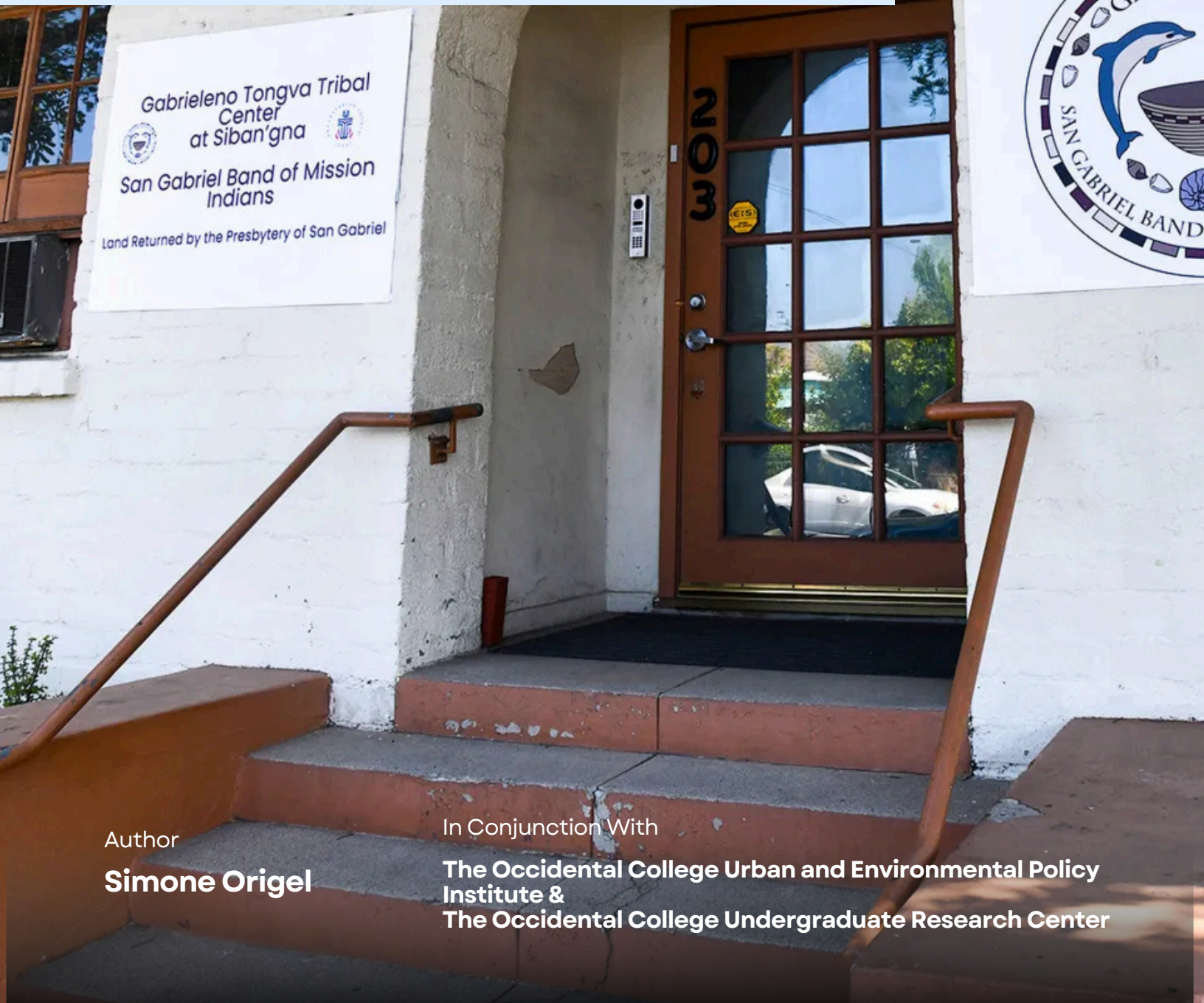


Historical Prioritization in San Gabriel: How the Built Environment Conflicts With the Preservation of Indigenous Histories

2025

Photo by Keith Durflinger, 2025



Author

Simone Origel

In Conjunction With

**The Occidental College Urban and Environmental Policy
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Acknowledgements

I acknowledge that Occidental College lies upon Gabrieleno Tongva land, Tovaangar. I honor the indigenous ways of knowing of the Gabrieleno Tongva and denounce the systemic forms of violence and displacement inflicted upon them. Please consider contributing to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna in their pursuit of indigenous sovereignty.

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Content Warning

This paper discusses sensitive topics including but not limited to Indigenous displacement, stolen land, colonial violence, generational trauma, genocide, and forced labor. Should you experience symptoms of emotional/psychological discomfort, please reach out to your medical practitioner and/or professional. If you are experiencing severe psychological distress, please text or call the following hotline: 988 (The National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline). Please proceed however you see fit.

Positionality Statement

My project highlights the land return of 203 E Mission Dr., San Gabriel CA 91776 from the San Gabriel Presbytery to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council. This land return is utilized as a case study in a broadened conversation regarding the role of the San Gabriel Mission, the built environment and the Land Back Movement (Pieratos, Manning, & Tilsen, 2020). I am from San Gabriel. Thus, the impact of the San Gabriel Mission on the Gabrieleno Tongva, the community, and the built environment interests me because growing up I frequently passed by the Mission, recognizing its stark architectural contrast to neighboring cities. Growing up I considered the Mission of San Gabriel Arcángel as a part of California history that remained obscure and in the past. However, the implications of the Mission of San Gabriel are not historic, they are current. San Gabriel's city motto is, "A city with a mission (San Gabriel City, n.d.). Thus, the built environment of San Gabriel relies on the Mission as a facet of their identity (San Gabriel City, n.d).

I acknowledge that I am not of Gabrieleno Tongva ancestry, therefore I do not intend to speak for anyone on the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council. As someone who is Mexican-American, knowledge of my indigenous ancestry has been lost as a product of colonization and immigration. I acknowledge the power in cultural expression, cultural sovereignty, and indigenous ways of knowing. As someone who has been disconnected from their indigenous heritage, I stand in solidarity with those working to peel back layers of colonialism to practice cultural sovereignty. I recognize that I cannot fully understand the lived experiences of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council as an outsider.

Executive Summary

Introduction

This project examines the destructive impact of the San Gabriel Mission development on the Gabrieleno Tongva people. The Gabrieleno Tongva are the indigenous people native to San Gabriel California, the Greater Los Angeles area, the Southern Channel Islands, and Orange County (GABRIELENO SAN GABRIEL BAND OF MISSION INDIANS, n.d.). The San Gabriel Mission established in 1771 by Spanish Franciscan missionaries functions as a catalyst for the growth of the agricultural industry in Los Angeles (Hackel, 2024). The Gabrieleno San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians opts to keep Gabrieleno in their name which was given to the Tongva by the Spanish as to recognize their ancestors who are “buried at the San Gabriel Mission who only knew themselves as Gabrieleno” (Gabrieleno San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians, n.d.). It is imperative we establish that the *Gabrieleno Tongva are still here* (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Time does not start with the settlement of Franciscan missionaries. In fact, in the 1500s the Gabrieleno Tongva community boasted over 50-100 villages (Singleton, 2004). Gabrieleno Tongva history can be traced back to 6000 B.C (Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, n.d.). This implies that the Gabrieleno Tongva stewarded the land of Tovaangar for approximately 7770 years before the development of the mission. To put this in perspective, it has been only approximately 254 years since Spanish settlement in San Gabriel where missionaries exacted control over the Gabrieleno-Tongva, leveraging Christianity and conversion as a gateway into less inhumane treatment (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Although European settlers did land on Catalina Island in 1542 and 1595, “permanent settlement did not occur until the Portola Expedition in 1769” (Dobson & Nez, 2023).

In an article published April 19th of this year, LA Times author Noah Haggerty writes, “On July 10, a church signed the deeds transferring a half-acre of land...less than a mile down the road from the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel – to an Indigenous tribe’s nonprofit” (Haggerty, 2025). In this historic turn of events minimal sources detail the transaction itself. My project aims to illustrate the intricacies of the process that allow the Gabrieleno Tongva to re-obtain the rights to the Presbytery of San Gabriel. In understanding the land return by the Presbytery of San Gabriel to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council, it is vital we acknowledge how land-returns are integral to indigenous sovereignty. Land-ownership holds socio-political implications therefore, to better grasp the magnitude of the recent San Gabriel land return, we must contextualize the role of land, Spanish authority, and the impact of the built environment. Additionally, land does not only serve as a means of wealth accrual but as a venue for cultural expression and practice. When access to land is removed, Indigenous people are barred from Indigenous sovereignty. Investigation into the history of the mission and current land back efforts can determine what is acknowledged when land is returned.

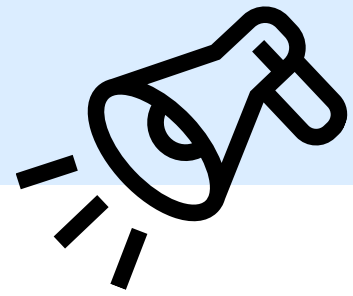
The San Gabriel Mission Arcángel



Photo by Simone Origel, 2025

In this case study, I review the history of the Mission San Gabriel Arcángel and its longstanding legacy in the city of San Gabriel. In particular, I focus on the impact of infrastructure and Indigenous land ownership in the 1800s and 1900s and later, how land returns become catalysts for change in the built environment. I utilize the land return of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna to 1) contextualize the role of Spanish, Mexican, and U.S. authority amidst the Mission San Gabriel development and 2) to understand what is gained when land is returned.

