

I. Spanish Period

A. Discovery of California

1. Cabrillo Cruises the Southern California Coast

Credit for the discovery of Alta (Upper) California is extended to the Portuguese navigator Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo, who first sighted its coastline from the sea in 1542 while searching for the legendary water route to Asia through North America. Leaving the port of Navidad on Mexico's west coast on 27 June 1542, he discovered and entered the harbor of San Diego three months later, on 28 September. After remaining in the area for six days, Cabrillo's two vessels, the San Salvador and the Victoria, continued on, discovering San Clemente Island next and eventually anchoring at Catalina Island, San Pedro Bay, Santa Monica on 9 October, Ventura, and at other points along the Santa Barbara Channel. Reaching the site of a large Indian village, which he named El Pueblo de las Canoas, Cabrillo came ashore, impressed by the fine large board boats utilized by the inhabitants. The exact location of this camp has been a source of dispute, its most likely location being either At Mugu Lagoon, southeast of Oxnard, or on a site at the foot of present Figueroa and Palm streets in Ventura.¹

The seas north of this section of coast proved too formidable for navigation because of powerful winds, making location of a safe harbor a critical necessity. Returning southward, the expedition finally spent the winter at San Miguel Island, where Cabrillo died from an infection in January 1543. Under his chief pilot, Bartolomé Ferrello, explorations northward continued, eventually reaching a point probably near the Rogue River off the coast of southern Oregon. Unfortunately no riches, no new anchorages, and no short cut to Europe were found.

2. Further Expeditions Curtailed

Further expeditions searching the north coast for a safe harbor and port of call for the annual Manila galleons, which at this point in their journey carrying the wealth of the Orient to Acapulco often required fresh food and water and sometimes an escort vessel, were similarly unsuccessful. The merchant-adventurer Sebastián Vizcaíno embarked from Acapulco in 1602, and after a long voyage, during which he renamed several places along the California coast, entered a bay on 16 December that he named in honor of the Spanish viceroy Conde De Monterey. During the next 167 years, however, California remained virtually isolated, held in low regard by the Spanish because it lacked riches and apparently offered no hope of a northwest passage. Other factors retarding further exploration to the area from Mexico were the strong winds and unfavorable currents that made travel by sea a perilous undertaking. Land travel was considered even more forbidding.

1. Mildred Brooke Hoover, Hero Eugene Rensch, Ethel Grace Rensch, Historic Spots in California, 3d ed. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), pp. 576-77.

B. Establishment of Missions

1. Portolá Founds Settlement at Monterey

Not until Spain feared loss of her New World empire to the Russians--encroaching from the northwest and to the English settled in the eastern Mississippi River Valley were efforts renewed to firmly establish her position in Alta California. Carlos III, in hopes of revivifying Spain's fading glory, issued a decree in 1767 banishing all Jesuits, who had been the subjects of mounting hostility in Spain for some time, from that country and her American possessions in favor of the Franciscans who were to assume administration and regulation of pastoral matters in the New World. He then appointed Captain Gaspar de Portolá, a leading expansionist thinker, as governor of Baja California. Accompanied by Junípero Serra, Father-President of the Franciscan missions in Baja California and of all prospective ones in Alta California, Portolá was under orders of José de Gálvez, visitador-général of Mexico City, to rediscover and occupy San Diego and Monterey harbors and then colonize and initiate religious activities in as much of Nueva California as possible. His immediate objective was the founding of a presidio and mission at San Diego that could be utilized as a way station on the journey to Monterey where another mission would be established. An intermediate stop was to be founded somewhere between the two.²

This "sacred expedition" was comprised of 225 men divided into four divisions, two that would travel overland and two that would carry food and equipment by sea. All four groups were to rendezvous at San Diego Bay before continuing on to Monterey. The two ships sailed in January and February 1769. The first land unit, under Captain Fernando Rivera y Moncada who commanded a force of light cavalry accompanied by natives of Baja California and by religious representatives, set out from Baja on 24 March driving a large herd of cattle, horses, and mules. The final group, including Portolá, Serra, and a few soldiers, tarried until 15 May and then followed a different route up from Mexico across the deserts to California.

By 1 July the various contingents had reached San Diego, although sickness had taken a devastating toll of both the land and sea forces. The mission of San Diego de Alcalá was dedicated on 16 July 1769, the first permanent white settlement in California. Two days earlier, Portolá and about sixty-four others from the main expedition (priests, soldiers, muleteers, and Christianized Indians) had pushed on overland in an attempt to relocate the Bay of Monterey. Reaching the site of the future pueblo of Los Angeles, they named it on the feast day of Our Lady of the Angels. Continuing northwest along the Santa Barbara Channel coast, they reached the shores of Monterey Bay on 2 October.

