

MISSION NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA SOLEDAD  
(La Misión de María Santísima)  
(Nuestra Señora Dolorosísima de la Soledad)  
(Soledad Mission)  
36641 Fort Romie Road  
Soledad  
Monterey County  
California

HALS CA-80  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY  
National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior  
1849 C Street NW  
Washington, DC 20240-0001

## HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY

### MISSION NUESTRA SEÑORA DE LA SOLEDAD

(La Misión de María Santísima, Nuestra Señora Dolorosísima de la Soledad,  
Soledad Mission)

**HALS NO. CA-80**

- Location:** 36641 Fort Romie Road, Soledad, Monterey County, California  
The mission is located in the Salinas River valley, about 30 miles south of the town of Salinas, within Monterey County.
- Latitude: 36.404694 Longitude: -121.355736 (Front Entry Garden to Museum, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)
- Significance:** The chain of 21 missions built in California between 1769 and 1823 represents some of California's earliest European habitation. Mission construction began while California was still controlled by Spain, long before Mexico gained control in 1821 or the United States took possession in 1846. As each mission was dedicated it formed the core of a new community, many of which grew into major California cities; San Diego, San Luis Obispo, San Francisco, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz and San Rafael all began as missions. Some mission sites were abandoned and later renovated by various interests during periods of revivalism and romantic ideas about early California Mission settlement. Mission quadrangles often received extensive flowers gardens during this period. Mission Soledad was the thirteenth mission constructed.
- Description:** Located in the patchwork agricultural fields of the Salinas Valley, Mission Nuestra Señora de la Soledad has a quiet character. The foothills of the coastal Santa Lucia mountain range, trending northwest, are a short distance west of the mission, and the Gabilan mountain range forms the eastern edge of the valley. The Salinas River traverses in a similar northwest route through the valley. The river is unusual in its northern direction of flow, but also for the fact that most of it runs underground; the above-ground appearance, much of the year, is of a wide and shallow wash.
- The approach to the mission is along the narrow two-lane Fort Ramie Road. A small olive tree orchard, modern concrete block "slumpstone" wall, wood signage, and an el Camino Real mission bell<sup>1</sup> announce one's arrival at the site. The walls and "Soledad Mission" signs are symmetrically placed. The sections of walls end at square concrete block posts that support iron gates. As one approaches the gates, an additional wood "welcome" sign is located to the right.

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<sup>1</sup> Cast iron El Camino Real bells, hung from shepherd's hook posts, were originally installed as historical markers along the Mission route in the early 1900s. Since then many have been replaced, and additional bells have been along the route. Source: CAHighways.org, accessed July 12, 2012

Plants grouped at the entry include *Juniperus* (juniper), and *Carpobrotus chilensis* (ice plant). On entering the site, one travels approximately 125 yards along the asphalt driveway, parallel to a fence and tree line, before reaching the back corner of the mission chapel. At this point the drive widens out into a broad, roughly triangular, gravel parking area, and one needs to continue along this driveway to reach the front of the mission, which faces away from Fort Ramie Road. According to drawings housed at the mission, this approach from the north east is opposite the historical approach. The missions were connected by the El Camino Real road which, at Mission Soledad, passed on the southwest side through what is still agricultural land. This historical approach would have brought a traveler to the chapel front.

The asphalt drive continues to a contemporary concrete block bathroom and a metal storage building before curving to meet a large asphalt area in front of the mission buildings. The road also provides access to a trailer that houses the caretaker's family, as well as a covered picnic area, and large, roofed concrete - block barbeque pit with grill.

This south and east edge contains a variety of plants, including a large *Pinus* (pine), *Phoenix canariensis* (date palm), *Washingtonia filifera* (California fan palm) and various *Juniperus* (juniper). A tall hedge of *Prunus* shrubs (laurel) fronted by *Agapanthus africanus* (lily-of-the-Nile) marks the eastern terminus of the parking area. Other plants include *Lobularia maritima* (sweet alyssum), and *Centranthus ruber* (Jupiter's beard), the California native *Eschscholzia californica* (California poppy), roses and *Hedera helix* (ivy). Objects in this area include a wood flagpole, picnic tables, a stone bench, a wood chair, a Colonial-style lamp on a metal post, and garbage cans. In the far southeast corner is a large wooden cross, a statue of a Franciscan padre, and curved plantings edged with stones. The plantings include, palm trees, pines, Lily-of-the-Nile, sweet alyssum, California poppy and also *Lavandula* (Lavander) and Italian Cypress (*Cupressus sempervirens*).

