

# History Comes Alive!

by Hynda Rudd,  
City Archivist (Retired),  
and Club Member



Tales From the City Archives

## The French in Los Angeles

■ Hynda's guest columnist writes about an often-overlooked group that helped to build the City.

*Photos courtesy the Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library Photo Archive, Carolyn Cole, director; and the personal collection of Helene DeMeestere.*

### The French in Los Angeles, 1827-1927

When we evoke the presence of French settlers in North American history, we are quick to mention Louisiana and Canada. Los Angeles, largely associated with immigrants from Asia and Latin America, is hardly a place that leaps to mind.

And yet...

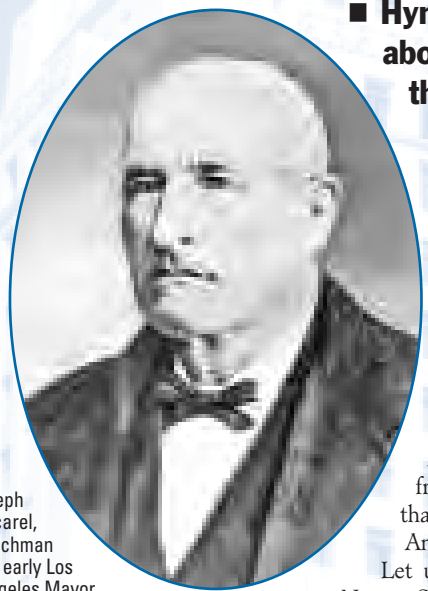
Let us travel back to the year 1827. *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora la Reina de los Angeles de la Porciúncula* has just become part of the Mexican Republic, created five years earlier when Mexico gained independence from the Spanish Crown. That year, though scarcely more than 1,000 residents lived in the area, one of them was a Frenchman, Louis Bauchet, a vintner. Bauchet, who lived for a few years in New Orleans, traveled through Mexico, married, and followed a trail of colonists to Los Angeles, was the first of several French adventurers and pioneers to settle permanently in the town.

Within a few years, Los Angeles saw the arrival of merchants in search of new trade opportunities and sailors on their way to other oceans. Not only were they seduced by the welcoming population, the Pueblo itself, and the vast stretches of surrounding land, but also by the climate, which invites cultivation. Mostly Catholic, those settlers

rapidly learned Spanish, married local women, and baptized their children at the Plaza Church. They absorbed the region's Spanish culture to the point of acquiring a Spanish twist to their names, courtesy of the locals: Louis Bauchet became Don Luis, Joseph Mascarel is Don José, and Charles Baric became Don Carlos. Integration progressed at a remarkable pace.

While Louis Bauchet is recorded as the earliest French pioneer in Los Angeles, Jean-Louis Vignes is considered the father of French immigration to Los Angeles. At 52, the adventurer and native of Bordeaux, France arrived in Los Angeles in 1831 and realized the potential for wine production. As he needed help to develop the vineyard, he called for experts from his home country. And so, a little French colony was well established by 1850. On his 104-acre vineyard in what was to be known as the heart of downtown, he enhanced local grapevines by grafting them to imported French specimens. He became the first person to ship and commercialize California wine throughout the United States. He was known as "Don Luis" by his Mexican peers.

California soon gained visibility abroad thanks to the Gold Rush, news of which reached Europe in 1849 at a time of political turmoil in France. The ideals for which the preceding generation had fought in 1789 during the French Revolution were vanishing, with successive governments intent on restoring the Old Regime to the dismay of supporters of the now lost French Republic. However, the opportunity to emigrate from France to California eased this mood of disappointment. The timing was ideal: The 31st state was emerging just as American democracy was becoming more unified. Not only did California promise new opportunities, but it had the advantage of being close to Mexico, a country with which France maintained close diplomatic relations. Many French émigrés viewed California as a chance to escape an undesirable regime, a place where they could exercise



Joseph Mascarel, Frenchman and early Los Angeles Mayor.

Let me introduce my guest columnist this month — Helene Demeestere, who was born and raised in France and arrived in Los Angeles in 1994. She has a Bachelor's degree in history from the Sorbonne, Paris, and a Master's degree in history from the Université de St. Denis, also in Paris.

She has also been educated in photography and journalism here in the States as well as in Paris. In Los Angeles she has been the photo archivist for the Mary Pickford Institute; and a part-time research project coordinator for the Los Angeles Central Library Photo Collection, a freelance historical researcher for editorial and visual projects. But her main focus has been on being the historian for the French community in Los Angeles from its inception to today.

