

Stop 8 – Handing Over the Mission

It was a momentous day at Mission San Juan – July 14th, 1794...the day control of the sacred community passed from missionary to local authority. The church became the spiritual center of a civilian community. They called the process secularization. Giving control to the natives was always in the mission plan. Originally, Spanish authorities intended natives to adapt and build a thriving Spanish pueblo or town within just ten years of first contact with missionaries. However, secularization of the San Antonio missions began more than 60 years after their founding.

Only 12 Indian families lived at Mission San Juan when partial secularization began. The families drew their land parcels in a lottery. Land was measured in *suertes*, or the amount of land that could be watered in one day. *Suerte* also means luck or chance.

By the time of secularization the population had dwindled from its peak of 250 Indians to just 36. Livestock had once numbered over 4,000. By 1794 only 55 cattle remained. Livestock, farm implements, carpenter, blacksmith, and other trade tools were divided among the families.

Apache and Comanche raids along with confiscation of cattle by the Spanish crown reduced the population. Spanish settlers established homesteads, farms, and ranches in the surrounding mission areas. Some of the haciendas were large enough to be considered villages. Land disputes between settlers, missionaries, and natives were common from mission establishment through modern times. By 1814 the Mission was practically destitute and only 15 Indians remained. By 1831, the 100th anniversary of its founding, all remaining property of Mission San Juan was sold at auction.