



Carmel Mission Basilica: Mission History (1542-Present)

Thank you for your interest in our beautiful Mission and welcome. The following is a brief history of the Carmel Mission Basilica and its important and unique place in California and U.S History. We hope this information is helpful and that you enjoy your visit to this special place that is so important to the beginnings of the California we know today. The story of the Carmel Mission is a living history, a legacy that continues with each of us who visits this historic place.

Centuries in the Making: The Establishment of Spanish California (1542-1784)

Alta (upper) California was first visited in 1542 by Spanish explorer Juan Cabrillo. Although known to Spain, it would be more than 200 years before they showed an interest in Alta California, the last frontier of Spanish colonization.

In 1769, the Spanish Crown sent an expedition from New Spain (today's Mexico) to enforce their claim to Alta California. The plan was to establish missions to introduce the Indigenous Peoples of the region to Christianity and Spanish culture while also establishing presidios (military forts) at San Diego and Monterey. The expedition was under the leadership of Fr. Junipero Serra (a future Catholic Saint) and Don Gaspar De Portolá. On July 16, 1769, they established the first mission and presidio at San Diego.

On June 3, 1770, after a year of journey and hardship, the soldiers of Don Gaspar De Portolá and the missionaries led by Fr. Serra, gathered by the Monterey Bay to witness a formal ceremony that would mark the establishment of the second mission which was to be called Mission San Carlos Borromeo. The mission was located within the Monterey Presidio less than a mile from the Bay.

A Missionaries Work: The Carmel Mission (1770- 1784)

The two main California Indian groups of the Monterey Bay region are were the Esselen and Rumsien (Rumsen) Peoples. Since they were located in Carmel Valley which also had a fresh water source and better land for growing crops, and the presidio soldiers did not have good relations with the Indian peoples, Fr. Serra moved the Mission from Monterey to its current site alongside the del Rio Carmel (Carmel River) on August 24, 1771.

The early years at Carmel were hard with few provisions. The first Church and dwellings were made of wood and mud. The padres depended mostly on ships from New Spain (Mexico) for their supplies. Unfortunately, these supply ships did not make it to the Monterey Bay very often. The California Indians of the region shared their food and supplies with the Missionaries. Over time, the padres, with the help of the Indians, were able to grow crops and later various livestock was raised. This provided food for the people of the Mission. As the Mission grew, the wood and mud buildings were replaced with adobe structures. Fr. Serra made Carmel the headquarters for the California Missions. It was from here that he oversaw the building of seven other Missions. He labored side by side with the Indians of the Mission until his death on August 28, 1784., If you visit the Convento Museum, you can see a replica of the room where he slept and where he died.

A Church for the Ages: The Mission after Fr. Serra (1784-1821)

After Fr. Serra's death, Fr. Fermin Lasuén continued the work of the Missions. It was Fr. Lasuén, who with the Christianized Indians of the Mission, built the stone church that stands today. The church was built on the site of the original adobe church with stone quarried from the local area. It was the first California Mission Church to be built from stone. The only other stone churches were at San Juan Capistrano and Santa Barbara; the eighteen other Missions were built of adobe. The present layout of the Mission is much like it was in the early 1800's. The buildings you see at the Mission today have been rebuilt on the same foundations of the buildings built by Fr. Lasuén. The California Missions thrived under Fr. Lasuén and his successors and the efforts of the California Indian Peoples.

A Time of Transition: The Mexican Period and the American era (1821- 1846)

In 1821, Mexico gained independence from Spain and Alta California became part of Mexico. In 1834, the Mexican government closed the missions and took over all the Mission lands. Although the land was originally intended to go to the Indians, most of them did not receive any land. Instead, it was sold to recent and established settlers by the new Mexican Government.

The California Indians and the padres were required to leave the Mission as church lands became land grants and ranches. Some California Indian groups returned to their traditional ways, while others worked as ranch hands and skilled laborers. The padres went back to Mexico or Spain and some became priests in the churches of the new towns of California.





After they left, the buildings of the Mission fell prey to vandalism and decay. The quadrangle buildings, which were built of adobe, became mounds of earth. The stone church remained a sorrowful reminder of the past. Its roof fallen in, its adornments removed, overrun by grounds squirrels and with birds nesting in the crevices, it stood a lonely ruin.

