

# San Antonio Missions

National Historical Park  
Texas

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

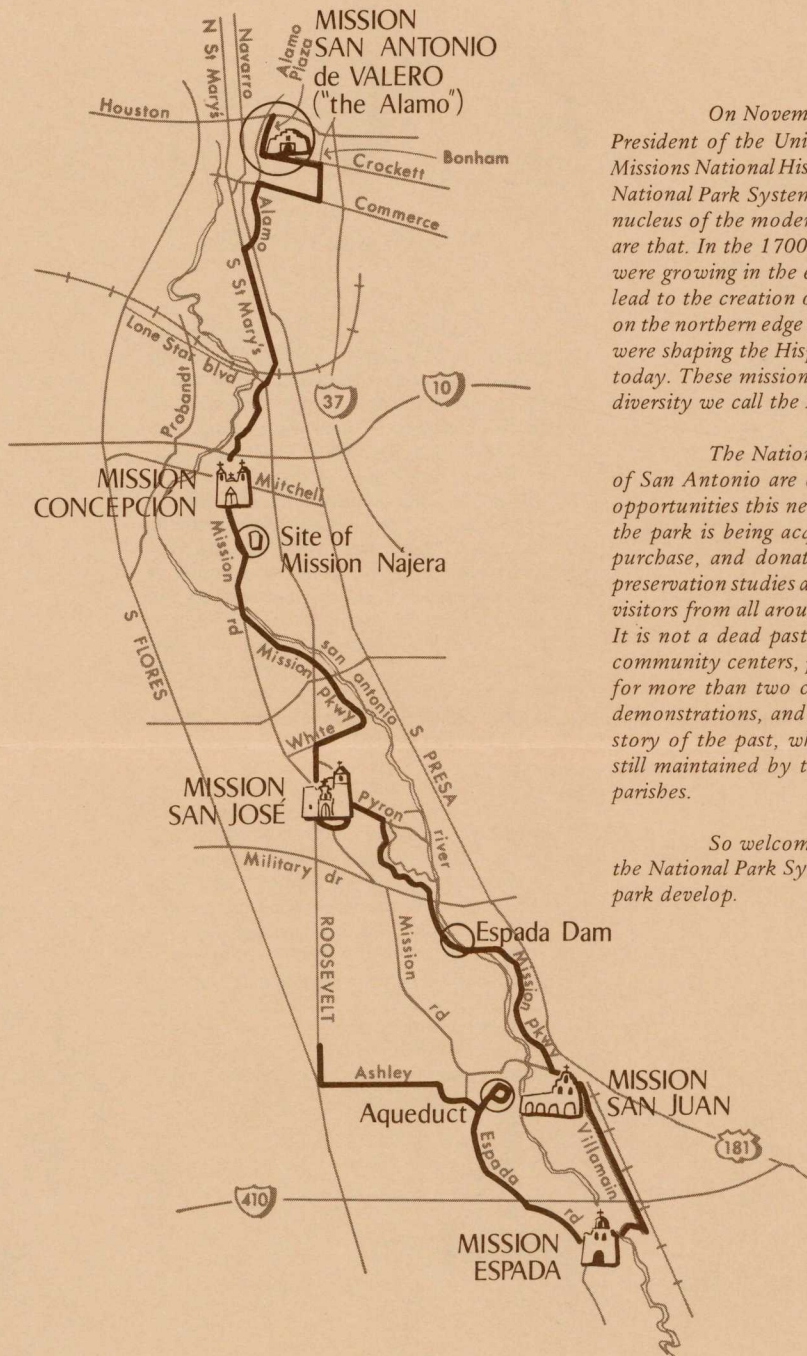
As celebrations in the year 1700 opened a new century, three European empires struggled for control of the New World. England dominated the east coast, France held the Mississippi Valley, and the Spanish worked their way northward from the heartland of New Spain—today's Mexico.

