Convento Complex

The convento—an open square of buildings with a central courtyard—was a focus of community life. To your right, an earthen berm protects the foundations of a row of work rooms. They included a kitchen, ironworking, carpentry, weaving, leather, and grain grinding areas. Women predominantly took on roles such as weaving, making pottery, grinding corn, wheat, and mesquite into flour, and cooking foods like tortillas. Men often were responsible for tanning leather, forging metalworks, hunting and butchering.

Convento Fragment

Before colonization, the cultures of the Pimería Alta were accepting of gender and sexual diversity. O'odham who lived outside of the sexual binary of male-female or identified as LGBTQ+ were called *wik'ovat*. These individuals were respected, and entrusted with sacred roles such as being healers, matchmakers, storytellers, or prophets.

In the early mission era, priests visited rarely and stayed only briefly. Wik'ovat and the rest of O'odham society could carry on traditional religious and social practices. Once Tumacácori gained a resident priest in 1768—he lived in this wing of the convento—LGBTQ+ native people had to conceal their identities or face persecution and risk their lives.

Storeroom

Prior to the mission era, food, grown and harvested for subsistence, was shared communally. Food was processed almost exclusively by women. Therefore, women dominated the domain of food growing, collecting, harvesting, and cooking. By influencing what people ate, women shaped the health and prosperity of their communities, and cultivated community ties that allowed for cohesive political and familial alliances. In the missions, this trend continued.

Women dominated the foodways of their homes and private lives. They formed the clay pots and woven baskets that held the food stored in this space, and in their homes. Because women were dominant in shaping diet, food preparation, and other kitchen activities, women could use food as a way to resist Spanish influence and preserve indigenous food customs. In this way, women acted as cultural brokers who mediated cultural, ethnic, and social tensions.

Cemetery

The cemetery at Tumacácori houses the burials of many mission residents. Many indigenous people were victims of diseases like smallpox, measles, syphilis and gonorrhea. The majority of burials here are children, some of whom may have died due to complications from their mothers' battles with syphilis. Syphilis, brought to the Pimería Alta by Europeans, wreaked havoc on native women's reproductive health, and led to increased maternal and infant mortality.

Native medicine men and priests alike struggled to keep their community healthy, and relied on women to heal the sick. Women were most familiar with botanical healing and had deep knowledge of the local flora. Thus, the entire mission community relied on women's knowledge of medicinal and botanical healing remedies. As a result, women led the way as healers and supported the health of people living in the mission.

Sacristy

Take a moment to stand in the sacristy—a space that women living in Tumacácori would never be allowed to enter. Native religious beliefs were predominantly based in nature, were flexible, and were less concerned with creating restriction than promoting social cohesion. In O'odham culture, matters of religion and spirit were less standardized and hierarchical than Spanish Catholicism. Women were involved in religious ceremonies and celebrations. They could even become sources of spiritual guidance.

Catholicism tightened the connections between sexuality, marriage, procreation, and gender roles. Women's roles in the Catholic church were extremely limited in comparison to traditional indigenous spiritual and religious beliefs. Imagine how strange it must have been for women to suddenly lose their prominent place in so many spiritual and religious matters.

Baptistry

In the baptistry, people across age groups became official members of the Cathoic church. Those baptized were assigned godparents. Becoming a godmother was a major opportunity for women to participate actively in the church setting. Godmotherhood provided access to authority in the way of controlling the role of cultural and spiritual mediator. The status of godmotherhood also elevated the symbolic importance of a woman in a historical moment where infant mortality among indigenous mothers living within missions was very high. Being a godmother fulfilled the maternal roles that were very culturally important to women in Spanish missions.