Failing to recognize it, however, the group pushed on north to Drake's Bay, which they reached on 31 October, some members of the party becoming the first white men to see the vast body of water of San Francisco Bay. Short of rations, sick, and disheartened by their failure to find the harbor at Monterey, the expedition turned south again and arrived back in San Diego in January 1770. So conscious of their disappointment in not founding the Monterey mission, Portolá failed to recognize the tremendous discovery that had been made instead.

2. Harry Hansen, ed., California: A Guide to the Golden State, American Guide Series, rev. ed. (New York: Hastings House, 1967), p. 44.

Death had been a constant visitor to the main camp in San Diego where food was scarce and disease rampant. Portolá determined to abandon the country unless a supply ship arrived by March. Amazingly, it did, and filled with new optimism, Portolá sent another expedition of soldiers and natives back up the coast in April 1770, its route possibly taking it via the Conejo Grade and Calabasas areas. This time Monterey Bay was found and in June 1770 the sites of a mission and presidio of San Carlos Borromeo de Monterey were formally dedicated. The nucleus of a settlement having been formed, Portolá embarked for Lower California.

2. De Anza Establishes San Francisco Mission

The problems faced by Father Serra, who was trying to administer the new missions in California, were many, not the least of which revolved around their lack of self-sufficiency and dependence on Mexico for supplies. He continually insisted that a land route had to be found to bring food and other items that were often lacking because of the delays experienced in sea travel. Partially on the strength of his arguments, in 1773 Captain Juan Bautista de Anza proposed an expedition to open a land route from northern Sonora to Monterey via present New Mexico and Arizona along the Gila and Colorado rivers. He was also empowered, for strategic purposes, to extend Spanish settlement to the Bay of San Francisco.

Anza's first expedition of thirty-four men set forth from Tubac on 8 January, struggled across the sands and lava beds of the Colorado Desert, through the Imperial Valley, the Anza Desert, and across the Jan Jacinto Range, reaching the mission of San Gabriel on 22 March. Continuing on to Monterey to explore the trail, he probably camped near Triunfo (the former post office at the junction of El Camino Real and the road to Lake Sherwood) in Russell Valley west of Calabasas in April. He spent the next night near San Buenaventura. Returning from the north he camped east of Camarillo at the foot of the Conejo Grade. Anza then returned to Mexico City via his earlier route. His second expedition in 1775-76 was primarily to transport settlers and soldiers to San Francisco, where a presidio and mission would be founded. Thirty soldier-colonists and their families and four civilian settlers and their families, over 200 individuals in all, comprised this first overland emigrant train to California. Large herds of cattle and horses were herded along to form the basis of their colonizing efforts. This group followed the previous route to San Gabriel where they arrived in January 1776. Crossing the southern edge of the San Fernando Valley, the expedition entered the Simi Hills at Calabasas and continued to the vicinity of Las Virgenes Creek and on north-west. After the founding of the Mission of San Francisco de Asís, Anza again departed for Mexico, his mission accomplished. The San Francisco presidio was formally established in September and the mission opened in October.

3. Missions Push Back the Frontier

During a period of a little over half a century the Franciscans managed to establish twenty-one missions in an effort to concretely assert Spain's rights in the New World as well as to win over new converts to Christianity.

Their last one, north of San Francisco Bay, was founded on 4 July 1823. Some had pueblos (agricultural towns) nearby as an effort to introduce civilian centers that could provide food for Spanish soldiers stationed in the area. Presidios were located at strategic coastal positions to guard the missions from hostile Indians, to keep the native neophytes in check, and to protect shipping.

The missions, centers of Christianity and "civilization," were set about a day's ride apart and were connected by El Camino Real (Royal Highway), a trail several hundred miles long over which dispatches were sent north from Mexico. Spanish influence was confined to the area along this route, with few expeditions penetrating into central or northern California. Each mission was generally self-sustaining, supporting cattle herds, large fields, and vegetable gardens tended by Indian converts. Although these natives learned to build irrigation systems and some attained such skills as weaving, masonry, carpentry, and blacksmithing, the mission system never undertook intellectual training and³ never developed self-control or self-reliance in the aboriginal population.

3. This summary of early exploratory activities has been taken from the following sources: Walton Bean, California: An Interpretive History (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1968), pp. 17-24, 35-44; Hoover et al, Historic Spots in California, pp. 148, 576-77; Russ Leadabrand, Shelly Lowenkopf, Bryce Patterson, Yesterday's California, Seemann's Historic States Series No. 3 (Miami: E.A. Seemann Publ., Inc., 1975), pp. 11-12; Hansen, California, pp. 43-45; W. H. Hutchinson, California (Palo Alto: American West Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 55-60; An Illustrated History of Southern California (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1890), p. 816; Frederic Taber Cooper, comp., Rider's California: A Guide-Book for Travelers (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1925), pp. xxxi-iii; Luther A. Ingersoll, Ingersoll's Century History: Santa Monica Bay Cities (Los Angeles: Luther A. Ingersoll, 1908), pp. 8-10.