The land they came into was and is a land of vast distances and spectacular scenery with dry plains broken by green river valleys, rugged mountains and polychromatic mesas. Scattered about, wherever the gift of water and climate allowed, lived various groups of Indians. They wrested their needs from the land by some combination of farming, fishing, hunting and gathering. These were the natives Spain encountered as she spread northward.

As a means of extending its influence and assimilating the natives to Spanish culture and Christianity, Spain introduced a remarkable frontier institution—the mission. Eventually, from lush California valleys to dry Texas plains to tropical Florida coasts, there developed a chain of Spanish missions.

Here Church and State blended. At the missions, with their fields, workshops and churches, priests in rough-woven robes taught Indians to raise cattle. Here the Indians adopted Spain's newest agricultural and social customs, and learned to pray in the words of the new Christian religion. In time, there was a network of Texas missions stretching from San Juan Bautista to the south in present-day Guerrero, to Dolores in what is now Nacogdoches in east Texas, to Ysleta del Sur near El Paso.

The Mission concept initially took root in east Texas with the establishment of two missions there by 1691. But the San Antonio River, winding through the south central plains like a green ribbon of life, eventually attracted Spain's interest. The first mission along its banks was *San Antonio de Valero*, founded in 1718. *San Antonio de Valero* was moved several times and lived for almost a century. Curiously, it gained its greatest fame years after it was abandoned when it entered Texas history and folklore as "the Alamo." Today it is open to visitors as a State Historical Site, managed by a private organization.

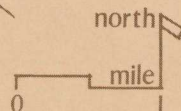


*On November 10, 1978, the Congress and the President of the United States authorized San Antonio Missions National Historical Park and made it a unit of the National Park System. These missions are more than the nucleus of the modern city of San Antonio, though they are that. In the 1700's, even as the forces of revolution were growing in the eastern English colonies that would lead to the creation of the United States, these outposts on the northern edge of Spain's frontier in the New World were shaping the Hispanic culture that enriches life here today. These missions represent a major influence on the diversity we call the American character.*

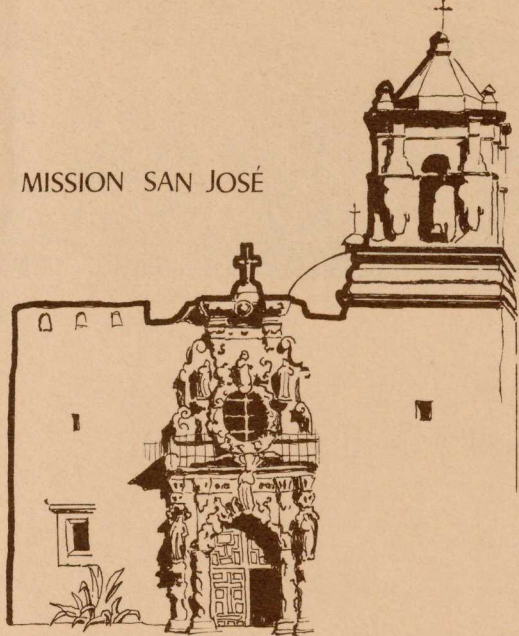
*The National Park Service and the community of San Antonio are cooperating to explore the unique opportunities this new park presents. Interest in land for the park is being acquired by cooperative agreement, purchase, and donation. Historical, archeological, and preservation studies are being done to create a place where visitors from all around the country can touch their past. It is not a dead past. These missions still are active community centers, part of life today as they have been for more than two centuries. Exhibits, tours, cultural demonstrations, and the stones themselves will tell the story of the past, while the churches in the missions, still maintained by the Church, continue to serve their parishes.*

*So welcome to this new—yet very old—part of the National Park System. We invite you to watch your park develop.*

