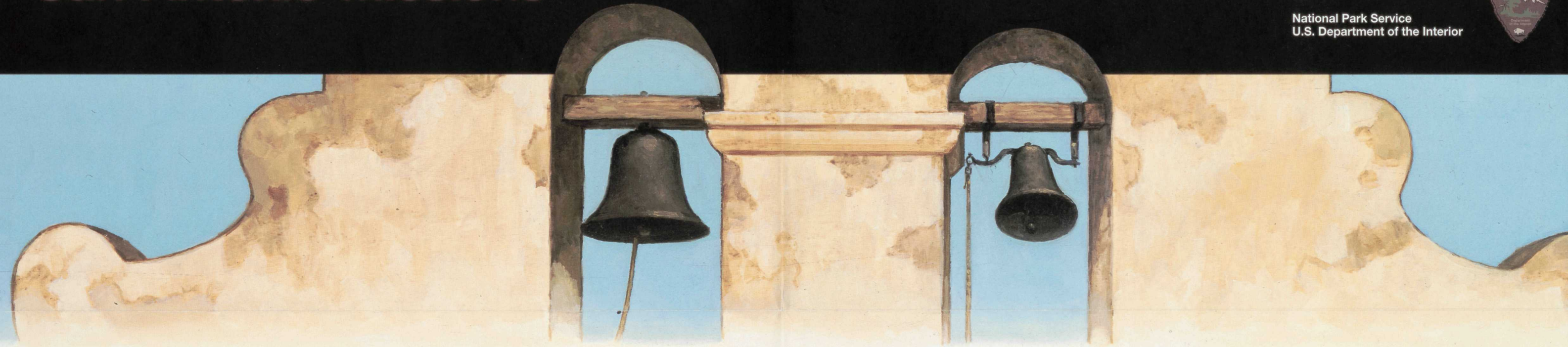


# San Antonio Missions

San Antonio Missions  
National Historical Park  
Texas

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior



The chain of missions established along the San Antonio River in the 18th century 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 early Spanish explorers northward across the Rio Grande. By the 17th century, Spaniards penetrated areas to the east, encountering the Tejas Indians for whom Texas is named. As dreams of wealth faded, the Spanish concentrated their efforts more fully on the



spreading of the Catholic faith—the basis of Spanish Colonial society—among the frontier Indians. Financially supported by the Crown, Franciscan missions served both Church and State. As an arm of the church, the mission was the vanguard of the spiritual conversion of the Indians. As an agent of the state, the mission helped push the empire northward. For the Indians, the missions offered 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 to be called the Alamo. Water, timber, and game in this rich valley had long attracted Spanish explorers. Noting the large population of Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-teken) 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 Anto-

nio River valley in 1731. These five missions, a presidio (fort), and a settlement were the seeds for one of the most successful Spanish communities in Texas.

The missions flourished between 1747 and 1775 despite periodic incursions by the Apache and Comanche Indians. Military support was always inadequate; the Spanish trained the Christianized mission Indians to defend their communities. However, after 70 years, the need for the missions diminished due to the effects of European diseases, acculturation, and intermarriage.

By 1824, the San Antonio missions were secularized—their lands redistributed among their inhabitants and the churches transferred to the secular clergy.

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

## The Coahuiltecan

The American Indians who lived in the San Antonio missions came from a number of hunting and gathering bands known collectively as Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-tekens). Ranging throughout today's south Texas and northeastern Mexico, they moved with the seasons, searching for food. Distinct dialects and religious practices were found among these bands, but they shared broad characteristics.

Extended families came together in larger bands when food was abundant.

The men hunted an occasional bison, deer, or rabbit or trapped fish and snakes. But fruits, nuts, beans, roots, and seeds gathered by the women and children provided the bulk of their diet. Dressed in skins and woven sandals, they used bows and arrows, fishing nets, digging sticks, and grinding stones to obtain and prepare food. When time permitted they fashioned brush huts and wove sleeping mats. They produced some simple pottery and were fine basket

makers, using them to store and transport food. They practiced rites of passage and seasonal ceremonies common to many hunter-gatherer cultures.

