

Patronato San Xavier Docent Manual

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PSX Mission Statement:

Patronato San Xavier funds and directs ethical conservation, conducts scientific research, and conveys the significance of Mission San Xavier del Bac, a National Historic Landmark in the community of Wa:k, part of the Tohono O’odham Nation.

Docent Program Essentials

Training Overview

Week 1: Welcome!	Week 2: Meet with Mentor	Week 3: Q+A	Week 4: Practice your Tour	Week 5: Final Preparations
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introductions to docent program, PSX, San Xavier del Bac• Assign a Docent Mentor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Arrange a time(s) to meet with Docent mentor• Shadow a tour on site with mentor	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Check in with Staff on Zoom• Bring questions!	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present your tour to Staff (virtually)• Be ready to receive and incorporate notes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Present for your peers!• Fingerprinting, When2Help login, schedule sign up

Docent training will be led by staff with current docents acting as Mentors. For the most part, training is independent and self-guided, however docents in training must attend the proscribed meetings with Mentors and Staff before being considered part of the Docent Program. Meetings with Mentors and PSX Staff will proceed under the assumption that participants have already read this manual in its entirety. Use meeting times to ask questions, test out a tour, and receive valuable feedback. Docents will be added to the schedule once they complete training.

Criteria for new docents in training:

- Be *accurate* and thorough in your knowledge of Core Concepts
- Have a welcoming and engaging presentation style
- Be available to give tours as a PSX docent for 8 hours in shifts each month

How to Use This Manual

This manual will cover essential information needed to effectively introduce docents and audiences to San Xavier del Bac and Patronato San Xavier. The Docent Manual should serve as your first resource for questions about the docent program, the church, and its communities. The five Core Concepts that summarize and guide docent tours at the mission are introduced and discussed under separate chapter headings in this manual.

Information is presented in a variety of ways to aid different reading objectives. For example, body text in **bold** is considered especially important and a key take-away. Words in **red** are included in the Glossary at the end of the manual. There is also a Bibliography for quick reference and to supply additional, relevant reading on the topics presented here.

Summaries of sections, trivia, images, and/or additional resources may be presented in a text box.

While the Docent Manual is updated on a regular basis, it is by no means a comprehensive source on all things “San Xavier.” Docents are encouraged to seek additional resources beyond this manual and its bibliography. Please inform the docent program leaders about new sources or information you feel should be included in future editions of the manual.

Role & Responsibilities of the Docent

Docents are an essential part of Patronato San Xavier's mission to convey the significance and history of San Xavier del Bac to the public. Additionally, docents provide vital fundraising support through tours and lectures. In 2019, Mission-related gifts generated by docent tours totaled nearly \$20,000. Many recurring donors who give monthly or yearly pledges joined our community of support after visiting the mission and attending a docent tour.

The **core responsibilities** of each docent are to:

- Accurately tell the story of the Mission without embellishment.
- Encourage people to support conservation work at the Mission, financially or otherwise.
- Assist with managing the competing interests of stakeholders, including visitors, parishioners, community members, and church staff.

The Docent Program Mission Statement

The Patronato Docents, by sharing Mission San Xavier del Bac's unique story with our visitors, *educate and inspire* in order to secure the future of this culturally significant, at-risk site.

San Xavier del Bac is a working church. Despite best intentions, some visitors may come to the Mission not fully appreciating this aspect, and so ignore the needs of worshipers. At times interests clash as people, attempting to practice their religion in peace, are overwhelmed by sightseers looking for a great photograph. Docents should make this point clear when engaging visitors and encourage them to be respectful of the space and the stakeholder communities at San Xavier.

There are three main stakeholder communities located at the Mission:

- The Wa:k O'odham community, who have been protectors of the church for multiple generations, and who are re-establishing an identity distinct from the broader Tohono O'odham Nation
- The San Xavier Catholic Parish, part of the Catholic Diocese of Tucson, who attend daily mass, holidays, baptisms, funerals, weddings, feast days, and other significant services at the church throughout the year.
- The Franciscans Order of Friars Minor, who took over the Mission from the Jesuits in 1767 and who continue to staff the Mission Parish. Many live at the Mission Friary.

Over centuries, these stakeholder groups have forged a deep and spiritual relationship with San Xavier del Bac and are largely responsible for why and how the Mission exists today.

Docent Program Overview

Currently, docents are organized around central leadership provided by Miles Green, Executive Director, and Sydney Tuller, Development Coordinator, and Kathy Baily, Scheduling Coordinator. They are assisted by a Docent Advisory Committee comprising of active docents

who serve on the committee for a three-year term. Kathy manages the monthly schedule and arranges special group tours (e.g. tour companies, schools, special interest groups, etc.) visiting the Mission. She also collects and reports monthly statistics on the number of visitors who take docent-led tours. Sydney curates and circulates informational content related to the Mission, including what is presented here in the manual.

When you encounter new information about the mission and its history, *you must verify the information and find its source*. Please bring new information to Sydney before incorporating it into your tour materials.

Docent Membership: Participation is open to anyone, regardless of faith or religious tradition. Being a member of the Catholic faith or San Xavier parish is not a requirement. However, docents must become a “Friend of Patronato” when they apply to the program and maintain that status throughout their tenure. Friends of Patronato provide annual funding support to the on-going preservation needs of the Mission. The minimum donation required to become a Friend is \$50 per fiscal year (July 1 – June 30). Learn more about the benefits of becoming a friend here: <https://patronatosanxavier.org/friend/>

Docents must also complete full training and conduct a sample tour for staff and other Docents that meets established criteria. New docent training occurs regularly, and educational opportunities are provided for active docents by guest speakers, field trips, and volunteers from the current Docent Program.

All docents are required by the Catholic Diocese of Tucson to undergo finger printing and a background check before giving a tour at the Mission. Please bring any questions about this process to Miles.

Dues: Docent dues are \$60 annually and cover the costs associated with the four quarterly meetings held during the winter season. Dues fall due on July 1st, the first day of PSX’s fiscal year. Payment by check is requested and members must be current at the time of the first quarterly meeting (typically October). **The yearly minimum financial commitment is \$50 to be a Friend of the Patronato and \$60 Docent dues, totaling \$110.**

Quarterly Meetings: Quarterly meetings are held the first Thursday of October, December, February and April. These start promptly at 10 AM and conclude at 12 PM. Aside from program updates, the meeting typically includes a featured educational speaker on topics relevant to Docent interests at the Mission. Patronato hosts an annual luncheon for all docents after the February meeting. Recordings of past meetings and lectures can be found on the docent web portal (<https://patronatosanxavier.org/docent-web-portal/>).

Tour Schedule: Tours take place from 9 AM to 2 PM, Monday through Saturday, all year *except*:

- St. Francis of Assisi Feast Day (October 4th)
- St. Francis Xavier Feast Day (December 3rd)

PSX Staff Contact Information:

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- Thanksgiving
- Christmas Day (December 25)
- Good Friday
- Holy Saturday
- Quarterly docent meeting dates

Tour schedules may be impacted by Mission church activities such as special masses, funerals, baptisms, quinceñeras, and other special events. **The church schedule takes priority over docent tours.** While every effort is made to contact docents if church activities result in tours being cancelled, occasionally this is not possible.

All tours take place outside of the church. Docents can use a guide and visual aides to educate visitors on unique interior features of the church. Many docents use an informational brochure, provided by Patronato, to structure their tour at the mission, which also serves as a good souvenir and has pictures of church art and history.

How to Schedule a Tour: Tours and docent schedules are managed through WhenToHelp.com, a web-based program. Kathy Baily builds the monthly schedule. Detailed information and instruction on how to sign up and schedule availability for tours will be presented during and after formal training.

Brief History of the Docent Program

In 2010, the Senior Pastor at San Xavier del Bac and Patronato's Executive Director identified the need to convey Mission history accurately and effectively to visitors, and so built a docent team trained to tell the story of the Mission and provide regularly scheduled, free, public tours. In February 2011, the first group of docents were trained by Patronato staff and Board Members, as well as anthropologist Bernard Fontana and architect Bob Vint. The foundational text used by docents was Fontana's, *San Xavier del Bac: Portrait of a Desert Church*.

By 2018 the program had grown to a point where 70 docents were providing 2,000 tours to 34,000 Mission visitors annually. Tours addressed aspects of Mission history, aligning information with several State educational standards. Docents also helped build a Speakers Bureau to provide community outreach to service clubs and organizations.

During this period, leadership of the Patronato Docent Organization was volunteer driven, with team members stepping up to take on management positions. In 2019, Patronato staff assumed responsibility for managing the monthly tour schedule. A steering committee was created to formalize direction of the Docent Program, which was ultimately assumed by the Patronato Executive team.

In 2020, church leaders requested that docents no longer bring tour groups inside the church as it was disruptive to worshippers. However, visitors were still welcome in the church during the day. Compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, there were additional health and safety concerns for bringing large groups inside. The Docent Program ultimately went on a 3-year hiatus, though

many docents remained active members. In 2023, the Docent Program began recruiting again and meeting groups of visitors at the Mission.

