

San Antonio Missions

San Antonio Missions
National Historical Park
Texas

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Official Map and Guide

The chain of missions established along the San Antonio River in the 18th century are reminders of one of Spain's most successful attempts to extend its New World dominion northward from Mexico. They were the greatest concentration of Catholic missions in North America. While tales of riches, such as those of the fabled region of Gran Quivira, spurred the conquistadors' advance across the Rio Grande, encounters with the Tejas Indians, for whom Texas was named, provided even greater impetus for Spain's colonization of its northern borderlands. As dreams of wealth faded, giving way to the

more practical goal of propagating the Catholic faith among the frontier Indians, the mission served to introduce native inhabitants into Spanish society. Catholicism, the very fiber of Spanish culture, was an assertive, nationalistic religion controlled and subsidized by the Crown. As an arm of the church, the mission was the vanguard for the spiritual conversion of New Spain's native inhabitants. As an agent of the state, the mission helped advance the empire northward. Contrasted with the military might of the presidio, or the often self-serving policies of civil government, the mission acted as a tem-

pering frontier influence, offering the Indians a less traumatic transition into European culture.

Threatened by French encroachments from Louisiana, Spain stepped up its colonization in 1690, establishing six missions in East Texas. In need of a way station between these and other Franciscan missions in Mexico, weary friars also founded San Antonio de Valero (the Alamo) on the San Antonio River in 1718. Abundant water and timber in this verdant valley had long attracted Spanish explorers. Noting the substantial population of Coahuiltecan Indians nearby,

Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús established a second mission, San José, near the river in 1720. As the East Texas missions succumbed to drought, malaria, and French incursions, three were relocated in the San Antonio Valley in 1731. These missions, along with their presidio and settlement, were the seeds for one of the most successful Spanish communities in Texas.

The missions flourished between 1745 and 1775, enjoying strong economies and peaceful coexistence between mission Indians and Spanish settlers. Later in the century increased hostility



from Apaches and Comanches, coupled with inadequate military support, weakened the missions. Disease reduced the surrounding Indian population, accelerating the missions' decline. In 1824, all Texas missions were secularized, their lands redistributed among the mission Indians and the churches transferred to the secular clergy. The San Antonio missions today represent a virtually unbroken connection with the past. Bearing the distinctive stamp of generations of Indian and Spanish craftsmen, they live still as active parishes.

The Franciscan Missions: Serving Cross and Crown



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

Spanish colonialism was at times exploitative. Yet, compared with some nations it was also decidedly humanitarian. The Franciscans who directed the mission effort among the Indians of South Texas introduced an enlightened doctrine. A mendicant order of friars who preferred practical application of their beliefs to

theological debate, the Franciscans served the Church as protectors of the Indians. They also assisted the king as explorers, cartographers, diplomats, scientific observers, and chroniclers. But their primary task in the New World was to extend Spanish culture to whatever lands the Crown had claimed.

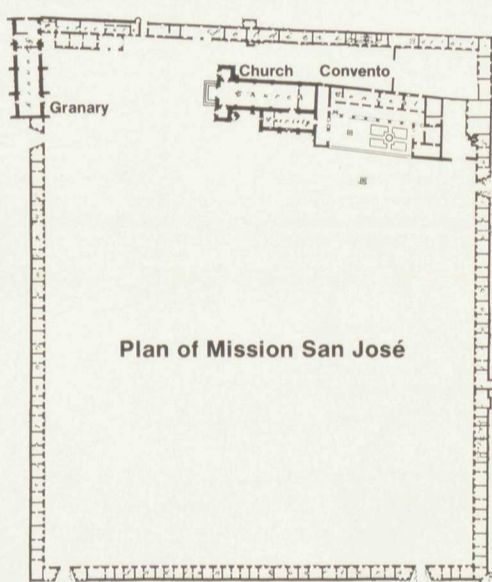
The mission system sought to bring Indians into Spanish society by concentrating scattered tribes into self-sufficient, church-oriented communities. Under the direction of the Franciscans, Indians built their own communities, erecting stone churches and developing stable economies.

With the assistance of two or three soldiers from the nearby presidio, who taught some of the Indians to use European arms, the San Antonio missions also served to

defend the king's dominions. Enclosed within massive stone walls, each protected compound offered its residents security against Apache and Comanche aggression. Nearly every army in Spanish Texas sent out in pursuit of hostile intruders enlisted a strong complement of mission Indian auxiliaries.

Still, 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.

