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## SITE OF EARLY LOS ANGELES

*Ruth E. Baugh*

TWO maps of early Los Angeles help interpret conditions that influenced selection of site for its original settlement: first, the plan of the pueblo as sketched by Jose Argüello in 1786—five years after the founding—on the occasion of the assignment to the colonists of town lots and planting fields; second, the plan of the city in 1849, as surveyed by Lieutenant Ord of the United States Army.

Argüello's sketch demonstrates the simple plan of the customary Spanish colony adapted, obviously, to the particular conditions of the Los Angeles site; Ord's map, strikingly similar, shows functions of the city sixty-eight years after establishment of the pueblo.

Of great interest today is the fact that the area of parent settlement, the subject of these two early maps, is still nucleus of twentieth-century Los Angeles. The Civic Center now under development contains the parent core, notwithstanding a tremendous enlargement of the city's area in recent years.

The pueblo of Los Angeles was one of three civilian settlements founded in Alta California, to provide agricultural produce for presidios which were being established along with missions for the control of Spain's important north-western frontier. Of the two colonies surviving the vicissitudes of early infancy, San Jose, the first to be organized, was planted in the fertile Santa Clara Valley south of San Francisco Bay, and received its settlers in November, 1777. A third civic community, Branciforte, was founded in 1797 near the site of the present city of Santa Cruz, but soon passed out of existence. Four years elapsed before arrangements

were concluded for the founding of the second colony, although the location of the southern settlement had been chosen by Felipe de Neve, governor of Alta California.

The site of the southern pueblo, the broad terrace of the Rio Porciuncula, was located only nine miles west of the Mission San Gabriel. Here, in 1769, Don Gaspar Portola, on his northward journey in search of Monterey Bay, had halted "to reconnoiter the country, and above all else to celebrate the jubilee of Our Lady of the Angels of Porciuncula." ("Porciuncula was the name of a town and parish near Assissi which became the abode of Saint Francis after the Benedictine monks had presented him, about 1211, with a little chapel which he called in a jocular way, *La Porciuncula* [the small portion]" Nellie Van de Grift Sanchez, *Spanish and Indian Place Names of California*, p. 51, San Francisco, 1914.) The diarist of the expedition, Padre Crespi, noted in his journal, the charms of this locality: "We entered a very spacious valley, well grown with cottonwoods and alders, among which ran a beautiful river from the north-northwest, and then doubling the point of a steep hill, it went on afterwards to the south. Toward the north-northeast; there is another river bed which forms a spacious water-course, but we found it dry. This bed unites with that of the river, giving a clear indication of great floods in the rainy season, for we saw that it had many trunks of trees on the banks. We halted not very far from the river which we named Porciuncula. Here we felt three consecutive earthquakes in the afternoon and night. This plain

where the river runs is very extensive. It has good land for planting all kinds of grain and seeds, and is the most suitable site of all that we have seen for a mission, for it has all the requisites for a large settlement. . . . After crossing the river we entered a large vineyard of wild grapes and an infinity of rose bushes in full bloom. All the soil is black and loamy, and is capable of producing every kind of grain and fruit which may be planted. We went west, continually over good land well covered

with grass." (Fray Juan Crespi, Missionary Explorer of the Pacific Coast, 1769–1774. Translation of diary by H. E. Bolton, pp. 147–149. University of California Press, 1927.)

Padre Crespi's account doubtless influenced Governor de Neve's choice of site for the southern pueblo. For twelve years the place had borne the name "Our Lady of the Angels of Porciuncula," and this name which was later applied to the pueblo was, in its abbreviated form, inherited by the

