

The Santa Fe Trail

The historic Santa Fe Trail spanned distance, time, and cultures. It covered 800 miles of the Great Plains between Missouri and Mexico (Santa Fe). It was used for 60 years (1821-1880) and is still recognized and celebrated today. In its day, the Trail served primarily as a commercial highway. The military used the trail to haul freight to supply the southwestern forts. The Trail was also used by stagecoach lines, those seeking gold in California and Colorado, fur trappers, and emigrants. The Trail in effect brought together Spanish and American cultures and melded them into a distinct culture with customs that still exist in the American Southwest (U.S. Dept. of Interior [USDOI] 1976). Many interactions, both amicable and contentious, between settlers and soldiers and the Plains Indians also occurred along the Trail. The Trail was rendered obsolete in 1880 when the railroad reached west to Santa Fe. Today the Trail is celebrated as a National Historic Trail and a Scenic Byway, and its remnants (as historic wagon-wheel ruts) and related historic structures (e.g., military forts and trading posts) are preserved on several national park units in Kansas, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Trail Beginnings & Geographic Setting

Covering approximately 800 miles, the Santa Fe Trail extends from Independence, Missouri to present day Santa Fe, New Mexico (Figure 1). The Trail originally began in Franklin,



Figure 1. The Santa Fe Trail and national park units on it route.

OVERVIEW



Santa Fe Trail caravan

Missouri, but the trail head was moved to Fort Osage and, by 1827, to Independence. Prior to the U.S. acquiring New Mexico in 1848, the area (New Mexico) was part of Mexico. In the early 1800s, Spain ruled Mexico and controlled its New Mexico colony, prohibiting manufacturing and international trade. U.S. visitors to Santa Fe recognized opportunity in the area for manufactured goods and supplies. In 1821, the Mexican people revolted and won independence from Spain, and gone were the impediments to trade.

The Santa Fe Trail was first used in 1821 by William Becknell. Becknell packed goods from Franklin, Missouri, to Santa Fe with five companions. The party left on September 1, 1821 and reached Santa Fe on November 16th (Duffus 1972). Becknell profited from the venture and made additional trips. On his third trip, he found a route that could be used by wagons (Santa Fe Trail Association (SFTA) 2009)-- the first to be driven over the plains to New Mexico (Gardner 1993). Becknell was credited as the "Father of the Santa Fe Trail." Encouraged by Mexico, other business people followed, and trade developed with Santa Fe.

Pack mules were originally used for trade travel, but mules and oxen worked well in pulling the light, sturdy wagons that were soon used. The wagons were designed for travel over rough, level terrain. Covering about 15-18 miles per day, the 800-mile journey took about two months (USDOI 1976).

In the following years, the Santa Fe Trail served as a vital commercial and military highway. First having served as an international trade route between the U.S. and Mexico, it provided the U.S. a route to invade New Mexico in 1846 during the Mexican-American War. After the U.S. acquired the



NPS PHOTO

Typical freight wagon used on the Trail

Southwest, the Trail facilitated U.S. economic development and settlement of the region (SFTA 2009).

Extending from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico, the Trail passed through Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico. A portion of the trail branches into the northern, Mountain Route, and the southern, Cimarron Route. The Cimarron Route, or Cutoff, was the original path of the Trail (the length of the Trail via this route was 800 miles). The Cimarron Cutoff was 100 miles shorter than the Mountain Branch, but travelers along its path had to contend with 40 miles or so of desert before reaching the Cimarron River (USDOI 1976). Infrequent waterholes and encounters with the Kiowas or Comanches threatened travelers along this stretch. The Mountain Branch also passed Bent's Fort in Colorado, which became a popular trading post. The two routes diverge in Southwestern Kansas at Cimarron, and meet back up near Fort Union, New Mexico. The Mountain Route was used after 1845. During the period of the Civil War (see discussion below), the Cimarron Route was used very little due to conflicts with Native Americans (USDOI 1976).



PHOTO: TOMYE FOLTS-ZETTNER

Santa Fe Trail ruts at Fort Union NM

The Santa Fe Trail Association website (see address below; page entitled "For Kids") provides a detailed description of the trail route, including references to rivers and present-day towns and roadways. USDOI (1976) also provides a detailed description of the Trail route.

