

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives

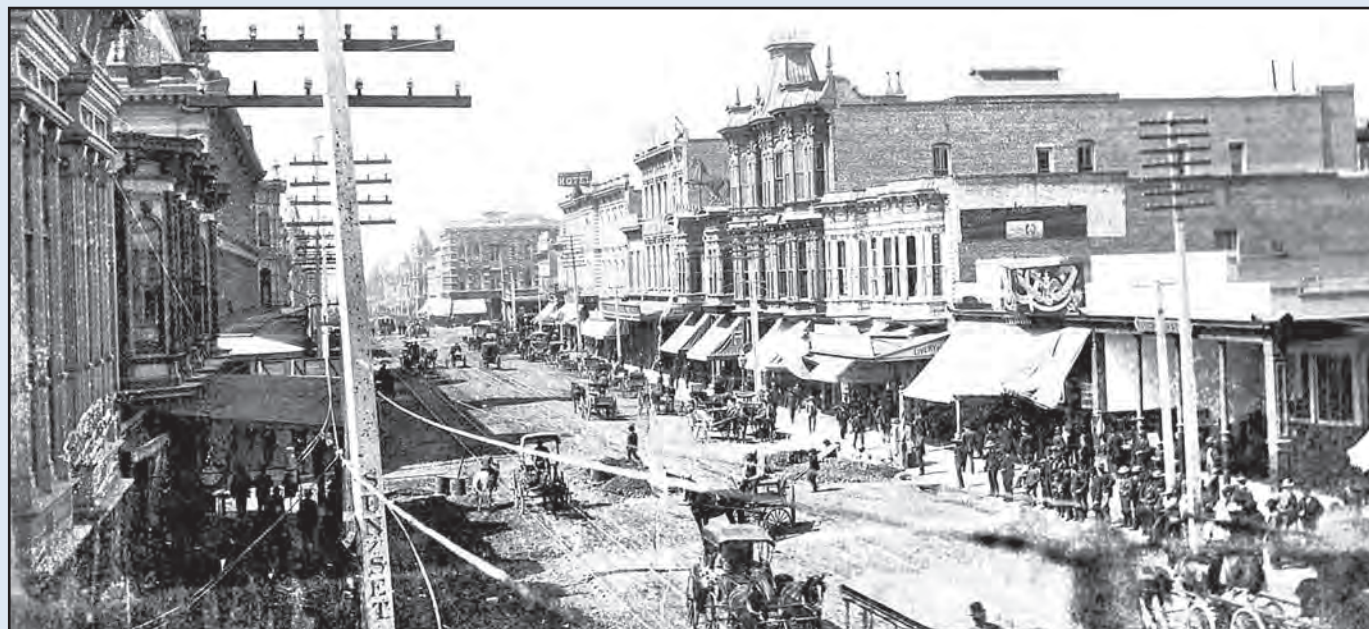


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1883: City Halls and Chain Gangs

■ Here's looking back into the 19th Century, when the City used chain gangs for public works.

Photos courtesy Security Pacific Collection, Los Angeles Public Library photo archive.



A view of North Main Street, 1880.

The definition of chain gangs has always fascinated me. I came upon an article in a volume, *Los Angeles: A Chronological & Documentary History, 1542-1976*, compiled and edited by Robert Mayer, Oceana Publications, Inc., 1978, that provided me with answers I had been searching for. But before I delve into that subject, I would like to give the readers a view of other interesting facts that occurred in the City of Los Angeles also in 1883:

- Twenty people were killed in a railroad disaster at Tehachapi Pass.
- Fifty houses and large sections of vineyards and orchards were washed away by floods Feb. 18.
- In March, the Board of Trade was organized.
- In May, Cameron E. Thom was elected mayor. Cameron E. Thom was a Southern gentleman from Virginia who arrived in Los Angeles in 1854. During the next decade he returned south to fight for the Confederacy during the Civil War. Upon his return to Los Angeles and prior to becoming mayor, he was a City Attorney and Police Judge, and he sat on the Police Commission and then the Board of Freeholders to draft the first home rule



Mayor Cameron Thom.

charter for the City of Los Angeles, which was adopted in 1889. He was also the County District Attorney for four terms. As mayor, Thom was determined that City government should have its own City Hall. The municipal facility was built in 1885, where it sat on Second Street between Spring and Fort (later Broadway) Streets. Its brick and stone façade was crowned with a schoolhouse-style bell tower. But, within two years, City Hall became inadequate for all the services rendered by the municipal government. Population had increased from 11,000 to 50,000. Los Angeles was no longer a dusty pueblo. The third City Hall's location was on Fort Street between Second and Third Streets, and it opened in 1889. The second City hall was sold in 1887 for \$120,000, which assisted in the construction of the third municipal building opening in 1889.

