



DAVID BOLTON

Executive Director & CEO of the California Missions Foundation and board member of the United States-Spain Council.

David Bolton is the current Executive Director and CEO of the California Missions Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation and restoration of the 21 historic Missions of California founded by Fray Junípero Serra. For the past 30 years, David has been dedicated to the preservation of the California Missions and related historical sites, as well as researching and helping to tell the story of early Spanish history in the American Southwest. As a film producer, David has spent more than two decades documenting the vast Spanish Mission chains of the Americas, from South America and Mexico to all corners of the present day United States.

David is currently a board member of the Washington D.C.-based United States-Spain Council, Old Spanish Days Inc. in Santa Barbara where he sits on the executive committee, Santa Barbara Boys and Girls Club where he currently serves as board chair, and the Santa Barbara Maritime Museum.

In April 2019, Mr. Bolton was knighted by Spain's King Felipe VI as a Commander of the Royal Order of Isabel la Católica.

The American Brief

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Established in 1998, the California Missions Foundation is dedicated to the long-term preservation and restoration needs of the California Spanish missions and their associated historic and cultural resources for public benefit. Is this valuable architectural and ethnographic heritage in danger?

The main work of the California Missions Foundation (CMF) is to help preserve, protect and restore the 21 California Missions and related historical sites. The California Missions have been under threat in recent years by individuals who view the history of the Missions in a negative light. The Mission structures have been vandalized, as have historical statues. Also, many of the California Mission structures are subject to the elements,

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and like any aging building, they have suffered deterioration over time due to rainstorms, earthquakes and fires. The California Spanish Missions are worth saving. The architecture led to a movement throughout the U.S. Southwest known as ‘mission revival’ architecture.

The language Spain brought to the Americas is spoken in many corners of the U.S. and throughout Latin America. The food, dance and culture that followed the Spanish Missions in the Rancho period, continues today throughout our communities. The California Missions are everyone’s story. Our indigenous population painted not only the interiors but also some of the pieces in

the vast collection of Colonial art. If we destroy the Missions, we destroy the history of many peoples. At Mission Santa Barbara there are two large paintings in the church done by Cabrera, a Zapotec Indian who was one of the leading painters in colonial times. At Mission San Gabriel the Stations of the Cross, which were saved during the recent fire that wiped through the historic church, were painted by Juan Antonio of the Topanga village of Tongva. Painters always put their own ideas into artwork, and he replaced Roman soldiers with Spanish soldiers in these Stations of the Cross. Eliminating history eliminated the history of many.

CMF continues to work to save this important history of the California Spanish Missions. At Mission San Miguel, closed in 2003 following the San Simeon earthquake, the interior painting by the local Salinan indigenous is the last fully intact and conserved at any of the Missions. To retrofit, holes are normally made in the wall, the beam is put inside the wall, and then the hole is patched and the wall repaired. To save these important works of the native Salinan community, the retrofit crew made holes in the outside wall, never penetrating through the interior walls. This saved the important interior wall painting.

The CMF is also strongly committed to education and scholarship. In your view, how important is education to allow new generations to

understand the historical past and cultural diversity of their own communities?

Education is one of the most important aspects of what we do. History is at risk of being lost forever if we do not protect the structures that tell the story of our ancestors and preserve them for generations to come. In recent days we have seen just how important an accurate understanding of history is. Statues of Junípero Serra, a Catholic Spanish missionary priest who protected the Native Americans from the colonialists, were torn down in San Francisco and Los Angeles in just the last few months with more statues being removed in Ventura and elsewhere. This sort of anger toward a man who served the poor depicts just how important a true understanding of history can be on our present communities. Records show that St. Junípero Serra protected the native communities where he served, and even fought to have the Mission at Monterey moved away from the Presidio to nearby Carmel to protect the native population. California was founded by many nations with unique cultures and peoples and all of these are re-

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presented in the names of cities throughout the state of California. These need to be preserved and protected so that our history is not lost.

