets, now the San Carlos Hotel site. It was one of the leading educational institutions of the state. St. Catherine's Academy, as this school was called, was opened in 1851 by three nuns of the Dominican order, under the direction of Rt. Rev. Joseph Alemany, bishop of Monterey.

Fr. Joseph Alemany, C O.P., was a native of Spain, and feeling the call of the missionary, left his native country in the early 1840's to come to America. After zealously laboring in the Atlantic states, he resolved to pass the remainder of his life in the Spanish speaking settlement of the Pacific Coast.

In 1850 he was consecrated bishop of Monterey, and fully realizing the need of a school for girls, and the necessity of having religious women to instruct the children of his new flock, he sent east for Mary Goemare, a French nun of the Dominican order and a most cultured young woman.

She came in answer to his appeal, accompanied by two other nuns, Mary Francis Stafford and Mary Aloysia O'Neil. They came to California by way of Aspinwall and Panama. From Aspinwall to Panama they traveled on mule-back and on Nov. 16, 1850, they left Panama on the steamer Columbus, reaching San Francisco on Dec. 6, and arriving in Monterey a few days later.

On the first of the new year they opened a school at the residence of W. E. P. Hartnell, a prominent member of the Roman Catholic Church, and one whose life was intimately connected with the early history of California. Owing to the increased attendance, all the pupils could not be accommodated, and shortly afterward the school was moved to a new building at the corner of Main (now Calle Principal) and Franklin streets, which was purchased from Don Miguel Jimeno, a brother-in-law of Mrs. Hartnell.

This building had been erected as a hotel and adjoined the Jimeno adobe residence. The convent formally was opened and placed under the protecting care of St. Catherine of Sienna and named St. Catherine's Academy.'

The first woman in California to enter the new novitiate was Maria Concepcion Arguello, the daughter of Jose Arguello; commandante of San Francisco in 1806, and governor of California, 1814-1845, She was a sister of Louis Antonio Arguello, second governor of California under Mexican rule, and successor to Pablo Vicente de Sola.

There is a pathetic romance connected with the life of Concepcion Arguello with which all readers of California history are familiar. Count Resanoff, the Russian envoy to California in 1806, is said to have fallen in love with her when he met her at the Presidio of San Francisco, where her father was the military commander. She was then 16 years of age and a beautiful young woman. Before he could marry Concepcion, the count had to obtain his emperor's consent, and as soon as the purposes of his voyage were disposed of, he departed for St. Petersburg to obtain the czar's consent and then return and claim his bride.

Unfortunately, however, he was killed by a fall from his horse while on his way through Siberia, and Concepcion never heard of his death until 1842. But she never doubled her suitor, so the story goes. She remained unwed, renouncing the world, and dedicating her life to instructing the young and the care of the sick. She followed the convent to Benicia in 1854 and died there in 1857.