# Digging up the Remains of Early Los Angeles:
## The Plaza Church Cemetery

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abstract: Recent construction next to the old Plaza Church in Los Angeles unearthed remnants of a forgotten burial ground where 695 bodies were interred between 1823 and 1844. Data from Franciscan sacramental records in the Huntington Library's Early California Population Project reveal the origins of these people, the migration of diverse Native American peoples to the pueblo, the increasing Indian presence there after 1835, and various aspects of the lives of individuals buried there. This discussion of the burial records pertaining to this one cemetery demonstrates the potential value of the Early California Population Project to research on many aspects of the history of the Spanish and Mexican periods of California history.

*Keywords*: Los Angeles Plaza Cemetery, Indians in Spanish Los Angeles, Early California Population Project, Burial Records

In the winter of 2010, news about excavations and the discovery of human remains in downtown Los Angeles at the site of the new cultural center, LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes, jolted the Los Angeles historical community. In the process of completing

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an outdoor garden plaza at the cultural center, workers unearthed bones from what we now know was Los Angeles's first Spanish[1] cemetery. Apparently administrators of the new cultural center had been led to believe that all human remains had long ago been removed from the cemetery to a different location and thus they had authorized the excavations necessary to complete the garden plaza. In this essay I will not go through all the twists and turns and missteps that led LA Plaza de Cultura y Artes to dig in that place, to continue the work over the objections of Native Americans and *Californio* descendents, and then to store the bones of more than 100 people in bags and buckets at the Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History.[2] Rough drafts of that history have already been written and published in the local media, notably the *Los Angeles Times* and *LA Weekly*, and I think it is still too early for us to fully understand the decisions that preceded the excavations and what happened during the digging.[3]

In this paper I want to turn our attention from the controversy over the handling of the bones unearthed at the plaza cemetery to the cemetery itself, to the people whose bones were probably excavated there, and what this sad story can tell us about the history of early Los Angeles and southern California. I am going to restrict almost all of my comments to the Indians buried in the cemetery. The early Spanish and Mexican residents of Los Angeles have their historians: Michael González, Miroslava Chávez, Bill Mason, Daniel Garr, Antonio José Ríos-Bustamante, Marie Northrop, the late Doyce Nunis and Thomas Owen, and many others have given us an understanding of the origins of the pueblo in Spanish colonial designs and Mexican ambitions.[4] From these outstanding scholars we know how

1. Editor's Note: Although Mexico won its independence in 1821, the news did not reach California until 1822. Thus, projects completed in 1822, such as this cemetery, were still carried out under the Spanish provincial government.

2. Initial reports placed the number of disturbed bodies at 118. Recent estimates are that the remains of some 103 people were removed from the site. David Tarler, Designated Federal Official, NAGPRA Review Committee to Dawn McDivitt, Manager, Capital Projects, Office of the Chief Executive, County of Los Angeles, December 9, 2011.

3. For press coverage of the controversy see, Carla Hall, *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 2011; Carla Hall, *Los Angeles Times*, January 14, 2011; Carla Hall, *Los Angeles Times*, January 15, 2011; Hector Tobar, *Los Angeles Times*, January 21, 2011; Hector Tobar, Los Angeles Times, January 28, 2011; Arnie Cooper, "Bone Bungling at Old Cemetery," *LA Weekly*, April 14, 2011.

4. On the early history of the pueblo, a sampling of the most important works are Michael J. González, *This Small City Will Be a Mexican Paradise: Exploring the Origins of Mexican Culture in Los Angeles, 1821–1846*

the town itself was platted in conformity with Spanish notions of urban planning, how its early residents were racially diverse in ways that mirrored the complicated racial intermixing and typologies of New Spain, and how this small Spanish settlement grew into a vibrant Mexican pueblo.

The plaza and its church (*Iglesia de Nuestra Señora la Reina de Los Angeles*, now often referred to as La Placita) have also received much attention as sites of cultural expression and social interaction. Francis J. Weber, Lisa Kealhofer, Phoebe Kropp, and William David Estrada, each from a different perspective, have brought the early plaza to life, illustrated how it has changed over time, and shown the importance of the plaza to Los Angeles, past and present.[5] From the writings of William McCawley, Bruce Miller, Bernice Johnston, W.W. Robinson, Hugo Reid, George Harwood Phillips, and many others, we also have a sense of the culture of the Gabrielino-Tongva and their interactions with the early Spanish and Mexican settlers of Los Angeles.[6] We know that Indian laborers were central to the

(Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005); Miroslava Chávez García, *Negotiating Conquest: Gender and Power in California, 1770s to 1880s* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2004); Miroslava Chávez, "'Pongo mi demanda': Challenging Patriarchy in Mexican Los Angeles, 1830–1850," in *Over the Edge: Remapping the American West*, ed. Valerie J. Matsumoto and Blake Allmendinger (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 272–290; William Marvin Mason, "Indian–Mexican Cultural Exchange in the Los Angeles Area, 1781–1834," *Aztlán*, 15 (Spring 1984): 125; William Mason, "Fages' Code of Conduct Toward Indians, 1787," *Journal of California Anthropology*, 2 (Summer 1975): 90–100; William Marvin Mason, *The Census of 1790: A Demographic History of Colonial California* (Menlo Park, CA: Ballena Press 1998); Dora P. Crouch, Daniel J. Garr, and Axel I. Mundigo, *Spanish City Planning in North America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982); Doyce Nunis, et al., *The Founding Documents of Los Angeles: A Bilingual Edition* (Los Angeles: Historical Society of Southern California, 2004); J. Thomas Owen, "The Church by the Plaza: A History of the Pueblo Church of Los Angeles," *Southern California Quarterly* (March 1960): 5–28; and Antonio Rios-Bustamante "Los Angeles Pueblo and Region: Continuity and Adaptation in the North Mexican Periphery," Ph.D. Dissertation, UCLA, 1985.

