CONVERT MISSION:

EXCHANGE AND ENCOUNTER AT SAN CARLOS BORROMEOM DE CARMELO

Jaimee Prado
Senior Division
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In 1770, Father Junipero Serra founded the most influential Catholic mission to the state of California. Under his leadership, Mission San Carlos Borromeo from 1770-1784 became a site bursting with cultural exchanges and encounters among the clergy, the government, and the Native American tribes of the region. The interactions among these groups at Mission San Carlos Borromeo were the driving forces behind the establishment of early California, making San Carlos, or the Carmel Mission, a crucial stepping stone to the Spanish settlement of California.

Catholic missionaries were sent to settle, establish, and convert the natives of the new Spanish colonies of Baja and Alta California. Under Fray Junipero Serra, a Spanish friar living in Mexico City, the Franciscans were sent to California.¹ Serra’s original assignment was in Baja California, now part of Mexico, but by October 1768, his orders were to establish missions in Alta California, the area of the present day state. In 1770, Fr. Junipero Serra and Captain Gaspar de Portola, California’s governor, set out to establish a mission and presidio in Monterey. Mission San Carlos Borromeo and the Spanish presidio were founded on June 3, 1770, making it the second Alta California mission founded after Mission San Diego.

According to Serra, it was “called ‘San Carlos de Monterey’ as arranged by the Most Illustrious Inspector General [Portola] in honor of our Catholic Monarch [King Carlos III of Spain] and the present viceroy [Carlos Francisco de Croix].”² As the “Father-President,”³ or leader of the Alta California Missions, Fr. Serra established his headquarters at Carmel, while Pedro Fages, the first lieutenant-governor of Alta California, settled at the Monterey presidio.

San Carlos’ first few years were difficult. The missionaries converted few Native Americans during the first year. San Carlos struggled in growing crops and obtaining resources such as clothing, beads, blankets, provisions, and Catholic items for conversion and administering the sacraments. Without these resources, the padres had no gifts to attract more Indians, who often only came to the mission to receive these presents. In this early time, “had [the Indians] joined the mission and depended upon it for food, they would have starved.”4 Just a few months after establishing the mission, Fr. Junipero Serra received approval from the viceroy to relocate the mission to the Carmel Valley.

Fr. Serra had several reasons for the mission’s relocation. First, few Indians lived around Monterey Bay, whereas more were settled around the Carmel Valley. Second, presidio soldiers mistreated the few Native Americans at Monterey, causing them to fear the padres and their efforts to convert them. Finally, fresh water in the Carmel Valley made the region better suited for agriculture. Fr. Serra wrote that the “move [to] the mission…to the banks of Carmel…[was] truly a delightful spot…thanks to its plentiful supply both of land and water, [and] gives promise of abundant harvests.”5 Relocation to the mission at the Carmel Valley occurred on December 24, 1771 and by the year’s end the priests had baptized twenty-two Indians.6

The two main tribes at the mission were the Rumsen and Esselen. Both groups were found to be relatively peaceful. Pedro Fages recorded that “the new Christians assist with punctuality at Mass and doctrine, and the natives…are accustomed to frequent the mission with much

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tranquility,” while Serra wrote that “the gentiles still continue to be as docile as ever, without any outbreaks,” unlike the violent outbreaks that occurred at the San Gabriel and San Diego missions in 1771 and 1775.

The Rumsen and Esselen lived in “stable communities for much of the year, but also maintained smaller satellite workstations,” and moved around according to the seasons. The traditional attire of these native women was an apron made of chords with a deer skin cloak in cooler weather, while girls ages nine to fourteen wore simple girdles. Men were typically naked, or had a hip-length cloak in the winter, while children were also naked. Traditional jobs for women included weaving reed baskets and gathering berries, fruits, and seeds. Men constructed bows and arrows to be used for hunting and fishing.

