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CALIFORNIA HISTORICAL SURVEY SERIES  
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Edited by Clark Wing

SERRA PALM - SAN DIEGO COUNTY

Registered Landmark #67

by

Don Morton

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## SERRA PALM

The historic Serra Palm, a date-tree, (Phoenix<sup>1</sup>  
dactylifera) is California Registered Landmark No. 67. It  
is located in North San Diego on the old "Pueblo Lands" known<sup>2</sup>  
as Old San Diego or Old Town which was discovered in 1542.  
The Palm is about four miles northwest of Fifth Street and  
Broadway,<sup>3</sup> San Diego, and is on the south side of the road  
at the north entrance to Old Town.<sup>4</sup> This road passes Pre-  
sidio Hill which was colonized in 1769-1837. It is near the  
head of the old trail from "Upper California to Lower Cali-  
fornia" opened by Portola, 1769, and former site of Fort  
Stockton<sup>5</sup> (1847); near San Diego Avenue and the San Diego  
River. The tree marks the southern terminus of El Camino  
Real, at Taylor Street opposite Old Town Bridge.<sup>6</sup>

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1. L. H. Bailey, Cyclopedia of American horticulture, III, 1194.
  2. Topography map, California: San Diego County, La Jolla quadrangle, United States geographical survey, edition of June 1904, reprinted 1920, University of California Library.
  3. Block map of the city of San Diego, Rodney Stokes Company, San Diego, California, August 1926.
  4. H. C. Hopkins, History of San Diego, its pueblo lands and water, 92.
  5. A. M. Suhl, "Sketch (map) of the Port of San Diego," by officers of U. S. Steamship Massachusetts, 1850, in collection of documents and maps, Historical geography of San Diego, University of California, A.B. thesis, 1924.
  6. "Serra Palm, San Diego," Motor Land, XXXVIII, April 1936.

Presidio Hill is nearly sixty feet above sea level, about a mile east of San Diego Bay, and overlooks Old Town to the west.<sup>7</sup> It is also known as "Mission Hill." The Old Town part of North San Diego lies between Mission Bay (False Bay), northwest of the San Diego River and Mission Valley, and the Coronado Beach part of San Diego Bay south of the river, U. S. Highway No. 101.<sup>8</sup> It is said the original site of the San Diego Mission dedicated by Father Junipero Serra July 16, 1769,<sup>9</sup> was on the hill near which stands the Serra Palm.

It is somewhat confusing to the stranger to hear of mission relics at both spots and to learn how far apart they are. Old Town was the place where the padres halted northward from Lower California, set up their cross and dedicated their mission. On the hill above, the Presidio was built and the soldiers established there. A little later (1774) Father Serra deemed it wise to remove the mission farther from the Presidio.<sup>10</sup>

In March 1923, the Serra Palm was enrolled in the American Forestry Association Hall of Fame for historic trees.<sup>11</sup> On July 16, 1929, the 160th anniversary of the

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7. Hopkins, History of San Diego, its pueblo lands and water, 63.
  8. H. M. Gousha Company, Chicago, California road map for Shell Oil Company, 1939.
  9. H. H. Bancroft, History of California, I, 204.
  10. "Handbook of Southern California," North American press association, III.
  11. F. Rider, Rider's California, 603.

founding of San Diego, the Junipero Serra Museum was dedicated on Presidio Hill. The Serra Palm "was inclosed in a modest picket fence in 1887."<sup>12</sup> An authority said there were originally three of these historic trees and that one of them was exhibited at the World's Fair, Chicago, in 1893.<sup>13</sup> Today the old tree is braced by giant cables and every care is given it.