II. Mexican Period

A. An End to Spanish Domination of California

1. California Remains Isolated During Era of European Chaos

The establishment of missions in Alta California appeared to satisfy for the time being Spain's desire to express her dominance in the region. Except for a confused governmental system that saw church, army, and civil leaders all fighting for control, little marred the tranquility of the region or affected its development for many years to come. The turbulence of the Napoleonic era in Europe all but obscured the importance of the New World colonies, which were, as a result, left almost completely on their own. By the time Europe began to recover and readjust to a new power structure, Spain's western colonial empire was so weak that as revolutionary activity began to foment in Mexico circa 1821, little could be done to prevent Alta California from being swept up in the chain of events.

Although remaining loyal to Spain during the Mexican Revolution by taking no part in the struggle to sever her dominance in the New World, and indeed, having little or no idea what events were transpiring to the south, the residents of Alta California were nevertheless impressed upon learning of the establishment of an independent government in Mexico City in 1822 and of a republic in 1824.

2. California Becomes Mexico's Possession

For the time being, however, little change occurred in the political climate of the province. In 1825 the area formally became a Territory of the Republic of Mexico and established a federal constitution modeled after that of the United States. Mexico appeared willing to make concessions compatible with California's new egalitarian philosophy in the form of liberal colonization laws in 1824 and 1828 that promised security and land to foreign settlers, and by removal of long-standing, rigid Spanish restrictions against permanent settlement by foreigners. In a flurry of democratic solidarity, the province opened ports to trade, declared Indians free citizens, levied duties and taxes on crops and cattle, and established a militia, military force, and judiciary bodies. Most importantly and most gratifying to the inhabitants, no great disturbance of property resulted from the change in leadership.¹

1. Cooper, Rider's California, p. xxxiv; Leada-brand et al, Yesterday's California, p. 15; Hansen, California, pp. 47-48.

B. Rise of Opposition to the Mission System

1. Missions as a Frontier Institution

The Franciscan missions that had been organized by Spain in a long string between San Diego and San Francisco were a well-established colonizing mechanism with a threefold objective: to convert the Indian population to Christianity, thus civilizing a vast frontier; to settle the natives on mission lands as loyal Spanish subjects; and to provide them with the essentials of food, clothing, and shelter.² Theoretically the Indians residing between the Coast Range and the ocean from San Diego northward that were being gathered into the various missions were the natural owners of the large areas of fertile land that were only being held in trust by the mission fathers. After a period of ten years from their founding, the missions were to be converted into pueblos and both real and personal property subdivided among the many neophytes.

The absorption of immense tracts of rich farm and grazing land by the Franciscans effectively prevented colonization of the region by white settlers, a situation that pleased the padres but that eventually proved their undoing. By the time of Mexican independence the missions had prospered to such a degree that they were catching the eye of a land-hungry and power-bent new generation of colonists who, after tasting the initial fruits of self government, were becoming dissatisfied with patriarchal mission authority.³

2. Early Spanish Land Grants

During the period following the exploratory ventures of Portolá and Anza into Alta California, occasional travelers through this area carried news back to Mexico of the mission herds thriving on their abundant pasturage. As a result, Castilian colonists who were struggling to raise cattle on the rocky plains of Mexico were tempted to move up the coast to these more promising fields. They were encouraged in their endeavor by the offer of generous individual land grants based on a system of land tenure recognizing the king as owner in fee simple of all colonial possessions in the New World.

These first land grants, varying from ten to twenty-plus square leagues each, were being made as early as 1784 by Provincial Governor Pedro Fages to Spanish Army veterans who had come to California as soldiers and were discharged or retired from active service. These gifts were strongly opposed by mission authorities who argued that colonization by whites in surrounding areas would result in rapid demoralization of the Indian population. Nevertheless, a 1786 law empowered Fages to not only bestow private grants, but to also present each rancho with a storehouse and at least 2,000 head of cattle.⁴

During the Spanish period few land grants were actually made, for two primary reasons: first, people were unwilling to move away from the secure

2. Joseph S. O'Flaherty, Those Powerful Years: The South Coast and Los Angeles, 1887-1917 (Hicksville, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1978), p. 68.

