

# Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II

---

Volume 27

Article 7

---

2022

## Notre Dame/Our Lady: The Economic Origins of Multilingual Education at a Bay Area Catholic School

Bianca Romero

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Romero, Bianca (2022) "Notre Dame/Our Lady: The Economic Origins of Multilingual Education at a Bay Area Catholic School," *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II*: Vol. 27, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarcommons.scu.edu/historical-perspectives/vol27/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Historical Perspectives: Santa Clara University Undergraduate Journal of History, Series II* by an authorized editor of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact [rscroggin@scu.edu](mailto:rscroggin@scu.edu).

## **Notre Dame/Our Lady: The Economic Origins of Multilingual Education at a Bay Area Catholic School**

**Bianca Romero**

Passing through downtown San Jose today, it is unlikely the average passerby would notice the 170-year-old institution at the intersection of Second and Reed streets. Like the school, the city of San Jose too has changed vastly in the last 170 years, welcoming new development, people, and ways of life as the valley has aged. In 1851, when Notre Dame High School first opened, the city of San Jose was itself in the midst of great cultural and demographic shifts. In the wake of the 1849 gold rush, white Americans flocked to northern California with hopes of finding wealth. While California was a new frontier ready for development for many of its newest settlers, the state was already home to a large and established population of previously Mexican citizens, their civil organization, and culture. New white immigrants imagined the Californios of the area as incredibly foreign-- they were Catholics and ranchers with no conception of private property and its deliberate fenced markers. Gradually, white Americans disenfranchised the original Spanish inhabitants to take their wealth and land and to thoroughly Anglicize the area. It was at this turning point in California history that the Sisters of Notre Dame arrived to educate future generations of Catholic women, including both new immigrants and the long established Californios.<sup>1</sup> Amidst cultural tension and at points, inexcusable violence, the Sisters of Notre Dame in San Jose educated Mexican-American and white students alongside each other and in the face of competing cultural forces. Ultimately, the economic sway of the previously established Californios established an initial space of integration that disappeared with their wealth and power in the area.

---

<sup>1</sup>Stephen J. Pitti, "Prologue: The Devil Defined, " in *The Devil in Silicon Valley: Northern California, Race, and Mexican Americans* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 26.

In this essay, the term Mexican-American refers to individuals native to California of Spanish and Native American descent, also known as Californio/a(s). By the late eighteenth century, few residents of Santa Clara county were of pure Spanish blood as defined by Spanish racial delineations.<sup>2</sup> It is safe to assume that most Californios were of mixed descent with variance among their proportions Indian or European heritage. The term white, or white American refers to European immigrants or American immigrants of European descent. Though at this point in America at large, the monolithic white identity was less common and some European immigrants faced discrimination from Nativist groups. It is especially important to consider that “In the 1840’s and 50’s American ideologies of race grouped Mexicans with Indians as nonwhites.”<sup>3</sup> Legally, Mexican-Americans were considered white, however they were set apart because social ideology imagined them as foreign. Due to a lack of demographic information, my conclusions about the school’s ethnic composition are merely informed by the names of students. Those with Spanish names I have dubbed Mexican-American, though there may be more or less ethnically Hispanic or Latino students because of this inferential error. Limited records and unclear and sometimes contradictory racial categories further complicate each student’s background.<sup>4</sup>

Much of my research in establishing the overarching context and narrative of the Sisters of Notre Dame at San Jose, is informed by two books chronicling the history of the Sisters on the West Coast. The first, *In Harvest Field by Sunset Shores*, is viewed as a nostalgic account of the Sisters' work and was published in 1934. This source is generally regarded as less reliable by those familiar with the archive because of its glorification of the Sisters' work,

---

<sup>2</sup> Pitti, “Prologue,” 14.

<sup>3</sup>Pitti, “Prologue,” 30.

