The Mission-Presidio System

A mission was a settlement set up in Indian Territory. Friars started these missions. Friars are members of the clergy who belonged to religious groups called orders. They invited Indians to live at the mission. There the friars taught them about Christianity and the language and customs of Spain. They also taught them Spanish farming methods.

The goal of the mission was to transform Native Americans into Christians and loyal Spanish subjects. Missionaries believed that this task would take about ten years to complete. They hoped that once they reached this goal, they would move on, leaving behind a Spanish settlement. This system had worked well in Mexico, and Spain’s leaders hoped that the same system would work in Texas. Thus, mission by mission, Texas would become “Spanish.”

A presidio protected the mission. Presidios were forts that offered safety from unfriendly Indians. They also helped control the Native Americans in the missions. Soldiers from the presidio caught Indians who ran away from the mission.

The Spanish government paid the missionaries. It also paid the costs of starting the missions and the presidios. The missions were supposed to become completely self-supporting.
The First Missions in Texas

In the 1680s the Spanish tried to settle Texas. In 1682, they built the mission of Corpus Christi de la Ysleta among the Tigua people. This mission was set up near present-day El Paso. About one year later, Spain set up missions near present-day Presidio. However, there were no Spanish settlers in East Texas. La Salle’s arrival along the Gulf coast changed that. It turned Spain’s mission efforts in Texas towards the east.

Tejas Mission: The search for LaSalle’s fort in 1689 brought the Spanish in contact with local Indians. These were Hasinai people, who were a group of Caddo Indians. The Spanish called them Tejas. *Tejas* was derived from a Caddoan word for “friend.” It is from this word that Texas takes its name.

In 1690, Alonso de Leon, who had led the LaSalle search the year before, returned to East Texas with Father Damian Massanet. They established the first mission in East Texas. Named San Francisco de los Tejas, it was located 20 miles northeast of present-day Crockett in what is now northeastern Houston County. Shortly afterward, Spanish friars started a second mission in East Texas called Santisimo Nombre de Maria. At first, the local Tejas welcome the Spanish. But in no time, things changed.

Mission Failure: The Hasinai never fully took to the teaching of the friars. The Spanish soldiers treated them with disrespect. Also, many Hasinai became sick with diseases carried by the Spanish. These illnesses were especially deadly to Indians because they had no resistance to them, and many died. Then a series of floods destroyed the Indians’ crops. The Hasinai blamed these events on the Spanish and plotted to kill them. The Spanish decided to abandon the missions and head west. Before leaving, the friars buried the mission bells and destroyed the mission.
1700s and St. Denis in Texas

Spain had built its first missions in East Texas in response to LaSalle’s efforts to claim Texas for France. In the 1700s, the actions of another Frenchman led to more Spanish missions. That man was Louis Juchereau de St. Denis.

St. Denis in Texas: In 1711, a Spanish missionary named Father Francisco Hidalgo wrote to the French governor of Louisiana. He asked for the governor’s help in building more missions among the Caddo Indians in East Texas. The governor sent St. Denis to help Father Hidalgo.

On his way to Texas, St. Denis built the trading post of Natchitoches on the Red River in western Louisiana. He then traveled through Texas to the Spanish mission of San Juan Bautista on the Rio Grande. The Spanish officials were shocked that this Frenchman had traveled through Texas unstopped. They quickly arrested him. While he was under house arrest, he convinced the Spanish to allow him to continue his planned missionary work.

St. Denis then traveled through East Texas along with Father Hidalgo and established six Spanish missions and a presidio. One of these missions was Los Adaes, near present-day Robeline, Louisiana. This was only about 15 miles from the French settlement at Natchitoches. The Spanish decided to make Los Adaes the capital of the province of Texas. This would help them keep an eye on French activity in the area.
1700s and the Chicken War

In 1719, Spain and France went to war with each other in Europe. This war spread to their colonies in the New World. The Spanish missions in East Texas had few soldiers to protect them against French soldiers. As a result, a small group of French soldiers raided the mission at Los Adaes. Apart from some frightened missionaries, the French soldiers found little there besides some chickens, which they took. The squawking chickens frightened the French soldiers’ horses. In the confusion, a mission priest escaped and reported the attack. People began calling this raid the chicken war.

The French attack was more comic than threatening. Yet, when Spanish missionaries and soldiers heard of it, they panicked. They retreated all the way to the missions at San Antonio de Valero. They abandoned East Texas missions once more.

San Antonio de Valero

The events of the Chicken War show the importance of the mission of San Antonio de Valero. One year before the war, a Spanish expedition went to Texas to find a good halfway point between the Rio Grande and East Texas. The Spanish picked an area on the San Antonio River and built Mission San Antonio de Valero.

The site offered many benefits. One early visitor of the region described the area as “...very desirable [for settlement] and favorable for its pleasantness, location, abundance of water and multitude of fish.” The Spanish soon built a presidio nearby called San Antonio de Bexar. Over time, San Antonio- or Bexar- proved to be one of the most important communities in Spanish Texas.

By 1721, the war between Spain and France was over. The Spanish government wished to regain control of East Texas. The Marques de San Miguel de Aguayo led this effort. First, Aguayo rebuilt the old missions. Then he founded more missions and presidios, including La Bahia. (This settlement moved twice. It eventually became present-day Goliad.)
1700s and Santa Cruz de San Saba Mission

Spanish missions faced raids by Indians. Lipan Apaches, Comanches, Wichitas, and Tonkawas attacked the Spaniards. Lipans took many Spanish lives. They also stole horses and cattle. This conflict increased, in part, because the Comanches from the north were pushing south into the areas in which the Lipans lived. The Lipans in turn, moved south into the paths of the Spanish.

In 1749, the Lipans and the Spanish made peace. The Spanish planned to build a mission for the Lipans. The Lipans agreed to convert to Christianity if the Spanish protected them from the Comanches.

Santa Cruz San Saba Mission: The Spanish built Santa Cruz de San Saba Mission for the Lipan Apaches. They also built a presidio to protect the mission. However, the Lipans had the Spanish set up the mission in Comanche territory, hoping to start a war between the Comanches and the Spanish.

The Lipan Apaches never really lived at the mission. Yet in 1758, about 2,000 Comanches, Wichitas and Tonkawas came in search of the Lipans. They burned down the mission and killed most of the missionaries. The friars never rebuilt the mission. The presidio, however, remained for a number of years.

The Spanish made one more attempt to build a mission among the Lipan Apaches. This was near present-day Camp Wood, on the upper Nueces River. Again, the mission was unable to protect the Lipan from enemy attack. The mission failed. As a result, the Spanish stopped working with the Lipan Apaches. All sides remained more or less hostile.