The neophytes' days were highly structured. At sunrise, bells called them to morning Mass, singing, prayers, and religious instruction, after which they returned to their



Plan of Mission San José

Missions in Texas were typical of many Spanish Catholic missions, with adaptations to New World conditions. The complex consisted of church, convento, granary, workshops, and often defensive walls that formed quarters for soldiers and Indians.

quarters for the morning meal, usually a corn dish. Some men headed for the fields, orchards, gardens, or quarries. Others stayed behind to tan leather and to forge iron in the workshops. A few spent long stretches tending livestock at the distant ranches. The women learned to cook, sew, spin, weave, garden, fashion candles, and make pottery. Fishing and arrow making were the specialties of the older residents, while children over five practiced their catechism, usually in the Spanish language. The success of vocational training in the missions was apparent in the imposing structures the Indians built, the fertile farms they tilled, and the growing herds of horses, cattle, sheep, goats, and other livestock they tended.

The ringing of the noon Angelus called everyone to the midday meal, typically consisting of a basic corn dish with a daily ration of beef, garden vegetables, and fresh fruit. After a brief rest, work resumed until the bells summoned everyone home at sunset. The Indians were led in a mass recitation of the rosary, accompanied by chanting and singing. After the evening meal of fish, beans, and corn, curfew ended the day.

The Coahuiltecan

The Native Americans who lived in the San Antonio missions came from a number of hunting and gathering bands, whom historians collectively call Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-tekens). Their strictly regulated mission life represented a profound change for people who had followed the rhythms of nature. Ranging throughout South Texas and northeastern Mexico, their movements were dictated by the seasonal availability of food. Distinct dialects and religious practices were found among these bands, but they shared broad characteristics. The basic units of society were extended families, which joined oth-

ers in larger bands when food was abundant. The men brought home an occasional bison, deer, rabbit, or snake. However, fruits, nuts, beans, roots, and seeds gathered by women and children provided the bulk of the diet.

When time permitted, they fashioned brush huts and slept on woven mats. Dressed in skins and woven sandals, they used bows and arrows, fishing nets, digging sticks, and grinding stones to obtain and prepare food. They produced some simple pottery, but were finer 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 the missions altered their living habits, the Coahuiltecan were being pressed by nomadic tribes encroaching



Coahuiltecan water jug

from the north. With the arrival of the Spanish, a more ominous threat was the introduction and spread of European diseases, which, in time, decimated their population. Struggling under such hardships, the Coahuiltecan proved to be relatively willing recruits for the friars. The Indians sought food and refuge in the missions in exchange for labor and

submission to religious conversion.

The essence of the mission system was discipline: religious, social, and moral. The physical arrangement of the compound was based on the idea of social unification, with the village as the central feature of every successful mission. This concentration of Indians into manageable units distinguished the successful mission effort in San Antonio from the aborted attempts in East Texas. Though some Coahuiltecan fled the missions to revert to nomadic life, many accepted the dogmas of Catholicism and became active participants in Spanish society.

Illustration of mission life and water jug by Richard Williams



San Antonio Missions

The Alamo
Mission San Antonio de Valero, commonly called the Alamo, was founded in 1718, the first 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.



The Spanish missions formed the foundation for the city of San Antonio. From its colonial beginnings as a small settlement near the missions, San Antonio developed into one of the 10 largest cities in the United States. The modern San Antonio community recognized the structures' significance, and since the 1920's has endeavored to preserve them. The Archdiocese of San Antonio, the San Antonio Conservation Society, the Texas Department of Parks & Wildlife, and a number of municipal agencies have played a part in maintaining these remnants of our national heritage.

In 1978 the United States Congress pledged Federal support by establishing the San Antonio Missions National Historical Park. With this recognition of national significance came the commitment of the National Park Service to stabilize and preserve the historic structures. By formal agreement the Archdiocese of San Antonio and the National Park Service encourage visitor enjoyment of these sites while ensuring there is no interference with the traditional services at the four active parishes.

New World Architecture
The sources for the architecture of the Texas missions lie in Spain, which served as a clearing house for many styles and motifs. A variety of features were incorporated into the construction of the missions. Colorful Moorish designs and intricate Renaissance details complement Romanesque forms and Gothic arches. Mission builders, skilled craftsmen recruited from Mexico, preserved the basic Spanish model, with modifications dictated by frontier conditions. Indian participation in the building of these churches helped foster a sense of community.

