

Spanish Colonial History

A Spanish Colonial Frontier: Missions, Presidios, Pueblos

California was a colonial province of the Spanish empire during the years 1769 to 1821. Located on the northern frontier of New Spain, California was far removed from the cosmopolitan center of the empire.

The central institutions of Spanish California were the Franciscan missions founded along the coast from San Diego to San Francisco. Presidios provided limited military protection while pueblos emerged as fledgling civilian centers.

The Spanish empire rested upon the inclusion, transformation, and exploitation of the Native peoples of the Americas.



Central to the success of this enterprise was the mission, a frontier institution designed to advance the empire as well as to convert Indians to Roman Catholicism.

Junípero Serra, a Spanish Franciscan, arrived in California in 1769 as a leader of what came to be called the Sacred Expedition. He founded California's first nine missions and served as father-president of the mission system. The proposed canonization of Serra in recent years has sparked an intense debate among scholars; headlines in the popular press asked the question "Saint or Sinner?"

After Serra's death, Fermín Francisco de Lasuén became father-president and doubled the number of California missions. Founding a mission was always the occasion of solemn ceremony including fervent prayers by the missionary priests. Mission architecture evolved slowly and reflected a variety of influences from Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

The missionaries used various methods of recruitment to gather the Native people to the missions. Once at the missions, the Indians received religious instruction as well as training in practical skills. Mission Indian testimony often described the missions as oppressive institutions and Native resistance took a variety of forms.

La Pérouse and Vancouver both produced insightful commentaries and detailed renderings of Spanish California while visiting California in the late 1780s and 90s. These and other documents are prime sources for our understanding of these early years of California history.



California's missions were frontier institutions, established to advance and consolidate the Spanish empire as well as to convert Indians to Roman Catholicism.

The roots of the mission system lie in the long struggle by Spaniards against the Moors on the Iberian peninsula. The cross and the sword moved forward together in the reconquest of Spain long before the Spanish conquest of the Americas.

The principal aim of the missionaries was the religious conversion of the Indians, but they believed that effective Christianization could not be separated from the larger process of acculturation. Their aim was to bring about a rapid and thorough transformation of the Native people. The Indians were to be Hispanicized not only in religion but also in social organization, language, dress, work habits, and virtually every other aspect of their lives.

The missions always were intended to be temporary institutions. Once the local Indians were Hispanicized, the missions were to be disbanded and the Indians were to assume their place as useful, productive members of the Spanish empire.

The founder of California's mission system was Junípero Serra, a Spanish Franciscan missionary priest.

Born on the island of Majorca on November 24, 1713, Serra began his career as a professor of theology in Palma. He resigned his professorship in 1749 to become a missionary to the Indians of the Americas.

For twenty years, Serra served as a missionary in New Spain, founding missions in the Sierra Gorda and elsewhere.

In 1768 he assumed the presidency of the former Jesuit missions on the Baja California peninsula. The next year he joined the Sacred Expedition to extend the mission system northward into Alta California. Between 1769 and 1784, Serra founded the following nine missions: San Diego (1769), San Carlos Borromeo (1770), San Antonio (1771), San Gabriel (1771), San Luis Obispo (1772), San Francisco (1776), San Juan Capistrano (1776), Santa Clara (1777), and San Buenaventura (1782). He served as father-president of the system from its headquarters at Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel, and it was there that he died at the age of seventy on August 28, 1784.

Serra was small in stature, just five feet two inches in height, but was a giant in determination. His friend and colleague Francisco Palóu paid Serra this tribute in 1787: "His memory shall not fail, because the works he performed when alive shall be impressed in the minds of the dwellers of this New California; despite the ravages of time, they shall not be forgotten."

Conflicting views of Junípero Serra and the missions have produced an ongoing debate among scholars and others interested in the impact of the missions on the Native people of California.



The debate intensified in the 1980s when Pope John Paul II declared Serra to be "Venerable," the first step toward sainthood. Just three years later the pope moved Serra to the second step by declaring him "Beatific." Supporters of Serra rejoiced that the church at last "recognized the extraordinary holiness of this man who was the founder of civilization in California." Critics of the missions, particularly among Native American groups, denounced the move. Some described Serra as a "sadist" and a "fanatic," while one critic of the mission system complained that the canonization of Serra "would be another insensitive reminder of past oppression and maltreatment."

Press coverage of the Serra controversy reflected the deep division in contemporary opinion. An article in The Sacramento Bee in February 1987 was headlined simply "Serra: Saint or Sinner?" When a similar article appeared in the San Jose Mercury News five months later, the question was slightly more extreme: "Serra's Mission: Saint or Sadist?" Meanwhile the Contra Costa Times puzzled its readers the following year with the query: "Serra: Saint or Enslaver?"

Following the death of Junípero Serra in 1784, Fermín Francisco de Lasuén became father-president of the California missions.