5. Francis J. Weber, compiler and editor, *The Old Plaza Church: A Documentary History* (Los Angeles: Libra Press,1981); Lisa Kealhofer, "Cultural Interaction during the Spanish Colonial Period: The Plaza Church Site, Los Angeles," Ph.D. Diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1991; Phoebe Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); William David Estrada, *The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008).

6. William McCawley, *The First Angelinos: The Gabrielino Indians of Los Angeles* (Banning, CA: Ballena Press, 1996); Bruce W. Miller, *The Gabrielino* (Los Osos, CA: Bruce W. Miller, III, 1991); Bernice Eastman Johnston, *California's Gabrielino Indians* (Los Angeles: Southwest Museum, 1962); Hugo Reid, "Los Angeles County Indians," in *A Scotch Paisano: Hugo Reid's Life in California, 1832–1852*, by Susanna Bryant Dakin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1939); W. W. Robinson, *The Indians of Los Angeles: Story of the Liquidation of a People* (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1952); George Harwood Phillips, *Chiefs and Challengers: Indian Resistance and Cooperation in Southern California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975); George Harwood Phillips, *Vineyards and Vaqueros: Indian Labor and the Expansion of Los Angeles, 1771–1877* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2010).

building of Los Angeles, and that much like today's undocumented workers, they were scorned and dismissed even as they remained indispensible. Despite all of this scholarship we still have much to learn about Indian life in early Los Angeles. And while it may seem odd to try and grasp something of the lives of Indians in early Los Angeles through the burial records of those interred there, that is my challenge in this evening's talk. For, I think that the burial records of the plaza church cemetery provide a very useful, and heretofore unexamined, source for the study of the Indians of the pueblo of Los Angeles. They are an excellent place to begin an inquiry, if for no other reason than they help us realize that the Indians of early Los Angeles were real people, people who came from villages throughout southern California and beyond. They were not simply nameless and faceless Indian laborers, even though that is how they often appear in works on Spanish and Mexican Los Angeles.

To see the richness of these records and the stories they open up, take, for example, the burial record of one Indian woman, Rafaela, who was interred in the cemetery on October 30, 1838.[7] Rafaela was from the Yuma region, and was baptized at the plaza church by Father Geronimo Boscana, one of the most interesting of the Mallorcan missionaries who came to Alta California.[8] At the time of her baptism in August 1829 Rafaela was only seven years old.[9] Rafaela was not the only Yuma-area Indian baptized in the missions of Southern California; there were nearly fifty of these displaced Indians in the California missions. Most likely, Rafaela was taken captive in a military incursion against her people. How Rafaela ended up in Los Angeles is not known, but given her age when she was baptized in the pueblo and the fact that she was baptized without parents, her travels from Yuma to Los Angeles must have involved tremendous disruption and hardship. She was buried by José María Navarro, a man whose life had taken a different course. Navarro was just a ten-year-old boy, not much older than Rafaela, when he came to Los Angeles in 1781, but unlike Rafaela, he came to Los Angeles not

7. As will be discussed below, this paper relies on the plaza church cemetery burial records that can be found online through the Huntington Library's Early California Population Project (ECPP). See ECCP, LA Pueblo Burial 00390, October 30, 1838.

8. On Boscana and other California missionaries, see Maynard Geiger, O.F.M. *Franciscan Missionaries in Hispanic California, 1769–1848* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library Press, 1969).

9. For the baptism of Rafaela, see ECPP, LA Baptism Record, 00170, August 16, 1829.

as a displaced orphan but with his parents and siblings as one of the first settlers of Los Angeles.[10] Navarro did not live his whole life in Los Angeles. But in 1838, when he buried Rafaela, he had been witness to many of the town's transformations. As an adult, José María Navarro buried 149 people in the plaza church cemetery, more than any of the cemetery's other keepers. However, in an ironic twist of fate, we have no record of his own death or the whereabouts of his burial. He disappears from the records after performing his last burial in 1846.

It is not just the Indian burials in the pueblo that carry interesting stories and give us a sense of the tremendous variety of experience in early Los Angeles. Among the cemetery dead are some of our city's most infamous and notorious early residents. They are Gervasio Alipas and his lover, María del Rosario Villa, both of whom were executed in 1836 by vigilantes for the murder of María's husband, who is also buried in the cemetery.[11] Then there is Antonio Valencia, shot in 1838 for the murder of Antonio Águila.[12] Also interred in the cemetery were the criminals José de Jesús Duarte, Ascensión Valencia, and Santiago Linares.[13] Found guilty of having robbed and broken the skull of the German shoemaker and shopkeeper Nicholas Fink, all three were executed and buried in the cemetery in 1841, perhaps not far from their victim.[14]

Not only do the burial records of the plaza church overflow with the final threads of stories like these, but it is through them that we can weave a story about the larger transformations of the pueblo and southern California during the Spanish and Mexican periods. Through these records we can see the tremendous regional and cultural diversity that marked the Indians of early Los Angeles, and we see how, over time, from its establishment in 1781 through the end of the period of Mexican control in 1846, the pueblo of Los Angeles, much like the city of Los Angeles today, was a magnet for

10. José María Navarro came to California with his parents and siblings as part of the original group of settlers recruited to establish Los Angeles in 1781. See Mason, *The Census of 1790*, 40.

