

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 1700s 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 the early Spanish explorers northward across the Rio Grande. By the 1600s Spaniards penetrated areas to the east, encountering the Tejas Indians for whom Texas is named. As dreams of wealth faded, the Spanish concentrated more fully on



spreading the Catholic faith—the basis of Spanish colonial society—among the frontier Indians. Financed by the Crown, Franciscan missions served both Church and State. As an arm of the church, the mission was the vanguard for converting the Indians spiritually. As an agent of the state, the mission helped push the empire northward. Missions also offered Indians 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 called the Alamo.

Water, timber, and wildlife in this rich valley had long attracted Spanish explorers. Noting the many 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 Antonio

River valley in 1731. These five missions, a *presidio* (fort), and settlement were the seeds for one of the most successful Spanish communities in Texas. These missions flourished between 1747 and 1775, despite periodic raids by Apache and Comanche Indians. Military support was never adequate, so the Spanish trained the Christianized mission Indians to defend their communities.

After 70 years there was less need for the missions because of the effects of European diseases, acculturation, and intermarriage. By 1824 the San Antonio missions were

secularized—the lands were redistributed among the inhabitants, and the churches were transferred to the secular clergy.

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

Coahuiltecan

American Indians living in the San Antonio missions came from several hunting and gathering bands known collectively as Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-tekens). Ranging across today's south Texas and north-eastern Mexico, they moved with the seasons in search of food. The bands had distinct dialects and religious practices but shared broad characteristics.

Extended families would come together in larger bands when food was abundant.

Men hunted the occasional bison, deer, or rabbit or trapped fish and snakes. But fruits, nuts, beans, roots, and seeds gathered by the women and children were the bulk of their diet.

Wearing skins and woven sandals, they used bows and arrows, fishing nets, digging sticks, and grinding stones to get and prepare food. When time permitted they made brush huts and wove sleeping mats. They produced simple pottery and were fine basket

makers, using baskets to store and carry food. They practiced rites of passage and observed seasonal ceremonies that were common to many hunter-gatherer cultures.

Even before mission life changed their ancient living habits, the Coahuiltecan were being pressed by nomadic tribes encroaching from the north. But a greater threat was the European diseases introduced

by the Spanish, which eventually decimated their numbers. Struggling under such hardships, Coahuiltecan proved to be relatively willing recruits for the missionaries. In exchange for labor and conversion to Catholicism, Indians received food and refuge in the missions.

The Franciscan Missions



Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús (1657-1726), founder of Mission San José. SAN JACINTO MUSEUM, HOUSTON

Cross and Crown Spanish colonialism, like that of other nations then, was exploitative. Yet the Franciscans directed these missions with a gentle hand. An order of friars whose members took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, the Franciscans pledged to serve as protectors of the Indians. They also helped the Crown as explorers,

cartographers, diplomats, scientific observers, and chroniclers. But their primary New World task was to expand Spanish culture to whatever lands the Crown claimed.

Missions functioned primarily as religious centers and training grounds for Spanish

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

Massive stone walls around the compounds gave residents security from enemies. Helped by soldiers from the nearby *presidio* (fort), the San Antonio missions also defended the King's dominions. Soldiers taught the Indians to use European arms. Nearly all armed patrols in Spanish Texas that pursued 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. Women and girls learned to cook, sew, and spin;



Mission San José, mid-1700s

tend gardens; and make soap, pottery, and candles. Older residents fished and made arrows. The neophytes practiced their catechism, usually in Spanish. Prayers and a little free time ended the day. Church feast days were welcome breaks in the routine.

Discipline—religious, social, and moral—was the essence of the mission system. Although some Coahuiltecan fled the missions to return to their old life, most accepted Catholicism and actively took part in Spanish society.



ILLUSTRATION OF MISSION LIFE
NPS/RICHARD WILLIAMS

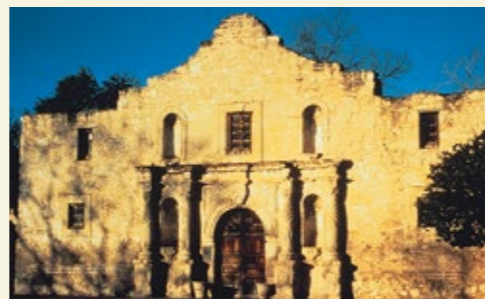
Visiting the Missions

Spanish Colonial Architecture

Early missions were unwalled communities built of wood or adobe. Later, as tensions between northern tribes and mission residents grew, these structures were encircled by stone walls. Directed by skilled artisans recruited from New Spain, the mission Indians built their communities. They preserved the basic Spanish model, modified as frontier conditions dictated.