The Santa Fe Trail passes through the Central Lowlands, the Great Plains, and the southern Rocky Mountains Physiographic Provinces (USDOI 1976). The Central Lowlands receive about 35 inches of rain per year. This area in eastern Kansas is characterized by rolling plains situated in between northeast-southwest oriented escarpments. Leaving the Central Lowlands, the Trail enters the Great Plains Physiographic Province in central Kansas. From this point, and into Oklahoma and Colorado, the topography is mostly flat with some rolling hills and sand dunes. Grama-buffalo and sandsage-bluestem grasses dominate the native vegetation. Woodlands occur along the rivers and streams, with trees such as elm, ash, and cottonwood. Occurring primarily in the spring and summer, annual precipitation is less here—on average 15 inches. Tableland-type topography characterizes the Trail route in southern Colorado and eastern New Mexico. Vegetation is basically the same as in the Great Plains, except for the juniper-pinon woodlands that occur at higher elevations. Continuing on into New Mexico, the Trail route changes considerably; plains vegetation is replaced by juniper-pinon and occasional pine-Douglas fir forests. Annual precipitation is about the same as in the Great Plains.

Other Notable People of the Trail

Native Americans

The lands through which the Trail passed were the homelands and hunting grounds of many Native American people. These lands were the hunting grounds of the Comanche, the Kiowa, southern bands of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho, and the Plains Apache, as well as the homelands of the Osage, the Kansas (Kaw), the Jicarilla Apache, the Ute, and the Pueblo Indians (National Park Service [NPS] 2009). Early encounters with Native Americans were primarily peaceful negotiations to obtain access to lands and trade in items such as horses and mules. However, confrontation with Native Americans increased with traffic along the Trail and settlers moving west. Eventually, Native Americans were displaced or assigned to reservations. Prior to use of the Trail by white traders and settlers, it was a part of the Native American trade network. It was also used by Spaniards of New Mexico for exploration and trade with the Plains Indians.

Soldiers

Soldiers used the Trail throughout its 60-year history. They

used the Trail during disputes between the Republic of Texas and Mexico in the 1840's, during the Mexican-American War in 1846-1848, and in the American Civil War, as well as during the management of conflicts between traders and Native American tribes (NPS 2009). The Mexican-American War broke out in 1846. The Army of the West, led by General Stephen Watts Kearny, traveled down the Santa Fe Trail to take control of New Mexico and upper California and to protect American traders on the Trail (NPS 2009). Despite warnings to the contrary, he entered Santa Fe unchallenged and attained his objective. The war was ended in 1848 with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. As the presence of the military increased with establishment of forts along the Trail (see below), freighting and merchant operations expanded. In 1858 as many as 1,800 wagons traversed the Trail, many loaded with military supplies.

The Civil War reached the West in 1862. The Confederate Army entered New Mexico from Texas and took over Albuquerque and Santa Fe., and hoped to take over Fort Union (and eventually Denver). However, in the most decisive western battle of the Civil War, the battle of Glorieta Pass (on the Santa Fe Trail), the Union stopped the Confederates. The Union Army was able to hold on to the Southwest and its valuable Santa Fe Trail supply line.

Forts and Park Units along the Trail

The U.S. opened military forts along the route of the Santa Fe Trail to protect trail travel and trade. The first military fort established, Fort Leavenworth in eastern Kansas, is not within the four I&M networks of the American Southwest. This fort was opened in 1827 to protect travelers on the Santa Fe and Oregon Trails; after the Mexican War, it was also the center for wagon freighting operations that supplied the military posts in the Southwest. The next fort, Fort Union, was established in 1851 near the western end of the Trail. It was an important military supply depot and became the largest military post in the Southwest. The fort also saw action during the Civil War. Eight years after Fort Union, Fort Larned was opened near the mid-point of the Trail to protect trail travelers. Bent's Fort, not a military fort but a trading post, was built in 1833. It was established by William and Charles Bent and Ceran St. Vrain to engage in trade with Plains Indians and trappers.

Fort Union

Fort Union was established in 1851 as the guardian of the Santa Fe Trail. It commanded the intersection of the Mountain and Cimarron Branches of the Trail. Fort Union served both military and civilian functions. Prior to the Civil War, the fort's troops patrolled the trail and, later, escorted mail stages.



Fort ruins at Fort Union NMON

NPS PHOTO

During the Civil War, the combination of Native American conflicts and raids by Confederates from Texas led to the troops' protection of all travelers and efforts to keep open the Santa Fe Trail. Three different forts were built close together on the site during its forty-year history. The third Fort Union was the largest in the American Southwest and functioned as a military garrison, territorial arsenal, and military supply depot for the Southwest. The railroad bypassed Fort Union in 1879, and its supply operations were gradually phased out. 1883 saw the closure of the depot. Today at Fort Union NM (FOUN), one can tour fort remains and see the largest visible network of Santa Fe Trail ruts.

