Father Serra plans the founding of Mission San Juan Capistrano

Much as the founding of the United States over 200 years ago was accomplished not in a single day or incident, so the establishment of the Mission San Juan Capistrano on November 1 of that same year, 1776, resulted from a chain of contributory, if disparate, events. Improved military, missionary, and supply-ship support from Central Mexico made possible in the mid-seventies the creation of a half-dozen missions in Alta California, but the missionary zeal of Father Junípero Serra proved a paramount factor in this expansive effort to secure the vast northern territory for Spain. Serra’s penning of a memorandum on August 21, 1775—a document which set forth dispositions for accomplishing the sixth of Serra’s missions—formally established the next task of the Franciscan fathers in the largely unclaimed wilderness. Importantly, too, the holograph or document solely in Serra’s hand reveals the practical, eighteenth-century attentions and problems related to the sustained mission-building effort. As it makes evident, securing appropriate icons and candles for the altar, beads for the natives, and chalice for the sacraments (to be borrowed from Mission San Diego) was no less a consideration than amassing adequate provisions, livestock, and tools for the expedition. The original Serra manuscript, now in the collection of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Honeyman, is a rare still-existing document in Serra’s own hand ordering the founding of one of his missions.3

The immediate events leading to Serra’s order for the founding of Mission San Juan Capistrano have been clearly established. His dream for establishing a chain of stations in Alta California had been frustrated during the spring and early summer of 1775, for although he had enough friars to staff additional missions, an edict of the viceregal council forbade founding any new institutions until sufficient troops could be assigned to protect them.4 On August 10, 1775, two letters from the viceroy4 arrived...
in Monterey which unblocked this impasse. One of them
directed the commandant of the Presidio of Monterey,
Fernando de Rivera y Moncada,7 to assist Father Serra in
establishing one or two new missions armed with soldiers
acquired from the presidios and from neighboring
missions,8 and the other informed Father Serra of the
viceroy’s message to Rivera.9 Rivera immediately de-
parted Monterey for Carmel to counsel with Father
Serra.10

An agreement concerning the foundation of a new
mission north of San Diego was finally hammered out in
the August conferences between the commandant of the
Monterey Presidio and the father president of the mis-
sions. The plans were confirmed in the document trans-
lated below of August 21, 1775, which authorizes and
prepares for the founding.11

Viva Jesús, María, Joseph!12
The Mission of San Juan Capistrano,13 which will be founded
in the valley of the same name, or its environs,14 halfway
between those of San Diego and of San Gabriel of the Earth-
quakes,15 about twenty leagues16 distant from each of them, and
about two leagues from the coast of the South Sea,17 according
to the agreement reached between the Captain Commandant
Don Fernando de Rivera y Moncada and the Father President
of the Missions, Friar Junípero Serra, on the thirteenth
of August, 1775, by the order and instructions of his Excellency,
the Viceroy of New Spain, which were issued the twenty-fourth
of May, and were received the tenth of August of this same year.

Dispositions
I assigned and named as missionary ministers for the new
mission:

The Father Preacher Friar Fermín Francisco Lasuén,18
and

The Father Preacher Friar Gregorio Amurriú.19
For the escort, the Commandant accepted of the four soldiers
offered by the missions only two, to whom he added four more
from the presidios, so that there are

Six leatherjackets, and
A muleter named Feliciano.

Item—Of the Indians, who with the permission of his Ex-
cellency, the Viceroy, came up from Baja California20 of their
own free will at the departure of our own religious, assigned
to this mission for its inception and for its agriculture,
Two families of man and wife, and
Four unmarried Indian youths.
Concerning provisions, at my request, the Commandant
granted,

Four tercios21 of fine flour
Two ditto of unsifted flour
Three tercios of beans
A tercio of rice,
and ordered from the San Diego warehouse,
Twenty-five fanegas22 of corn.
And to please the natives,23 and to reciprocate their little gifts, I
gave to Father Lasuén,