11. See ECPP, LA Pueblo Burials 00271 and 00272, April 8, 1836.

12. For Valencia see ECPP, LA Pueblo Burials 00396, November 19, 1838.

13. For Linares, Valencia, and Duarte, see ECPP, LA Pueblo Burials 00046a, 00047a, and 00048a, April 7, 1841.

14. For Fink, see ECPP, LA Pueblo Burial 00035a, January 18, 1841. On this murder, see Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. 4 (San Francisco: The History Company, 1886), 629–630, n. 11.

individuals and families from afar who were seeking a better life. Finally, the cemetery records allow us to see how the overall population of the pueblo changed over time. Through the Spanish era and the early Mexican period, from the early 1780s through the early 1830s, the pueblo population gradually became more and more Indian. At the same time, it became more diverse, shifting from a largely Gabrielino-Tongva population to one composed of Indians from across southern California, especially after mission secularization in the early 1830s. That is the larger story of this talk and the one that emerges so clearly from the sacramental records of early Los Angeles. To begin to tell this story of the transformation of the Indian population in the pueblo of Los Angeles, I start with a very short background on the plaza church cemetery itself. Then I discuss the sources used in this inquiry, namely Franciscan sacramental records and the Huntington Library's Early California Population Project. In parts three and four of the essay, I discuss what those records tell us about the Indians who were buried in the pueblo and how and why the Indian population at the pueblo moved from being Gabrielino/Tongva to one that encompassed Indians from across southern California and beyond.

## 1. The Los Angeles Plaza Church Cemetery

The settlement of the pueblo of Los Angeles began in September 1781 when forty-six racially and ethnically diverse settlers took up residence in what is now downtown Los Angeles. They did so in partial fulfillment of Governor Felipe de Neve's ambitious plan to establish two agricultural communities in California that would liberate Spanish soldiers and settlers in the region from their growing dependence on the Franciscan missions for food. By 1784 there was a simple chapel under construction in the pueblo, and once it was complete missionaries from San Gabriel from time to time officiated there.[15] By 1810, the pueblo's inhabitants were voicing complaints that the missionaries at San Gabriel were too few and too distant to meet their spiritual needs. When the padres pointed out that they had their hands full at the mission, with more than 1,600 resident neophytes by that time, the *pobladores* applied for their own church,

15. My discussion of the early history of the pueblo church is drawn from Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 5–28.

and in 1814 they were given the authority to construct one in the pueblo.[16] Soon, a building was begun, but it was destroyed when the Los Angeles River flooded in 1815.

In 1818 Governor Pablo Vicente de Solá chose a new site for the church, one that would be less vulnerable to flooding. When the settlers themselves did not come up with enough money in the form of cattle to provide for the construction of the church, Father President Mariano Payeras requested alms from the southern missions. The alms came in the form of seven barrels of brandy, which, when sold to the soldiers and settlers of the region, raised money for the missions and gave generations of historians an easy laugh line when they commented on the "spiritual foundations" of the pueblo church.[17]

A master builder designed the pueblo church, but much of the work of constructing it fell to mission Indians, notably those from San Gabriel.[18] In 1821 the missions again contributed commodities, mostly in the form of wine and brandy, to help pay for the construction of the church and goods to furnish it.[19] Construction continued into 1822 with Indian laborers from Missions San Luis Rey and San Diego.[20] And in 1822 the very handy and crafty Joseph Chapman, an English pirate who ended up in southern California, brought the project to completion.[21] It is worth noting that even after the building was dedicated in 1822 the church had no resident priest and thus was served only intermittently by the padres from San Gabriel. From 1832 to 1837, however, Father Alexis Bachelot, a French priest who had recently worked in Hawai'i, took up residence as the priest in the pueblo. But after his return to Hawai'i in 1838, the pueblo was once again without a priest.[22]

16. In 1814 Mission San Gabriel's population was listed as 1679. "The Resident (Existentes) Neophytes of the California Missions," *HSSCQ,* 1950, Vol. 40, 145–148.

17. Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 9.

18. Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 10, says that Mission San Gabriel charged $155.81 at one *real* a day for the laborers. This sum suggests that laborers from Mission San Gabriel worked about 1,240 labor days on the pueblo church. See also Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. 2:123. For the professionals who may have laid out the plan and supervised construction, and for the Indian labor, see Mardith K. Schuetz-Miller, *Building and Builders in Hispanic California, 1769–1850* (Tucson: Southwestern Mission Research Center, and Santa Barbara: Santa Barbara Trust for Historic Preservation/Presidio Research Publication, 1994), 22–25.

19. Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 10.

20. Ibid., 15 cites Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. 2: 128.

21. Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 15.

