

Tucson History Series

This is the third of a six-part series on the history of Tucson. Author Bob Ring challenged himself to capture the “what,” “when”, and “how” of the important events that shaped Tucson’s development. Here’s the series schedule:

Part 1: Tucson’s First Residents: Hunter-Gatherers to Farmers

Part 2: The Hohokam and Descendants

Part 3: Spanish Missionaries

Part 4: The Spanish/Mexican Presidio

Part 5: Tucson in U.S. Territory

Part 6: Tucson in the State of Arizona

Part 3 - Spanish Missionaries

1694 to 1775

By the early 1690s, Spanish colonial policy had been in operation in Mexico for almost 175 years, with Spanish control and influence steadily expanding northward from central Mexico. According to historian Henry F. Dobins in *Spanish Colonial Tucson*, “Colonial officials relied heavily on missionaries to concentrate scattered native populations at a relatively few mission sites” to foster farming and stock-raising, while preparing natives to “become tribute-paying subjects of the Crown.” The missionary effort in northern Mexico and southern Arizona was assigned to the Roman Catholic religious order, the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits.

Jesuits

Destined to play a key role in southern Arizona, in lands formerly occupied by the Hohokam, Jesuit missionary Father Eusebio Kino became the first European to explore the Santa Cruz Valley.

In 1692 when Father Kino first visited the Sobaipuri (related to Pima) village of *Bac*, about seven miles south of Tucson, he found over 800 natives, farming irrigated fields.

When he traveled further north in 1694, Kino found another Sobaipuri village called *Schookson* (later named Tucson by the Spanish) - on the west side of the Santa Cruz River at the foot of A-Mountain. Three years later on another visit, he counted 750 people living in 186 houses stretched out along the river.

At *Schookson*, Father Kino saw that from a combination of the free-flowing river, tapping underground flows in river marshes, plus natural springs in the marshes, the natives irrigated their crops, using canals probably left behind by the Hohokam. Between A-Mountain and the Rillito River, on the east bank of the river, the Sobaipuris also irrigated crops in the floodplain. They probably grew corn, beans, squash, melons, and cotton.

Father Kino established more than 20 missions in Mexican Sonora and south-central Arizona, earning the respect of the natives, his fellow missionaries, and his superiors. He founded Mission San Xavier del Bac in 1692 as the northern-most Jesuit mission in southern Arizona.

Between 1694 and his death in 1711, Kino rarely visited Tucson. Other priests from San Xavier and missions farther south occasionally visited Tucson, but with little effect on the religious conversion of the natives.

But, in the words of anthropologist Thomas E. Sheridan, other “events ... truly revolutionized human society in Arizona.” Father Kino introduced wheat, cattle, horses and mules to the natives along the Santa Cruz River. Other Jesuit missionaries introduced barley, peaches and sheep to complement the native summer crops and wild food resources. The seeds for better agriculture and ranching had been planted.

According to anthropologist Sheridan, “the most important impetus to Spanish settlement” was a silver strike in 1736 in northern Mexican Sonora that resulted in a large migration of Spanish fortune seekers into south-central Arizona. In addition to mining, some of these adventurers were impressed by the fertile Santa Cruz Valley and stayed to farm or start cattle ranches. This brought the interlopers into land conflicts with native Pimas who were already chaffing at perceived harsh treatment by Jesuit missionaries.

In 1751 the Pimas revolted against Spanish control across northern Sonora and south-central Arizona, affecting natives as far north as San Xavier del Bac. Following the deaths of two Spanish missionaries, and over a hundred settlers and peaceful natives, the Spanish military defeated a large force of Native Americans and peace was negotiated.

The next year in 1752, the Spanish set up a fort or presidio, at Tubac to protect Spanish interests in the Santa Cruz Valley. This was the first permanent Spanish settlement in Arizona.

The first attempt at establishing a permanent mission in Tucson occurred in 1757 when German-born Jesuit Bernhard Middendorff arrived, accompanied by ten soldiers to provide security. But after only five months, Middendorff was driven out by the natives and he fled to Mission San Xavier del Bac, with Tucson reverting to the status of a “branch” mission.