There is limited information available regarding the return of the San Gabriel Presbytery therefore, by interviewing key stakeholders, I can gain insight into what land-back entails. Interviewing stakeholders helps to illustrate the steps of the land-return process and provide insights to the challenges and forthcoming for other similar processes. Archives such as Calisphere, the California Digital Newspaper Collection, the Online Archive of California, USC Special Collections, The Los Angeles Public Library, and the Huntington Library help to contextualize my findings.



A Call for the Incorporation of Indigenous Perspectives in Historiography

First-hand accounts by the Spanish (during the time of the mission development) describing Indigenous peoples emphasizes societal prejudices and contempt against native populations. Author Steven Hackel comments on disagreement among scholars that arise from the limited documentation of Native histories noting, "the historiography of early California and its missions has been divided into two opposing camps of scholars: those who portray the Franciscans as saving childlike Indians from savagism and those who depict the missions as brutal labor camps committed to cultural genocide" (Hackel, 2003). Ultimately Hackel positions his argument by calling for the interpretation of not only Spanish but Indigenous accounts when looking at the mission's history (Hackel, 2003). Despite varying discourses regarding the Indigenous histories, I position my project by acknowledging the oppression faced by the Gabrieleno Tongva and echo Hackel's call for increased incorporation of Indigenous accounts within historiography. History is shaped by whose stories are included and who gets to tell it. Indigenous representation may also be informed by Indigenous modes of dispersing lived experiences. Hackel quotes *The Missions of California: A Legacy of Genocide* written by Indigenous authors Rupert Costo and Jeannette Henry Costo that Indigenous perspectives provide the most accuracy when learning about Indigenous histories and lived experiences (Hackel, 2003). An excerpt of the Costos book is quoted in Hackel's publication expressing, "Ours was an oral history, an oral literature, a poetry that was spoken, remembered, a true 'Remembrance of Things Past'" (Hackel, 2003). Thus, we must consider a discrepancy in this report and uphold the value in oral histories—accounts in which this report lacks.

Background and Context

This case study explores a potential shift in Indigenous representation in San Gabriel through an investigation into the return of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna by the Presbytery of San Gabriel. Today, San Gabriel has grown into an ethnic enclave, fostering a predominantly Asian and Mexican community rich in multiracial, regional, and transnational history (Cheng, 2014). According to the ACS 5-year survey San Gabriel's population is 59% Asian, 26% Hispanic, and 10% White (Census Reporter, n.d.). This is due to an influx of Mexican, Chinese and Japanese settlement in the area post World War II because San Gabriel was a "less racially exclusive suburban development" (Cheng, 2014).

The city however, still reinforces awareness of Spanish settlement through the preservation of the Mission District which boasts Spanish Colonial architecture. Although the local High School, Gabrielino acknowledges San Gabriel's indigenous population by name, Indigenous representation is implicit in comparison to the outward expression of Spanish Colonial histories through the built environment. On the side of the now closed San Gabriel Mission Art Center, a mural by Donald "Putt" Putman depicts the Gabrieleno Tongva and Franciscan missionaries together (Boose, 2013). However this mural indicates a harmonious relationship between the two groups and fails to hint at the oppressive power dynamics imposed by the Spanish and later Mexican forms of governance. Similarly, a mural within the San Gabriel Public Library painted by Indigenous artist Robert Freeman in 1984 depicts "scenes from the Mission's daily life" (Public Art Archive, n.d.). One scene in the mural demonstrates, "a padre help[ing] Gabrielinos build a stone wall" (Public Art Archive, n.d). While this mural demonstrates the Mission as a hub of Indigenous labor, it does not reveal the disproportionate expectation of Indigenous people to complete labor within inhumane conditions (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Today the Mission serves as a place of Catholic worship and museum curated by Professor Yve Chavez and Dr. Steven Hackel (Mission San Gabriel Arcángel, n.d.). As the city grows and changes, it is vital we understand how the Mission's development and Indigenous labor allowed for growth. San Gabriel relies on the Mission to form a facet of the city's identity, and while the Mission is integral to San Gabriel's history, it is our responsibility to challenge history and investigate whose histories get left out of the narrative.

Mural by Donald "Putt" Putman, 2001



Photo by Simone Origel, 2025

Mural by Robert Freeman, 1984



Photo by Simone Origel, 2025

Historic Background of the San Gabriel Mission Development

The San Gabriel Mission was founded in 1771 by Pedro Benito Cambón and Angel Somera in the San Gabriel Valley. The mission was originally situated bordering the Río Hondo River and later moved to its current location in 1775. Franciscan priests were then selected in 1769 to convert the Indigenous population of San Gabriel; the Gabrieleno/Kizh people (Hackel, 2024). Over time the mission underwent significant expansion and in 1812 boasted a population of 1,500 people (Hackel, 2024). However, in 1834 the mission became secularized and Mexican priests replaced Spanish priests (Hackel, 2024). It must be noted that the Spanish exerted control over California from 1776 to 1821 (National Park Service, 2024). In turn, Mexico ceded California upon the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 which transferred the jurisdiction of California to the United States (National Archives, 2022). Following this time period, the development of the transcontinental railroad played a major role in tourism and the urbanization of the area surrounding the mission. Along the mission lies the Southern Pacific Railroad (San Gabriel City, n.d.). Carleton Watkins, a friend of Collis P. Huntington, is recognized for his 1880 photography of the mission alongside railroad tracks (Hackel, 2024). “By juxtaposing the verticality of the aging walls of the mission with the gleaming horizontal tracks of the railroad, Watkins suggests the arrival of dramatic forces of change into a region that otherwise appeared frozen in time” (Hackel, 2024). The author of *Mission San Gabriel: A History of Its Construction and Preservation* interprets this photograph as in-line with John Gast’s *American Progress* painting. Hackel claims the photograph depicts the railroad, “as the agent of Manifest Destiny piercing a slumbering landscape” (Hackel, 2024). As the population grew however, new architectural styles came into fashion. In 1885, San Gabriel experienced an increase in economic output alongside the rise of Victorianism. This is in-part due to anti-Mexican and anti-Spanish ideals held by newcomers who were dismayed at the mission’s role as a hub of catholic worship (Hackel, 2024).



Title:
Mission San Gabriel,
Estab. Sept. 8th, 1771.

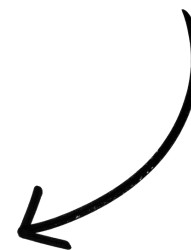


Photo by Carleton E. Watkins, 1829-1916

Sourced from The Huntington Library Digital Collections

Spanish Exertion of Control

The spread of the California missions began when the Spanish settled to protect silver mines in northwestern Spain (Hackel, 1998). During this time, the Spanish employed a mercantilist framework which relies on individual colonies to manufacture goods (Hackel, 1998). Franciscan missionaries, however, served to convert Indigenous populations to Catholicism (Hackel, 2024). Leading historian and professor of colonial California studies, Stephen Hackel writes about brutal power dynamics between the Spanish and Indigenous, “Viewing themselves as the spiritual fathers of the Indians, Franciscans maintained that it was their responsibility to chastise them; they flogged Indians for repeatedly running away, for practicing native religious beliefs, and for performing a host of other acts considered disrespectful or sinful (Hackel, 1997). In a more recent publication by Hackel, he asserts, “Colonization exacted a toll on Native peoples. Soldiers assaulted them and diseases killed huge numbers at the mission...they imperiled the Native subsistence economy, placing additional pressure on Natives to move to the missions, where food appeared plentiful. Yet, those at the mission suffered frighteningly high rates of mortality” (Hackel, 2024).

Discrepancies in Indigenous Representation

In 1860 approximately 150 people lived in San Gabriel which only increased. Restrictions in land ownership and a failure to count and report indigenous peoples in the Census contributed to discrepancies in Indigenous representation from the 1870s onward (Hackel, 2024). Failure of the U.S. government to distinguish Native Americans in federal documentation lends itself to the confounding of Indigenous identities with Mexican identities (Hackel, 2024). Indigenous erasure and prejudice does not end with a failure of governmental structures to acknowledge their identity but was engrained into the language of Spanish missionaries. *The Pride of the Missions: A Documentary History of the San Gabriel Mission*, by F.J. Weber provides accounts about the Indigenous written by the Spanish. In a 1913 address honoring the life of Franciscan priest, Junípero Serra, Bishop Conaty remarks, “Serra labored not that we might praise him here today, but he labored for the upraising and the evangelizing of an inferior and a down-trodden race” (Weber, 1979). Indigenous people were also referred to in 1787 accounts by Pedro Fages as “the lazy, the cowardly, and the thievish” (Weber, 1979). Indigenous people are consistently demeaned and positioned as inferior as a justification for Spanish rule. Language in historic accounts demonstrates a clear power dynamic in which the Spanish used religious conversion to enforce hatred and control and which the Mexican government perpetuated.

History of Presbyterian Churches in San Gabriel

The Presbyterian church is divided into multiple denominations. They are categorized by their differences in beliefs. Two of the following include, The Presbyterian Church U.S.A (PCUSA) and the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) (Carter, 2014). In 1973, PCA split from PCUSA and PCUSA officially formed in 1983 when the United Presbyterian Church in the United States and the Presbyterian Church in the United States joined (Carter, 2014). Alternatively, “In 1982, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, joined the Presbyterian Church in America” (Carter, 2014). PCUSA is known for following a more liberal set of beliefs namely, by allowing “ministers to perform any legal marriage between two people” regardless of sex and through their stances on abortion and divorce (Carter, 2014). PCA differs from PCUSA by following a more conservative set of beliefs (Carter, 2014). Property of the churches within PCUSA belongs to PCUSA whereas property of PCA “belongs to the local congregation without any right of reversion whatsoever to any Presbytery or General Assembly” (Carter, 2014). There are also the Evangelical Presbyterian Church (EPC) and the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (ECO) (Vanderbloemen, n.d.). However, these two branches split more recently in 1981 and 2012 respectively (Vanderbloemen, n.d.). The Presbytery of San Gabriel functions under PCUSA. The Presbytery of San Gabriel is a governing body responsible for overseeing the PCUSA communities within the San Gabriel Valley (Presbytery of San Gabriel, n.d.). The Presbyterian Church began formation in 1517 separating itself from the Roman Catholic church long before the San Gabriel Mission development, therefore it functions as an entity separate from the Roman Catholic Church (Ruth, 2024).

