



2 HISTORY OF EL CAMINO

*THE MISSIONS AND EL CAMINO
LOCATING SAN MATEO ON EL CAMINO
REMEMBERING THE ORIGINS THROUGH THE BELL MARKERS
WHY DOES EL CAMINO LOOK THE WAY IT DOES IN SAN MATEO*

SETTINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES HISTORY OF

The stretch of El Camino in California owes its origins to Father Junipero Serra, a Franciscan monk, who, departing Mexico in 1769, traveled north to extend Spanish influence and convert the native populations. Following the coastal ridgeline and the Pacific Ocean, the missionaries pushed steadily north into what is now California. At that time, the northerly road was little more than a dirt path, originating at the first mission in what is now San Diego. Upon the approximate completion of a full day's journey, they would stop to establish a new mission, a way station facilitating both commerce and conversion, before heading north again.

Branching and winding as demanded by the coastal topography and the Bay, the missionary path progressed northward on two spurs; one from San Jose to current-day Sonoma, where the final Mission was founded in 1823 and a shorter second led from *Mission Santa Clara* in the Peninsula to *Mission San Francisco de Asis* (*Mission Dolores*) in San Francisco.

A Russian presence claiming lands to the north of San Francisco made this a logical terminus for military and colonial expansion and allowed a rich exchange of goods and ideas between the two cultures

Upon completion of this continuous chain of



Figure 2.1 Ruins of Mission el Soledad on El Camino in Salinas Valley, CA.



Figure 2.2 El Camino passing through Cuesta Ridge near San Luis Obispo, CA.



Figure 2.3 Along Zaca Station Road (El Camino) north of Santa Barbara, CA



Figure 2.4 El Camino near San Juan Batista, CA.

Spanish enclaves, stretching by that time from Guatemala to northern California, the road connecting them was given the name El Camino Real, which translated into English means "the royal road." (Although this translation may place significance on the "royal" nature of the route, the exchange of goods and ideas along El Camino* involved the native cultures more than the Spanish Crown.) Through this exchange, El Camino would serve as the central nervous system supporting the propagation of Spanish Colonialism in western North America.

Recalling, by name, the major public thoroughfares of Imperial Europe, El Camino was intended to operate as the central artery of commerce and

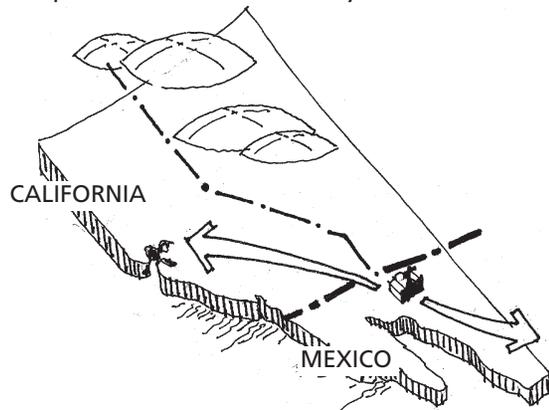


Figure 2.5 El Camino follows the Missionary path from northern Mexico travelling north and south. The northern section terminates in the Bay Area.

* For the remainder of this document, El Camino Real will be referred to as El Camino with the exception, when the street name is used within a title it will be referred to by its entire name.

culture in the Spanish colonial system. It enabled steady communication between Missions and ultimately the crown. Further, the several Missions along El Camino became the location of constant exchange between native peoples and cultures and the Spanish socio-religious edifice. These focal points formed the foundation of future cities and towns. Smaller settlements eventually started along El Camino as rest points on the day's journey between the Missions.

As the West Coast became increasingly settled, El Camino developed into a valuable transportation route for the agriculturally rich state of California, moving both commodities and workers throughout the state. In 1906, the Federal government officially recognized the importance of El Camino by making it the second nationally named highway in the US.

