

MISSION SAN JUAN BAUTISTA

(San Juan Bautista Plaza)

Roughly bounded by Second Street, driveway and unpaved road in
line with Polk Street, San Juan Creek, and Franklin Street

San Juan Bautista

San Benito County

California

HALS CA-84

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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:** Roughly bounded by Second Street, driveway and unpaved road in line with Polk Street, San Juan Creek, and Franklin Street
San Juan Bautista, San Benito County, California
San Juan Bautista Plaza National Historic Landmark District
San Juan Bautista State Historic Park
Lat: 36.84521 Long: -122.53556 (Plaza Center, Garmin GPS unit, accuracy 10', WGS84)
- Significance:** Franciscan missionaries founded twenty-one missions on the Pacific coast of the Spanish colony of Alta California between 1769 and 1823. Control of Alta California shifted to Mexico in the 1820s and to America in the 1840s. Some of the communities that grew around the missions became major cities; some missions were abandoned and later reconstructed. Portions of El Camino Real, the road connecting the missions, became interstate or state highways. Mission San Juan Bautista was the fifteenth mission to be established, in 1797. Despite repeated damage from earthquakes on the adjacent San Andreas Fault, Mission San Juan Bautista was never moved from its original location and has been in continuous use as a church since its establishment. Its environs are still largely agricultural, its plaza has been restored to the spirit of its 1870 state, and its adjacent portion of El Camino Real is still unpaved. Noted architect Irving Morrow, landscape architect Emerson Knight, and mission restoration specialist Harry Downie played a part in the restoration of the buildings and landscape. Current and former mission sites are of archaeological interest.
- Description:** Mission San Juan Bautista is situated at the edge of a low plateau—a scarp of the San Andreas Fault—overlooking the San Juan Valley, the floodplain of the San Benito River. At its peak, the Mission had agricultural fields and livestock ranches throughout the valley and the mountainsides overlooking the valley. Today, the following remnants of the original mission landscape remain: the plaza, quadrangle gardens, cemetery, El Camino Real, entrance garden, neophyte housing site, orchard site, San Juan Creek, vineyard site, and hilltop cross. The most memorable characteristics of the landscape are the simplicity of the plaza and the sleepy, stopped-in-time feeling of the plaza's environs.
- The plaza is a rectangle oriented northeast to southwest along its length. At its center is a 150' (45 m) by 200' (61 m) rectangle of lawn, bordered on three sides by a road of compacted decomposed granite (DG) and on the southwest side by asphalt-paved Second Street. Black Locust (*Robinia pseudoacacia*) trees border the outer side of the DG road, and there are two Locust trees

shading picnic tables on the inner side of the DG road. Three sides are loosely enclosed by buildings, all one- to two-story wood or adobe buildings built between 1800 and 1868 with porches, balconies, or arcades fronting the plaza.¹ The northeast side, which overlooks the San Juan Valley, has always been open. The bounding DG roads are closed to cars except for parking during Sunday church services and special events. From ca. 1800 to ca. 1834, this was an open space where mission work was done and church festivals were held. From ca. 1834 to ca. 1883, this was an open town square bordered by hitching rails, where ranching families tied their horses during Sunday church services and festivals were held. According to Morrow and Knight, hotel-proprietor Zanetta planted a double row of Locust trees ca. 1860, but only two trees on the inner row survived. In ca. 1884, a garden began to take shape in the plaza center. By 1931, it was a formal garden with straight paths converging on a central monument from the corners and midpoints. At the recommendation of Morrow and Knight, the State Park replaced the formal garden with lawn in 1940. The town's living Christmas Tree, a Deodar Cedar (*Cedrus deodara*) remained on the lawn until ca. 1955.

The quadrangle is defined on two and half sides by 1800–1933 mission buildings,² on one side by a 1940 adobe wall, and on one half side by a picket fence. The quadrangle has the same orientation as the plaza, except the church building is slightly skewed; archaeologist Rubén Mendoza has noted that this permits the rising sun to light the main altar on the winter solstice. The two gardens inside the quadrangle total about 1 acre (0.4 hec) and are separated by a lattice fence. The visitors' garden is a ca. 1976 mission revival-style garden located near the buildings. The remainder is a ca. 1900 grove of Olive (*Olea europaea*) trees. Within the grove are large picnic tables and large rotisserie pits for the annual fund-raising barbecue. Mendoza has been doing archaeological research on the quadrangle intermittently since 1995. From 1797 to ca. 1834, the quadrangle was enclosed by buildings or walls; the mission oven and well were inside the quadrangle. After 1834, buildings were lost to fire or decay as the mission declined. From ca. 1890 to ca. 1975, the visitors' garden had rectangular planting beds set on a grid.