Despite the separation of the Presbyterian church into multiple denominations, there are accounts of various Presbyterian churches in San Gabriel. There was St. James Presbyterian Church founded in 1944 and located on 200 W. Las Tunas which was purchased in 1949 (The Los Angeles Times, 1966; Renewal SGV, n.d.) This location is now home to Renewal SGV, a part of the Covenant Order of Evangelical Presbyterians (Renewal SGV, n.d.). It is likely that the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel was classified as a “Mexican Church” differentiating itself from St. James Presbyterian (The Highland Park News-Herald, 1941). It is unclear when the First Presbyterian church of San Gabriel fell under the jurisdiction of PCUSA as this publication cites that Rev. Ramon Cabrera, who worked at the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel spoke at a “Evangelical Spanish-Speaking Church of Southern California” (The Highland Park News-Herald, 1941). This allows us to infer the First Presbyterian Church may have Evangelical beginnings.

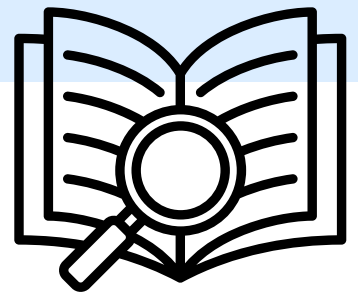
The founder of La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center Rev. Cesar Lizarrága also worked at the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel (McClellan, 2014). Lizarrága and his wife, Angelita “encouraged community members to become citizens, vote and become part of the solution - empowering them” due to socioeconomic difficulties experienced by Mexican migrants (McClellan, 2014). A 1943 article section titled “First Spanish Presbyterian San Gabriel” recalls how Rev. Cesar Lizarrága filled in for Rev. Ramon Cabrera at the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel (Daily News, 1943). The La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center former website highlights that the Lizárragas noticed resource disparities within Mexican communities while they worked as “pastors of the Presbyterian Church on East Mission Road in 1943” (The Wayback Machine, 2025). La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center opened subsequently in 1946 (The Wayback Machine, 2025). Events of the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel are cited as hosting events at 219 E. Mission Dr. (The Star-Tribune, 1972). While the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel and St. James Presbyterian church hosted a joint service at 200 W. Las Tunas Dr., The Architectural Resources group indicates that the Mexican Presbyterian Church on 219 E. Mission Rd. was affiliated with both La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center and the San Gabriel Welfare Association (The Los Angeles Times, 1966; Architectural Resources Group, 2021). They also claim that the Lizárragas were pastors at the “adjacent Presbyterian church” which would be 219 E. Mission Rd. (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). This is also supported by an Enchilada Luncheon hosted in 1972 by the San Gabriel Presbyterian Church at 219 E. Mission Dr. which is now a Protestant church, El Majestad Foursquare Church (The Star-Tribune, 1972; Architectural Resources Group, 2021). It is unclear when the church switched from the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel to El Majestad Foursquare church, however it is clear that the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel served the local Mexican community.

The Presbytery of San Gabriel officially formed after the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel was founded with its first meeting in January of 1968 (El Sereno Star, 1967). The San Gabriel Presbytery began by branching off from the Presbytery of Los Angeles (El Sereno Star, 1967). This governing body of Presbyterian elders at times met at Herrick Chapel at Occidental College in Eagle Rock (Highland Park News-Herald and Journal, 1969; The Star-Tribune, 1969). A Presbytery is responsible for the governance of PCUSA Presbyterian Churches within specific geographic boundaries (Presbytery of Genesee Valley, n.d.). However, they also hold “the power to organize new congregations, to merge or to divide congregations, to dismiss a congregation to another denomination or dissolve a congregation” (Stanford et al., 2008).

Land Ownership Over Time

Prior to Spanish settlement, Gabrieleno Tongva people stewarded the lands with an emphasis on land conservation (Dobson & Nez, 2023). “Stewardship” is defined as, “the careful and responsible management of something entrusted to one’s care” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). This emphasizes that for the Gabrieleno Tongva, land is to be regarded with respect, not as a tool for exploitation to ensure economic gain. The Gabrieleno Tongva relied heavily on seafaring where ti’ats, small canoes were used to fish, “sheepshead, shark, barracuda, [and] halibut” (Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, 2023). The Gabrieleno Tongva also fished from the shore and diving was used to harvest “abalone, [mussels], and clams” (Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, 2023). Acorns and black walnuts were main components in the diets of the Gabrieleno Tongva and bows and arrows, traps and spears were used to hunt “deer, rabbit, and fowl” (Gabrielino/Tongva Nation, 2023). Under Spanish rule Indigenous people were displaced and forced to “build and maintain the missions, pueblos, and presidios for the Spanish settlers while enduring unspeakable abuse at the hands of Spanish soldiers” (Dobson & Nez, 2023). The Recopilación de Leyes de los Reynos de las Indias or, The Compilation of Laws of the Kings of the Indies relinquished Indigenous rights of land stewardship. This made it so Spanish settlers were entitled to the “possessions, the right to as much land as they needed for their habitations, for tillage, and for the pasturage of their flocks” (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Land was to serve the Spanish agenda and the Gabrieleno Tongva were expected to complete labor that sustained Spanish development. Obtaining land still remains a struggle for the Gabrieleno Tongva because they are not federally recognized (Haggerty, 2025). This makes land negotiations difficult as federal recognition can create protections from the acquisition of Native lands by non-Native peoples (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d.). Additionally, lands owned by non-federally recognized tribes cannot be put into a trust with the U.S. federal government making it difficult to not only obtain land but keep the land (Milwaukee Public Museum, n.d.).

