

Hugo Oconór (1734-1779)

Founder of Tucson

After Hugh O'Connor, now Hugo Oconór, set foot on the American continent, most of his time was spent in the northernmost part of New Spain, known as the 'Interior Provinces': Sonora, Nuevo Mexico, Nueva Vizcaya, Cohahuila, Texas, Nuevo Santander and Nuevo Leon.

As part of the Bourbon Reforms (1766), the king commissioned the Marqués de Rubí to travel all along the northern frontier. He inspected the forts, known as presidios, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and made recommendations on improvements. Rubí's report advocated a tighter more unified northern command, and the reorganization of the presidios against native and rival powers (British, French, and Russians). Oconór was tasked with implementing Rubí's recommendations. During the reorganization, Oconór received his nickname, el capitán Colorado (the red captain).

In March 1767 the viceroy of New Spain, Carlos Francisco de Croix, appointed Oconór as governor of Texas. The Spanish grip on the area was fragile, and Oconór was instructed to lead a military campaign against the Comanches. In 1770, a new governor of Texas was appointed, and Oconór left for Mexico City. The king promoted Oconór to lieutenant colonel and appointed him commander of the presidio of San Sabá in 1771.

Oconór was then entrusted with more responsibilities. The Rubí report advocated the line of presidios be rearranged to match the actual possessions of New Spain, creating a border. The Spanish Crown wanted the presidios to form a united buffer against native populations and rival imperial ventures, to protect the silver mines of northern Mexico, and to serve as bases to expand the empire.



Mission San Javier del Bac in Tucson, AZ located near Oconor's Tucson Presidio

Presidios were placed at regular intervals and some were moved to new sites. The report also created the post of Commandant Inspector of the Interior Provinces. Oconór's experience as an administrator and as a fighter led to his appointment as the first Commandant Inspector in September 1772.

Between December 1772 and June 1773, Oconór chose locations for the presidios and fought a successful campaign against the Apaches across 1,500 miles. Oconór then turned westwards to the province of Sonora. In August 1775, he chose the site of what is now Tucson in Arizona. The presidio at Tubac was moved to the Indian village of San Augustin del Tucson, the northernmost point of New Spain, its furthest imperial border. In the last months of 1775 he led his largest and most carefully planned military campaign. While the Apaches remained strong, a line of presidios, however weak, now existed from the Gulf of Mexico to the Gulf of California.

In May 1776 the Spanish Crown created the official jurisdiction of the Interior Provinces and made it independent of the viceroy in Mexico City. Teodoro de Croix was appointed first Commandant General of the Interior Provinces, superseding Oconór. In July 1776, exhausted by years of service on the harsh frontier, he requested a transfer to a less strenuous post. At the end of 1777 Oconór was appointed Captain-General of Yucatan, moving in February 1778 to Mérida, the capital. There he sought to regain his health, spending most of his time at a spa at Miraflores, where he died on 8 March 1779, aged 45.

