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.

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 and the most important economic and social center. Visitors praised its unique church architecture and the rich fields and pastures.

San Juan

Mission San Juan Capistrano was originally San José de los Nazonis in East Texas. In 1731 it was moved to its permanent site 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.

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 renamed San Francisco de la Espada. It 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 stonecutting for building elaborate buildings.

Mission Ranches

A mission's goal of self-sufficiency depended on the success of its ranch. Free-roaming livestock on the mission ranches proved very profitable. Sheep, goats, and cattle were sold or traded to the presidios and civil settlements as far south and west as Lower California (today 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 infrequent to be effective. When 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 horsback, and even longhorn cattle began in the Spanish colonial period. The mission ranches left a rich heritage of equipment, vocabulary, and folklore.

The Acequia System

Espada Dam, completed by 1745, still diverts river water into an acequia madre (mother system). Mission Espada has the best-preserved acequia network irrigated about 3,500 acres of land. 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 crop land was measured in acre-loads, the amount of land that could be watered in a day. The 15-mile network irrigated about 3,500 acres of land.

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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.

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