

MISSION SAN DIEGO DE ALCALA
(Mother of the Alta California Missions)
10818 San Diego Mission Road
San Diego
San Diego County
California

HALS CA-81
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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

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Location: 10818 San Diego Mission Road, San Diego, California
(Bounded by Mission Road, Mission Gorge Road, and Friars Road; just east of Interstate 5)

Latitude 32.784583, Longitude -117.105864 (Fountain in the center of the quadrangle, Google Earth, Simple Cylindrical Projection, WGS84)

Significance: Mission San Diego was the first of 21 missions in the state of California; founded by the Franciscan Order, lead by Father Junipero Serra. Founded on July 16th, 1769 by Fr. Serra himself, Mission San Diego de Alcala marks the birthplace of Christianity in California, and thus is referred to as the “Mother of the Missions”. The mission was made a minor basilica in 1976 by Pope Paul VI. In addition, the first known Christian martyr in California, Fr. Luis Jayme, is buried in the main sanctuary of the Church.

Description: The present Mission of San Diego de Alcala is the 5th in the history of the mission, four of which were on the mission’s present site. Today it is a parish church and under the auspice of he Diocese of San Diego, and therefore is no longer staffed by the Franciscan order that founded the original mission in 1769.

Only a few elements of the present mission building are from the original mission built on this site in 1774: the façade of the mission Church, the base of the *campanario* and one room of convent. One of the bells in the tower, named *Mater Doloroso*, which was cast in New Spain in the early mission period and is the most original of the five bells, is rung daily for the Angelus and masses. The 46-foot *campanario* was restored with the rest of the mission in the 1930s and today all 5 bells ring only one time a year—on July 16th, the birthday of the mission.

This forth and final reconstruction of the Mission Church took place in the 1930s. Great efforts were made to reproduce the same exterior and interior lines of the original Church, and today the Church itself is 150 feet long and 35 feet wide, with a ceiling 29 feet high; the Church itself stands 35 feet above the main road level. Today the structure is reinforced concrete, but pains have been taken to restore the Church as close as possible to the building’s original character: the decorative and adobe tiles within the Church are reproduction of the originals, hand sown timbers and lentils make up the roof, and wrought iron hardware is of the style of the Mission era.

One may enter Mission San Diego de Alcala through the main door of the Church or through the cemetery courtyard. The quadrangular cemetery courtyard, reconstructed in the 1931 renovation, is attached to the northwest side of the Mission Church and is perhaps the oldest gravesite in California. Though no graves remain intact today, several adobe and tile crosses signify the burial spot of hundreds of Indians who were buried at the Mission site, which was the custom among the Missions. The courtyard has an adobe stairway which leads to the *campanario*. The courtyard is filled with plants both native and non native: aloe tree from Africa, potato trees, *pittosporum tabira* from Japan, bougainvillea, agapanthus, hibiscus, as well as succulents and other flowering plants and trees. There are two statues in the Cemetery Courtyard: one of St. Joseph, Fr. Serra's patron, and one of Fr. Serra himself, donated by the Hannon Foundation.

Leaving the Cemetery to the northeast, one enters a large patio with a hexagonal fountain at its center. Though the fountain was not original to the mission, it was the possible site of the cistern that brought water to the Mission from the Mission Dam. The four walls that surround the quadrangle patio replicate the living and work quarters and working rooms of the padres and Indians. In the northeast corner is the entrance to the Mission Museum which contains pictures and artifact from the present site of the mission. Next to the museum is the Bernardine Chapel constructed in 1977. Outside above the main door are four alcoves containing statues of St. Frances, Padre Serra, Padre Jayme and St. Didacus. The chapel's choir is from Spain and the tile floor from the Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. In the southwest corner of the quadrangle lies an open excavation site, begun by students at the University of San Diego 1966. The site is believed to be the part of the Mission's *convento* where visitors to the monastery stayed, as well as a great room, *la sala*, where the padres met.

