Old Mission San Juan Capistrano

Curt Teich & Co. Inc., Chicago
D-9267

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October 2012
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CALIFORNIA
Mission San Juan Capistrano, California

The founding of the Spanish Missions in California furnished an epic of history. These historical monuments are reminders of the great Franciscan adventure; twenty-one vast establishments—the ruins of which still stand in wonder and beauty, at various points along these 600 miles of glorious golden coast region.

Spain had established several Missions in Lower (Baja) California, when the need of offsetting the activities of strange trades of Upper (Alta) California led to the plan of colonization that was to have a profound effect. The cross, the sword and the hoe were the symbols of this movement, to carry civilization into the wilderness.

Command was given by the Spanish Crown to settle California. Four expeditions set out from points in Baja California, Mexico, two by land and two by sea. The two sea divisions preceded the land parties, planning to arrive in San Diego at about the same time.

The first expedition by land was headed by Fray Crespi and Captain Fernando Rivera. The second division by land was in charge of Gaspar de Portola, who bore the title of both Commandante and Governor of Alta California. Father Junipero Serra, President of the Franciscans of Baja California, who was the guiding spirit of this great undertaking, was unable to start with the second division because of an injury, but weeks later was able to join up with Portola before the party arrived in San Diego.

With the establishment of the first Mission at San Diego on July 16th, 1769, California history and civilization had its beginning. From this base during the next thirty years, a score of Missions and several branches were established at points a day’s journey apart by horseback. The last of the Missions was established at a point about fifty miles north of San Francisco. Missions were not established progressively, but first at strategic points, others in between to be built at later dates.

The trail connecting the Missions was known as the El Camino Real (The Royal Road). The name is still preserved for the Coast Highway of California, U. S. Highway 101.

The Mission San Juan Capistrano, with the little town bearing the same name, is situated in Orange County, California, fifty-eight miles south from Los Angeles, on the State Highway leading to San Diego.

The first attempt to found this Mission took place October 30th, 1775, the octave of the feast of San Juan Capistrano, when Mass was celebrated in a shelter of boughs by Fray Fermín Francisco de Lasuen, but amidst the rejoicing over the happy beginning, it was halted by the startling news of an Indian uprising at the Mission in San Diego, to which point the entire party returned to restore peace and order at that establishment.

A year passed before work was resumed. This time it was Father Serra himself who officiated at the ceremonies. Arriving at the spot that had been chosen the year before, he found the cross still standing. Digging up the bells that had been buried, and repairing the ramadas or rudely built huts, he proceeded with all solemnity possible to found this, the seventh Mission, on November 5th 1776.

The establishment was not as many suppose, a monastery; it was the headquarters for the Indians in the work of civilizing them, teaching them the Christian religion and useful industries. A glance over the place will show how admirably it was planned for its purpose. Besides the church for instruction and worship, and the living rooms for the Padres and the guests’ rooms, there were store houses for provisions and shops for the various craftsmen.
San Juan Capistrano Mission Garden

MISSION GARDEN

Flowers bloom profusely at all seasons in this beautiful old fashioned garden in front of the old mission.
Along this corridor are the entrances to the original living quarters of the padres that were in charge of the mission.
CAMPAÑARIO AND STATUE OF FATHER SERRA

In honor of Father Junipera Serra, the founder of the California Missions, a statue has been placed near the campanario in the front garden of the mission.

San Juan Capistrano Mission – Companario and Statue of Father Serra
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Front Mission Garden
San Juan Capistrano Mission Fountain and Pool
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Main Walk in Front Garden

The garden presents a picture of fascinating beauty. Flowers of many colors, beautiful shrubs and shady trees line the many walks.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Campanario, Stone Church and Garden
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Front Corridor

FRONT CORRIDOR

Showing left, arch entrance to the Spanish patio and right, the doorway leading to old quarters formerly used by the Padre of the mission.
OLD CHAPEL ARCHES

In front mission garden, looking towards the padres' quarters. The chapel has been in use since 1890. It was originally the living rooms of the Fathers in charge.
FLOWER BORDERED WALK

One of the many inviting trails thru the mission gardens, which are a mass of bloom every month of the year.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Old Stone Church and the Bells of the Mission

OLD STONE CHURCH AND THE BELLS OF THE MISSION
★ The bell wall or campanario was built in 1813. The bells still peal forth the Angelus daily and call the faithful to worship.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – In the Front Garden

IN THE FRONT GARDEN

★ Where hundreds of beautiful snow white pigeons flock together and greet the visitors, often alighting on one’s shoulder and beg to be fed from the hand.
OLD PEPPER TREE IN MISSION GARDEN

★ The large pepper tree that graces the front of the mission is typical of early California, and banked with gorgeous flowers on all sides, adds to the charm of the old cloisters.