The outstanding features which caused the Serra Palm to be registered as a state landmark are colorful traditions and legends. Among the more serious are numerous statements: "the Serra Palm was the first date-tree planted in California"; "the Serra Palm was planted by Father Serra in 1769"; and "the Serra Palm tree is the tallest and oldest date-palm in California." And then there is the story that "at the mission-well the padres made an exit from the underground passage to the group of palm trees." In a study of mission architecture, Prent Duell said:<sup>14</sup>

Most missions of early date possessed secret passages as a means of escape in case they were besieged. It is difficult to locate any of them now, as they are well concealed or fallen in. San Diego Mission has an underground passage of very ingenious arrangement, leading, perhaps, from

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12. H. E. Rensch, Historic spots in California; southern coast counties, I, 179. Bailey, Cyclopedia of American horticulture, III, 1194.
13. Hopkins, History of San Diego, its pueblo lands and water, 92.
14. C. A. Engelhardt, San Diego mission, 350-351.

some room in the mission to the well at the foot of the hill. Its entrance has never been sought for and it has for the most part fallen in, as can be found by exploring from the well. The passage led underground from the well, opening into the sides several yards below the level of the grade. The padres could then go and fetch water without being seen by a hostile band of Indians. Across the well, the passage continued some distance further and made an exit in the group of palm trees, planted by the Fathers. Hence, in the time of great danger, the padres could enter the passage, leap across the well and escape by the exit at a considerable distance from the mission. The mission at an early date was destroyed (1775) and several of the Fathers escaped by this means.

Father Engelhardt said the story of the "San Diego Tunnel" is not authentic and that,<sup>15</sup> "in the whole mass of available documents no mention whatever is made that a tunnel was built." However, according to more recent observations and explorations, the underground passage or tunnel connecting the date-palm grove with the old mission did exist.<sup>16</sup> One authority on the subject said:

The writer was convinced that there was something to the story.... Further investigation disclosed ... 'We were yesterday one of a party who drove out to the mission.... There is a curious circumstance about a well that stands at

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15. Engelhardt, San Diego mission, 351.

16. Hopkins, History of San Diego, its pueblo lands and water, 311-315.

the gate. When Davis started to dig for water, he presently struck a tunnel which led, on being investigated, to a reservoir. This tunnel had been dug by the old monks years and years ago....<sup>17</sup>

Armed with this information the author returned to the courteous Mission caretaker.... He said that he did, and that he had been in the tunnel....

Our investigation was then turned to the aqueduct running from the Mission dam. We found that the tunnel was floored with tile such as was made and used by the Mission Fathers, and that water was turned from the aqueduct into the tunnel....

However, the story of the mysterious mission tunnel may have originated with the legend that there was also "hidden treasure in the grove of date-palms and secret underground passage of the well."

We find that the tunnel was built as part of the first irrigation system in the history of California.<sup>18</sup> There is no record that the date-palms were planted by Father Serra in 1769. Serra died in 1784. The irrigation system was not completed until about 1816-1820. Prior to 1816 the landscape was barren of date-palms or other fruit trees. Thus, it is assumed that the estimated age of the Serra Palm is around 123 years. It is believed to have been called the "Serra Palm" by public-spirited citizens soon after the Chicago

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17. Hopkins, History of San Diego, 311.

18. Bancroft, History of California, II, 106.

World's Fair in 1893. Between the period of 1850-1893 it was modestly known as just one of several old date-palms. According to Bancroft, and early diaries of explorers and pioneers who journeyed to San Diego during the first mission period, 1769-1803, Mission San Diego and the San Diego Presidio were barren of fruit trees and date-palms. At least there is no record of them.

There was a severe drought in 1801 and 1803, causing a great want of grain.<sup>19</sup> It is thought that this impelled the fathers "to construct an extensive system of irrigation works" by first building a primitive dam across the San Diego River.<sup>20</sup> Bancroft said:

The first of the decade the rains were late and there was great want of grain at the mission, as also in 1803.... I suppose it may have been these droughts that impelled the friars to construct an extensive system of irrigation works, and that the works, the remaining of which are yet (1874) to be seen, were probably completed during this decade (1803-1813), though there are no definite records on the subject.... Some three miles above the mission the river was dammed by a solid stone wall thirteen feet in thickness, and coated with a cement that became as hard as rock. In the center was a gate-way twelve feet wide lined with brick. The dam was standing in 1874, though the water had washed

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19. Engelhardt, San Diego mission, 157.

