

Early California Population Project Report

STEVEN W. HACKEL

Department of History, Oregon State University,
Corvallis, OR 97331-5104

The Early California Population Project is a database that has been developed by the Henry E. Huntington Library over the course of eight years. The database, which is now accessible online, makes available all of the information contained in the California mission registers, records that are of unique and vital importance to the study of California, the American Southwest, and colonial America. The vast potential of these records has in many ways remained unexploited, since they are scattered across California and are often too old and brittle to handle. Microfilm copies of the registers exist in archives, but are of poor quality and often hard to locate. Lacking adequate staff and the resources to facilitate genealogical and historical research, libraries, archives, missions, and dioceses each year turn away countless individuals who are eager to study early California's Indian, Hispanic, and Anglo-American inhabitants. The Early California Population Project was created as a solution to the problem of access, and is a significant new resource for the study of California before 1850.

The Early California Population Project is creating—for wide dissemination—a database of records that are of unique and vital importance to the study of California, the American Southwest, and colonial America. This database project, developed by the Henry E. Huntington Library, will provide easy and democratic access to all information contained in the California mission registers. As anthropologists, historians, and genealogists are well aware, the sacramental registers of the California missions are among the most important sources for the study of California and its peoples before 1850. Within the baptism, marriage, and burial records of each of the California missions sits an extraordinary wealth of unique information on the Indians, soldiers, and settlers of Alta California. During the last three decades, a small group of historians and anthropologists, some working alone, others working in collaboration, have

made good use of these records and demonstrated the degree to which mission records can be studied and made more accessible through complex computerized and searchable databases. But the vast potential of California's mission records has remained unexploited for a variety of reasons. The records themselves have been either too remote or too complicated for easy and sustained consultation by anyone but the most dedicated and specialized of scholars. The construction of databases based on mission records has proven to be extremely time-consuming and challenging, and therefore some regions have yet to be studied through the sacramental registers. When databases have been created, their structure and design necessarily have been narrowed by specific research questions and (until recently) technological limitations on the amount of information that could be stored and managed in a computer file. Furthermore, while existing databases of mission records are extremely powerful tools, each is in one important way incomplete: since soldiers and settlers moved from mission to mission, as did Indians with less frequency, datasets that did not encompass all of the California missions could not capture the full life histories of the most mobile Indians, soldiers, and settlers of Spanish and Mexican California.

For these reasons, by the mid-1990s the need for a comprehensive and integrated database of all of the information in all of the California mission sacramental registers was increasingly apparent. It was also apparent that this task was simply too large for any one individual to accomplish. As a result of these realizations, and from the desire to establish a new resource for the study of California before 1850, the Early California Population Project was born. In the short report that follows, I will attempt to explain the nature of the Early California Population Project database, its development by researchers and by staff at the Huntington Library, and its ability to serve the needs of a wide range of scholars and researchers. The inherent challenges presented to researchers by mission sacramental records have been discussed at length elsewhere, and readers interested in those issues should consult Johnson (1988), Hackel (2005), and Milliken (1991).

Begun in earnest in 1998 and now nearing completion at the Huntington, the Early California Population Project (ECP) is a computer database of all the information

recorded in the baptism, marriage, and burial registers kept by missionaries and parish priests in California between 1769 and 1850. The ECPP is designed to provide access to information found in mission sacramental registers that are scattered across California and are often too old and too fragile to handle. Microfilm copies of registers exist in archives but are of variable quality. Understanding these registers, written as they are in eighteenth-century Spanish script, demands rare skills and enormous effort. Lacking adequate staff and the resources to facilitate genealogical and historical research, libraries, archives, missions, and dioceses each year turn away countless individuals who are eager to study early California's Indian, Spanish, and Anglo-American inhabitants. Thus, the ECPP database is a response to scholars' needs and to barriers of access; it will be easy to navigate and widely accessible through the Huntington Library's website (www.huntington.org).

This project offers great opportunities for the present and future study of the people and communities of early California. Through the ECPP database, (1) community historians will be able to study in greater detail the individuals and families who settled California's first presidios and pueblos; (2) anthropologists and ethnohistorians will be able to examine the settlement patterns of Indians in Alta California and their movement to the missions; (3) historical demographers will be able to bring greater detail to their attempts to understand the pace and magnitude of Indian population decline in Alta California; (4) scholars of religion will be able to study the practice and administration of Catholicism in the California missions and the lives of California's Franciscans; (5) social historians will be able to study the structure and growth of the missions and the secular communities of Spanish and Mexican California; and (6) genealogists will be able to more easily trace and identify the people who lived in California from 1769 to 1850.