22. Ibid., 21. On Bachelot, see Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. 3: 317–318.

Attached to the pueblo church were two cemeteries, which spared the pueblo residents from carting their deceased ten miles to Mission San Gabriel, as they had done for forty years between the establishment of the pueblo in 1781 and the consecration of the plaza church

The cemetery on the south side of the Plaza Church was in use from 1823 to 1844. In this photograph, taken about 1870, the burial ground, with its trees and walkways, is visible over the wall.
*Title Insurance / C.C. Pierce Photo Collection, Courtesy Libraries of the University of Southern California*

in 1822. At first, the plaza church cemetery was along the northern wall of the church. Once this area was filled, bodies were interred on the southern side of the church.[23]

## 2. The Plaza Church Burial Records and the Early California Population Project

To determine who was buried in the plaza church cemetery, we turn to the baptism, marriage, and burial registers produced by the Franciscans of Spanish and Mexican California. Missionaries in California were required to keep records for all Indians affiliated with the missions and

23. Owen, "The Church of the Plaza," *HSSCQ*, 22–24.

for the region's Spanish and Mexican population, all of whom were at least nominally Catholic. Thus, whenever the missionaries in California baptized, married, or buried an individual, they recorded, to the best of their abilities, that individual's birthplace, age, parents, marital status, children, siblings, godparents, Spanish name, and any other information they deemed unique or relevant. They also assigned individual baptism, marriage, and burial records a unique number. Because the separate baptism, marriage, and burial registers for all of California's twenty-one missions are largely complete, consistently thorough, and in many ways cross-referenced, records from different missions and registers can be linked and sorted by individual. And this is what we have done in the Early California Population Project, a major Huntington Library-based project that I have been affiliated with as General Editor since the project's inception. All basic data entry for the project was completed in June 2006, and the project went online soon thereafter.[24] The project has records on about 101,000 baptisms, 28,000 marriages, and 71,000 burials performed in California between 1769 and 1850. The database encompasses records from all twenty-one of the California missions, in addition to the Los Angeles plaza church (1826–1848) and the Santa Barbara Presidio (1782–1848).[25]

These records reveal that there were some 695 people buried at the plaza church between January 1823, when the cemetery was consecrated, and November 1844, when a new burial ground was opened at another location. This was by no means the first cemetery in Los Angeles nor by any measure one of its largest. California Indians had been burying their dead in burial grounds in this region for many thousands of years. And the cemetery of Mission San Gabriel was in use as early as 1774; by 1850 San Gabriel was the final resting place for more than 6,000 baptized Indians.

Most of the dead interred at the plaza church cemetery were California Indians. Some 388 Indians were buried at the site compared to some 307 non-Indians. But if the cemetery had opened and closed earlier, its records would tell a different story. Until the onset of mission

24. The ECPP is available through the website of the Huntington Library, its host and sponsoring institution. See: http://www.huntington.org/Information/ECPPmain.htm

25. For more information on the ECPP, see Steven W. Hackel, "Transforming an Eighteenth-Century Archive into a Twenty-First Century Database: The Early California Population Project," co-authored with Anne Marie Reid, *History Compass*, Vol. V, 1013–1025; and Hackel, "Early California Population Project Report," *Journal of California and Great Basin Anthropology*, Vol. XXVI, 71–74.

secularization in the early 1830s, most of the people buried at the cemetery were *gente de razón,* mixed-race soldiers and settlers whose origins can be traced to Sonora and Sinaloa.[26] Before 1835, burials of *gente de razón* in the plaza church cemetery outnumbered Indians buried there 147 to 112. After 1835 Indians buried outnumbered settler burials 258 to 144. Clearly, after the mid-1830s not only the pueblo but its cemetery was becoming more Indian. Unfortunately, the recent excavations of the human remains at the cemetery are unlikely to ever tell us much about the ways in which these bodies were actually placed in the plaza church cemetery, but one wonders if the increasing numbers of Indians in the cemetery led to changes in mortuary practices after the mid-1830s.

The burial records of the pueblo cemetery reveal that many of the 388 Indians buried there came from all over southern California, which is no surprise given that the Los Angeles pueblo during the 1830s and 1840s was a magnet for Gabrielino-Tongva, Diegueño, Juaneño, Luiseño, and Serrano families, as well as individuals from these and other groups. Table 1 presents a rough breakdown of the origins of the Indians buried at the plaza church cemetery, and it reveals the wide distribution of the origins of those buried there.

When the general categories are consolidated, as shown in Table 2, it is clear that the majority of the Indians buried in the plaza church cemetery originated in the region between Los Angeles and San Diego. The plaza church burial records reveal that a third of the Indians buried in the cemetery whose origins are known were probably Gabrielino-Tongvas; they were local Indians who had been baptized at Missions San Gabriel or San Fernando or at the plaza church. Roughly a quarter of the Indians buried in the cemetery had moved to the pueblo from Missions San Juan Capistrano or San Luis Rey. Another 17 percent of the adults had come from Mission San Diego. And 6 percent had ventured north from Baja California.

One of the central factors that marked Indian communities in Spanish California was extremely high infant and childhood mortality.[27] Thus, if the pueblo was anything like a mission, one would expect to find that a large number of the Indians buried there were children.

26. On the racial and cultural ideas of the early Spanish inhabitants of Los Angeles, see Mason, *The Census of 1790*, 45–64.

27. On Indian mortality in the California missions, see Hackel, *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Relations in Colonial California, 1769–1850* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 96–123.