In 1846, California won its independence from Mexico to become the Republic of California. In 1848, it officially became a Territory of the United States, and in 1850 it became the thirty-first state of the Union. On October 19, 1859, the United States government returned the Mission ruins to the Catholic Church.

Even after the Mission was abandoned, the Catholic Indian Peoples continued to celebrate the feast day of the Mission's patron Saint, San Carlos Borroméo. They continued to bury their family members in the church and the cemetery. Many still today regard the Mission as a sacred site.

The Mission Continues: Restoration Era (1884- 2008)

Restoration of the Mission began in 1884 under the direction of Fr. Angelo Casanova. In the early 1920's, noted California artist Jo Mora was involved with restoration of the Mission and in 1933 the greatest period of restoration began. It was then that Curator Harry Downie was chosen to lead the restoration effort, and he spent almost 50 years returning the Carmel Mission to the state you see today. The work started slowly with the excavation of the ruins and the study of old documents, sketches and photographs which were necessary to develop plans. Work began on the padre's quarters which today house many artifacts of the mission days.

In 1936, the roof of the church, installed in 1884, required attention. Through various means funds were raised and the roof and ceiling of the stone church were restored to their original mission era configuration. By 1941, the former soldier's quarters on the east side of the quadrangle were restored. Today, the area is used as the Mission office and rectory.

In 1943, the south side of the quadrangle was restored from the foundation of the old crumbled adobe walls. This building is now the classrooms for Junipero Serra Elementary School. By 1946, the remains of the original padre's kitchen and the blacksmith shop on the east side were restored and now it is used as a daily chapel. The building which originally housed workshops and was the residence for the unmarried Christianized Indian women on the west side of the quadrangle was restored in the 1950's thanks to support from singer Bing Crosby. They are now a part of the school.

This era was highlighted by a visit from the U.S President Dwight D. Eisenhower and the First Lady in 1956, and in 1960 then Senator and future President John F. Kennedy visited the Carmel Mission with his wife and future First Lady, Jacqueline Kennedy.

In 1960, the Mission Church was made a Basilica by Pope John Paul XXIII, the first California mission to become a Basilica. Saint Pope John Paul II visited in 1987, venerated Fr. Serra and prayed at the altar of Our Lady of Bethlehem. In 1988, he beatified Fr. Serra at the Vatican.

The Mission is included on the U.S National Register of Historic Places (1966) and was named a U.S National Historic Landmark in 1960. It is also listed as a California Historical Landmark No. 135. From 1980 to 2006, efforts continued to preserve the Mission were completed by Mission Curator, Richard Joseph Menn and his assistant Huu Nguyen.

The restoration of the Mission took many decades and as the Carmel community grew, a diocesan parish was established, and the church flourished. Today it forms a vital and welcoming Christian community. The Mission community has continued to grow helped to renew the Parish and the Carmel community grew. New generations of settlers established themselves as Californians, Peoples from around the world. They earnestly formed a vibrant community which continues and flourishes today.

The Mission Today: The Preservation Era (2008-to Present)

In 2008, the Parish established the independent Carmel Mission Foundation for the continued preservation and protection of the Mission. Pastor Fr. John Griffin completed a seismic retrofit of the Basilica in 2013, to mark the celebration of the 300th of Fr. Serra's birth. That same year, the future King and Queen of Spain, Prince Felipe VI and Princess Letizia visited the Mission.

On September 15, 2015, during his official visit to the United States, Pope Francis celebrated the canonization of Fr. Junipero Serra at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington D.C. This historic event made Fr. Junipero Serra the first Saint of California. It was the culmination of generations of advocacy, which began at the parish level and developed into an international effort for the sainthood of the Spanish Missionary. The Carmel Mission Basilica now has the great distinction of being a shrine to one of the newest Saints of the Catholic Faith.

In 2016, the preservation of the Mission continued with the renovation of the inner courtyard under the guidance of the current Pastor, Fr. Paul Murphy. Recent efforts have focused on presenting new exhibits to memorialize and share with the public the recent historic moments and canonization of Saint Junipero Serra. Additionally, because share some of the great treasures of our California heritage with our visitors. The Mission Museum is actively engaged in the preservation and interpretation of the art and artifacts of the Mission collection ensuring that this important history is preserved for future generations. We are actively engaged in the preservation and interpretation of the historic art, artifacts and heritage of the Mission collection ensuring that this important history of California is preserved for future generations.