Since its inception in 1998, the Early California Population Project has been based at the Huntington Library. Founded in 1919 by Henry E. Huntington, railroad magnate and real estate developer, the Huntington Library has long been known as one of Southern California's preeminent educational and cultural institutions. The Huntington is also an internationally distinguished research center for advanced studies in the humanities. Today the Huntington Library houses over 6.4 million items: more than 670,000 rare and reference

books; 800,000 photographs; 450,000 historical prints and ephemeral items; and over 4.5 million individual manuscripts. Designated a National Endowment for the Humanities Center for Advanced Studies in 1996, the Huntington administers the largest fellowship program of any independent library in the country. The history of California has always been central to the Library's collections, to scholars in residence at the library, and to the institution's exhibitions and public programs. The Library has one of the largest collections in the world of materials on westward expansion, including diaries, letters, and early territorial imprints. Most importantly, the Huntington has a nearly complete set of microfilm copies of the California mission registers, and numerous books and publications relating to the families of early California.

Through the Huntington Library, the Early California Population Project has acquired generous financial support from many granting agencies. The John Randolph Haynes and Dorothy Haynes Foundation, the California State Library (Library Services and Technology Act), the Dan Murphy Foundation, the Giles W. & Elise G. Mead Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Humanities, have all funded a Huntington-based project staff of between two and four full-time employees that have been devoted to data entry since 1999. This work has been carried out through the Huntington Library's Research program, which is overseen by Robert C. Ritchie. Database design and data entry have been guided by the editorial supervision of the project's initiator and General Editor, Steven W. Hackel, and the Coordinator of Work, Anne M. Reid.

The primary sources for the Early California Population Project are the baptism, marriage, and burial registers produced by the Franciscans of Spanish and Mexican California. Much like parish priests in Europe, missionaries in California were required to keep records for all Indians affiliated with the missions and for the region's Spanish and Mexican population, all of whom were at least nominally Catholic. Thus, whenever the missionaries in California baptized an individual, they recorded—to the best of their ability—that individual's birthplace, age, parents, marital status, children, siblings, godparents, Spanish name, and any other information they deemed unique or relevant. They also assigned that individual's baptism record a unique number. Similarly,

when they married or buried someone, they assigned that individual's marriage or burial record a unique number, and in these records they nearly always recorded the individual's Spanish name, age, marital status, place of baptism, family relations, and (if known) baptism record number. Because the separate baptism, marriage, and burial registers for all of California's twenty-one missions are largely complete, consistently thorough, and in many ways cross-referenced, records from different missions and registers can be linked and sorted by individual. The California mission registers, therefore, contain the information necessary to reconstruct not only the individual life histories of the tens of thousands of Indians and settlers who lived in Alta California, but the divergent population dynamics of these groups.

All basic data entry for the project was completed in June, 2006. The project has records on about 101,000 baptisms, 28,000 marriages, and 71,000 burials performed in California between 1769 and 1850. No other region of colonial America that became part of the United States has a database consisting of such an extensive set of vital records. The database encompasses records from all twenty-one of the California missions, in addition to the Los Angeles Plaza Church and the Santa Barbara Presidio. Unfortunately, there are a few notable gaps in the documentary record. All sacramental records from Mission San Luis Rey are missing, but the project used the mission's *padrón* (a form of a household census) to reconstruct some of the mission's population (see Johnson and Crawford 1999). The burial records for Mission Soledad are also lost. In addition, there are also major gaps in baptisms at Mission San Gabriel, and at San Diego there is a sixteen-year gap in burials after 1831. With these exceptions, there are no major gaps in the missions' sacramental records. Nevertheless, each mission's records have their own idiosyncrasies, and these will be discussed in various mission memos attached to the ECPP website.

The design structure of the initial ECPP database emerged in the fall and spring of 1999–2000 through the combined efforts of Steven W. Hackel, John R. Johnson, and Randall T. Milliken. Over time, as more data were added to the project, the ECPP database structure was expanded. Since the ECPP is intended as a source for a wide range of future researchers, many of whom will certainly ask questions that cannot now be anticipated,

the design team sought to craft a database that would allow for the capture of all of the information contained in the mission registers. The result is a wide and flexible range of fields designed to allow data entry to expand in relationship to the amount of information contained in a given record. In its current form, the ECPP database has more than 82 fields related to individual baptism records, 92 fields covering the marriages of individuals, and 47 fields concerning burial information. An electronic Guide to Users will help researchers understand and search the fields of the ECPP website.

