

1850

Los Angeles County was formed.

In April the first election was held in Los Angeles County. A three-person "Court of Sessions," was elected as the first governing body. George T. Burrill was elected as the first Sheriff of Los Angeles County.

The jurisdiction of the Sheriff's Office when Los Angeles County was first formed included the territories that are now Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Riverside, Orange and Kern Counties.

Sheriff Burrill's duties included not only enforcing the law, but collecting taxes. Tax money was necessary to fund the local government.

Los Angeles County inherited the old guardhouse from the military. This structure had been used by the military to confine prisoners and was quickly replaced with a wooden structure jail. The one room structure was built of logs with no jail cells. Prisoners were chained by an ankle or wrist to a heavy log that was placed in the center of the room.

The military accidentally destroyed the wooden Jail. The jail was rebuilt using the existing floor plan but instead of logs, the second jail was constructed of adobe. The adobe jail was located west of Main Street and south of Arcadia Street on a hill above the Lafayette Hotel.

The Sheriff's first jailer was Samuel Whiting. He was responsible for the security of prisoners as well as their care and feeding.

In a one year period starting in September of 1850, 31 people were murdered in Los Angeles. Out of a population of only 2,500, this is by far the highest homicide rate in American history. This does not include the murder of Indians, Blacks, Asians and Mexicans which were not considered crimes, or, the murders that nobody ever knew about in the vast California wilderness.

In the Old West, justice was often swift. Vigilante groups, acting both as judge and jury, often hung miscreants they felt went unpunished for their crimes. Many times vigilante groups were so determined that they overpowered the Sheriff who could only watch helplessly as prisoners were forcibly taken from his custody and hung.

When an official death sentence was passed by the court, carrying out the execution was the Sheriff's responsibility.

These legal hangings became public spectacles, often taking on a festival type atmosphere. Families, brought picnic baskets, vendors sold souvenirs and photographers took multiple photos of the event. Many of the pictures ended up on postcards that were sold for a penny.

John “Red” Irving, leader of a gang of 25 desperados known as the “Irving Party hatched a plot to liberate the Lugo brothers from the L.A. County Jail while they were being transferred from the jail to the courthouse. The Sheriff discovered the plan and arranged to have a troop of soldiers present which prevented the lynching.

The 1850’s were a lawless and dangerous time in Los Angeles. Before pursuing hostile criminals, the Sheriff would often enlist the help of the City Marshal, the Town Constables, the U.S. Army or a mounted posse called the Los Angeles Rangers. These groups often combined forces not only to combat large criminal gangs, but for their own safety.

During the Wild West years of the 1800’s, the Sheriff and his deputies did not wear uniforms, but dressed like everyone else. The only visible means of identifying a lawman was by his badge.

When groups of lawmen gathered to pursue and apprehend an outlaw, they wore their badges openly for easy identification, which prevented them from shooting each other during a gun fight.

When a posse was needed to hunt down criminals, they were chosen from townspeople. Any person who was willing to help and who looked trustworthy was deputized on the spot as the Sheriff pinned a badge on them.

During the 1800’s, there was no standard badge for the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department. The badges worn by early deputies were made of sheet silver and hand engraved with the words: L.A. COUNTY DEPUTY SHERIFF or DEPUTY L.A. COUNTY SHERIFF. The badge issued to the Sheriff was gold and engraved: L.A. COUNTY SHERIFF.

During the first 50 years of the Sheriff’s Department the appearance of the badges varied, some were shaped like a star, others like a shield. The badges were made by local jewelers and each deputy had to pay for his own. The more a deputy paid, the more elaborate the badge.

1851

The Court of Sessions reduced the fees paid to Sheriff Burrill to prevent the county from running out of money. The Sheriff was responsible for a jurisdiction that covered thousands of square miles. He was on-call around the clock. For this, he was substantially rewarded with a salary of \$10,000 a year.

The first documented escape from the adobe jail was by inmate, Matias Cortaza. Citizens were outraged that an escape had occurred. In order to calm the upset citizens, six additional jailers were assigned to a variety of shifts to help secure the inmates. After the commotion died down the extra jailers were let go and the one jailer who was left was required to secure the inmates by himself.

