
THE SPANISH MISSIONS OF CALIFORNIA

BY ROBERT P. LOWMAN



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PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT BY ROBERT P. LOWMAN

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THE STORY OF THE CALIFORNIA MISSIONS

Between 1769 and 1823, Franciscan missionaries from Spain built 21 missions along the coast of California. Stretching from San Diego in the south to Sonoma in the north, the missions served two purposes. They introduced the Roman Catholic faith to the native people of California, and they were part of Spain's plan for extending its empire. This book tells their story.

California Before the Spanish Arrived

In 1769 California was inhabited by Native Americans who had migrated from Asia, probably between 15,000 and 20,000 years ago. For many years it was assumed that American Indians crossed a land bridge thought to exist at one time between Asia and North America near the Bering Strait in Alaska, but modern scholars believe many tribes may have migrated along the coast in watercraft rather than on land.

Estimates of the native population in California before the Europeans arrived differ widely. Most experts seem to favor numbers between 200,000 and 300,000, but no one really knows, and the actual number could have been somewhat lower or higher. Scholars also disagree about the number of different tribes in California, but missions were founded in the homelands of nine different tribes. Members of at least 20 different native tribes were among the converts at the 21 California missions.

Generally speaking, native peoples in California lived in villages, called *rancherías* by the Spanish. Villages varied tremendously in size, from a few dozen people to a thousand or more. The family was the basic unit of society, and each village had a local leader or chief. The position of chief was usually inherited, but merit also played a role, with some chiefs selecting successors who were not relatives, but who were expert in hunting, fishing, tribal law, or other skills. Most chiefs were men, but women in some tribes also commonly served as chief.

Native languages, diet, cultures, and religious beliefs differed widely among the tribes, but it is possible to make some general statements. All the tribes lived off the land, and in coastal California, that meant a rich and varied diet based on native plants and animals.

The acorn provided the most important starch and was

a central part of the diet. The seeds of native grasses were also a major source of food. For tribes living in or near mountains, pine nuts provided an important basic dietary core. Men hunted or fished, which added protein to the diet. Natives also gathered and ate a wide variety of vegetables and fruits in season. Because harvesting acorns, grass seed and pine nuts were seasonal tasks, families had to gather and store enough foodstuffs in granaries to last until the next harvest.

Natives ground acorns and seeds into flour. They added water to the flour to make a paste, and cooked the paste in finely woven baskets using rocks heated to high temperatures. The mixture was stirred frequently to keep the rocks from burning the baskets.

Native men and children in California usually wore clothing only when the weather became very cold. Women usually wore skirts of *tule* grass or animal skins. All natives used animal skins for warmth in colder weather. General Mariano Vallejo of Sonoma once reportedly had a conversation about clothing with a local chief who was naked when he visited the General. Vallejo asked the man, "Are you not cold?"

"Is your face cold?" replied the chief.

"Not at all," said the General.

The chief pointed to his own body. "I am all face."

The various tribes built different kinds of houses. In coastal California the most common houses were circular and were built of willow poles bent to meet at the top. Natives often wove small branches between the poles to create walls, and they used mats of *tule* for the roof. Fifty people or more could sleep in a single large house, although most houses were smaller. For privacy, *tule* mats were hung inside to create rooms.

Trade between villages and tribes was well established. The most common money was made of discs cut from seashells, especially the olive snail shell, and strung together into long strands. Well established trails went from village to village, linked tribal areas, and provided access to good locations for hunting or gathering acorns or pine nuts. Early Spanish explorers generally followed existing native trails, and many major highways in California today follow early Indian routes. Some tribes were skilled

at building watercraft and traveled up and down the coast to fish, trade, and visit villages on the Channel Islands off the coast. The Chumash and Tongva built wooden craft. Other tribes built canoes of tightly bound *tule* grass.

One resource in the coastal mountains of California was an item of major importance to Native Americans throughout the entire western United States—red paint made from a rock called cinnabar, found in New Almaden near Mission Santa Clara. A second important trade item in other parts of California was turquoise, not highly valued by California natives, but valuable in trade with Indians of the Southwest.

Early Explorers

What today is the State of California had been known to Spanish explorers since 1542, when Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo first sailed up the Pacific Coast of North America as far north as California. Other explorers followed, at first in search of a mythical northwest passage to the Philippine Islands. Later, when trade between the Spanish colony of Mexico and the Philippine Islands was well established, the Spanish needed a safe route for sailing home from the Philippines to Mexico. The direct southern route was dangerous. Sailors faced head winds and unfavorable currents on the southern route. Southern voyages home took a long time to complete and often ended in disaster.