Docent Values

- Respect for the culture and religious traditions of the Mission.
- Respect for the culture and spiritual traditions of the community of Wa:k.
- Appreciation of the story, art, and architecture of the Mission.
- Accuracy of information and interpretation.
- Commitment to conservation and preservation efforts.
- Personal learning and growth.
- Docent fellowship.

Introduction: San Xavier del Bac in Context

An icon of Tucson and the Southwest, San Xavier del Bac is immediately recognizable by its unique architecture and strikingly bright white exterior, an unexpected sight in the middle of the Sonoran Desert. Many things make San Xavier special to many groups of people. Placing San Xavier in its historical, cultural, and geographical context is key to conveying why it is so unique beyond its aesthetic beauty and framing as the “White Dove of the Desert.”



“Mission San Xavier del Bac, Tucson, Arizona.”
Ansel Adams, 1968. Adams allegedly coined the nickname,
“White Dove of the Desert.”

San Xavier is part of a series of missions established by **Father Eusebio Kino** through what are now the states of Sonora and Arizona. In fact, San Xavier is part of a pilgrimage chain across the US-Mexico border, connecting people of faith across the Kino mission chain. Prior to the intensification of border controls, followers from both sides would take part in walking pilgrimages to celebrate saint days at their respective missions.

Unlike its closest “sister” mission, **Tumacácori** near Tubac, San Xavier is an active church with a parish community. Services are held daily either in the 18th century church or in the smaller Juan Diego

Chapel. Next door, there is a parish school, which has recently begun reenrolling students grades K through 3rd. Though the school closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is set to re-open in the Fall, 2024. A Franciscan **friary** sits just behind the church, which provides housing for up to 10 friars and others from the Franciscan order who hold staff positions at the Diocese offices, who work at the Catholic Diocese in Tucson, or who have retired from active ministry.

San Xavier del Bac represents a spiritual space of immense importance to many, but especially the community of Wa:k and the broader O’odham community. The ancestors of many people still living in Wa:k built and maintained the church. When the Mission was abandoned between 1821 and 1859, members of the community took much of the statuary and artifacts into their homes to protect from looters. Feast day celebrations at the Mission bring in people of Catholic faith and the local O’odham community, continuing a long history of joint celebrations at the Mission. Currently, Patronato’s art conservation team includes Tim Lewis and Matilde Rubio, who have led conservation projects as independent consultants since the 1990’s. Susie Moreno is Patronato’s first Preventive Conservation Specialist, a position that monitors conditions of the church building and art, and addresses preservation issues as they arise. Both Tim and Susie are from Wa:k and grew up in the church parish. Community members from Wa:k and the Tohono O’odham Nation also serve on the PSX Board of Directors.

Telling the Story of San Xavier del Bac

Bringing together the history, art, architecture, and communities at San Xavier can be challenging to convey, especially in the span of a 30-minute tour. It is advisable to cover the essential, **Core Concepts** salient to the church:

- 1) The O'odham and the community of Wa:k
- 2) Father Kino and the history of San Xavier del Bac
- 3) The construction and architecture of the mission and its ancillary buildings
- 4) The highly stylized and symbolic artwork on and in the church
- 5) Contemporary preservation efforts led by Patronato San Xavier

There are resources at the end of this manual to help you craft your tour of the Mission, including the pitch for donations in support of Patronato San Xavier. It is recommended that you take advice from current docents and practice your tour before meeting with your first group of visitors.

There are many stories that circulate about the mission, its history, and the people associated with it, including Father Kino and the Wa:k community. It may be enticing to embellish facts and romanticize about a building that already looks very romantic, especially in front of a captive audience. But to do so would be contradictory to Patronato San Xavier's mission. Telling an inaccurate story, even if it's a good story, hinders the ability of PSX to ethically and responsibly care for the building and its art, and ultimately does a disservice to the people who live, work, and worship at this church.

This is why we ask that docents verify new information about the church and bring it to PSX staff before repeating it as part of a tour. This manual is frequently edited and revised to include the most accurate, up-to-date information available on the mission, so any input from docents is welcome. Use critical thinking and good judgement when pulling information together for your own tour of the mission.

The O'odham and the Community of Wa:k

Millenia of Continued Habitation

Tucson and the surrounding area has been populated by the O'odham (pronounced, "Aw-thum" and meaning, "people") and their ancestors for thousands of years. The O'odham are descended from the Huhugam, a term which refers to all ancestors and can include the Hohokam archaeological culture. From around 300 to 1500 CE, this region was inhabited by Hohokam farmers. Artifacts from the Clovis period, one of the earliest archaeological cultures in North America, have been identified at nearby Murray Springs, close to Sierra Vista, indicating at least 13,000 years of continued habitation by the O'odham, Hohokam, and their ancestors.

Prior to the arrival of Kino and the Spanish to what they called Pimería Alta, a number of culturally distinct O'odham groups inhabited the Sonoran Desert. The Akimel O'odham ("river people") traditionally lived along the Gila, the Salt, and San Pedro rivers. The Sobaipuri ("being like the enemy") O'odham, a group related to the Akimel O'odham, lived at communities along the San Pedro and Santa Cruz Rivers, including at Wa:k, where many of their descendants still reside. Being on the river afforded water access for much of the year allowing the Sobaipuri O'odham to grow and harvest crops except in the coldest months. The Sobaipuri were also recognized as being fierce warriors, which is where their name likely originated.

The Tohono O'odham ("desert people") were seasonally nomadic. During the summer months they would venture to villages close to rivers and arroyos while in winter they would move to settlements in the foothills where hunting supplemented their food supply. Unlike the Akimel O'odham, the Tohono O'odham relied on cultivating drought tolerant plants in addition to hunting and gathering wild resources.

The Hia-Ced O'odham (pronounced "Hee-ya Chood Aw-thum," and meaning "sand people") were desert dwellers who favored a mostly nomadic, forager lifestyle, across the Sonoran Desert, Colorado River, and the Gulf of California. Today, they maintain their own language and cultural identity within the broader Tohono O'odham Nation.

Since the arrival of the Europeans, the various O'odham groups comingled as access to their ancestral lands was restricted and taken away. The creation of the Tohono O'odham Nation in 1917 unified these groups, but had the impact of creating from these diverse cultures the erroneous notion of a singular identity. Many residents of Wa:k still acknowledge their Sobaipuri O'odham heritage as distinct from the Tohono O'odham. The community of Wa:k is in the process of reestablishing their sense of unique cultural identity.

The Tohono O'odham Nation is the second largest reservation in the United States. It covers nearly 3 million acres, slightly smaller than the State of Connecticut. Tribal registration nears 33,000 members, with roughly half living on the reservation. There are four non-contiguous sections to the Nation divided into 11 local Districts. The largest part of the Nation, centered on Sells, extends 74 miles along the US-Mexico border. The traditional O'odham homeland reaches into Sonora, Mexico, and until the intensification of border controls within the last twenty years, members of the tribal family would move across the border with impunity.



Map of contemporary Tohono O’odham Nation within traditional O’odham lands. San Xavier District is indicated by the grey arrow. Credit: <https://native-land.ca/maps/territories/tohono-oodham/>.

San Xavier District is the second largest tribal district within the Tohono O’odham Nation, though San Xavier was once its own reservation, recognized in 1874. Then called the “San Xavier Indian Reservation,” it was the one of the first reservations in the nation established with the Dawes Act.

The Santa Cruz River and the Community of Wa:k

When Anglo ranchers expanded through Arizona in the late 19th and early 20th century, they diverted riverways and contributed to mass drought and famine in the region. Today, with Tucson’s sprawling population, decades of ranching and mining, and other contributing factors, the water table across the valley has dropped considerably. As a consequence, the Santa Cruz and other rivers in the area run above ground for only a brief part of the rainy season.

But prior to the arrival of Europeans, rivers in the desert flowed for much of the year. Portions of the Santa Cruz River flowed above ground approximately 10 months of the year. Underlying basalt rock brought the water flow to the surface. But, just north of the current community of Wa:k, the basalt disappears, allowing the water to descend into the ground and the river to maintain a subterranean flow. It was this natural phenomenon of the water appearing to go into the ground that gave the village of Wa:k its name. In the O’odham language, “Wa:k” means “go in” or “enter.”

By the early 18th century, approximately 6,000 O’odham lived in the permanent agricultural communities along the San Pedro and Santa Cruz rivers. Of these communities, Wa:k was the largest. Proximity to the Santa Cruz River facilitated the growth of a large agricultural village of Sobaipuri O’odham. When Kino visited in 1692, Wa:k was a thriving community of more than 800, large enough that people lived in separate neighborhoods.

Households consisted of two structures, one for general use and the other for sleeping and storage. Known as “**ki**,” houses were made of bent branches that formed a barrel-shaped dome which was then covered with mats and mud, helping to maintain a pleasant temperature. Wooden ramadas were not common housing structures among the Sobaipuri O’odham as they were with the Tohono O’odham.



Today, many traditional native plants are grown and sold at the San Xavier Co-op Farm in Wa:k located just east of the Mission. Photo Credit: Ajo Farmer’s Market.

