

# Santa Cruz anchored the Spaniards' settlement

*EDITOR'S NOTE: This occasional series traces the history of Santa Cruz in honor of the city's bicentennial year, marking the founding of Santa Cruz Mission in August, 1791.*

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IN 1769, SPANISH explorer Gaspar de Portola came north from San Diego to explore the Monterey Bay region. His party crossed a river on which the Indians had placed a ceremonial stuffed bird, and named it the Pajaro (the Spanish word for bird.) The next river crossing occurred on St. Lawrence Day, and that river was aptly named the San Lorenzo.

As members of the expedition later looked at what is now the Laurel Street Creek, the beauty of the surroundings led them to give the stream a special name — Santa Cruz, or holy cross.

One of the priests on the expedition, Juan Crespi, suggested in his diary that such a beautiful and abundant land would be “a neat place for a mission,” said Edna Kimbro of the Adobe Coalition and a local-history buff — using in her words, not his.

Twenty-two years later, Father Fermin Francisco de Lasuen, who had succeeded Junipero Serra as head of the missions in upper California, decided it also would be

a “neat” place to help maintain Spanish and church control of Monterey Bay.

Thus a mission — and a town — were born.

With the soldier-filled Presidio and growing mission in Monterey on one side of the bay, Santa Cruz would be the perfect strategic counterweight.

“If you had a thriving city on each side of the bay you could protect the bay,” said Kimbro, noting that the point of the missions was not just to Christianize the natives, but to spread Spanish colonial rule in the New World by creating new citizens.

“Monterey was their capital, and they wanted to protect it.”

The missions were an outgrowth of the needs of both the Spanish government and the Catholic Church, Kimbro said.

“Their (Spain’s) claim on California, they felt, was threatened because they didn’t have enough development here. . . . They didn’t have enough soldiers or colonists to people all the parts of the world that belonged to them. So they converted the natives to Christians to keep the huge empire going.”

The Spanish government asked the Catholic Church for help, and members of the Franciscan religious order, who were missionaries, took up the task for their own purpose: to spread the world of Christianity to the “heathens” of the New World.

So, in 1791, Lasuen ordered a party of



two priests and five soldiers be sent out from the nearby Santa Clara Mission over what is now Highway 17 to start Mission Santa Cruz.

On Aug. 28, the group officially planted a cross and held a ceremony. At first, the mission wasn’t to be built on the hill, but in the lowlands by the San Lorenzo River.

Kimbro, whose expertise in mission-style adobe buildings has led to a broader

knowledge of Santa Cruz history, said an advance party of converted Indians from Santa Clara had been sent ahead to create interest on the part of the Ohlones here for the coming Spanish.

“Sure enough, a good number of them showed up and they had a founding ceremony,” said Kimbro. “They officially planted a cross (and) a few weeks later came back with a few sheep and cows and started building.”

At first, the settlement was only a few jacals (shacks made with wooden poles and thatched roofs), said Kimbro. The Spanish planted a wheat field near what is now the Harvey West Industrial Park.

But the winter of 1791-92 was not kind, and the whole fledgling settlement was flooded.

“So they scratched their heads and said, hmmm,” said Kimbro. “They contacted the Carmel Mission to ask permission to move.”

Up the hill they went, and began building the adobe mission that was to be town government for the next 40-odd years.

Kimbro said the first thing built at the mission was sleeping quarters made of adobe with a veranda down the length of it. Part of the veranda was walled in, and that was where Mass was said until the church was built.

The Indians, said Kimbro, were bribed with trinkets to come and help. Although

there are reports of some dissatisfaction, there were no uprisings despite the fact the Indians far outnumbered the Spanish soldiers, she said.

In 1812, a priest who the Indians said mistreated them was killed, but the workers continued to help build the mission.

While the mission was going up, the Spaniards also created a town called Branciforte on the east side of the San Lorenzo.

Kimbro said they envisioned this to be a town for retired soldiers and their families, which would further stabilize their hold on Monterey Bay.

In 1834, Branciforte merged with the newly created non-secular town of Santa Cruz, although the state at first named the county Branciforte in 1850 — until unhappy residents forced a quick change.

Eventually, Mexico took over control of California from the Spanish, and ruled through numerous uprisings until it became part of the United States.

“What attracted Americans and the British to Santa Cruz was that it was the birthplace of the lumber industry in America,” said Kimbro. “Sailors jumped ship and lived up in the mountains.”

The Gold Rush brought a lot of Americans to California, and Santa Cruz produced food and wood to serve their needs. The lime industry also began to flourish, providing materials for many of the buildings going up in San Francisco.