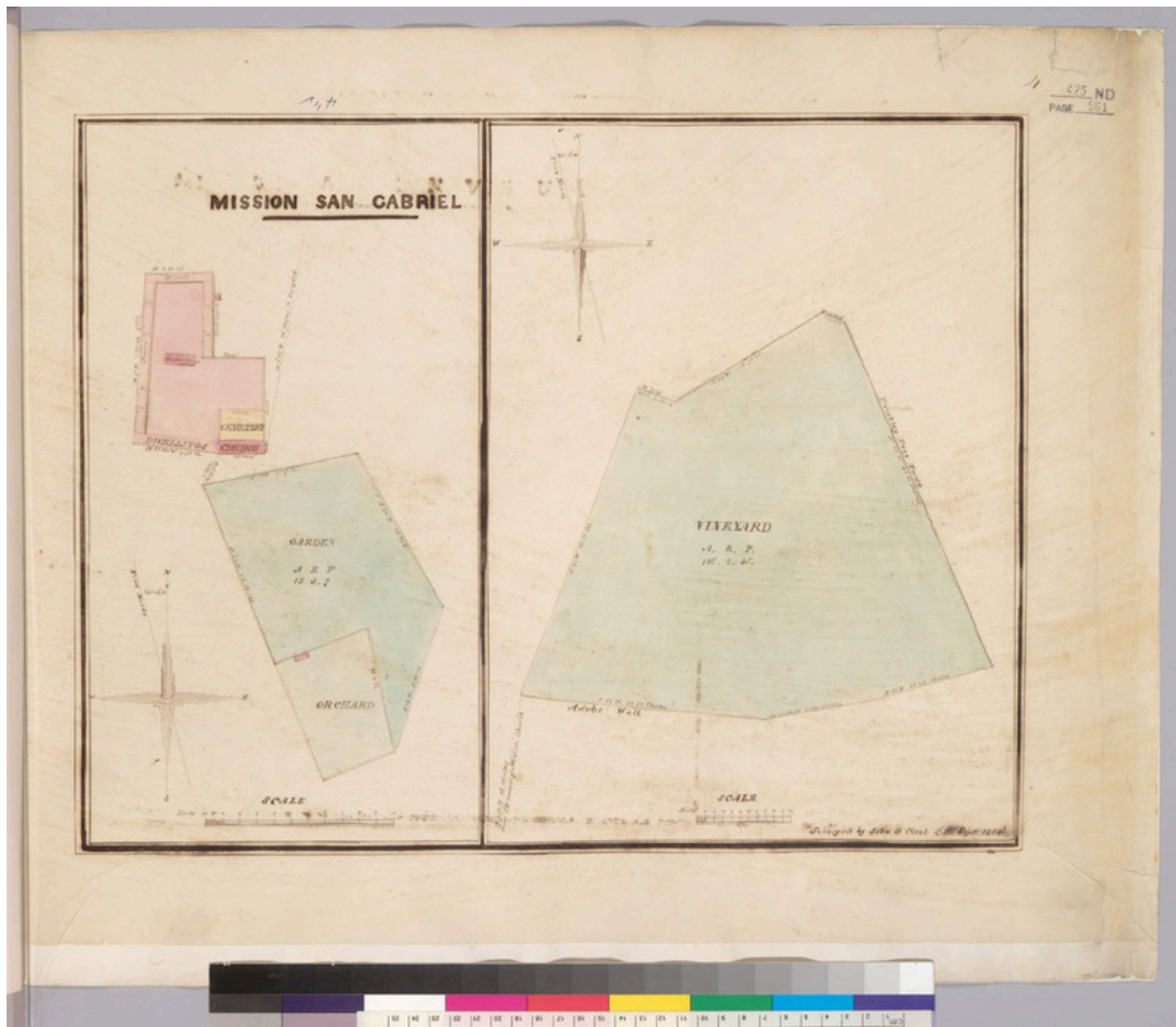
Literature Review



Indigenous Representation Under Spanish and Mexican Governance

Spanish and Mexican control contributed to the erasure of Indigenous histories through the limitations of land ownership (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). In 1824, the Colonization Act inspired European migrants to “colonize its northwestern frontier” by allowing European migrants to become naturalized Mexican citizens if they convert to Catholicism (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). Despite conversation among the Mexican government in the early 1830s to return mission lands to converted indigenous people, indigenous “property rights were largely restricted” (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). Ornelas-Higdon writes, Native Americans “could not sell their land or transfer ownership, which suggested that they did not have title or true ownership over property” (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). Thus, while indigenous people could own mission lands in approximately 1834, they were unable to sell cattle and only small plots of land were distributed, with few exceptions (Ornelas-Higdon). The fertile lands of San Gabriel lent itself to the production of wine. However, indigenous people were also banned from buying wine despite often being paid with alcohol instead of money. Giving Indigenous peoples wine at a time when it was prohibited furthered the criminalization against them. Furthermore, limitations implemented by Franciscans ensured indigenous people could only complete labor to produce wine but not partake in the economic benefit. This demonstrates how the mission served as a driver for economic agricultural growth; one in which indigenous people were expected to maintain but banned from benefitting from. Governor Pío Pico implemented regulations in 1845 delineating Indigenous people’s role within the wine industry (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). These regulations made it unlawful for indigenous people to obtain or ferment their own grapes without a permit. Indigenous people also became subject to daily checks ensuring they were not producing their own alcohol (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). Both Franciscan and Mexican Californios recognized grapes as a catalyst for economic prosperity. By making it unfeasible for indigenous peoples to have sovereignty over the land, Mexican and Franciscan governments could maintain their political and economic power. Ornelas-Higdon denotes, “These laws protected the rights of property owners while both escalating punishments for violations and continuing to relegate Indians to being conscripted laborers. Being a landless person meant that one had no rights to possess grapes in large quantities and therefore had no right to make or sell wine, or even participate in the free market” (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). Therefore, property rights and labor limitations hindered Indigenous people from the accrual of generational wealth by restricting their means of acquiring property.

Prominence of the vineyards and the agricultural industry is demonstrated by how much space they consume.



Title: Mission San Gabriel / surveyed by John G. Cleal, C.E., Sepr. 1854

Sourced from the Berkeley Library Digital Collections

Furthering Indigenous Land Restrictions Under U.S. Rule

California became a state in 1850 and although the Section 2 of the California for the Government and Protections of Indians asserted that Indigenous people are entitled to live on native lands without disruption or displacement, “the Act allowed for the Justice of the Peace to remove Indians owned by White settlers... [and] the indenture of Indian children and the forced labor of convicted Indians” (Dobson & Nez, 2023). The government later signed the “18 lost treaties” from 1851-1852 declaring the compensation to Native American tribes and the distribution of 8.5 million acres of land for reservations; however, the treaties remain unratified (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Indigenous writer of Mono descent (native to San Francisco) Tashina Boyer writes, “1853 California Tribes are rendered landless. My Mono People are left homeless (Boyer, 2025). The repercussions of the unfulfilled “18 lost treaties” are felt today as limiting access to ancestral lands prohibits Native Californians from Indigenous sovereignty.

The Land Back Movement

The land back movement centers indigenous sovereignty in a push to unify as a response to, “the oppression and dispossession of Indigenous Peoples’ Lands and territories (Leonard, David-Chavez, & Smiles, 2023). The Land Back Movement gained traction in July 2020 when, “over 100 land defenders protest[ed] President Trump’s rally at Mount Rushmore in order to bring attention to the undelivered treaty obligation of the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1869 to return the Black Hills or the Paha Sapa to its original inhabitants” (Pieratos, Manning, & Tilsen, 2020). Land back is a product of indigenous forms of resistance beginning in 1492 when Indigenous people demonstrated opposition against Christopher Columbus (Pieratos, Manning, & Tilsen, 2020). The fight for Indigenous sovereignty is long-standing but the origination of The LandBack Movement is attributed to Arnell Tailfeathers’s Instagram posting with the phrase “Land Back” (Yesno, 2022). As this post grew in popularity, “Land Back” became a “rallying call” (Yesno, 2022). Subsequently, the NDN Collective formed The Land Back Movement, “in response to protests at Mount Rushmore” and in an effort to obtain Indigenous sovereignty (Bender, 2022). The NDN Collective, an Indigenous-led organization functions on three pillars: “Defend, Develop, and Decolonize.” These pillars set a framework that centers the dismantling of systemic oppression in order to obtain Indigenous self-determination (Pieratos, Manning, & Tilsen, 2020). The NDN collective was founded by member of the Oglala Lakota Nation, Nick Tilsen (NDN Collective, n.d.). The purpose of the collective is to, “Build the collective power of Indigenous Peoples, communities, and Nations to exercise our inherent right to self-determination, while fostering a world that is built on a foundation of justice and equity for all people and Mother Earth” (NDN Collective, n.d.).

The collective focuses their community organizing locally with emphasis on strategies such as art, tactical media, voting for policies that foster Indigenous sovereignty, and through their work on their four campaigns (NDN Collective, n.d.). Systemic oppression of Indigenous peoples was widely feasible through the employment of legal frameworks such as The Doctrine of Discovery (Pieratos, Manning, & Tilsen, 2020). The Doctrine of Discovery, coined in 1845, makes it legally acceptable to transfer the property rights of Indigenous land without the consent or knowledge of Indigenous peoples (Miller, 2011). In addition, the Doctrine of Discovery also works in tandem with ideologies such as “Manifest Destiny.” Manifest Destiny positions the acquisition of Indigenous lands as a right to westward expansion (Miller, 2011). Manifest Destiny reflects U.S. nationalism through the justification that because the United States is morally superior, people have a right to exert power over civilizations that don’t align with western ideologies or practices (Miller, 2011). On July 23rd, 2025 the U.S. Department of Homeland Security posted a photo of the painting “American Progress” by John Gast. Gast’s painting depicts manifest destiny as an angel-like figure floating over American plains. In the art piece, Native Americans are cast under a shadow, running from “Miss Columbia.” Meanwhile, white pioneers are marching under the light (Roberts, 2025). While some may argue that The Doctrine of Discovery is no longer commonplace, its ideologies are ingrained into systems and beliefs of American identity. The NDN’s Land Back campaign acknowledges the cataclysmic effects of antiquated ideologies and recognizes that the effects of the Doctrine of Discovery and Manifest Destiny remain today (Chavez, 2024).

Looking Into Other Land Back Initiatives

Indigenous tribes remain dedicated to the fight for land nationwide. The Land Back movement is not limited to the physical return of land but the ability of Native peoples to interact, learn from, and govern the land (Kelsey et al., 2023). In 2018 Sharon Alexander returned her grandparents home to the Tongva Taraxat Paxaavxa Conservancy (Ogilvie, 2022). The Tongva Taraxat Paxaavxa Conservancy serves to steward Tongva lands, “receiving and managing land back, building community for Native people, practicing traditional ceremonies, creating a native archive, and rematriating the lands by returning our native culture and ecosystems” (TONGVA.LAND, n.d.) Alexander found it important to return the \$2 million property (as of a 2015 assessment) because “As a person of Jewish faith whose community has also faced displacement and oppression, the donation was in line with Alexander’s spiritual values...She believes the donation also honors her grandmother’s legacy” (Ogilvie, 2022). This private land-return posed difficulties as the infrastructure to receive the land was not yet established for the Tongva (Ogilvie, 2022). Furthermore, the land return carried an abundance of emotional weight “for both giver and receiver... Alexander’s family experienced anti-Semitism, and the home was a refuge (Ogilvie, 2022). There is also emotional strain for the Tongva people who must grapple with forced displacement, violence, and oppression (Ogilvie, 2022). Kimberly Johnson, vice president of the Tongva Taraxat Paxaavxa Conservancy and member on the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council expresses grappling with injustice takes time, “It takes generations to get over all of that genocide” (Ogilvie, 2022).

