

About Your Visit

The site is on Colorado State Route 194, 9 miles east of La Junta, Colo., and 14 miles west of Las Animas, Colo. Both La Junta and Las Animas are served by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad.

Lodging, food, gasoline and similar services are not available at the site but may be obtained in nearby communities.

Administration

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, established on March 15, 1963, and containing approximately 178 acres, is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.

The National Park System, of which this area is a unit, is dedicated to conserving the scenic, scientific, and historic heritage of the United States for the benefit and inspiration of its people.

Development of this area will be part of MISSION 66, a 10-year program to develop and staff the areas of the National Park System so that they can be used and enjoyed by both present and future generations.

A superintendent, whose address is Box 581, La Junta, Colo., is in immediate charge of the area.

America's Natural Resources

Created in 1849, the Department of the Interior—America's Department of Natural Resources—is concerned with the management, conservation, and development of the Nation's water, wildlife, mineral, forest, and park and recreational resources. It also has major responsibilities for Indian and Territorial affairs.

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department works to assure the nonrenewable resources are developed and used wisely, that park and recreational resources are conserved, and that renewable resources make their full contribution to the progress, prosperity, and security of the United States—now and in the future.

Cover: Sketch of old Fort Bent made in 1845
by Lt. J. W. Abert
National Archives photo.

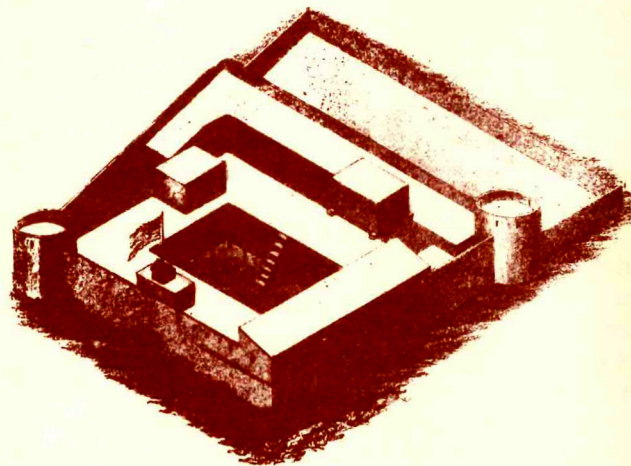
UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



BENT'S OLD FORT

NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE



Colorado

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In southeastern Colorado lies the remains of one of the most significant fur-trading establishments of the West—Bent's Old Fort. Located on both the north and south route between the Platte River country and Santa Fe, N. Mex., and the east and west route up the Arkansas and into the mountains, trappers and Indians alike found this their most natural trading point. These factors combined to make Bent's Fort the principal outpost of civilization on the Southern Plains and rendezvous point for Indian tribes of the region. As such, it played a vital role in the economic and political conquest of the Southwest.

While competing companies, with headquarters in St. Louis, were pushing up the Missouri River and into the Rocky Mountains in the third decade of the 19th century, striving to obtain a monopoly of the fur trade in those regions, rival traders were pressing west and south into the Rocky Mountains and into New Mexico—some with the objective of procuring furs from the Indians, others with the hope of reaping fabulous profits from the Mexican trade.

For many years, Americans, recognizing the demand in that region for manufactured goods, had attempted in vain to break the trade barrier in New Mexico, then dominated by Spain. However, when word reached the Mississippi Valley in 1821 that Mexico had thrown off its Spanish shackles, merchants lost no time in testing the validity of their information. Several parties set out from Missouri that year for the New Mexican capital and disposed of their goods at handsome profits. When others heard the news of rich returns to be earned from this trade, they also entered the business.

Within several years, trade with New Mexico was well established. Some of the merchants disposed of their goods to the Mexican people residing largely in Santa Fe and Taos. Others conducted successful trading expeditions among the Indian tribes in Mexican territory. By 1824, the Santa Fe trade was well established. From 1822 to 1829, it averaged annually, in the value of the cost of goods in eastern cities, \$64,000; during the 1830's, \$160,000; and from 1838 to 1843, \$130,000.

In general, caravans traveled to Santa Fe by two different routes. The main trail began at Independence

which, after 1827, became the principal outfitting point and ran across the plains in the present-day Kansas to the Big Bend of the Arkansas. From there it continued on the north bank of that stream to the Middle Cimarron Crossing where one trail crossed over the Cimarron Desert to a point near Las Vegas where it joined the main trail to Santa Fe. The second, known as the mountain route, continued up the Arkansas River at Timpas Creek where it took a southwesterly course across the mountains at Raton Pass, joining the main trail near Las Vegas. Although the mountain route was longer, it was a much safer, easier road.

Bent, St. Vrain and Company

Among the early traders who developed an interest in both fur trade with the Indians of the Southwest and in marketing American merchandise in New Mexico were two brothers, Charles and William Bent, and Ceran St. Vrain, all of St. Louis.

These three principal partners of the firm, which was organized in 1830, had earlier been engaged in the Upper Missouri fur trade and were well equipped by both temperament and experience for the Indian and Mexican trade. Charles Bent assumed the responsibility for arranging credit for the firm in St. Louis and purchasing and transporting trade goods to New Mexico. St. Vrain, who by the mid-1820's had become well established in New Mexico and later became a Mexican citizen, was responsible for marketing the merchandise. William Bent did not become an active partner until after the fort was built.

