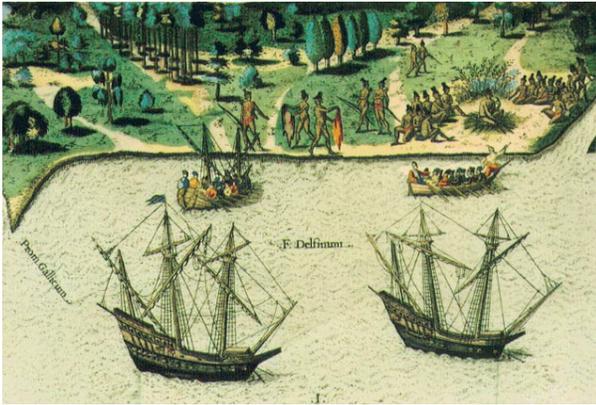


Frequently Asked Questions about The Spanish Mission System



Why did the Spanish build Missions?

After the initial discovery of the New World in 1492, Spain and the rest of Europe battled for colonial supremacy on the new continent. The Spanish Empire started colonizing in the southern portion of North America, for instance, the land which today is Mexico. Although Spain's claims on the new world almost spanned half the continent, only a small percentage was actually populated and controlled by the Spanish. By the 1700s, Spain felt pressure from other European powers for control and dominance over North America.

In the later half of the 18th century Russian fur traders were expanding south from Alaska all the way into Northern California and the English were expanding their claims from the east. The Spanish government feared Russian and English colonization would expand into their claimed region of California.



An anachronous map of the overseas Spanish Empire (1492-1898) in red, and the Spanish Habsburg realms in Europe (1516-1714) in orange.

Therefore, Spain used the mission system to colonize California. By 1823, 21 missions lined the coast. Just two padres and a handful of soldiers would be responsible for both religious and governmental development of each mission in California.

Was the Mission System the only way Spain colonized California?

The Spanish government used a variety of methods to colonize California including the establishment of pueblos towns, and presidios or forts for protection. The number of towns and presidios were small in comparison to Mexico because California offered little enticement for colonists to move to a far away frontier which lacked material comforts.



In 1777, fourteen families founded the first pueblo in California which is now the major city of San Jose. The second pueblo was established in 1781 which is now the city of Los Angeles. In 1791, evicted ex-convicts and prostitutes from Mexico founded the third and roughest pueblo Villa de Branciforte, which is near present day Santa Cruz.

The three pueblos did not fair well. Many colonists grew angry were not allowed to own the land they worked on. The Spanish government retained ownership. Besides the missions and pueblos, the Spanish established presidios that guarded and protected the Spanish claim on the land. The presidios were at San Diego, Santa Barbara, Monterey, and San Francisco.

What was life like for a soldier?

Five to six soldiers were stationed at each mission. They enforced discipline, fought off pirates or other foreign powers, and protected the missions from outlying Indians who tried to attack. The remaining Spanish soldiers in California, approximately 150, would have been evenly spread out at the four presidios. Amazingly enough, only 300 soldiers dispersed over 650 long miles controlled and protected the missions and pueblos. They did this monumental task over 65 years!

Life as a California soldier was not easy; often, the Spanish government had a hard time recruiting people willing to a distant frontier. A good proportion of the soldiers stationed in California had a tainted past, some were even recruited from Mexican prisons.

Soldiers were trained in the necessary fighting skills and mission or presidio procedures. They wore protective heavy leather jackets made of seven layers of deer hide, which could stop and arrow from piercing the skin. Besides the leather armor, they carried shields and muskets.



Life for any Spanish soldier was hard. Moving to California meant leaving their homes, family, and former life forever. It meant that contact with the outside world would be very limiting. Many soldiers might have been frustrated living at Mission San Juan Capistrano. Little soldiering was required, and for the most part, soldiers trained Native Americans in trade skills, and oversaw the construction of the Mission. Often soldiers had many arguments with the padres about the organization and functioning of the Mission.

Some soldiers embraced their new life, married Native American women of the Mission, and retired on beautiful ranchos after completing their tenure.

Were the Missions successful?

There are varied opinions on whether the Missions were successful. The main debate is whether historians believe the mission system was good or bad. A better way to address this question is to examine whether or not the padres effectively met their own goals.

The mission system was designed initially to do the following: convert Native Americans to the Catholic faith, train the Native American converts to be self-sustaining Spanish citizens, and lastly, to live a proper “European-like” lifestyle.

The padres came with the intent to Christianize and “civilize” the Native American people of California. By 1821, over 20 years after the first mission was founded, more than 31,000 Native American converts lived within the 21 missions; yet Mission padres did not feel the Native Americans were ready to hold land and live on their own as good Spanish citizens. It is fair to say the Spanish failed at creating a stable, self-sustaining Spanish population of converted Native Americans.

By the time the Mission system ended, the majority of Native American converts could no longer return to their old way of life. The Native people often worked as servants or ranch hands for wealthy Californios. After the Gold Rush conditions worsened. Americans proved to be discriminatory and even killed many Native Americans.

Although the Padres had good intentions, many negative consequences fell upon the Native peoples. Many Native Americans died from disease. Some critics of the mission system define it as a disguised form of slavery forcing religion and culture on the Native population of California; the Spanish did not allow the native people to keep their own traditions or culture.

