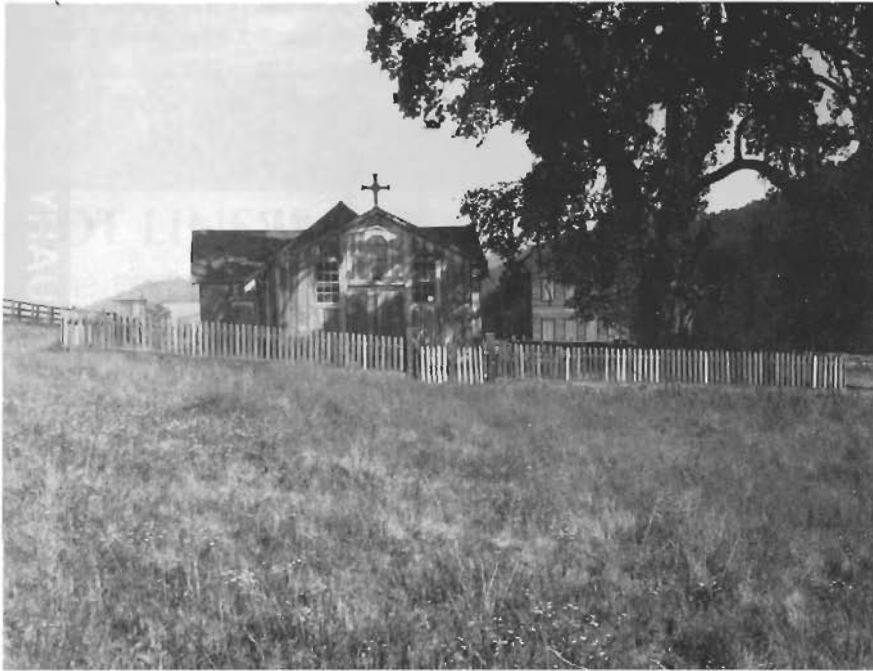


From Schoolhouse to Church to Laboratory



From "The History of Jasper Ridge," by Dorothy F. Regnery

St. Dennis Church, the first Catholic church between Mission Dolores and Mission Santa Clara. "Here after service was over the lumbermen used to have horse races, judged by a jolly, kindly priest." From "The History of Jasper Ridge," by Dorothy F. Regnery.

WHEN THE ACCELERATOR was built in the early 1960s, a limestone and bronze marker had to be moved from the otherwise open land. The marker, which is now located just south of Sand Hill Road, commemorates the first church built in San Mateo County and its founding father, Dennis Martin.

In 1850 Dennis Martin bought 1500 acres, consisting of large portions of what is now SLAC, as well as parts of Webb Ranch and Jasper Ridge. At the time the nearest missions were in San Francisco and Santa Clara, and it was not until 1853, when Martin converted a wooden school house into the St. Dennis Catholic Church, that a church existed in San Mateo County.

Martin came to the United States as a young Irish immigrant. In 1844 he, his father, and brother-in-law joined a group of Irish pioneers to cross the country by wagon train to California. After venturing into the gold fields of the Stanislaus and Mokelumne Rivers, and working as a lumberman, Martin had made enough money to purchase property here. He decided to set up his own lumber business, and as there were few, if any, redwoods on his property, he purchased additional wooded slopes. Martin also built the first grist mill and some of the first big saw mills in the area, and shipped the redwood on his personal schooner to San Francisco.

Dennis Martin was not only an energetic entrepreneur, but in many ways a community leader. From the start he invested his money in socially-oriented projects as well as in business. He built bunk houses for his workers, and a school house which he operated at his own expense for about a year. In 1853 he converted the school building into a church. Archbishop Josef S. Alemany dedicated the church, naming it St. Dennis in honor of the patron saint of Dennis Martin.

Shortly after the founding of the church, Martin established a cemetery within its vicinity. The church was intended for his family, neighbors and

employees, and many people walked from as far away as Redwood City to attend service on Sunday. With 50 families attending regularly, the church was a focal point of community activity. Both Protestants and Catholics attended services. On feast days people often camped nearby for several days.

When Martin bought his land in 1850, California still belonged to Mexico, and no one was aware that American law would soon become relevant. Martin had purchased his property in good faith, but when California became part of the United States many of the Spanish land boundaries were no longer recognized because of differences in Spanish and Anglo-American property law. A land survey determined Martin's ranch to be much smaller in size, and he was dispossessed of all the land north of San Francisquito Creek. Martin not only lost the majority of his land, but also his house, mills, and the church. He and his family moved to the remaining 250 acres at El Corte Madera. This was the beginning of Martin's fading prosperity. The redwood forests began to dwindle, and in 1882 Martin moved to San Francisco to live and work.

St. Dennis' Church was still in use several years after Martin lost his property. However, when the Church of the Nativity was founded in Menlo Park in 1872, the small church was abandoned. A second life began for St. Dennis Church when the Archdiocese of San Francisco purchased some land in Sharon Heights and established a new church in 1961. At the time Stanford University planned to develop a subdivision of 1000 homes on the site where SLAC now stands. Even though the subdivision never materialized, St. Dennis Parish has grown, and its church is once again in the center of a community.

—Annette Cords