3. Hansen, California, pp. 46, 70; Ingersoll, Century History, pp. 14, 51.

4. Hansen, California, p. 47; Robert Glass Cleland, The Cattle on a Thousand Hills: Southern California, 1850-1870 (San Marino, Ca: The Huntington Library, 1941), p. 5; Illustrated History of Southern California, p. 752.

mission communities, and second and probably most significant, the Franciscans had by this time already appropriated the best land.⁵

The first California land grant, issued in 1784, was to Rancho San Rafael, which included parts of modern-day Glendale and Burbank. Most of the twenty or so cessions made by the crown to individuals centered around the Los Angeles and San Diego areas. Four important ones near Los Angeles pueblo were: Topanga Malibu, 13,000 acres granted to Jose Bartolomé Tapia; Rancho Santiago de Santa Ana, 62,000 acres conveyed to Antonio Yorba; Rancho Simi, 93,000 acres owned jointly by Patricio Xavier and Miguel Pico; and Rancho San Antonio, 30,000 acres given to Antonio María Lugo in 1810. Other early Hispanic grants were given to Ranchos San Pedro, Los Nietos, San Vicente, Santa Monica, Boca de Santa Monica, Las Virgenes, and The Conejo.⁶

3. Secularization Act of 1834

The success of the Mexican Revolution had been very disappointing to the mission fathers, who had consistently prayed for the triumph of the Mother Country. In the downfall of Spanish monarchical domination and the rise of Republicanism they perceived the downfall of their missions and feudal institutions and secular power in general. As a result of their fear of the new order and of their jealousy of the burgeoning influence of the pueblos in California life, the Franciscan missionaries remained hostile to the Mexican Republic, a fact not overlooked during discussions on secularization.⁷

The fears of the missionaries that their authority would soon be transferred to lay officials were not unfounded, for with the precedent of land reform acts in Mexico and with the desire on the part of many settlers for land and cattle and a share in the country's wealth, a campaign was launched to have the mission lands restored to the public domain. In theory this would eliminate strong religious influence in the area and ensure a more equal distribution of wealth among whites and Indian alike. In practice, however, the Secularization Act of 1834 became an instrument benefitting the Californios only, whereby mission herds were plundered, Indians scattered, and over eight million acres of productive land were broken up into 800 privately-owned ranches.

At the time of passage of this act, which effectively brought the mission era to a close, California's governor, José Figueroa, had formulated

5. Cleland, Cattle on a Thousand Hills, p. 26.

6. Hutchinson, California, p. 64; Leadabrand et al, Yesterday's California, p. 13; Cleland, Cattle on a Thousand Hills, p. 26; Illustrated History of Southern California, p. 752; State of California, Department of Parks and Recreation, The Resources Agency, "Santa Monica Mountains and Seashore Recreation Plan," July 1975, p. 64.

7. Ingersoll, Century History, p. 47; Cooper, Rider's California, pp. xxxiv-v.

a careful plan for its implementation. One-half of the mission land and livestock was to be distributed to the Indians, who would be forbidden by law to sell or mortgage their holdings. Unfortunately, Figueroa died before his plan could be carried out, and because of the vagueness of the procedures to be followed, the change was made too quickly and with too little preparation. When the breakup came, ineffective monitoring resulted in the seizure of most of the land and cattle by the colonists, a negligible amount of money being given to the Christianized Indians as payment, which was quickly spent. Even the mission fathers contributed to the bedlam by slaughtering vast numbers of cattle in order to salvage from the sale of the hides as much wealth as possible for the Pious Fund, which had subsidized their religious activities in the area. As a result of their carnage, rotting carcasses by the hundreds were left behind scattered over the hillsides. The Indians were the most seriously affected by the Secularization Act. Unable to fend for themselves after so many years of dependency centered around the mission establishments, some clung to the few Franciscans who remained, while others attempted to find jobs as laborers in nearby pueblos. There they soon fell victim to alcohol and other vices, and most were held in contempt by the general population. Others determined to completely abandon the area and seek refuge with other Indian groups. Only those trained as vaqueros were able to find secure employment on the newly-established ranchos into which the mission lands had been subdivided. The last fragments of missions holdings passed into private hands at the end of 1845.⁸

C. Era of the Ranchos

1. Mexican Land Grants

The passage of the Secularization Act enabled private citizens to petition for grants of mission land ranging from one to eleven square leagues (4,500 to 50,000 acres) in size. Much of the land was freely distributed by Mexican government officials as political plums to their supporters.¹⁰ By the creation of hundreds of new private ranches, the social, cultural, and economic emphasis of Mexican California shifted from the mission to the rancho, a patriarchal enterprise headquartered in an adobe hacienda and run along the lines of a medieval English manor. Thousands of cattle roamed limitless acres of wild range, with farming undertaken by Indian labor recruited from the dying missions only to the extent of satisfying individual rancho needs. Each homestead became socially and culturally self-sufficient, and here several

8. O'Flaherty, Those Powerful Years, p. 69; Hansen, California, p. 46; Bean, Interpretive History, pp. 67-69; Paul C. Johnson, Pictorial History of California (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1970), p. 58.

9. Andrew Rolfe, California: A Student's Guide to Localized History (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 12.

10. O'Flaherty, Those Powerful Years, p. 69.