**Table 1. General Origins of Indians Buried at the Plaza Church**

| General Origin | Number in Burial Reg. | Number Recorded Elsewhere | Total | % of Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Apache | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| Baja California | 23 | | 23 | 5.93% |
| Los Angeles | 88 | 2 | 90 | 23.20% |
| Santa Barbara | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| San Buenaventura | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| Santa Clara | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| San Diego | 61 | 4 | 65 | 16.75% |
| San Fernando | 4 | 2 | 6 | 1.55% |
| San Gabriel | 25 | 10 | 35 | 9.02% |
| San José | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| San Juan Capistrano | 31 | | 31 | 7.99% |
| San Luis Rey | 57 | | 57 | 14.69% |
| Sierra | 2 | | 2 | 0.52% |
| Sonora | 2 | | 2 | 0.52% |
| Ute | 1 | | 1 | 0.26% |
| Yuma | 6 | | 6 | 1.55% |
| Unstated | 65 | 0 | 65 | 16.75% |
| Totals | 370 | 18 | 388 | 100.00% |

**Table 2. General Categories of Indians Buried at the Plaza Church**

| General Category | Number | % of Total |
|---|---|---|
| Gabrielino-Tongva | 131 | 34% |
| Luiseño | 57 | 15% |
| Juaneño | 31 | 8% |
| Diegueño | 65 | 17% |
| Other | 39 | 10% |
| Unknown | 65 | 17% |
| Totals | 388 | 100% |

In fact, this is the case. While it is impossible at this time with this data to determine the mortality rates of Indians in the pueblo and compare them to those in the missions, it seems noteworthy that in the pueblo cemetery 44 percent of the Indians buried were children. At nearby Mission San Gabriel, the percentage of Indian burials in the cemetery that were children was nearly identical, 43 percent. The similarity in these figures does not mean that Indians in the pueblo suffered the same debilitating mortality as those in the missions. To determine that we would have to know a lot more about the Indian families in the pueblo, especially the number of children born there. But the percentage of all Indians buried in the plaza church cemetery who were children does suggest that life in the pueblo may not have been much healthier than in a nearby mission, and that is tragic because missions were exceptionally unhealthy.[28]

## 3. The Pueblo of Los Angeles as a Site of Indian Labor

As noted above, the plaza church burial records of Indians clearly show that the burials in the pueblo cemetery fell into two main

28. There is an extensive literature on Indian population decline in the missions of California. Among the most important works are Hackel, *Children of Coyote*, 65–123; Sherburne F. Cook, *The Conflict Between the California Indian and White Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Sherburne F. Cook, *The Population of the California Indians, 1769–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976); Robert H. Jackson, *Indian Population Decline: The Missions of Northwestern New Spain, 1687–1840* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1994); Cook and Borah, "Missions Registers as Sources of Vital Statistics," in *Essays in Population History, Vol. 3, Mexico and California*, ed. Sherburne F. Cook and Woodrow Borah (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 177–192; and James A. Sandos, *Converting California: Indians and Franciscans in the Missions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 111–127.

categories, those from 1823 to 1835 and those from 1836 to 1844. Before 1836, most of those buried in the cemetery were soldiers and settlers and nearly all the Indians buried in the cemetery were local Gabrielino-Tongvas who came to the pueblo as laborers. After 1835, however, the pueblo increasingly became a site for Indian laborers from throughout southern California, and these Indians began to dominate burials at the pueblo church cemetery. Significantly, before 1836 Indian laborers came to the pueblo despite the wishes of the missionaries; afterwards they came to the pueblo because the missionaries had lost control over Indians in the missions. To see how the secularization of the missions, the padres' loss of control over the Indians at the missions, and the Indians' calculated flight from missions to the pueblo played out across southern California, let us turn more closely to the data. From 1826 to 1835, there were around seventy-five Gabrielino-Tongvas buried in the cemetery as compared to sixteen Diegueños, Luiseños, and Juaneños. But between 1836 and 1844, the figures became reversed. In this second period, there were only forty Gabrielino-Tongvas buried in the cemetery as compared to 144 Diegueños, Luiseños, and Juaneños. The numbers of Gabrielino-Tongvas buried did not decline on an annual basis; but the numbers of Indians from the southern missions increased dramatically over the years.

The origin of this situation can be traced to the first days of the pueblo. Not long after its establishment in 1781, the settlers of Los Angeles developed a quick dependence on Indian laborers, and this accounts for the earliest Indian burials at the pueblo cemetery.[29] In the fall of 1784 Gabrielino-Tongvas laborers harvested for the settlers large quantities of corn, kidney beans, wheat, lentils, and garbanzos that they had helped plant in the pueblo's fields for the *pobladores*.[30] Soon, the expansion of the settlers' fields and the steady increase in their livestock imperiled the Gabrielino-Tongvas and compelled them to work for the settlers year round.[31] Thus, what began as seasonal labor for the Gabrielino-Tongvas soon became a part of

29. Mason, "Indian-Mexican Cultural Exchange," 123–124; Hackel, "Land, Labor, and Production: The Colonial Economy of Spanish and Mexican California," in *Contested Eden: California before the Gold Rush*, ed. Ramón A. Gutiérrez (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 127–128.

30. Ortega to Pedro Fages, April 18, 1784, Los Angeles, Archives of California, Bancroft Library, CA 22: 176–77; Ríos-Bustamante, "Los Angeles, Pueblo and Region," 110.

