

The Agua Mansa Cemetery

Agua Mansa

The Agua Mansa community, which spanned both sides of the Santa Ana River, was the first settlement in the San Bernardino Valley after the close of the Mission period in the 1830s. It had the first church, the first school, and was the first to develop a lumbering industry. It was the largest settlement between Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Los Angeles until the growth of the Mormon settlement at San Bernardino in the 1850s. But the town virtually disappeared after only 50 years and, today, the Agua Mansa Cemetery is all that remains of this thriving community.

The Settlement

Antonio Maria Lugo and Juan Bandini established the San Bernardino and Jurupa ranchos on former Mission San Gabriel property in the 1830s. By offering land, they convinced a group of Indians and Hispanics from Abiquiu, New Mexico, to settle on the upper Santa Ana River and serve as a buffer against raiders and outlaws along the trading route from Santa Fe to Los Angeles. The emigrants first colonized Politana on the Rancho San Bernardino in 1842. Ten of these families, led by Lorenzo Trujillo, moved from Politana to 2,000 acres on the "Bandini Donation" on the east side of the river, on the northern boundary of the Jurupa Rancho. This village was known as "La Placita de los Trujillos", later called La Placita. A second group moved to the west side of the river at Agua Mansa, and by 1845 the twin communities were firmly established. Farmsteads were laid out, an extensive irrigation system was dug, and grapes, grain, vegetables, and fruit trees were planted. Horses, sheep, and cattle were pastured on the mesa to the southeast, at present-day Riverside.

Agua Mansa flourished until January 1862, when a great flood filled the Santa Ana River from bluff to bluff and destroyed the west bank community, leaving only the cemetery, the chapel, and Cornelius Jensen's adjoining store, built in 1854. Most of the homes in La Placita were also damaged or destroyed. Although rebuilt, the farming community never regained its importance. Decrease in farmland fertility due to the flooding, the coming of the railroad, the rise of the cement industry, and the expansion of the citrus industry drew people away from farming. La Placita was a recognized community of Riverside until 1926. The Trujillo cantina closed in World War II, and the last burial in the cemetery occurred in 1963.

The Chapel

The first church in the Agua Mansa community was a brush-covered *enramada* in the square of La Placita. A permanent adobe church was built near the river bank in 1852; it collapsed in quicksand the day after the last row of adobe bricks was placed. Work on a third church, this time on the Agua Mansa side of the river, started immediately. The 11½' by 58' chapel was completed in 1853 and dedicated in 1857 as "San Salvador". The Agua Mansa Cemetery was consecrated in 1854. The chapel withstood the 1862 flood, although the water rose to its steps. In fact, the ringing church bell alerted the Agua Mansans to the impending flood, and all escaped without loss of life. In 1867, however, the parish was moved to San Bernardino, and by 1883 the chapel stood abandoned and crumbling.

Agua Mansa Today

In an effort to stem vandalism, "Friends for the Preservation of the Agua Mansa Cemetery" was formed in 1955 by Marie Espinosa Wood, a descendent of two of the original families. Through hard work and fund raising, these volunteers researched the land title, built a bridge, and fenced and refurbished the cemetery. In 1967, Agua Mansa Cemetery was acquired by San Bernardino County and is now administered as a historic site of the San Bernardino County Museums. With the help of Friends of Agua Mansa Cemetery, a full-size replica of the San Salvador church was constructed and dedicated in 1978 within the cemetery boundaries rather than on the original plot at the bottom of the bluff.

To learn more about Agua Mansa, we suggest *The Agua Mansa History Trail* (San Bernardino County Museum Association Quarterly 43(3), 1996) and *The Story of Agua Mansa: Its Settlement, Churches and People*, both by Dr. Bruce Harley and available at Agua Mansa and the Museum Store in Redlands.