Four bundles of various colored beads.
Concerning cattle—of the cows that have just arrived in San
Diego, from Baja California, assigned to this mission are:
Nine milch cows and a bull and
A yoke of broken oxen from San Buenaventura, and
I will take care to replace them when that desired
foundation is realized,24
As to mules and horses, the Father Preachers of this mission
have been assigned and have received:
Eight pack mules, six broken and two unbroken
Three broken saddle mules
Three broken horses
Two mares and one of them with her colt.
Concerning pigs—the San Diego Mission will give a boar
and a sow, and
Concerning chickens—From there (that mission), or from San
Gabriel, however they should prefer.
Item—Two saddles equipped with their bridles, etc. for the
Father Preachers.
Item—Two ditto also completely equipped for the young
cowhands.
Concerning tools, I delivered to Father Lasúén:

Twelve big new hoes
Two axes for woodcutting or preparing charcoal
Six large machetes for clearing
Six large new knives and
the branding iron for marking livestock in this form

As for crowbars, plowshares or other ironware which they should need until the memorial from Mexico should arrive.25

I have written to the Father Preachers of San Gabriel to release those in the stores of San Buenaventura which are kept at the said mission.

For the Church and the Sacristy, they have

One pulpit crucifix of our Lord for the altar.
One painting, more than a vara long of the Most Blessed Mary, depicted as the Heavenly Shepherdess. In the background, a condemned man is represented, and this is the painting that Father Campa used.26

Item—Another painting of a little more than a third of a vara depicting Our Lady of Solitude.
Item—(among others) A print of our Sainted Patron.
Item—About four varas of muslin to make a baldachin and a backdrop for the altar.
Item—A new missal with the saints of our order.
Item—A number of corporals, doubled of fine linen, with a burse, and a small pall.
Item—An amice of Breton lace, and two purificators of fine linen.
Item—A rochet of fine white brabant linen with its lace embroidery.
Item—Castilian wax sufficient for masses for a year.
Item—As for wine, the two closest missions will supply what they can.
Item—Assigned to this mission are all the ornaments for the church as well as for the house which have come from Baja California, that should be found to have been for the use of the two aforesaid ministers and of the Father Preachers Prestamero27 and Imas.28
For celebration of the Mass, the Mission of San Diego will supply a chalice which is there now without any other purpose than to be used for travelers, and from the stores of San Buenaventura, the Father Preachers of San Gabriel will release a set of vestments of each color, and from the same place provisionally, Chrism, surplices, ritual, baptismal shell, and everything else necessary and a bell.

Item—The Mission of San Antonio has given for entries and records Two blank books bound in red leather. With these beginnings and dispositions, the Father Friar Fernán left this Mission of San Carlos of Monterey on the twenty-first of August, 1775 in order to join with his companion residing at the (Mission) of San Luis Obispo. May God bless them. Amen.

Armed with Father Serra’s blessing and dispositions, Father Lasuén left Carmel, joined Father Amurrió, his co-missionary minister, and hurried south. Upon reaching San Gabriel Mission, the two friars parted again, Father Amurrió remaining to secure the goods and cattle that Father Serra had assigned to the new establishment, Father Lasuén proceeding to the site of the proposed new mission, where he erected an arbor, raised a large cross, and on October 30, 1775, celebrated mass.

Father Amurrió’s arrival eight days later was marked by tragedy, for on the same day, a messenger brought news of an Indian massacre at San Diego. Concerned for their safety, Friars Lasuén and Amurrió suspended work on the new mission immediately. They buried the mission bells and, after loading all movable goods onto pack mules, withdrew to San Diego. A year’s delay ensued, but finally, on November 1, 1776, Father Serra himself, on the altar he constructed, celebrated Mass in the valley of San Juan Capistrano, founding the mission he had envisaged long before.
The Serra document and Wiles painting are reproduced through the courtesy of Mr. and Mrs. Robert B. Honeyman, Jr.

