

FRENCH CONNECTION

Four ways to get a taste of L.A.'s colorful Gallic past

BY MATT HORMANN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY VANESSA STUMP

At the northern end of L.A.'s Chinatown, in front of the Pacific Alliance Medical Center (PAMC) on College Street, a bronze statue of Joan of Arc stands like a sentinel, one of the last vestiges of a French community that once thrived in downtown Los Angeles.

PAMC is the site of L.A.'s first hospital, the French Hospital, which was built in 1869 to serve the town's growing French population. The French made up more than 10 percent of L.A.'s population in the mid-19th century. The city had three French mayors between 1859 and 1876, and even produced a weekly French newspaper.

Most traces of the French Colony, or "Frenchtown," as it was called in the 1850s and '60s, have long since disappeared, but nearby street signs still bear the names of pioneer French settlers in California—Louis Bauchet and Jean-Louis Vignes, who arrived in the 1820s and '30s, when Los Angeles was a small outpost of newly independent Mexico.

In 1827, Bauchet, a former officer of Napoleon Bonaparte's Old Guard, moved to Los Angeles, where he bought a vineyard along present-day Bauchet Street. Vignes followed in 1831; he planted 104

acres of Bordeaux grapevines on the current Union Station site, thus becoming one of California's first commercial wine-makers. Vignes ushered in the first wave of French immigrants, who were lured by California's Mediterranean climate and the promise of cheap land.

Immigration increased when California achieved statehood in 1850. Over the next several decades, French-speaking settlers, including Belgians and Québécois, formed a tight-knit community along the thoroughfares of Aliso, Commercial, Alameda, and Spring streets and transformed the original Spanish character of the Plaza of Los Angeles.

The historic Pico House turned into the French-owned National Hotel, and the Merced Theater housed the French Society, Le Cercle Français. French developers commissioned other structures that still form part of El Pueblo de Los Angeles State Historical Monument, such as the Vickrey/Brunswick Building, Garnier Building, Hammel Building, and Italian Hall.

French immigration declined after World War I, and with the construction of City Hall in 1927, many French-owned businesses were displaced. However, traces of L.A.'s Gallic legacy still remain.