Sam Whiting left his job as county jailer to become the City Marshal. George Robinson replaced Whiting as jailer. A short time later, Robinson was charged with negligence for allowing prisoners to escape.

L.A. mayor, city marshal and former jailer, Sam Whiting were all indicted by the grand jury for selling the services of Indians arrested for minor offenses and dividing the funds.

The early Sheriffs of Los Angeles County were elected for one year terms of office. In September of 1851, after George T. Burrill's term ended, James Barton was elected as the second Sheriff of Los Angeles County.

1852

The City Council formed the Los Angeles Rangers to gain control of the rampant lawlessness. This elite posse of 100 volunteers was ready to ride at a moment's notice to assist lawmen in tracking down dangerous outlaws. The group took orders from the Mayor and the Sheriff and were the forerunners of today's Reserve Deputy Sheriff's.

When the Sheriff's Office was first formed, it covered such a vast region, it was impossible for one Sheriff and a few deputies to respond to the needs of the entire jurisdiction in a timely or effective manner. Many towns elected Township Constables to control the violence and protect the citizens. The constables reported directly to the Sheriff and when necessary, provided him with additional support.

The first criminal court judge in Los Angeles was Augustine Olvera, who had a thorough knowledge of law and justice. His command of the English language was lacking, however, which required Sheriff Burrill to act as the court interpreter. This assignment paid the Sheriff an additional \$50 a month.

Sheriff Burrill appointed Elijah T. Moulton as his first deputy. Deputy Moulton was directly subordinate to the Sheriff and was sometimes referred to as Undersheriff. Moulton Avenue in East L.A. is named after this first deputy.

In July, 3 inmates escaped from the Los Angeles County Jail. Two of them fled to San Juan Capistrano where they robbed and murdered two American cattle buyers. When they were caught, instead of returning them to the L.A. County Jail, they were placed in the custody of a citizen's committee. A jury of twelve held a trial on the spot, convicted and then hanged all of them.

Recognizing the gross inadequacy of the adobe jail, the Board of Supervisors began accepting bids for the construction of a new jail.

The first Sheriffs of Los Angeles County used cap and ball black powder revolvers exclusively.

1853

San Bernardino County was formed from Los Angeles County.

During this same year, a new Los Angeles County Jail was constructed. This two story brick building was occupied by city prisoners on the first floor and county prisoners on the second floor.

Joaquin Murrieta and his desperadoes met with “Three Fingered Jack” Garcia, and together they went on a bloody, nine month rampage. Murrieta was one of the so-called “Five Joaquins” listed on a bill passed in the California state legislature in May 1853. The bill authorized the hiring of 20 rangers over a three month period to hunt down Joaquin Botellier, Joaquin Carrillo, Joaquin Ocomorenia, Joaquin Murrieta and Joaquin Valenzuela, along with their gangs.

The California Rangers hired to track down the Joaquins were paid \$150 a month along with a chance to share the \$1,000 governor's reward if they were successful.

On July 25, 1853, a group of Rangers encountered a band of armed Mexican men near Pacheco Pass. A confrontation took place and two of the Mexicans were killed. One was claimed to be Murrieta, and the other was thought to be Manuel Garcia, also known as Three-Fingered Jack, one of Joaquin's most notorious associates.

The Rangers severed Three-Fingered Jack's hand and Murrieta's head as proof of the outlaws' deaths, and were used by the Rangers to collect the reward. The hand and head were preserved in a jar of alcohol and displayed throughout California where spectators could pay \$1 to see them.

1854

Los Angeles County held its first legal execution at the brick jail on February 13, 1854. As hundreds of citizens watched this historic event, Ignacio Herrera was hanged for killing a young man involved in a love triangle. Between 1851 and 1874, Los Angeles witnessed 40 legal hangings, 38 lynchings and 32 executions by vigilance committee.