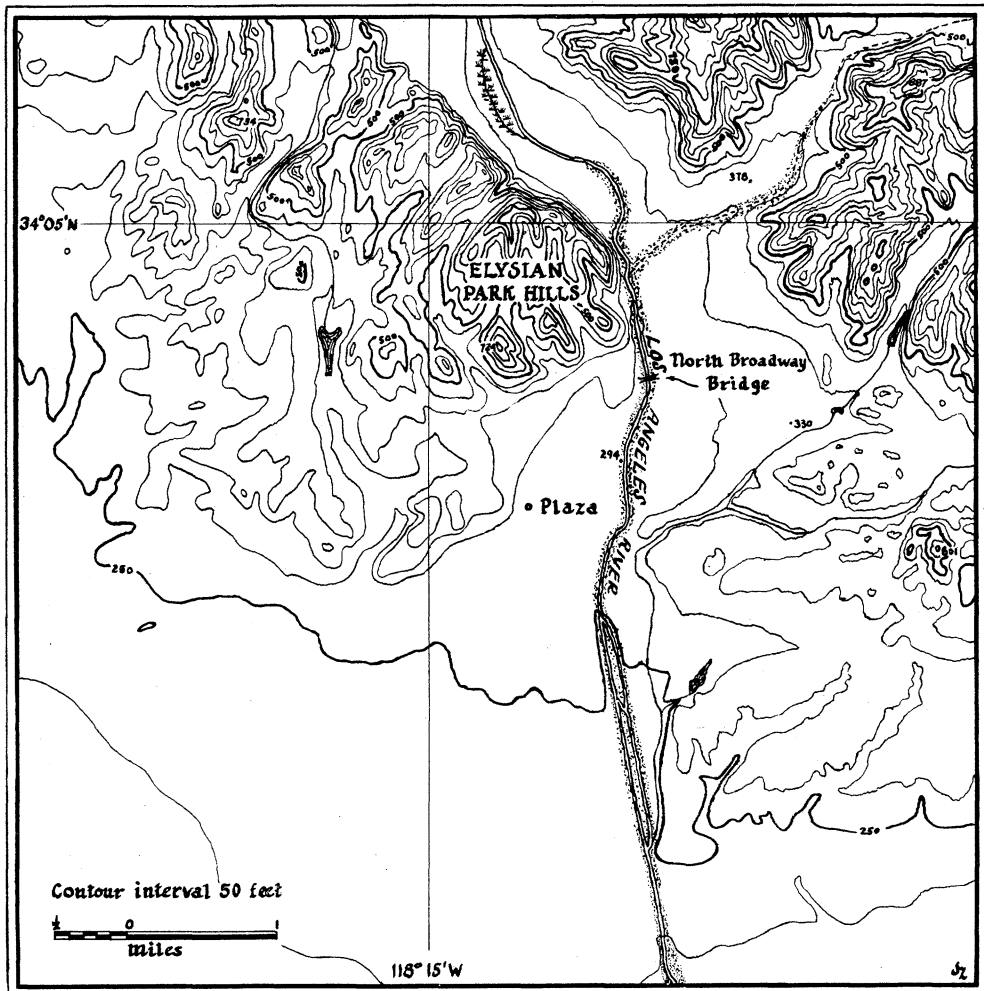


FIGURE 1.—Topography of central Los Angeles showing river, terrace, and hills of the site of the early settlement. The entire area included in this map is today the nucleus of the city of Los Angeles. (Adapted from U. S. topographic map, Los Angeles quadrangle, edition of 1900.)