This year the Catholic church returned land in the United States for the first time (Washington, 2025). The land was returned by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration to the Lac du Flambeau Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians in Wisconsin for the same price it was purchased for: \$30,000 (Washington, 2025). The land return is an act of reparative justice for the harm incurred by the forced attendance of Indigenous children at Catholic boarding schools (Washington, 2025). The current monetary value of the 2-acre property is \$2.6 million (Kutz, 2025). Increasing property value adds to one of the challenges of incentivizing people to return land. A large portion of “Tribes' ancestral lands have been developed into some of the County’s most expensive zip codes” (Dobson & Nez, 2023). People often own high-value property for years as the property value will likely increase over time. As the property value increases, people can obtain equity. Thus, property can serve as a foundation for the creation of generational wealth. The U.S. government is also very aware of the value in possessing land as they have yet to return the Black Hills. The Fort Laramie Treaty granted the Black Hills to the Oceti Sakowin (Thompson, 2022). Oceti Sakowin refers to the Nakota, Dakota, and the Lakota people (State Board of Education Standards, 2018). However, there was an influx of miners settling in the Black Hills in search of gold in the 1870s which broke the treaty (Thompson, 2022). In 1980 the U.S. The Supreme Court tried to settle the lawsuit with \$105 million (now \$1 billion) however the settlement was rejected (Thompson, 2022). PBS remarks, “The Sioux never wanted the money because the land was never for sale” (Fritz & Sreenivasan, 2011) Today, the NDN Collective continues to fight for this land back. They refuse to settle for \$1 billion because “if the sum were to be distributed to the thousands of Sioux people who have a claim to the Black Hills, it would be gone within years or even months” (Thompson, 2022). The Black Hills carry deep cultural and spiritual significance therefore agreeing with the U.S. The Supreme Court would restrict future prospects of Indigenous sovereignty for the Oceti Sakowin (Fritz & Sreenivasan, 2011). Land back initiatives in the U.S. do not follow a linear path and are not always successful. Furthermore, land holds socio-political implications as it is held for the generation of long-term wealth, cultural and religious expression. As each land back initiative is different, they must be addressed on a case by case basis with the involvement of Indigenous peoples at every step of the process.

Research and Design

In this study we utilize data sourced from historical archives to contextualize interview findings and provide visual elements to aid our overall understanding of the Mission San Gabriel's role as a catalyst for forced Indigenous labor and urban growth (Dobson & Nez, 2023; Hackel, 2024). These primary sources give insight into the evolution of language, the built environment, and power. Analyzed materials include newspapers, photographs, books, and maps. Historical data is sourced from [Newspapers.com](https://www.newspapers.com), a newspaper archive which provided us with sources including but not limited to the Los Angeles Times, The South Pasadena Record, Pasadena Star-News, The Pasadena Post, and The Highland Park News-Herald and Journal. Data is also sourced from various in-person and digital collections including the Huntington Library Special Collections archive, the USC Library, Calisphere, the Homestead Museum and Berkeley digital collections. Limitations of this study include finite amounts of available maps, photographs, and written accounts from the time of the mission development onward. Looking back in time to inform the present requires the researcher to understand different modes of communication. For example, taking a photograph was much more inaccessible in the early 1800s than it is today, begging us to consider the disparity in whose perspective is documented and whose is not. Authors Richard Dunley and Jo Pugh emphasize, "in archival science scholarship, catalogues are shaped by subjective decisions of archivists, and frequently the record creators before them" (Dunley & Pugh, 2021). Therefore, because archival data is fragmented, honoring certain perspectives over others, it cannot stand alone. In this study historical archival data is supplemental to interview research and works in tandem with contemporary sources and accounts.

Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were utilized to better understand the chronological processes of the land return by the Presbytery of San Gabriel to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council. At first glance, the process was not transparent thus, interviews served to illustrate the sequence of events and hear from stakeholders involved in the land return process. Limitations of this method are that all research participants are representatives from the Presbyterian Church. This minimizes the range of perspectives gathered via interviews. Additionally, because I conducted the study in an area I am local to, the people I could interview was limited as I could not interview people I knew as to minimize bias in interview responses. The names of research participants are kept confidential for protection of participants' privacy however, this data is not anonymous as job titles are used as pseudonyms. Interview data was coded using Atlas.ti coding software. This allowed for Descriptive Coding content analysis. Descriptive coding organizes interview data by separating it into code groups (Saldaña, 2016). Researchers can use these code groups to recognize major themes in the data. According to Hanna Schebesta, author of "Content Analysis Software in Legal Research: A Proof of Concept Using ATLAS.ti," coding combines qualitative data allowing for its expression as quantitative data (Schebesta, 2018). This is because data is organized into different groups allowing researchers to identify the frequency at which certain topics are mentioned. There are, however, limitations to this form of analysis. The researcher holds a vast amount of power when creating the code groups and may "misrepresent data" (Schebesta, 2018). Furthermore, because ATLAS.ti is an online software, there poses a risk of glitches, a misrepresentation of data, and difficulties in software navigation from a researcher perspective (Schebesta, 2018). Despite limitations, Descriptive Coding allows for interview data to be separated in a way that highlights major interview findings.

Data and Analysis

Mission San Gabriel Arcángel's Influence on the Built Environment

The San Gabriel Mission became an inspiration for many artists beginning in the 1850s (Hackel, 2024). Eventual implementation of the railroad and streetcar lines made tourism to the mission increasingly accessible (Hackel, 2024). The mission was not only a sign of Spanish Colonial power but became a spectacle which drove visitors into San Gabriel. This occurred concurrently with the increased urbanization of Los Angeles. Thus, the San Gabriel mission became a catalyst for city growth. Author Julie Tomiak refers to such patterns as “settler urbanism” (Tomiak, 2023). Tomiak asserts that rhetoric reinstating colonial acquisition of land as fixed negates Indigenous futurity. Land back serves as a mechanism for Indigenous populations to reclaim land thus opposing the reinforcement of settler urbanism. We can apply Henri Lefebvre’s concept of space as a “social product” (Sharp, 2022). In this way, we can think of the mission as an output of Spanish Colonial ideology. Therefore, the mission reinforces Spanish colonial ideals through its existence alone.

Today, in a portion of the city designated as “The Mission District” bell motifs are scattered throughout the urban environment (Ramos, n.d.). In The Mission District, buildings mirror the architecture of the Mission San Gabriel on South Mission Drive (Ramos, n.d.). Design choices like these are intentional and explicit as the city motto remains, “A city with a mission” (San Gabriel City, n.d.). The built environment poses tension between indigenous land-return efforts and the city through architectural representation alone. Authors Sezneva and Halauniova argue that the built environment can inform beliefs. They argue, “Styles, historical periods, the qualities of materials, colours, infrastructure maintenance, even bacterial colonies support, through established relations of equivalency, ideas about foundational ‘truths’ regarding the city, its community, and its values” (Sezneva & Halauniova, 2021). Failure on the city’s behalf to actively dismantle systems of oppression through education or Indigenous representation prioritizes the architectural legacy of the city over indigenous efforts. Authors of “Ugly and uglier: defining value and politics in architecture” designate explicit emphasis on certain architectural structures as political. “If the aesthetic politics expressed through buildings are substantive, as Yurchak (2011) and Enigbokan (2016) suggest, this is because valuation of buildings mobilizes and stabilizes specific social orders” (Sezneva & Halauniova, 2021).

The Mission San Gabriel is a prime example of this because it reflected colonial control and power during the time of its development which also resulted in the destruction of Indigenous history (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). Because San Gabriel cannot preserve what has been destroyed, land back initiatives, like the return of the San Gabriel presbytery, become a vital step in indigenous representation.

The History of 203 E. Mission Rd.

On October 20, 1929 a Los Angeles Times Article exclaims, “Maternity Hospital Unit Dedicated” in big bold letters (Los Angeles Times, 1929). Below the header, lies a photo of the building that now serves as the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban’gna. The celebration dedication for the building was given by The Church of Our Saviour, a protestant church down the road (COS Episcopal, n.d.). This 8-bed hospital was created due to donations by organizations and individuals and later maintained through a leadership campaign in D.C. that raises money to keep the hospital functioning (Los Angeles Times, 1929). Archival newspaper sources refer to this development as 215 E Mission Rd., 214 E. El Monte St. and 203 E. Mission Rd. (Pasadena Star-News, 1930). The hospital development was led by the San Gabriel Welfare Association (Pasadena Star-News, 1929). The San Gabriel Welfare Association was previously known as the San Gabriel Settlement which, “provided for the needy Mexican and white families of the district of San Gabriel” (The Pasadena Post, 1929). The San Gabriel Settlement was founded in The Old Grapevine in 1916 with aims to create, “social service work; to instruct and advise and assist with all kinds of work; to find employment; to encourage cleanliness; to foster obedience to the laws of the land; to develop the spirit of self reliance and helpfulness; [and] to aid in development of good citizenship” (The Los Angeles Times, 1916). Newspaper publications make clear that the settlement is not a charity but serves to benefit the entire community (The Los Angeles Times, 1916). Additionally, a 1930s newspaper publication notes that at the hospital, “No one is ever turned away...The hospital is run in connection with the Settlement House” (Pasadena Star-News, 1930). The maternity hospital at 203 E. Mission Rd. neighbored the Mexican Presbyterian Church, a place of worship that provided church services in Spanish to cater to the, “predominantly Spanish speaking people who lived on nearby blocks. The property continues to be used as a Spanish language Protestant church and is now called the Majestad Foursquare Church” (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). However, the exact date of when the Presbyterian church obtained the land is unclear as the San Gabriel Welfare Association followed “interdenominational policy” (Pasadena Star-News, 1929).

During World War II however, the property “served as a Red Cross Headquarters” (The Los Angeles Times, 1952). A 1952 newspaper publication notes that after the Red Cross’s usage of the building, the organization La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center opened in 1945 and, “Although it is now under direct supervision of the Presbytery [of Los Angeles], it was founded by the First Presbyterian Church of San Gabriel” (The Los Angeles Times, 1952). La Casa de San Gabriel community center was founded by a married couple who were both born in Mexico, Angelita Lizárraga and Rev. César Lizárraga, a pastor in the Presbyterian church (Gaydos, 2025). The Lizárraga family remained active in La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center with family member Lauren Lizárraga Gray on the board until the organization’s final years (ProPublica, 2024). La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center closed in 2025 and the land title was transferred to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council in 2025 (Participant 1, personal communication, November 20, 2025).