Even before their ancient living habits were altered by mission life, the Coahuiltecan were being pressed by nomadic tribes encroaching from the north. A greater threat, however, was the introduction of European diseases by the Spanish, which eventually decimated their numbers. Struggling under such hard-

ships, the Coahuiltecan proved to be relatively willing recruits for the missionaries. In exchange for labor and conversion to Catholicism, the Indians received food and refuge in the missions.

## The Franciscan Missions



Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús (1657-1726), founder of mission San José.

**Serving Cross and Crown** Spanish colonialism, like that of other nations at the time, was exploitative. Yet the Franciscans who directed the missions did so with a relatively gentle hand. An order of friars whose members took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Franciscans pledged to serve as protectors of the Indi-

ans. They also assisted the Crown as explorers, cartographers, diplomats, scientific observers, and chroniclers. But their primary task in the New World was to aid in extending Spanish culture to whatever lands the Crown claimed.

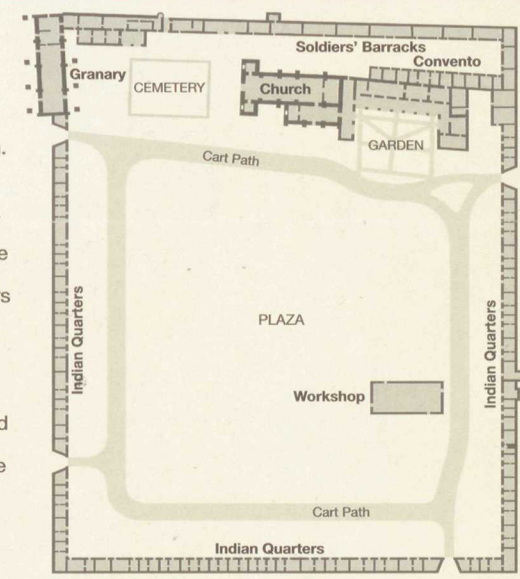
The mission system sought to bring Indians into Spanish society by concentrating scattered tribes into church-centered communities. Under the direction of the Franciscans, Indians built these communities, eventually erecting stone structures and developing stable economies. The missions functioned primarily as religious centers and training grounds for the rudiments of Spanish citizenship. Indians were

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

Enclosed within massive stone walls, each compound offered its residents security from enemies. With the assistance of several soldiers from the nearby presidio (fort), the San Antonio missions also served to defend the King's dominions. The soldiers taught the Indians to use European arms. Nearly every armed patrol in Spanish Texas that set out in pursuit of 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. The women and girls learned to cook, sew, and spin; tend gardens; and make soap, pottery, and candles. Fishing and arrow making were the



responsibility of the older residents. The neophytes practiced their catechism, usually in Spanish. The day ended with prayers and a little free time. Church feast days provided a welcome break in the routine.

The essence of the mission system was discipline—religious, social, and moral. Though some Coahuiltecan fled the missions to return to their old life, most accepted Catholicism and became active participants in Spanish society.

Illustration of mission life by Richard Williams





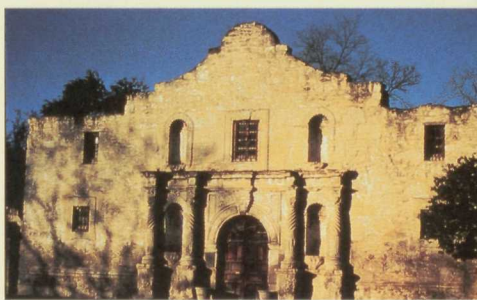
# Visiting the Missions

## Spanish Colonial Architecture

The early missions were unwallied communities built of wood or adobe. Later, because of tensions between the northern tribes and mission occupants, the structures were encircled by stone walls. Mission Indians built their communities under the direction of skilled craftsmen recruited from New Spain. These artisans preserved the basic Spanish model with modifications dictated by frontier conditions.

