

MISSION SAN CARLOS BORROMEO
(Carmel Mission)
3080 Rio Road at Lausen Drive
Carmel-by-the-Sea
Monterey County
California

HALS CA-71
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN LANDSCAPES SURVEY
National Park Service
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Location: 3080 Rio Road at Lausen Drive, Carmel-by-the-Sea, Monterey County, California.
Lat: 36.542658 Long: -121.919619 (Fountain in the quadrangle, 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 some continue as active parishes.

Mission San Carlos Borromeo was the second Alta California mission to be constructed. It was founded June 3, 1770 in Monterey and moved to the present site in December of 1771. The first mass was held in Carmel on August 24, 1771. Father Junipero Serra, who established 9 of the 14 missions and served as Presidente of the California missions, is buried in the church along with 3 other Franciscan Fathers: Father Juan Crespi, Father Fermin Francisco de Lasuen and Father Palou. Harry W. Downie, the curator credited with restoring the mission, is also buried at the mission, along with several Native Americans who were converted to the Catholic faith and helped construct and operate the mission.

Mission San Carlos de Borromeo became the center of religious control in California. It served as headquarters of the mission chain during Father Serra's time and beyond, until 1803. Of all the missions, this site represents one of the most authentically -restored.

Description: Visitors enter the mission complex through a small room on the northeast side of the complex — originally the cloister — that now serves as a visitor center and gift store. One exits this room through a small door that opens onto a plaza east of the mission's main entrance. The plaza is paved with exposed aggregate with brick bands (suggesting a 1970s-era addition) and measures 38' x 138'¹. There are foundation plantings at the mission and museum buildings in beds lined with cobbles. Two stout Yews (*Taxus baccata*) flank a narrow exit door from the museum. A wall of stone and decoratively-cast concrete, with brick steps and integral timber benches, separates this plaza from an elevated garden that is

¹ All dimensions taken from Google Earth so are approximate.

enclosed by an adobe wall. A second set of steps into the garden is made of terra cotta tiles and stone.

The 65' x 85' garden consists of crushed stone paths and raised, lushly planted beds of mortared-stone. The garden has a multi-tier fountain in a quatrefoil-shaped basin as its center piece. Species include smoke bush (*Cotinus coggygria*), 3 prominent Dracaena (*Cordyline australis*) trees, a citrus, a very showy purple mallow (*Lavatera sp.*) with variegated leaves, aloe, iris, red valerian (*Centranthus rubra*), pride-of-madeira (*Echium fastuosum*), rosemary (*Rosmarinus sp.*), ornamental grasses, Sage (*Salvia sp.*) and several varieties of spectacular climbing roses. There is a life-size bronze sculpture of Father Serra in this garden. The garden is enclosed on the west side by the Harry Downie Museum, which is accessed via tile steps from the entry plaza. A large cork oak (*Quercus suber*) is to the right of the entry door.

From the entry plaza visitors walk west through an ornamental iron gate into the cemetery that lies north of the mission. There is a row of graves immediately adjacent to the mission, then a path and three more rows of graves, all running parallel to the mission. The cemetery consists of dirt paths between graves in an area 160' x 50'. The graves are outlined with rocks and shells and are marked by lichen-covered concrete or stone headstones or wooden crosses. Some graves have tile or bronze plaques and terra-cotta tile pavers. Simply constructed split-rail fencing protects some of the graves from foot traffic.

The primary path continues around the back of the mission into a heavily shaded area at the northwest corner of the complex, marked by a large Monterey cypress (*Cupressus macrocarpa*) with a canopy 65 foot in diameter. From this corner, visitors enter a quadrangle defined by the mission church and three long, narrow-perimeter buildings—the school (girl's quarters historically), the rectory and chapel (the soldier's quarters and kitchen), and the gift shop and museum (cloister).

Visitors don't take in the large plaza immediately. Instead, one moves through a semi-private, shaded courtyard known as the Serra Memorial garden, featuring tile art, a fountain, benches, and spaces that feel intimate. This garden was dedicated in 1994, on the 200th anniversary of the death of Father Serra.

The quadrangle is a vast trapezoid 180' x 265', paved with exposed aggregate with brick bands. There are plantings at the perimeter and a tiled basin with a fountain at the center, 21' in diameter. Trees inside the quadrangle include a 50-year-old-plus California Pepper (*Schinus molle*), Monterey Cypress, Deodar Cedar (*Cedrus deodara*), flowering plum (*Prunus cerasifera*), and dracenea. From the center of the plaza, looking toward the mission's bell tower, one sees a bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea specabilis*) that accents the base of the tower.

The pentafoil-shaped pool basin has a stucco exterior and a wide cap with inlaid pieces of weathered brick. The inside is lined with small, dark blue tile. At one side a dome-shaped brick form has a rustic, heavily-worn spout that looks like a turtle head.

Perennial plantings at the perimeter of the quadrangle include salvia, roses, penstemon, gladiolas, prickly-pear cactus, pride-of-madeira, geraniums and hollyhocks. Wisteria and grape vines are planted at the arcade posts.