- On Aug. 22, the City Council adopted an ordinance for the establishment of Elysian Park.
- On Nov. 24, the Central Railroad was granted a franchise for a street railway.
- The Historical Society of Southern California was formed in November.
- The Southern Pacific Railroad completed its line to Yuma, where it connected with the Texas Pacific. Los Angeles began enjoying the first direct transcontinental route to the east. The citizens of the City had hoped this venture would favor Los Angeles, but the owners of the railroad had other ideas, and chose San Francisco instead.
- The last volunteer fire companies were organized. One was for the Morris Vineyard Tract and the other for East Los Angeles.
- The French weekly paper *Le Progress* began publication.

Now is the time to return to the original topic under discussion. Chain gangs have been noted a number of times throughout our City history since its founding in 1850. But,

not until 1883 was there an ordinance (Old Series) that provided for the criminals to work on the streets and other public works for the City of Los Angeles.

Ordinance No. 72 (OS), March 3, 1883

"The Mayor and Council of the City of Los Angeles do ordain as follows:

Section 1

That in all cases of the entry of a judgment against any person for any violation of the ordinance of the City of Los Angeles, wherein the said person shall be sentenced to pay a fine, the Court shall have proven to make it a part of the Judgment that the defendant be imprisoned until the fine be paid and satisfied at the rate of one dollar per day; and the court may make it a part of the Judgment and sentence that such person shall perform labor on the streets and other public works of said City, until such fine shall be discharged at the rate of one dollar per day.

For each day which the said person so connected may pass in prison, he shall be entitled to a credit of one dollar upon his fine and he may at any time pay the sum then remaining unsatisfied and obtain his discharge from custody. And in all cases of the entry of Judgment against any person for any violation of the ordinance of the City of Los Angeles wherein the said person shall be sentenced to imprisonment, the said person may be forced and the Court may

make it a part of the judgment that he be forced to perform labor on the streets and other public works, of said City during the time of such imprisonment, provided that in no case shall any person under sixteen years of age or any female be forced to work upon the public works of said City.

Section 2

All ordinances and parts of ordinances so far as they conflict with this ordinance, but no further, shall be, and the same are hereby repealed.

Section 3

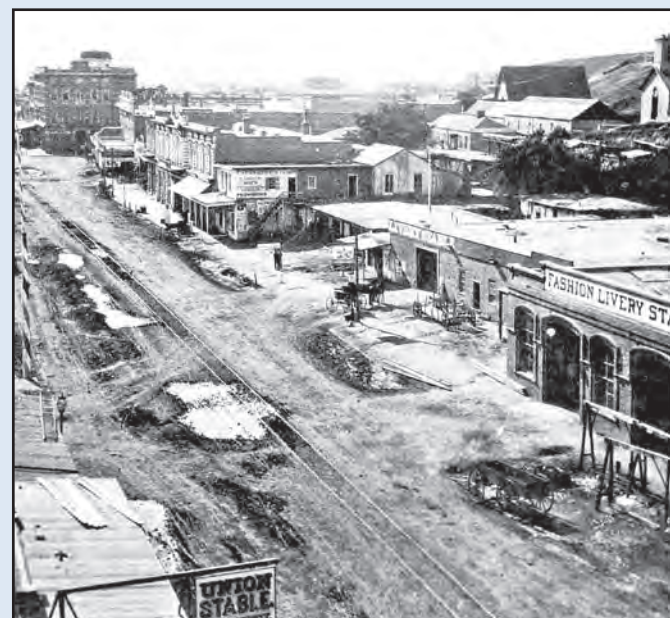
The Clerk of the Council shall certify to the passage of this ordinance and cause the same to be published, once, in the "Los Angeles Daily Herald" and thereupon and thereafter it shall take effect and be in force.

I hereby Certify, that the foregoing ordinance, was adopted by the Council of the City of Los Angeles, at its meeting of March 3, 1883. Signature unknown. On March 5, 1883, Mayor Cameron E. Thom, approved the Ordinance Number 72 (OS)."

Does anyone have information when chain gangs were discontinued in City government? I would appreciate knowing. I can be e-mailed the answer at hyndarudd@att.net. Thank you very much.



1885 Second Street City Hall.



Main Street from the junction with Spring Street at Temple, circa 1870.