31. On these processes, see Hackel, *Children of Coyote*, 65–80.

their year-round work regimen. There are no reliable estimates of the number of Indian laborers in the pueblo of Los Angeles during the Spanish period. But by the mid-1790s, labor relations between the Gabrielino-Tongvas and the Spanish had led to considerable acculturation between the Indian and Spanish communities. Many Gabrielino-Tongva laborers spoke some Spanish and a few dressed like their employers.[32]

Only the Franciscans, as far as we know, objected to the working relationships between Indians and settlers in Los Angeles. The padres knew that the settlers offered material incentives to attract Indians as laborers; most likely they offered the Gabrielino-Tongvas a combination of food, clothing, and glass beads. These likely incentives would have been attractive to the Gabrielino-Tongvas, especially if they considered that their work for the *pobladores* would allow them to remain somewhat independent of Mission San Gabriel, where baptism required, at least in the padres' eyes, an eventual renunciation of many aspects of native life. The attractions of the pueblo to native laborers led Father Francisco Fermín Lasuén to conclude that the pueblo of Los Angeles was "an immense hindrance to the conversion of the pagans, for they give them bad example, they scandalize them, and they actually persuade them not to become Christians, lest they themselves suffer the loss of free labor."[33]

One of the most explicit statements of how the Gabrielino-Tongvas and the settlers of the pueblo of Los Angeles came to depend upon each other came from Father Vicente de Santa María. Santa María had been sent by Father Lasuén to explore territory between Missions San Buenaventura and San Gabriel with an eye toward locating a desirable place for the establishment of a new mission, the one that would be established in 1797 and named San Fernando, Rey de España. Toward the end of his short diary of the expedition the padre concluded, "I observed [that] the whole pagandom, between this Mission [San Buenaventura] and that of San Gabriel, along the beach, along the camino real, and along the border of the north, is fond of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, of the rancho of Mariano Verdugo, of the rancho of Reyes, and of the Zanja. Here we

32. See Mason, "Indian-Mexican Cultural Exchange."

33. Lasuén to Don Jacobo Ugarte y Loyola, October 20, 1787, Mission San Carlos, *Writings of Lasuén*, Vol. 1: 168.

see nothing but pagans passing, clad in shoes, with sombreros and blankets, and serving as muleteers to the settlers and rancheros, so that if it were not for the gentiles there would be neither pueblo nor rancho."[34]

In 1804, Fray José Miguel of San Gabriel wrote to Raymundo Carrillo, *alcalde* of Los Angeles, about the growing community of unbaptized Indians who had moved to the pueblo. Carrillo had reported that 200 Indians were now in or around the town, and Miguel replied that there was nothing he could do about it. Father Francisco de Sarría also believed that the pueblo allowed the Gabrielino-Tongvas to avoid the missions. He argued that the pueblo of Los Angeles had become a gathering place for the unbaptized. To Sarría, these independent Indians had "closed their ears" to the missionaries, as if the padres had spoken with "venomous tongues."Although Sarría was a master of hyperbole and often had a cynical and dismissive view of Indians, he correctly understood that Indians chose to work on ranchos and in the pueblo to avoid life at the missions. It was this calculus that drew so many Gabrielino-Tongvas to the pueblo of Los Angeles before 1836, and it helps explain why so many ended up in its cemetery.

## 4. After Mission Secularization: The Second Period of the Pueblo Cemetery

Beginning in 1836, not only did Indians begin to outnumber the settlers in the cemetery, but the origins of the Indians buried in the plaza church cemetery shifted as Gabrielino-Tongvas were suddenly outnumbered by Diegueños, Luiseños, and Juaneños. Mission secularization and the expansion of viticulture in the pueblo explain both of these shifts. Missions San Diego, San Juan Capistrano, and San Luis Rey were secularized in 1834. During secularization the missionaries were stripped of their authority over the daily lives of Indians, and in most missions they were replaced by secular priests who administered sacraments but oversaw little else. The secularization of these three missions meant that around 5,000 Diegueños, Luiseños, and Juaneños affiliated with them were not only free to leave the missions but faced difficult prospects if they stayed. Few

34. Zephyrin Engelhardt, *San Fernando Rey: The Mission of the Valley* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1927), 9.

Indians received mission land or livestock during secularization. Nearly everything of value in the missions went to the Californios who were appointed to administer them. Tragically, with the onset of secularization, thousands of Indians faced the same challenges that an earlier generation of Indians had confronted when their villages became no longer viable after the onset of Spanish colonization and the revolutionary forces it brought to Alta California. A generation or two before secularization, many Indian villages and their communities had been overrun by livestock and disease, and survivors had opted for life in the missions, where they had learned different modes of production and subsistence. Now, with the onset of secularization, many southern California Indians would make a second migration, this time to the pueblo of Los Angeles. Hugo Reid captured this migration when he recalled in 1852 that after secularization Indians of "San Diego, San Luis Rey, and San Juan Capistrano overran this country, filling the Los Angeles and pueblo surrounding ranchos with more servants than were required."[35] What led so many Indians to believe that they would find employment in the pueblo is not known, but this migration suggests previously unstudied networks of communication between Indians throughout southern California. Perhaps the Diegueños, Luiseños, and Juaneños had heard of the town's suddenly expanding and expansive vineyards, which counted tens of thousands of vines by the later 1830s and early 1840s, and the growing need for hands to tend the vineyards.

As I have been suggesting, during this second period of the pueblo of Los Angeles, the Indian population increased dramatically. In 1830 there were already several hundred Indians living and working in the pueblo and its surrounding ranchos.[36] By 1836, some 553 Indians worked in the pueblo and its neighboring ranchos.[37] By 1844, this figure was at least 650 and perhaps higher.[38] And this is significant, for it means that the pueblo of Los Angeles in the late 1830s was one of the most diverse Indian communities ever in southern California history. There was no other time when Indians from so many different parts of the state lived and worked in proximity to one another.

35. George Harwood Phillips, *Vineyards and Vaqueros*, 175.

36. Hackel, "Land, Labor, and Production," 136.

37. Los Angeles Census of 1836.

38. It seems possible that some of the pages of the Los Angeles census for the year listing Indian residents of Los Angeles have been lost. Los Angeles Census of 1844.

