

## This Day in History... July 16, 1769

# Spanish Found First Mission in California

On July 16, 1769, Franciscan friar Junipero Serra founded California's first Catholic mission. This marked the beginning of the Spanish mission system in California, which would go on to shape the culture, history, and landscape of the region for centuries.

In 1749, Father Serra left a prestigious teaching position in Spain to work at a missionary in Mexico City. The Spanish emperor selected Serra to head a series of missions that stretched into present-day California. The missions were founded to establish permanent settlements, prevent Russians from encroaching in the region, and spread Christianity to the Native Americans.

Serra traveled north from Mexico with Spanish soldiers and settlers, choosing a hill near the San Diego River as the site for the new mission. On July 16, 1769, Serra's expedition reached the site of present-day San Diego, California. While the rest of the party continued on in search of Monterrey harbor, Serra and a few followers remained behind. Serra then blessed the new outpost of Christianity, raised the Spanish flag, and named the new mission San Diego de Alcalá. Serra's companions failed to find Monterrey, but he later did find it and established his second mission there – San Carlos Barromeo.



*Stamp pictures Father Serra and one of his missions.*

Mission San Diego de Alcalá served many roles. It was a church, a school, a farm, and a hub for Spanish settlers. It was named after Saint Didacus of Alcalá (San Diego in Spanish). Serra's goal was to convert the local Kumeyaay people to Christianity and teach them European ways of life. This process involved forcing Native Americans to give up their traditional customs, languages, and religions. Disease and harsh conditions led to many deaths.

In 1775, Kumeyaay warriors attacked and burned much of the mission in protest of the Spanish presence and treatment. One missionary was killed. The mission was rebuilt and became an important center of Spanish influence in the region.

Under Father Serra's leadership, a total of 21 missions were built along California's coast, spaced about a day's journey apart. In 1771, Serra relocated to Carmel. His headquarters became known as "Mission Carmel." During the last three years of his life, Serra walked more than 600 miles to visit the Franciscan missions and confirm 5,309 people who had been baptized during the previous 14 years. Father Serra was declared a saint in 2015.

Communities eventually grew around the missions. These missions formed a base for the settlement of California. Today, more than 60% of Californians live in areas that once surrounded the Franciscan missions.

These missions were designed to convert Native Americans to Christianity and teach them European customs and religious practices. However, the mission system also disrupted Native American life, bringing diseases, forced labor, and cultural change. Junipero Serra is a controversial figure today. While he is credited with helping to shape California's early history, many also criticize the missions' negative impact on indigenous communities.

Today, Mission San Diego de Alcalá is a National Historic Landmark and still functions as a Catholic parish. Visitors can tour the restored buildings, gardens, and museum to learn about California's complex mission history. The site remains a symbol of both religious legacy and the lasting effects of colonization in the American West.



*Stamp issued on the 200th anniversary of this event.*



*Friar Serra founded the Carmel Mission in 1770.*

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