20. Bancroft, History of California, II, 106.

out a channel at one end.... From this dam an aqueduct of tiles resting on cobblestones in cement, and carrying a stream one foot deep and two feet wide at the surface, was built down the stream through a precipitous gorge, impassable on horseback, to the mission lands. The aqueduct often crossed gulches from fifteen to twenty feet wide and deep, and was so strong that in places it supported itself after the foundations were removed.

Although Bancroft said the irrigation project was probably completed during 1803-1813, according to the annual reports of Father Sanchez and Martin, the big dam and aqueduct was still in course of construction as late as 1816.<sup>21</sup> The Spanish padres made no report of the progress after the year 1816. Hence, it is probable the primitive irrigating system and mission-well tunnel was completed around 1816-1820.<sup>22</sup> The dam was still a solid structure as late as 1904. It was this achievement of pioneer engineering of early California at San Diego which gave the mission padre<sup>s</sup> a high place in the history of agricultural irrigation and development. We can likewise approximate the period when the fathers set out their 600 square-yard mission garden, assuming that it was more practical to wait until the fruit trees and groves of date-palms could be watered by the completed irrigation

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21. Engelhardt, San Diego mission, 165.  
22. Ibid., 301.



system, about 1820.

The average growth of the date-palm of the Serra Palm variety, is about 50 feet in thirty years, and takes sixteen years to form a trunk.<sup>23</sup> This may account for the fact that Dana and others who visited San Diego (1820-1830)<sup>24</sup> prior to the secularization of the mission in 1834, did not see or report of having observed the present Serra Palm near Presidio Hill. Be that as it may, the beautiful Serra Palm near the old Presidio Hill and the entrance to Old San Diego still waves in honor of the padres though their missions<sup>25</sup> have passed away.

Father Serra remained in California as the president of the great mission system, until his death at Monterey, August 28, 1784.<sup>26</sup> During his fifteen years of hard work among the new missions, Serra made as many overland journeys on horseback from San Diego to Monterey and San Francisco and return, as well as several trips to Mexico. As a pioneer trail blazer of Alta or New California, he was beloved by all, including the most cruel Indian savages. When Father Junípero

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23. Bailey, Cyclopedia of American horticulture, III, 1310, 1311.

24. Angelhardt, San Diego mission, 216-219, 233-239, 242-244, 305.

25. J. Van Brunt, California missions, 56.

26. Bolton, [edited by]. Historical memoirs of New California, by Fray Francisco Palóu, IV, 343.

Serra died, one of his brother companions, Father Palou, wrote to Joseph de Galvez, in Mexico. In the letter dated, <sup>27</sup> Mission San Carlos, September 6, 1784, Palou said:

Will your Excellency permit me to give you the news of the death of our beloved and honored Father President, Fray Junipero Serra, whom God was pleased to take to eternity on the day of San Agustin, the 28th of August last.... His death was a matter of great sorrow and grief for the loss of so kindly and zealous a prelate, who inspired us by his exemplary life and religious zeal and directed us in the conversion of these Indians.... I was in the mission of our father San Francisco, forty leagues from here, when his Reverence wrote to me that he wished to see me. I started at once.... Eight days after my arrival at this mission his Reverence had some fever.... On the 27th, in the morning, after having performed divine service, he went on foot to the church, accompanied by the greater part of the town, which is composed of about seven hundred neophytes and by other hundreds from the presidio.... As soon as he reached the altar vested in ecclesiastical dress, kneeling near the steps of the chancel, the sick father himself chanted the Tantum Ergo for the sacred ceremony, with the same resounding voice he always used, as if nothing were the matter.... In the early part of the night he asked me for extreme unction, which I administered to him while he was seated on an Indian armchair.... On the 28th the slight fever continued.... When the last prayer was finished he exclaimed as if filled

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27. Bolton; [edited by]. Historical memoirs of New California, by Fray Francisco Palou, IV, 348-352.

with happiness and joy, 'with the favor of God I am no longer afraid. He has taken all fear from me now. I will rest awhile.' Then, seating himself on the Indian chair he only took off his mantle and reclined on his customary bed, which was some planks covered by a single blanket. He had retired to rest for all eternity....