Tumacácori National Historical Park

Explore Tumacácori

Hidden Herstories
Women of Tumacácori



Duration



Distance



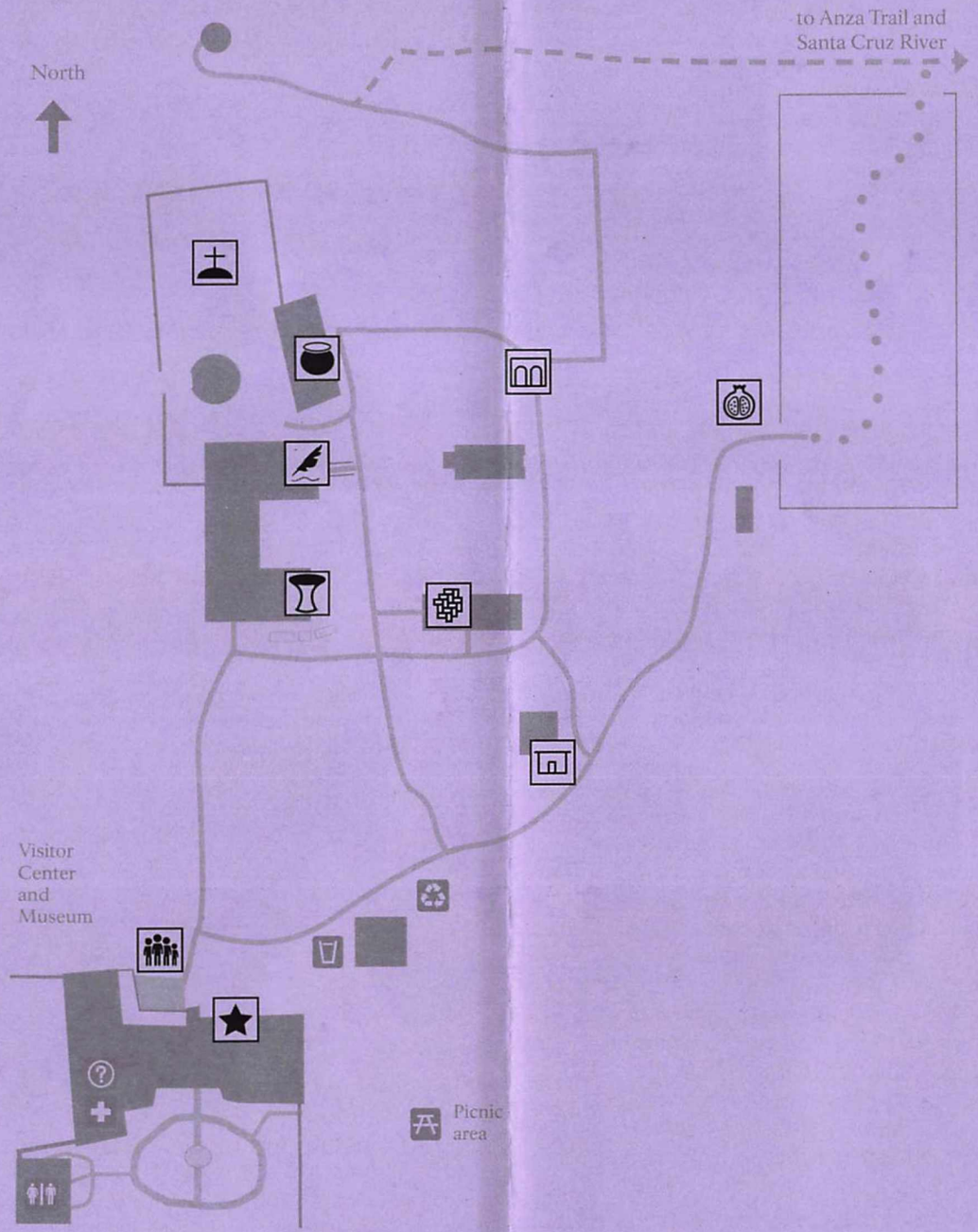
<0.5 mi

Accessibility



Advice for a safe and responsible trip:

1. Stay on the sidewalks
2. Protect the historic structures
3. Respect all wildlife
4. Dispose of trash properly



★ Start (Mission Model)

Life at the Tumacácori mission was full of complex dynamics. Social interactions, taboos, customs, and even things like food and disease were influenced by power and gender. Indigenous neophytes and Spanish missionaries alike were engaged in a kind of sociocultural battle, whether they knew it or not.

O'odham, Yoeme, and Nde cultures generally valued knowledge, maturity, and skill—qualifications obtainable by men and women. Eventually these were challenged by Spanish colonial hierarchies based on race, ancestry, ethnicity, sex, religion, and ownership of land. Take a moment to look at the model of the mission community and ponder what it may have been like to live as a woman during this time.

Community Plaza

The plaza of a mission is a public space where people would tell stories, barter goods, and participate in social activities. Before missionization, O'odham women played a sport called *toka*, similar to field hockey, in open fields like this one. After the completion of daily chores, O'odham women found time to compete and socialize during a toka game.

However, the free time that women and men enjoyed before dwindled with the establishment of the mission due to the increased time dedicated to intensive agriculture, animal husbandry, and more. As a result, toka games, racing, and dancing would become less common. Instead, women used the plaza as a place to make pottery while making jokes with their friends, bundling firewood, or grinding corn to make *masa* (dough).

Melhok ki (moo-ro kee)

Before the arrival of the Spanish, indigenous people lived in homes built primarily by women, made of wooden poles, grasses, yucca, and other natural materials. These homes were easily constructed, taken down, and changed with the landscape. O'odham villages organized themselves into family groups according to maternal lineages.

In mission housing, native families transitioned into permanent, patriarchal modes of living favored by the Spanish. Homes eventually adopted the square style, like the one before you. Here, women held significant influence. The domestic space allowed women to play important family roles and provided the privacy in which they could oversee the preservation of their culture.

Orchard

Before colonization, gathering foodstuffs and other resources was the primary responsibility of native women. The native groups here practiced non-intensive agriculture in addition to hunting and gathering. It was a woman's job to fill *ollas* (large pots) with water, carried over long distances from rivers and springs, for their family's use.

Women had always been experts on plant life and cultivation. Once the Spanish missions arrived, women were given the task of adapting to a brand new array of exotic fruits, vegetables, and herbs that they had to learn to grow and prepare. Less intensive agriculture of familiar native plants, like squash and beans, gave way to highly intensive agriculture of new and strange plants. Women learned to plant, maintain, and harvest orchards such as this one in order to support the entire mission community.