To the right of the excavation site is the convent, believed to be the living quarters of Fr. Serra himself at one time. Originally constructed in the late 1700s, the adobe walls and wooden beams are still visible and believed to be one of the only parts of the mission which survived the Indian attack, earthquake, and military occupation of the Mission. The room is staged today with the necessary elements of the missionary's room—bed, desk, loft where the second of the two padres of the mission would sleep.

And finally, the Church itself was restored in the dimensions of the Church built in 1813, before the military occupation (during which the interior of the Church was used for stables and a second level was added for the army's barracks.) The Church's nave is long and narrow, dictated by the length of trees accessible to the padres. The original materials in the Mission Church itself are the wooden beams over the doorway, the adobe bricks in the

baptistery arch, and the dark floor tiles made by the padres and the Indians. The wood in the rafters in the roof was reinforced in 2010 by drilling and inserting threaded stainless steel rods into wooden poles. Though no documentation of what the original sanctuary looked like exists, and because many of the interior decorations were destroyed in the fire, or looted, it is hard to know what the original Church looked like. However, small statues of Jesus, the Blessed Mother, St. Joseph, St. Ann, and Our Lady of the Assumption in the reredos are believed to be of the early Mission period. The reredos in the back of the sanctuary repeat the design of the exterior of the facade. The reredo was made in Mexico and dedicated to the late J. John Sashin, Esq. To the right of the alter, in the tiled floor, is a marble cross marking the burial spot of 5 padres who are buried in the main sanctuary of the Church: Padre Juan Figuar (1784) Padre Juan Mariner (1800), Padre Jose Panto (1812), Padre Fernando Martin (1838), and Padre Luis Jayme, California's first martyr (1775). To the right of the main sanctuary is a canopy, signifying that the Church was made a Basilica, as well as a painting of St. Didacus, dated 1775.

At the back of the Church is the choir loft, which is entered from the outside. Under the loft are the front doors to the Church, hand-carved replicas of the original doors. The baptismal font is a replica of that used on Majorca to baptize Blessed Serra himself, and the image of St. Anne above the font is the oldest wood carving in the mission. A picture of St. Agnus in the back of the Church near the Confessional is also traced to 16th century Spanish artistry.

History: Mission San Diego di Alcala' was founded on the 16th of July 1769 by Fr. Serra near the Presidio, near the Bay of San Diego. The Mission was named after *San Didacus (Diego) de Alcala*, a Spanish saint from Seville who lived and austere and holy life in the 15th century. The Spanish explorer Sebastian Vizcaino entered what is now the San Diego Bay in 1602 and named it after St. Didacus de Alcala—which was also the name of his flagship—the day before the saint's feast day. Fr. Serra, along with Padres Juan Vizcaino and Fernando Parron, arrived in San Diego in 1769 and immediately began preparations for a Mission. The site chosen was near a Cosoy Indian site, overlooking the Bay.

In 1774, Fr. Louis Jayme acquired permission to move the Mission six miles northeast of the Presidio, near the village of Nipaguay. The Mission site was changed due to a poor water source by the Bay, poor soil, as well as continual conflict between the colonizers and the neophyte Indians. (One skirmish between the two left three Indians and three colonizers dead). The Indians who lived near the Mission site were Kumeyaay, or sometimes referred to as Diegueno or Mission Indians.

Primary source literature makes clear that Indians who lived at the mission did so voluntarily. Mission San Diego de Alcala was very poor in resources, and documents show that the Indians took turns living in the nearby village and

living in the Mission. On November 4th, 1775, however, the mission was attacked by a large group of disgruntled Indians who burned the Church, guard house and living quarters. Fr. Luis Jayme, pastor, awakened by the ruckus, was beaten and killed by the Indians just south of the main church. The place of his martyrdom is marked by a pathway leading to a cross. Fr. Jayme is buried in the sanctuary of the Church and his grave visible, to the right of the alter. Two others were killed that night: Urselino the Mission carpenter and Jose Romero, the blacksmith.

Fr. Serra returned to the Mission to rebuild it, completing the work in 1776. Another reconstruction and enlargement of the Mission took place in 1780s. In that period the Church was enlarged and 3 foot adobe walls were put into place, a tulle and poles roof with earthen cover was installed, and the Mission developed its quadrangle shape. 1808 a third Church was constructed due to damage incurred by an earthquake in 1803. Following the earthquake, the buttresses, now visible to the Mission Church, were added.

