

San Antonio Missions

San Antonio Missions
National Historical Park
Texas

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The chain of missions established along the San Antonio River in the 1700s is a reminder of one of Spain's most successful attempts to extend its dominion northward from New Spain (present-day Mexico). Collectively they form the largest concentration of Catholic missions in North America.

Tales of riches spurred the early Spanish explorers northward across the Rio Grande. By the 1600s Spaniards penetrated areas to the east, encountering the Tejas Indians for whom Texas is named. As dreams of wealth faded, the Spanish concentrated more fully on



spreading the Catholic faith—the basis of Spanish colonial society—among the frontier Indians. Financed by the Crown, Franciscan missions served both Church and State. As an arm of the church, the mission was the vanguard for converting the Indians spiritually. As an agent of the state, the mission helped push the empire northward. Missions also offered Indians sanctuary from their enemies.

Threatened by French encroachments from Louisiana, Spain stepped up its colonization in 1690, establishing six missions in East Texas. Needing a way station between these and

other Franciscan missions in New Spain, the friars transferred a failed mission on the Rio Grande to the San Antonio River in 1718. It was renamed mission San Antonio de Valero, later called the Alamo.

Water, timber, and wildlife in this rich valley had long attracted Spanish explorers. Noting the many Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-teen) Indians nearby, Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús established a second mission, San José, in 1720. As the East Texas missions failed due to disease, drought, and shifting relations with France, three were moved to the San Antonio

River valley in 1731. These five missions, a *presidio* (fort), and settlement were the seeds for one of the most successful Spanish communities in Texas. These missions flourished between 1747 and 1775, despite periodic raids by Apache and Comanche Indians. Military support was never adequate, so the Spanish trained the Christianized mission Indians to defend their communities.

After 70 years there was less need for the missions because of the effects of European diseases, acculturation, and intermarriage. By 1824 the San Antonio missions were

secularized—the lands were redistributed among the inhabitants, and the churches were transferred to the secular clergy.

The Spanish missions helped form the foundation for the city of San Antonio. Modern San Antonio early recognized the missions' significance, and since the 1920s the city has worked to preserve them. Today these missions represent a nearly unbroken connection with the past. Carrying the legacy of generations of American Indians and Hispanics, they live as active parishes.

Coahuiltecan

American Indians living in the San Antonio missions came from several hunting and gathering bands known collectively as Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-teen).

Ranging across today's south Texas and north-eastern Mexico, they moved with the seasons in search of food. The bands had distinct dialects and religious practices but shared broad characteristics.

Extended families would come together in larger bands when food was abundant.

Men hunted the occasional bison, deer, or rabbit or trapped fish and snakes. But fruits, nuts, beans, roots, and seeds gathered by the women and children were the bulk of their diet.

Wearing skins and woven sandals, they used bows and arrows, fishing nets, digging sticks, and grinding stones to get and prepare food. When time permitted they made brush huts and wove sleeping mats. They produced simple pottery and were fine basket

makers, using baskets to store and carry food. They practiced rites of passage and observed seasonal ceremonies that were common to many hunter-gatherer cultures.

Even before mission life changed their ancient living habits, the Coahuiltecan were being pressed by nomadic tribes encroaching from the north. But a greater threat was the European diseases introduced

by the Spanish, which eventually decimated their numbers. Struggling under such hardships, Coahuiltecan proved to be relatively willing recruits for the missionaries. In exchange for labor and conversion to Catholicism, Indians received food and refuge in the missions.

The Franciscan Missions



Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús (1657-1726), founder of Mission San José. SAN JACINTO MUSEUM, HOUSTON

Cross and Crown Spanish colonialism, like that of other nations then, was exploitative. Yet the Franciscans directed these missions with a gentle hand. An order of friars whose members took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Franciscans pledged to serve as protectors of the Indians. They also helped the Crown as explorers,

cartographers, diplomats, scientific observers, and chroniclers. But their primary New World task was to expand Spanish culture to whatever lands the Crown claimed.

The mission system sought to bring Indians into Spanish society by concentrating the scattered tribes as church-centered communities. With the direction of the Franciscans, the Indians built these communities, eventually erecting stone structures and developing stable economies.

Missions functioned primarily as religious centers and training grounds for Spanish

citizenship. Indians were taught obedience to the Crown along with the vocational skills needed for economic self-sufficiency.

Massive stone walls around the compounds gave residents security from enemies. Helped by soldiers from the nearby *presidio* (fort), the San Antonio missions also defended the King's dominions. Soldiers taught the Indians to use European arms. Nearly all armed patrols in Spanish Texas that pursued Apache and Comanche Indians included mission Indian auxiliaries.

Life in the Mission

The Indian neophytes' days were highly structured. At sunrise, bells called them to morning Mass, singing, prayers, and religious instruction. They then returned to their quarters for the morning meal, usually a corn dish.

Most men and boys headed for the fields, orchards, gardens, or quarries. Others stayed behind to forge iron, weave cloth, or build structures. A few tended livestock at the distant ranches. Women and girls learned to cook, sew, and spin;



Mission San José, mid-1700s

tend gardens; and make soap, pottery, and candles. Older residents fished and made arrows. The neophytes practiced their catechism, usually in Spanish. Prayers and a little free time ended the day. Church feast days were welcome breaks in the routine.

Discipline—religious, social, and moral—was the essence of the mission system. Although some Coahuiltecan fled the missions to return to their old life, most accepted Catholicism and actively took part in Spanish society.



ILLUSTRATION OF MISSION LIFE
NPS/RICHARD WILLIAMS