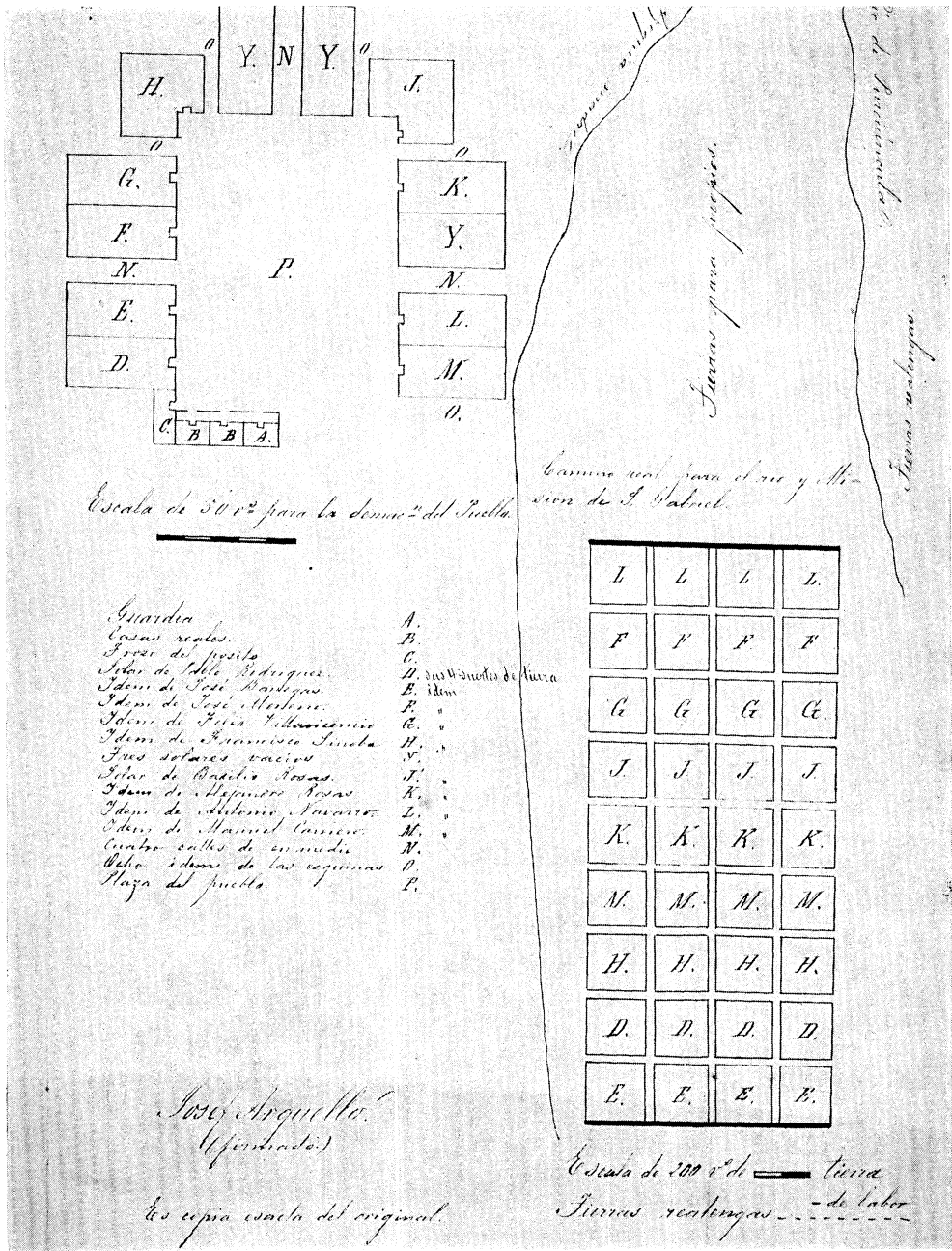


FIGURE 2.—Plan of the Pueblo of Los Angeles. Copy of the original sketch executed in 1786 by Jose Arguello on the occasion of the assignment to the colonists of the town lots and planting fields in accordance with Governor de Neve's Reglamento of 1781. The *propios* or municipal lands, the rents of which were used to defray pueblo expenses, lay between the Rio de Porciuncula (Los Angeles River) on the right, and the *aquequia madre* (mother ditch) in the center of the sketch. Fronting the plaza (P) were the house-lots and spaces reserved for municipal buildings. The King's Highway connecting the San Gabriel Mission enters the plaza at O. The names of the nine heads of families to whom lands were granted are here listed. The scale used in mapping the pueblo proper is four times larger than that used for the fields. (From the Provincial State Papers, Archives of California. Tom. III-IV, p. 55. Bancroft Library, University of California.)

city of Los Angeles. With this location in mind, the governor prescribed the conditions for the settlement:

"For the establishment of the Pueblo of Los Angeles, near the river Porciuncula, and on the land designated for this purpose, there shall be included all the lands that may be benefited by irrigation. There shall be marked out the best place to construct the dam in order that the water may be distributed to the largest extent of land.