Since the primary goal of the project is an electronic version of the original records—not a database of information derived from an interpretation or manipulation of information contained in the original registers—information has been transferred directly from the original registers *as it appears in the original records*. However, a secondary goal of the project has been to link together the dispersed baptism, marriage, and burial records of individuals in order to facilitate data retrieval and the creation of histories of individuals and families. It is in the area of record linkage that the ECPP staff has moved well beyond a simple transcription of the original registers. Complicating the linking of records was the fact that the Franciscans tended to use only first names when they identified Indians in the mission records. Fortunately, though, the Franciscans also included in their records many other bits of identifying information that permitted project staff to link burial records to baptism records, marriage records to baptism records, and children's baptism records to their parents' baptism and marriage records. Since these links are the result of many decisions that may not be readily apparent to ECPP users, we have devoted a separate field to an explanation of how each link was made. We have 39 different ways links can be established. These run from the Franciscans having made the link themselves to ECPP staff having determined the link through various combinations of evidence, such as the year of the individual's birth, or the name of the individual's parents, siblings, or spouse.

At this point, (1) 64,612 out of 71,360 death records have been linked to the deceased's baptismal record; (2) 46,731 out of 65,170 baptism records that list information on a Spanish-named mother have been linked to the mother's baptismal record; (3) 42,412 out of 65,015 baptism records that list information on a Spanish-named

father have been linked to the father's baptismal record; and (4) out of 27,985 marriage records, we have cross-linked the bride to her baptismal record in 25,200 cases, and the groom to his baptism record in 24,811 cases.

While the vast majority of the ECPP data was compiled at the Huntington, the project benefited from the generosity of scholars who were willing to contribute their own data to the project. Data for Mission San Carlos came from Steven Hackel; Randy Milliken and John Johnson provided their database of missions San Antonio and San Miguel; John Johnson shared his work on missions San Luis Obispo and San Luis Rey; and Steven O'Neil and John Johnson provided a copy of their work on Mission San Juan Capistrano. All of this work was checked for accuracy by ECPP staff, and none of it was downloaded directly into the ECPP database. All donated data were modified so that information in each field for each record would conform to the transcription conventions outlined by ECPP staff.

ECPP staff did not work directly with original manuscripts, but rather with microfilm of the originals. Some of this microfilm is part of the Huntington Library's microfilm collection, but much of it was borrowed from institutions throughout the state. The Santa Barbara Mission Archive-Library was particularly generous in sharing its microfilm. The University of Santa Clara provided film for Mission Santa Clara, and the Archive of the Archdiocese of San Francisco permitted the ECPP to use microfilm copies of records from many of the missions of northern California. Finally, the Archival Center of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles provided a copy of various records for Mission San Fernando. Without the support of Doyce Nunis, Anne McMahon, and Jeffrey Burns, the ECPP could not have been completed so expeditiously.

After an internal review of the database and a testing of the website, a link to the database will be placed on the Huntington Library's homepage in the summer of 2006. At this moment in time, the ECPP website is still under construction. Thus, it is too early to describe in detail the website, but all fields in the ECPP will be searchable, and the site will be easy to navigate. Accompanying the database will be various explanatory memos describing the records used to create the database, the conventions followed by ECPP data-entry personnel, and the particularities of the records of each of the missions incorporated into the database. It is the hope of the Huntington Library and the project's sponsors, staff, contributors, and general editor that the ECPP will constitute an enduring contribution to the anthropological, historical, ethnohistorical, and genealogical study of all of the peoples and communities of California before 1850.

REFERENCES

- Hackel, Steven W.
2005 *Children of Coyote, Missionaries of Saint Francis: Indian-Spanish Missionaries in Colonial California, 1769-1850*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Johnson, John R.
1988 Mission Registers as Anthropological Questionnaires: Understanding Limitations of the Data. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 12: 9-30.
- Johnson, John R., and Dinah Crawford
1999 Contributions to Luiseño Ethnohistory Based on Mission Register Research. *Pacific Coast Archaeological Society Quarterly* 33(4):79-102.
- Milliken, Randall T.
1991 *An Ethnohistory of the Indian People of the San Francisco Bay Area from 1770 to 1810*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley.

