THE HISTORICAL AND ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES OF THE SANTA CRUZ RIVER VALLEY, ARIZONA

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In southern Arizona and northern Sonora there is a harsh desert region connected by river valleys and ancient cultures. In the midst of this harsh desert, these river systems fed by springs and summer rains create oasis areas for rich agriculture and provided routes to travel north and south from deeper in Mexico. Contact between peoples in the regions is thousands of years old. In the Tucson area some of the oldest corn agriculture is to be found north of central Mexico going back 3,000 years. Major irrigation canals large enough to divert the entire course of the Santa Cruz River were constructed over 1,000 years ago. What is true of Tucson is also true of many sites along the Santa Cruz River where water was dependable agricultural settlements were dense. The river was not always dependable and some of its flow was at times subsurface. In the Tucson area this meant additional dependence on springs on either side of the river.

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In the 1680’s Jesuit missionaries led by Eusebio Francisco Kino moved north into the land of the northern Pimas or O’odham. Missions and visitas of missions were established beginning in 1687 at Misión Dolores in Sonora south of the current border followed by San Ignacio 1687, Guevavi early 1690’s, and San Xavier near Tucson in 1700. The missionaries brought new plants, especially wheat and fruit trees and domesticated animals such as horses, cattle and sheep. This added considerably to the indigenous diet and created year round agriculture. As missionaries moved north so did other Hispanics, soldiers, miners, ranchers and merchants. By the 1750’s a company garrison of troops was established at Tubac and in 1775 the Tubac presidio was moved to Tucson.

In the mid 1600’s Apache Indians moved in from the northeast and conflicts between these raiding peoples and the O’odham, Opata, other native peoples and Hispanics defined much of the history of the Spanish and Mexican periods. The establishment of Spanish missions and government also created the opportunity and reason for native tribes in the area to travel throughout Sonora in search of work. By the middle of the 19th century the region was a mixture of several varieties of Hispanic (Catalan, Basque, Castilian, etc.) others from Europe, many native people and after 1853 people from the United States with roots in northern Europe. The modern Southwest of United States and Northern Mexico was born.

The ancient trade routes that brought native people north from central Mexico were basically the same routes used by Spanish explorers and missionaries. These routes became the Camino Reales or royal roads. Even today modern highways are close to the original routes. The term Los Caminos Reales refers to a relatively well traveled route guarded by presidial troops. They were not exactly the same in all times of colonial history but generally followed similar routes. A Royal Road came north from the state of Sinaloa through the towns of Alamos and San Miguel de Horcucitas where it split, one route going northwest to the Santa Ana area and then along the Magdalena river to Altar and north from Altar, eventually reaching Tucson.

Another route went north along the San Miguel river to Misión Dolores then north through the town Santa Cruz a little further north it split, one route crossing the mountains and going to the Santa Cruz valley and north to Tucson the