Despite the arid land and small number of laborers, the Mission was very prosperous. It is recorded that at its peak production in 1797 the Mission was farming 50,000 acres of wheat, corn, barley and beans. In addition, the livestock numbered in the tens of thousands.

Mexico secularized the Missions after gaining independence from Spain in 1821. Mission San Diego de Alcala was given over to Santiago Arguello in 1846, and one year later the US Cavalry occupied the Mission grounds, remaining there until 1857. Reports from that period note that this occupation greatly altered the Mission, as crumbling walls were removed and some buildings were demolished altogether.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln reinstated the Mission territories into to the hands of the Catholic Church, but by that time Mission San Diego was in great disrepair. Franciscan Father Anthony Ubach began restoration of the Mission and started a Mission school on the site, which was later taken over in 1892 by the Sisters of the Carondole. That Mission school has since moved to Banning California and today the Nazareth School thrives on the Mission property, under the auspice of the Diocese of San Diego. The school, north of the Mission complex and is run by the Sisters of the Nazarene.

This final grand restoration of the Mission under Fr. Ubach began in 1890s, and continued past his death in 1909. This final part of restoration took place under the direction of Archbishop Cantwell of Los Angeles and chief restorer J. Marshall Miller. The Mission was rededicated in 1931, just in time for the World's Fair held in San Diego.

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Mission San Diego de Alcalá's website:

missionsandiego.com/mission_history.htm

Mission Tour: <http://www.missiontour.org/sandiego/index.htm>

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July 31, 2012



The façade, *campanario*, and buttress of Mission San Diego de Alcalá. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The Cemetery quadrangle with view of statue of St. Joseph, patron of Fr. Serra and the missions, as well of several adobe crosses. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



One of the crosses commemorating the site where hundreds of Indians were laid to rest during the Mission era. Several of such crosses lie in the Cemetery; all made of the original Mission adobe. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



Stairwell leading to the 5-belled *campanario*. The bell on the bottom right is the most original mission bell, *Mater Dolorosa*. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The mission bell, *Mater Dolorosa*, is the only bell still rung by hand, daily. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



From the nave of the Mission Church the chancel, reredos, statuary, canopy, altar and retrofitted ceiling appear to be in excellent condition. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



A closer view of the chancel and reredos with 18th c. statuary of St. Joseph (left) the Blessed Mother (right), and the Madonna and Child (over the tabernacle) from 19th c. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The marble cross in the chancel, to the right of the altar, marks the burial spot of five padres who led the mission and are buried in the chancel. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The Bernardine Chapel, added to the Mission in 1977. The choir and alter were both sent from Spain and the floor is from the Basilica of our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The hexagonal fountain in the middle of the quadrangular courtyard is not an original piece of the Mission, but possibly the site of the early cistern which brought water from the Mission Dam to the Mission. (Holly Peterson, 12 July 2012)



View of the excavation site from the front façade of what was once the convent and *la sala*. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012).



The excavation of the original convent on the south end of the mission quadrangle. Begun in 1966 by the University of San Diego, this excavation site is occasionally active today. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The site where Fr. Luis Jayme was killed by Indians who attacked the Mission on the night of 5 November 1775. Fr. Jayme was 35 years old and believed to be the first Christian martyr in California; in the only mission in California that was ever attacked by Indians. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



The convent where Fr. Serra was believed to have lived for a period, along with Mission Padres Laseun and Fuste, who joined Serra in the period after Fr. Jayme's martyrdom. This is one of the few rooms from the original mission that survived fire, earthquake and military occupation. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)



Mission San Diego de Alcalá is one of the small white spots just above where the three freeways intersect. A 1936 HABS photograph taken of the Mission from about the same spot shows only the Mission surrounded by agricultural development. This photo illustrates the phenomenon seen with most of the California missions—they became the centers of cities. (Holly Peterson, 18 July 2012)