In California, Indians from different villages had long exchanged marriage partners. And missions, of course, were composed of Indians from many different linguistic and cultural groups, but the Los Angeles pueblo after secularization was even more diverse. It pulled in Indian people from greater distances than any single mission ever did. Thus, the plaza church cemetery not only contains Indians from throughout southern California, but it was the place of burial for Indians from the Colorado River area, Baja California, Sonora, as well as Missions San Fernando, San Buenaventura, Santa Clara, and San José. One man, identified as Manuel Guillermo and buried in September of 1836, was identified as Apache.[39] Why and how he came to the pueblo of Los Angeles is not known, and neither are the circumstances of his death.

Though outnumbered, the settlers buried in the pueblo of Los Angeles after secularization were also a diverse and varied group, and their names, from Juan Alvarado to Juana Yorba, are a roster of the early Spanish and Mexican families of Los Angeles. While many of the dead were born in Los Angeles, others came from afar, from places like Mexico City, Sonora, Sinaloa, Guadalajara, Baja California, and even New Mexico. Antonio López came from Portugal, and Thomas Brown hailed from Ireland.[40] Like the Indians who moved to the pueblo of Los Angeles these settlers had come to the pueblo in search of work and opportunity. Many did so because they had no better option. Thus, long before Los Angeles became the cosmopolitan and international city that it is today, it was marked by many levels of diversity, which we still know too little about.

The influx of Indians and foreigners into the pueblo precipitated several developments, many of which are related, and all of them mark another step in the pueblo's movement towards the exclusionary behavior that would mark Mexican-Indian relations in Los Angeles during the 1830s and 1840s. Together they led to the closure of the cemetery, which brings us to the end of our story. As their numbers grew in the pueblo during the 1830s, Indians in the pueblo were increasingly seen by town fathers as unruly. They were forced

39. ECPP, LA Pueblo Burial 00289, September 22, 1836.

40. For Lopéz, see ECPP, Burial Record 00027b, December 19, 1840, and for Brown see ECPP, Burial Record 00174, January 28, 1833.

to live in a single village where their activities could be closely monitored. And their village was steadily condemned as a place of vice. Indians of the town were forbidden from bathing in the central irrigation ditch or using it to wash their clothes, even though with their own labor they had constructed and maintained the *zanja*. Eventually, the Indian village associated with the pueblo was razed, and the Indians of the pueblo were relocated to another site across the river. All of these events are related. As the town grew, it became more diverse. As life in the pueblo became more complicated, some leading and influential residents found it increasingly uninhabitable.

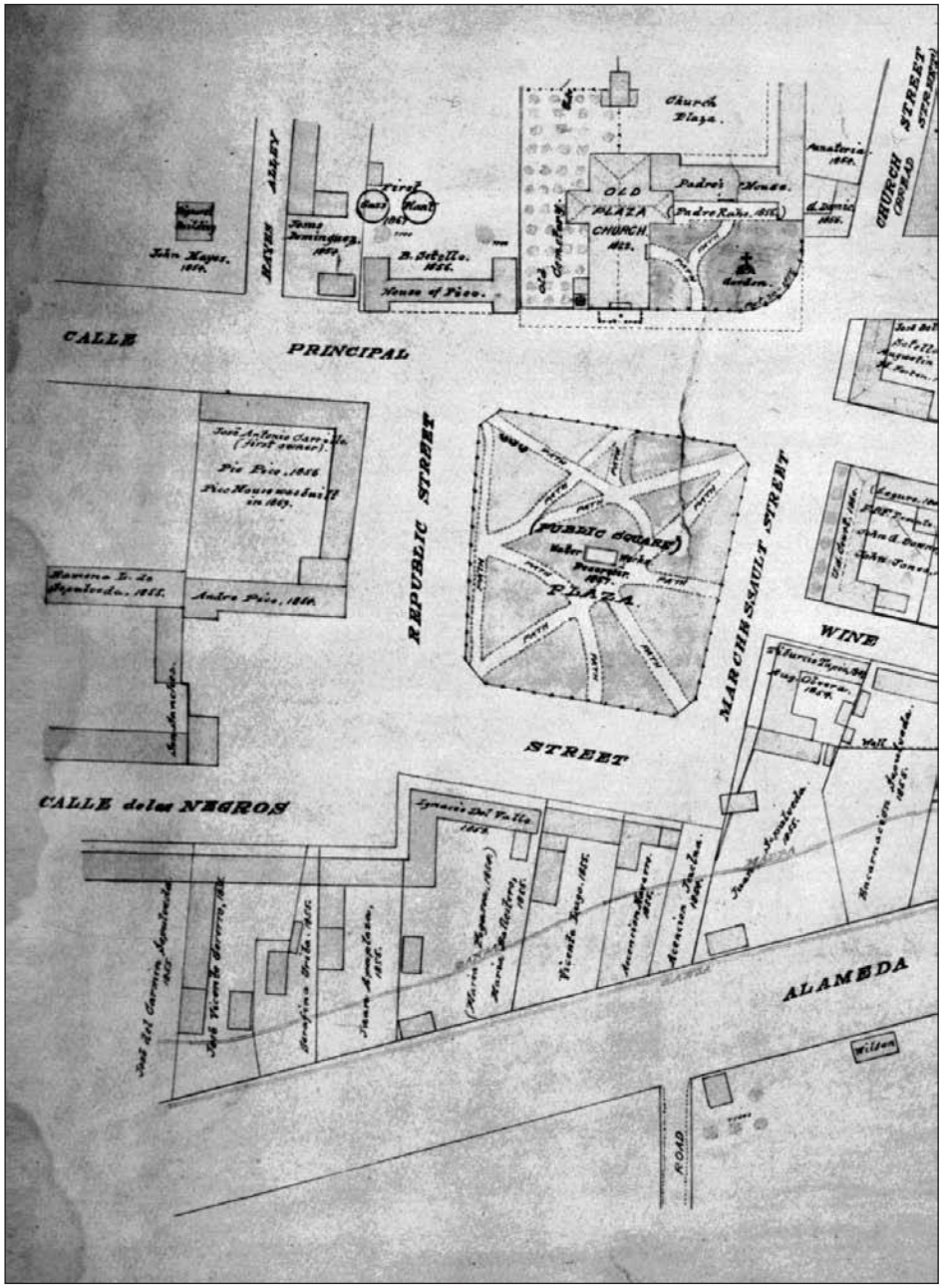
The plaza church cemetery was a focal point of these new tensions. In 1837, Father Bachelot reported that the cemetery was too small and needed to be enlarged.[41] The following year, a group of settlers, perhaps the same ones who wanted the Indian village moved across the river, petitioned the town council, "asking that the cemetery be removed from inside the city . . . as the place where it is now situated is very injurious to the health."[42] In 1839, some settlers in Los Angeles complained again to the town council that the plaza church cemetery was "inadequate" and "endangering the health of the community."[43] Finally, in 1844, the council set aside some one hundred *varas* of land for a new cemetery, a short distance from the city, at the foot of the hills. It seems that the new Catholic cemetery was opened and consecrated in November of 1844, much to the relief of some of the town's non-Indian residents, who had claimed that in the old one, "a grave cannot be made, without the corrupt miasmata, offending the neighborhood."[44] But one wonders, what was so offensive about the previous location to the sensibilities of the town's leaders. Was it that the former cemetery was full of decaying corpses or was it that the cemetery was increasingly full of Indian bodies? Moreover, perhaps the cemetery had become a place of reverence for Indians, as more Indians were laid to rest in the plaza church cemetery. If so, the cemetery itself was a potential gathering ground of people whom the town leaders wished to keep at arms' length. It seems noteworthy that in December of 1844, just a month