The padres’ conversion work thrived following the establishment of the newly relocated mission. Native Americans occasionally came to the mission on their own, as they were typically gifted clothes or blankets as incentives to bring their children for baptism. The Native Americans also came to the mission for protection. Pedro Fages wrote that “They [the Indians] like the Spaniards very much, and accept shelter and protection among them, which they absolutely need,” as “before the founding of the presidio at San Carlos…they were in continual war [with neighboring nations]…much is avoided with the new settlement [the Mission].” Tribes of the mountains had persecuted the natives of the area, and as many of

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7 Pedro Fages, *The Fages Diary of 1775*, ed. by May Helen Van Gulpen (1911), 117.
10 Ibid, 218
11 Ibid, 211
13 Ibid, 117
natives moved to the mission, the persecution gradually ceased. Fages hypothesized that “the fear that [our] weapons might aid those that are now our friends [the Indians]”\textsuperscript{14} was the reason for this decrease. This important point shows how the natives became dependent on the missions for their safety, and how this cultural exchange with the Spanish benefitted their wellbeing.

The biggest challenge the padres faced was overcoming the language barrier, but with the help of interpreters, the padres learned some of the native dialect and children learned some Spanish, which assisted the conversion process. When a family came to the mission for baptism, they would either reside at the mission or leave the child with the priests to be brought up Catholic under the Mission’s supervision.\textsuperscript{15} In working with these Indians, the padres learned to undertake a different style of conversion than what was typical of the time period. Instead of “arguing logically,…conversion involved forming a personal connection…gaining their trust, building something new or on top of indigenous practices, and offering material benefits.”\textsuperscript{16} For those past eight-year-olds to be baptized, simple children’s catechetical lessons were taught to all, often using religious paintings, as to have a “basic comprehension of the Catholicism [before Baptism].”\textsuperscript{17} When the natives were baptized, Fr. Serra granted them their own unique Spanish name, usually that of a saint or another Catholic figure. However, many of these neophytes used their traditional names while “some were even unaware of the name Serra had given them.”\textsuperscript{18}

While living at the mission, the Indians exchanged aspects of their traditional lifestyle for that of the Spanish. Women now wore skirts with cloth shirts, while girls continued wearing

\textsuperscript{14} Pedro Fages, \textit{The Fages Diary of 1775}, ed. by May Helen Van Gulpen (1911), 118
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., s 46
\textsuperscript{16} Steven Hackel, \textit{Junipero Serra: California’s Founding Father} (New York: Hill and Wang, 2014), 63-64.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid, 177
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 222
their traditional girdles. Men wore a breech cloth with their traditional cloaks, while children remained naked. Jobs around the mission included “farmers, shepherds, gardeners, harvesters, and diggers,”19 while “several Indians had developed into first rate vaqueros (cowboys).”20 By 1783, “some Indians [were found] tilling their own little plots of land”21 at their settlements around the mission.

Daily mass and religious education was mandatory, and the neophytes were required to follow Catholic teachings on sexuality, marriage, and divorce. Those who violated these teachings or mission rules were whipped by the soldiers as commanded by the padres, while existing marriages were blessed by the priests. The natives at San Carlos only left the mission for about two weeks each year,22 if they obtained special permission. The neophytes who fled the mission were sought after and upon their return received corporal punishment or imprisonment. On the padres’ command, the soldiers flogged the disobedient. This controversial act did not originate with the California padres, but was taken from earlier missionaries. In a letter to California’s governor, Fr. Junipero Serra’s justified corporal punishment as follows:

“That spiritual fathers should punish their sons, the Indians, with blows appears to be as old as the conquest of [the Americas]; so general in fact that the saints do not seem to be any exception to the rule…In the life of St. Francis Solano…when they failed to carry out his orders, he gave directions for his Indians to be whipped.”23

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20 *Ibid.*, 106
21 *Ibid.*, 106
Nevertheless, the Indians were able to bring some aspects of their culture to mission life. San Carlos’ Indians chose to live in villages of traditional straw huts right outside the mission instead of in the mission’s adobe buildings. They occasionally wore their native celebratory attire to entertain visitors with dances, and on the feast day of St. Carlos, the neophytes were allowed to celebrate with traditional songs and dance. They were permitted to perform traditional routines, such as gathering sardines at the shore in late summer and venturing out to hunt and gather animals and plants, which were “important for cultural and religious practices.” These traditional food collections were tolerated by the padres as they were often beneficial to the mission, especially in times of food shortages.