The Sobaipuri utilized a complex system of irrigation canals to sustain their crops and towns. Their primary crops were cotton, corn, beans and squash. These crops could not survive frost, so cultivation lasted from March to November. The Sobaipuri also harvested desert plants such as saguaro fruit, agave heart and leaves, mesquite tree pods, cholla buds, and mesquite sap. Saguaro fruit was fermented into wine for use at special ceremonies.

O’odham Culture & Language

O’odham is still spoken today in multiple different dialects that characterize different outgroups and areas of the O’odham world. Like many indigenous groups, the O’odham maintain a strong tradition of oral history, storytelling, and songs.

Storytellers are greatly respected as the keepers of history and cultural memory. O’odham language dialects remain largely oral, though written orthography was developed in the 1960s and 1970s. Tohono O’odham poet, Dr. Ofelia Zepeda, published the first pedagogical book on O’odham grammar in the 1980s.

The O’odham also keep **calendar sticks**, which individual calendar makers use to recount events important to their lifetime. Calendar sticks were traditionally buried with their makers, meaning their specific history died with the maker. The most important events were incorporated into oral histories and passed on through the generations.

Spiritually, the O’odham trace their origin to **I’itoi**, the revered Elder Brother and/or Creator of the O’odham, known by different names depending on the dialectal variant or region. According to oral history, I’itoi brought their ancestors, the Huhugam, up from the lower earth. I’itoi is responsible for the gift of the **himdag**, which guides people to remain in balance with the world and interact with it as intended.

I'itoi taught the Huhugam how to survive in the desert by showing them which foods were good to eat, which were poisonous, and which had medicinal properties. He taught them how to build reed shelters with mud and mesquite branches, and how to build structures for shade. When I'itoi was satisfied the people could survive in the harsh landscape, he removed himself to a cave high up on **Waw Giwulk**, or Baboquivari Peak, located near Sells on the main reservation. For generations and still today, many O'odham climb up to this cave to leave behind small offerings to I'itoi.

A symbol closely associated with the O'odham is the **Man in the Maze**. The meaning of the maze is consistent throughout the O'odham world, but interpretations of the “man” is varied. For some he is I'itoi, for others the “man” can represent any human being. Early versions of this symbol consist of the maze without the man. These earliest versions were not circular but oblong with the opening to the maze at the bottom. In all cases the maze depicts a person's journey and their himdag or “way of life.” The zig-zagging path may represent the many tragedies and triumphs one faces at each turn. As death (in some cases, at the maze's center) comes closer, one last turn at the end offers a chance to look back on one's trail, one's himdag.



Walking through the sanctuary and ancillary buildings at San Xavier del Bac, it is possible to spot several representations of I'itoi and depictions of the Man in the Maze.

When **Jesuit** priests arrived with the intention of converting the O'odham to Christianity, many traditional O'odham stories happened to align with the bible. A Creator, I'itoi, made heaven, earth, and the first people. After teaching them about the world, I'itoi removed himself. There was a great flood and a period when I'itoi went into the world to make things right again. These similarities were utilized by the Jesuits to aid assimilation and conversion to Christianity.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Hiding in the Shadows of History](#) – David Martínez (article)
- [T-A:ga \(Our Story\): An Introduction to the Culture and History of the Tohono O'odham](#) – Bernard G. Siquieros (video)
- [Who are the Sobaipuri O'odham?](#) – Deni J. Seymour (video)

The History of San Xavier del Bac

The Jesuits and Missionary Work



Statue of St. Francis Xavier from the main altar of the church. The wooden statue was carved and painted in about 1759 in Mexico for use at this church.

The Jesuit order of priests was founded in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola, **Francis Xavier**, and five others as a reform movement within the Catholic Church. They recognized problems with the Church yet remained loyal to the Pope in Rome. The Jesuits soon became an important intellectual influence in the Counter-Reformation in Europe. When Europe, and Christianity, launched global colonization campaigns, many Jesuits took distant missionary posts as part of their service.

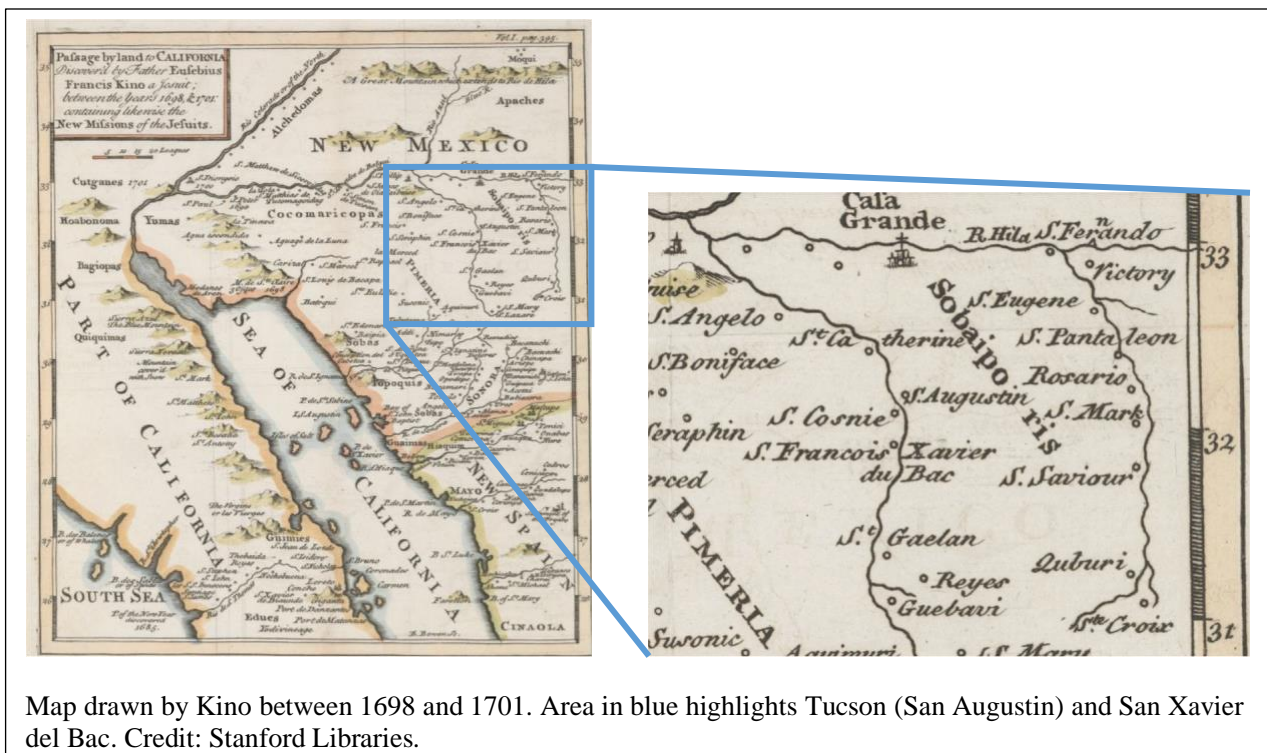
Motivated by their dedication to the Jesuit order and to spreading Christianity, Jesuit priests often committed themselves to learning the language of their missionary region in order to write, preach, and instruct indigenous peoples on Christianity and European culture. They frequently retained or adapted local cultural traits that did not violate Catholic traditions. Through their efforts, whether intentional or not, many Jesuits were able to protect indigenous parishes from the exploitation and abuse of conquering forces, even though missions often paved the way for military invasion.

Missionary goals often clashed with the colonial priorities of Europe. Sometimes local officials accused Jesuit missionaries of interfering with “proper” colonial enterprises focused on exploiting land, wealth, and people. Ultimately, in 1767, King Carlos III of Spain called for the Jesuits to be expelled from New Spain.

Father Eusebio Francesco Kino

Kino was born Eusebio Chini (pronounced, “Kini”) into a noble family in the village of Segno in the Holy Roman Empire, now Northern Italy. The exact date of his birth is unknown, but he was baptized on 10 August 1645. He was educated in Innsbruck, Austria. In 1665, as part of a vow fulfillment after recuperating from a serious illness, he joined the Society of Jesuits and adopted Francesco as his second name for devotion to St. Francis Xavier. He became a Jesuit priest in 1677.

Although Kino (as he was called in Spanish) wanted to follow the legacy of his patron saint and serve the order in East Asia, he was sent instead to New Spain. Arriving in 1681, he spent time in and around Mexico City for several years and didn’t begin his travels to Pimería Alta until 1687. There, he built a chain of missions extending from present-day Sonora northeast into Arizona, covering nearly 150 miles. During this time, Kino authored books on religion, astronomy, and cartography. He drew some of the earliest surviving maps of Pimería Alta and Baja California.



Map drawn by Kino between 1698 and 1701. Area in blue highlights Tucson (San Augustin) and San Xavier del Bac. Credit: Stanford Libraries.

News of Kino's presence reached Tumacácori and Wa:k in 1691. According to Kino's memoirs, Wa:k village couriers journeyed south, to a point 10 miles west of present-day Nogales, to meet with Father Kino and invite him to visit their communities. The motivations behind this meeting have been speculated by researchers and contemporary Wa:k community members. Kino was not the first European to arrive in the region, nor the first missionary. An O'odham rebellion against Spanish colonization a century earlier in the 1540s effectively scared off missionary efforts in the region for a long time after. The Sobaipuri couriers who met with Kino might have been acting on hospitality as much as curiosity or caution. Kino was also apparently a uniquely charismatic and kind individual who made an effort to understand his hosts before telling them about his own religion and culture. He is described this way in the historic record, and he is remembered this way by many.