"The site where the Pueblo is to be established shall be marked out, on land slightly elevated, exposed to the north and south winds. Measures shall be taken to avoid the dangers of floods; the most immediate vicinity to the river, or vicinity to the principal zanja shall be preferred; taking care that from the Pueblo the whole or greatest part of the planting lands shall be seen." (Order of Governor Felipe de Neve for founding of Los Angeles. Translation by Phil Townsend Hanna in the Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California. Vol. XV, Pt. I, pp. 154-155. 1931.) To this site, two leagues west of San Gabriel, a small group of Spanish soldiers escorted the forty-six settlers who had been recruited in northern Mexico, and with fitting ceremony formally founded on September 4, 1781 *El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora La Reina de los Angeles*.

The area chosen was eminently satisfactory for an agricultural colony. If at first the land yielded poor returns, the cause lay in unskilful cultivation and not in adverse natural conditions. Rainfall was far from adequate, it is true, but the *pobladores* were accustomed to an even scantier precipitation in the Sonoran desert. Spanish officials and Franciscan friars were familiar with the moisture deficiencies of the Mediterranean climate and knew the requisite

agricultural practices, particularly that of irrigation, utilized in the European homeland to overcome the handicap of a long, dry summer. Thus water was the critical factor in agricultural production on this Pacific Mediterranean littoral, for without it even this fertile soil would yield but a niggardly return. The determining element, therefore, in the pueblo's location, was the presence of a small stream.

The Rio Porciuncula (Los Angeles River) enters the plain a few miles above the town site, discharging a clear rivulet from the saturated gravels which underlie the San Fernando Valley. The stream constitutes the overflow from a subterranean reservoir; hence its volume, though meager, was fairly constant as far down as the pueblo. Below that point it diminished in volume and finally was lost in the sands of the deep gulch in which it is entrenched. Occasionally, however, swollen by torrential winter rains, it became a turbulent river and occupied its arroyo from bank to bank.

To escape the winter floods and to facilitate the distribution of irrigating water, the pueblo was laid out on the broad terrace about half a mile west of the arroyo's edge. A simple dam was constructed two miles upstream where the river rounded the steep bluff of the Elysian Park Hills, and from this point water was diverted into *zanjas*, thence on to the high level of the terrace and to the pueblo and planting fields beyond. Here the ground was level, but with sufficient slope to insure good drainage. (Figure 1.)

The intermediate location of the terrace between the entrenched river on the east, and an irregular line of hills rising abruptly on the west, hemmed in the little settlement and created an easily defensible site, an advantage which fortunately was not put to the

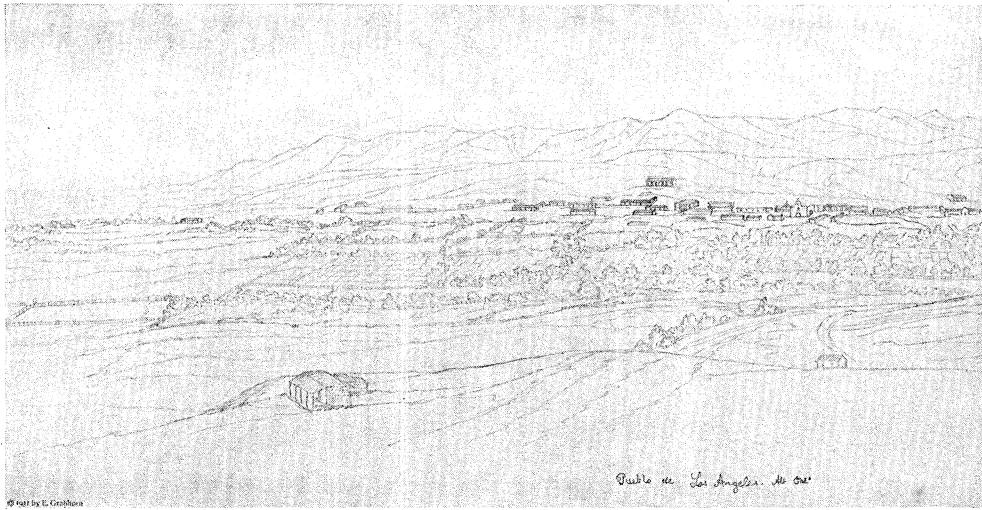


FIGURE 3.—The plan of the city of Los Angeles in 1849, as surveyed and drawn by Lieutenant E. O. C. Ord of the United States Army. Ord's map includes a part of the area shown on Argüello's sketch. The point of intersection of the two coordinate lines of the Ord map is the parish church which fronted the plaza in 1849, as it does today. This location, however, is not identical with that of the original plaza because the pueblo in the early years of its history was forced to move back from the river to escape destructive winter floods. Vineyards and gardens occupied the entire area of the level terrace between the river and the main irrigation ditch, whereas the newly plotted business and residential district was laid out near the base of the hills. The piedmont road in the left center of the map is the Spanish trail which Portola followed in 1769 on his march northward in search of Monterey Bay.