Although the Native American lifestyle changed over the course of the missionary period, life at the mission served as a transition for the Indians as Spanish rule continued to spread across their native land. Even though many died from disease and native cultural aspects faded, they became accustomed to the Spanish way of life, from religious customs to food production. However, this exchange between the padres and Indians led to conflicts with California’s government.

As the headquarters of the Father-President and the governor of California, crucial government encounters occurred at the mission and the Monterey presidio. The first governmental authority was the Mexican viceroy, Carlos Francisco de Croix, who commissioned the settlement of the Alta California. In 1771, the viceroy became Antonio Maria de Bucareli de Ursua. Both men were staunch supporters of Junipero Serra and the missions, sending supply ships to Monterey and intervening on Serra’s behalf in conflicts with

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25 Ibid, 84.
California’s government. Junipero Serra’s interaction with Alta California’s early government was a large contrast to his interactions with the viceroy. As the figure of the Church, Junipero Serra clashed with the figures of state in early California, particularly regarding religious authority.

Pedro Fages, the first lieutenant governor, had a tumultuous relationship with Fr. Serra. They constantly argued about the establishment of other missions, Serra’s requests for more soldiers for the missions, and the discipline of Indians only by Fages’ authorization. Fr. Serra objected to Fages’ involvement in missions and authority over the Indians, but “Fages believed that [Serra]… if left to his own devices, would punish the Indians arbitrarily and put soldiers in harm’s way.”

Eventually, “Fr. Serra came to realize that if the California missions were to succeed the respective rights of the Church and Military had to be defined.” At his headquarters, Serra compiled a list of complaints and suggestions for Bucareli, the viceroy, regarding Fages and governmental authority. Fr. Serra emerged victorious as Fages was replaced, issues surrounding soldiers for missions were resolved, and the padres’ authority over the Natives was affirmed: “the training, governance, punishment, and upbringing of the baptized Indians, and those who will be baptized, pertain exclusively to the missionary fathers, the only exception being for crimes of violence.”

Don Fernando Rivera y Moncada became Fages’ replacement as the captain commander in 1775 after the California government was reorganized. He had “jurisdiction over the territory covered by the Franciscan missions,” therefore, the missions could only rely on the viceroy

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26 Ibid, 186.
27 James Culleton, Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey (Fresno, California: Academy of California Church History, 1950), 54.
29 James Culleton, Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey (Fresno, California: Academy of California Church History, 1950), 62.
for provisions, so Serra couldn’t expect aid from the viceroy against the California government. Rivera y Moncada and Serra constantly clashed over the need for soldiers at the missions and the establishment of the San Francisco Bay missions.

Don Felipe Neve became the Governor of California in 1777, the year Monterey became California’s capital. Serra experienced a different conflict with Neve than his predecessors, as Neve challenged the role of missionaries in the region, limiting their “rule” over the Indians. Neve saw the padres’ authority over the Native Americans as “oppressive… that it ‘rendered the Indians’ fate worse than slaves’.” He attempted to “implement the imperial policy of assimilating Indians into the Spanish political system,” giving them rights and authority. The missionary padres were ordered to “allow Indians in the oldest missions to begin electing their own municipal officials” in 1778. Two alcaldes, who had the “functions of chief” and two regidores, who served as “counselors” were ordered to be elected for San Carlos. These Indian officials “served as intermediaries between the Franciscans and Indians.” The alcaldes and regidores monitored and instructed the other Indians’ work, at times “decided how to allocate the missions’ food and labor” after consulting with the padres, worked as interpreters, and participated as witnesses and sponsors in the Catholic sacraments. These elections challenged the authority of the padres at San Carlos, especially in the case of the first alcalde, Baltazar. His poor behavior set a negative example to the other Indians as his position allowed him “to be exempt from punishment and the jurisdiction of the fathers.” Eventually, the padres were able

31 James Culleton, Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey (Fresno, California: Academy of California Church History, 1950), 88.
32 Ibid, 89
33 Ibid, 214
34 Steven Hackel, Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis (University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 2005), 241.
35 Ibid, 244
36 Ibid, 88
to have a say in which Native Americans were nominated, and these nominees were usually former tribe leaders or the best Spanish speakers.

