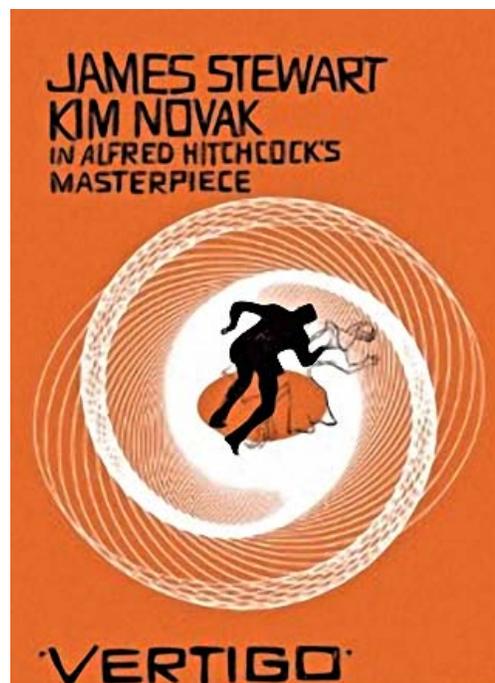




**California Missions**  
*Keeping the Past Present*

## California Stories

# Movies and the Missions



The California Stories are a collection of interesting and historical stories from early California and the California Missions written by David J. McLaughlin.



## Movies and the Missions

California and its historic missions have been featured in many movies beginning in 1819. The motion picture pioneer and director David W. Griffith was the first to discover that California's old Spanish missions were ideal settings for movies. In 1910 he filmed *Two Brothers*, starring Mary Pickford, at [Mission San Juan Capistrano](#). *Two Brothers* was only 17 minutes in length.



David W. Griffith  
(1875-1948)

Griffith began his career as an actor and writer for the theater in 1897, just as the new medium was emerging. He directed over 450 short, black and white silent films in the early 1900s, perfecting techniques that would ultimately make his epic *Birth of a Nation* (1915) a classic.

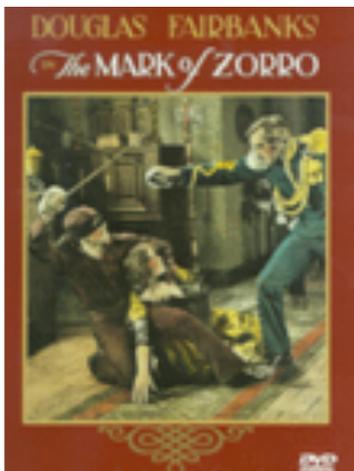
Shooting was delayed by days of rain, and Griffith, impatient, began work on his next project before *Birth of a Nation* was finished.

His next film was another mission era romance, *Ramona*, based on Helen Hunt Jackson's popular novel. This short silent film also starred Mary Pickford. *Ramona* was to be reintroduced several times. The beautiful Mexican actress Dolores del Rio starred in another silent film version in 1928. With the advent of sound movies and Technicolor, *Ramona* was reintroduced in 1936 to a new generation in a version starring Don Ameche and Loretta Young.



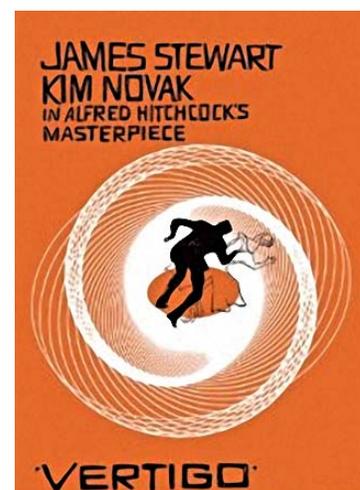


Another enduring story set in historic Old California that was destined for the movies was an adventure tale written by Johnstone McCulley. Titled *The Curse of Capistrano*, the story was serialized in a pulp fiction magazine in 1919. Mary Pickford recommended the story of *Don Diego de la Vega* to Douglas Fairbanks on their honeymoon trip to Europe. The motion picture version was renamed *The Mark of Zorro*. The movie opened at the Capital Theater in New York in 1920 where it enjoyed the largest single-day gross in movie history up to that time.



The Mark of Zorro spawned numerous offshoots. Fairbanks played both the father and son in a 1925 movie *Don Q, the Son of Zorro*. Republic Pictures made a serial *Zorro Rides Again* in 1937. Disney adapted the story for a TV series starring Guy Williams. It ran from 1957-1959. In 1992 Disney computer colorized 78 original episodes and replayed them on the Disney Channel. These movies and TV episodes often featured padres and mission backdrops patterned after the old Spanish missions, sometimes on location but usually on sets created in Hollywood.

Perhaps the most famous movie featuring the California missions was Alfred Hitchcock's acclaimed 1958 thriller *Vertigo*. Much of the movie was shot on location in San Francisco. It features prominent city landmarks: the California Palace of Legion of Honor, Fort Point at the Presidio, the Golden Gate Bridge... and two of the old Spanish missions. [San Francisco de Asis](#), better known as Mission Dolores, appears in a scene featuring the mission cemetery.





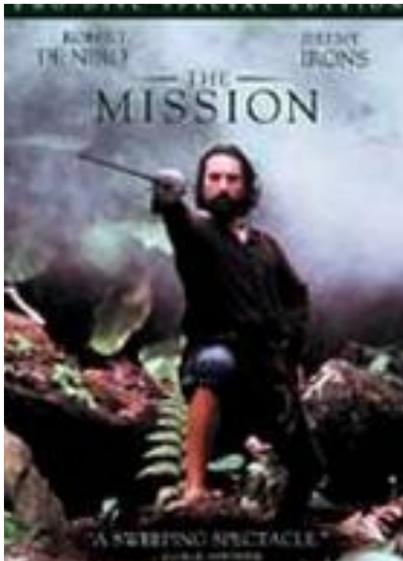
The other mission featured in *Vertigo* was [San Juan Bautista](#) in the town of that name, located about 90 miles south of San Francisco. *Vertigo* contains a number of captivating exterior scenes shot around the San Juan Bautista Mission, the 19th-century buildings and stables across from the mission and the town plaza (the only original Spanish Plaza left in California).

The bell tower where the mystery of *Vertigo* is revealed was created in Hollywood. Hitchcock modified a painting of the mission church, adding a tall tower. He then built a full-scale replica for the interior staircase shots and the belfry scene.



*Bell Tower For Vertigo*

The role of California's missions featured in movies faded in the last half of the 20th century as the old missions were restored and most became active Catholic churches again.



When a new version of *Mask of Zorro* was filmed in 1998 (Anthony Hopkins plays the aging Zorro, who teaches Antonio Banderas to become the new Zorro) it was shot at Hidalgo, Mexico and six other locations in Mexico.

The most notable recent film featuring the mission era was set in the Rio de la Plata region of South America. Appropriately titled *The Mission*, this 1986 movie starred Robert De Niro and Jeremy Irons. It was directed by Roland Joffé and has a hauntingly beautiful musical score by Ennio Morricone.



## California Missions

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The film is based on events that took place when Spain ceded part of South America to Portugal in the 1750 Treaty of Madrid. By this treaty, the Jesuits were forced to abandon the missions they had built to serve the Guarani Indians, who couldn't understand "why God had changed his mind." The film tells the tragic story of how the mission Indians and some of their Jesuit priests resisted the change and were crushed by overwhelming force.