Meanwhile a new force had moved into southern Arizona from the Great Plains, a force that would have a far ranging impact on Spanish colonialism and Tucson. Since the late 1600s, fierce, warlike Apaches had been harassing the Spanish and more peaceful Native Americans, including the eastern Sobaipuris living along the San Pedro River.

With the Sobaipuris much reduced in numbers, in 1762 Spanish Colonial officials, trying to strengthen their northern frontier, ordered Spanish troops to relocate the Sobaipuris from their native land to existing missions to the west. About 250 Sobaipuri came to Tucson. One unfortunate result of this move was the removal of a barrier to Apache plundering to the south and west.

Then suddenly in 1767, King Charles III of Spain expelled the Jesuits from the Americas because their model of independent mission communities didn't fit Spain's emerging desire to exploit their colonial lands and native labor for private gain. For Tucson, nearly 70 years of sporadic Jesuit missionary visits had not had much effect on the natives.

Franciscans

King Charles ordered another Catholic religious order, the Franciscan College of the Holy Cross, to operate the northern Sonora and south-central Arizona missions. The Franciscans assigned Spanish-born friar, Fray Francisco Garcés, to the San Xavier del Bac Mission and the associated natives at Tucson. Immediately after arriving in 1768, Fray Garcés began splitting his time between *Bac* and Tucson, for the first time providing a continuing religious presence for the natives in Tucson.

After the native village of *Bac* suffered three attacks by Apaches in 1768 and 1769, the military commander at the Spanish presidio in Tubac, Capt. Juan Bautista de Anza, ordered that Tucson natives build a protective wall for their village. Under military supervision, the native Tucsonans completed an adobe structure with towers in early 1771 and later that year a church. This was the first European-style construction at Tucson.

Fray Garcés dedicated the new church to Saint Augustine, thus christening Mission San Agustin del Tucson.

In 1772 Spanish officials began thinking about building new presidios and relocating others to provide a "unified line of defense" against British and Russian interests in the northwest. Spanish soldier, Irish mercenary, Colonel Hugo O'Connor was given the responsibility of selecting the sites.

On August 20, 1775, O'Connor announced his decision to move the presidio at Tubac to Tucson. He apparently recognized Tucson's advantages of established missions at *Bac* and Tucson; ample water, pastures, and wood; and the Native American population, rich fields, and orchards. The site for the new presidio was to be on the east terrace of the Santa Cruz River, opposite the Native American village and Mission San Agustin del Tucson - where downtown Tucson is today.

Just after O'Connor made his decision, Juan Batista de Anza, accompanied by Fray Garcés and many of the troops from the Tubac presidio, departed on an expedition to California, where Anza established the first Spanish colony at San Francisco. Short of manpower, the construction of the presidio in Tucson proceeded slowly.

When the California expedition returned in late 1776, having pioneered the future road west along the Gila River, the troops moved into the incomplete new presidio at Tucson.

Thus, at the same time that America was proclaiming its independence from England, 2300 miles to the east in Philadelphia, Tucson was reborn as a Spanish settlement.

Garcés continued his ministry at *Bac* and Tucson through 1779, before moving on to other missions on the Spanish colonial frontier. In 1881 he was killed along the Colorado River by Yuma Indians rebelling against harsh Spanish treatment.

Sources: Arizona: A Cavalcade of History (Marshall Trimble, 1989), Arizona: A Celebration of the Grand Canyon State (Jim Turner, 2011), Arizona: A History (Thomas E. Sheridan, 2012), Cultural History of the Tucson Basin (J. Homer Thiel and Michael W. Diehl, 2004), Islands in the Desert: A History of the Uplands of Southeastern Arizona (John P. Wilson, 1995), Spanish Colonial Tucson (Henry F. Dobyns, 1976), A Thousand Years of Irrigation in Tucson (Jonathan B. Mabry and Homer Thiel, 1995), www.discoverseaz.com: Hispanic Culture, Spanish Missions.



Father Eusebio Kino was commemorated in this statue by Julian Martinez, located at the intersection of 15th Street and Kino Avenue. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



This statue of Tucson founder, Irishman Hugo O'Connor, complete with red hair, by Sierra Vista sculptor Brian Donahue, stands in front of the historic Manning House in downtown Tucson. (Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)