



California State Parks Video Transcript



San Juan Bautista: The Early Years

It is hard to imagine the Valley of San Juan as a marsh; the game was so abundant as to awe the most seasoned of explorers. Flocks of geese and ducks were so enormous that a single rifle shot would put birds to flight, darken the skies, and put up a noise that was like a hurricane. There is nothing left of the herds of deer and antelope, gone are the bears and foxes, and there is almost nothing remaining of the Ohlone civilization.

There were once about ten-thousand Native Americans living between San Juan Bautista and San Francisco. That was long before the first Spanish explorer came to California in search of the Seven Cities of Gold. They never found them, nor did they find a safe harbor for the Philippine trade one-hundred years later. Alta California was to remain the distant back area to the great Spanish Empire until the 18th century.

When Spain returned this time to secure its frontiers from English and Russian expansion, a priest, Father Juan Crespi, travelling with the Pedro Fajes expedition in 1772, made notes in his journal of the Valley of San Juan. He described it as a flat grassy plain spotted with marshy lagoons. There were alders, willows, and cottonwoods growing along what later became known as San Juan Creek.

He also noted that the flat hill overlooking the lush grasslands would make an excellent site for a mission. On the same day, he commented that the "heathen," the native inhabitants, ran like deer upon seeing the Spaniards. Upon examining their campsite, he later commented that they had left behind some of the finest basketware he had ever seen.

A mission was founded in 1797 by Father Fermin Lasuen, a Franciscan, on the feast of St. John the Baptist, and, as Father Crespi had observed, it was a very good site indeed, because not only did the location have a favorable climate and a fertile valley, it had plenty of raw material for the mission--an abundant harvest of souls.

The story of San Juan Bautista is full of ironies; the first may have been that the Spanish priest did not see that the Indians were an extremely religious people. They were not concerned with elaborate ritual but lived instead in hour-to-hour and day-to-day observances to their gods. The Franciscan Fathers taught the Indians to till the soil, weave clothing, say their prayers in Spanish, sing and play songs, and to make adobe bricks for buildings. The mission was officially completed in 1812, but between 1797 and 1831 Indian labor built one-hundred-and-twenty-eight buildings of adobe.

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While the Indians were learning the arts of European civilization, travelers enjoyed the abundant life fostered by the mission. San Juan was located a day's ride from Mission San Jose, Carmel, Santa Cruz, and Soledad; it was a crossroads on the "Camino Real."

In 1834, twelve years after Spanish rule was replaced by Mexican rule, the Mission period officially ended. The missions became property of the government, and the Indians for whom the missions had become a way of life were put off the lands. It was the era of the New Aristocrats, the "Californios." The new society had developed far from the capitol Mexico City, and, aided by mission-trained Indian labor, it formed its own special gentility. A traveler was always assured a sumptuous welcome at the ranchos. It was the time of the "vaquero and the lariat," and twice a year at the great cattle roundups, the "rodeos," the Californios would celebrate their skill. Not there was any lack of celebration, because every night somewhere in San Juan there was usually a fandango.

San Juan for a brief while was the headquarters of the Northern Territory of California. The Mexican government required all foreign vessels to stop at the port of Monterey, guaranteeing a trade in tallow and hides--tallow for candles and hides for the leather goods of the New England industrial revolution. From San Juan, General José Castro planned two insurrections against the governors of Spanish California; neither would make a stir in history because the Californio period was short lived.

Americans, with manifest destiny in their hearts, were crossing the mountains to share in the feast of land and gold. During the war between the United States and Mexico, the Californio forces were encamped in San Juan. General John Fremont made a stand on Gavilan Peak overlooking San Juan but was forced to retreat after just three days by General José Castro. The Mexican government had provided only scant armament for the protection of its Northern Territory, and with the end of the war California was part of the United States.

The Gold Rush turned San Juan Bautista into a boomtown, and the discovery of mercury at New Idrea only put San Juan again at the crossroads. By 1855 there were four general stores and as many as eleven stage lines bringing travelers to the hotels, taverns, and shops. It seemed as if all roads led to San Juan. In 1858 Angelo Zineta opened the Plaza Hotel, and his excellent French and Italian, cuisine made it one of the most famous hotels of its time. Some proud local residents even boasted "San Juan Baustista was destined to become one of the greatest cities in the country."

But San Juan Bautista is a city of ironies; a series of catastrophes halted the growth of the town. A fire destroyed a major downtown block, a smallpox epidemic claimed many of the townspeople and almost all of the Indian population, and the railroad chose to put a train station on a goat ranch owned by Colonel Hollister instead of in San Juan Bautista. The new city of Hollister became the county seat of the newly formed San Benito County.

As the century progressed, the town declined. In 1884 the city passed an ordinance allowing the cattle to roam the streets for a month to keep the grass from overtaking the town. The Eagle Hook and Ladder Company continued to win races and organize dances, but there were only about three-hundred people left in town, and half the houses were empty. By the end of the century it was a wonder the town continued to exist.

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The next irony almost brought the town to its end; the mission, with its wonderful site overlooking the fertile valley, was on top of San Andreas Fault. No one could have known in the time of the founding of the mission there had been a lot of earthquake activity, but in 1906 the earthquake that devastated San Francisco almost leveled the mission.

San Juan is a town that has refused to die. All roads lead to San Juan, almost. Today even Highway 101 bypasses the town by three miles. But the climate still remains spring-like, and the old mission has remained in continuous service for almost two-hundred years. Little by little, it, and many of the buildings in town, have been lovingly restored. Which leads to the most beautiful irony of all--that if San Juan had prospered and grown, none of its beauty would probably have remained.

Running Time: 11 minutes

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