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MISIÓN SAN JUAN BAUTISTA AND PLAZA

By John Samuel Fot

Founded June 24, 1790, Misión San Juan Bautista,
partly destroyed by earthquakes, 1800 and 1906, was repeated-
ly restored, the two bells it now uses being salvaged from
its original chime. The plaza on its south side witnessed
many historic scenes, including General Frémont's activities
in 1846.

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(Summary by John Samuel Fox)

Misión San Juan Bautista was founded on June 24, 1796, primarily as a post along El Camino Real, the King's Highway, for travelers in the extensive north-side traffic of California. A site was chosen where trees, water, stones, and tules for roofing were near enough to supply the basic necessities for mission life. This position between Santa Clara and San Carlos, near the San Benito River, would also be useful in completing the pacification and conversion of the Indians west of the coast range. As was the general rule in the Alta California missions, many factors-religious, economic, and strategic-combined to determine the establishment of San Juan Bautista.

The padres did their work well, training neophytes for this world's tasks and preparing them for the world to come according to the tenets of their faith. Twenty-three nearby rancherias of Indians provided fertile ground for reaping a good harvest of pagan souls. The mission establishment became an agricultural and industrial entity, self-sufficing as far as possible. The natives learned the crafts of leatherwork, pottery making, wood working, carpentry, forging, weaving, and sewing. All were done on the premises. Agriculture

and livestock raising provided food.

In order to house these activities, both religious and secular, Indian labor, supervised by the padres, built the impressive mission establishments which have come down to us. Houses for the neophytes, quarters for the soldier guard, granaries, and workshops had to be constructed as the mission prospered. In June, 1803, the population of the surrounding countryside celebrated the ceremony of laying the cornerstone for a permanent adobe brick church, which was completed nine years later. This structure was two hundred feet long, seventy-five feet wide, and forty-five feet high. Built on the plan of a three-aisled basilica, it introduced a revolutionary style into mission architecture; no other California mission followed that form.

An object of particular pride in the new church was the life-size statue of St. John, its patron saint, acquired in 1809. This statue is of considerable interest today for the good coloring and excellent anatomical detail, which have been preserved. Other church decorations consisted of mural paintings representing the stations of the cross, done in red and green by the neophytes.

The prosperity of San Juan Bautista was not long enjoyed. The establishment began to decline after 1815 as the Mexican war for independence cut off supplies and forced the missions to support the military forces of the province. This

drain continued throughout the next decade, and in the 1830's the mission economy of San Juan Bautista was completely disrupted as a result of the secularization policies of the Mexican governors and the depredations of hill Indians who had never been civilized.

While the natives began to desert the mission after the secularization of 1834 to return to the "tulares," white families moved in, settling near the church. By the end of the decade, a community of about fifty whites had replaced the populous Indian village of earlier days. It was from this small start that the town of San Juan Bautista had its growth. The most influential family was that of the Castros whose house faced the level square on the south side of the mission. Just when this square began to be called the Plaza is uncertain, but it logically became the hub of activity because of the proximity of the two most important edifices in the valley - the church and the Castro dwelling. An adobe structure, later called the Plaza Hotel, and the Zanetta house also faced the square. Many exciting events in the Mexican period and the American invasion centered around the Plaza or could be seen from it.

During the gold rush the little town boomed to become one of the largest in Monterey county. After the building of the railroad in 1870, however, San Juan Bautista declined because it was not on the right of way. Many of its

people drifted away, drought and disease attacked the town, and it began to resemble a mining country ghost town. The quiet placidity of mission life, the turbulence of violent politics and revolution, and the excitement of a headlong rush for gold - all are joined in the history of San Juan Bautista.

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