While the importance of El Camino as a commercial and public route has diminished over the years, with ascendancy of high-speed freeways, it still carries a strong sense of its history. Efforts such as the Historic El Camino Bell Markers appeal to this significant historical awareness. A series of cast iron bells commemorating the street's role in California's rich Spanish heritage dot the entire stretch of



Figure 2.6 A more modified contemporary design of the El Camino bell-marker, shown here in San Mateo, is much shorter, including a more rounded hook and fuller bell.



Figure 2.7 The El Camino bell-marker as seen here in San Carlos, has a much longer and higher hook and a thinner bell, which reflects the traditional design of the bell throughout the state.

SETTINGS AND OPPORTUNITIES HISTORY OF EL CAMINO

to evolve once again. There is not the same demand for continuous strip retail. The road is used more significantly for in-city trips and local circulation. Strong housing, office and technology growth is beginning to consider a presence along El Camino. Shoppers seek a distinctive high quality experience, offering variety, interest and easy access. The automobile still predominates, with reverse commute traffic beginning to surpass regular commute traffic volumes. While the automobile is the predominant mode of commute transportation, rail commuting has begun to grow in the last decade.

It is these new pressures and potentials that will guide the work of the El Camino Master Plan team - learning from history and looking to frame the future. El Camino in San Mateo tells the story of the great road's evolution and offers once again the opportunity to command a leadership role in community building on the Peninsula.

commercial development progressed along traffic routes into areas with available parking; El Camino was instrumental in this role. The lots along the street began to be developed for uses that responded to the automobile - drive-through restaurants, gas and service stations and auto dealerships. While El Camino still provided the main north-south access through the Peninsula, the street was becoming a destination for shopping during the day, and cruising at night.

The most significant contemporary change in El Camino's context however was the construction of the Bay Area's freeway system - first Highway 101 and then Highway 280. The laying of these freeways added more fuel to the explosive suburban housing market that the Bay Area was experiencing after WWII. This growth in housing, added to the strong residential base that existed previously in San Mateo, helped establish San Mateo as one of the largest suburbs that dotted the San Francisco Peninsula. Both routes, in their time, served to relieve north-south travel congestion and spur development served best by the corridors. In San Mateo this is most apparent along Highway 101 and the east-west link of Route 92, as they have attracted intense development investment both along corridors and at intersections.

With the regional traffic demand handled, primarily, on freeway routes, this left El Camino

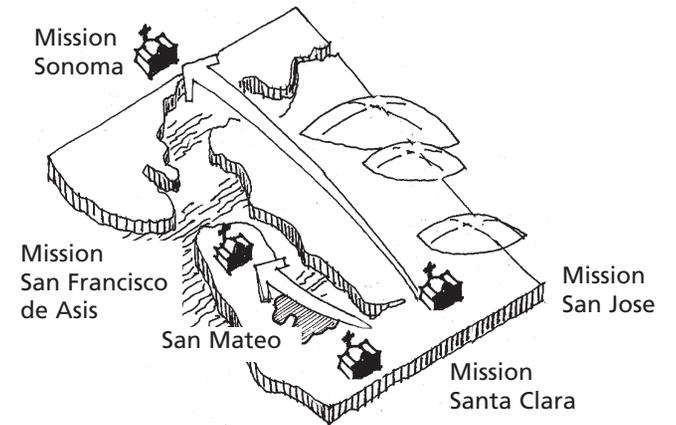


Figure 2.8 The split in the Bay Area forms two legs terminating at Mission San Francisco and Mission Sonoma. San Mateo is located along the shorter leg that heads to San Francisco.