Father Junipero Serra was born in the town of Petra, in the Island of Majorca, November 24, 1713.<sup>23</sup> His parents were Antonio Serra and Margarita Ferrer. They named their infant son Miguel Joseph. He was baptized the day of his birth. During his boyhood days he attended the church and convent of San Bernardino in Petra. He was small in stature, not so robust as the little peasant boys. He had an ardent temperament and possessed a strength of will and intellect which would have made him an important factor in any walk of life. "His life can be searched in vain for a single record of sin, frivolity, or dreary waste places. He was not converted after years spent in dissipation. His soul from childhood to the hour of his death remained ever exquisitely clean and fresh."<sup>29</sup> While yet a boy his parents, observing his extraordinary abilities, took him to Palma, to pursue his studies. He became in a short time conspicuous among his fellow students for his proficiency in learning. It is

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23. A. H. Fitch, Junipero Serra, the man and his work, 3.

29. Ibid., 5.

said his longing to become a monk never left him. Father Serra took his first vows September 14, 1730. In 1730 the principal convent in Palma elected him professor of philosophy. At his ordination he took the name of Junipero. His doctrinal degrees brought him fame. But it was his eloquence as a preacher which dominated the people. They flocked in large crowds to hear his sermons. He had a sonorous voice and a fervent delivery.

For more than a century the modest house at Petra, Majorca, where Father Serra was born, had been neglected to the point of nearly disappearing.<sup>30</sup> In the early 1930's a few men of good will, faithful to the memory of the seraphic Fray Junipero Serra, led by Jaime Oliver, Town Physician of Petra, devoted their energies and historical knowledge to search for that lost treasure. They finally succeeded in locating the house, two blocks distant from the old convent where the Franciscan Father had been ordained. They then solicited the aid of the Palma Rotary Club and provided funds to acquire the property. The birthplace and former boyhood home of Father Serra was then donated to the City and County of San Francisco, California, after restoring it to its original state. The solemn celebration of the historical occasion

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30. J. C. Cebrian, Presentation of Serra's birthplace, Reprinted from the California Historical Society Quarterly, September 1932, University of California Library, 3.

was held at Petra, May 12, 1932. It was held in the presence of the civil, military and judicial authorities of the Island and several Rotary clubs of Spain, and a delegate from San Francisco, California. After reading the letter from the Mayor of San Francisco, appointing Juan C. Cebrian (a pioneer California resident for sixty years) to be his representative at the ceremony, the President of the Palma Club said in part:<sup>31</sup>

On the 16th of November 1913, the Second Centenary of his birth was celebrated. It was agreed to raise his status in the Gallery of Fame of the Federal Capitol of Washington, where only two men of each state of the Union of North America can be adopted, and his name was loved and venerated....

The civil Governor, Fr. Manent, ended his speech by saying, "I bear witness to the fact that the Rotarian Club of Majorca hands over to the municipality of the City and County of San Francisco, California, the house wherein Fray Junipero was born."<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, Governor James Rolph, Jr., then proclaimed May 11, 1932, as "Serra Day" in honor of the presentation of the Serra birthplace to San Francisco. In San Diego, the lone date-tree dedicated in recent years as the Serra

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31. Cebrian, Presentation of Serra's birthplace, 4.  
32. Ibid., 6-7.

Palm Registered Landmark No. 67, is an appropriate living symbol immortalizing the landing place of Father Junipero Serra and his Spanish pioneers on the Pacific shores one hundred and seventy years ago. This Landmark, the Serra Palm, is now one of the three hundred historic spots in California. These places are not all owned by the State, but they have been registered as landmarks because they have historical significance.

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