In 1564 and 1565, on a round trip voyage that lasted 129 days, Andrés Urdaneta was the first to discover that sailing north from the Philippines and then across the Pacific at between 30 and 40 degrees latitude allowed ships to take advantage of westerly winds and the Japan Current. This route resulted in first landfall in North America near Cape Mendocino, north of San Francisco. It soon became the normal route of ships returning to Mexico from the Philippines. Keeping the coastline of California under Spanish control and secure for these trading ships was one reason Spain eventually decided to colonize California.

The Spanish were not the only European power interested in the west coast of North America. Francis Drake, commissioned by Queen Elizabeth I to "annoy the King of Spain in his Indies," sailed from England to the Pacific Ocean and captured many Spanish ships, stealing their cargo and striking terror into the residents of towns where he stopped for supplies. Drake landed on the coast of California in 1579, probably in Drake's Bay. While in California, the crew beached his ship, the *Golden Hind*, for caulking and repairs before sailing back to England.

While sailing up and down the coast of California, Drake conducted friendly trade and exchanged gifts with

Native American people. He claimed title to California for the Queen of England, leaving behind a brass plate, nailed to a post, to document his claim.

Out of concern that other European powers might try to colonize California, in 1584 the Spanish Viceroy in Mexico sent Francisco de Gali to sail up the coast of California to observe and chart the coastline. In 1585 Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeno retraced Gali's route and claimed California for the King of Spain, but his voyage met with disaster. His ship was driven ashore, and his 70 crew members crowded into a small launch and slowly made their way down the coast. Although considered a failure at the time, Cermeno brought back the most accurate description of the California coast yet produced, first noting the existence of Monterey Bay.

Seven years later, in 1602, Sebastián Vizcaíno made his famous voyage up the California coast. Vizcaíno named many coastal features in California, among them Monterey and Carmel, San Diego, Santa Catalina Island, Point Conception and Santa Bárbara. Vizcaíno was the last Spanish explorer known to visit California until 1769—a gap of 167 years. Often incorrectly given credit for the discovery of Monterey Bay, Vizcaíno's description of the bay was so inaccurate that later explorers could not even recognize it.

Founding the First Mission in Upper California

The founding of the first mission in San Diego in 1769 was the result of several events set in motion when Charles III became King of Spain. First, Charles appointed José de Gálvez inspector general for New Spain, which included what is now Mexico. Gálvez began making changes from the moment he arrived in Mexico and became more powerful than the Viceroy. He wanted to strengthen the northern frontier, and he had been ordered by the king to increase revenues to the crown.

Second, in 1768 King Charles expelled the Jesuit order from all Spanish colonies. Charles was concerned that the Jesuits had become too powerful and might be more loyal to the Pope in Rome than the Spanish King. The Jesuits were replaced in Lower California (now Baja California) by a small group of Franciscans, led by Father Junípero Serra, a native of Mallorca, Spain.

Spain was also concerned that Russian explorers had been active in North America, and English colonists had entered the Ohio River Valley. To Gálvez, it made sense to occupy what was called Upper California (now the State of California) as a way of accomplishing several things at one time. Colonizing Upper California would extend and



Above: Behind the church and *convento* wing is a beautiful fountain. Although not dating from the mission period, it is located at the site of an old cistern.
Right: The church was rebuilt in 1931, following the plans of the church originally constructed in 1813.



SAN DIEGO DE ALCALÁ

Founded: July 16, 1769 by Father Junípero Serra. It was the first of the 21 California Missions.

Patron Saint: Diego de San Nicolás del Puerto (died 1463), a Franciscan friar known for his devout life and public speaking ability. He was named St. Didacus by Pope Sixtus V in 1588.



Native American Population: The Kumeyaay, also known as Tipai-Ipai, or “people” in the Kumeyaay language. The Kumeyaay lived in the most southern part of California and northern Baja California. They lived by hunting and gathering edible plants and seeds. They often moved between the coastal plains and the mountains. There were about ten Kumeyaay villages near the site of the mission.

Presidio Hill overlooking the ocean near present Old Town, San Diego. Father Serra first celebrated mass in a simple chapel made of brushwood with a roof of *tule* grass. Permanent buildings were completed by 1773, but the nearby soil was poor, and crops did not grow well. There were also problems between the Kumeyaay and the soldiers at the nearby *presidio*, or fort, so the padres decided to move the mission inland.