test during pueblo days, for the natives encamped in the rancheria of Yang-na, located "among the woods on the river's bank" appear to have received hospitably Spanish conquistadores as well as Mexican immigrants.

The general situation of the pueblo was no less favorable than its site. Grass covered plains stretched continuously to the ocean, twenty miles to south and west; they were to become within a few decades the grazing grounds of thousands of cattle, horses, and sheep. Beyond the knolls and ridges east of the river lay the fertile valley lands tributary to the Mission San Gabriel, the outpost which provided physical and spiritual sustenance to the infant colony. Twelve miles to the north, there rose from the plain a mountain wall, the *Sierra Madre*, nurturer of mountain streams, and truly a mother to the infant settlements planted in the valleys of semi-arid southern California;

indeed, this range is no less a mother to groves and gardens which today lie at her feet.

The pueblo plan, adopted for Los Angeles, was utilized by Spain in her colonies throughout North and South America. It comprised a village in which house lots faced a common square or plaza, with planting fields and pastures beyond the residential precincts. According to the governor's instruction, the pueblo should contain four square leagues (28 square miles). In the geographical center of this area "a plaza 200 by 300 feet was to be laid out with its corners facing the cardinal points and with streets running perpendicularly from each of its four sides." (H. H. Bancroft, *History of California*, Vol. I, p. 345.) Lands were apportioned so that each settler received a house lot as well as a share in the *suertes* or sowing fields. The west side of the plaza was set aside for the church and government

buildings, while east of the river were the *realengas* or royal lands.

The first community task of the *pobladores* was the construction of the mother ditch, which conveyed domestic and irrigating water to the pueblo and its fields. The settlers doubtless attempted some cultivation during the first year of the colony's existence, but records of production are lacking. By 1786 the colony was apparently self-supporting, for in that year government aid was withdrawn. Jose Argüello, under the Governor's direction, executed the final distribution of property, guaranteeing the title of each settler to a house lot and four fields—two *suertes* of irrigable land and two of dry. The accompanying sketch of the pueblo (Figure 2) included in the territorial records of Alta California shows the location of residence plots fronting the plaza, and of the *suertes* in the area between the main ditch and the river. *El camino real* which ran out to Mission San Gabriel, crossed the Rio Porciuncula and *zanja madre* just north of the planted fields. (Archives of California, Provincial State Papers, Tom. III-IV, p. 55. Bancroft Library, University of California. The map of the pueblo is on a scale four times larger than that of the fields.)

But to the close of the century, the accomplishments of the pueblo hardly justified the establishment of the colony. By 1800 the population numbered only 315. In 1822, Mexico threw off the yoke of Spain and became a republic; thereupon for more than two decades California's affairs were administered by Mexican governors. By the arrival of traders and trappers from Santa Fe and of foreigners who reached the west coast in American and English ships, the population slowly increased. The designation of Los Angeles as capital of Alta California—a temporary arrangement only—and the promotion of the

pueblo to the rank of a city resulted in an ever-growing demand for house lots. But imperfect titles and lack of maps and records made the transfer of land difficult. Judging by the minutes of its meetings, one is led to believe that the granting of lots and the confirmation of titles was the major business of the local *ajuntamiento*, or town council, throughout the decade preceding the American conquest. (Proceedings of the *Ajuntamiento* in Los Angeles City Archives.)

