

Tucson History Series

This is the fourth 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 4 - The Spanish/Mexican Presidio

1775 to 1854

Spanish soldier, Irish mercenary, Colonel Hugo O’Conor became the father of Tucson on August 20, 1775 when, with the authority from Spanish officials, he decided to move the presidio at Tubac to Tucson, as part of Spain’s strategy to strengthen its defense of New Spain. But construction of the new presidio proceeded slowly due to a shortage of soldiers, many of whom were with Captain Juan Batista de Anza on his long expedition from Tubac to northern California. The first soldiers didn’t move to the Tucson presidio until late 1776. The fort was not finished until May 1783, completed after revitalized efforts following a disastrous attack by Apache raiders in May 1782.

Spanish Period

The presidio was located where downtown Tucson is today, bounded approximately by Pennington Street on the south, Church Avenue on the east, Washington Street on the north, and Main Avenue on the west. The adobe walls were three feet thick at the base and ten to twelve feet high, along a huge square about 700 feet on a side. There were square towers at the northeast and southwest corners, a main gate at the center of the west wall, and a smaller gate on the east side. The commandant’s house was in the center, a chapel along the east wall, and the interior walls were lined with stables, warehouses, and eventually, homes for some of the soldiers.

The practical mission of the Tucson presidio was to counter the threat of Apache raiders. Captain Pedro Allande became commandant of the fort in 1777, and through 1784, defended the presidio against four direct Apache attacks and conducted relentless campaigns against the Apache in their own territory.

In the mid-1780s, Spain adopted a new Apache policy by encouraging the natives to settle near presidios and trading posts, where they would be “rewarded” with food rations, spirits, and (inferior) weapons. The plan worked - for the first time there was peace on the frontier. Tucson acquired its first Apache

residents in 1787, when about 100 men, women, and children built their wickiups beside the Santa Cruz River at the northern end of the presidio.

Spanish settlers, attracted by the relative safety of the Tucson presidio, soon arrived to farm the banks of the Santa Cruz River, to mine in the surrounding hills, and to graze cattle. Spanish and Native American farmers grew corn, wheat, vegetables, and cultivated fruit orchards in irrigated fields. Foreshadowing future problems, there was competition for water, leading to agreements that increasingly favored the presidio over the Native Americans.

For the last 30 years of the Spanish empire in Mexico (1790-1821), the Santa Cruz Valley and Tucson flourished. Awe-inspiring churches were built at the missions of San Jose de Tumacácori and San Xavier del Bac. A massive two-story *convento* (general purpose building) was built near the Mission San Agustin del Tucson along with a four-acre walled garden to supply fruits and vegetables to the presidio and adjoining natives.

Tucson's population grew slowly, reaching about 1,000 in 1819, including a full complement of about 100 soldiers, plus Native Americans, settlers, and priests.

But big changes were brewing. Spain, the world's richest and most powerful nation, was in decline and its empire was breaking up; European wars had taken their toll. In 1810 Mexicans started a revolution to achieve their freedom. Finally in 1821 the Mexican War of Independence ended with Mexico free after 300 years of Spanish colonialism.

Mexican Period

After achieving independence, Mexico suffered a financial depression. Frontier colonization efforts suffered greatly, including those in the Santa Cruz Valley and the Tucson presidio. There was a shortage of men and resources. The presidio fell into disrepair. Church buildings were neglected, including Mission San Agustin del Tucson, abandoned in 1831, and the majestic *convento*, finally abandoned in 1843.

Old alliances between Spain and the natives ended. There were no rations for the peaceable Apaches, so they left the proximity of the Tucson presidio and resumed raiding. Meanwhile the population of the peaceful O'odham natives in the Santa Cruz Valley was declining drastically due to diseases brought by the Europeans and Apache depredations.

The Mexican economy slowly improved. Mexico continued Spain's policy of providing land grants in southern Arizona, drawing new farmers and ranchers. Mexicans also claimed abandoned O'odham lands adjoining the missions along the Santa Cruz River – a veritable “land grab,” according to anthropologist Thomas E. Sheridan.

Mexico encouraged trade with the “western” United States; soon trade routes were established between Missouri settlements and New Mexico, and eventually southern Arizona. Fur trappers started operating along Arizona rivers in the 1820s; some visited Tucson. Tucson was beginning to be noticed by the United States.

By the mid-1840s, the Mexican depression was over and Mexican Army forces occupied the Tucson presidio.

Farming continued as the main Tucson industry. Additional Mexican settlers began arriving from the south. Winter crops of wheat, barley, chickpeas, lentils, and garlic followed the summer crops of corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, chili peppers, tobacco and cotton. Irrigation schedules were set by an elected overseer. Mexican ranchers irrigated cattle pastures in the valley south of Tucson.

In 1846 Mexico went to war with the land-hungry United States over disagreements about the ownership of Texas and California. American forces quickly occupied New Mexico and California and then mounted a resupply mission to California from New Mexico. That expedition – the first to use wagons on a transcontinental journey - was accomplished by the famous Mormon Battalion under Lieutenant Colonel Philip St. George Cooke. They passed through Tucson and then westward along the Gila River on the trail traveled 70 years earlier by Juan Batista de Anza.

The Mexican-American War ended in 1848 with Mexico ceding lands to the U.S. for \$15 million that included Texas and the future states of California, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, New Mexico, and the part of Arizona north of the Gila River.

Contacts between Mexican Tucson and Americans increased dramatically when gold was discovered in California in 1848. Tens of thousands of American gold seekers traveled west through Tucson in 1849 and 1850 to reach the California gold fields.

Soon a growing colony of Americans had settled in Tucson – attracted by local mining and ranching possibilities. Tucson was transforming to a small town. Development – including homes, businesses and stores - had expanded outside the walls of the presidio. Apaches were still a menace but stayed away because of the troops. According to Tucson historian C. L. Sonnichsen, Tucson was “Not a bustling town yet, but it was beginning to stir.”

In 1854, completing a deal to secure lands for a southern transcontinental railroad, the United States Congress approved the Gadsden Purchase; the U.S. paid Mexico \$10 million for southern Arizona.

Tucson now belonged to America!

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), Spanish Colonial Tucson (Henry F. Dobyns, 1976), A Thousand Years of Irrigation in Tucson (Jonathan B. Mabry and Homer Thiel, 1995), Tucson: The Life and Times of an American City (C. L. Sonnichsen, 1982), www.discoverseaz.com: Hispanic Culture



Tucson Origins Heritage Park recently completed the Presidio San Agustin del Tucson interpretive center at the southwest corner of Church Avenue and Washington Street. This is a restoration of the presidio's northeast tower. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)



Reconstruction of the San Agustin Mission Garden is underway on its original location at the foot of A-Mountain by Friends of Tucson's Birthplace. (Courtesy of Bob Ring)