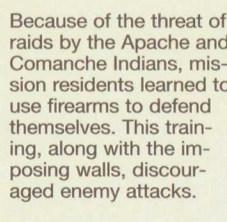
## The Alamo

Mission San Antonio de Valero, commonly called the Alamo, was founded in 1718, the first mission on the San Antonio River. A State Historic Site, the Alamo has been under the care of the Daughters of the Republic of Texas since 1905.



Original interior paintings remain at Mission Concepción. Some are religious symbols. Others are decorative, imitating architectural elements.

of instruction. Missionaries recognized conversions when Indians took the sacraments. While some conversions were temporary at best, the combination of religious training and pageantry was, on the whole, successful.



The fine detail of the legendary Rose Window, or Rosa's Window, at Mission San José demonstrates the high craftsmanship of the artisans who worked on the missions.



The entrance gate at Mission San Juan is typical of the Romanesque arches found throughout the missions.

ported area settlements and the nearby presidio (fort). In good times they traded surplus goods to others. This thriving economy helped the missions to survive epidemics and warfare.



Some maintain that the unusual broken arch over the doorway at Mission Espada simply reflects a builder's mistake. Whatever the explanation, many find beauty in the inversion of the expected line.

came the property of the Crown and subject to taxation in 1778, the vast mission herds were reduced to several hundred head.

A century later the American cattle industry was built on the legacy of these Texas mission ranches. The regulations governing the industry, the techniques for handling herds from horseback, even longhorn cattle, had their origins in

the Spanish colonial period. The mission ranches left a rich heritage of equipment, vocabulary, and folklore. Rancho de las Cabras is located southwest of Floresville, Texas. Access to the site is by ranger-guided tour. Contact the park for the current schedule.

## Concepción



The mission of *Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción* was transferred from East Texas in 1731. The church looks essentially as it did in the mid-1700s when it served as the mission's center of religious activity. Colorful geometric designs that once covered its surface have long since faded.

The missionaries strove to replace traditional Indian ritual with religious festivals teaching Christian beliefs. Carvings of the saints and objects of adoration were popular representations of Catholicism among the Indians. Morality plays and religious celebrations were common methods

## San José

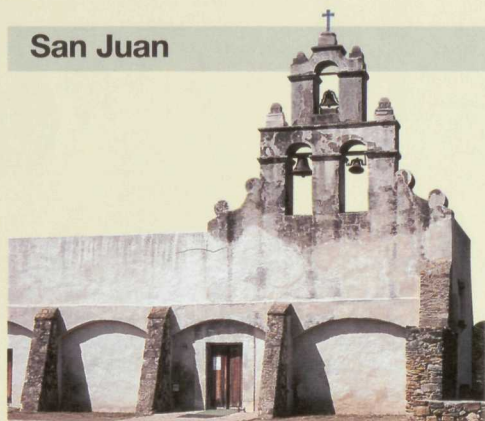


In 1720 Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús founded what became the best known of the Texas missions, *San José y San Miguel de Aguayo*. Viewed as a model of mission organization, San José was a major social center. The unique architecture of its church and the richness of its fields and pastures led visitors to comment on its beau-

ty. The size of the complex bears witness to San José's reputation as the "Queen of the Missions."

The village was the central feature of every successful mission. The importance of community life is evident in the physical arrangement of the mission compound. The massive stone walls reflect its defensive role.

## San Juan



Mission *San Juan Capistrano* was originally established as San José de los Nazonis in East Texas. In 1731 it was relocated to its permanent home on the east bank of the San Antonio River. By mid-century, San Juan, with its rich farm and pastures, was a regional supplier of agricultural produce.

Orchards and gardens outside the walls provided

ed peaches, melons, pumpkins, grapes, and peppers. Corn, beans, sweet potatoes, squash, and even sugar cane were grown in irrigated fields. In 1762 Mission San Juan's herds were reported to include 3500 sheep and nearly as many cattle.