41. Edwin H. Carpenter, *Early Cemeteries of the City of Los Angeles* (Los Angeles: Dawson's Book Shop, 1973), 12.

42. Ibid., 12–13.

43. Owen, "The Church by the Plaza," 23.

44. Carpenter, *Early Cemeteries of the City of Los Angeles*, 13–14.




Between 1837 and 1844, some Angelenos pressed to close the plaza church cemetery. But, although a new cemetery was opened outside the town center in 1844, the bodies previously buried there were not reinterred in the new graveyard. In this 1873 survey map of the plaza area, the lot on the south side of the church is labeled as a cemetery with rows of crosses representing the graves.
*Solano Reeve Collection. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library.*

after the new cemetery was opened, the town council subdivided the new cemetery: one section was for the ministers, another was for "vaults and monuments," and the remainder of the land was for the Indians.[45]

Historian Thomas Owen, writing in 1960, suggested that in 1844 human remains were moved from the old cemetery to the new one.[46] But this looks more like a baseless assumption than a fact-based conclusion. Nothing in the historical record states that any remains were in fact ever moved from the old plaza church cemetery to the new one. Settlers who wanted Indians out of the center of Los Angeles were not likely to have taken the time to dig up Indians' bones and carry them across town for reburial. Moreover, given that the digging at the old cemetery required by each new burial was seemingly causing offense to those nearby, and that the summer of 1844 saw an outbreak of smallpox in Santa Barbara, it seems very likely that city officials wisely chose to leave the bodies in the old cemetery alone. Over time, the assumption that the bones in the old cemetery were moved became wishful thinking. A garden was planted on top of the cemetery. Eventually that garden gave way to a parking lot. And the bodies of the Indians and others interred in the old plaza church cemetery were left largely undisturbed until the winter of 2010 when workers for the Plaza de Cultura y Artes excavated the site. Today a new garden likely sits atop one half of Los Angeles's first cemetery. The other half of the cemetery, at least the last time I was there, was covered by a temporary tarp, a sad and inelegant shroud for many of the first residents of Los Angeles.[47]

45. Phillips, *Vineyards and Vaqueros*, 194.

46. Owen, "The Church by the Plaza," 23.

47. As this article goes to press the controversy over the remains excavated at the site continues. The Los Angeles County Museum of Natural History has taken over custody of the remains, and the County has tried to determine the best way to reinter the remains. All parties involved agreed not to perform any sort of invasive tests on the remains excavated at the site. While this makes good sense, it rendered it impossible to determine if in fact the remains removed from the site are those of Native Americans even though there is little doubt that that is in fact the case. Given that the remains are of uncertain origin, they cannot be classified as Native Americans, as NAGPRA (the federal law) defines that term. Thus, the Interior Department has ruled that NAGPRA is not the overarching legislation that will govern the reinterment of the remains. With this ruling, the County of Los Angeles is now free to follow state and local laws and guidelines in the reinterment. This process has been rendered more controversial by the fact that so many of the California Indian groups who believe that their ancestors were buried at the plaza church cemetery have no federal recognition and thus seem to have no legal standing in this dispute.