<sup>4</sup> Gregory Rosenthal, "Nahoa's Tears: GOLD, DREAMS, AND DIASPORA IN CALIFORNIA," In *Beyond Hawai'i: Native Labor in the Pacific World*, (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018. Accessed July 5, 2021): 132-65, 164.

evident even in the title, though it does provide greater detail on the years preceding their arrival in San Francisco. The overt bias of this book can be linked to the author's membership as a sister in the congregation. Her pride shines through in her historicization, celebrating the 84th anniversary of the sisters in San Jose. The second book, *A Light in the Valley*, was published in 1967 and is regarded as the authoritative source on the Sisters in San Jose. This book was written and researched by Mary McNamee, also a sister at Notre Dame. This source is more exhaustive and considerably less biased, nevertheless, her linkage to the school is evident in her glorified framing of the school's history.<sup>5</sup>

The order of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, founded in 1804, are a group committed to the education of women to this day. The foundress of the Sisters of Notrer Dame, Saint Julie Billiart, was a devout Belgian peasant who lived through the French Revolution. Saint Julie was specifically concerned with the education of poor girls who could not otherwise afford an education. In 1844, the order expanded beyond Europe when a delegation of Sisters from Belgium took the perilous journey around Cape Horn. They hoped to establish the first women's institutions west of the Mississippi river and bring their mission to the Western United States. Initially working in Oregon, the Sisters established schools at two sites. They established a school for orphans and French-Indian children in Saint Paul and a boarding and day school for young women in Oregon City.<sup>6</sup> The dearest cause to those early pioneers was the conversion of Native Americans to their Catholic faith. On their voyage to the Americas, "hours were spent in study of the English and of the Indian

---

<sup>5</sup> These books proved vital in constructing the surrounding context of the premiums, ledgers, and rosters which make up the majority of my inquiry and analysis. Secondary sources chronicling the school's early history are extremely limited as a result of the equally limited research in this archive.

<sup>6</sup>Mary Dominica McNamee, *Light in the Valley* (Berkeley, CA: Howell-North, 1967).

language.”<sup>7</sup> In order to more efficiently spread the Catholic religion, the Belgian Sisters learned English and Native American languages from a Native American teacher on board the ship, evidence of their dedication to evangelization. From the start of their mission, sisters viewed multilingualism as a tool of their cause, learning and adapting to their target group.

Alongside this main mission, there are descriptions of Sisters teaching housekeeping and other domestic skills to their pupils. Though this may have been reflective of the social status of these students, the historian has framed it as a request of their French-Canadian fathers. Another important aspect of the sister’s educational praxis to this day is their affirmation that they teach students “what they need to know for life”; this was how they adjusted their curriculum for each school and student body. In 1849 the discovery of Gold marked a turning point in American history at large, but also in the history of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the West Coast. Faced with the allure of California Gold, Oregonians left en masse in hopes of making their fortune. This mass emigration from Oregon shocked the Sisters. Fortunately, the Bishop of San Francisco invited them to move and serve a different emerging community. The Sisters built their school in San Jose in the hopes of creating a formal settlement and educating the women in the area.

Before the school officially opened, the Sisters stayed with the prominent Californio Sunol family. Their first four students were taught in the Sunol house, mostly in Spanish. Their shared Catholic faith was a likely motivator for the Sisters’ engagement with the Californio population. This marked a change in the Sisters’ mission because Californio families were highly prejudiced against Native Americans and would not permit them to be educated alongside their daughters at the school in San Jose. Additionally, the heavy biases of Californio and white families, the

---

<sup>7</sup>Sarah-Alice Katharyne Quinlan, *In Harvest Fields by Sunset Shores: The Work of the Sisters of Notre Dame on the Pacific Coast* (San Francisco, CA: Gilmartin Co., 1926.) 53.

school's main benefactors, against Native Americans, likely prevented the Sisters from recruiting Native American students for their new school. It is also likely that the Sisters had to cater to different demographics at their school in San Jose since there were only 157 Indigenous people in all of Santa Clara county when the school opened.<sup>8</sup> With the move of their physical location, the demographics surrounding the school shifted as well. With an extremely limited Native American community, the Sisters turned to the pre-existing Catholic community in San Jose to establish their school for young women.