Kino arrived at Tumacácori that same year and visited Wa:k in August 1692, not long after another rebellion against the Spanish had been peacefully resolved. Writing in his journals five years after this visit, Kino describes a warm reception at Wa:k. He was impressed by the agricultural village and saw potential in the thriving area along the Santa Cruz as a "gateway to the Gila." Kino rechristened the area San Xavier del Bac adding his patron saint to a mispronunciation of the Sobaipuri O'odham village.

Founding a mission in New Spain did not always mean constructing a new building, but rather beginning the process of establishing a church and a community of worshippers. It's likely the first mission was located northwest of its current position, where the village of Wa:k was then situated. Historical records support the existence of a simple ramada-like structure, unrecognizable as a holy place to Spanish representatives of the Church, but nonetheless a place of worship. Because there were so few priests, no new mission could be started if it was more

than a day's ride by horse or a three-day walk from the next mission. A mission had to be self-sustaining with good water, wood, building materials, and fields for grazing and for crops.

Kino died of fever in March of 1711 in present-day Magdalena de Kino, Sonora. Today, it is still possible for pilgrims and tourists to visit his burial site. In 1756, **Father Alonso Ignacio Espinoza**, another Jesuit, built a structure near the current location of the church. By then, the village of Wa:k had moved further south along the Santa Cruz river, and Espinoza built his church near the village center. The foundations of this simple rectangular building crafted from sun-dried **adobe** blocks were discovered during excavations carried out in the 1950's.

The Franciscan Era

The Jesuit era at San Xavier ended in June 1767 when King Carlos of Spain called for the expulsion of "all members of the Society of Jesus" from all Spanish domains and for the confiscation of all their goods. Almost overnight, in the mission towns of the Pimería Alta, the "black robes" (Jesuits) disappeared, and the "gray robes" (Franciscans) replaced them.

Father Juan Bautista Velderrain and **Father Juan Bautista Llorens** were two such Franciscan missionaries who oversaw construction of the current church. Beginning in 1783 with Velderrain, and ending in 1797 with Llorens, who continued the work after Velderrain's death in 1790. The original architect of San Xavier del Bac is unclear. Oral tradition states that master mason Ygnacio Gaona, credited with building a similarly styled mission in Caborca, Mexico, was the original designer of San Xavier. But aside from a census record taken in 1801 that lists Ygnacio and his family as residents of Wa:k, no written records exist to verify this claim.

Similarly, no written record exists describing how San Xavier del Bac was built. An account by Father Velderrain, written when he supervised construction of the mission at Suaqui, indicates that O'odham laborers there were paid with food, sugar, and tobacco. It has been *speculated* that San Xavier was also built by O'odham laborers working for food and supplies. But to assume without supporting evidence that the O'odham harmoniously and voluntarily engaged in hard labor to build the church would be incorrect.

Seven years after Father Llorens took over the mission in 1790, the unfinished construction project at San Xavier ran out of money. Nonetheless, it remained a functioning church and mission for two decades until Mexico gained its independence from Spain in 1821, when instability and vulnerability to Apache raiding forced the Franciscans to flee. During this period of "abandonment" by the Catholic Church, community members of Wa:k continued to protect the church and its artifacts, bringing wooden saints into their homes, and keeping the keys to the

Talking about an incomplete historical record

There's a lot we don't know about San Xavier. Much of our historical knowledge comes from journal entries, correspondences, and inventories, which may be incomplete or inaccurate. Is a journal entry written years after the fact reliable? Did the writer have specific motivations for portraying certain events one way or another? These questions are regularly debated by experts in the literature.

For this reason, using phrases like:

- "we speculate,"
- "it's possible,"
- "experts believe,"

...and other qualifying language is recommended in order to represent the incomplete historical record as best as possible.

Citing the source of information is also very good practice!

building. Historical accounts state that occasionally visitors were granted access inside. Reports from visitors of pottery figures on the altars and statues, as well as a “well-preserved Spanish bible,” indicate that it may still have been a place of worship during this time.

With the Gadsden Purchase of 1853, San Xavier came under the Diocese of Santa Fe. Numerous restoration and upkeep projects were initiated, though there were other challenges, ranging from a 7.2 earthquake in 1887, looting and vandalism from outsiders, a tornado, and lightning strikes, to continued maintenance under harsh desert conditions.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [History of Land and Water in San Xavier](#) – Jacelle Ramon-Sauberan (video)
- [Finding Father Kino’s San Xavier del Wa:k](#) – Deni Seymour (article)
- [Padre Kino’s Footsteps: Tumacácori](#) – Deni Seymour (video)
- [Arizona: A History](#) – Tom Sheridan (book)

Architecture & Construction

Architectural Style

Several different terms have been used to describe the architecture at San Xavier del Bac. The church called Ultra Baroque, or **Churrigueresque**, referring to its ornate decoration, symmetry, and sense of high drama, typical of the Baroque style. It also resembles **Folk Baroque** churches in Querétaro, Mexico, which was the Franciscan center for artistic and architectural thought in New Spain in the 18th century. Experts believe that many builders and artists who worked on San Xavier del Bac were recruited from Querétaro.

San Xavier also exhibits some Moorish influence. This architectural style is known as **Mudéjar**, meaning “those who remained” after the Christian reconquest of Iberia. This style is immediately evident at San Xavier in the octagonal towers, the **finials** around the roof perimeter, and in the simple curved downspouts that lead from the vaulted roofline. The church’s **cupola** is also a product of Byzantine and Persian mastery of the **pendentive**, or angled support, on which the dome rests.

An aerial view of San Xavier Mission shows that the church itself is laid out in the form of a Latin cross, with the bottom of the cross at the south end, flanked by the east and west towers. The south-facing orientation of the church at Wack is distinct from early Christian churches, which traditionally faced east. It is thought that the church faces south in order to attract worshippers who would have been traveling north from Sonora along the Kino mission chain.



Mission at Santiago de Jalpan, Querétaro, Mexico.
Photo credit: Temo Rivera.

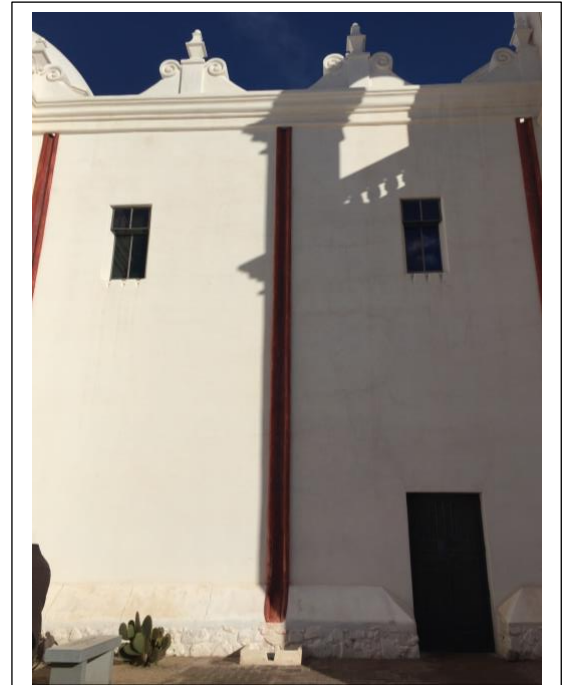
Mission Construction

The church at San Xavier was primarily built with kiln-fired bricks bonded with lime plaster mortar, not mud adobe. Though firing bricks was an expensive and therefore an uncommon technology in Pimería Alta at the time, this technique allowed for the stable construction of buildings up to five stories tall, like San Xavier del Bac. Father Velderrain had earlier used fired brick to construct the church at Suaqui, and brought the technique to San Xavier in the 1780s. At that time, Franciscan priests were trained in Roman architecture and construction techniques, which may be how he learned the process.

San Xavier Mission is constructed from local sand, clay, lime and volcanic rock. Wood was gathered from mesquite bosques along the Santa Cruz and from pine trees in the Santa Rita and Santa Catalina mountains. O’odham laborers dug down to the bedrock to establish a firm footing

for the five-story church. Volcanic rock covered with lime plaster was used for the church foundation. The O'odham mined lime and clay for the bricks, slaked and shaped them on site, and mixed the lime mortar. Lime was obtained from local limestone deposits found approximately one-half mile away. Mucilage from crushed nopal cactus pads was added to the lime mortar to slow the curing of the exterior coating and to act as a binder. Slowing down the curing process also aided in shaping the plaster. This lime plaster mix is what gives the church its iconic white color.

The brick used for the foundation and walls was fired at a nearby kiln, built to accommodate a fire hot enough to harden the brick. However, the quality of the fired brick was very uneven and depended on proximity to the heat. Bricks farther from the heat were weaker and had a different color than the bricks nearer to the heat source. In later centuries, these weaker bricks were particularly vulnerable to water trapped under the Portland cement-based plasters applied to the building during repairs carried out in the mid 20th century. Replacement bricks used for conservation work are also kiln-fired bricks produced in the same way as they were in the 1770's.