Notes

2. A shorter, variant draft of this document in the Stephens Collection of the University of Texas was translated and edited by Antoine Tibesar in Writings of Junipero Serra (Washington, D.C., 1956), II:310-313.
6. Don Antonio Mariá Bucareli y Ursúa, Knight Commander (Fray Bailio) of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem (Knights of Malta), viceroy of New Spain from 1771 to 1779. Born in Seville, Jan. 24, 1717, Bucareli died in Mexico City, April 9, 1779.
7. Fernando de Rivera y Moncada, having commanded the Loreto garrison in Baja California, accompanied the Portolá expedition to Monterey and then returned to Lower California. On August 17, 1773, he was appointed military commander of Upper California, and he remained in that command until February 3, 1777. He was killed by Indians near Yuma on July 17, 1781, during the Colorado River massacre.
11. As Father Geiger observed, "The agreement was made not without difficulty and only after long negotiations," Palou’s Life, 428, n.11. Father Serra’s own account of the negotiations with Rivera appears in a report he wrote to Bucareli on August 17, 1775. See Writings of Junipero Serra, II:300-305.
12. A customary salutation found frequently in Father Serra’s letters. See Writings, II:25, 39, 44, 45, 49.
13. St. John Capistran was born in Capistrano, Italy, in 1385. After having served as governor of Perugia, he entered the Franciscan order on April 14, 1416. For thirty years after his ordination in 1420 he was a successful mission preacher in Italy and was assigned missions abroad on behalf of the pope. Sent first to deal with the Hussites, he was called finally to preach a crusade against the Turks who in 1453 had captured Constantinople. He accompanied the Hungarian General Hunyadi during the great victory at Belgrade in 1456, but shortly after, on October 23, 1456, he died of the plague. He was canonized in 1724. For further details on the mission’s patron, see Engelhardt, San Juan Capistrano, 232-235.
14. Father Serra was familiar with the territory he described, having camped in the valley, then called Cañada de San Francisco Solano, with other members of the Portolá expedition on July 24-26, 1769. An account of that camp site appears in The Diary of Miguel Costansó, edited by Frederick J. Teggett (Berkeley, 1911), pp. 14-15.
15. The earthquake from which the San Gabriel Mission drew its descriptive epithet occurred on July 28, 1769, as reported in Costansó, 16-17.
16. A standard Spanish measure of distance, a league measured 5,000 varas, or about 2.6 miles.
17. This reference to the distance of the proposed site from the sea would seem to be unique in Father Serra’s writings, cf. Writings of Junipero Serra, II:311; Palou’s Life, 158; and Palou, Historical Memoirs, IV:58. The terms, "Oceano Asiatico" or "Mar del Sur" were the customary designations for the Pacific Ocean used by the Spanish explorers of the eighteenth century, as is evidenced by the map Costansó drew in 1770, which was printed at Madrid by Hipolito Ricarte in 1771. It is listed by Pedro Torres Lanzas in his Relación descriptiva de los mapas, planos, e de México y Florida (Seville, 1900), I:181-182, no. 255.
18. Father Fermín Francisco de Lasuén, who was born at Vitoria, Spain, on June 7, 1736, entered the Franciscan Order in 1751 and was ordained, probably in Mexico, before February 25, 1761. He began his missionary work in Baja California, where he remained until the Franciscans turned over their missions to the Dominicans in 1773. Then he traveled overland, first to San Diego and then to San Gabriel Mission. He served as a supernumerary at San Gabriel until June of 1775 when he became personal chaplain to Commandant Rivera and ministered to the soldiers and their families at the Monterey Presidio. For a biographical account of Father Lasuén’s life subsequent to his assignment to San Juan Capistrano Mission, and of his work following his appointment as Father Serra’s successor in 1785, see Maynard Geiger, Franciscan Missionaries in Hispanic California (San Marino, 1969):136-142 (hereafter Geiger, Missionaries).
19. Father Gregorio Amurriñó was born at Bastida, Spain, in 1744.
and became a Franciscan, March 18, 1760. Having served at Mission Santa Gertrudis in Baja California from 1771-1773, Father Amurrió traveled overland to San Diego Mission where he remained until May, 1774. His next assignment was at Mission San Luis Obispo, where he received Father Serra’s assignment as specified in this document. Thereafter, Father Amurrió journeyed south with Father Lasuén as far as San Gabriel Mission. For further data on Father Amurrió’s life, see Geiger, Missionaries, 13-15, and Engelhardt, San Juan Capistrano, 212-213.