There was one known Native American student. She is not present in the school's records because she attended for only a few weeks, however, her autobiography revealed she was briefly enrolled at Notre Dame San Jose. As a child, the esteemed Native American author Sarah Winnemucca enrolled at Notre Dame with her sister, but they were forced to leave by Californio families.<sup>9</sup> In her autobiography, *Life Among the Piutes*, Sarah Winnemucca explained, "We were only there a little while, say three weeks, when complaints were made to the Sisters by wealthy parents about Indians being in school with their children. The Sisters then wrote to our friends to come take us away, and so they did."<sup>10</sup> Her very brief description of these events does not provide great detail to the nature of her time there and there are no records from the Sisters to add additional context, other than the girls' forced removal. It is the current belief at the Sisters' archive in Belmont that the Californio families pushed out the Winnemuccas, but there is no written evidence that confirms this. Considering this event in the greater context of California history, Mexican-American and white Californians held many prejudices Native Americans. The

---

<sup>8</sup> In the early 19th century cholera and smallpox outbreaks ravaged the Native population. The threat of disease met with the imposition of Spanish colonial forces in culture and labor.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Looms, "Unfortunate Era at Historic S.J. School," *Mercury News*, 1975.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, *Life Among the Piutes: Their Wrongs and Claims* (Bishop, CA: Chalfant Press, 1969,) 70.

monetary sway of these students as benefactors of the school likely meant the Sisters had to maintain their contentment, despite their initial interest in teaching Native Americans. In the very least, this instance reflects a racial hierarchy at the school that placed white and Californio students above Native Americans, despite the Sisters' original evangelizing intentions in America.

For a significant amount of the nineteenth century, schooling was conducted in both Spanish and English. The program for the 1853 commencement exercises lists a Senior class and a separate Spanish class.<sup>11</sup> A prospectus from the 1891-92 school year lists the cost of attendance, graduation, outcomes, and school rules in both English and Spanish.<sup>12</sup> They received separate awards and are referred to on the premium as “the spanish students.”<sup>13</sup> The program lists many awards and distinctions outside of their recognition of the Spanish students, but few of the Spanish students received recognition outside of their specific distinction. There are many allusions to the prominence of both languages in secondary accounts, though with an air of disdain, such as the, “Spanish Young Ladies’ were adamant; they must be taught in their native tongue.”<sup>14</sup> Sister McNamee in her framing of the early curriculum upheld that the Spanish mothers wanted their daughters educated in different arts. They asked specifically for their daughters to be taught domestic arts such as embroidery and crocheting over composition or music. She framed their preferences in such a way that the Spanish students wanted to receive an entirely different education from the other girls. Such domestic classes are listed in many of the premiums from the school in the nineteenth century. The convergence of several testimonies on the subject of the Spanish curriculum maintains the narrative that Spanish students asked to be taught separately. Sister McNamee explained that after the leave of the native Spanish

---

<sup>11</sup>“Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>12</sup>“School Handbook” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>13</sup> “Commencement Program Listing Students’ Names and Accolades” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>14</sup> McNamee, *Valley*, 47.

teacher, a Belgian sister was taught Spanish by her pupils in order to continue Spanish instruction. This seemed contradictory, however, especially considering another prospectus explained that, “French, German, and Spanish are taught by native teachers,” which seems to mean native speakers of those languages.<sup>15</sup> By 1862, the separate Spanish Division was dissolved, however, the school continued to offer a parallel Spanish curriculum and continued to print official documents in both languages.<sup>16</sup>

As the school and city grew, more white students enrolled. Many of the white students were of Irish, Belgian, and French descent. Many of the students shared a common Catholic background that likely motivated their choice to enroll at Notre Dame. In 1862, of the 196 pupils listed on the school premium, 23 had Spanish last names.<sup>17</sup> The format of the prospectuses varied from year to year. The 1857, 1864, 1865, 1866, and 1867 prospectuses list students' countries of origin and included students from Mexico, Chile, Peru, Vancouver Island, France, Belgium, Ireland, England, and Australia. Others list only the students' names. Any foreign students were likely white, or at least incredibly wealthy, in order to afford boarding school in another country. However, this prospectus evidences that in addition to the Californio students, students from other parts of Latin America attended Notre Dame and likely took advantage of the Spanish division. This program, though segregated, must have been somewhat prestigious in order to attract wealthy international students.

One article analyzing the diary of a Santa Clara College student touches upon the cultural climate at Notre Dame from an outside perspective. A scholar's comments on the journal explained, “At nearby Notre Dame College, a ‘state of cold war’ raged in the 1850s between Californio and Anglo Students. Raised in home environments that protected them from the world, the

---

<sup>15</sup> “Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>16</sup> “Commencement Program for the 1853 School Year” (San Jose, n.d.).

<sup>17</sup> “Commencement Program Listing Students' Names and Accolades” (San Jose, n.d.).