Lime-plaster exterior of the church with painted downspouts for water runoff. Note the whitewashed volcanic rock foundation.

The walls of the church building are 6 feet thick at the foundation and 3 feet thick at the top. The lower wall consists of two layers of brick and lime mortar, sandwiching volcanic rock and a lime mortar slurry. The church is 80 feet tall at the towers and 60 feet tall at the main dome, representing an impressive feat of construction and engineering for the late 18th century. It is unclear if scaffolding of some type was used, or how exactly the walls were raised since there are no historical records of this process. Some of the rock work and buttresses were added in the later 1880's and 1890's when there was concern that the church foundation was at risk.

End of Initial Construction

Father Velderrain had initially borrowed some 7,000 pesos from a wealthy Sonoran rancher to fund the project. As security against the loan, Velderrain offered the mission's wheat crop across several years. However, Velderrain died in 1790 leaving the overall structure complete but with detailing and other work still unfinished. Completing the structure fell to Father Juan Bautista Llorens.

Around this time, inflation in Europe reduced available funding for construction projects such as the church at W:k, and in 1792, changes in colonial policy meant missionaries could no longer depend on income from mission lands to fund building projects. Artisans brought from Mexico to work on the church demanded hazard pay to compensate for raids on the mission compound, which effectively doubled their wages. By 1797 the cost of construction reached nearly \$40,000 pesos. With no pay, construction stopped and the artisans left. The East Tower was still un-

Why is the East Tower unfinished?

While San Xavier's unfinished tower has fueled many myths over the years, the true story is that the builders simply ran out of money!

In the interest of accurate historic preservation, there are no plans to complete the tower. Other parts of the mission have similarly been left unfinished.

plastered and missing its upper dome and lantern. The art inside the choir loft was still being designed when construction came to a halt, while the baptistry only has some of the planned images painted inside.

Ancillary Mission Buildings

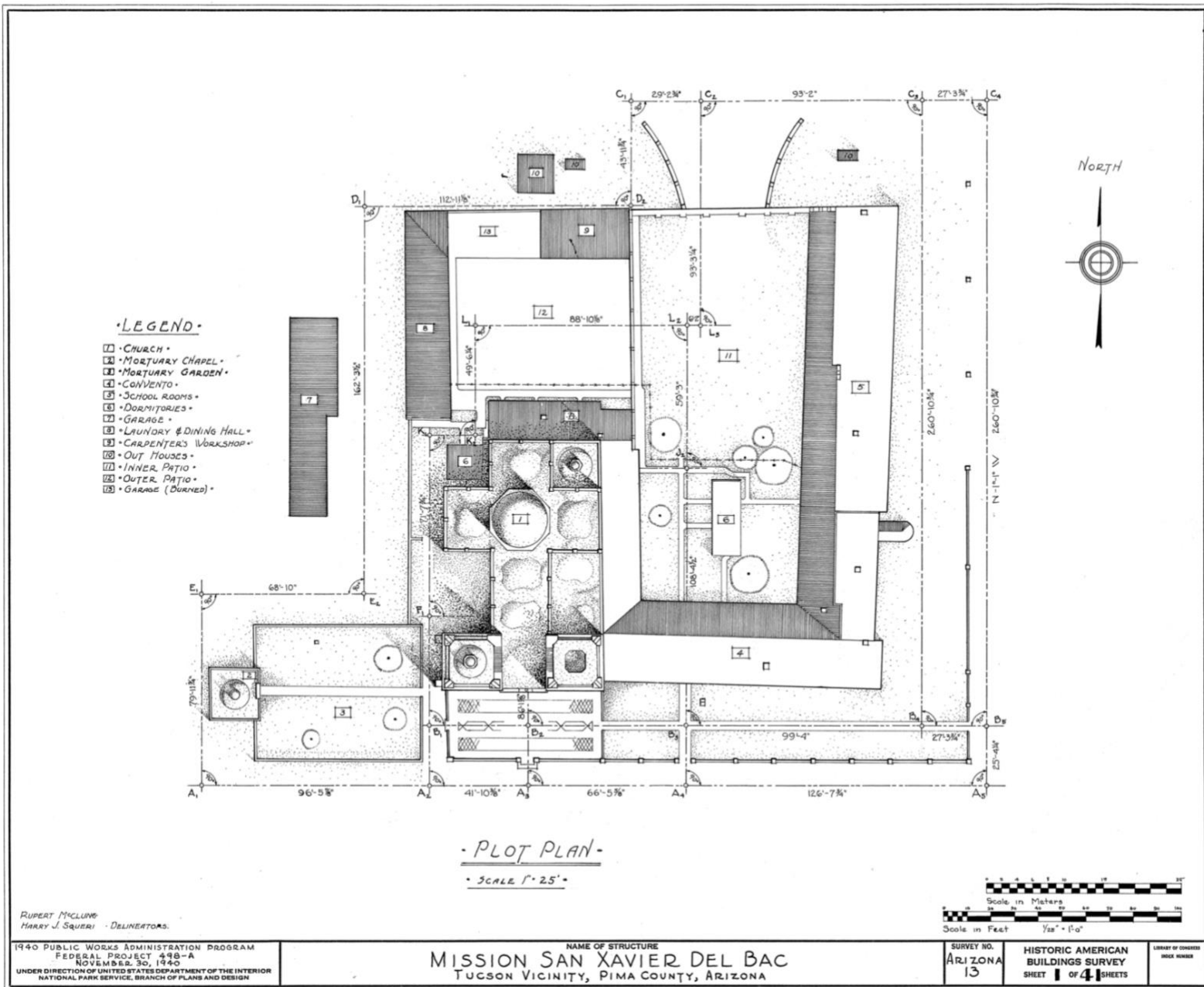
The **mortuary chapel**, located to the west of the front entrance, was built at the same time as the main church. Traditionally, this is where the body of the deceased would rest prior to being moved into the church for the funeral.

The courtyard in front of the chapel was the original church cemetery. The chapel had fallen into disuse before the 1887 earthquake when the walls surrounding the cemetery collapsed. During reconstruction of the walls in the early 20th century, the original entrance to the mortuary chapel was moved from the north wall to its current location on the east. Around this same time, the cemetery was abandoned.

Beginning in the 1800's, other buildings and additions were added to the mission campus to support its inhabitants, including the **convento**, **courtyard**, auto park, and **friary**. The various functions of these buildings have changed through time, as have their dimensions and make-up.

Construction on the main **convento**, which includes the row of buildings on the southeast side of the mission campus, began in the early 1800's after the church was left incomplete. At that time, "convento" referred to both women's and men's living quarters. Early photographs reveal that this was originally a collection of separate adobe buildings. Contrary to popular belief, the adobe from Father Espinosa's church was not repurposed here. Tree-ring analysis found that wood in the convento was cut in 1811, so it is unlikely that materials from the 1786 church were viable for reuse. This wing has had multiple purposes across time, and still functioned as dormitories and workspaces for the friars who staffed the Mission until quite recently. When the modern friary was built in 1990's, this area was repurposed as the current Juan Diego Chapel, the video room, the candle lobby, museum rooms, and courtyard entrance.

The **sacristy arcade** describes the overhanging roof of the convento and administrative offices surrounding the interior perimeter of the courtyard and the friary. Over the years it has been added onto, but it was primarily built in the 1800's. The original roof beams were carved from pine and mesquite. Saguaro ribs serve as lath for a mud and manure overlay. Several layers of roofing have been added over time, and a major restoration of the east arcade is needed to reinforce the ceiling.



Architectural plan of the Mission and ancillary buildings from 1940. Currently, the convento wing serves as business offices for the church as well as museum rooms. The friary now occupies the “Outer Patio” and surrounding buildings. The “Dormitories” in the middle of the “Inner Patio” no longer exist.

The long building on the east side of the church across from **Grotto Hill** is now known as the **Granjon administration wing**. It was constructed between 1899 and 1913, and functions today as Mission administrative offices, classrooms, maintenance shop, and (towards the south) the Mission's gift shop. There is also a small apartment for use by visiting family members of the friars.



Northern view of the sacristy arcade beam ceiling along the Granjon administration wing.

Visible from the center courtyard, **Granjon's Gate** was added with the 1906 preservation work carried out by **Bishop Henri Granjon**, the second bishop of Tucson. It was originally meant to encircle an auto park for visitors and still serves a similar function. The style of the gate can best be described as California Mission Revival, though today, this combination of architectural styles would not align with preservation ethics and guidelines as it confuses the design elements of the historic church building. Granjon, hailing from Léon, France, also added the bronze lion heads that once adorned the roof and finials of the church. Some can still be seen on the west side of the courtyard roof.

The **courtyard**, enclosed by Granjon's Gate, was the original corral. The courtyard fountain

was added in the mid-20th century as were the olive trees, meant to evoke the aesthetic of California missions, particularly those in Santa Barbara.

