

MISSION SAN FRANCISCO SOLANO DE SONOMA
(Sonoma Mission, Sonoma State Historic Park)
East Spain Street and First Street East
Sonoma
Sonoma County
California

HALS CA-66
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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
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Location: East Spain Street and First Street East, Sonoma, Sonoma County, CA

The mission is located within Sonoma State Historic Park.

Lat: 38.293692 Long: -122.456178 (Southwest corner of the reconstructed chapel, 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.

The site for Mission San Francisco Solano was established by Father Jose Altimira on July 4, 1823 in what became the town of Sonoma. Father Altimira intended that this site would replace the mission in San Francisco. The final mission to be built in California, it retains integrity. Only parts of the current museum wing are original; the existing chapel is a reconstruction dating to 1914. The adobe buildings and the courtyard also retain significance as representations of the enthusiastic renovation and recreation of the adobes that occurred throughout California during a period when residents romanticized and again placed value on the remaining mission sites.

Description: Located northeast of the 1836 Sonoma Plaza, the mission forms part of the Sonoma Historic Park complex of buildings and sites. East Spain Street runs east/west along the front of the property; First Street East runs along the western edge of the property. The buildings are slightly offset from the angle of the streets, a result of later reconstructions. The reconstructed adobe brick chapel, facing East Spain Street, is located at the southwest corner of the lot, setback a short distance from the streets. The length of the museum contains a loggia on the street side, and is located along the East. Spain side, forming an L to the chapel. The eastern edge of the museum building contains a wide covered driveway for access to the courtyard. The entire site is relatively flat; elevation is approximately 91 feet.

From East Spain Street, paths lead from the sidewalks to the chapel and the museum loggia. The three main paths are red clay tile and a fourth path, wide

enough to accommodate a car, is located at the eastern edge. It is soil and gravel and is edged with stones. Low stone walls edge the planting area at the sidewalk edge. The planting area contains low-water using plants, mostly consisting of *Arctostaphylos* (knickknick) with groups of cactus and roses lining the eastern path. An El Camino Real mission bell, commonly placed at the missions by the El Camino Real Association, is located at the southwest corner in front of a multi-stem pomegranate. It is not known if this is an original El Camino Real bell. The narrow western edge of the property between the chapel and the courtyard wall is a planting area containing plaques and drought tolerant, California native shrubs.

The courtyard, located behind the buildings, is roughly rectangular. It is enclosed by the museum building to the south and partially by the church to the west; other edges are formed by a stucco wall. A small stucco structure with bathrooms and storage occupies the back northeast corner. Near the western edge of the courtyard is located a contemporary wood shade and storage structure used for educational activities; associated with this area are non-historic cooking areas used for demonstrations, one is a wood-burning stove and two are large iron kettles.

There are filtered views to the northern hills, mostly due to an empty lot north of the mission site. A private house and outbuildings are located very near the eastern property line. Nearby buildings and neighborhood trees are visible from the entire site.

There is evidence that rain water travels over the land (shallow rivulets) to a drain inlet located near the covered driveway. The ground plane, except where plants occur, is decomposed granite and gravel and is a soft golden color.

Deep beds or rosemary are located along the back walls of the museum and side wall of the chapel. Off center to the courtyard doors from the museum and the chapel is located a planter/well feature. This feature creates a square form, entered at the corners; the center is a stone octagonal well, about 48" tall, capped with red tile and eight inverted roof tiles over which water flows to an octagonal receiving channel. The planters are of low stone with taller square inserts opposite the well. Each of these square planters contains an olive tree. Other plants in the lower planters include citrus, pomegranate, and herbs. Ornamentals also occur, including Jacob's beard, *Zantedischia* (Calla Lily) *Muhlenbergia* (Muhly), and *Ribes* (California Currant).

Most of the rear wall is obscured by a large and old *Aesculus californica* (California buckeye) and tall, gnarled masses of spiny cactus. According to State Historic Parks Guide Phil McCulley, some of the cactus plants date to the original mission; this large and sprawling mass is located in the vicinity of the non-extant women's dormitory. West of this plant group is an oak tree, close to

the wall, and in the corner is a large clump of roses which may be *Rosa californica*.