The cemetery overlooks the valley. Adobe walls enclose it on three sides and the church on the fourth. Olive trees planted in rows in ca. 1890 provide dappled shade. A massive stone-buttressed retaining wall supports it along the fault scarp. The first burial was in 1797. The cemetery was laid out by 1811.

El Camino Real, or Reál, (the Royal Road) is an approximately 8' (2.4m)-wide

¹ The buildings are Zanetta Cottage (ca. 1860s, moved to current location 1885), Zanetta House/Plaza Hall (1868 on site of earlier mission adobe), Plaza Stable (ca. 1861), Castro-Breen Adobe (1838-41), Plaza Hotel (1813-14 first story, 1858 second story), Monastery Wing (1800-1812).

² The buildings are Church (1803-1812, restored 1950), Monastery Wing (1800-1812), Maryknoll Rectory (1932-33), Guesthouse/Indian Jail (1797-1803, restored 1932), Chapel (1799-1803, restored 1996).

trail of compacted soil running along the base of the fault scarp between the mission and the former orchard.

The garden outside the main church entrance is a ca. 2005 four-square garden of rose shrubs and statuary, lined with boxwood and centered on a modern stone fountain. Three squares each have one Cypress (*Cupressus sp.*) tree, which pre-date the rose garden. A bronze sculpture of Saint John the Baptist by sculptor Thomas Marsh was installed in 2000 on the garden axis opposite the church. Until the 1850s this was an open space with a wood cross and two bells hanging from a beam supported by posts. In the 1860s, a picket fence was added to separate the entrance area from the plaza. By the 1880s, a peaked arch was added over the entrance gate and Cypresses were planted. Emerson and Knight recommended replacing the picket fence with a hedge.

The orchard site is a roughly square, 11-acre (4.5 hec) parcel at the foot of the fault scarp. It is still owned by the diocese and is currently used to grow vegetables. The mission planted 875 Apple (*Malus sp.*) and Pear (*Pyrus sp.*) trees on this site before 1828. Visitors in the 1850s commented that the pears were delicious and the apples unexceptional. The Pear trees outlived the Apple trees and were still producing until at least 1910. In 1947, a rodeo arena was built on the site. The grandstand seats were built above and below El Camino Real. A fund-raising rodeo was held at this site each year near Saint John's Day until 1983. The rodeo ring was removed by 1989; the grandstand concrete base still remains on the fault scarp.

San Juan Creek starts at a spring in the Gabilan, or Gavilán, Mountains. When it reaches the valley floor, it flows in a nearly-straight, approximately 30' (9 m)-wide ditch, or zanja, lined intermittently with Willow (*Salix sp.*) trees. It carried water to and kept cattle from the mission vegetable fields and orchard.

The neophyte housing site, or Taix lot, is an irregular, undeveloped parcel at the east corner of Second and Franklin Streets. The State Park uses it for parking and storage. Archaeological research led by John Clemmer in 1961 and Glenn Farris in 1991 located the foundations of housing built there in the early 1820s for Native American laborers.

The vineyard site is a roughly L-shaped, 38-acre (15 hec) parcel about 1.2 miles (1.9 km) southeast from the plaza, at the foot of the Gabilan Mountains at 553 Mission Vineyard Road. The parcel has multiple uses—partially intact oval racetrack, stable, residence, and agri-industrial facility—although it is still a single parcel in the county records. The mission planted 1200 vines at this site before 1828 and irrigated it using a zanja from the Gabilans. It was un-irrigated and neglected by 1845, taken over by squatters by 1854, returned to the mission in 1859, and still in use as a vineyard until at least 1939. In 1946, Bishop Philip Scher sold the parcel to locally-prominent rancher and horseman Arthur Nyland

(1895–1970),³ who built a harness racing training facility there. Nyland's children sold the parcel to the current owner in 1978.

The hilltop cross is a concrete cross about 1.8 miles (2.9 km) southeast from and about 740' (230 m) above the plaza, on the crest of Mount Holy Cross (Pagan Hill) at 1000 San Juan Canyon Road. The cross is on a private gated estate, but it is still a local landmark, particularly at night, when it is illuminated. The San Juan Bautista Service Club maintains it. According to a 1907 newspaper article, the site was sacred to the local Mutsun tribe and the missionaries erected a wood cross there in ca. 1803 to increase conversions to Catholicism; a farmer chopped it down in the 1850s. A redwood cross was erected on the site in 1907, and it was replaced with the concrete cross ca. 1929.