The Alamo

Mission San Antonio de Valero is commonly called the Alamo (right). Founded in 1718, it was the first mission on the San Antonio River. After 106 years as the sole caretaker of the Alamo, the Daughters of the Republic of Texas now manages this state historic site under the Texas General Land Office.



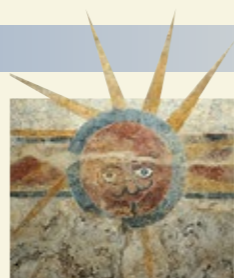
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Concepción



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 as the mission's center of religious activity. Colorful geometric designs once covering its surface have long faded.

Missionaries worked to replace traditional Indian rituals with religious festivals teaching Christian beliefs. Carvings of the saints and objects of adoration were popular images of Catholicism among the Indians. Morality plays and religious celebrations were used for instruction. Missionaries recognized



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

conversions when Indians took the sacraments.

While some of these conversions were temporary, the combined religious training and pageantry were largely successful.

San José



In 1720 Fray Antonio Margil de Jesús founded the best known of the Texas missions, *San José y San Miguel de Aguayo*. San José was the model mission organization and a major social center. Visitors praised its unique church architecture and the rich fields and pastures.

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

Its village was central to a successful mission, and the layout of the mission compound shows how important the community's life was. Massive stone walls were for defense.

The mission residents learned to use firearms to fend off Comanche and Apache raids. Their skill—plus imposing walls—discouraged enemy attacks.

Fine details in San José's legendary Rose Window, or Rosa's Window (right), show the Spanish artisans' high level of skill.



San Juan



Mission San Juan Capistrano was originally *San José de los Nazonis* in East Texas. In 1731 it was moved to its permanent home on the San Antonio River's east bank. Its fertile farmland and pastures would soon make it a regional supplier of produce. Orchards and gardens outside the

walls grew peaches, melons, pumpkins, grapes, and peppers. Its irrigated fields produced corn, beans, sweet potatoes, squash, and even sugar cane.

In 1762 Mission San Juan's herds were said to number 3,500 sheep and nearly as many cattle.



Mission San Juan's gate typifies the Romanesque arches found throughout the missions.

The missions of San Antonio were not only self-sufficient, but they supported settlements and the nearby *presidio* (fort). In the good times they traded surplus goods to others. This thriving economy helped the missions to survive epidemics and warfare.

Espada



Founded in 1690 as *San Francisco de los Tejas*, this oldest of the East Texas missions was moved to the San Antonio River in 1731 and there renamed *San Francisco de la Espada*. Espada looks nearly as remote now as in the mid-1700s. It was Spanish policy that missionaries make mission community life

like a Spanish village's life. To develop a solid economy, they taught mission Indians vocations. Men learned to weave cloth. Blacksmiths, indispensable, repaired farm implements and broken metal tools. Others learned carpentry, masonry, and stone-cutting for building elaborate buildings.

Espada was the only mission that made bricks, which you can still see.

Work skills from the mission period were a boon to San Antonio's post-colonial growth. Mission artisans' influence shows throughout today's city.



Some say the broken arch over the Mission Espada doorway is a builder's mistake, but many find beauty in how it inverts the line you expect.

Mission Ranches



A mission's goal of self-sufficiency depended on the success of its farm and ranch. Free-roaming livestock on the mission ranches proved very profitable. Surplus sheep, goats, and cattle were sold or traded to the *presidios* and 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 built like a small fortress to protect the vaqueros and their families.