Concepción



The handsome church at Concepción looks essentially as it did more than 200 years ago when it stood at the center of local religious activity. Colorful geometric designs originally covered its surface, but the patterns have long since faded. From the beginning, Mission Concepción hosted religious festivals. The friars strove to replace traditional Indian ritual through the demonstration of Christian ide-

als. Carvings of the saints and colorful paintings of other deities were popular visual representations of Catholicism among the Indians. Morality plays, and celebrations such as *Los Pastores*, a colorful drama honoring the birth of Christ, were common practice.

In addition, the friars formalized the Indian's acceptance of Catholicism through the adminis-

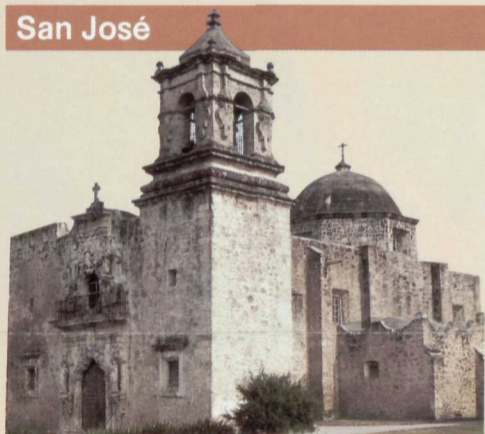


Original interior paintings still remain at Mission Concepción. Some are religious symbols. Others are decorative elements.

tration of the sacraments. While some conversions were temporary at best, the combination of strict teaching and pageantry was, on the whole, successful.

Many Indians continued to practice the Catholic faith after secularization. Today, some members of Concepción parish are likely descended from those early converts.

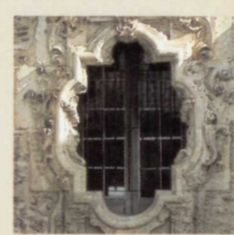
San José



One year after Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús left the failed missions in East Texas, he founded what would become the largest and best known of the Texas missions. After early travails, San José prospered, its 300 inhabitants sustained by extensive fields and herds of livestock. Viewed as the model among the Texas missions, San José gained a reputation as a

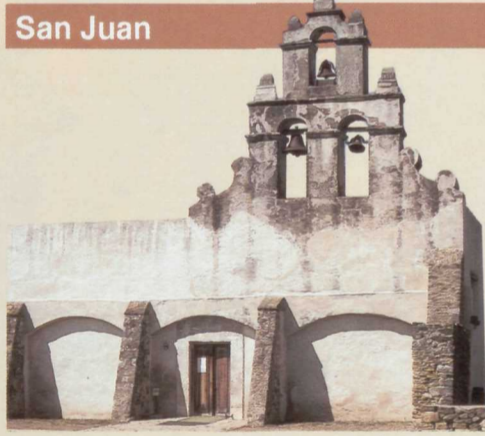
major social and cultural center. A visitor in 1777 referred to the structure as the "Queen of the Missions." So rich an enterprise was a natural target for mounted Apache and Comanche raiders. With technical help from the two or three presidial troops garrisoned there, San José residents learned to defend themselves. Already proficient with bow and arrow, Indians also practiced the use of guns and lances.

Although they could not prevent raids on their livestock, the mission itself was almost impregnable. In his journal, Fray Juan Agustín Morfi attested to the defensive character of mission San José: "It is, in truth, the first mission in America. . . in point of beauty, plan, and strength. . . there is not a presidio along the entire frontier line that can compare with it."



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

San Juan



Originally christened San José de los Nazonis while in East Texas, the reestablished mission of San Juan Capistrano made its permanent home along the banks of the San Antonio River in 1731. By mid-century, San Juan, with its rich farm and pasturelands, was a regional supplier of agricultural produce.

San Juan was a self-sustaining community. Within the compound,

Indian artisans produced iron, wood, cloth, and leather goods from the workshops. Orchards and gardens outside the walls provided melons, pumpkins, grapes, and peppers. Beyond the mission complex, Indian farmers cultivated corn, beans, squash, sweet potatoes, and even sugar cane in irrigated fields. A few miles southeast of Mission San Juan was *Rancho Patagulla*, which in 1762 reported 3,500

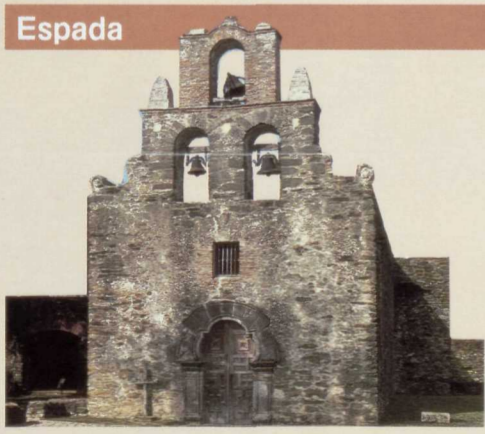


The entrance gate at Mission San Juan is typical of the Romanesque arches found throughout the missions.

sheep and nearly as many cattle.