20. Especially in the early mission period, “California” was used to designate the present Baja California. Therefore, to prevent confusion, the translator has rendered Father Serra’s “California” here as Baja California.

21. Although seemingly impossible to give an exact modern equivalent for the tercio, a unit of measure used frequently by Father Serra, see Manuel Carrera Stampa, “The Evolution of Weights and Measures in New Spain,” The Hispanic American Historical Review, XXIX (1949):2-24. It may be possible to approximate its capacity by referring to an analogous English measure, the tierce. As early as 1590, the tierce or terce was defined as being equal to one-third of a pipe, or forty-two gallons. As late as 1820 it referred to a cask or vessel holding that quantity, usually of wine, but also of various kinds of both dry and liquid provisions. See Ronald Edward Zupko, A Dictionary of English Weights and Measures (London, 1968), p. 170.

22. A dry-measure equivalent to about 1.6 bushels.

23. Gentiles were Indians who had not as yet embraced the Catholic Faith. While receiving instruction they were referred to as catechumens, and after baptism they were termed neophytes.

24. Originally, San Buenaventura was planned as the third mission, to serve the central coast between the missions of San Diego and Monterey. Owing to difficulties between the military unit and the Indians at the San Gabriel Mission, however, this plan was altered. While awaiting the foundation of San Buenaventura, the provisions and materials initially assigned to that mission were stored at San Gabriel. On this arrangement, see Palou’s Life, 120, and Palou, Historical Memoirs, II:321-328.

25. The memorial mentioned here was Father Serra’s thirty-two article report on the general conditions and chief needs of the missions, which he wrote on March 13, 1773, during his visit to Mexico City. Addressed to Viceroy Bucareli, this memoran-

dum’s sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth articles relate to the need of the missions for iron, forges, and blacksmiths. A complete text of the memorial appears in Writings of Junipero Serra, I: 294-327. Its composition and effects are discussed in Palou’s Life, 140; Palou, Historical Memoirs, III:1-36; and Engelhardt, The Missions, II:100-133.

26. Father Miguel Campa y Cos, born in Durango, Mexico, in 1719, became a Franciscan on December 7, 1742. Having served in the Sierra Gorda Mission for over twenty years, he sailed to Baja California in 1768 and was placed in charge of Mission San Ignacio, a post he relinquished to the Dominicans in 1773 when he returned to Mexico City. As a ship’s chaplain with the Heceta expedition to the northwestern waters, Campa kept a diary, and after landing at Monterey, he traveled with Heceta and Father Palou to San Francisco on their search for a possible mission site. Father Campa journeyed back to Mexico in 1775, and though he continued an active Franciscan career, appears never to have visited Alta California again. See Palou’s Life, 148, and Palou, Historical Memoirs, I:1026.

27. Father Juan Prestamero, born in 1736, attended the Franciscan noviciate at Vitoria together with Father Lasuén. Having sailed from Spain in 1759, he was ordained in Mexico City, but was sent back to Spain because of ill health. In 1773, he was again in the New World, arriving first at the San Diego Mission and then continuing north to San Luis Obispo where he was stationed as a supernumerary. In 1774, Prestamero left Alta California and ultimately disaffiliated himself from missionary work, as Geiger reports in Missionaries, 197-198.

28. Born in the Diocese of Pamplona, Spain, Father Vicente Imá arrived at Mexico City in 1770 and was assigned to the missions of Baja California. He sailed from Loreto to San Blas with Martinez in 1772, but seems never to have served in Alta California. He was permitted to cease missionary activity in 1783. For further data on Father Imá, see Palou’s Life, 134.

29. Just as the document began with a characteristic Serra salutation, it closes with his distinguishing signature flourish. See Geiger, Missionaries, title page.

30. Palou’s Life, 158-159; Palou, Historical Memoirs, IV:58-60; and Engelhardt, San Juan Capistrano, 4-6.

31. Palou’s Life, 177-180; Palou, Historical Memoirs, IV:151; and Engelhardt, San Juan Capistrano, 7.