Late in 1854, Sheriff Barton was mistreating an Indian woman and was confronted by Andres Fuentes. A few days later, Barton had Andres arrested. In prison, Andres met Juan Flores who was also arrested by Sheriff Barton. Together they plotted to seek revenge against the Sheriff. Just after Andres was released from prison, Flores escaped.

On October 13, 1854, the Sheriff and his deputies arrested Dave Brown for murder. As Brown was arrested and taken to the jail, an angry crowd gathered outside to lynch him. Mayor Stephen C. Foster appeased the crowd by promising that, if the courts did not find Brown guilty, he would resign and lead the lynching himself.

A month later, Judge Hayes convicted Brown for murder and sentenced him to hang on January 12, 1855 along with Felipe Alvitre, another murderer. The men appealed and both received stays of execution from the court. Brown's reprieve arrived, but there was nothing for Alvitre. The Hispanic citizens felt that if Brown and Alvitre were both found guilty of murder and sentenced to death, then they should both live or die together.

On January 12, more than 2,000 armed men gathered around the gallows. Sheriff Barton hung Alvitre. The spectators were stirred to a frenzy, chanting that Brown be hung. Everyone turned toward the Mayor, who resigned his position on the spot and agreed to head the mob. The angry horde stormed the jail doors, smashing them in. Brown was dragged to the nearest corral gateway and hung.

A few days later, Alvitre's stay of execution arrived. Mayor Foster was soon re-elected in a landside vote and there was nothing the Sheriff could do about it. Barton was so angry that he refused to run for re-election as Sheriff. He did, however, run for a position on the Board of Supervisors, and won.

1855

Sheriff David W. Alexander - September 1855 – August 1856

1856

On July 19, Constable William Jenkins was sent to the home of Maria Candelaria Polloreña to seize a guitar from Antonio Ruiz, who owed another man \$50. A confrontation and a struggle ensued which resulted in Constable Jenkins shooting over his shoulder and killing an unarmed man.

Constable Jenkins turned himself into the Sheriff. He was released on bail. Many townspeople were outraged and wanted to lynch Jenkins. Sheriff Alexander realized the danger that Jenkins was in and jailed him for his own protection. The constable was eventually tried for murder and acquitted.

At Antonio's funeral, Frenchman, Fernando Cariergue, urged the crowd to attack the town.

Sheriff Alexander organized the citizenry into platoons in order to protect the town. City Marshal Billy Getman and one of his officers, William Peterson, along with six other riders exchanged gunfire with Cariergue's party as they rode towards town. Getman stayed to confront the crowd as the other riders in Getman's party rode back to town to notify the Sheriff. Getman was struck in the face by one gunman's bullet, knocking him from his horse. The other riders fired at the defenseless lawman while he was lying on the ground. Getman rolled as bullets exploded in the dirt, just missing him by inches.

The Marshal's men arrived in time to warn the Sheriff about the impending attack. Quick mobilization of the platoons prevented Cariergue and his thugs from destroying the town. Cariergue fled the pueblo and hid out in San Gabriel.

Andres Pico supported Sheriff Alexander by forming a posse of twenty vaqueros who rode out and captured Cariergue. Now Cariergue was in jail with Jenkins, the man he was going to lynch for killing his friend. The Sheriff and the Judge tried to find a way to bring lasting peace to the town. An Anglo jury found Jenkins not guilty and in return, the grand jury refused to indict Cariergue for the attempted murder of Marshal Getman. Both men were released from jail and the Angelenos went about their business.

Stressed from the incident, Sheriff Alexander went to his friend, former Sheriff James Barton. Barton told Alexander that he would much rather be Sheriff than County Supervisor. Alexander said that he was through chasing down criminals. Resigning as Sheriff, Alexander took over the remainder of Barton's term as County Supervisor.

After Alexander resigned as Sheriff, the Board of Supervisors appointed Charles E. Hale as interim Sheriff until elections could be held.

Sheriff Charles E. Hale August 1856 – November 1856

On Sunday, March 4th, a butcher was stabbed at a Mexican dance house and died almost instantly. Constable Hale arrested the murderer, and while he and Mr. Pancho Johnson were transporting the suspect to jail, four men began firing at them. Mr. Johnson and the prisoner were severely wounded. Constable Hale returned fire wounding one of the desperados so severely that he died the next morning of his wounds.