A total of 969 Indians were baptized from 1770 to Fr. Serra’s death on August 28, 1784 at the mission. After Fr. Junipero Serra’s death, Fr. Fermin Francisco Lasuen, the new Father-President, maintained San Carlos as the headquarters for the Alta California missions. As the Father President’s headquarters, the Carmel Mission was a key component of early California history. Fr. Junipero Serra’s interaction with the Monterey Indians prepared him to work with the other Native Americans at the eight other California missions he established over the years. It was Fr. Serra’s first-hand experiences with the soldiers and Indians at San Carlos that fueled his drive to challenge California’s government. Lastly, with Neve’s decree, select Indians were granted rights and authority for the first time, a privilege granted in the early days only to the neophytes at the oldest missions. This exchange and encounter among the clergy, government, and Native Americans made Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo the epicenter for spiritual and governmental matters in Alta California, making it a crucial piece to the backbone of Early California.
Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

This primary source was the diary of Pedro Fages, the first lieutenant-governor of California. From his firsthand account, I learned about the behavior of the Native Americans, and found how they benefitted from living at the mission because of the protection they received.

This primary source consisted of a variety of Junipero Serra’s letters, mostly to the padres in Mexico. From this, I learned about Serra’s personal experience in the move to the Carmel Valley, the Native Americans’ behavior, and why the mission was named San Carlos Borromeo.

Secondary Sources

From this website, I obtained information regarding the establishment of the presidio and mission’s original site at the Monterey Bay. This source explained the earlier aspect of the founding of San Carlos Borromeo, discussing Junipero Serra’s journey from San Diego to the Monterey Bay.

This website gave me a brief summary of the mission at its original location in Monterey and the relocation to the Carmel Valley. Using this as a guideline, I used both primary and secondary sources to expand on the points this website gave.

This website contained general information about the Carmel Mission from its establishment to the restoration efforts in the 1880s. It also discussed the architecture of the mission. After reading through the site, I realized that I had to narrow the time period my paper focused on in, otherwise it would move into the restoration process.

This book was the second most used source for this paper. I learned specific details about the Rumsen and Esselen tribes, including their traditional clothing and jobs. It was also from this source that I learned about Neve’s decree that the Native Americans at the oldest missions be elected for certain positions in government. Because this book was organized chronologically, I was able to use it to decide the specific dates that I wanted to narrow my paper down to.


I used this website to learn about the voyage of Gaspar de Portola and Junipero Serra from San Diego to the Monterey Bay. It described the exploration aspect of the founding of the mission and contained most of the same information as the books I used.


This book was used for more in-depth research on the interaction between the Native Americans and the clergy. It included more particular details on Indian life at the mission, the roles of the elected Indian officials after Neve’s decree, and how often they left the mission. It contained a lot of information specific to San Carlos, as the mission was often used as an example when a point was discussed.


This biography of Junipero Serra was the main source of information that I used for this paper. It contained a vast amount of detail on Junipero Serra, the missions, and the life of the Native Americans at the missions in general. A majority of the information I used on the Mexican viceroy, California’s early government figures and Fr. Serra’s encounter with them were taken from this book.


This is the mission’s official website, and it gave a short summary of the mission’s history. I used this to cross reference with other websites to ensure accuracy and to mentally organize the sequence of events.


This website focused on life at the relocated mission at Carmel. Using the bibliography of this website, I obtained the book *Indians and Pioneers of Old Monterey* by James Culleton to use as one of my sources.

This website was the first source I used, as it gave brief facts about the founding of the Mission and the Native Americans found there, along with other general information. I used this site primarily to familiarize myself with the topic and used other sources to expand upon the information.


This scholarly article was primarily used to touch upon the controversy surrounding Junipero Serra and the corporal punishment of the Native Americans. I used a quote from this article, which was taken from Junipero Serra’s writing, to address Serra’s view on the topic.


This website gave a short synopsis of Junipero Serra’s life, from his birth in Spain to his death at Carmel. From this website I found that the Franciscans were sent to Alta California under Spanish command to build missions in order to convert the Indians there and settle and establish the region.