

Stop 21 – El Camino Real

It may have been called the King's Highway or Royal Road but traveling along El Camino Real was never easy. The 2,500 miles of roads that connected Mexico City to the outer territories of New Spain were unpaved, rugged trails. Travelers had to be patient. The route was slow and often elusive. The settlements along the Camino Real were distant with few or no rest areas to find comfort, water, or food. During the 18th and much of the 19th Century, travelers along the Camino Real journeyed under threat of Indian attack, rationed supplies, and sometimes severe weather conditions. Imagine traveling hundreds of miles with no road signs and only primitive maps. How would you navigate to your destination?

Settlers, missionaries, and soldiers journeyed along the Camino Real de Los Tejas from Monclova, Mexico in New Spain through Laredo, San Antonio, Nacogdoches, and into Louisiana. Parts of the original routes of the Camino Real followed established Indian trails, animal migration trails, and trade routes. The network of roads provided a channel for trade, cultural exchange, and communication between the Spanish and native communities of Texas. In times of surplus at the missions, cattle, crops, and cloth was exchanged for metals, tobacco, chocolate and other special items. The arteries of the Camino Real kept Texas alive and helped it grow.

Beginning in the 1820s, more than 130 years after it was first blazed by Spanish explorers, travelers from the United States came into New Spain and then Mexico, and then the Republic of Texas, along the Camino Real. El Camino Real de los Tejas is today's Highway 21. The road from San Antonio to Nacogdoches in East Texas is marked at five mile intervals by granite markers donated by the Daughters of the American Revolution in 1918. Look for these markers beginning near Mission Concepcion at Mission Rd and Mission Espada at Espada Rd and Loop 410. In 2004 El Camino Real de los Tejas was designated a National Historic Trail.