MISSION CHRONICLES
Information for Locals
Presented by Mission San Juan Capistrano
Projects Underway to Ensure the Preservation of Mission History

HISTORY AND PRESERVATION OF THE OLIVE MILL
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Mission San Juan Capistrano’s Olive Mill, which stands in front of the Soldiers Barracks building, dates back to the early 1880s. Resident priest Father Jose Mut, who served the Mission between 1866-1886, asked Mission caretaker Ramon Yorba to build it so that he could make olive oil on site. Ramon Yorba made a crude olive mill, or olive crusher, by building a red brick circular vat, repurposing small millstones, and using tree branches as support beams for the project.

According to Ramon Yorba and local townspeople of the time, the vertical millstones moved around the central post by pushing a handlebar and walking around the circular vat. The crushed olives, or the pulp, was then collected from the vat and then pressed between heavy boards to make olive oil.

The Olive Mill was probably only used for a few years after it was built. By 1889, Mission San Juan Capistrano had no resident priest and the Olive Mill most likely stopped being used.

During the 1930s, local amateur historian E. L. Howell grew interested in the Mission’s history and the olive oil production that led to the Olive Mill’s repair. Sam Romero, and Ramon Yorba (who originally built it 50 years earlier) repaired it.

In the past 10 years the brick columns of the Olive Mill have become unstable, causing them to lean to the sides. In 2012, as a temporary solution, stabilizing support beams were put in place to keep the columns from falling down, while preservation dollars could be raised.

Recently, Mission San Juan Capistrano received funds to stabilize the Olive Mill. The work will begin this spring, with the goals of stabilizing the brick columns back to its vertical position, securing the foundation, and installing a new beam between the two columns. The Olive Mill Preservation Project should take about three weeks to complete.

Although the 134-year-old Olive Mill does not date back to the Mission Era (1776-1834), it is a testament to the olive oil production process, which was introduced to California by the Spanish missionaries. Therefore, the community of San Juan Capistrano had been actively growing and processing olives for the majority of 19th and early 20th centuries. Whether they crushed olives by hand using a mortar and pestle, or used makeshift equipment like the Mission’s Olive Mill, San Juan Capistrano residents have made olive oil for cooking, medicine, lamps, and ointments for over 200 years!

Visit the Mission Store for olive mill inspired products such as specialty oils and home décor items that celebrate the long history of agriculture at Mission San Juan Capistrano.