The Superintendent  
San Antonio Missions  
National Historical Park  
727 E. Durango, Room A612  
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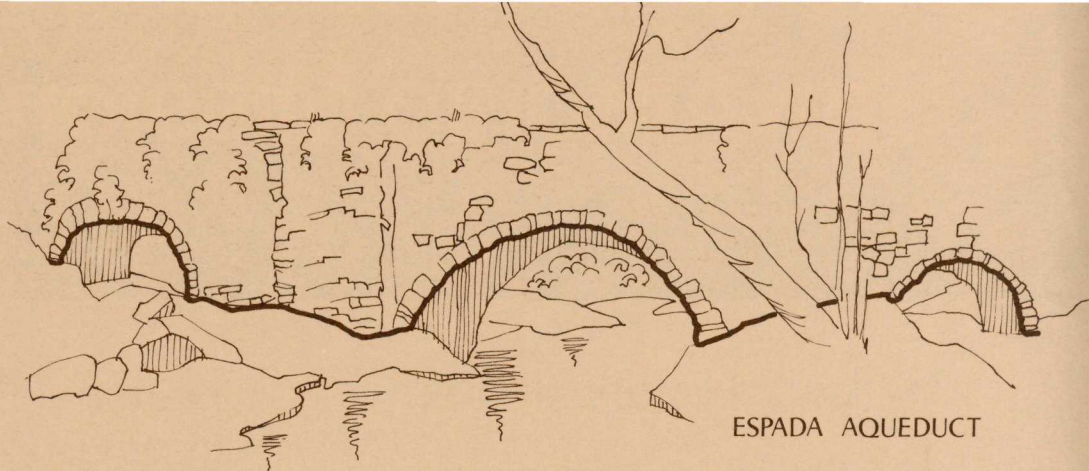
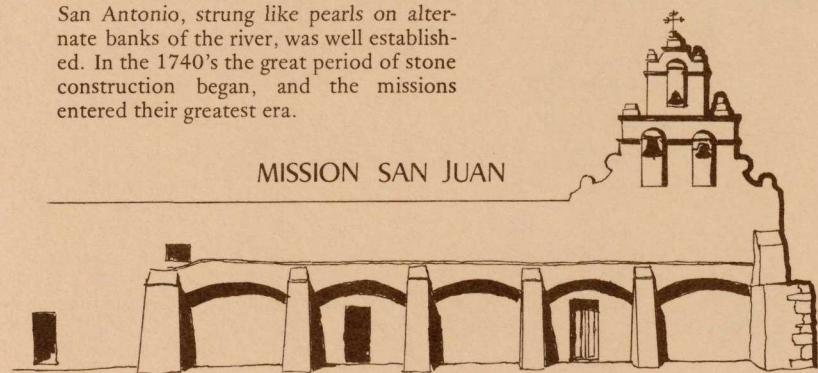
MISSION SAN JOSÉ



While Mission San Antonio de Valero was thriving, the east Texas missions were experiencing critical setbacks. Non-mission Indians became aggressive, sometimes attacking the missions. The disruptions affected the economy, and under pressure Spain began to pull back. One priest returning from that frontier was Fray Antonio Margil de Jesus, a remarkable man in any era and deservedly remembered today as one of the greatest missionaries of his time. While staying at Mission San Antonio in 1719 he saw that along the San Antonio River he could begin anew the work that had been disrupted in the east. In 1720 he established Mission San José y San Miguel de Aguayo as close to Mission San Antonio as Spanish law allowed. San José started with temporary structures and was moved several times. By 1740 it was located where it is today. The church seen today at this "Queen of the Missions" was begun in 1768 and completed in the 1770's, while the American Revolution raged half-a-continent away. Here, with the large compound still intact, visitors can sense the broad range of activities of a mission. Surely this is one of the most beautiful Spanish colonial churches in the United States, and its decoration and sculpture, including the famous Rosa's window, must have been stunning on the frontier. Father Agustín de Morfi wrote in 1777, "It is a beautiful temple, with three vaulted naves, 50 varas [vara=33"] long and 10 wide, with its transept." The facade seen today and Rosa's window are original while much of the building, including the collapsed dome, was rebuilt in the 1930's.

