Situating Mission Santa Clara de Asis: 1776–1851, Documentary and Material Evidence of Life on the Alta California Frontier: A Timeline
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Academy of American Franciscan History, Berkeley, 2006. 483 pp., 51 figs., index, $35.00 cloth.

Between 1920 and 1934, the noted historian Father Zephyrin Engelhardt, O.F.M., compiled his celebrated histories of the individual California missions. Each volume was packed with documentary information, including demographic and economic tables, that makes these works still useful today. Engelhardt was only able to complete about three-fourths of these local histories before his death. Unfortunately, Mission Santa Clara, one of the most successful Franciscan establishments in California, was never the subject of a completed manuscript. Noting the absence of a traditional history of Santa Clara, Professor Skowronek realized the need to focus attention on the mission, which has been subject to rapid change and development both on campus and in the surrounding area. Skowronek decided to go much farther and create more than a superficial outline of Mission Santa Clara’s history. This volume is truly multidimensional in its scope, wedding archaeological research, ethnographic accounts, and oral histories to a wide variety of original documentary sources. In many cases, this is the first time that the primary documents have been assembled in one place and published in a single volume. In this respect, Skowronek has provided an infinitely more useful volume to researchers of Santa Clara than Engelhardt would have done had he finished his Santa Clara manuscript.

Santa Clara Mission has a very complex history. The mission church was situated at five different locations at various periods. The neophyte population consisted of a mixture of local Ohlones, and some Yokuts and Sierra Miwok from the east. Skowronek begins his volume with a concise summary of the local Ohlone people, derived from archaeological, ethnographic and historical sources. He discusses both prehistoric society and native life at the mission in a fair and balanced manner.

The remainder of the book is organized into chronological periods, from the mission’s founding in 1777 to the departure of the Franciscans in 1851. In each chapter, documents of the period appear at the appropriate time. Such organization makes the volume an invaluable source book to researchers. Explorers’ accounts, inventories, correspondence, questionnaires, and reports each inform the reader about particular years. Each year is prefaced by a brief statement about world events that affected Spanish California, causing the yearly entry to assume a context within a larger picture. Copious illustrations illuminate sections discussing places, objects, and personalities. Though Skowronek does not claim that the materials included are totally comprehensive, the volume represents the most thorough collection of hard-to-find source materials for any mission. It even includes the statistical information for which Engelhardt was famous.

Mission Santa Clara is a truly multicultural urban site, continuously occupied by various ethnic groups for over 220 years. Understanding events following secularization in 1836, first under Mexico and then under the United States, is vitally important to modern researchers who seek to understand the “flow of history” and the nature of modifications to the original site. Most published accounts of other missions, including those of Engelhardt, only provide sketchy accounts of this period at best. Skowronek gives equal attention to this critical period in the decline of the missions, demonstrating how the mission priests were instrumental in the founding of the City of Santa Clara in 1847. In 1851, Mission Santa Clara was transferred from the Franciscans to the custody of the Society of Jesus as a parish church. A detailed inventory of the contents of the still extant buildings provides us with a wealth of information on the details of mission life.
In summarizing the Santa Clara story, Skowronek notes that the original educational function of the mission has been continued today by a university of 8,000 modern “neophytes” preparing for lives in a changing world. The story of the later lives of the 1,000 native neophytes at Santa Clara in 1836 still needs further research. The author urges more study on this topic.

The volume is in the attractive format of the Academy of American Franciscan History. Organized for ease as a reference work, the volume contains many documents and illustrations that have never before been published. Useful appendices on the five Santa Clara churches, a glossary, and an index add to its value. Skowronek remains throughout a lucid and engaging writer, drawing on a wealth of knowledge accumulated over the last 16 years. The multidimensional approach of the book makes it valuable to archaeologists, historians, and the interested public. It is a book that all persons interested in this period will want in their libraries; one that can serve as an excellent model for studies of other Spanish mission sites.

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Mission Santa Clara de AsÃ­s is a Spanish mission founded by the Franciscan order in the present-day city of Santa Clara, California. The mission, which was the eighth in California, was founded on January 12, 1777. Named for Saint Clare of Assisi, the founder of the order of the Poor Clares and an early companion of St. Francis of Assisi, this was the first California mission to be named in honor of a woman. Archaeology at Santa Clara de AsÃ­s: the slow rediscovery of a moveable mission. Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly 33(3): 54â€“92. Google Scholar. Skowronek, R. K., Thompson, E., and Johnson, V. (2006). Situating Mission Santa Clara de AsÃ­s, 1776â€“1851, Documentary and Material Evidence of Life on the Alta California Frontier: A Timeline, Academy of American Franciscan History, Berkeley. Google Scholar. Skowronek, R. K., Blackman, M. J., and Bishop, R. L. (2009).