Spanish-speaking young woman felt ‘ill at ease’ among less restrained ‘yanquitas’”, meaning yankee women.<sup>18</sup> This testimony from a man at a similar Santa Clara county Catholic institution offers an outsider’s look into the contemporary climate at the school. The article argues that because women were raised at home, and thus less exposed to other people and cultures, the women at Notre Dame faced greater cultural conflict. This is one critical analysis of the Mexican-American families' request for separate instruction. Not only was there a language barrier, but there was mutual disdain among the Mexican-American and white students. These two analyses of the Spanish curriculum offer two stories behind this separate division, one of cultural tension and the other of accommodation. It seems both the Californio community and the white community at Notre Dame were wary of each other, and asked for separate schooling to avoid the corrupting forces of the opposite culture. In short, wariness of new white American culture in conjunction with fear of losing their cultural identity inspired Californio families to request a separate Spanish curriculum.

On the other hand, in the face of prejudice towards Californios in tandem with their declining economic sway, it was remarkable that the Sisters included Spanish students in their school and accommodated their requests. With the increasing white population who systematically disenfranchised Californio families, one would imagine that supporting this group so fervently might mark some sort of allegiance. Regardless, the sisters Other interesting points of consideration are the ways the Sisters did not force English upon the Mexican-American students. As a new part of the United States, classes were conducted predominantly in English. Students all studied an additional language and had a choice between French, German, and Spanish. Second language requirements were the same for Spanish students, however, their

---

<sup>18</sup>Jesús María Estudillo and Gerald McKeivitt, "Hispanic Californians and Catholic Higher Education: The Diary of Jesús María Estudillo, 1857-1864," *California History* 69, no. 4 (1990): 328.

language of instruction was Spanish and English was a second language option. As Belgian immigrants who represented a linguistic, ethnic, and religious minority in the fast-growing state, perhaps the Sisters had less interest in foisting English upon the Mexican-American students. Both Sister McNamee and historian Gerald McKeivitt conceded that Mexican-American students were wary of their white peers.

Without testimonies from the students themselves it is impossible to know whether Spanish students found a welcome community at Notre Dame college. The present archive of student testimony of the Bay Area Sisters housed in Belmont is largely a result of Sr. McNamee's research for her book. From that collection, there are several letters from a student named Isabel Ramirez which offer insight into the experiences of Californio students at Notre Dame. Isabel wrote a letter to her godfather, the benefactor of her education that follows, "My dear God father I have the pleasure to inform you that I am very much pleased with my situation. I make much progress in my study, and now I am in the first class of the elementary school it seems to me I will improve very much because I do all in my power to learn my lessons to accomplish your desires."<sup>19</sup> It is important to consider that all letters were monitored by the Sisters, meaning any complaints Isabel may have had could have been censored by herself or the Sisters. However, her pleasant experiences at the school were upheld by her Granddaughter who shared, "Isabel was the first pupil from Southern California enrolled at Notre Dame college in San Jose. ... In later days she loved to recall her convent school days and told us how kind the Sisters were to her and how the parents of her classmates often invited her to their homes and treated her as a daughter."<sup>20</sup> As an adult, Isabel fondly recollected her time at the academy. It appears she was a beloved pupil and was warmly regarded by the families of her peers. Eventually,

---

<sup>19</sup>Isabel Ramirez (San Jose, CA, n.d.).

<sup>20</sup> Mary E Valla (Los Angeles, CA, n.d.).

Isabel's family ran out of money to send her to Notre Dame, which forced her to return home. At minimum, boarding students had to pay \$92.50 to attend Notre Dame, accounting for the entrance fee, the year's tuition, and a quarterly physicians fee. After California became a state, the mass immigration of white Americans devastated the pre-existing "Mestizo Bourgeoisie."<sup>21</sup> Many white Americans arrived in Silicon Valley, squatted on land, shot or stole grazing cattle, or manipulated the cultural disparities between Spanish and Anglo views on private property to take Californio land.<sup>22</sup> In the 1860's Mexican-American land ownership dropped from 129 families to 63 and forced many to become wage laborers.<sup>23</sup> In the early years of the school, Californio wealth had significantly greater sway. They were the long established land owning families who had already made their fortunes. However, over the course of the first two decades, Californio families became increasingly disenfranchised, lost their wealth, and could no longer afford such luxuries like private boarding school. This likely explains the declining Mexican-American population at Notre Dame.