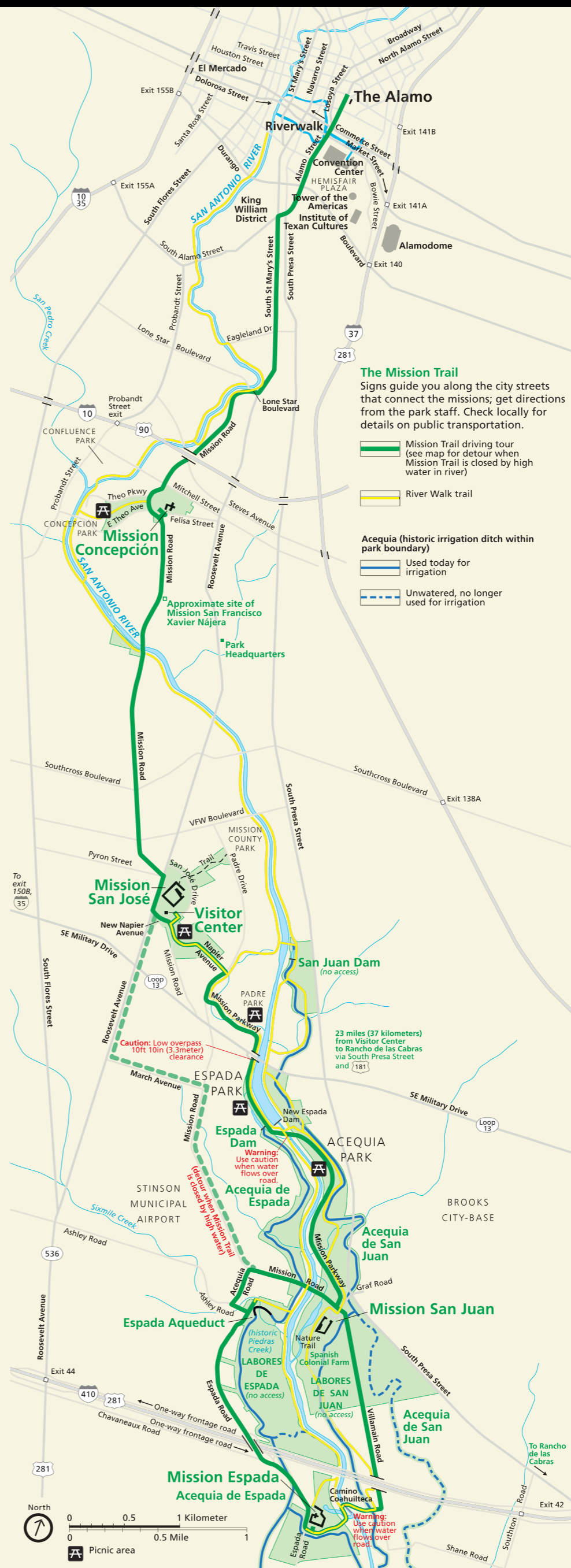
Growing conflicts with Apache Indians began the mission ranches' decline in the 1770s. Branding cattle in the rough south Texas brush country was difficult and too infre-

quent to be effective. When all unbranded cattle became property of the Crown and subject to taxation in 1778, the vast mission herds were reduced to several hundred head.

America's cattle industry in the 1800s stood on these Texas mission ranches' legacy. Industry regulations, ways of handling the herds from horseback, and

even longhorn cattle began in the Spanish colonial period. The mission ranches left a rich heritage of equipment, vocabulary, and folklore.

Rancho de las Cabras is southwest of Floresville, Texas. Access to the site is by ranger-guided tour. Contact the park for a current tour schedule.



About Your Visit

The visitor center—located at 6701 San José Drive, San Antonio, TX 78214—and missions are open daily except Thanksgiving Day, December 25, and January 1. The park has picnic tables. Food, camping, and lodging are nearby.

For Your Safety Be careful: walks, ramps, and steps can be uneven and slippery. • Avoid fire ants; stay on sidewalks. • Lock your car with 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. Don't pass barriers that announce water on roads. Be cautious at water crossings.

Be Considerate Stay off fragile stone walls. The missions are places of worship. Do not disrupt religious services; be respectful of priests and parishioners.

Firearms See the park website for regulations.

Accessibility We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. For information go to the visitor center, ask a ranger, call, or check our website.

Congress created San Antonio Missions National Historical Park in 1978. By cooperative agreement with the Archdiocese of San Antonio, mission churches remain active centers of worship. The National Park Service has cooperative agreements with the City of San Antonio, County of Bexar, State of Texas, and San Antonio Conservation Society. This is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

More Information

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The Acequia System



Arches of the two-centuries-old Espada Aqueduct.

The success of any mission depended on crops. Sparse rainfall and the need for irrigation made it a priority to create seven gravity flow ditch systems, called acequias. Five dams and several aqueducts along the San Antonio River ensured the flow of river water into the system. In Spanish Texas, irrigation was so important that cropland was measured in *suertes*, the amount of land that could be watered in a day. The 15-mile network irrigated about 3,500 acres of land.

Mission Espada has the best-preserved acequia system. Espada Dam, completed by 1745, still diverts river water into an acequia madre (mother ditch). Water is carried over Sixmile Creek (historically Piedras Creek) via Espada Aqueduct—the oldest Spanish aqueduct in the United States. Floodgates controlled water flow to fields for irrigation and bathing, washing, and powering mill wheels. Farms still use this system today.



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