To the north of the Mission proper is the modern **friary** constructed in 1991 with its adjoining courtyard. The friary provides housing for up to 10 friars and others from the Franciscan order who hold staff positions at the Diocese offices, who work at the Catholic Diocese in Tucson, or who have retired from active ministry. This is a private area, closed off to outsiders.

East of the mission campus lies the modern Convent and **Mission School**. A school building to the west of the church built in the early 1900's was destroyed by a tornado in 1964 but was soon rebuilt. At the time of writing, the school is in the process of reopening and enrolling students after its brief closure during COVID lockdown.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [San Xavier del Bac Conservation Management Plan](#) – Penn Praxis (report)
- [Bac on the Border](#) – Emily Umberger (article)
- [San Xavier del Bac: Portrait of a Desert Church](#) – Bernard “Bunny” Fontana (book, ask PSX)

Art & Symbolism at the Church

The baroque style extends to San Xavier's interior and exterior artistic design, characterized by whimsical, symmetrical, overabundant decoration intended to convey a message to the viewer and elicit an emotional response. Even those who spend a lot of time in and around the church remark how frequently they see a new feature that they never noticed before. Such is the density of design at San Xavier. This manual will attempt to cover the most basic elements and features, though a more comprehensive overview of the art at San Xavier is provided by the Additional Resources at the end of the section.

The Façade and Exterior

The informational introduction to San Xavier, the **façade**, contains an impressive amount of symbols, meant to attract worshippers and tell them about the space they are about to enter. Crests with IHS (representative of Jesus Christ) and MAR (for the Virgin Mary) flank the Franciscan coat of arms, with the naked arm of Jesus intertwined with the clothed arm of Saint Francis of Assisi. The two lions on either side of the façade, and interior, represent the Spanish royals. The inward curving plaster scrolls, or **volute**s, have a cat and mouse within them, referencing an O'odham legend that states if the cat ever catches the mouse, the world is coming to an end. The **martyred saints** located in the four niches down the façade all represent female saints. The prominence of female saints, along with numerous images of Mary throughout the church have led some to call San Xavier a Marian church. At the very top of the façade, the seemingly out of place cement cone, which now serves to hold a cross or flag on holidays and feast days, is thought to have been a statue of Saint Francis Xavier. This assertion is based on photographic evidence from past centuries as the statue is now covered in cement.



Saint Lucy on the right side of the retablo façade flanked by two replica estípites, which are held in place by metal reinforcements. The small black square on the lower right side of her dress is a test area where the plaster was removed to reveal the original coloring. Preservation work began on the façade in spring, 2024.

The façade itself is made of molded brick and sculpted lime plaster. It resembles the design of the **retablo** (meaning “behind the table” or “altarpiece”) within the church, and conservators believe that the sculptor of the interior retablo may have also created the exterior façade. The eight non-weightbearing columns, or **estípites** on either side of the façade were originally made of soft molded brick, stacked around a wooden core. Preservation efforts in the mid-20th century replaced the lower estípites with replicas made of “**cast stone**” (a cement-based mixture) and secured them to the front with rebar and steel straps. This same project reinforced much of the lower façade with chicken wire lath and cement-based coatings to consolidate fragile plaster. Though applied with the best of intentions, these materials are now considered inappropriate and harmful to the integrity of the original fabric.

The appearance of the retablo façade today is muted in color, largely due to the previous restoration campaign. Chemical analysis has identified four primary colors were originally used to paint the facade: a deep red, ochre yellow, white, and black. Though most of the original paint has been lost or obscured, there are areas where the original colors and intricate patterns can still be seen, particularly on St. Barbara, located in the top-left niche, and in the central cockle shell below a painted chevron pattern. The **rainbow** over the wooden doors was also likely colorfully painted. The rainbow represents summer rains for the O’odham, while also broadly symbolizing God’s covenant with Noah in the Bible. The front entry doors framed under the rainbow are crafted from pine, likely harvested from the Santa Catalina mountains. Its decorative handles were done by Tucson blacksmith, Raul Vásquez, in the 1940’s.

Woodwork in and around the church is particularly vulnerable to rot and insect damage, and is an ongoing concern for conservators at San Xavier. The balconies on the façade and towers have been repaired and replaced at least twice since the late 19th century; once as part of Bishop Granjon’s restoration project (the original spindles and railings had badly deteriorated in the earthquake), and again in the 1950’s. The supervising architect at that time ran ads in the local newspaper, asking for “old, seasoned mesquite logs” to restore the wooden balconies.

Other design elements common on the exterior are finials, volutes, and scallop shells. **Finials** are the diamond-shaped decorative posts seen along the parapet of the church and flanking the upper tier of the façade. Today, finials along the parapet are flanked by spiral **volute**s, modeled after those present at San Xavier’s sister church in Caborca. The volutes have evolved over time. Initially, they appear to have represented a kind of griffin’s head. Both the finials and volutes were replaced during Bishop Granjon’s restoration, when the finials were given a new, tapered form and the deteriorating griffin’s heads were replaced with cast lions’ heads. But by the 1940s, many lions had deteriorated and posed a falling hazard to the building and visitors alike. Because it was impossible to discern the original design from historic photos and drawings, the scroll motif was borrowed from Caborca when the volutes were reconstructed in the 1950s.



Granjon finials and lion’s head volutes (left) and current finials with scrolled volutes (right).

The motif of the **scallop shell** features prominently across the mission. In Catholicism, the symbol is associated with Saint James the Greater who brought the religion to Spain and subsequently became their patron saint. It is also symbolic of baptism and pilgrimages where scallop shells were traditionally used to scoop food and water. Scallop shells can be found across the mission in windows and doors, near water fonts, and painted into murals.

The Interior

The inside of the church, including its **nave** and **transepts**, is ornately decorated with imported pigments (like orpiment, vermillion, and Prussian blue) and has seen little alteration over the years. Perhaps the most prominent feature in the church is the **retablo mayor**, or main altarpiece, situated directly behind the altar where the priest leads mass and services for the parish. All retablos in the church, including those on the east and west transept walls, are made of sculpted lime and sand plaster with brick and wood columns, and adorned with gilded, painted wooden statues. **Gesso** was often applied to plaster and wood surfaces to make them easier to paint. It is difficult to accurately identify the original organic binders present in the paint, but analysis indicates the paints were likely oil paints prepared with an animal protein binder, then applied to a gesso surface.

Prominent in the center of the retablo is the “**Immaculate Conception**,” a representation of Mary. The Immaculate Mary statue is believed to be part of the original decorative plan of the church and is an excellent example of **estofado**, the multi-step process using gesso, gold leaf, and **tempera** to give statues the appearance of textile garments. Immaculate Mary received its first-ever comprehensive conservation treatment in 2016.

The clothed figure on the bottom register of the retablo mayor is **Saint Francis Xavier**, possibly the oldest statue in the church. It was ordered by Jesuit missionary Father Espinosa from a guild workshop in Mexico City in 1759. This gessoed and painted “processional sculpture” features a carved head and torso that sits atop four roughly carved wooden “legs,” which reduce its weight so it can be easily carried during processions. The arms are articulated, and the exposed wrists, hands, and head were specially treated to impart a lifelike appearance. The San Xavier Feast Committee is responsible for removing and dressing the statue during St. Xavier’s feast day.

The wood statues and plaster representations of saints on the left and right sides of the retablo mayor and in nearby niches have changed positions and even identities over

STILL MISSING!

The Carved Lions
stolen from Mission San Xavier
on the night of August 6th, 1982



One of the missing carvings. The matching lion has no paws.
Approximate length, 42 inches; approximate height at the
head, 27 inches. They are wood carvings and are part of the
original 1797 missions decorations.

Dial 88-CRIME, Tucson, Arizona,
with any information
that might lead to the return of the lions.
Your identity will remain confidential.

