



Mission San Francisco de la Espada

English



Oil by Theodore Gentilz, courtesy of the Witte Museum

After 250 years, Mission San Francisco de la Espada (Mission Saint Francis of the Sword) remarkably retains its unique features and solitary character – keepsakes from the mid-1700s. Espada’s ongoing legacy lies in the blending of Spanish and American Indian lifeways on this sacred ground, creating a new people and culture. Though Spain lost its claim on the New World, its legendary presence remains. As you explore the site, look for the distinctive Spanish features of the church doorway, *espadaña* (belltower), brick archways, and flowing *acequias* (irrigation ditches).

First Mission in Texas

Espada’s roots lie in east Texas, where Spain founded Mission San Francisco de los Texas in 1690. Along with several others, it served as a buffer against French encroachment from Louisiana. Fevers, floods, fires, enemies, and limit-

ed supplies prompted several relocations of this early mission. On March 5, 1731, Mission San Francisco de la Espada was established along this bank of the San Antonio River.

Missions: Tools of Change

Imagine two diverse cultures – separated by language, values and faith – colliding and merging to create a unique mix.

Spanish Franciscan missionaries pursued a powerful vision for God and country. They aligned and trained the Coahuiltecan (kwa-weel-teken) hunting and gathering cultures to be servants of God and loyal, productive subjects of the Spanish monarchy.

Over a 50-year period, they earnestly taught the principles of farming, ranching, architecture, blacksmithing, loom weaving, spinning, and masonry. Espada was the only San Antonio mission where bricks and tiles were made. The Catholic faith and Spanish language became the foundation of the new culture.

Many Coahuiltecan, staggered by famine, imported diseases, enemy tribes, and strange intruders, opted for protection and steady food supply of Mission Espada. Here they mastered Spanish life – and embraced Christianity.

By the mid-1700’s, these mission walls echoed with the essence of a dynamic community: the blacksmith’s ringing anvil, bellowing livestock, three pounding looms, the clatter of carpentry, and the scrape of the brick maker. Imagine peach orchards and vast fields of beans, corn, and melons beyond the walls, and within, the hum of chants, prayers, and instructional conversations. Daily training and tasks were accomplished to the timing of the mission bells “*which clang out three times a day...startling in the still country air.*”

Community Changes

1794 Inventory	
8 yokes of oxen	3 pounds of steel
1 cow and calf	98 pounds of lead
4 horses	2 cannons
3 mules	25 pounds of iron
1,150 sheep	875 pounds of wood
2 looms	
a few spinning wheels	
1 pair shears per family	

In 1794, Espada began the process of secularization or the transformation to a church-based community. However, the mission was impoverished. Each of the remaining 15 families received land, but shared equipment and supplies.

In 1826, a band of Comanches raided the cornfields and killed the livestock. The same year, a kitchen fire destroyed most of the buildings; the chapel survived. Yet, people continued to make their home here.

Remains to be Seen

Today the church serves as the heart of this small community; mission descendants continue to worship here. Franciscans, clothed in their simple brown habits, work in the convento. A community assistance organization

operates on the site. The mute and fragile walls of today's Mission Espada stand as a testament to the enduring impact of the people who built and nurtured it.

Protect these historic stone structures by not climbing, standing, or sitting on them.