Sheriff James R. Barton – November 1856 – January 1857 (second Term)

1857

On January 23rd Sheriff Barton and his posse of 5 were tracking down a gang of murderers in San Juan Capistrano when they were ambushed by several members of the Manillas gang. During an intense gun battle, Sheriff Barton and 3 of his posse members were killed. The other 2 posse members were able to race back to Los Angeles to report the killing of the sheriff and posse members.

A massive search for the killers of Sheriff Barton and his posse was conducted throughout Southern California. After killing Barton, Juan Flores and his Manillas gang rode furiously to avoid the posse, indian scouts and military troupes who were searching for them. Some of the killers were eventually tracked down and killed. The head of bandit Miguel Soto was cut off and taken to El Monte for Deputy William Peterson to identify. Peterson recognized the face as that of Miguel Soto. Sheriff Barton's pistol was still in Soto's possession when he was killed.

Tempers in Los Angeles continued to flare from the Sheriff's murder. Vigilantes, bent on revenge, began rounding up every suspect that might in any way be associated with either the Stockton robbery or Flores and his Manillas gang. Three innocent citizens were hung.

On February 14, a vigilante group became restless after one of Sheriff Barton's killers, Juan Flores had been held in the L.A. County jail for a week. The group removed Juan Flores from the custody of the Sheriff and took him up to Fort Hill. The bandit was hung as 3,000 people looked on. The posse who hunted down Flores were among the onlookers.

Sheriff William C. Getman – September 1857 – January 1858

Four months after William Getman became sheriff, he was involved in a shooting with a mentally ill man. The sheriff was shot and killed. His deputies confronted the suspect and during another shooting, suspect Reed was shot and killed.

The day of Sheriff Getman's funeral, all of the buildings in town were draped in black. Saloons were closed. The whole town watched as the funeral director reluctantly removed what was the symbol of a hero, Sheriff Getman's badge.

Sheriff Billy Getman was the first law enforcement officer in the nation killed by a mentally deranged person. His death was also one of the earliest documented cases of what has become known as, "Suicide by Cop." This syndrome is characterized by a mentally ill person provoking the police into killing him since he is not willing to do it himself.

William Getman was the second and last Sheriff killed in the line of duty in Los Angeles County.

1858

Sheriff James S. Thompson – January 1858 – August 1859

In Northern California, Sheriff John Murphy of Santa Clara County captured Pancho Daniel who was involved in killing Sheriff Barton and his posse members. At the time of his arrest, Daniel still had Barton's gun belt in his possession.

While Pancho Daniel was being held in the L.A. County Jail, Sheriff Thompson was sent out on a false report that a fugitive was just outside of town. While the sheriff was gone, 200 vigilantes overpowered the jailer and dragged Daniel out of his cell. The mob took the outlaw into the jail yard and hung him to death using a rope over the crossbeam of the jail gate.

By the late 1850's, cartridge-style rim-fire ammunition became available. This type of ammunition was ideal for small, lightweight and easily concealable derringers. These weapons were a perfect back-up weapon for lawmen.

1859

Sheriff Tomas Sanchez – September 1859 – February 1868

Sanchez was the first Mexican American Sheriff in Department history.

Sheriff Sanchez developed a program to earn additional income for the Sheriff's Department when he created the first "Licensing Detail." He convinced the Board of Supervisors to let him handle all county business licensing for a fee of 10% per license.

Many of the old traditions in California disappeared when a depressing mixture of taxation, crime, drought, small pox and high interest rates destroyed the powerful land-owning dons. Sheriff Sanchez was affected too. He, along with many other land owners, was forced to divide his land and sell it off to pay debts and liens. By 1900, all of the beautiful large ranchos like Sanchez's were gone.

In December the sheriff had won permission to use inmate labor to construct a ten foot fence around the jail yard. The fence was not built to keep inmates inside but to keep vigilantes out.