This confused state of affairs persisted until the territorial governor in 1849 requested a map of the city and information pertaining to the granting of lots. (Guinn, James M., History of Los Angeles, Vol. I, p. 266.) Lieutenant E. O. C. Ord of the United States Army was commissioned to survey the city and, in addition, was instructed by the local council to sketch "all lands actually under cultivation from the principal water-dam down to the last cultivated field below. As to the lots that should be shown on the map, they should begin at the cemetery and end with the house of Bottiler. As to the commonalty lands of this city the surveyor should determine the four points of the compass and taking the parish church for a center, measure two leagues in each cardinal direction. These lines will bisect the four sides of a square within which the lands of this municipality will be contained, the area of the same being sixteen square leagues, and each side of the square measuring four leagues." (Los Angeles City Archives. Vol. IV, pp. 590-594, 1849.)

The results of Lieutenant Ord's survey are embodied in the "Plan de la Ciudad de Los Angeles," completed August 29, 1849, today a highly prized record in the city's archives as it is the first authentic map of the city of Los Angeles (Figure 3). Although Ord's map records

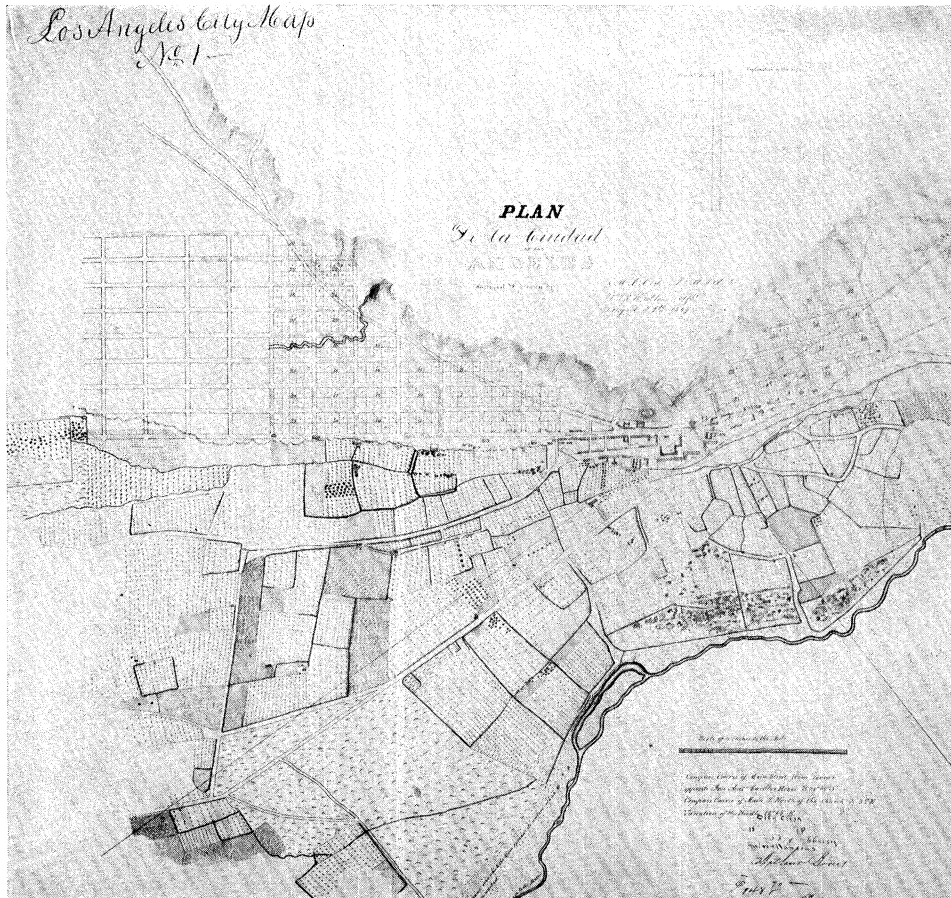


FIGURE 4.—The pueblo of Los Angeles as sketched by H. M. T. Powell, March 17, 1850. This view of the settlement was made seven months after the completion of the Ord map (Figure 3). (From "The Santa Fe Trail to California, 1849-1852," the Journal and Drawings of H. M. T. Powell. Edited by D. S. Watson, San Francisco, 1931. Sketch used by permission of the Book Club of California and the Grabhorn Press.)

conditions in 1849, it enables us in the light of historical facts to reconstruct the physical aspect of the original pueblo, and to interpret the rôle played by the three dominant geographical features: river, terrace, hills.