The San Antonio missions were not only self-sufficient, but also sup-

## Espada



Founded as San Francisco de los Tejas in 1690, the oldest of the East Texas missions was moved to the San Antonio River in 1731 and re-named *San Francisco de la Espada*. The southernmost of the San Antonio chain of missions, Espada appears almost as remote today as it did in the mid-1700s.

Following Spanish policy, the missionaries strove to

make life in the mission communities closely resemble that of Spanish villages. In order to develop a solid economy, they taught mission Indians specific vocations. Men learned to weave cloth. Blacksmiths were indispensable for repairing farm implements and reworking broken metal tools. Others learned carpentry, masonry, and stonemasonry to construct elaborate buildings.

## The Mission Ranches



A mission's goal of becoming self-sufficient depended on the success of its farm and ranch. The free-roaming livestock on the mission ranches proved very profitable. Surplus sheep, goats, and cattle were sold or traded to the *presidios* and to civil settlements as far south and west as Coahuila (in present-day Mexico) and east to Louisiana. Mission Espada's *Rancho de las Cabras*

(Ranch of the Goats) was constructed like a small fortress to protect the *vaqueros* and their families. Growing conflicts with the Apache Indians marked the beginning of the mission ranches' decline in the 1770s. Branding in the rough south Texas brush country was difficult, and it was done too infrequently to be very effective. When all unbranded cattle be-



## About Your Visit

The visitor center and missions are open daily except for Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. Picnic facilities are in the park; restaurants, camping, and lodging are nearby. For more information write: Superintendent, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, 2202 Roosevelt Ave., San Antonio, TX 78210; phone 210-932-1001; headquarters phone: 210-534-8833; on the Internet: [www.nps.gov/saan](http://www.nps.gov/saan).

## For Your Safety

Be aware of hazards. Stay on the sidewalks to avoid fire ants. Step carefully on walkways, ramps, and steps; some are uneven and slippery. Do not climb on fragile mission structures. Lock your car and put valuables out of sight. **Flash floods are common and deadly.** When the San Antonio River rises, the mission trail south of Mission San José is closed. Do not pass barriers announcing water on the roads. Use caution at water crossings.

## Please Be Considerate

Stay off fragile stone walls; they are historic resources. The missions are places of worship. Please do not disrupt religious services, and be considerate of parish priests and parishioners.

## Accessibility

Missions are historic areas. Accessibility varies from site to site. A wheelchair is available at each mission. The visitor center is accessible. A captioned film can be viewed in Spanish or English. Contact a ranger for more information.

In 1978, Congress pledged federal support for this nationally significant resource by establishing San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. By cooperative agreement with the Archdiocese of San Antonio, the mission churches remain active centers of worship. The National Park Service also has cooperative agreements with the City of San Antonio, the County of Bexar, the State of Texas, and the San Antonio Conservation Society.



The arches of the two-centuries-old Espada Aqueduct.

## The Acequia System

The success of any new mission was dependent upon planting and harvesting crops. Sparse rainfall and the need for irrigation made the construction of seven gravity flow ditch systems, known as *acequias*, a high priority for the missionaries and Indians. Five dams and several aqueducts along the San Antonio River ensured a continual flow of river water into the system. So important was irrigation in Spanish Texas that cropland was measured in *suertes*, or the amount of land that could be watered in one day. The 15-mile network irrigated about 3,500 acres of land.

Mission Espada has the best preserved of these acequia systems. Espada Dam, completed by 1745, still diverts river water into an *acequia madre* (mother ditch). The water is carried over Sixmile Creek (historically called Piedras Creek) through Espada Aqueduct—the oldest Spanish aqueduct in the United States. Floodgates controlled water sent to each field for irrigation and for auxiliary uses such as bathing, washing, and power for mill wheels. Today, nearby farms still use the water from this system.

**Acequia (historic irrigation ditch within park boundary)**  
 — Used today for irrigation  
 - - - Unwatered, no longer used for irrigation

## The Mission Trail

Signs guide you along the city streets that connect the four missions; directions can be obtained from the park staff. Check locally for information on public transportation.

