Between 1697 and 1834, Catholic padres from Spain established 51 missions along the west coast of North America. These missions stretched from the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula to the Sonoma Valley north of San Francisco Bay. The earliest missions were built close to a presidio (military fort) to protect the new Spanish settlers. While the mission settlements existed to spread Christianity to California Indians, they also strengthened Spain’s territorial claims in the New World. With the help of Indian workers, the Spaniards introduced European livestock, vegetables, fruits, and industry to this region. However, European diseases introduced to California caused the Indian populations to decline sharply.

**Image below:** Father Junipero Serra founded Mission San Carlos Borroméo de Carmelo in 1770. The missions served as centers of religious life in Spanish California. This particular mission is still in use by the local community.
El Camino Real, or The Royal Road, connects 21 Spanish Missions that were built in Alta California. Beginning in San Diego in 1769, Spain built missions all along the California coast until 1823. Each mission site was carefully selected, and when they were all built they were no more than a long day’s horse ride apart from each other. The Spanish looked for sites that were close to the coast, had reliable fresh water sources, and supplied wood for fires and construction. They also looked for level land with good soil for growing crops and raising livestock. The natural landscapes on mission lands were soon replaced with agriculture and other businesses. These settlements forever changed the Indian way of life.

**Image below:** Mission San Diego de Alcalá was the first mission built by the Spanish in what is now California. Native Americans attempted a revolt against the Spanish here in 1775. This painting of the mission is from 1848, shortly before the mission fell into ruin.