San Diego, Santa Barbara, Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Luis Obispo, San Jose... As you have just mentioned, many cities in California emerged after the founding and settlement of missions, presidios and pueblos by Spaniards and proudly preserve in their names, streets and architecture these Spanish reminiscences. The exhibition “Designing America: Spain’s Imprint in the U.S.”, organized by the Fundación Consejo España – EE.UU., precisely covers this not very well-known aspect of our shared history. Is the American society in general, and Californians in particular, aware of the Spanish contribution to the construction of American territory, landscape, and urbanism? How can we work together to improve the knowledge of the rich and multiethnic Hispanic heritage in the United States?

It would be a most valuable endeavor to create educational programs that better explain and bring to light and consciousness the unique and beautiful history encapsulated by the variety of cultures involved in early California. If more emphasis was given to the beauty of the diverse history of California, maybe it would help ease the current cultural tensions in our state. Californians know the

names of our cities are Spanish, but it is an unconscious knowledge. Bringing that knowledge to the forefront will help educate and heal the divide. Many Californians are unaware of the distinction between the Native American city, park and building names and the Spanish names. Bringing light to the fact that names like Napa, Azusa, Yosemite and Temecula were named in honor of Native Americans may go a long way to help Californians appreciate their rich, collective heritage. However, the Spanish legacy in California also needs to be explained. CMF thinks that our publications and our web site are two places where we could do even more to help tell more of the Spanish stories

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and the important impacts Spain has had not only on California but throughout U.S. history.

The emerging movement in the United States fighting systemic racism raised after George Floyd’s death also led to vandalism against statues of some relevant historical figures now accused of racism and genocide, such as Christopher Columbus, Ponce de León, Junípero Serra or even Miguel de Cervantes. In response, the California Missions Foundation released a statement asking to stop violence and seek consensus. What is the official position of the CMF on this issue?

The California Missions Foundation would like to emphasize the beautiful, unique and common heritage that we share together as Californians. These statues are beautiful works of art that were created to celebrate our historical heroes. Rather than tear down or vandalize these pieces, we would like to see more statues of the heroes in every culture of California’s history erected and on



display to communicate and teach the depth and breadth of the historical footprint that has given birth to the land we know and love today.

How can we work to redirect the discussion from very different points of view and sensibilities towards an open and constructive dialogue within the framework of the historical revisionism?

The California Missions Foundation believes that through greater education and advocacy, we will be able to make a case for the value of every culture, nation and people who played a role in the history and founding of California. The history of California is Native American, Spanish, Mexican and American. All groups added their touch and heritage to these lands. Every group should have its history protected, preserved and continued on to the next generations. The culinary, artistic, nature-loving, family-centric values of each of these cultures have all contributed to what has become California in the year 2020. Let us focus on the gifts that cultural diversity has brought to our state rather than the

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conflicts of our historical past. In so doing, we may arrive at a peaceful and joyful society able to enjoy a common heritage together in the golden state.

You are member of the Board of Directors of the United States–Spain Council, the U.S. counterpart of the Fundación Consejo España–EE.UU. Both institutions work jointly since their establishment in 1997 to foster a better mutual understanding between the Spanish and American civil societies. What should be their role in the promotion and defense of the Hispanic heritage in the United States?

The United States–Spain Council and la Fundación are two important sister organizations that each have a duty to help protect, preserve and conserve the legacy and the heritage of Spain in the U.S. A more robust cultural program in tandem with the on-going financial and political goals of the organization’s members would go a long way to help educate the masses about the important role Spain played in the development of many parts of the U.S. Spanish businesses can also help. At a time when many seek to erase history, we need to proclaim it and celebrate it to help keep it alive. This can be done in a tasteful manner. In addition, helping with some of the various preservation projects would help send a message that Spain also cares about these historic sites at the California Missions.