The south side of the plaza includes an edible garden with a grape arbor, a fig tree, artichokes, corn, beans, and an olive tree that was propagated from a tree planted in the 1700s. In all there are some 200 types of plants in the mission gardens — predominantly California natives and other drought-tolerant species well adapted to the climate. Other species include Matilija poppy, California fuchsia (*Zauchnera californica*), Wild lilac (*Ceanothus sp*), Alstroemeria, calla lilies (*Zantedeschia aethiopica*) and lily-of-the-nile (*Agapanthus africanus*).

The current condition of the site is good. This is an active mission church. The buildings have been authentically restored and new elements are generally compatible. The gardens include more species than would have existed during the mission period. They are appropriate for the climate and site conditions, but the author would prefer to see fewer species and fewer modern hybrids. While some elements of the landscape do not appear to be authentic to the mission period, they were likely added as part of the 1930s restoration and, as such, are nearly 80 years old. The author found the exposed aggregate paving the most offensive of these additions.

History: In 1767 King Charles III of Spain suspected that the Jesuits who had established 14 missions in Baja California were withholding payments due the royal treasury. He sent Don Gaspar de Portola, Governor of the Californias, to evict the Jesuits, and he charged Junipero Serra, a Franciscan missionary, to take charge of the missions. Father Serra had “an iron determination to bring enlightenment and a better life to the Indians.” About the same time, Jose de Galvez, the king’s inspector-general, had a plan to extend the chain of missions north into Alta California. Galvez wanted to establish positions at San Diego and Monterey to hold back settlement by the British, Dutch and Russians who were encroaching on Spain’s empire.

The first mission in Alta California — Mission San Diego de Alcalá — was dedicated 16 July 1769 in San Diego. The second Alta California mission was San Carlos Borromeo — named after the Archbishop of Milan, Saint Charles Borromeo — originally dedicated in Monterey on 3 June 1770. Conflicts with nearby soldiers and the lack of good agricultural land resulted in a relocation to Carmel Valley in December of 1771.

In all, Father Serra established nine missions in Alta California and designated Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo as his headquarters. It remained the headquarters until 1803, long after Serra's death on 28 August 1784, when he was buried beneath the chapel floor. At its peak, Mission San Carlos Borromeo housed 927 Native Americans who were trained as plowmen, shepherds, cattle herders, blacksmiths and carpenters. They made adobe bricks, roof tiles and the tools needed to build the missions. In 1832 the mission had 2,100 cattle and 3,300 sheep. Agricultural crops included wheat, barley, corn, vineyards and various vegetables.

According to the HABS record prepared by A. Lewis Koue, AIA, in June 1962, "Present building begun 1793 and dedicated Sept. 1797. Became headquarters for Father Presidentes of all Missions in California. In ruins after secularization in 1836 until 1882 when partially restored. Complete restoration started in 1924, especially since 1933 when it became a Parish Church."

Mexico gained control of Alta California in the Mexican War of Independence in 1821. When the Mexican government secularized the mission in 1834, its lands were divided amongst the local landowners, and the mission fell into ruin. The United States government gained control of California in 1846. The Catholic Church regained control of the property in 1859 and in 1884 Father Angel Casanova began the first restoration effort. According to *The California Missions Resource Center*, "Only the ruins of the church remained standing when restoration began in 1921, so extensive excavation of the old foundation was required to determine the precise layout of the mission." In the 1930s Sir Harry W. Downie (1903 – 1980) served as Carmel curator and was charged with directing the restoration of the mission. He devoted nearly five decades of his life to this endeavor — restoring the mission and surrounding buildings. According to multiple sources, "the Carmel mission church is one of the most authentically restored of all the mission churches in California" due to Downie's dedication. He is buried in the mission cemetery.

The mission became a parish church in 1933. In 1961, Pope John XXIII designated Mission San Carlos Borromeo as a minor basilica. In 1987, Pope John Paul II visited the mission while traveling in the United States.

The site is a California Historical Landmark, No. 135; is a National Historic Landmark; is listed in the National Register of Historic Places, NRIS Number 66000214; and is HABS CA-136.

Sources: Library of Congress HABS/HAER/HALS Collection, Historic American Building Survey, National Park Service, Western Office, Division of Design and Construction, 1000 Geary Street, San Francisco, CA. Mission San Carlos Borromeo, <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/CA0361/>

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Mission bell tower and the cloister from inside the quadrangle (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Mission forecourt and main entrance to Mission San Carlos Borromeo (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Concrete and cobble wall, bench and steps up to the garden in the northeast corner. The quatrefoil pool and fountain, bronze sculpture of Father Serra, and the Harry W. Downie museum and cork oak in the background (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Detail of the decorative concrete and timber bench (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Graves in the cemetery marked with abalone shells, cobbles and wood crosses (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Fountain and pentafoil-shaped basin in the quadrangle. Pepper Tree (*Schinus molle*) in the foreground (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Detail of fountain basin with blue tile, stucco walls and wide brick cap (Chris Pattillo, June 2010).



Detail of the bell tower. Plantings include bougainvillea, salvia, roses and grape vines (Chris Pattillo June, 2010).