In 1722 a short-lived mission, San Francisco Xavier de Nájera, was established near the present site of Concepción. A state marker on Mission Road south of Concepción commemorates this mission. The other three missions, Nuestra Señora de la Purísima Concepción de Acuña, San Juan Capistrano, and San Francisco de la Espada also were relocated from the east Texas frontier. With the dedication of these three the cluster of five missions in San Antonio, strung like pearls on alternate banks of the river, was well established. In the 1740's the great period of stone construction began, and the missions entered their greatest era.

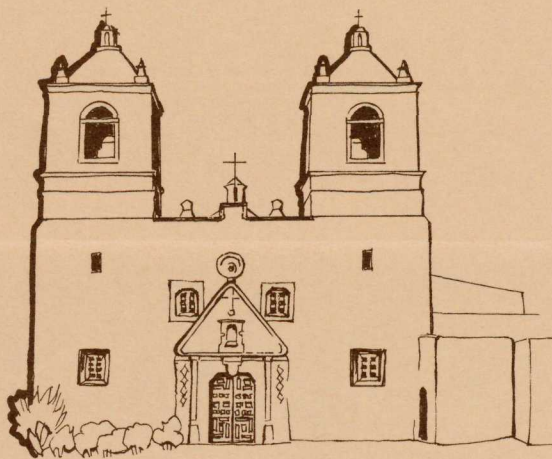
MISSION SAN JUAN



ESPADA AQUEDUCT

Mission life was not limited to the walls and structures, but also extended to the fields surrounding the compound. Various agricultural activities, and the development and maintenance of a sophisticated irrigation system, were essential. Dams were built to establish a reliable and elevated water source. The Espada Dam still is functioning today and can be seen along the route between San José and San Juan. These dams supplied water for the *acequias*, an extensive system of gravity-fed irrigation ditches. Parts of the missions' *acequias* are still in use today. Of these, the most astonishing is the Espada Aqueduct. Here the terrain demanded that the ditch cross *over* a natural stream, so a stone aqueduct was built that still stands, carrying water as it has for two and a half centuries. San Juan and Espada are still surrounded by farms (*labores*) and much community activity. Today, the agricultural life of the missions can easily be imagined near these two missions.

MISSION CONCEPCIÓN



Walking around the missions today, quiet islands in the midst of a modern city, it takes effort to imagine what it was like when they were islands of activity on the vast, semi-arid Texas plains. Each mission had a village of Indians gathered within it for religious and civil instruction, protection and commerce. Daily life revolved around the routines of the Church, and much time was spent constructing and maintaining the great stone buildings which were much larger than anything the Indians had ever seen before. The church at Concepción is essentially as it was two centuries ago, although modern developments have eliminated the compound. It is the oldest unrestored stone Catholic church in the United States.

At the center of mission activity were the rough-robed friars who served as teachers, protectors, disciplinarians and pastors. Usually they were the first to rise in the morning, say their prayers and Mass and then begin the work with the Indians as the sun moved across the morning sky. They taught farming techniques and religion, masonry and blacksmithing, carpentry and Spanish. Late at night the friars were often the last to go to bed. At best the rugged life of the missionary left little leisure time and for the most part, it was a life of sacrifice.

As the century turned again and entered the 1800's, the role of the missions declined. The politics of the continent changed too. The young United States, a vaguely distant country during the great era of the missions, showed unexpected vitality and expanded westward with incredible energy. While the churches of the missions continued to serve the spiritual needs of the population, they were no longer the agents of empire. Mexico broke from Spain, and then Texas broke from Mexico. Finally, Texas and the whole western half of the continent were joined to the United States. But these missions, like others on that remote frontier that stretched from Florida to California, had done their work. Indeed, they were the nucleus for the settlement of today's American Southwest. The touch of Spain enriched the American mix. In religion, architecture, food, language, in a multitude of ways, life today reflects the people, Indians and Spaniards alike, who built these missions along the San Antonio River.

MISSION ESPADA