203 E. Mission Rd. in its Early Days

MATERNITY HOSPITAL UNIT DEDICATED

Structure Designed for Welfare of Babies



San Gabriel Project

DEDICATION of the new maternity hospital of the San Gabriel Welfare Association on East Mission Drive, San Gabriel, was held Sunday with Rev. John R.

ing the next few weeks a campaign under the leadership of D. C. Mallock will be conducted for funds to provide for its upkeep.

The hospital has eight beds, which

STEEL CONTRACT LET

Consolidated Steel Corporation, Los Angeles, has been awarded contract for fabrication and erection of structural steel for the new maternity hospital.

Los Angeles Times, 1929

Interview Findings: The Land Return Process

Code Groups	Participant 1: Member on the Presbytery's Administrative Commission	Participant 2: Executive Presbyter of the Presbytery of San Gabriel	Participant 3: Moderator of the Presbytery's Administrative Commission
Presbyterian Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presbytery elected an administrative commission which oversees the land return process and holds authority in carrying out the land return. - Only the Presbytery could divest from the property. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presbyterian Church has been working to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Administrative commission met to discuss legal steps including what contracts they needed to provide the tenants of La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center with - Administrative commission served to ensure the land return took place
The Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Councils' Relationship with La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center and the Presbyterian Church	<p>The Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council had their office in La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center. Therefore, tribal elders had a relationship with those at the community center.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - "But as the members of the tribe will say, back then, it wasn't okay to be native, and so they passed as Latino." In turn, members of the Gabrieleno Tongva were active members of the La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center - 40-80 year relationship between tribal leaders and the Community Center - Presbytery worked on the land return in Altadena 	
Values of the Presbytery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presbytery is and was in support of land returns before the land was transferred. - Presbyterian church endorsed the land return that occurred in Altadena to the Tongva people. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encourages the facilitation of economic development for the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presbytery of San Gabriel aims to be supportive of the programming implemented by the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council
Stance of La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The board of La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center also thought [the land return] was a wonderful idea. 		
Stance of the City of San Gabriel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mayor of San Gabriel Denise Menchaca and chair of La Casa's board of directors "thought that the city of San Gabriel would be overjoyed by this." 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - City was glad property was not going to developers - Liked that 203 E. Mission Rd. is close to the Mission, has qualities of the Mission's architecture, and that the architecture would be preserved 	
Support and Feasibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The land return was "seamlessly easy." - The city did not have any hesitation with the land return. It was strongly supported by the city. - "It was like a knife through butter." 		
Unexpected Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Did not realize that this is the first time from a church that a land return occurred. - The celebration was wide-reaching with governmental figures, members of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council, church figures, and community members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Land return occurred in "record time" - Every week someone contacts them with questions about the land return 	
Broader Implications	<p>Opens up conversation between the Roman Catholic Church and the City of San Gabriel for land returns.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - National Presbyterian staff felt compelled to document this land return in hopes to inspire other religious institutions - Other Presbyteries are also working on land returns nationally - The Land Return is also incredibly significant due to proximity to the Mission and long-standing relationships with the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Land return may be able to open up dialogue and partnerships between the City of San Gabriel and the Tribal Council - Participant 3 hopes this land return can serve as an example for other churches to return their land to Indigenous peoples
Indigenous Sovereignty	<p>Land return fosters Indigenous engagement with the land</p>		
Various Steps Land Return Process			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A difficult aspect of the closure of the Community Center was that people were going to lose their jobs and students at the preschool would have to move schools - Wanted to ensure parents and children in the preschool were provided ample time to decide next steps so they allowed the preschool to finish the school year - There are multiple organizations that use the Tongva name however, the land return to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council was justified because of their relationship with La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center and because the land returned is part of their ancestral village

Interview Findings

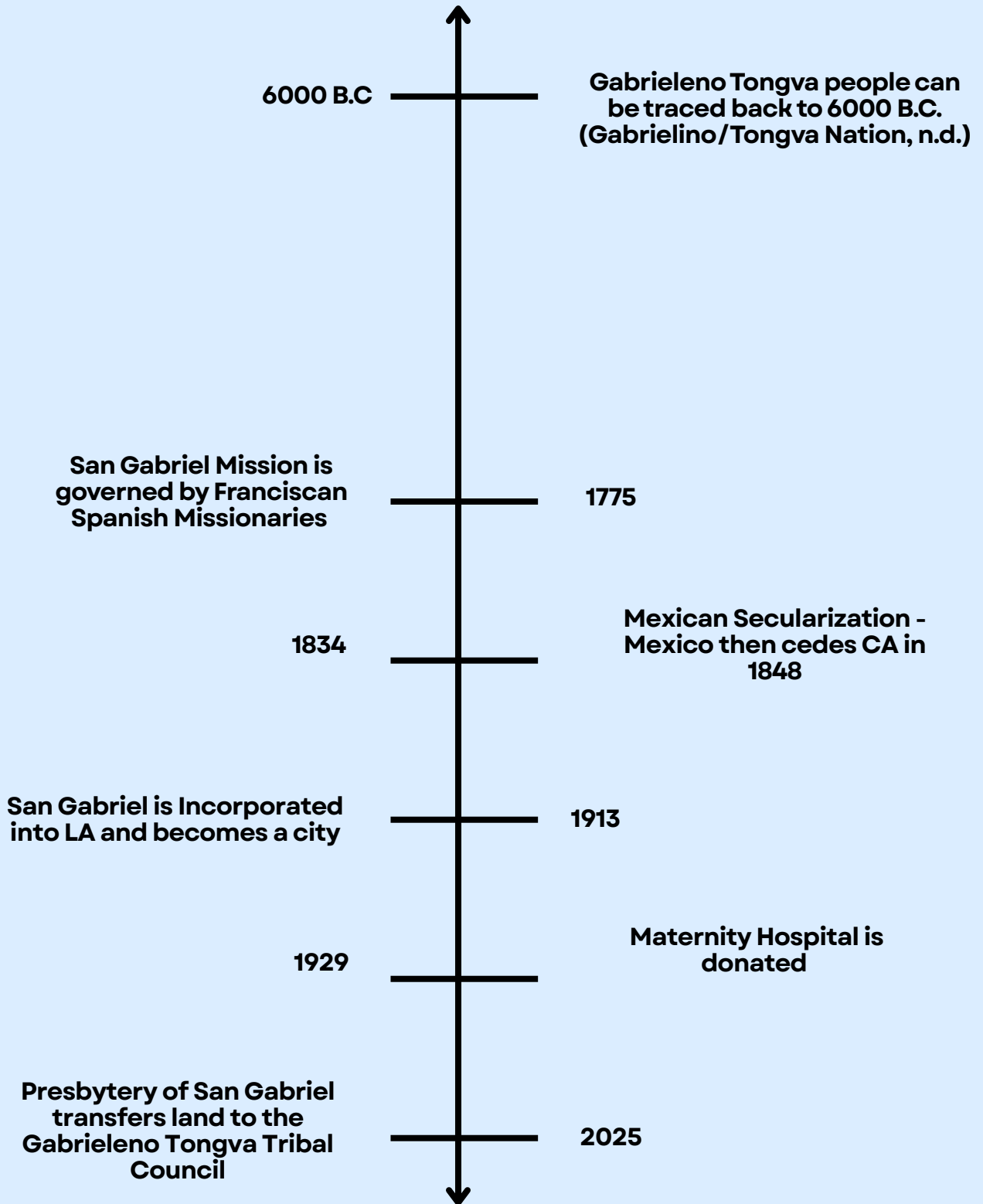
I interviewed three representatives from the Presbyterian church involved in the return of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna for approximately 30 minutes. My main questions revolved around the sequence of events that preceded the return of the land. Findings demonstrate that the land return occurred as follows:

1. 203 E. Mission Rd. was owned by the San Gabriel Presbytery for approximately 80 years (Participant 3, personal communication, December 8, 2025). In the 1940s there was a push to create neighborhood houses or community centers and La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center was the last one remaining after the 1970s (Participant 3, personal communication, December 8, 2025).
2. San Gabriel Presbytery discusses acts of reparations with the Black community but recognizes their understanding and relationships with the Black community were not substantial enough to decide the next steps for historic repair (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). Instead, they learned from this that they must form a stronger relationship with the Black community. (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025).
3. La Casa de San Gabriel Community Center informs the San Gabriel Presbytery that due to a lack of membership they need to close down (Participant 1, personal communication, November 20, 2025; Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025; and Participant 3, personal communication, December 8, 2025).
4. Mona Recalde, Elder in the Presbyterian Church and member of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council asks Participant 2 about the feasibility of a land return (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). For Participant 2, this made immediate sense considering their longstanding relationship with the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council.
5. The Presbytery then completed the approval process very quickly (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). Participant 1, notes this process as “seamlessly easy” and “like a knife through butter” (Participant 1, personal communication, November 20, 2025).
6. The idea arose in approximately November of 2024 and the land was transferred in June 2025 (Participant 1, personal communication, November 20, 2025).
7. Participant 2 and Mona Recalde are noted as primary players in this process (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). Recalde facilitated discussion with the Tribal Council and the Administrative Commission was a branch of the Presbytery (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025).
8. Every step of the way, each decision was made with the consultation of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). Although the Presbytery asked if issuing an apology would be wanted by the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council, mutual agreement informed their decision on calling the land return a celebration (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025). Jihyun Oh (Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of PCUSA) and Jermaine Ross-Allam (founder of PCUSA's Center for the Repair of Historic Harms) both attended the celebration (Participant 3, personal communication, December 8, 2025).
9. Participant 2 states, “the way that the ground became fertile was through the relationship [between the Presbyterian Church and the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council]” (Participant 2, personal communication, November 21, 2025).