Two large olive trees and a small pomegranate are growing along the eastern wall.

History:

Father Jose Altimira, an energetic and enthusiastic priest, was assigned to Mission Dolores in San Francisco, as well as Mission San Rafael. He disliked the mission in San Francisco and felt the climate encouraged disease. He determined that he should establish a mission further north and east. He received early encouragement, but forged ahead without benefit of official permissions from his supervisors; he relied on the encouragement of the Mexican governor.

The site was chosen in August of 1823. Father Altimira praised the site for good soil, nearby fresh water, and nearby woods for building material and fire wood. Within four days his workers had established a ditch for water delivery and expected a delivery of cattle. Discussion and reprimands followed Father Altimira's unauthorized expansion; ultimately a compromise position was established and Altimira's efforts were allowed to continue.

The following spring a new church was dedicated. Already the site included several wood structures, including a granary, a house for the priests, and seven houses for the guards and their families. The first adobe building, to house the padres, was begun. Cattle and crops were established. Local Indians, hostile to the mission, attacked it in 1826, and a discouraged Father Altimira asked to be transferred south. Padre Buenaventura Fortuny was assigned to take his place.

By the time Padre Fortuny retired to the quieter Mission San Diego, he had established a productive mission which contained permanent structures and an enclosed quadrangle. A new permanent adobe church was started in 1827 on the eastern side of the quadrangle. The padres' house, located between the chapel and the church, was enlarged and helped form the south side of the emerging quadrangle. Tasks such as weaving, carpentry and forging metal, were located in a long, narrow structure behind the existing chapel; with the chapel they formed the west wall of the quad. The monjeria (a dormitory to house unmarried women) and additional work spaces created the north wall and northwest corner. A cemetery was added east of the chapel building. The mission claimed many thousands of acres of land, sending out families to farm and raise cattle and horses as far north as Santa Rosa.

A Father Gutierrez was stationed at the mission for a short time, and was succeeded by Father Jose Lorenzo de la Concepcion Quijas in 1834, which was the year that the Mexican government proceeded with secularization of all of the missions. Mariano Vallejo was appointed as administrator of the mission lands and expected to oversee its transition to a pueblo called Pueblo de Sonoma. The

mission church would serve as a parish church. Mission lands and holding were to be distributed among the Indian neophytes, but this rarely occurred.

In 1835, Vallejo laid out the new pueblo streets, using the mission as a starting point. Barracks were constructed near the mission buildings and military units were installed at the pueblo; Russian settlements at Fort Ross and Bodega were considered a threat to Mexican settlement. Father Quijas left the mission that year in protest over the offensive behavior of major-domo Antonio Ortega, leaving the church without a regular spiritual leader; Father Quijas, and later, other priests, made an occasional foray to Sonoma to say mass in the adobe church. Outbuildings began to fall into disrepair and portions of the structures were disassembled for use in construction elsewhere. By 1839, the mission complex, including the large adobe church, was beginning to decay.

In 1840, (now) General Vallejo ordered the construction of a new adobe chapel to replace the original wooden chapel. The original chapel had been in use as a store and was being demolished. The new chapel, utilizing elements of the mission complex, was completed in 1841. Two large mission bells were hung from a heavy beam in front of the chapel. The padre's house remained habitable and was made available for guests. A visitor in 1841 describes the site as being in ruins, except for the chapel and the guest rooms in the padre's house. The situation continued until 1846 when part of the padre's house was deeded to Vallejo's secretary.

At the end of 1849, Father Stanislaus LeBret was assigned to the mission church to minister to the growing town. Very little was left of the adobe church and the grounds were filled with trash. In September of 1850, California became the 31st state to join the United States. The little chapel became a full parish church

Modernization was undertaken in 1858 with the addition of bricks to the façade of the chapel, modern shingles, and a belfry. In 1862, questions of land ownership were officially settled and the archbishop was granted the mission church and padres' house area (the current mission grounds) amounting to 2.06 acres, plus a vineyard to the east. The Catholic church continued to hold the property until 1881 when the land was sold to a local merchant, and a new church was built half a mile west.