Early History: Mission San Diego was founded on

The new site was six miles up the San Diego River from

the *presidio*. The soil was better. New buildings were finished by December 1774. Then in 1775, the Spanish and the Native Americans fought each other, and both Kumeyaay and Spaniards were killed. The mission was burned. Father Luís Jayme died in the conflict, and he is buried under the altar of the mission church.

Current Church: The current church was completed in 1813. Although there was interest in restoring the church as early as 1891, the restoration was not completed until 1931, using funds raised by a community group.

Highlights of the Mission Period: San Diego did not produce large crops, because usually there was too little rainfall. However, in 1821 the mission raised 23,000 bushels of wheat, barley, and corn, one of the largest harvests at any mission. At its height, the mission owned about 20,000 sheep, 10,000 head of cattle, and 1,200 horses and mules. Mission crops and livestock fed and clothed more than 1,600 Kumeyaay and Spaniards who lived on more than 50,000 acres of mission lands. Many Kumeyaay lived in the mountains east of the mission, so the padres opened a sub-mission, or *asistencia*, in the mountains in 1818. It was called Santa Ysabel. The original chapel is gone, but a new chapel was built in 1924 near where the first chapel stood.

Secularization and Sale: San Diego Mission was secularized in 1834, and the last Franciscan left in 1835. The U.S. Army occupied the mission in 1853. The mission and 22.21 acres of land were returned to the Catholic



Surrounded by mission buildings, the courtyard provides a place for quiet meditation.



The interior of the church was reproduced in its original, simple style.

Church in 1855, but the soldiers did not leave until 1858 or 1859. Then the buildings were abandoned until 1892, when the mission grounds became a school for Native American children.

The Mission Today: Pope Paul VI designated the mission as a Minor Basilica in 1976. Today, the mission is a parish church in the Diocese of San Diego.



A beautifully landscaped courtyard provides a peaceful setting for the mission church.

SAN CARLOS BORROMÉO DEL RÍO CARMELO

Founded: June 3, 1770 by Father Junípero Serra. It was the second of the 21 California Missions.

Patron Saint: Charles Borromeo (1538–1584) was archbishop of Milan and a cardinal of the Catholic Church. He helped reform the Church and opened seminaries for the education of priests. He was canonized by Pope Paul V in 1610.



Native American Population: The Ohlone people (called Costanoan, or “coastal” by the Spanish) lived around Carmel mission. To the south were the Esselen. The five Ohlone villages near the mission spoke the Rumsen language. The Ohlone hunted, fished, and gathered acorns and other plants for their food. San Carlos was the first of six missions built on Ohlone land.

Early History: Mission San Carlos, also known as Carmel Mission, was first built next to the *presidio*, or fort, at Monterey. The location was not good. There was little water. The native villages were far away, and the purpose of the mission was to convert natives to Christianity. It was often foggy, and there was conflict between the soldiers at the *presidio* and the Ohlone people. In 1771, Father Serra

THE 21 CALIFORNIA MISSIONS AND DATES THEY WERE FOUNDED

Founding Order	Name of Mission	Founding Date
1	San Diego de Alcalá	July 16, 1769
2	San Carlos Borroméo de Carmelo	June 3, 1770
3	San Antonio de Padua	July 14, 1771
4	San Gabriel Arcángel	September 8, 1771
5	San Luís Obispo de Tolosa	September 1, 1772
6	San Francisco de Asís (Dolores)	June 29, 1776
7	San Juan Capistrano	November 1, 1776
8	Santa Clara de Asís	January 12, 1777
9	San Buenaventura	March 31, 1782
10	Santa Bárbara, Virgen y Mártir	December 4, 1786
11	La Purísima Concepción de María Santísima	December 8, 1787
12	La Exaltación Santa Cruz	August 28, 1791
13	Nuestra Señora de la Soledad	October 9, 1791
14	Patriarca Misión del Gloriosísimo San José	June 11, 1797
15	San Juan Bautista	June 24, 1797
16	San Miguel Arcángel	July 25, 1797
17	San Fernando Rey de España	September 8, 1797
18	San Luís Rey de Francia	June 13, 1798
19	Santa Inés, Virgen y Mártir	September 17, 1804
20	San Rafael Arcángel	December 14, 1817
21	San Francisco Solano de Sonoma	July 4, 1823





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