

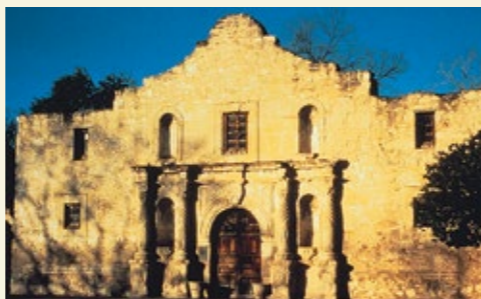
# Visiting the Missions

## 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.



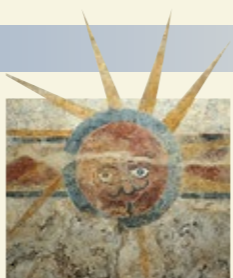
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## Concepción



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 Nazonios* 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.

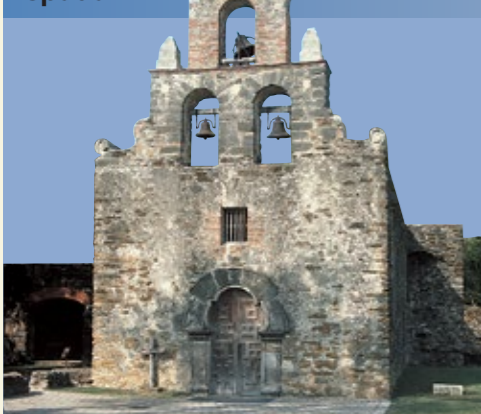
In 1762 Mission San Juan's herds were said to number 3,500 sheep and nearly as many cattle.



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.

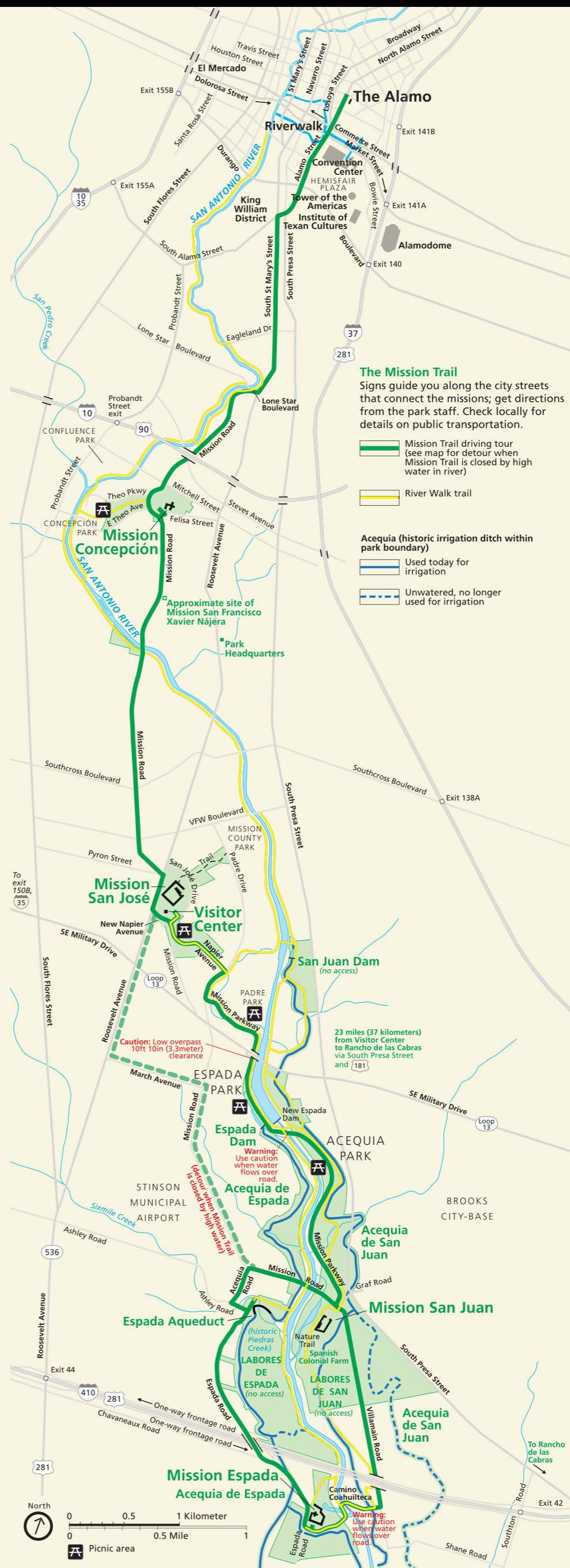
Growing conflicts with Apache Indians began the mission ranches' decline in the 1770s. Branding cattle in the rough south Texas brush country was difficult and too infre-

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](http://www.nps.gov).

## More Information

San Antonio Missions National Historical Park  
2202 Roosevelt Avenue  
San Antonio, TX 78210  
210-932-1001; headquarters 210-534-8833  
[www.nps.gov/saan](http://www.nps.gov/saan)

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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.