The existing buildings consist of a chapel and the Padre's Wing, across from which are located the contemporary support buildings. Behind the Padre's Wing are the exposed foundation walls of the original mission buildings. The Padre's Wing is canted slightly, about 22 degrees from east to west, and the Chapel is at 90 degrees to it. The chapel is forward of the wing, and faces roughly southwest. The arrangement creates two sides of an entry garden. The front of the Padre's Wing, facing the garden, has a covered arcade which contains benches, potted plants, and hanging planted baskets.

The front garden is split by the slightly curving, asphalt entry path. The path leads to the gift store entrance, and creates two sections of garden. The path and the planting areas are bordered by a row of stones placed on the ground. The western section of garden consists of roses, a replica of the original mission bell

(mounted on a wood frame), citrus trees, lily-of-the-Nile, California fan palm, and scattered annual flowers such as sweet alyssum, Jupiter's beard, and the California native California poppy. A concrete birdbath on which rests a statue of Saint Francis is located in the approximate center of this planting area.

The eastern section of the front garden is larger, and is mostly well-tended lawn bordered along the drive by stones and evenly-spaced tree roses. The lawn extends from the rose border to the arcade. The section of the entry path is bordered by additional citrus trees, Jupiter's beard, and two palm trees; one date palm and one California fan palm. An additional fan palm is located in the lawn, next to the arcade. At the southeastern end of the lawn is an arched metal trellis, planted with roses, beneath which sits a very large metal kettle or bowl. Adjacent is a wooden sign with the words, "Soledad Mission, Founded Oct. 9, 1971, Restoration Oct 9, 1955". Behind this, across the path to the mission quadrangle, is a pair of concrete benches on a concrete pad and a metal memorial plaque mounted on a concrete base. The plaque reads "In Memory of Rose Rhyner, Dec. 27, 1890 – Jan. 4, 1976, Dedicated Native Daughter, Member of the Grand Parlor, Mission Soledad Restoration committee, Native Daughters of the Golden West, and Benefactor of this Mission."

Behind the wing and chapel are the decayed remains of many of the original mission structures, which are roughly parallel and perpendicular to the existing buildings. These remains and the wing delineate what had been the inner quadrangle. Beyond the final line of building foundation is the olive orchard, laid out parallel to the Padre's Wing. Access from the extant buildings to this area is along either side of the chapel/museum complex.

This space has not received the extensive garden treatment common to many other missions. The badly decayed remnant walls that form the north and east perimeter have been eroding back to the soil; the walls are a few feet tall in places and almost imperceptible in other sections. The tops of the walls are softly rounded. In conjunction with these remnants are scattered stones, often stacked and occurring in rough lines that appear intentionally placed; however, given the history of site modifications, it's difficult to know if these stones are in, or near, their original location.

The extant walls and areas near them are the subject of ongoing archeological excavations, and work areas are delineated with simple fencing consisting of peeler-core posts and wire. The ground plane is predominantly native soil, sandy and dun-colored, with few low weedy grasses and forbs. It is generally level. A few wooden signs identify features such as the site of the original church, Indian workshops, Carpenter shop, etc.

Roughly in the center of the space is an octagonal fountain of concrete block slumpstone, approximately 4' tall by 14' wide, with a thin, red brick tile cap.

Stacked stones rise from the center of the fountain, on top of which is a bubbler. Water lilies dot the water. A brass plaque on the side facing the museum indicates the fountain was dedicated by the Mission Soledad Restoration Committee, Grand Parlor, N.D.G.W., on September 27, 1975.

The fountain is surrounded by an exposed aggregate concrete path, also octagonal in form. A pair of curving, exposed aggregate, concrete paths are symmetrically placed from the fountain to each side of the chapel and museum building complex. Along the eastern path is also located a sundial on an exposed aggregate stand, offset from the main path and surrounded by a pink-stained concrete access path. Nearby are two signs indicating gravesites for Jose Joaquin de Arrillaga and Padre Florencio Ibanez; the signs are painted wood with incised lettering which is painted white. In front of each sign is a concrete pad. De Arrillaga was buried beneath the floor of the original church; the church is no longer extant.

Near the southern terminus of each path, near the back of the mission museum building, are small groups of trees; two *Olea europaea* (olive) to the east and two olives plus an *Eriobotrya* (loquat) tree to the west.

