

Basic Detail Report



Keystone

Date

1797-1806

Primary Maker

Mission San Juan Capistrano

Medium

Limestone and sandstone

Description

This keystone was made between 1797 and 1806 during the construction of Mission San Juan Capistrano's Great Stone Church. The California mission system, while founded by Spanish missionaries, was maintained physically and economically by Indigenous peoples, so it is likely that this object and the building it once held together were made by members of the local Acjachemen tribe. With the arrival of the Spanish, traditional local food

sources became less reliable, and disease spread rapidly amongst the Indigenous population. Joining a mission community presented a comparatively stable option in a disruptive period because it offered a measure of protection against food insecurity and other dangers. Additionally, if tribes joined a mission, they would be shielded by Spanish arms from rival tribes. However, those who joined the missions were forced to assimilate to Spanish culture and Christian religion. Indigenous workers, whose livelihoods were tied to the missions, became known jointly as Mission Indians, leading to the erasure and homogenization of their tribal identities. They could not leave without permission, and punishment—such as flogging—for breaking rules was common and severe. The combination of these factors left few options for survival and amounted to a system of forced labor. To construct the Great Stone Church, Mission Indians quarried sandstone and limestone from areas up to six miles away and transported them in oxen-drawn carts or by hand back to the Mission site. The stone was then crushed into a powder to create a mortar that was stronger and less likely to erode over time than the actual stones. For the brief period that it stood completed, the church and its 120 foot bell tower could be seen from miles away and heard from even farther, until the morning of December 8, 1812, when a massive earthquake brought the structure crumbling down, killing the 42 Indigenous worshipers inside.