Helene asks any of the readers of French descent to please contact her, as she is preparing a directory of French Angelenos. She may be contacted at (323) 850-1570 or [Indmstr@aol.com](mailto:Indmstr@aol.com).

I know you will enjoy her article as much as I did!  
— Hynda



Guest columnist  
Helene Demeestere.



An early French-cultivated vineyard at El Aliso, near present-day Union Station.



long-held principles of equality and democracy within a republic.

Of the many Frenchmen who sailed to the gold fields of Northern California, a few drifted southward, choosing Los Angeles as a place to establish roots. They took part in every aspect of municipal life, contributing their knowledge and skills to city and county administration. Aside from Joseph Mascarel, who was elected mayor, many Frenchmen took seats in the council chambers. Maurice Kremer, fluent in four languages and with six years' experience working as City Council secretary (later known as City Clerk), was elected treasurer of the county and praised for his administrative skills.

Joseph Mascarel, known as "Don José" by his Mexican counterparts, served as the mayor of Los Angeles from 1865 to 1866. (At that time Los Angeles City officials served only one term.) Mascarel governed with an iron fist, prohibiting Angelenos from carrying any weapon whatsoever, including slingshots. Residents also elected him as City (Common) Councilman seven times between 1867 and 1881. The former sailor from Marseilles, France, who began his life in Los Angeles as a vegetable gardener, invested money in land and in 1874 purchased a large homestead in what is now Hollywood, leaving the property to be managed by his two daughters and their families.

Within the City, these French figures wielded considerable economic power: They were founding members of the first important bank, proprietors of reputable businesses, and skilled tradesmen, with occupations ranging from storekeepers and hotel managers to physicians and engineers. Out in the countryside, the French developed and enhanced the quality of local wine and wool. Their knowledge of agriculture and cattle-raising contributed as well to the county's growing reputation.

### 1850-1880

The period from 1850 to 1880 represents a golden age for French immigrants in Los Angeles despite their rather small numbers. Because of the linguistic similarity between French and Spanish, a shared Catholic faith, and the fact that many of them married into Mexican families, these French settlers were able to merge Mexican and European cultures, providing a definitive advantage when it came to transforming this small Mexican village into a mature American city. Successful and integrated, they also formed a tightly knit community whose members shared the same social agenda.

A majority of them were bachelors, as was often the case with pioneers and immigrants; to support each other in case of death or sickness, they established the French Benevolent Society in 1860. From this organization emerged the construction of the French Hospital, only the second to be built in Los Angeles. The French Hospital provided "free medical care for its members. Charging \$1 per month for membership, it preceded the concept of HMOs. In 1869, the [Benevolent] Society built a hospital ... for its members' use. The nurses were trained at the on-site nursing school and lived together in the hospital's front house." The original hospital was on College and Hill Streets. It was later moved to the new Chinatown area.

Later, the development of railroad transportation in both Europe and the United States and the work of immigration agencies in remote French villages lead larger groups of immigrants to set their sights on Los Angeles. In search of jobs and land opportunities, this fresh wave of newcomers hoped to realize the American dream. As opposed to their pioneer predecessors, they were generally less educated and less keen on adventure. Many had difficulty learning a new language and adapting to work as farmhands and sheepherders. In an increasingly agricultural county, they were also far outnumbered by the massive influx of English-speaking migrants pouring into Los Angeles during the boom of the 1880s.



St. Vibiana Cathedral, overseen and partially financed by an early French settler. The building is no longer used as a Catholic church.



The French Hospital in 1904.

The new French immigrants scattered throughout the county, from the Tehachapi Mountains to San Pedro. And while they were far less likely to get involved in City matters than their predecessors, they were fond of gathering with their peers. Many kept active social lives, organizing picnics, celebrating French holidays, creating French clubs, and publishing French newspapers. A French Quarter sprouted east of the City around the turn of the century, with middle-class residents claiming property on Summit and Pleasant avenues in Boyle Heights and the working class congregating east of the Plaza. Aliso Street became a meeting place for farmers and sheepherders in town for business or a visit to the French Hospital. In the same way, the corner of Alameda and Aliso developed into something of a French neighborhood, with several boarding houses, grocery stores, saloons, stables and shops all catering to the county's 1,800 French residents. A glance at the L.A. City Directory of 1897 reveals businesses with names like "Le Café des Alpes" and "L'Hotel de Bayonne" that echoed the home regions of most of Los Angeles' French immigrants. As the population of Los Angeles climbed to 100,000, more French citizens found employment in the service and hospitality industries. From time to time, one of those immigrants rose from the crowd to distinguish himself as a successful entrepreneur.

