



California Missions
Keeping the Past Present

California Stories

The Reluctant President



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



The Reluctant President

This is the compelling life story of Fermin Francisco de Lasuén, the second Father-President of the California Missions. All great organizations work hard to select the right top executive, particularly the individual who will succeed the founder and first great leader of any new venture. Sometimes, the individual best suited doesn't want the job.

One of the major figures in the early history of California was a Franciscan missionary, Fermin Francisco de Lasuén.

Fr. Lasuén, born in Vitoria in the Basque region of Spain, became a Franciscan in 1751 when he was only 14 years old. He volunteered for missionary duty (a ten-year commitment) at the age of 23. He was sent to New Spain to complete his education at the Apostolic College of San Fernando in Mexico City. Fr. Lasuén's first missionary assignment was in the Sierra Gorda where he served successfully for five years.

In 1768 he was part of a small elite band sent to Baja, California, where the missions were in disarray after the abrupt ejection of the Jesuits from all Spanish Territory. Even though Fr. Lasuén was one of the youngest missionaries in the Baja contingent, he was selected to become the sole missionary at remote Mission San Francisco de Borja, which had the largest population of all the Baja missions. After five years of struggle and considerable success, Fr. Lasuén had completed the ten years of missionary service he contracted for and expected to be sent back to San Fernando.



The next decade of his life brought one disappointment after another. Rather than being permitted to return to San Fernando, he was ordered to Alta California where he was “urgently needed”. But when he arrived, there was no assignment for him, and he was a supernumerary (an unassigned ‘extra’) for nineteen months. The governor of California, a fellow Basque, then asked that he be appointed Chaplain at the Monterey Peninsula, a controversial new position. His tenure was short-lived and the assignment caused a rift between him and Father-President Junípero Serra, who didn’t think the presidios should have chaplains.



Lasuén as a young missionary, a sculpture by Stephen Zakian, 1955

Finally in 1775, Fr. Lasuén was given a meaningful job - to establish a new mission at San Juan Capistrano. A few days after Lasuén founded the mission, on October 30, 1775, he received orders to abandon the effort and come immediately to the presidio of San Diego. The nearby mission of San Diego de Alcalá had been attacked, the resident priest killed, and the mission burned to the ground.

After more months as a supernumerary at San Luis Obispo, Fr. Lasuén was then asked to take on an assignment no one wanted - to re-establish Mission San Diego. It took several months of pleading from Fr. Serra and the direct intervention of the Guardian of San Fernando to persuade him to accept this assignment, which he did reluctantly, with the hope and expectation that after he got the mission functioning again, he would be able to leave California and return to the Apostolic College of San Fernando.



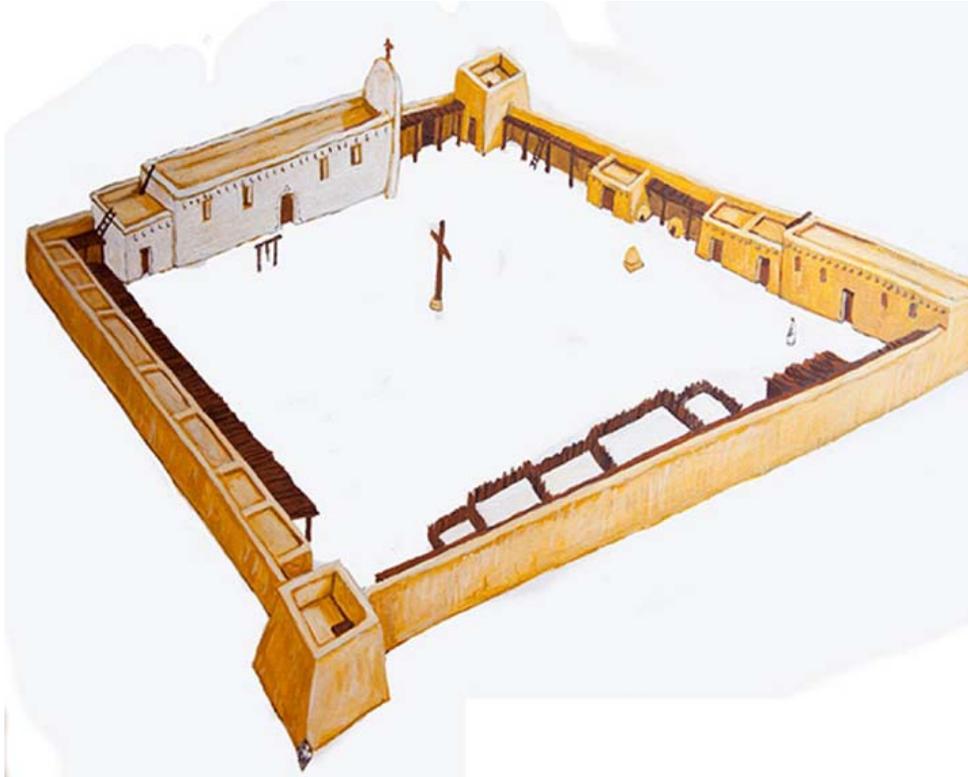
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What actually happened was that Fr. Lasuén served as the senior missionary at Mission San Diego for ten years. Over that period he did a brilliant job. He mended relationships with the natives, increased the mission population, built a substantial herd of livestock, increased agricultural output, and built a new mission complex.