The map shows that the Los Angeles of 1849, like the pueblo of 1781, centered round the plaza. On the west, the town was sharply delimited by hills which presented a steep front to the settlement, while on the east, the utilized area stopped abruptly at the brink of the dry wash in which flowed the intermittent Los Angeles River. The resi-

dential section occupied the higher ground west of the zanja madre and Calle Principal, whereas the cultivated fields lay east of, and slightly lower than, the mother ditch.

The zanja madre had to tap the river far enough above the pueblo to allow the diverted water to flow by gravity to the terrace, which is elevated above the stream level at the town. Originally a crude dam of brush and poles was thrown across the river two miles upstream. (The original intake was located in the vicinity of the present North Broadway bridge, according to

the late Charles J. Prudhomme, who came to Los Angeles in 1855, and who was for many years an engineer in the Los Angeles Water Department.) From this point the main conduit ran southward, following the base of a low scarp (probably Alameda Street) to a point above the plaza where it bifurcated into two major ditches, one of which carried the domestic water supply to the pueblo, the other, the irrigating water to the fields. As population increased and the cultivated area was extended, the ditches were lengthened until a general zanja system served the pueblo. This system, improved and enlarged, was utilized for more than a century.

On the sunny terrace sloping gently to the river lay the cultivated fields. Ord's map indicates that grapes were the dominant crop and were given preference of location: they were planted nearest the zanja madre for adequate water, and removed far enough from the river to escape the ravages of winter floods. Major Emory, who passed through Los Angeles the year of the Ord survey, noted that "of the many fruits capable of being produced with success (in Los Angeles), by culture and irrigation the grape is perhaps that which is brought nearest to perfection." (Emory, W. H., *Notes of Travel in California from the official reports of Colonel Fremont and Major Emory*, p. 275. Dublin, 1849.) Lieutenant Parke, enroute through southern California in 1854, was impressed by the irrigation facilities found at the settlement of Los Angeles. "Most of the fine graperies," he observed, "extend along the river-side. In the vineyard of Don Luis Vignes the vines are watered by open drains from the river, which run down one side of an allotment with side sluices for allowing small streams to flow in between the rows and irrigate the ground. . . . Many of these vine-

yards are very extensive and are said to contain from 25,000 to 30,000 and even 40,000 vines, the stock of which was brought by the padres from Spain and France." (Parke, Lieut. John G., *Reports of explorations and surveys to ascertain a railroad route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean [1853-1856]*. Ex. Document 91, Vol. VII, pp. 80-81. House of Representatives, Washington, D. C., 1857.)

Grapes and wine were much in demand, and constituted the cash crop of pueblo farmers. For the year ending June 1850, Los Angeles County produced 57,355 gallons of wine, valued at \$6,550 according to the Federal Census. (Seventh Census of the United States, 1850. Washington, D. C. 1853.) During the period of the gold rush, grapes from the southern districts found a ready market in San Francisco and the mining towns adjacent to Sacramento. Even as late as 1859, grapes were shipped to northern markets. The report of coastwise shipments of domestic produce from the port of San Pedro for the year ending October 31, 1859 lists grapes and wine as the exports of greatest value. During that period, 22,974 boxes of grapes, valued at \$67,484, and 183,500 gallons of wine with a value of \$138,625, were exported, the bulk of the shipment going to San Francisco. (Los Angeles Star. September 24, 1859.)

Beyond the limits of Ord's Los Angeles, intensive cultivation was restricted. Powell's sketch of the city (Figure 4), made only seven months after Ord's survey, depicts the cultivated land west of the river, but indicates no cultivation east of the gulch. (The Santa Fe Trail to California, 1849-1852. The Journal and Drawings of H. M. T. Powell. Edited by D. S. Watson. The Book Club of California, Grabhorn Press, San Francisco, 1931.) However, with the extension of the zanja system,

grape plantings became numerous on the east terrace. In this district during 1859–1860, H. D. Barrows watered a vineyard of 29,000 vines. (Barrows, H. D., *Water for domestic purposes versus water for irrigation*. Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California, Vol. VIII, pp. 208–209.) But the vast area out of reach of the fructifying waters of the river was devoted exclusively to grazing.