Interview Findings

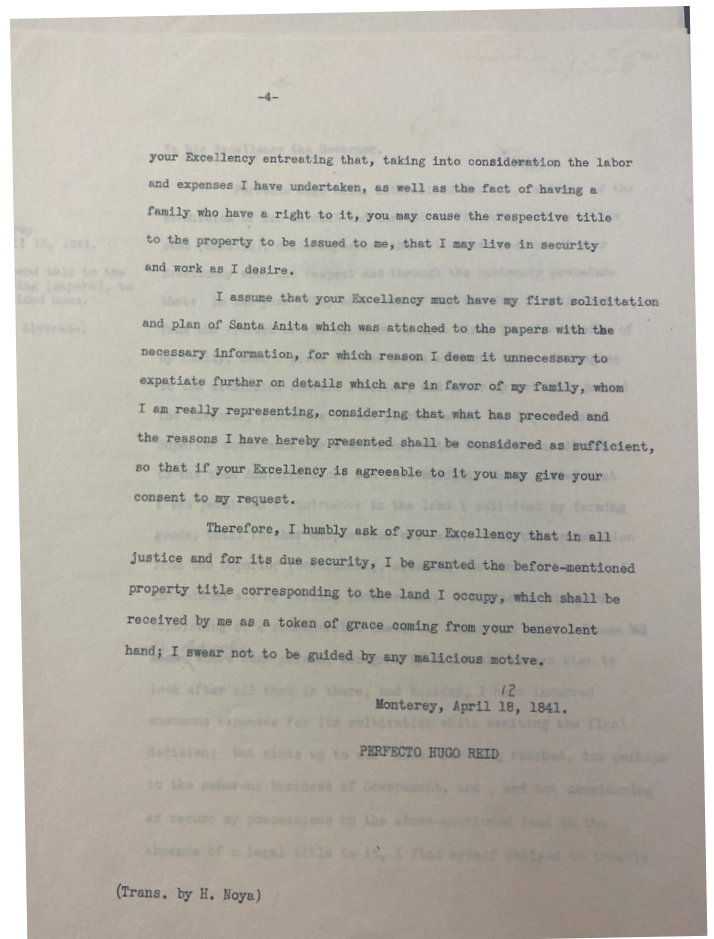
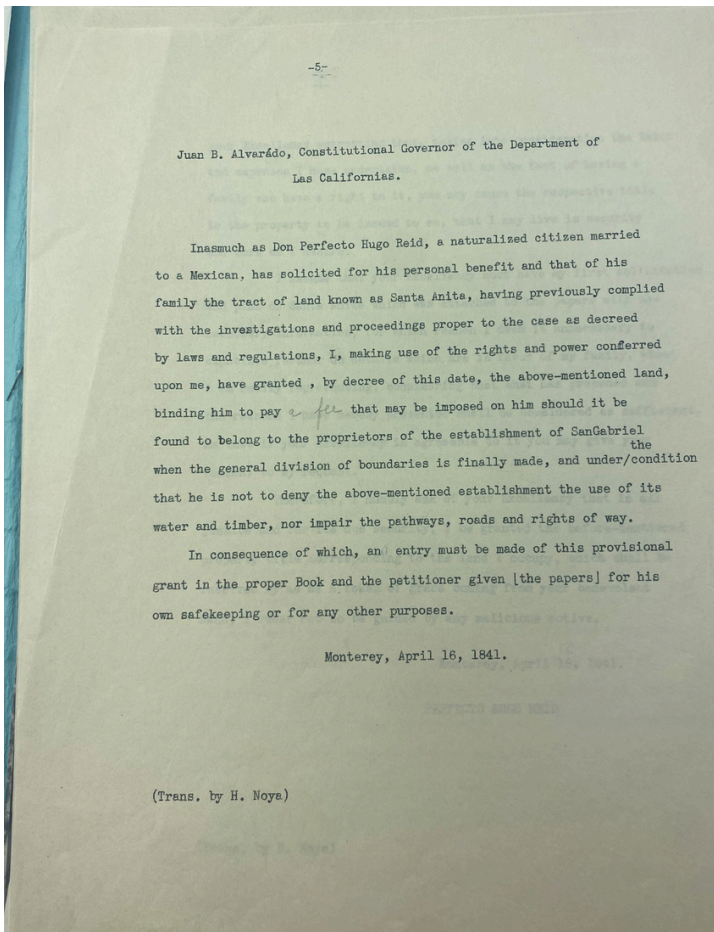
The Presbyterian Church, PCUSA has a commitment to reparative justice. In 2022, a report was created titled, “Race, Reparative Justices and the PC(USA)” which identifies the PC(USA)’s involvement in injustice by, “sit[ing] on land that was once illegitimately gained from Indigenous peoples” (The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) of the General Assembly Mission Council/Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2022). The report also states that PCUSA is dedicated to, “direct and encourage various bodies connected to the denomination to act out of a reparatory justice framework” (The Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy (ACSWP) of the General Assembly Mission Council/Presbyterian Mission Agency, 2022). Understanding that the PCUSA is committed to reparative justice may inform why the land return by the San Gabriel Presbytery to the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council went so smoothly. This is not to say the Presbyterian Church has not experienced internal conflict among members. In 1971, the Presbyterian Church gave \$10,000 to the legal defense fund of Angela Davis, member of the Black Panther Party and activist (Tangeman, 2021). While Rev. Turner and Rev. McCloud were in support of the grant and responsible for its facilitation, letters from “a ‘disgusted Presbyterian’ resented ‘having to donate money to that sub-human Angela Davis through our church’” (Tangeman, 2021). Therefore, while the Presbyterian church has a history of participating in acts of racial and reparative justice, they were not always unified in their actions (Tangeman, 2021).

Broad Timeline



Rancho Santa Anita Grant: Case File for Land Granted by Juan Bautista Alvarado to Hugo Reid

Hugo Reid was a Scottish man who wrote his request for land in 1839 (Heizer, n.d.). Hugo Reid demonstrates himself a worthy candidate for the Santa Anita plot of land because of his ability to cultivate grapes and care for vineyards. Notably he asserts a right to the land because his wife, Victoria, is Gabrieleno. Officials agree that Hugo Reid is entitled to the land and he is granted the space. This is reflective of Ornelas-Higdon's point that secularization brought forth proposals that indigenous peoples should have mission lands; however, "ended up in the hands of wealthy and powerful Californios and immigrants from Europe and the United States" (Ornelas-Higdon, 2023). The land grant to Hugo Reid demonstrates a unique situation in which land was still granted to a European migrant under the guise of returning land to indigenous people.



Rancho Santa Anita Grant: Case File for Land Granted by Juan Bautista Alvarado to Hugo Reid

-3- *Transcription of p. 3 of the expediente*

Angeles, May 18, 1839.

To his Excellency the Governor.

Perfecto Hugo Reid, naturalized Mexican, resident of the ex-Mission of San Gabriel and married to Victoria, native of the same [Mission], declares, before the well-known justice of your Excellency with due respect and through the customary procedure that: In the year 1839, with date of May the 6th, I solicited from the Prefect of the district at that time, for the benefit of my family, that a piece of land known as Santa Anita, belonging to the ex-Mission wherein I reside, and after my petition passed the customary procedure it was placed before the Departmental Superior Government for a decision, which was an order directed to the then Administrator, Don Juan Bandini, which stated that I was permitted to introduce in the land I solicited my farming goods, until further disposition was made. With this permission from the Superior [Government], assuming the land to be mine, I introduced all my farming possessions; I planted a vineyard consisting of a considerable number of vines and built a house ~~with solid walls~~ ^{with solid walls} where some person, assigned by me, would always stay to look after all that is there, and besides, I have incurred enormous expenses for its cultivation while awaiting the final decision; but since up to now none has been reached, due perhaps to the numerous business of Government, and, and not considering as secure my possessions on the above-mentioned land in the absence of a legal title to it, I find myself obliged to trouble

Monterey
April 13, 1841.
Append this to the preceding [papers], to be decided upon.
Alvarado.

-2-

Angeles, May 18, 1839.

Having informed the Ayuntamiento of this city during today's session of the preceding report, it was decided and approved to send the original and other papers on the case to the Prefect of the district for the necessary steps to be taken.

Tiburcio Tapia
Narciso Botello.

x x x x x x x

To his Excellency the Governor.

The Messrs. Lopes have applied, since the year 37, for this same tract of land which is solicited; Don Vicente Lasosa has also asked for it, and now Don Hugo Reid, the latter strengthening his claim with the fact he is married to an Indian from San Gabriel, from whom he has native family. He is deserving of his request for this reason. Your Excellency will decide what you consider most suitable in view of the three petitions.

Angeles, May 24, 1839.
L. Cosme D. Peña

(Translated by H. Noya)

Angeles, May 11, 1839.

Having informed the Ayuntamiento of this city, during today's session, of the present petition, it was decided to submit it to the land commission so that the report requested by the prefect of this district may be made out.

Tiburcio Tapia
President
Narciso Botello
Secretary

x x x x x x x

To the Illustrious Ayuntamiento.

The land commission has reduced the tract of land referred to in this petition and declares that at present it is partly occupied by a small number of sheep and some short crops kept by the Indians, and since the petitioner's claim is strengthened by his family, it recognizes that he has some right in his favor, - this being the report they have rendered.