Born in Spain on June 7, 1736, Lasuén served for many years as a missionary in the Sierra Gorda and elsewhere in New Spain. He sailed with Serra to Baja California in 1768 and served as president of the Baja missions after Serra's departure with the Sacred Expedition. Later, in 1773, Lasuén joined Serra in Alta California.

Lasuén assumed the presidency of the Alta California missions in 1785 and doubled their number. During his eighteen-year tenure he founded the following missions: Santa Barbara (1786), La Purísima Concepción (1787), Santa Cruz (1791), Soledad (1791), San José (1797), San Juan Bautista (1797), San Miguel (1797), San Fernando (1797), and San Luis Rey (1798). Lasuén died at Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel on June 26, 1803.



Although not nearly as well known today as Junípero Serra, Lasuén supervised the building of many of the impressive mission structures that are extant today. Historian Charles Chapman wrote of Lasuén: "In zeal as a Christian and missionary he equaled, though he could not surpass, Father Junípero."

An ambitious colonial administrator named José de Gálvez arrived in New Spain in 1765. It was Gálvez who conceived and ordered what came to be called the "Sacred Expedition," an expedition to extend Spanish settlement northward to Alta California.



Gálvez hoped that the success of the expedition would lead to his appointment to higher colonial office.

The specific goals of the expedition were to found missions and presidios at the bays of San Diego and Monterey. The expedition included three ships and two land parties, all under the command of Captain Gaspar de Portolá. In the expedition were soldiers, christianized Indians, various artisans, and a contingent of Franciscan missionaries headed by Junípero Serra.

The various components of the expedition began heading northward from Baja California in 1769. Serra soon began to suffer from an old leg injury. When Portolá advised him to turn back, Serra refused. Serra wrote in his diary, "I trust that God will give me the strength to reach San Diego, as He has given me the strength to come so far.... Even though I should die on the way, I shall not turn back."

The sites for each of the California missions were carefully selected by the Spanish missionaries. The sites had to have good supplies of water and fertile soils for growing crops. Most important of all, the missions had to be located near Native population centers.



Junípero Serra founded Mission San Antonio de Padua in 1771 in the heartland of the Salinan Indians. The founding included prayers and other signs of Serra's "ardent zeal for the conversion" of the Native people. Francisco Palóu, a companion and early biographer of Serra, offered in 1787 the following account:

"[The missionaries] inspected the terrain and found an extensive and attractive plain...adjoining a river, which they named the San Antonio. To them it seemed quite an apt site for the new mission because of the good current of water flowing even in the month of July, which is the high point of the dry season. They realized that they could readily utilize the river for irrigation purposes. They all concurred in the choice of this spot for the settlement; whereupon the Venerable Father [Serra] ordered the mules to be unloaded and the bells hung from the branch of a tree. As soon as they could be rung, the servant of God began to sound them in a merry peal and to shout as if enraptured: 'Come, you pagans; come, come to the Holy Church; come, come to receive the Faith of Jesus Christ.'"

The earliest mission structures in California were simple affairs made of logs, branches, and thatch. These early structures soon were replaced by larger buildings made of adobe, sun-dried mud bricks.

Several of the missions, such as those at Santa Barbara and San Juan Capistrano, reached a more elaborate stage. Architectural elements were rendered in shaped stones and fired brick.

The designs of the missions, at first, were strictly utilitarian. Later, as more flexible building materials were introduced, the designs incorporated a variety of decorative elements. Stone pilasters, entablatures, and friezes defined the neoclassic facade at Mission Santa Barbara. Roman arches of fired brick lined the arcades in nearly every mission quadrangle. A Moorish dome topped the church at Mission San Carlos Borromeo and a Moorish doorway led to the mortuary chapel.

The designs of the missions also reflected the limitations imposed by the materials available on this colonial frontier. The maximum height of the mission walls, for instance, was determined by the bearing capacity of the adobe bricks.

The Franciscan priests in Spanish California used many different methods to recruit Native people into the missions.

The missionaries hoped at first that recruits would come voluntarily, attracted by the ceremonies and rituals of the church. Some Indians did freely join the missions because they believed the missionaries were shaman-like intermediaries to the spirit world. The missionaries attracted additional recruits by offering glass beads, colored cloth, and other gifts.

Sometimes the missionaries entered Native villages and baptized the young children. Later the missionaries required the children to come to the missions for further religious instruction. Naturally the parents wanted to be with their children and so they also came to live at the missions.

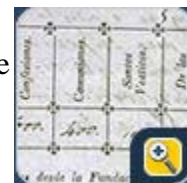
As time went on, the regular food supply available at the missions became a powerful inducement. Mission farms and ranches destroyed the Indians' traditional food-gathering grounds, thus people came to the missions seeking nourishment. Several observers also reported that Spanish soldiers used force to remove people from their villages and take them to the missions.

Historians and others continue to debate the question of the impact of the missions on the California Indians. Some scholars believe that the missions benefited the Native people; others regard their impact as catastrophic.



One sad fact is beyond dispute: the Indians at the missions suffered a high death rate, caused primarily by diseases for which they lacked immunity. The concentration of Indians in large numbers at the missions, the changes in diet, and the imposition of an alien discipline all contributed to the high rate of death.

