



# Foundation Document Overview

## San Antonio Missions National Historical Park

Texas



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*SAN ANTONIO MISSIONS NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK protects, preserves, restores, and interprets four Spanish Colonial missions and their associated cultural landscape features established along the upper San Antonio River.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why San Antonio Missions National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- The Spanish Empire's efforts to colonize, evangelize, and defend the northern frontier of New Spain—reflected by the architecture, landscapes, and functioning acequias and agricultural systems—are preserved as the most complete, geographically concentrated, and intact group of Spanish Colonial mission complexes in the world.
- San Antonio Missions National Historical Park resources are the result of the complex interweaving of peoples and cultures from indigenous groups, central and northern New Spain, and the Spanish settlers that precipitated a rapid, fundamental, and permanent change most dramatically among the indigenous groups. This new society, neither wholly indigenous nor wholly Spanish, has continually evolved to become the predominant culture of South Texas.
- In partnership with the National Park Service, the Archdiocese of San Antonio and local parishes preserve and provide public access to San Antonio Missions National Historical Park's four historic mission churches, all of which are active today. This is the only park unit in the national park system that has this type of partnership.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Mission Concepción**
- **Mission San José**
- **Mission San Juan**
- **Mission Espada**
- **Museum Collections and Archives**
- **Partnerships**



## Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- Like a grand tapestry of interwoven warp and weft, the history of these missions displays recurring opportunity and imposition, will and submission, action and consequence, gain and loss—inspiring us to study and appreciate history in such a way that we emerge better equipped to chart our own future and influence the future of others.
- The hardship, devastation, and uncertainty of life in this region during the 17th and 18th centuries influenced the extent to which indigenous groups accepted or rejected mission culture—allowing us to more deeply identify with our human capacity to adapt to challenge.
- The complex mixing of colonial Spain with the indigenous people of this region offers unique opportunities to understand and reflect upon continuity and loss of religious beliefs, cultural identity, and sense of place in the world.
- Past and present dynamic communities with functioning agricultural systems, complex architectural features, and natural and cultural landscapes at San Antonio Missions National Historical Park demonstrate how landscapes shape, and are shaped by, human societies.





## Description

Located along a 7.7-mile stretch of the upper San Antonio River basin in southern Texas are five Spanish Colonial mission complexes built in the early 18th century. These missions were not simply churches; they were large, self-sustaining settlements complete with agricultural systems. The Spanish Crown's goal for the missions was to convert indigenous people to Spanish-speaking Catholic citizens skilled in a trade who could be taxed by the king. The rapid interweaving of peoples and cultures and the sharing of knowledge and skills among inhabitants marked a rapid and permanent shift in the development and culture of South Texas.

The park preserves rare examples of internationally important 18th-century historic structures found in four mission complexes. Mission Concepción, with the oldest unreconstructed stone church in the United States, and the Mission Espada complex, which includes the only functioning aqueduct from the Spanish Colonial period in the United States, are designated national historic landmarks. Mission San José is a model of Texas missions with a church, indian quarters, mill, and granary, all of which were fully restored in the 1930s to allow visitors to understand how the missions looked and operated more than 250 years ago. Mission San Juan includes operational *labores* irrigated by an acequia. The park also preserves Rancho de las Cabras (Rancho), the only extant mission ranch with standing architectural ruins and intact archeological deposits that illustrate ranching and other highly communal shared skills and activities among inhabitants. Together, these features are unmatched in number and range of surviving elements, and serve as an extraordinary illustration of the colonization and evangelization of an indigenous population and defense of the Spanish Empire in North America. On July 5, 2015, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designated San Antonio Missions National Historical Park a World Heritage Site in recognition of the park resources' outstanding universal value and importance to all humankind.

In siting the missions, topography and proximity to the San Antonio River were critical. The success of any mission depended on agriculture, and rainfall in South Texas is sparse. According to the Laws of the Indies, missions were required to be at least one day's ride apart, but for various reasons the Franciscan missionaries established the San Antonio missions closer together than is found anywhere else in the Spanish Colonial Empire. In spite of the proximity to each other, each mission was planned to include self-sustaining agricultural systems and to prepare for eventual secularization.

Partnership agreements have been fundamental to the park's establishment and operations. In 1983, the National Park Service and the Catholic Archdiocese of South Texas entered into a cooperative agreement unlike any in the national park system. The agreement enables the National Park Service to provide for the preservation, restoration, and interpretation of the missions and allows access to the mission grounds and secular mission buildings for public use. The Archbishop is responsible for holding and preserving the non-secular structures within the missions. In addition, the National Park Service works cooperatively with others to preserve and provide public access and education for the missions.

The missions are now completely interwoven into the urban fabric of the seventh most populated US city. The park's linear, urban boundary extends from downtown San Antonio through the southside community and is connected via street networks, public transportation, and bicycle and pedestrian trails. San Antonio Missions National Historical Park's four mission churches are active catholic parishes that hold regular services and events.