On the Ord map the confused mosaic of holdings and the haphazard arrangement of roads in the district of the original planting fields reflect the irregular methods of land acquisition during the thirties and forties. The roads—mere lanes—followed farm boundaries. An exception is noted in the main road

which bisects the cultivated area between Calle Principal and the river, the present Alameda Street. The original Spanish trail which skirted the base of the hills—Portola's path in 1769—persists on Ord's map. And only in the newly plotted section of the city of 1849 does a conventional net of streets appear.

There is no historical evidence that the hills immediately west of the settlement played a military rôle during the early days of the pueblo. Not until the time of the American conquest was the elevation, Fort Hill, fortified. Here, after the first conquest of the territory in 1846, Captain Gillespie of the United States Army stood siege during an uprising of the Californians. Following



FIGURE 5.—The civic center of modern Los Angeles embraces the site of the original settlement, notwithstanding a tremendous areal expansion of the city during the present century. The course of Los Angeles River roughly traces the upper margin of the photograph; a portion of the hills that confined the early pueblo on the west are seen in the lower left-hand corner. (Spence Air Photos, Los Angeles.)

the recapture of Los Angeles by Commodore Stockton and General Kearny the next year, a redoubt, Fort Moore, was constructed on Fort Hill, but was abandoned shortly thereafter. (Guinn, James M., Publications of the Historical Society of Southern California. Vol. IV, pp. 141-147.)

It is interesting to follow up the part played by the terrace, river, and hills of the original site in the later decades of Los Angeles' development. The hills to this day present a barrier. They barred expansion for many years, setting a limit to the occupancy of lands on the west. With the eventual spread of the city in that direction, several tunnels were cut to connect the newer residential and business districts on the west with the old center, but this improvement came late. The first tunnel was completed as recently as 1901.

In the eighties, following construction of streets, the hills overlooking the plain and river became a high-class residential district for a short time. Then retrogression set in. Today, the flamboyant architecture of these run-down houses dates the period of their heyday.

The hills, however, may come into a more positive utilization as befits their prominence. According to W. H. Schuchardt of the Los Angeles City Planning Commission, the hills adjacent to the terrace "supply excellent sites for superior types of multiple dwellings," close to the new Civic Center. They make possible "an unusual architectural crescendo leading to a grand climax a hundred feet above the lower land," and thus offer opportunities in the projected Civic Center for "a truly great modern acropolis." (Schuchardt, W. H., *The Civic Center*, in "Los Angeles, preface to a master plan." Publication XIX, p. 240, The Pacific Southwest Academy. Los Angeles, 1941.)

The rural aspect of the city persisted until the late seventies. *Urbs in horto*, a city within a garden, aptly described Los Angeles at that time. Business and social life centered round the plaza. North of the plaza lay Sonoratown, "as Mexican as though transported bodily from Old Mexico." (Workman, Boyle. *The City That Grew*. P. 114. Los Angeles, 1935.)

The event that ushered in the transformation from rural town to metropolis was the completion of transcontinental railroads to Los Angeles. The Southern Pacific Railroad reached Southern California in 1876, and the Santa Fe nine years later. A rate war ensued which was a contributing factor in drawing thousands of new residents to California. Population grew rapidly, business increased and the city began an areal expansion which has carried its boundaries miles in all directions from the parent core.

Vineyards and orchards on the terrace gave way to factories, wholesale blocks and business houses. Railroads and electric transportation lines criss-crossed the area recently under cultivation. The zanjas that had served the early farmlands disappeared. Bridges spanned the river. And the river itself, *raison d'être* of the original settlement, continued to serve the enlarged city. Even today this small and almost invisible stream contributes an appreciable per cent of the total water supply. Easily recovered as it emerges from the San Fernando Valley, through infiltration galleries it is diverted into municipal reservoirs.

The location of the Civic Center of modern Los Angeles in close proximity to the old plaza ties the present to the past in utilizing the parent center, heart of the settlement from the days of the city's founding.