

Mission San Juan Bautista

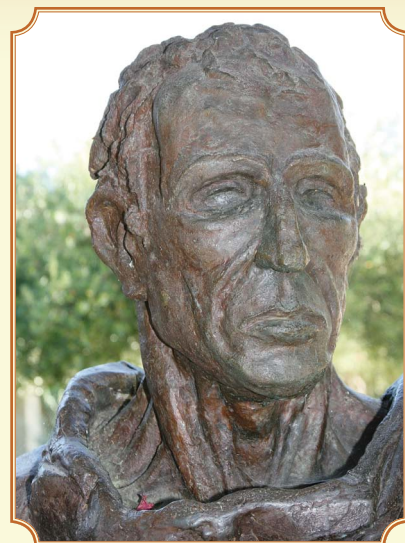


On the cover: In restoring the mission, great care was taken to duplicate the original painted ornamentation of the walls.

This page, right: original and restored wall sections.

This page, far right: Bust of Padre Fermín Francisco de Lasuén (1736-1803), founder of Mission San Juan Bautista. The regional council of Álava, Spain donated the bust in 1997 in honor of their illustrious citizen.

Facing page: A view from across the original Spanish plaza. The old mission church looks much as it did nearly two hundred years ago.



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Introduction

As the year 1797 began, Spanish colonial rule in California was well established. A chain of thirteen prosperous missions stretched along the coastal strip from San Diego to San Francisco. There were Spanish *presidios*, or forts, in San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco. Two *pueblos*, or towns, had been founded—San José and Los Angeles. Since Governor Borica had taken office in 1794, relationships between the church and Spanish civil authorities had become friendlier and more cooperative than ever before.

The Franciscan missionaries had long hoped to establish missions only a day's ride apart, yet there were still great stretches between missions, making travel more difficult and even dangerous. Padre Fermín Francisco de Lasuén, *Padre Presidente* of the California Missions, believed the time had come to fill the gaps. He conferred with the governor, who quickly agreed that more missions were needed.

Padre Lasuén and Governor Borica together asked Viceroy Branciforte in Mexico City for permission to establish five more missions, cleverly pointing out that none of the Viceroy's funds would be needed for the project. They even suggested the government could save money, since military escorts might no longer be needed for trips between missions. The Viceroy soon approved their plans.

A site in the San Benito Valley already had been selected for the Mission of San Juan Bautista. In May of 1797 Corporal Ballesteros and five Spanish soldiers arrived from Monterey presidio. In a month they had built a temporary chapel, a granary, a house for the padres, and a guard house for themselves. The stage was set for the founding of the mission honoring San Juan Bautista—St. John the Baptist.



This page: The mission at San Juan Bautista.

Facing page: The *convento*, or cloister wing, has nineteen arches and forms one side of the original Spanish *plaza* in the town of San Juan Bautista.





The San Benito Valley

The San Benito Valley had been inhabited for many centuries by the Ohlone Mutsun Indians. They lived in *rancherías*, or villages, made up of houses constructed of willow branches and grass grouped around a central area used for cooking and social activities such as dancing and story telling. There were at least twenty-eight *rancherías* in the area surrounding the new mission, including one village, Popeloutchem, located on the present site of the town of San Juan Bautista.

The Mutsun lived simply in a way that provided them with all the resources they needed.



Facing page: Standing in front of the mission church, San Juan Bautista—St. John the Baptist—raises his arms to the heavens in this powerful sculpture by Thomas Marsh. Erected on December 21, 2000, the sculpture portrays St. John as a Native American.

This page: The original baptismal font, sculpted at the mission by Mutsun craftsmen, measures forty inches in diameter. It is still in use today. The painting above the font shows Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist, Patron Saint of the mission.

Their villages were small and widely spaced. They gathered acorns from the plentiful oak trees in the area and ate other seeds, nuts, and roots. They hunted with bows and arrows. They had developed elaborate skills in basketry. They often wore tattoos and body paint and played drums and wind instruments similar to flutes. Although all the villages in the area were inhabited by people of the same tribe, there were at least fifteen recognized dialects spoken in the area around the mission. This was the context in which the new mission was founded.



Mission San Juan Bautista

After the preliminary buildings of logs and thatch had been built by Corporal Ballesteros and his men, Padre Fermín Lasuén came directly from founding Mission San José on June 11 to perform the dedication ceremonies for Mission San Juan Bautista on June 24, 1797. It was the fifteenth mission in a chain that eventually numbered twenty-one.

The first baptism occurred on July 11, 1797. A ten-year-old Mut-

sun boy, sponsored by Corporal Ballesteros, received the name of Juan Bautista. The mission served European colonists as well as Native Americans, and the first European to be baptized, on August 22, 1797, was Francisco Javier Antonio Ballesteros, a son of the corporal. Eight days later three soldiers of the guard were baptized. By the end of the year eighty-five had received the Sacrament.

The church grew rapidly, and it was possible to build an adobe chapel. By the year 1800 there were more than five hundred Mutsun Indians living at the mission. But in October of that year a series



This page: The beautiful patio or interior courtyard of the mission, looking toward the rectory and offices.

Facing page: The rich agricultural fields of the San Benito Valley dwarf Old Mission San Juan Bautista, seen here from the east.



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