These products helped support not only the San Antonio missions, but also the local settlements and presidial garrisons in the area. With its surplus, San Juan established a trade network stretching east to Louisiana and south to Coahuila, Mexico. This thriving economy helped the mission to survive epidemics and Indian attacks in its final years.

Espada



In 1731, after their retreat from East Texas, the founders of San Francisco de los Tejas moved the mission to the San Antonio River and renamed it San Francisco de la Espada. The southernmost of the San Antonio chain of missions, Espada appears as remote today as it did in the mid-1700s.

After each mission developed a solid economy, the

Indians needed specialized vocational training. As plows, farm implements, and the gear for horses and mules fell into disrepair, a blacksmith became indispensable. Tanning and weaving skills were needed to clothe the Indians. Following Spanish policy, the friars strove to make life in the mission communities closely resemble that of Spanish villages. As mission buildings became more elaborate, Indian

occupants learned the skills of masonry and carpentry, generally under the direction of local craftsmen.

After secularization, the vocational skills acquired during the mission period proved beneficial to the post-colonial growth of San Antonio. The influence of these Indian artisans is evident throughout the city today.



Unusual arched doorway at Mission Espada has generated much speculation. Some maintain the broken arch simply reflects a builder's mistake. Others find beauty in the inversion of the expected line.

The Acequia System

The initial success of any new mission was dependent upon the planting and harvesting of crops. Sparse rainfall and the need for irrigation water made the design and installation of an *acequia* system a high priority. So important was irrigation in Spanish Texas that cropland was measured in *suertes*, the amount of land that could be watered in one day.

The Moslems introduced the use of *acequias*—irrigation ditches—to the arid regions of Spain. Once arrived on the frontier, the Franciscans found the system well suited for use in the desert Southwest. In order to distribute the water, missionaries and Indians built seven gravity ditches, five dams, and an aqueduct—a 15-mile network

that irrigated about 3,500 acres of land.

The best preserved of these *acequias* is the one near Mission Espada. Espada Dam, completed by 1740, diverted river water into an *acequia madre* (mother ditch). It is still in operation, but now plays a secondary role beside the modern dam. The water was carried over Piedras Creek



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

through Espada Aqueduct—one of the oldest arched Spanish aqueducts in the United States (left). Using floodgates, the *aguador* (water master) controlled the volume of water sent to each field for irrigation and for such auxiliary uses as bathing, washing, and power for mill wheels. Today, nearby farms still use the water from this system.

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The Mission Trail

The route that connects the four missions can be confusing for visitors. Signs along the route will help guide you, and directions can be obtained from the park staff and from most commercial establishments. Planning your route before you begin will save time and minimize traffic problems. The city bus system is an alternative to your car. When the San Antonio River rises, the major route south of Mission San José is closed to traffic. Information on alternate routes can be obtained at each mission.

San Antonio Missions National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. By cooperative agreement with the Archdiocese of San Antonio, the mission churches remain active centers of worship. The 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 missions are open 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., except during Daylight Savings Time, when the hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. The missions are closed on Christmas Day and New Year's Day. To request educational presentations for school groups, call (512) 229-5701. National Park rangers are available at each mission site. Local companies offer commercial tours. Picnic and camping facilities are near the park, as are a number of restaurants and lodging facilities. For further information, write: Superintendent, San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, 2202 Roosevelt Ave., San Antonio, TX 78210.

For Your Safety

For a safe and enjoyable trip, be aware of hazards. Stay on the sidewalks to avoid fire ants. Be careful when using 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.

Please Be Considerate

The historic structures are fragile resources. Help us preserve them for future generations. Remember also that these are places of worship. Parish priests and parishioners deserve your respect; please do not disrupt their services.

Accessibility

A wheelchair is available at each mission. Missions Concepción and San José are accessible to mobility-impaired visitors. Missions San Juan and Espada are accessible but with some difficulty. Audio devices introduce visually impaired visitors to each mission.

San Antonio Missions National Historical Park is a unit of the National Park System, which consists of more than 340 parks representing important examples of our Nation's natural and historical heritage.



North

0.1 1 Kilometer

0 0.1 1 Mile

Mission Trail driving tour

Distance and distance indicator

Historic acequia (active)

Historic acequia (dry)

Picnic area