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Carmel Mission: THEN AND NOW

With a long and fascinating history, the Carmel Mission church is still on the "must-see" list for anyone taking in the beauty of the California coastline. The Mission, first founded in 1770, has undergone some changes over the years, but the compelling antiquity and the stories that it harbors within its walls continue to fascinate even the most religiously challenged. Yes, it has endured many constructive updates over the years, but none so important and historically perfect as what is happening now.

In 1852 the Mission had fallen into a state of abject ruin and disrepair. The floor and roof tiles, along with the doors, had been removed. The bells and art were gone and the roof of the stone church had caved in. The other buildings of adobe in the Mission complex were dissolving away. And by 1880 it was deserted and in ruins. Perhaps providentially, that same year, the Hotel del Monte opened in Monterey, heralded as the most elegant hotel west of the Mississippi. Charles Crocker and his partners in the Big Four built it, along with the 17-Mile Drive, as a day trip for hotel guests. And for ten cents, guests could tour the Mission ruins.

Notable individuals like Phoebe Hearst, mother of William Randolph Hearst, and Leland Stanford's wife, Jane, rallied support for the Mission. At the same time, well-known writers Helen Hunt Jackson and Robert Louis Stevenson wrote poignantly of the Mission's plight. The Society of California Pioneers and Native Sons of the Golden West lent their support as well, and by 1884, a new roof was placed on the church and that began a process of restoration lasting well into the 20th century.

In 2008, new studies indicated that the church roof and the stone church walls, which date from 1797, were in dire need of repair due to age and weatherization. Also, any repair would require an upgrade to current seismic codes. So, in that same year, the Carmel Mission Foundation was formed to provide the funding for the restoration and preservation of the historic buildings and artifacts of the Mission. The Foundation, a nonprofit corporation, independent from any religious organization, is determined to develop ongoing financial reserves that will allow for the preservation of these historical properties.

Next year, the church's roof will be carefully removed, leaving the interior ceiling intact. The historic roof tiles will be preserved and reused. While the roof is off, the structure will be seismically strengthened. Building systems will be modernized and a new fire suppression system will be installed. At the same time, the interior of the church will be protected so that the daily visitors will continue to have access and see the finest example of Mission construction in California. When completed, this multi-million dollar project will make the Mission safer, stronger, and more accessible for future generations. **For more information or to help this worthy cause, visit carmelmissionfoundation.org.** ■