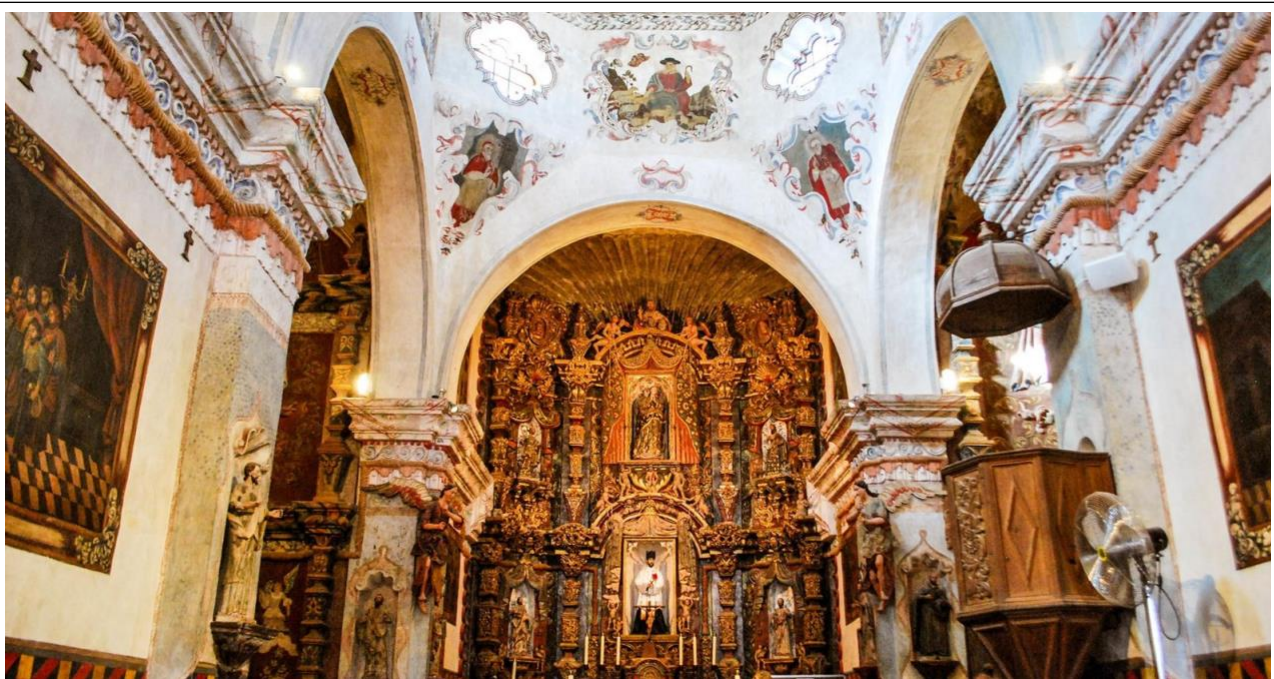
\$1000 REWARD

The two lions on either side of the altar are recreations made in the 1980s. The original 18th century lions were taken by a custodian and burned in the church incinerator. In a letter written years later asking for forgiveness, the custodian said he thought the lions were speaking to him.

the years. Though some have names written at their feet, others can be identified by their clothes, hair, or other defining features. Representations of Franciscan saints often have brown or grey vestments, tied with a rope belt, and wear a tonsure, where the top of their head is bald. The statue of Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuit order, has black vestments that button at his chin.

Standing in front of the retablo mayor and turning left, one faces the **west transept** and retablo, which features statues of St. Francis of Assisi, the Man of Sorrows, and a **reclining St. Francis Xavier** wrapped in a blanket. Churchgoers and pilgrims often come to visit this statue specifically and place **milagros** and other offerings on or in the surrounding glass case. This wooden statue may have had other uses in the past. Based on wear marks and paint on the body, limbs, and head, this statue may at one time have been a representation of Jesus after the crucifixion.

On the opposite side of the sanctuary is the **east transept**, notable for the large crucifixion that once also held a statue of the crucified Christ. Beneath the crucifixion is a wooden statue of **Our Lady of Sorrows**, another recipient of much devotion in the church. Often, she is dressed in colorful vestments with a depiction of the Man in the Maze. Both east and west transepts have candle racks for votive offerings.



Interior of the sanctuary facing north towards the retablo mayor. Photo credit: National Parks Service.

There are numerous elements throughout the sanctuary that reference the O'odham and the Sonoran Desert. For example, the saints in the upper registers of both transepts have brown skin. In the west transept, above the niche with the Man of Sorrows, there is a green and black pattern that reminded more than one conservator of saguaro spines. There are also a number of mice, shells, and other small creatures painted into the "marble" **fresco** above the retablo, indicating that Spanish and Mexican artists weren't the only ones decorating the church.

Layered symbols also reference the history of the Catholic church and stories from the bible. In particular, the border that wraps around the interior of the church represents the hem of Aaron's robe, the Franciscan rope belt, and the vine of Christ, thought to be a more palatable depiction of the Crucifixion for new audiences.

The **murals** seen on walls, ceilings, and corners all over the church portray numerous biblical scenes like the Last Supper and the Pentecost, as well as the trials of different saints. These likely provided opportunities for the priests to share visuals of bible stories with new converts. Many in the nave and transepts were painted over in the mid-20th century with oil-based paints, and have a glossier sheen than the original wall art. The dado motif along the bottom of the sanctuary wall was also repainted by the same artist in bolder, more vibrant colors. The original, more subdued dado can still be seen on the wall of the **baptistry** and the **sacristy**, though both rooms are currently closed to the general public.

On the northwest side of the sanctuary, just past the main doors before the stairs to the west tower, lies the **baptistry**. While the paintings inside are incomplete, they are relatively well preserved and unchanged compared to the paintings on the walls of the nave. The baptismal font is made of hammered copper and sits on a pedestal made of carved brick and lime plaster. Its lid depicts the Jesuit monogram and it is likely the same font listed in an inventory from 1767.

The **sacristy**, where priests prepare before mass, is located to the east of the retablo mayor. Its walls and ceiling are decorated with paintings of different saints and a large depiction of the crucifixion. Much of this room, including the original holy water font in the southern corner, are now covered by Perspex at the behest of conservators. Today the sacristy is still a highly functional space for the church, housing the electric breakers, wiring, and two enormous pieces of furniture for storage. In many ways, it represents the balance needed to ensure responsible preservation of a working 18th-century church.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- [Close look at San Xavier's intricate entrance reveals surprises](#) – Henry Brean (article)
- [A Tale of Two Saints at San Xavier del Bac](#) – Emily Umberger (article)
- [A Gift of Angels: The art of Mission San Xavier del Bac](#) – Bernard “Bunny” Fontana (book, ask PSX)

Common themes and symbols at San Xavier:

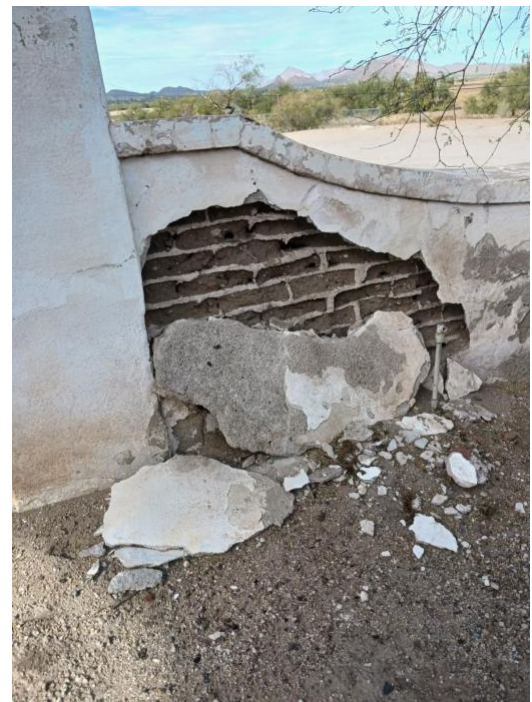
- Two patron saints: St. Francis Assisi (Franciscan) and St. Francis Xavier (Jesuit). Jesuit and Franciscan saints and symbols can be found throughout.
- Depictions of O'odham people and legends, and desert environment.
- Numerous female saints and depictions of Mary.
- Scallop shell as a symbol of Saint James the Greater, patron saint of Spain.

Conservation, Preservation & the Role of Patronato

San Xavier del Bac stands as a tribute to the strength of the building and its community, despite being abandoned for more than 30 years after Mexican independence and having been subject to vandalism, an earthquake, a lightning strike, and other potentially devastating destructive forces.

But the first comprehensive restoration campaign was coordinated by Bishop Granjon, who took a personal interest in the Mission church and invested considerable sums from his own inheritance in a campaign that spanned 1905 through 1912. Granjon's restorations included rebuilding the atrium and cemetery walls (both of which had fallen during the earthquake), extending the north **convento wing**, building an auto court demarcated by Granjon's Gate, and giving the entire complex a fresh coat of bright white lime wash—the first time the Mission and its ancillary buildings appeared as uniformly white as they do today. Granjon is also remembered for adding lion statues around the mission campus, a reference to his home region of Léon, France.

But over the years, standards in historic preservation and conservation have changed. Though no cement or concrete was used in the original construction of the church, which is predominantly made of fired brick, basalt rock, and lime plaster, the advent of **Portland cement** in the mid 19th century led many to prefer this newer more versatile material over traditional lime plaster. Portland cement-based plasters were introduced across the Mission in the mid 20th century. The use of this material was thought to supersede the more traditional lime-based plasters, being more durable and water-repellant. But, importantly, Portland cement is not as porous as lime plaster. Water vapor that enters the wall system beneath the cement, whether through rainfall, humidity, or other sources, ends up trapped under the cement and has nowhere to escape. Water-soluble salts that enter with the water can wreak havoc on the soft brick masonry and delicate wall paintings when the water evaporates and the salts recrystallize. Identifying areas where Portland cement was used at the church and assessing whether (or when) it needs to be replaced by traditional lime and nopal plaster is a continual priority.



An eastern section of Granjon's Gate where the cement crumbled because of water damage.

Many restoration projects throughout San Xavier's history have taken liberties with its appearance, not always referencing historic documentation of the church, and making design choices based on aesthetic appeal. This is especially problematic when one considers that those often leading these projects were not members of the Wa:k community. Historical accuracy and community input are central to the current conservation plan at San Xavier.

Patronato San Xavier

Patronato began in the 1970s as a collaboration between the two resident priests at the Mission and a group of wealthy Tucsonans who were personally invested in the church. This group had already funded several smaller preservation projects at the Mission when the friars received a sizable legacy designated specifically for preservation purposes. Without a firewall to protect this money, the priests foresaw that the general needs of the parish would quickly deplete the funds despite the donor's intent. There was also a fear of encroachment on the Mission as the city of Tucson spread south and west.

