

EARLY EPIDEMICS IN CALIFORNIA MISSIONS

When Europeans invaded California, they brought devastatingly infectious diseases with them. These diseases spread rapidly among Native peoples, and became the earliest recorded epidemics in the Golden State.

Throughout history, Indigenous Californians were relatively free of serious disease. Illnesses in the Americas tended to be chronic and episodic, rather than acute and epidemic like in Europe. But when Europeans arrived in the region, these explorers and colonists carried a number of new viruses and bacteria with them when they arrived.

The consequences were disastrous for Native American people, who lacked natural immunity to such illnesses. **Within just a few generations, European-borne diseases led to a swift decline in the number of Native people in California: approximately 350,000 people in 1769 to under 100,000 people by 1836.**

Epidemics often started or spread through missions.

The Spanish founded 21 of these religious outposts beginning in 1769, and forced many Indigenous people to live and work at the missions. **In these crowded, unsanitary living conditions, Native Californians frequently contracted infections** like the flu, dysentery, smallpox, diphtheria, and chickenpox. Frequent travel between missions easily spread these diseases.



A group of Native Californians and teachers at Mission San Diego, c. 1880. Courtesy UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library. Frank B. Rodolph Photograph Collection Album 15 : BANC PIC 1905.17160-PIC.

An infected Spanish sailor brought smallpox to Native Americans in California when he visited the San Diego mission. Entire villages fell victim. Out of the seven Native villages located nearby, only one remained post-epidemic.

One of the worst epidemics began in 1806: the measles. The virus attacked Native Californians from San Francisco to Santa Barbara. Excessive

manual labor demands and poor nutrition contributed to the measles' devastating effects. The epidemic likely also caused psychological harm, as Native peoples grappled with the fact that their traditional medicines and healing efforts were ineffective in curing the disease.



Mission San Carlos Borromeo del Río Carmelo, first built in 1797. Wood engraving, 1852, F. Gleason publisher. California State Library Collection.

Nota de las Medicinas para Misiones		
S.º 1.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 2.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 3.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 4.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 5.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 6.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
S.º 7.º 1/2 lb. de Opio		
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Nota de las medicinas para misiones (Register of Medicines for the Missions), 1811. This document records the medications sent to the Alta California missions by the Colegio de San Fernando in Mexico City in November of 1811, including the quantity and the cost.

The diverse list includes opium, myrrh, syrups (lemon, carnation and cider), ether, mercury ointment, fir oil, orange peels, chia, ipepacuana and quina. Mission Santa Clara Manuscript Collection, Santa Clara University Library, Archives & Special Collections.

These early epidemics continue to leave their mark on Native peoples' immune systems. A recent study suggests that the impacts of smallpox, measles, and other European-introduced diseases permanently altered the immune systems of Native Californians at the genetic level.