J[uan]n Crisóst[om]o Vejar
Januario Abila

(Trans. by H. Noya)

Urbanization in San Gabriel

San Gabriel became a city on April 24, 1913 when it was incorporated into Los Angeles County (San Gabriel City, n.d). San Gabriel became a city due to dissatisfaction with county resources and the want from constituents to distinguish themselves from neighboring city: Alhambra (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). While fruit remained a source of economic success, The Mission Play written by John Steven McGroarty in 1911 was a major component in the fostering of “Hispanic roots to present a collective identity and architectural vernacular that recast the community’s Spanish Colonial and Mexican era past in glorified terms” (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). The 1.5 million dollar production was supported by Henry Huntington and depicted, “a romantic and sentimental picture of mission life... portraying Franciscan priests and Spanish and Mexican colonizers as benevolent actors... the play ignored the rampant disease and social injustices experienced by the Native Americans who were uprooted from their ancestral villages and forcibly moved to the missions” (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). The play was a massive undertaking with the ideas originating from Frank Miller owner of the Mission Inn located in Riverside (The Tidings, 1914). He then consulted with the former president of Stanford University, Dr. David Starr Jordan when they both settled on having author, historian, and editor Steven McGroarty write the play (The Tidings, 1914).

Upon opening, the play gained widespread attention globally (South Pasadena Record, 1915). While many were drawn to San Gabriel from 1849-1912 due to the fertile land and therefore abundant agricultural economy, The Mission Play cemented the city as a tourist attraction (Architectural Resources Group, 2021) A 1915 publication of the South Pasadena Record emphasizes the contemporary importance of the play’s occurrence to the city’s development (South Pasadena Record, 1913). They call for the swift clean up of the city and alterations that improve San Gabriel’s infrastructure because, “San Gabriel will grow. It must grow. Thousands of the people who attend the Mission Play ride in automobiles. They see the surrounding territory. They love the Mission Play, they love the country, they love or will love San Gabriel” (South Pasadena Record, 1913). Evidently, the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse was built for the play’s production (Los Angeles Conservancy, n.d.). Therefore the building’s tie to McGroarty’s play posits itself as a purveyor of colonial histories (Los Angeles Conservancy, n.d.). Approximately 2.5 million people witnessed The Mission Play cementing San Gabriel’s identity as a city characterized by the Mission. The South Pasadena Record describes the production as a, “soul inspiring event with a touch of the sublime. The play itself is a dignified portrayal of the events which served to Christianize California. It serves to take the hearers back to those ancient yet greatly loved days” (South Pasadena Record, 1913). Yet this synopsis is biased and incomplete as it takes the colonial retellings of the Mission Play as a pillar of truth without fully considering Indigenous histories.

Beyond San Gabriel’s founding, The San Gabriel Mission served as inspiration for Spanish Colonial Revival architecture located in the Mission District (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). The Architectural Resources Group attributes an influx in commercial development due to the building of City Hall which, “provided a centralized location for civic life and housed various functions - including the police station and commerce” (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). In this way, The Mission District became an architectural extension of the San Gabriel Mission as it blossomed into a hub for commercial businesses; however, it wasn’t referred to as ‘The Mission District’ until 1994 (Architectural Resources Group, 2021). Today, The Mission District remains a place of Spanish Colonial Revival architecture and civic buildings like the San Gabriel Mission Playhouse and City Hall are still in use.

The Inside of the San Gabriel Mission Museum



Photo by Simone Origel, 2025

Indication of How Significantly San Gabriel Has Changed



Title: Cow on street at Mission San Gabriel
Date: 1890
Sourced from California State Library

Colonial Depictions of Mission Life Within The Mission Play



Title: R.D. McLean portraying Junipero Serra
Date: 1926
Sourced from the Los Angeles Public Library

Recommendations

1. Fostering Relationships and Open Communication With People Native to the Area in Which You Reside

Interview findings demonstrate the feasibility of the land return of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna was contingent upon existing relationships with Tribal Elders in the Presbyterian Church. Therefore, communication and relationships allowed for open dialogue regarding the land return process among church leaders and members of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council. Communication with Tribal Elders can inform what the appropriate steps are in conducting a land return. Furthermore, "The ongoing harm of disregard could start to be healed with action (Dobson & Nez, 2023). Communication can be a starting point in conducting land returns as it was for the land return of the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Center at Siban'gna.

2. Increase Land Back Initiatives of Local Lands in San Gabriel, Especially Lands Associated with the Mission San Gabriel

The return of ancestral land allows for Indigenous sovereignty. The development of the San Gabriel Mission was reliant on forced Indigenous labor (Dobson & Nez, 2023). In turn, the Gabrieleno Tongva continue to grapple with the effects of displacement from ancestral lands (Ogilvie, 2022). Therefore, it is vital the Roman Catholic church returns land in a step of reparative justice.

3. Implement City-Wide Educational Programming Regarding the Impact of the Missions of the Gabrieleno Tongva and Foster Indigenous Representation

San Gabriel must foster city-wide educational programming regarding the destructive impact of the San Gabriel Mission development on the Gabrieleno Tongva because space functions as a "social product" and has the ability to reinforce colonial ideals (Sharp, 2022; Sezneva & Halauniova, 2021). Because San Gabriel City relies on areas of the city such as The Mission District to formulate the city's identity, there must be ample implementation of educational programming that illustrates how San Gabriel's identity, as it is presented today, is informed by the oppression imposed upon the Gabrieleno Tongva by the Roman Catholic church. In this programming, Indigenous voices must be centered in all steps to ensure educational resources are culturally sensitive, appropriate, and wanted by Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council. All steps in such processes must also be led with consent from the Gabrieleno Tongva Tribal Council.

Conclusion

The San Gabriel mission continues to display a narrative of Spanish Colonial control. However, the NDN's Land Back framework provides a basis for the reclamation of Indigenous land to enable Indigenous sovereignty. Colonial ideologies manifest into language, legal frameworks, exclusion, and the urbanization of cities. This context emphasizes that the impact of the mission is not just historical but present in the shaping of San Gabriel today. While the Presbyterian and the Roman Catholic Church function separately, the Presbyterian Church demonstrates that it is possible for churches to return land and therefore, the San Gabriel Mission has an example to follow (Gaydos, 2025). By increasing land returns, California tribes have the ability to steward the land in ways that have been stolen from them. Churches can return land they own in an effort to increase movement towards Indigenous sovereignty.

Image of the Native American Garden at the San Gabriel Mission Arcángel - a collaboration between the Archdiocese of Los Angeles and the Gabrieleno San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians

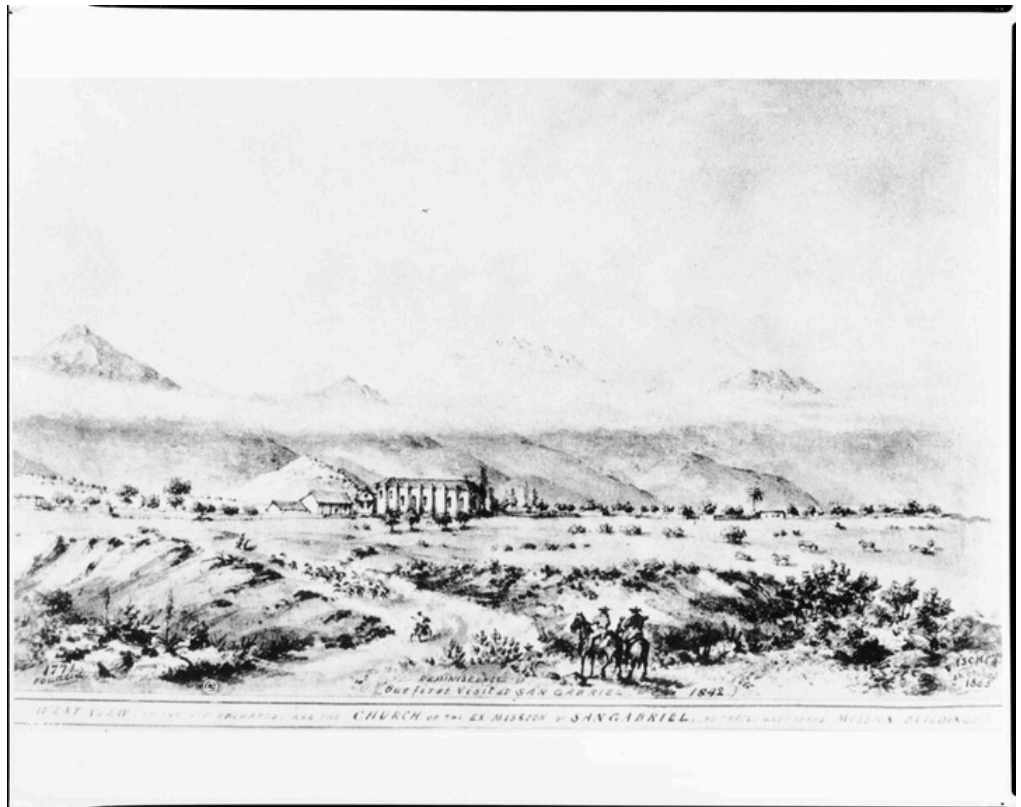


Photo by Simone Origel, 2025

Appendix



Title: Indians at San Gabriel, Cal., 1883
Date: 1883
Sourced from the Huntington Digital Library



Title: Painting by Edward Vischer depicting the Mission San Gabriel as seen from a distance, ca.1842-1865
Date: 1842/1865
Sourced from the USC Digital Library

Appendix



Title: In the San Gabriel Mission Orchard
Date: approx. 1877 - approx. 1880
Sourced from the Huntington Digital Library



Title: Indian house at the
Mission San Gabriel, ca. 1844
Date: 1844
Sourced from the USC Digital
Library

Appendix



Title: Jacinta Serrano, last San Gabriel Mission Indian basket maker.

Date: approx. 1887

Sourced from the Huntington Digital Library

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