In defense of the mission system, historians often compare Spanish treatment to the later years with the Americans. For instance, the Spanish treated the Indians far better than their American successors in California, who killed off Indians indiscriminately with guns and introduced deadly diseases, then herded the remainder onto reservations in the most worthless portions of the state.

California’s Native population would never be the same after colonization. In 1900 approximately 15,500 Native Americans made up California’s population, which pre-Spanish arrival had been around 300,000.

How did the Missions come to an end?

It was obvious by the early 1800s that the Spanish empire was growing weak and military outposts were growing thin. The Spanish empire was dealing with rebellion in many of its colonies. South America, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean would all start revolutions and gain their independence. During the time of revolution, the Spanish government discontinued supply ships to California which resulted in the missions becoming more and more self-reliant and forcing many padres to trade illegally with smugglers just to keep the missions running.



During the period of 1800-1820 epidemics and death rates soared. Many Native Americans rebelled or tried to run away. Many of the Native Americans began to view the mission system as a form of slavery which they could not escape. Many grew weary of ever attaining the Spanish citizenry status the padres promised.

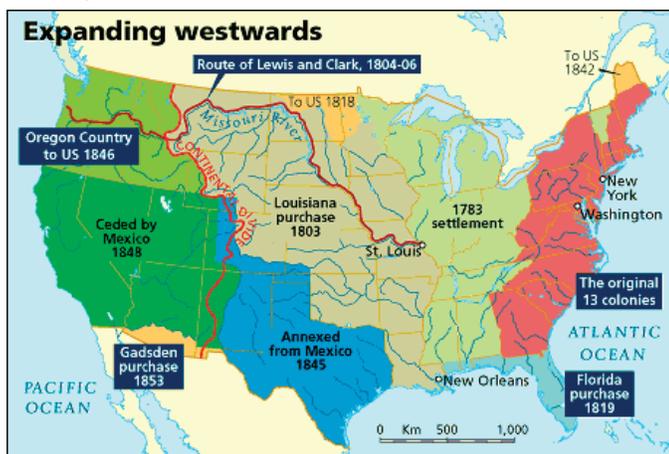
By 1821 Mexico finally won its independence from Spain. The new Mexican government disliked the mission system. By 1830, Spanish, Mexican, and Californio factions fought about what to do about the mission system in Alta California. Ultimately, in 1833, Mexico passed a law which officially ended or secularized the missions. This law meant that the lands held in trust for the Native American mission converts would be given to them in a form of a new pueblo. A commissioner would oversee the missions’ crops and herds, while the land was divided up as communal pasture, town plot, and individual plots for each family.

Was secularization a good thing?

Secularization proved to work in many areas throughout Mexico, yet Alta California proved to be problematic for many reasons. The majority of Spanish land was held by the mission system; only 51 pieces of property were in private hands in all of Alta California. Spanish-Mexican settlers wanted secularization so they could set up ranches and own land. By the 1830s, secularization allowed them to buy land and create ranchos.



Often these settlers would swindle land and property rights from the Native Americans. The majority of Native Americans ended up working for the Spanish-Mexican landowners, who treated them like virtual slaves. The landowners paid their workers only in room and board. The Native American rancho workers received no wage. Although they had the right to leave the rancho, many felt they had no choice. Many had no place else to go.



The Spanish-Mexican land owners, or Californios expanded into the tallow and hide trade. California ranchos profited from practically free labor, high demand for goods from foreign trading vessels, and zero taxation from the Mexican government.

The only group that profited from secularization was the few landowning Californios who determined the fate of former Mission workers.

What happened to the Missions buildings after secularization?

After secularization, mission buildings were often used as the community church and the community gathering area. Mission San Juan Capistrano had a different history.

The governor Pio Pico sold the land and buildings at auction in 1844. Pico's brother-in-law John Forster purchased the land (which was valued at \$54,000) for only \$710. While the Forster family used the buildings as a home for over 20 years, California continued to change and grow.

After gold was discovered at Sutter's Mill in 1848, an influx of Americans arrived to make their fortune. The historic year of 1848 coincided with the end of the Mexican American War. With signing the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Mexico ceded California and a good portion of the western lands of North America to the United States.

Only a few years after acquiring the territory of California, statehood was declared in 1850. Many California dioceses, and parishioners petitioned the government to have mission buildings and lands returned to the church. People were saddened at the state of the missions. Some mission buildings had been turned into stores, bars, inns, or even stables. Most were falling apart and not maintained.

President Abraham Lincoln responded to the petitioners by giving back the missions to the Catholic Church. By the 1870s and early 1900s, artists, photographers, and visionaries took interest in the abandoned missions. Many wealthy individuals formed groups to campaign for restoration. The Landmarks Club and Father John O'Sullivan were Mission San Juan Capistrano's greatest proponents of preservation.

National Historic Landmark Status

The California State Park System runs only three out of the Twenty-one Missions. The Catholic Church or Non-Profit organizations run the eighteen other California Missions.

California State Parks include:

1. Mission La Purisima
2. Mission Santa Cruz
3. Mission San Francisco Solano (a part of Sonoma State Historic Park)