During the mission period, the Native population from San Diego to San Francisco fell from an estimated 72,000 to 18,000--a decline of more than 75 percent.



The Indians of California have always been a deeply religious people. Their traditional ways are rooted in age-old spiritual beliefs and practices. Spanish missionaries introduced to California the Roman Catholic religion. The missionaries baptized thousands of Indians into this new religion at the missions.



The missionary friars insisted that the Indians remain at the missions once they had been baptized. Neophytes, or converted Indians, were not allowed to reject their vows and return to their former way of life. Soldiers garrisoned at the missions assisted in the recapture of runaway Indians.

This policy of "enforced residence" was deemed necessary to instruct the converted Indians in Catholicism. Twice a day the missionaries required the neophytes to recite the doctrina, a statement of basic Christian beliefs.

No one today can determine the effectiveness of the missionaries' program of religious conversion and instruction. One skeptical California ranchero, Antonio Maria Osio, doubted that the Indians in the missions ever adopted a true Christianity "simply because they had been sprinkled with baptismal water."

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In recent years historians have come to appreciate the value of the testimony of California Indians who lived in the Spanish missions. Their testimony provides an "inside look" at mission life.



The testimony of Pablo Tac, a mission Indian born at San Luis Rey, offers a positive view. He and another Luiseño youth were taken to Rome by a missionary in 1833. In the manuscript of his testimony, deposited in the Vatican Library, Tac expressed thanks to God for the coming of the missionaries to his country. He did observe, however, that thousands of his people died "as a result of the sickness that came to California."

Victoria, a Tongva woman who grew up in Mission San Gabriel, testified that mission life was filled with misery, humiliation, and terror. She reported that the missionaries punished an Indian



woman who had a miscarriage by having her head shaved, by being flogged every day for fifteen days, and by wearing iron shackles on her feet for three months, and by "having to appear every Sunday in church, on the steps leading up to the altar, with a hideous painted wooden child in her arms."

Lorenzo Asisaro, a neophyte at Mission Santa Cruz, testified that the mission Indians were subject to strict discipline: "The Indians at the missions were very severely treated by the padres, often punished by fifty lashes on the bare back. They were governed somewhat in the military style, having sergeants, corporals, and overseers, who were Indians, and they reported to the padres any disobedience or infraction of the rules, and then came the lash without mercy, the women the same as the men. The lash was made of rawhide."

The Native people of California responded to the Spanish missions in a variety of ways. Some cooperated fully while others resisted.

Passive resistance by mission Indians included strategies of noncooperation, work slowdowns, and the destruction of tools and equipment. Others resisted by running away. Soldiers stationed at the missions were charged with the duty of tracking down and bringing back the fugitives.

Active resistance to the missions included short-lived revolts, occasional attempts to murder individual missionaries, and raids on mission herds by mission fugitives and unconverted Indians. The first violent attack occurred in 1769 at San Diego, just a month after the mission was founded. The most successful instance of violent resistance was the destruction of two interior missions founded along the Colorado River. The Yuma people in 1781 attacked the missions and killed thirty soldiers and four missionaries.

Four years later, a 24-year-old Tongva shaman named Toypurina participated in an Indian conspiracy to destroy Mission San Gabriel. Like other Native leaders, Toypurina probably regarded the missionaries as a threat to her traditional status and authority. When questioned about her role in planning the revolt, Toypurina said: "I hate the padres and all of you, for living here on my native soil, for trespassing upon the land of my forefathers."

The Spanish missions in California were visited by several European expeditions in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The records from these expeditions provide historians with an "outside look" at mission operations.



The first outsider to visit the missions was Jean Francois Galaup de La Pérouse, the leader of a voyage of scientific exploration for the French government. La Pérouse praised the character of the individual missionaries--"these men, truly apostolic, who have abandoned the idle life of a cloister to give themselves up to fatigues, cares, and anxieties of every kind." La Pérouse was less complimentary, however, of the missionaries' treatment of the California Indians.

In the following passage, La Pérouse compares Mission San Carlos Borromeo with the slave plantations he had earlier visited in the West Indies: "In a word, everything reminded us of a habitation in Saint Domingo, or any other West Indian [slave] colony. The men and women are assembled by the sound of the bell, one of the religious conducts them to their work, to church, and to all other exercises. We mention it with pain. The resemblance is so perfect, that we saw men and women loaded with irons, others in the stocks; and at length the noise of the strokes of a whip struck our ears...."

One of the most observant European visitors to Spanish California was the English naval officer George Vancouver, leader of an around-the-world voyage of exploration.



He visited San Francisco Bay in November 1792, and also traveled to the missions at Santa Clara, Monterey, and San Diego. The following year he returned to California, and in the winter of 1794 he came back to Monterey for a final visit.

Vancouver persisted in referring to California as "New Albion," always using the name applied to California by the Englishman Francis Drake during his visit in 1579.