

California Mission Vocabulary

Many Spanish words used at the missions have become part of our language today. Other words are useful to understand the missions themselves.

Adobe – a compound made of natural clay, straw, and sometimes dung. The mixture was usually pressed into molds and then baked in the sun to form durable bricks.

Alta California – literally, “upper California,” the Spanish name for the administrative area extending north from San Diego. Today this region is encompassed within the modern state of California.

Asistencia – a sub-mission, or mission extension. These met most of the requirements of a mission, but often did not have a resident *padre*.

Baja California – literally, “lower California,” the Spanish name for the administrative area south of San Diego. Today *Baja California* is one of the 31 states of modern Mexico.

Campanario – a bell wall or tower. *Campanarios* were prominent features of most missions.

Camposanto – a cemetery. The burials and grave markers in the mission *camposantos* provide a great deal of information for historians.

Chapel – a church, or place of worship. Many of the missions started with small chapels. Even when larger churches were built, a separate chapel was often maintained for use by the *padres*.

Convento – housing for members of the mission community. Convento may also refer to a hospice or guest house.

El Camino Real – literally “The Royal Road,” a trail linking the California Missions.

Estancia - literally a “station” - a ranch or farm built to provide food for a mission.

Franciscan – a member of the religious order that built the California Missions. The Franciscan order was founded by St. Francis of Assisi in 1209.

Fresco – a type of painting, applied to wet plaster, used to decorate many of the missions.

Friar – a member of a religious order. The missions were founded by *friars* of the *Franciscan* order. Most of the *friars* were not *padres*.

Ladrillo – a kind of flat tile, made of *adobe*, often used for roofing at the missions.

Lavanderia - literally a “laundry,” often used to refer to any place for washing and bathing.

Mission – a religious community. Twenty-one missions were built in *Alta California* by Spanish *padres* to spread the Catholic faith.

Neophyte – a convert to a religious order. When Indians joined the mission communities, they were considered *neophytes*.

Padre – literally, “father” – the Spanish word for a priest. Each of the missions had at least one *padre* in residence. *Asistencias* usually did not have their own *padre*, but they would be visited regularly by a *padre* from the main mission.

Plaza – a square, usually at the center of a town. Many missions were built around, or adjacent to a plaza.

Presidio – a military fort or prison. The California Mission system was paralleled by five *presidios*, which were intended to defend the Spanish lands and settlements in *Alta California*.

Pueblo – the Spanish word for a little town or village. The Spanish often used the word *pueblo* to refer to the Indian villages.

Rancho - the Spanish word for “ranch.” Many of the missions had extensive *ranchos* to provide beef and leather for the growing mission communities.

Vaquero – the Spanish word for “cowboy.” Many *vaqueros* were needed to work on the mission *ranchos*.