Under new ownership, the chapel became a storage space, often used for hay. The padres' house was used for various storage and commercial enterprises. The courtyard housed teams and wagons, as well as hardware and trash. Two houses were built over the site of the old adobe church. A frame structure was erected in front of the chapel in the late 1890s and used as a saloon. A picket fence enclosed the front of the old padres' house where tiles and sheets of tin covered the roof.

It was the beginning of the twentieth century when the Sonoma Valley Woman's Club undertook efforts to preserve and restore the ruined mission. The landowner granted permission for repairs while the women set about raising funds for purchase of the complex. The California Historic Landmarks League, The Native Sons of the Golden West, and William Randolph Hearst were enthusiastic supporters. The land was purchased by the Landmarks League in 1903; they realized their intention of turning the site over to California's State Parks system in March of 1906. Twenty-six days later the April 18th earthquake struck the region. The buildings seemed to survive with little damage, but in 1908 parts of the Padres' house roof and sections of wall collapsed. The following February, part of the chapel wall collapsed, exposing the choir loft and vestibule. The California Legislature appropriated funds for reconstruction and the site was reopened to the public in 1914. The front wall of the Padre's house was retained and the structure was reconstructed narrower than its original width, and a former breezeway between the house and chapel was enclosed. The 1829 mission bell was located in San Francisco and was hung on a heavy beam near the chapel

The mission was designated "California Historical Monument No. 3" in 1926. Restoration work continued, and in 1943-44, tile-topped walls were constructed to enclose the now somewhat smaller courtyard. A small 0.91 acre parcel adjacent and north of the mission site was purchased and added to the park. This land remains undeveloped. A Historic American Buildings Survey photograph from 1934 shows the reconstructed buildings, not completely replastered, with very spare landscaping; a juniper, a couple of vines, ivy on a bell support, and little else.

In the mid 1950s, Sonoma State Historic Park was created under the auspices of the California Department of Parks and Recreation and included the mission, the barracks building across the street, and other structures and sites from the Vallejo era. According to Robert Smilie's history of the mission, it was in subsequent years that the landscaping was added to the grounds. (Smilie's book, *The Sonoma Mission; San Francisco Solano de Sonoma* was the main source of information for this history.)

Sources: **Maps and Historic Views**

Historic American Buildings Survey Roger Sturtevant, Photographer Feb. 12, 1934 FRONT - Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma, First & Spain Streets, Sonoma, Sonoma County, CA." Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. (HABS CAL, 49-ONO, 2—1.) Accessed on March 12, 2012, at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/ca1118.photos.010695p/>

Exterior, General View of Mission and Convento, c 1880 - Mission San Francisco Solano de Sonoma, First & Spain Streets, Sonoma, Sonoma County, CA. Photocopy of photograph (from 'The California Advertiser', c. 1880). Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division Washington, D.C. (HABS CAL, 49-SONO, 2—15.) Accessed on March 12, 2012, at <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/resource/hhh.ca1118.photos.010709p/>

Interviews

McCulley, Phil, State Historic Parks Guide. Personal interview at the mission. 18 Feb. 2012.

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California State Parks. *Sonoma State Historic Park*. Brochure. Sacramento: California State Parks. N.D.

Smilie, Robert S. *The Sonoma Mission; San Francisco Solano de Sonoma*. Fresno: Valley Publishers, 1975.

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April 2, 2012



The reconstructed chapel at Mission San Francisco Solano, as seen from the corner of East Spain Street and First Street East. (Janet Gracyk, February 19, 2012).



The stone planters in the courtyard and four olive trees create a strong central feature. A recirculating water feature resembling a well is located in the center of the feature. The rear corner of the chapel is visible on the left. (Janet Gracyk, February 19, 2012).



The California buckeye tree is beginning to leaf out above the large tangle of cactus. The contemporary restroom building is visible to the right, and the courtyard wall is visible to the left. (Janet Gracyk, February 19, 2012).