

San Antonio Missions

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

San Antonio Missions
National Historical Park



Mission San Juan Capistrano

English



Looking on the ruins of Mission San Juan Capistrano, it might be hard to envision a thriving community. This serene rural setting seems to silence voices of the past. Yet if you linger, you may sense those voices echoing from the limestone walls. On any day, it is common to hear the inhabitants of San Juan's still active community. They continue to visit the mission grounds, enjoying the natural and spiritual elements of their neighborhood mission.

The Development of a Community

The history of Mission San Juan began in the woods of East Texas. In 1716, Mission San José de los Nazonis was established to serve the Nazonis Indians. However, the mission was not successful, and whatever was transportable was moved here. On

March 5, 1731, the mission was reestablished on the east bank of the San Antonio River and renamed San Juan Capistrano.

Despite the new location, the mission still had to contend with adversity. Epidemics of smallpox, measles, and other European disease swept through the mission, causing much suffering and death among the native inhabitants. Early on, bands of raiding Apaches and later Comanches terrorized the community. At times, when food was bountiful and danger was low outside the protective walls, some of the mission Indians left, returning to their hunting and gathering way of life. Political problems also arose. As governing power figures in the area changed, so did support for the mission.

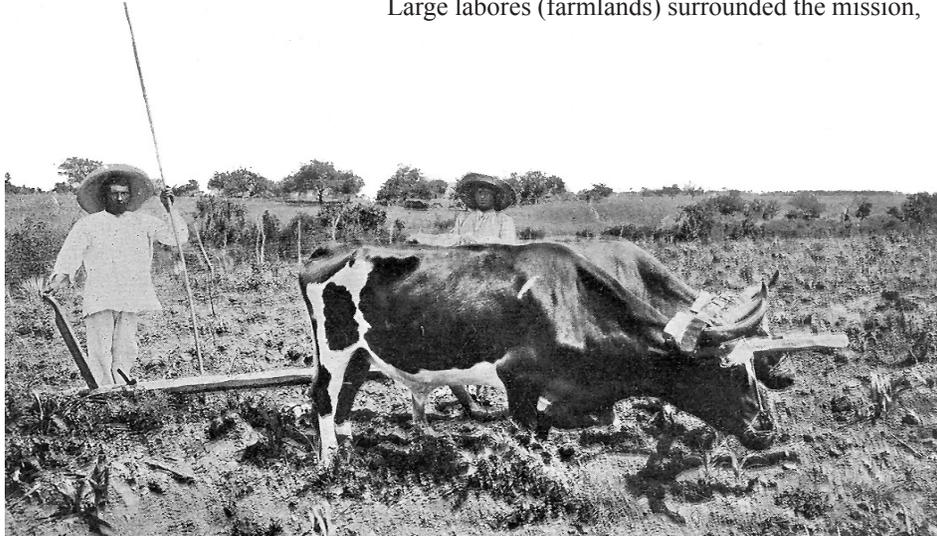
Still, the mission persevered and grew. By 1762 there were 203 Indians residing at Mission San Juan. The mission included a granary, textile shops, and Indian houses made of adobe with thatched roofs. One government inspector wrote in 1767, “. . . overseers or administrators are not needed. . . . The Indians themselves take care of work in the cloth factory, carpenter shop, forge . . . and attend to all of the work that is to be done in the town. They are industrious and diligent and are skilled in all kinds of labor.”

One task that the community could not accomplish, however, was the construction of a new and larger church, which began in 1772. This effort may have been a part of a plan to completely renovate the east side of the mission compound. The intended design of the building probably included a vaulted ceiling over the nave and a dome over the sacristy. A lack of Indian labor prohibited the completion of the project, and construction halted in 1786.



Agriculture: A Mission Success Story

While the walled compound served as the center of mission life, it was outside the walls where the community enjoyed some of its greatest success. Large labores (farmlands) surrounded the mission,



and were irrigated by acequias (irrigation ditches). A section of the labores and acequia can be seen across the parking lot from the mission compound. Crops included corn, beans, chilies, melons, cotton, sugar cane, and squash. The fertile soil of the San Antonio River flood plain and the reliable water supply made for successful farming — the mission often enjoyed large surpluses of food.

The success of its agriculture became the basis of Mission San Juan's economy. Surplus produce, along with cattle and other goods, were traded with other Spanish missions and settlements in the area and into present-day Mexico. There possibly was even trade with French settlements in Louisiana. This legacy continues today, as agriculture is still prominent in the surrounding area.

Mission San Juan Today

It may seem quiet today, yet Mission San Juan is still the center of a vibrant community. The meeting of the Spanish and native people has led to a new, unique culture that is celebrated among the people of San Juan Parish. Many parishioners trace their roots back to the original inhabitants. For them, Mission San Juan serves as the spiritual center of their community. They come to worship at the church, just as their ancestors did centuries ago.