San Juan Capistrano Mission – Old Pepper Tree in Mission Garden
THE GREAT STONE CHURCH

★ Before its destruction in 1812, this was the noblest and most magnificent of all the California mission churches. The workmanship may be judged from the carved pilasters, capitals, doorways, arches and keystones that still remain.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – The Great Stone Church

★ The stone church was started in 1796 and was finished in 1806 and destroyed by an earthquake in 1812. It is in the upper crevices of these ruins that the swallows of Capistrano make their homes.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Entrance to the Sacred Garden

ENTRANCE TO THE SACRED GARDEN
★ The sacred garden and fountain in the shadow of the campanario which was built in 1813 to accommodate the four bells, where they have remained ever since.
THE SACRED GARDEN

★ The campanario or bell tower wall is between the great stone church and the original rectory. The two larger bells are dated 1796 and the smaller ones 1804.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Thru the Arches, looking towards the Padres’ Quarters
Looking towards the old Barracks

The ivy covered corridors, the profusion of flowers and shaded walks thru the gardens, add to the charm and beauty of this historical spot.
Serra Church Corridor

The corridor leads along the adobe building on the east side of the quadrangle known as Father Serra’s church. This is not only the oldest part of the mission, but is also the oldest building in the state.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – The Fountain of the Four Evangelists

THE FOUNTAIN OF THE FOUR EVANGELISTS

Located in the center of the inner patio with flower bordered walks leading to the four sides of the quadrangle.
OLD ARCHES OF THE INNER PATIO

In this northeast corner, the rooms of this building were the storehouses for wheat, barley, hides, tallow and other provisions.
SOUTH CORRIDOR OF INNER PATIO

★ The original living quarters of the mission padres have two long corridors, one facing the old mission garden, and the north side fronting the inner patio which was used as an outdoor workshop.

San Juan Capistrano Mission – South Corridor of Inner Patio
THE INNER PATIO

Originally a perfect cloister enclosed with the four corridors and the completed buildings, and used by the Fathers as a place for the Indians to work and play. During games the roofs of the corridors were used as grand stands for the spectators.
A WALK IN THE PATIO GARDEN

The flowers, trees and shrubs that border the walks of the arched quadrangle of the inner patio are typical of the early mission days.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Altar in Serra Church
THE VESTIBULE OF SERRA CHURCH

Looking through the arches towards the inner patio and Spanish garden.

San Juan Capistrano Mission – The Vestibule of Serra Church
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Convent Building and Ruins of the West Corridor

**CONVENT BUILDING AND RUINS OF THE WEST CORRIDOR**

★ The west corridor was a long six room building, where Indians were taught useful trades: making shoes, harness, blankets and hats.
CONVENT CORRIDOR

This, the north building, was formerly a warehouse where crops, hides and tallow were stored. The building was restored in 1924 and is now in use as the parish school.
San Juan Capistrano Mission – A Portion of the Ruins of the Workshops
San Juan Capistrano Mission – Corridor of the old Barracks Building
San Juan Capistrano Mission – The Mission as it appeared 30 years ago
The arch lined quadrangle around which the Mission buildings are clustered, is commonly called the "patio". The area of the patio is about one acre, each side measuring approximately two hundred feet. In Mission days, one of its uses was that of an outdoor workshop.

The large room on the north side of the Patio, in the northeast corner, were the store-houses for wheat, barley, hides and other provisions. In the northwest corner were located the shops in which soap, candles, blankets, hats, harness and shoes were made.

In the front building was the kitchen of the Padres and other occupants of the Mission building. Next to the kitchen, to the east was the pantry, where the old hand-hewn shelves made of hardwood, and the gallery still stand. The passage way next to the pantry is called the zaguan, which is now the principal entrance to the patio within. The rooms to the east of the zaguan were the living quarters of the Padres.

The adobe building, 162 feet long which forms part of the east side of the quadrangle, is known as Father Serra's church. This is not only the oldest part of the Mission, but also the oldest building in the state, and the only one that goes back to the day of the renowned Apostle of California.

The old stone church of the Mission before its destruction by an earthquake in 1812, was the most magnificent of all the Mission churches in California. The workmanship may be judged from the carved pilasters, capitals, doorways, arches and keystones that still remain.

The Mission Bells which now hang in the bell wall or Campanario between the present chapel and the ruins of the old church, at one time swung high up in the tower which was part of the great church.

Less than sixty years after the establishment of this magnificent Mission, the ruin of San Juan Capistrano and the other Missions of California was accomplished by native California officials of the Mexican government, who under the hypocritical pretense of alleviating the condition of the Mission Indians, brought about the confiscation of the Indian lands and Mission property by the territorial government. In 1845 the buildings were sold at public auction by Governor Pio Pico; the buildings, furniture, three plots of land, the garden, orchard and vineyards for $710, paid for in cash, hides and tallow.

When the United States acquired California, a land commission was appointed in 1851 to investigate private claims of property. The commission found the sale to be illegal. On March 18th, 1865, just a month before his death, President Abraham Lincoln signed a patent conveying the Mission buildings and land back to the Bishop of the Diocese, as representative of the Catholic Church.

The Mission today is in an excellent state of preservation. The repair work necessary to preserve it has been done with unusual taste and judgment so that it has retained all the charm of an ancient structure. Its ivy draped corridors, its fragrant and colorful gardens and fountained courts enchant the many visitors with the full beauty of this romantic spot whose history has been so full of stirring adventure and whose present loveliness is so great.

Perhaps one of the strangest and most interesting sights at the Mission are the busy little cliff swallows——"Las Golondrinas" that build their little mud nests in the ledges and arches of the old Church. With the coming of spring, each year, on St. Joseph's Day, March nineteenth, the return of the swallows is celebrated. For many years, the swallows stayed on after raising their families until St. John's Day, October twenty-third. Of recent years, ranchers have had to resort to scientific destruction of insects, which is the principal food of the little birds, and has caused them to depart as soon as their second family is strong enough to fly, and by early September the swallows have vanished, and their little mud nests deserted.

History of the San Juan Capistrano Mission