One building that remains in today's Los Angeles landscape became a reality during our local "French Revolution." It is St. Vibiana's Cathedral, dedicated in 1876. Louis Mesmer, an Alsatian French baker, arrived in Los Angeles in 1852. Generous and energetic, Mesmer devoted himself to the development of Los Angeles. He donated property for the Southern Pacific Railroad terminal, helped purchase land for the Los Angeles Normal School and in 1872 co-founded the Los Angeles *Evening Express* newspaper. His greatest contribution, however, was St. Vibiana's Cathedral, the construction of which he not only helped finance but personally oversaw.

Also paramount during this period were the French "movers and shakers" of this young, burgeoning community. The entrepreneurs included investors who founded the International Savings and Exchange Bank on Spring Street in 1904 to serve the large influx of immigrants arriving at the turn of the century. Later it merged with a predecessor, the Farmers and Merchants Bank, to become the Bank of America. Among the 13 founders of the Farmers and Merchants National Bank in 1871, two were Frenchmen, former Mayor Joseph Mascarel and Domingo Amestoy.

Jean-Louis Sainsevain, a nephew of Jean-Louis Vignes, a cooper by trade, arrived in Los Angeles in 1839 to work on his uncle's vineyard. In 1862, using lumber from a San Bernardino sawmill owned by his brother, Pierre, he capitalized on his woodworking skills to lay a system of wooden pipes and construct a waterwheel. In doing so, he drastically improved the archaic, unsanitary water system of *zanjas*, or open ditches, that had formerly supplied water to the Los Angeles inhabitants.

After securing water rights from the City, Sainsevain drew water from the Los Angeles River and diverted the water to residents. As advanced as his system was, however, alternating periods of flood and drought proved too stressful for his network of wooden pipes, which burst after several years of pressure.

In 1890, there was the Los Angeles City Water Company on the Plaza. Solomon Lazard, a French Jew, bought out the previous water rights from Jean-Louis Sainsevain. Originally Lazard and two partners established the buyout in 1868. With a 30-year lease on the City's water supply, the Los Angeles City Water Company laid iron pipes and erected a fountain in the center of Los Angeles Plaza. Upon expiration of the lease in 1898, the City underwent four years of intense negotiations to regain control of its water distribution and establish what is now the Department of Water and Power.

Solomon Lazard was also a storeowner on Main Street in the 1860s. But in 1874 Lazard sold his store—by then named The City of Paris—to his cousin and former partner, Eugene Meyer, who relocated it to an ornate building on Spring Street. By the late 1880s it was Los Angeles' largest retail business, specializing in fancy goods and fashions imported from France and Britain. The shop doubled as the French Consulate, with Meyer and the subsequent owner, Leon Loeb, each serving as official representatives of the French government.

Moving from entrepreneurship to colonization, the French community or "colony" wanted to have its own newspapers. Despite its tight-knit nature and relatively small size, the French community was not immune to dissent. In 1896, three different local French language weekly newspapers circulated in Los Angeles, each with a distinct editorial perspective. They were: *L'Union Nouvelle* (1879-1966); *Le Progres* (1894-96); and *Le Francais* (1896-98). The editors of *Le Progres* and *L'Union Nouvelle*, the fiercest rivals, were known to come to blows on the street. *L'Union Nouvelle* survived the longest, enduring until the 1960s.

Despite carving a niche for themselves in Los Angeles, members of the French Colony, as they had come to call themselves, did not forget their motherland. They showed solidarity during tragic and joyful events alike, as reinforced by the fact that some patriots returned to France in 1914 when war with Germany called for soldiers. Later, the ratio of French residents to the general population of Los Angeles decreased for several reasons. After World War I, emigration from France was no longer an option for young men when so many hands were needed at home to compensate for the millions of casualties. The Volstead Act, which prohibited the sale of alcohol in the United States (Prohibition), and the more stringent U.S. immigration laws of 1924, took further tolls on the numbers. At the same time, Los Angeles entered a period of exponential growth, thus minimizing the French presence among the flock of newcomers. Aliso Street, with its proximity to busy railroad stations and expanding warehouses, lost its appeal as a center for the community. As more people purchased cars, they begin to settle farther away from the City's busy and commercial downtown, where the construction of a newer and larger civic center was under way.

By 1927, there was no longer a French Quarter to speak of. On what was once at the heart of the French community, a new construction of a larger civic center was under way with the current City Hall rising up to mark the birth of a new era for Los Angeles.