



Junipero Serra: California's Founding Father

Steven W. Hackel

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A portrait of the priest and colonialist who is one of the most important figures in California's history

In the 1770s, just as Britain's American subjects were freeing themselves from the burdens of colonial rule, Spaniards moved up the California coast to build frontier outposts of empire and church. At the head of this effort was Junípero Serra, an ambitious Franciscan who hoped to convert California Indians to Catholicism and turn them into European-style farmers. For his efforts, he has been beatified by the Catholic Church and widely celebrated as the man who laid the foundation for modern California. But his legacy is divisive. The missions Serra founded would devastate California's Native American population, and much more than his counterparts in colonial America, he remains a contentious and contested figure to this day.

Steven W. Hackel's groundbreaking biography, *Junípero Serra: California's Founding Father*, is the first to remove Serra from the realm of polemic and place him within the currents of history. Born into a poor family on the Spanish island of Mallorca, Serra joined the Franciscan order and rose to prominence as a priest and professor through his feats of devotion and powers of intellect. But he could imagine no greater service to God than converting Indians, and in 1749 he set off for the new world. In Mexico, Serra first worked as a missionary to Indians and as an uncompromising agent of the Inquisition. He then became an itinerant preacher, gaining a reputation as a mesmerizing orator who could inspire, enthrall, and terrify his audiences at will. With a potent blend of Franciscan piety and worldly cunning, he outmaneuvered Spanish royal officials, rival religious orders, and avaricious settlers to establish himself as a peerless frontier administrator. In the culminating years of his life, he extended Spanish dominion north, founding and promoting missions in present-day San Diego, Los Angeles, Monterey, and San Francisco. But even Serra could not overcome the forces massing against him. California's military leaders rarely shared his zeal, Indians often opposed his efforts, and ultimately the missions proved to be cauldrons of disease and discontent. Serra, in his hope to save souls, unwittingly helped bring about the massive decline of California's indigenous population.

On the three-hundredth anniversary of Junípero Serra's birth, Hackel's complex, authoritative biography tells the full story of a man whose life and legacies continue to be both celebrated and denounced. Based on exhaustive research and a vivid narrative, this is an essential portrait of America's least understood founder.

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