The solution was to form a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) corporation that could assume responsibility for the conservation of the Mission, and preserve and manage gifts that were designated for conservation purposes. Being a separate entity from the Church, the organization would also be eligible to pursue more diverse funding sources. Patronato San Xavier was incorporated in 1978.

To date the Patronato has funded and carried out a range of preservation projects at San Xavier. Notable past projects include removal of incompatible materials applied to the roof of the church which led to considerable infiltration by water; comprehensive cleaning and conservation of the interior artwork, conducted in seven winter campaigns throughout the 1990s; and restoration of the west tower in the early 2000s and the east tower from 2015 through 2022. Patronato also manages the mission's museum and coordinates the Docent Program.

As stated above, the Docent Program is an essential part of conveying Mission history and importance, as well as engaging visitors at San Xavier del Bac. The Patronato receives no sustaining income from religious or government funding structures. **The majority of support comes to Patronato through individual donors.** Docent tours frequently serve as the first point of contact for future donors and supporters.

Building Your Tour

Core Concept Summary:

The O'odham & the community of Wa:k	
Father Kino & the history of San Xavier del Bac	
Construction and architecture	
Interior & exterior artwork	
Patronato San Xavier	

Fun Facts & Trivia (with sources):

Asking for Donations:

Elements of a basic donation pitch	Sample phrases	Practice writing your own!
Thank the audience for their attention.	“Thanks for coming out today! I’d like to tell a little about Patronato San Xavier.”	
PSX is an independent, historic preservation nonprofit, not a religious organization.	“Patronato is a non-profit dedicated to the preservation of one of our nation’s most significant cultural sites. We’re not part of the church.”	
Importance of individual donations in keeping up maintenance at San Xavier.	“70% of our funding comes from individual donations, like yours. All donations go toward Patronato and preservation work at San Xavier.”	
Invitation to make tax-deductible donation, whenever they feel they can, and to stay in touch.	“I’m going to give you an envelope with our address on it. You don’t have to do anything with it right now, but take it with you, we’re happy to accept donations at any time. Patronato will provide tax receipts for a donation of any amount if you include your name and address.”	
Thank audience again for all their support.	“If you can’t donate, please spread the word about our work! Thank you again for all your support...”	

FAQ from Tours:

Glossary

Adobe – Building material made of clay, water, and straw. Typical of the southwest, but not used to build the 18th century church at San Xavier.

Akimel O’odham – “River people.” Traditionally lived and farmed along the Gila River in present-day Arizona.

Baptistry – Designated room or area for baptisms at the church.

Calendar stick – Traditional record keeping method of the O’odham. Makers would record significant events in their lives and be buried with their individual calendar stick.

Cast Stone – A cement-based material used to reconstruct the estípites on the façade at San Xavier.

Churrigueresque – Sometimes called Ultra Baroque, highly decorative architectural style named for José Benito de Churriguera. Originated in Spain and popular in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Convento – Living quarters of the nuns and/or friars. Located northeast of the main church, just off the patio, at San Xavier del Bac.

Courtyard – The large open air space encircled by the convento, friary, and administration wing of the mission. Fountain and olive trees were added in the 1960s.

Cupola – Design element at the top of a building or structure, often dome-like.

Espinosa, Father Alonso Ignacio – Jesuit priest who succeeded Kino at San Xavier del Bac.

Estípites – Non-weightbearing columns featured on the retablos of the church.

Estofado – Multi-step process that involves applying paint over gold leaf, then etching it away in certain areas to give the appearance of textile garments.

Façade – Large decorative face of the Mission made of carved brick and lime plaster.

Finial – Decorative design element at the end of a post or object. Commonly seen on bedposts, curtain rods, and staircase banisters.

Folk Baroque – Ornate architectural style typical of rural churches in Europe and Mexico built in the colonial period.

Fresco – Painting technique where paints are applied directly to wet plaster. An extremely durable and popular technique throughout history, especially during the European Renaissance.

Friary – Current living quarters of the Franciscan friars at San Xavier. The building was constructed in 1990s and is closed to the public.

Gesso – white paint mixture used to coat surface like wood or plaster to make them easier to paint.

Gaona, Ygnacio – Master mason who, according to oral tradition, designed the mission at San Xavier del Bac. He is listed on the W:k census from 1801 along with his wife and family. Ygnacio and his brother are also thought to have designed and built a similar mission in Caborca, Mexico.

Granjon, Bishop Henri – second bishop of Tucson who led the first comprehensive restoration project at the Mission.

Granjon's Gate – Tall, arched gate at the northern end of the courtyard that borders the autopark for church staff.

Grotto Hill – Small hill to the east of San Xavier del Bac, immediately identified by the a lion statue and white cross. The shrine to the Virgin Mary on the north side of the hill is frequently visited by worshippers. Grotto Hill is not church property.

Hia-Ced O'odham – “Sand people.” Nomadic desert dwellers with a broad seasonal range over the Sonoran Desert to the Colorado River and Gulf of California.

Himdag – “Way of life.” What guides people to remain in balance with the world and interact with it as intended. Often represented by the Man in the Maze.

Hohokam – Archaeological culture from around 300 – 1500 CE. Famous for agricultural advancement.

Huhugam – O'odham word that refers to all past ancestors. The name, Hohokam, is said to be derived from Huhugam, but does not necessarily refer to the same group of people.

I'toi – Elder Brother and Creator of the O'odham. I'toi brought the Huhugam up from the lower earth and is responsible for the gift of the himdag.

Jesuit Order – Founded in 1534 by Ignatius Loyola, Francisco Xavier, and five others as a reform movement within the Catholic Church. Eventually became an important intellectual influence in the Counter-Reformation in Europe.

Ki – Traditional housing structure at W:k made of bent branches and covered with mats and mud.

Kino, Father Eusebio (~1645 – 1711) – Italian-born Jesuit missionary who built over 20 missions in contemporary Arizona, Sonora, and Baja California, including San Xavier del Bac.

Llorens, Father Juan Bautista – Franciscan Father who oversaw the final stages of construction at San Xavier del Bac after Father Velderrain's death.

Man in the Maze – Symbol closely associated with the O'odham. Depicts a person's journey through life.

Milagro – "Miracle." Small religious charms offered to saints for guidance, help, or protection.
Mortuary chapel - Traditionally where the body of the deceased would rest prior to being moved into the church for the funeral. Located to the west of the main church at San Xavier del Bac.

Mudéjar – Islamic architecture and art style evident in dome and arch ways. Means "those who remained," referring to Muslims who stayed in Iberia after the Christian reconquest.

Nave – The long central part of the interior of a church where most of the congregation sits.

O'odham – Means "people." Inhabitants of the Sonoran Desert and surrounding landscape for thousands of years.

Pendentive – Triangular segment in the upper portion of a room that supports a domed ceiling.

Pimería Alta – Spanish colonial term that refers to the area of land broadly covering the Sonoran Desert. "Pima" is an outdated term for the Akimel O'odham.

Portland cement – Most common type of cement, named for its resemblance to portland stone. Developed in England in the 19th century.

Retablo – "behind the table / altarpiece." Decorative panels on the back wall of the north nave and east and west transepts.

Sacristy – Room or area of a church where the priest prepares for mass.

Sacristy arcade – Overhanging roof of the convento surrounding the interior perimeter of the patio and the friary at San Xavier del Bac.

Santa Cruz River – Tributary of the Gila River in Arizona and Sonora.

Sobaipuri O'odham – "Enemy-like people." Named for their reputation of being fierce warriors. Agricultural group along the Santa Cruz River, inhabitants of Wá:k, and caretakers of San Xavier del Bac for countless generations.

Tempera – Paint made of pigment mixed with an organic protein binder.

Tohono O'odham – "Desert people." Traditionally, a seasonally nomadic group in the Sonoran Desert with homelands extending as far as the Gulf of California.

Tohono O’odham Nation – Second largest reservation in the United States, located in southern Arizona along the border with Mexico, divided into 11 districts. Many O’odham people today are associated with the Tohono O’odham Nation even if they are descended from a different outgroup.

Transepts – In a cross-shaped church, the “arms” coming off the nave.

Tumacácori – “Sister” mission to San Xavier del Bac located near Tubac, AZ. Considered a stabilized ruin, not a working church.

Velderrain, Father Juan Bautista – Franciscan priest who oversaw initial stages of construction of the current church building at Wa:k. Died 1790.

Volutes – Spiral-shaped decorative feature seen on the outside of the church, on the roof, and on the façade.

Wa:k – Original Sobaipuri O’odham village on the Santa Cruz River and current community at San Xavier del Bac. The word means “go in” or “enter” in O’odham.

Waw Giwulk – Also known as Baboquivari Peak. Where I’itoi removed himself after completing his work with the Huhugam. Many O’odham still bring small offerings to I’itoi here.

Xavier, Saint Francis (1506-1552) – One of five founders of the Jesuit Order. One patron saint of San Xavier del Bac.

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