Between the fountain and the northern walls remnants occurs a group of trees, three olive, two *Eucalyptus*, one *Quercus agrifolia* (coast live oak), and a loquat. They were placed roughly parallel to the mission walls, but are not otherwise regularly placed.

The western border is defined by a row of very old grape vines. These are grown against a barbed wire fence with irregularly placed wood posts. On the day of the site visit, cars were parked along this edge. Beyond this border is the wide entry drive.

Behind the remnant northern walls is another section of wire fencing. Beyond that fence is the recently planted olive orchard. According to a volunteer at the mission, who declined to give her name, the orchard was planted in 2002.

According to the mission guest brochure, the trees were grown  
*with cuttings taken from 200 year old trees that were once part of Mission La Purisima Concepcion in Lompoc. While not native to the Mission, the oil from these olives has been and will be used to supply the Monterey Diocese with oil for sacraments.*

2012 was the first year the olive orchard produced enough oil to bottle some for sale in the mission museum gift store.

Two volunteers, who declined to be identified, were interviewed during the site visit of April 29, 2012. They said the site has a good well, and that the landscape planting and maintenance is done by volunteers and the caretaker and his family.

History: The mission was founded in October 1791, reached its peak population in 1804, and was secularized in 1834. The original mission name is La Misión de María Santísima, Nuestra Señora Dolorosísima de la Soledad, translated as The Mission of Mary Most Holy, Our Most Sorrowful Lady of Solitude. Crops grown by Mission Soledad were wheat, barley, corn, beans and peas; however, it was in the lower one third of productive missions. Lands owned by the mission were extensive and included a large vineyard and orchard, as well as three outlying cattle and sheep ranches. The native Americans brought into the mission were primarily the Chalon, Esselen and Yokut peoples. One significant event was the death of the Spanish Governor José Joaquín de Arrillaga who died on July 24, 1814 while visiting the mission and was buried in the then extant chapel.

The mission was considered a hard-luck assignment, being hot and windy in summer, and cold, wet and windy in winter. The site often flooded, one flood destroyed the original church in 1824. In 1832 floods ruined the chapel. Early drawings show flat lands with scattered low shrubs and very few trees.

Official record keeping was halted during the 1834 secularization; apparently Padre Vincente Francisco de Sarria continued to serve, dying in May 1835, after falling at the altar during mass.

After secularization the mission functioned as a ranch house and was later abandoned for over 100 years resulting in significant deterioration of the adobe structures as evidenced by historical drawings and photographs. Roof tiles were sold in 1846 to help settle Mexican debts. With roofs gone, the adobe walls crumbled under the exposure to the weather. In 1859 the mission was returned to the Catholic Church.

In 1935, the Daughters of the Golden West undertook fundraising for restoration/reconstruction of the mission, completing the chapel in 1955, and the *convento* or Padre's wing, now the museum, in 1963. These are the two wings still in existence, the remainder of the mission being the deteriorating wall remnants described above. During reconstruction some mission complex walls were bulldozed. The mission caretaker also removed earth and artifacts, using a backhoe and shovel. A hand-dug aqueduct 15 miles long to irrigate approximately 20,000 acres of surrounding mission lands was discovered by archaeologists from CSU Monterey Bay in 2007. The chapel still functions as a Catholic parish church of the Diocese of Monterey and sits on a 15.2 acre parcel of land. The Mission is listed on the California Historic Landmarks #233.

Sources: **Maps and Images**  
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"Nuestra Senora de la Soledad." California Missions Resource Center. <http://www.missionscalifornia.com/keyfacts/soledad-mission.html>. Accessed June 23, 2012.

"Welcome to the Soledad Mission." Brochure. Provided at museum gift store. No author, no date.

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July 27, 2012



Front of Mission chapel, parking lot to the left , Padre's wing to the right.  
(S. Raube, April, 28, 2012)



Front of Mission chapel and entry garden. The el Camino Real bell is located to the left. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Front of Padre's wing with entry garden lawn, barbeque and picnic shelters in the background. Agricultural lands surround the mission. El Camino Real would have been in the nearest fields.(S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Padre's wing. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Rear of Padre's wing with olive trees.(S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Rear of Padre's wing with olive and loquat trees. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Commemerative fountain. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Original mission quadrangle area, adobe wall remnants in background.  
View to east. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Remains of mission walls with archeology work underway. View to south.  
(S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Old grape vines along driveway. Rear of chapel and museum are visible.  
(S. Raube, April 28, 2012)



Driveway with new olive orchard. (S. Raube, April 28, 2012)