Fort Larned

Fort Larned was established on the western Kansas prairie for the protection of mail coaches, freighters, and other traffic on the Trail. Operating from 1860 through the late 1870s, it was the most important military post guarding the northern portion of the Trail. The fort was also the site of an Indian Agency, and therefore important in maintaining amicable rela-



Restored buildings at Fort Larned NHS

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Buffalo soldier (painting by Don Stivers)

tions with Plains Indians. Also of note, Fort Larned was the first military installation to receive for duty one of the newly formed African American cavalry regiments known as Buffalo Soldiers. Company A of the 10th Cavalry arrived in April of 1867 with nearly 100 men (Walker 1997). Buffalos Soldiers are noted for having played a major role in the settlement and development of the West and for their dedication and bravery under harsh conditions and racial prejudice. Today, Fort Larned NHS (FOLS) has nine restored buildings with which to explore and imagine military life on the Trail. During parts of the year, staff and volunteers at FOLS dress in period clothing and man the fort.

Bent's Fort (Bent's Old Fort)

The original adobe fort at Bent's Old Fort NHS (BEOL), built by William Bent in 1833, became the center of the establishing company's trading business; they also established Fort St. Vrain to the north and Fort Adobe to the south, as well as stores in Mexico at Taos and Santa Fe. Bent's Fort became

NPS PHOTO



Reconstructed fort at Bent's Old Fort NHS

one of the most significant trading posts in the West. Trade was primarily with the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians for buffalo robes. The fort was the only major permanent white settlement on the Santa Fe Trail for much of its history. It provided supplies, rest, and protection to a variety of visitors, including the U.S. Army. During the war with Mexico, the fort was used as a staging area for Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny and his Army of the West. Bent's Fort was burned and abandoned in 1849 due to a cholera epidemic spreading through the Native American tribes (USDOJ 1976). In 1852-53, Bent built a new fort (Bent's New Fort) downstream on the Arkansas River to reestablish the Indian trade. Several years later, Fort Lyon (originally called Fort Wise) was established nearby and served as a guardian of the Mountain Branch of the Trail during the Civil War.

Today, BEOL features a reconstructed 1840s adobe fur trading post. The fort was reconstructed in 1976 using original sketches, paintings, diaries, and archeological excavations. Living historians recreate the past with guided tours, demonstrations, and special events.

Wagon-wheel Ruts and Glorieta Pass at Pecos NHP

At Pecos NHP (PECO), Santa Fe Trail history exists along with the ancient pueblo of Pecos (abandoned in 1837), colonial missions, and 20th century ranch history. A portion of the Trail is visible at PECO, and the park is the location of the Civil War Battle of Glorieta Pass. This battle, near Santa Fe, is where the Union troops defeated the Confederate Army in what is considered the turning point of the Civil War in the Southwest. Additionally, the ruins of the 17th century mission church served as a landmark for Trail travelers.



Santa Fe Trail ruts at Pecos NHP

PHOTO: COURTNEY MOORE



Goods at the reconstructed fort at Bent's Old Fort NHS

Decline of the Santa Fe Trail

The decline of the Santa Fe Trail started in 1863 with the westward expansion of the Kansas Pacific Railroad from Wyandotte, Kansas (USDOI 1976). Four years later the Trail was abandoned east of Fort Larned. Not long after, the railroad bypassed the Cimarron Cutoff, and the wagon traffic that remained followed the Mountain Branch. By 1873, the railroad reached the vicinity of Bent's Fort. More than 60 years of life on the Santa Fe Trail ended when the first steam engine reached Santa Fe in February of 1880.

Management & Preservation of the Santa Fe Trail

The NPS works in cooperation with the SFTA, a nonprofit organization, to coordinate the preservation and use of the Trail. This includes providing technical and some financial assistance to Trail projects. Most trail resources (buildings, historic sites, landmarks, wagon-wheel ruts) are managed by private landowners, nonprofit groups, or local, state or federal agencies. The SFTA's goals focus on preserving, exploring, educating about, and celebrating the Trail.

The Santa Fe Trail became a part of the National Trails System (NTS) in 1987. The NTS is the network of scenic, historic, and recreation trails created by the National Trails System Act of 1968. Trails in the system provide for outdoor recreation needs, promote the enjoyment, appreciation, and preservation of open-air, outdoor areas and historic resources, and encourage public access and citizen involvement. There are currently 20 national scenic and historic trails in the NTS, with the majority assigned to the NPS. The Santa Fe National Historic Trail is one of twelve national historic trails. A portion of the Santa Fe Trail has been recognized in an additional way. A highway route that approximates the trail's path through Colorado and northern New Mexico was designated as the

Santa Fe Trail National Scenic Byway by the U.S. Secretary of Transportation in 1998.