History: On Saint John's Day (June 24) 1797, Father Fermin Francisco de Lasuén, then leader of the Franciscan missionary order in Alta California, dedicated the site of Mission San Juan Bautista. The mission was established so that travelers would not have to camp in dangerous, open country overnight when traveling between Mission San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo (1770) and Mission Santa Clara de Asís (1777). The development and running of the mission was overseen by the missionaries. The laborers were Native Americans, or neophytes, mostly of the local Mutsun tribe. The mission flourished in the pleasant Mediterranean climate and fertile floodplain soil.⁴

Mexico gained its independence from Spain and control of Alta California in 1821. Spain had financially supported the missions; Mexico regarded the missions as a source of income. At first, the mission was able to support itself by trading agricultural and livestock products to foreign ships. As the Mexican taxes became more burdensome, the mission began to decline. In 1834, Governor José Figueroa declared San Juan Bautista a pueblo (town) and Mission San Juan Bautista a curacy. The neophytes were freed, which to most of them meant becoming homeless, and the mission lost all of its land, except for the mission quadrangle and cemetery.

America gained control of Alta California in 1847. With the discovery of gold in 1849, migration to northern California surged. California became a state in 1850. San Juan Bautista became a thriving stagecoach stop. Archbishop Joseph Sadoc Alemany petitioned the U.S. government in 1853 for the return of

³ Nyland was a descendant of the Breen family who lived in the Castro-Breen Adobe.

⁴ Winters are wet with minimums averaging 37°F (3°C), and summers are dry with maximums averaging 80°F (27°C). Annual precipitation averages 13" (33 cm). The dominant soil type in the valley is Sorrento silty clay loam. (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and Desert Research Institute, Western Regional Climate Center, "Period of Record General Climate Summary, Hollister, California (044022): 1895-1974," <http://www.wrcc.dri.edu/cgi-bin/cliMAIN.pl?ca4022>; United States Department of Agriculture, Natural Resources Conservation Service, "Web Soil Survey: San Benito County, California," 3 Feb 2012, <http://websoilsurvey.nrcs.usda.gov/app/WebSoilSurvey.aspx>)

the orchard and vineyard. President James Buchanan signed the patent returning them to the mission in 1859. When city officials declined a request from the Southern Pacific Railroad for money to build a railroad line through San Juan Bautista, the railroad built the line through Hollister instead. When the Hollister line opened in 1871, San Juan Bautista entered a prolonged economic slump.

Barker et al. credit the publication of Helen Hunt Jackson's novel *Ramona* in 1884 with the start of the Mission Revival movement. San Juan Bautista became a tourist destination and the mission landscape was romanticized during the pastorship of Father Ricardo Valentin Closa (1841–1916), from 1875 to 1909. Visitors wrote glowingly of Closa's fragrant, flower-filled garden.

When the mission was severely damaged by a 1906 earthquake on the San Andreas Fault (the same earthquake that damaged San Francisco), Closa turned to the town for help. A fund-raising fiesta, including a barbecue, held on Saint John's Day in 1907 was such a success that it became an annual event, except for a break during World War II. The church was able to match grants to pay for restorations overseen by mission restoration specialist Harry Downie (1903–1980) in 1950 and 1976–78.

When the secular buildings surrounding the plaza were at risk of being lost, Mayor Frank Abbe invited the State Park Commission to visit in 1928. The town successfully lobbied the Park Commission to purchase the plaza and surrounding secular buildings for a State Historic Park. Architect Irving Morrow (1884–1952) and landscape architect Emerson Knight (1882–1960) wrote a report on the proposed park for the commission in 1931. The park was dedicated on September 29, 1935.

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Photographs (Cate Bainton, *19 Feb 2012 and †9 Apr 2012)

‡ indicates temporal comparison to HABS photograph by Roger Sturtevant, Feb 1934.

View looking north of Plaza, Monastery, and Church from 2nd and Washington Streets. †‡



View looking northeast of Plaza, Zanetta Cottage, and Plaza Hall from 2nd and Mariposa Streets. †



View looking south of Plaza, Plaza Stable, Castro-Breen Adobe from north corner of Plaza. †



View looking southwest of Plaza, Plaza Hotel, and Monastery from east corner of Plaza. †



View looking southwest of San Andreas Fault scarp and Church from Former Orchard. *‡



View looking northwest of St. John the Baptist sculpture, Entrance Garden, and Church. †‡



Photographs (Cate Bainton, *19 Feb 2012 and †9 Apr 2012)

† indicates temporal comparison to HABS photograph by Roger Sturtevant, Feb 1934.

View looking southeast of Cemetery wall, rodeo grandstand base, and El Camino Real. †



Detail view of Cemetery adobe freestanding wall, stone retaining wall, and stone buttress.*



View looking east of Olive Grove Barbecue Area and Monastery from Second Street adobe wall.* †



View looking northeast of Visitors' Garden, Chapel, and Guest House from lattice fence.* †



View looking east of Visitors' Garden from Maryknoll Rectory.* †



View looking northwest of Visitors' Garden from Monastery.*