*Mission San Diego, as it looked c. 1820
by Edith Buckland Webb (1877-1955)*



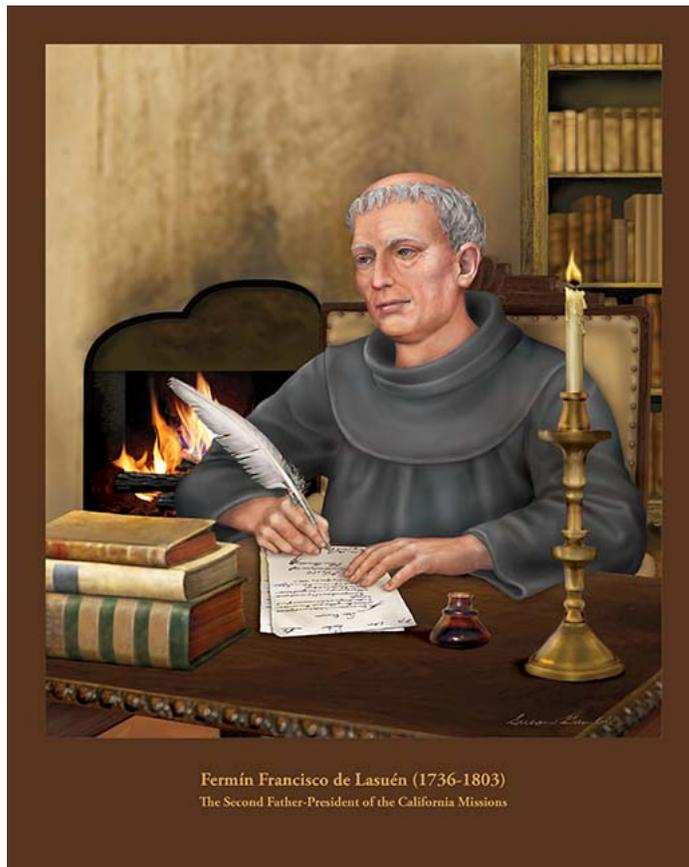
*The new mission complex at Mission San Diego, c.1870 after a drawing
by Dr. Jack Williams, © 2014 Pentacle Press LLC*

During these years, Fr. Lasuén also developed a close relationship with Father-President Junípero Serra, who became increasingly convinced that Fr. Lasuén was the best man to succeed him. Finally, in 1870 Fr. Lasuén accepted the role God had for him in life. He wrote: “I am determined to silence forever any urge to seek a different assignment.”

To no-one’s surprise, after Fr. Serra died, Fermín Francisco de Lasuén was elected the second Father-President of the California missions, a position he assumed in 1785 and performed superbly for eighteen years, longer than any other Father-President.



Under the leadership of this capable executive and inspiring leader the number of missions doubled (he founded nine more missions), the neophyte population increased four-fold, agricultural production soared, and the livestock count increased to the point where the missions became economically viable.



Father-President Lasuén in his mature years, a painting by Susan Gamble, © 2015 Pentacle Press LLC

Fr. Lasuén guided the California missions into their golden age, managed the missionaries with compassion and understanding, and remained a humble man who everyone called Padre Fermin.