Much of the Santa Fe Trail is owned by private individuals and organizations. Some sites have limited or no public access. As previously discussed, trail sites are located on four national park units—FOLS, BEOL, FOUN, and PECO. Efforts are made at the parks to preserve and protect the wagon-wheel ruts. Ruts are protected by preventing ground-disturbing activities in their vicinity and efforts to maintain native vegetation at the sites. For example, at FOLS, managers and researchers are monitoring prairie dogs in the vicinity of trail ruts due to concerns that the animals' burrowing activities are impacting the ruts. Although it is NPS policy to conserve and recover prairie dogs wherever possible, populations can be controlled in some cases, including the prevention of damage to park resources.

More Trail Facts

- Independence, Missouri was also a "jumping off point" for the Oregon and California Trails (SFTA 2009).
- Early on, the most popular commodity traded in Santa Fe was cotton cloth; woolen and silk goods and other assorted items (e.g., playing cards) were also in demand (Gardner 1993). In exchange, traders received silver pesos, mules, and beaver pelts.
- In addition to the national park units, there are many significant historic sites along the Trail in either public or private ownership (USDOI 1976). These include:
 - o **Pawnee Rock** in Kansas — a well-known landmark and Native American lookout and ambush point along the trail;
 - o **Point of Rocks** in Kansas — a landmark (large rock outcropping) for travelers on the Cimarron Cutoff, now within the Cimarron National Grasslands;
 - o **Raton Pass** in New Mexico — the location of Wooten's toll road, established in 1866;
 - o **Wagon Mound** in northeastern New Mexico — the last well-known landmark crossing the plains; and



Wagon and oxen like those used on the Trail

o **Santa Fe Plaza** — built in 1610, the Plaza was the entry port of the Santa Fe Trail and the northern end of the Chihuahua Trail from Mexico.

Website Links

Santa Fe Trail Association (SFTA) – URL: <http://www.santafetrail.org/index.php>.

The SFTA partners with the NPS to coordinate the preservation and use of the Trail. The SFTA's goals focus on preserving, exploring, educating about, and celebrating the Trail. Their activities include publishing a quarterly journal, *Wagon Tracks*, devoted to scholarship and news about the Trail. Based on geographical segments, there are 10 chapters of the SFTA.

Santa Fe National Historic Trail – URL: <http://www.nps.gov/archive/safe/fnl-sft/broch/newbro.htm>.

This NPS website includes a history of the trail, trail maps, photographs, and information on visiting the trail. Another NPS website (URL: <http://nps.gov/safe/parkmgmt/certified-sites-on-the-santa-fe-nht.htm>) provides a listing by state of historic sites and interpretive areas whose owners/managers are “certified” partners with the NPS on the Trail.

Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) – URL: <http://www.nationaltrailspartnership.org/>.

PNTS, created in 1995, facilitates cooperation among government agencies and private groups involved with the national scenic and historic trails of the National Trails System.

Santa Fe Trail Center – URL: <http://www.santafetrailcenter.org/index.html>.

The Santa Fe Trail Center is an educational institution devoted to interpretation of the Santa Fe Trail. The Center, located near Larned, Kansas, contains a museum with indoor and outdoor exhibits and a research library and archives.

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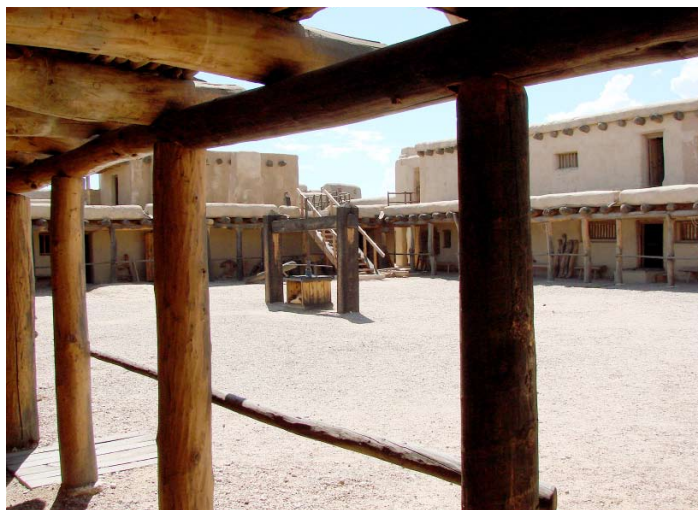


PHOTO: DAVID ZETNER

Reconstructed fort at Bent's Old Fort NHS

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