Among Isabel's letters is a note she received from a classmate at Notre Dame. The letter, written on a paper doily, was the only correspondence between Isabel and one of her peers. The letter to Isabel follows,

Dearest Isabelita,

how happy I feel to address you these few lines to tell you that I am enjoying good health and I hope you will be the same, Dear friend I would like to receive a letter from you but I think you have forgotten me, as for the first time I write to you I cannot make it longer. Sister Mary Cornelia and Sister Mary sends [sic] their love to you and of the [sic] young ladies. Josefina

---

<sup>21</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 20.

<sup>22</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 35.

<sup>23</sup>Pitti, "Prologue," 39-40.

Delgado sends her best respects. Sofia sends her best respects to you. From your dear friend Rebecca Hanks

P.D. querieda [sic] Isabel Mariquita está muy triste de no haber recibido carta de ti y así Querida Isabelita dispénsame lo mal escrita que está.<sup>24</sup>

Clearly Isabel was dearly missed by her peers, including her white friend Rebecca Hanks. Their relationship then is indicative of friendships among Spanish and Anglo students at Notre Dame. Additionally, the Spanish postscript implies a familiarity not only with Isabel, but with her culture that is a true testament to their friendship. Students could learn Spanish as an additional language, this served as a possible vehicle for cultural exchange as it may have facilitated greater mutuality among Mexican-American and white students. It is possible that the relationship between Isabel and Rebecca was an anomaly. The social climate at the time, especially among new immigrants to the area, was highly informed by anti-hispanic sentiment.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, some students did form bonds amidst this period of hatred and mutual disdain among the Mexican and white communities. At the same time, such relationships were evidence for those who opposed integrated classrooms because they facilitated multicultural solidarity.

The Sisters' archives have little to no records from the students. As a result, it is unclear whether Isabel's experience was an exception or the status quo for the experience of Spanish students at Notre Dame. Fortunately, their founding parallels that of Santa Clara university in 1851. The schools' shared Catholic identity links their history in Santa Clara County and offers insight into the experiences of Californios who attended both schools. An analysis of a journal written by a young Californio who attended Santa Clara College mentions Notre Dame academy several times. Jesus Maria Estudillo, the journal's owner, frequented the campus

---

<sup>24</sup> Rebecca Hanks (San Jose, California, n.d.).

<sup>25</sup> Pitti, "Prologue," 26.

at Notre Dame. The article shaping his experiences explains that, “with acculturation as their ultimate objective, Catholic bishops and educators created primary and secondary schools and colleges that met the needs of post conquest Californios.”<sup>26</sup> Immigrants themselves, the Jesuits at Santa Clara helped their students transition to the newly Anglicized state. Notre Dame’s curriculum, as the women’s institution in the area, is generally regarded as a parallel to the acculturation approach that the Jesuits took for women. Meaning, Catholic education in California generally aided in the assimilation of pupils to the dominant culture. However, the Spanish curriculum at Notre Dame preserved Spanish language and culture for the young ladies in the program. The girls learned every subject, including history, math, and science, in their language. The Spanish curriculum made space for instruction in their own language, despite the diminishing Californio influence in the area. Over the course of the nineteenth century, as Californio families lost considerable wealth and influence, many families could no longer afford Notre Dame’s boarding school. Eventually, the Spanish division was completely dissolved and classes were conducted in English.

The first few decades at Notre Dame reflected the history of San Jose in the mid nineteenth century as a moment of cultural and economic transition. Segregation in and of itself suggests discriminatory practices, however, it appears that the Mexican-American families’ wariness of white classmates informed this request. While it is highly likely the white families held their own prejudices, there is no evidence that they asked the Mexican-American students to be segregated. Eventually, the separate Spanish curriculum was dissolved and schooling was conducted in English only. However, there are decades of Spanish language documents at the school, drafted to accommodate a multilingual student body. With the waning wealth and influence of Mexican-

---

<sup>26</sup> Estudillo, *Diary*, 321.

Americans in San Jose, economic forces likely pushed out many of the Spanish speaking students, which limited their influence at the school. Nevertheless, the institutional initiatives to accommodate Mexican-American students' educational endeavors conveyed a sense of multicultural solidarity among the varying Catholic demographics in Notre Dame's initial student bodies.