

El Molino Viejo



Southern California Quarters California Historical Society

El Molino Viejo, San Marino's earliest and most historic building, was the first grist mill to be built in California. Meal was ground there for nearly 4,000 Indian neophytes, and it was an important factor in the expansion of the self-contained Mission Community. Under the Spanish colonial system, Missions served as outposts of the empire in transforming natives into industrious and loyal subjects of the Crown. In 1806 Father Jose Maria Zalvidea began twenty years of such successful rule that San Gabriel, the fourth Mission established, became known as the Queen of the Missions.

In designing the mill, Father Zalvidea pioneered the use of an horizontal, direct impulse water wheel. Built by Mission Indians under the supervision of the Majordomo, Claudio Lopez, the mill was finished between 1812 and 1816. Building methods followed the hispanic tradition and experience in colonizing the new world. Cement was made by burning stone; lime for plaster was burned from ocean shells. The five feet thick lower walls and foundation are of volcanic stone cut in blocks, further strengthened by corner buttresses. The upper walls, three feet deep, and the arched water chambers are of fired, hand made adobe brick. The roof is of tile over timbered beams cut from the San Gabriel mountains.



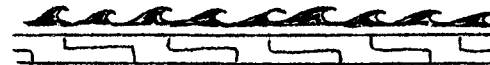
The grist mill was operated by water from Kewen and Los Robles canyons. A cement ditch brought the water to the mill along the bottom of the bluff now topped by the Huntington Sheraton Hotel. The water was stored in a cistern along the west wall, released into the water chamber through the thick wall at the bottom by means of a narrow spout flume to pour horizontally against the buckets of the water wheel. A vertical shaft extending through the wheel and up into the second floor, where the meal was ground, turned the heavy millstones in the same rotation as the water wheel below. The force of the water was not sufficient to start the wheel turning. A leather thong had to be wrapped around the shaft and pulled by a row of Indians running into the mill yard. (This principle is still used to start outboard motors today). There were two arched wheel chambers but only the South one was ever used as the earthquake of 1812 cracked the northeast cistern. After turning the wheel, the water flowed into the lake below to be used to irrigate the vineyards, fruit and olive orchards.

El Molino Viejo was only used for a few years because water spiraling up the shaft dampened the grain, and meal could not be stored there because of the dampness. A second mill was built opposite the Mission in 1822, of which nothing remains today.

In 1833 the Mexican government relieved the Franciscan Missionaries of their holdings by the Act of Secularization. The vast lands of the San Gabriel Mission which had stretched from the mountains to the sea and from Los Angeles to San Bernardino now passed into private hands.

At the end of the Mexican era Hugo Reid and William Workman assumed title to 16,000 acres of Mission lands including El Molino Viejo. Their title was not recognized by the American Land Commission. In 1858 we find Dr. Thomas White deeding "The Old Mill Site", for which he paid \$500.00, to his daughter Fannie Kewen for the sum of one dollar and his "natural love and affection". The Kewens lived in the mill for 20 years and made it into a comfortable residence with french doors, a fireplace and a front portico. The lovely garden overlooking the lake and the hospitality at El Molino Viejo became famous, and no doubt helped elect Colonel Kewen to a seat in the State Assembly.

After Kewen's death Edward Mayberry paid \$36,000 for the property. Calling his estate the El Molino Ranch, Mayberry improved and added to the property during the next 20 years. He built a modern house for himself on the bluff and used El Molino Viejo as a ranch house.



In 1903 the Huntington Land and Improvement Company purchased the Ranch for a hotel site. The Huntington Hotel was finished by 1914, and El Molino Viejo became the Club House for the golf course which Mr. William Hertrich laid out around the lake, now Lacy Park, but at that time called Wilson's Lake for Don Benito Wilson.

Ultimately, golf gave way to subdividers, and Mrs. Arabella Huntington purchased El Molino Viejo intending to make it into a residence. After her death it became the property of Mrs. James R. Brehm (Leslie Huntington).

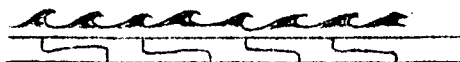
In converting El Molino Viejo to a modern residence, Mr. & Mrs. Brehm engaged Frederick H. Ruppel, who had restored the Mission San Juan Capistrano, to preserve the authenticity of the building. Mr. Ruppel made no structural changes in the original walls and partitions, and as far as possible in the restoration, used primitive methods in the Franciscan tradition: sun-dried adobe brick and tile, leather thongs to tie the ceiling beams, fire charred wooden doors and window frames, and walls decorated by the primitive motif "The River of Life". Details of the reconstruction are shown by blueprints deposited in the San Marino Public Library. In 1937, El Molino Viejo was included in the Historic American building survey and a certificate was awarded.

In 1962, when Mr. & Mrs. Brehm died, El Molino Viejo was deeded to the city of San Marino to be maintained and preserved as an historical monument.

After 150 years El Molino Viejo stands today, behind the wall at 1120 Old Mill Road, serene in its own enduring tradition of strength and beauty.

Prepared for exhibit on
EL MOLINO VIEJO
Fiftieth Anniversary of Incorporation of
CITY OF SAN MARINO

By



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