Establishing Missions in San Antonio

Have you ever thought about who founded San Antonio? How did the city get its name? Maybe you have visited the Alamo or been to a mariachi mass at the San José Mission. These are some of the first places the Spanish built when they arrived.

Establishing Colonies

Four hundred years ago Spain owned half of the world. Spanish men explored new lands. They claimed them for the Spanish king. The Catholic religion was very important to the people. Franciscan priests arrived to start schools and churches.

Many Spanish settled in Mexico. They decided to colonize what is now Texas. The first expedition was in 1691. The explorers camped beside a river the Indians called “Yanaguana.” It was June 13, the feast day of Saint Anthony. The Spaniards renamed the river “el río de San Antonio de Padua” in his honor.

The Missions

The settlement on the river grew. It was important because it was the halfway point for people crossing Texas. Five missions were built along the banks of the river. They were places where Indians could be “Christianized.” The Spanish made the Indians Spanish citizens.

Life in the Missions

The Franciscan priests lived in convents at each mission. There were stables, blacksmiths and workshops where people made everything they needed. Each mission had its own granary and a rancho which provided people with meat. There were family gardens. People grew corn, beans, lentils, melons and sweet potatoes.

All the missions were built on a similar plan. There was a large center square with high walls. There was an entrance tower with a cannon and ammunition. At each corner, there was a swivel gun that could be turned in different directions. Enemy Indians often attacked the missions. The Spanish had to be able to protect themselves.

Everyone in the mission worked hard, but they also had time for fun. They dressed in colorful costumes for festivals. They enjoyed dancing and playing music.

The Missions Today

The missions were no longer part of the Catholic Church by 1824. However, they remain important to our city today. The San Antonio Missions National Historic Park manages the sites. Visitors come to the sites to learn about life in early San Antonio.