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FRANCISCAN FRIARS IN SACRAMENTO

By Father Claude F. Riffel, OFM, pastor of St Francis Church, printed in the October 28, 1976 issue of the *Catholic Herald*

This year marks the 750th anniversary of the death of St. Francis of Assisi, founder of the Franciscans, who have long been associated with the history of California and Sacramento. They established the first settlement in California at San Diego in 1769. The chain of Missions eventually reached to Sonoma. When Mexico declared its independence and secularized the Missions, a gradual decline began until just a handful of Franciscans remained at Santa Barbara. It appeared they would soon fade from the scene.

But with the influx of settlers to California, the bishops found themselves hard-pressed for priests to care for their fast-growing flocks. In 1894, eight years after Bishop Patrick Manogue was transferred to the newly established Diocese of Sacramento, he wrote the Franciscans in St. Louis, Missouri, asking them to take charge of a new parish he intended to establish in Sacramento.

The Provincial Chapter decided to accede to the bishop's request and Father Augustine McClory, OFM was assigned to the new foundation. He arrived on October 14, 1894 and temporarily took up residence at the Cathedral, then the only parish in Sacramento. He began a census and a search for property.

Finally the land on the southwest corner of 26th and K was chosen and purchased in December of 1894. The property had a small two-room house, so Father Augustine moved there with Father Pius Nierman, OFM, his assistant, and Brother Wendelin Hottinger, OFM. A second parish in Sacramento was a reality.

Brother Adrian Wiewer, OFM, was chosen as architect for the new church and friary. His plans were approved and a contract was awarded for \$14,000. During the construction the parish celebrated Mass in the Union Hall at 20th and O Streets, the first Mass of the new parish being held on January 20, 1895. Ground was broken for the new plant on February 7, 1895. Bishop Manogue died just three weeks later. So the new church and friary were blessed by Father Thomas Grace on May 24 of that year.

Apparently the parishioners of that time were far-sighted. With the completion of the church a two-room school was built which opened for classes on November 7 of that same year. Sisters of Mercy from St. Joseph Academy were the first teachers. But six years later enrollment had increased so much at St. Joseph's that Mother Vincent informed the pastor that the Sisters could no longer continue at St Francis.

In August 1901 the Franciscan Sisters from Stella Niagara, New York arrived to staff the school. A new convent awaited them. This year marks the seventy-fifth anniversary of their coming. The parish was only ten years old when it was realized that the new church was too small for the growing parish which took in such a large area. The boundaries were the levee on the north, 18th Street on the west, on the south a line just north of Freeport and indefinite on the east. So plans were started for a new church, under the direction of Father Godfrey Hoelters, OFM, who was pastor.

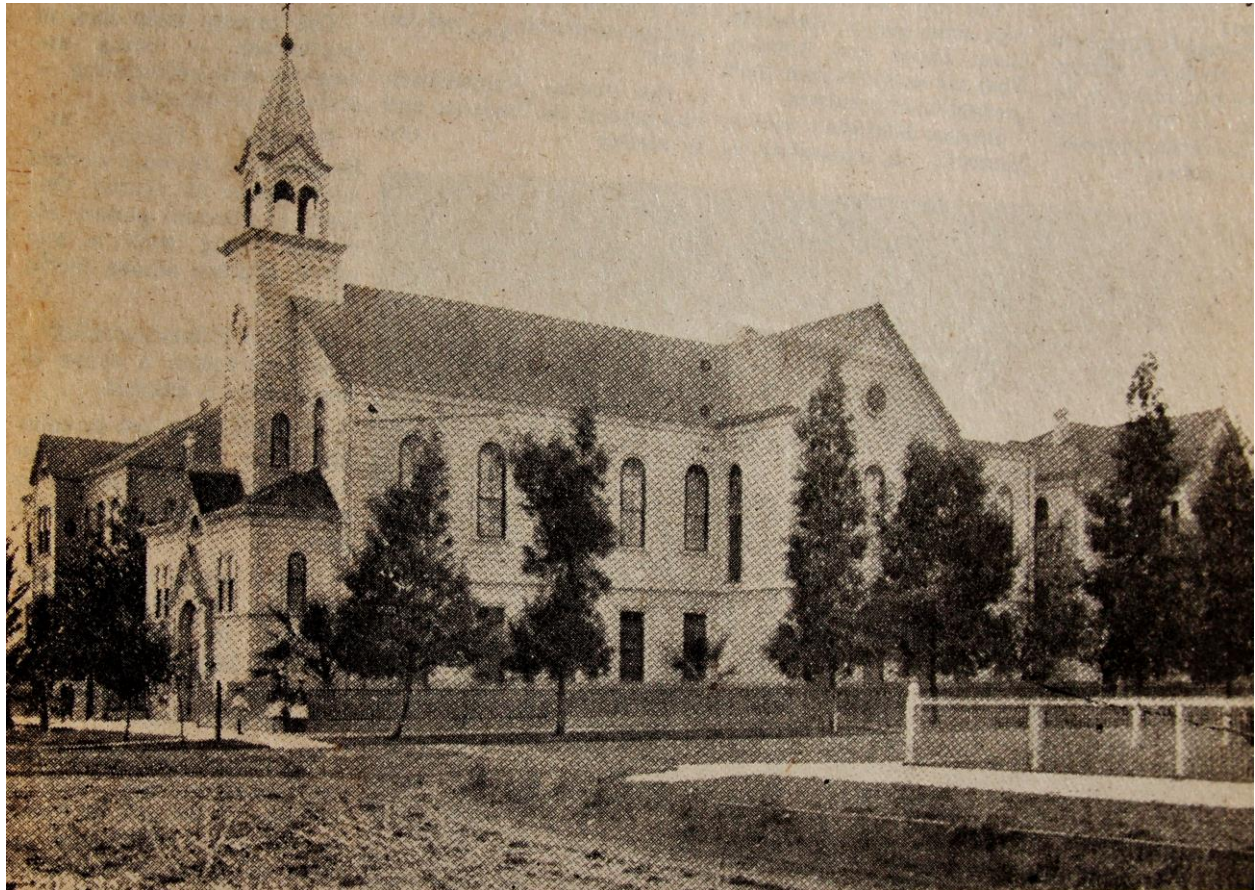


Photo from the Diocesan Archives

The First St Francis Church on 26th and K Streets, Sacramento

Brother Adrian Wiewer, OFM, though now a jubilarian, was chosen as architect. He drew the plans for the present church. In the fall of 1908 the cornerstone was laid, and two years later, on October 18, 1910, the new church was dedicated. In 1924 a new school was built along 25th Street. On the site of the old school the present Friary was constructed in 1925.

In 1951 a new convent was built, for with the growth of the parish, the school grew rapidly also. In 1943 a high school department for girls was added to the elementary school. The high school continued until the opening of Bishop Armstrong and later of St. Francis High at 60th and M



Photo by John E Boll 2012

St Francis of Assisi Parish Complex Today, 2012



The great affection and esteem of the Franciscans for the people of Sacramento is shown in the fact that, though they have Friaries in the seven western states, they chose St. Francis in Sacramento as the site for their novitiate in 1969. The novitiate remained here until this year when it was transferred to Oakland. This was a decision regretfully made because the reason for it was that there was not sufficient room in the Friary for the class of eleven novices together with the parish staff.

As the Franciscans begin their eighty-third year of service to the people of the Capitol City, it is with a deep sense of gratitude to the clergy, sisters and people for their support, encouragement and cooperation – and a firm hope of much history yet to be recorded.