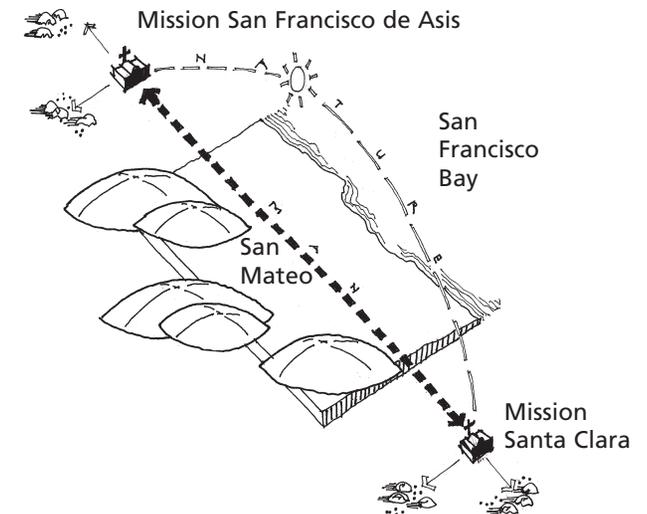


Figure 2.9 The laying out of the El Camino by the Spanish Missionaries followed for the most part the lowland between the Pacific Ocean and the inland mountains. The placement of the actual Missions along the route was determined from a one day's walking journey north from the previous Mission. The diagram depicts how San Mateo and El Camino lay in between the mountains and the Bay instead of the Ocean.

El Camino. The bells date from 1906 with the formation of the El Camino Association and the erection of the first bell at the Old Plaza Church in Los Angeles. Located in front of each of the Missions and at intervals along El Camino, the bell markers insert a consistent symbolic element in the state's landscape.

REGIONAL CONTEXT:

As the Missionaries moved into the Bay Area, El Camino split in two due to the San Francisco Bay. The two legs both contain a Mission at both ends; Mission San Jose and Mission Sonoma along the eastern leg, and Mission Santa Clara and Mission Dolores along the western leg. As mentioned earlier, the Russian presence farther north closed off options for continued expansion of El Camino into the North Bay. The terminus of both El Camino branches in the Bay Area meant that the settlements here were at the borders between different Colonial influences. While the Missions were not intended as fortified settlements, tensions were high, and the later Missions played a key role in protecting the Spanish influence in Northern America.

The original path of El Camino bypassed a section of San Mateo as the Missionaries tried to avoid the wetlands that existed in the south of San Mateo. The current path of El Camino in

the southern part of San Mateo (roughly from Hillsdale Boulevard south) now follows what was originally called County Road.

In later years, the strategic role of El Camino through the Peninsula evolved to one of communication and commerce. As the largest city on the route from San Jose to San Francisco, San Mateo established a leadership role and was the first community to evolve a distinctive urban center with a prominent front door on El Camino. Other communities along the El Camino routes in the Bay Area seized the opportunity to expand along this lifeline, setting the pattern for the metropolitan region we see today.

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT:

Today, the role of El Camino up and down the Peninsula has evolved once again. Suburban villages are growing proudly into small cities, seeking to concentrate densities along transportation routes as housing pressures mount and lower density areas seek protection. With the downtown core of San Mateo located along El Camino, the city's evolution has traditionally been strongly linked to the changing tides of the street. Logically then, San Mateo has set out to play a leadership role in redefining and redesigning El Camino's role with economically strong and aesthetically distinctive

destinations, which link the road and the railroad.

The majority of Peninsula and South Bay settlements originated as agricultural and ranching communities, embracing a Spanish land management model. As such, a location along El Camino offered excellent access to the exchange of vital goods and supplies. Later, the introduction of rail lines in the Bay Area strengthened the commercial vitality of the El Camino corridor, and the location of a rail stop at San Mateo maintained the City's strategic role. The laying of the rail lines followed the same lowland course that the missionaries chose, due to the relative ease of movement. In San Mateo, the proximity of El Camino to the Union Pacific Rail Line (along which Caltrain currently operates their commuter line) allowed the downtown core to act as the hinge between the two transportation modes, road and rail. The presence of this hinge provided a logical center for a strong commercial core in downtown .

For San Mateo the 1940's brought a surge of developers buying land and arranging suburban developments throughout the City. From what was once a smaller residential settlement, San Mateo began to evolve into a true suburban community built on easy access into San Francisco by automobile via El Camino. Spreading outward from the downtown core,