Building The Fort

The concept of a great trading establishment on the Arkansas among the Southwestern Indian tribes appears to have evolved in the mind of Charles Bent soon after the formation of a partnership. Bent believed that such a fort, as large as any on the Missouri River, would be necessary to hold this vast territory against competing traders. Since suitable timber was not available, the trading post necessarily had to be built of adobe, which was made primarily of mud and hence could be built cheaply.

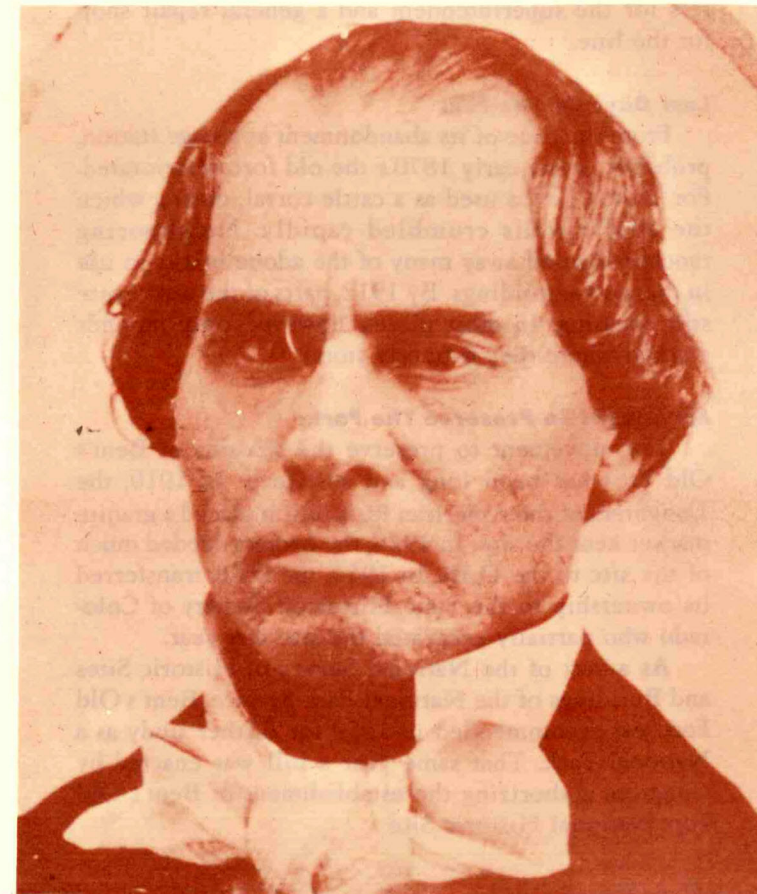
After weighing a number of factors, the partners selected a site located on the north side of the Arkansas (in American territory), about 12 miles north of the mouth of the Purgatorie River. It was on the border between the Cheyenne, Prairie Apache, Arapaho, Comanche, Ute, and Kiowa, and accessible to roving bands of Shoshoni, Crow, and Gros Ventre. The site was close to the mountains and still in buffalo country. It was selected so the partners could haul supplies from the

east in American territory and then go into Mexico. From the standpoint of wood and grass, the location was undesirable as neither were abundant there.

No contemporary accounts have been found giving details of the building of the post or the date of its completion. According to existing evidence, it was probably completed in 1833 or 1834. Actual building of the fort seems to have been under William Bent's direction. One writer estimates that perhaps 150 Mexican peons, paid at the rate of \$5 to \$10 a month in trade goods, were hired to build the fort. It soon became known as "Fort William," after William Bent, its manager, and "Bent's [singular form] Fort." Most contemporary writers called it "Bent's Fort."

The trading establishment was one of the largest in the trans-Mississippi West. With the possible exceptions of the American Fur Company's Forts Pierre and Union on the Missouri River, no trading house approached it in size. It was the largest establishment in that vast terrain between St. Louis and the Pacific, and was built to withstand formidable Indian attacks.

William Bent. State Historical Society of Colorado photo.



Center Of A Giant Empire

For 15 years, Bent's Old Fort ruled over a giant empire in the Southern Plains. This domain extended over much of present-day Colorado, western Nebraska and Kansas, southern Wyoming, northern New Mexico, and the Oklahoma and Texas Panhandles.

From Bent's Fort, traders went out in all directions to the various Indian tribes. Traveling two or three together, they carried on mules or in carts an ample supply of such choice trade items as colored beads, butcher knives, brassware, iron for making arrowheads, small axes, vermilion, lead, gunpowder, and blankets. Sugar and coffee were principal goodwill gifts. Liquor later became an important item in the Indian trade, but Bent, St. Vrain and Company held its use to a minimum.

During the early days of the fur trade, beaver pelts were the main item which the Indian had to exchange. With the decline of the beaver hat in the 1830's, the skin became less important so traders turned to the buffalo robe.

Many famous characters in the history of the West were employed at some time as traders at Bent's Fort. Among these were Kit Carson, "Uncle Dick" Wootton, Lucien Maxwell, "Bill" Williams, and John Smith.

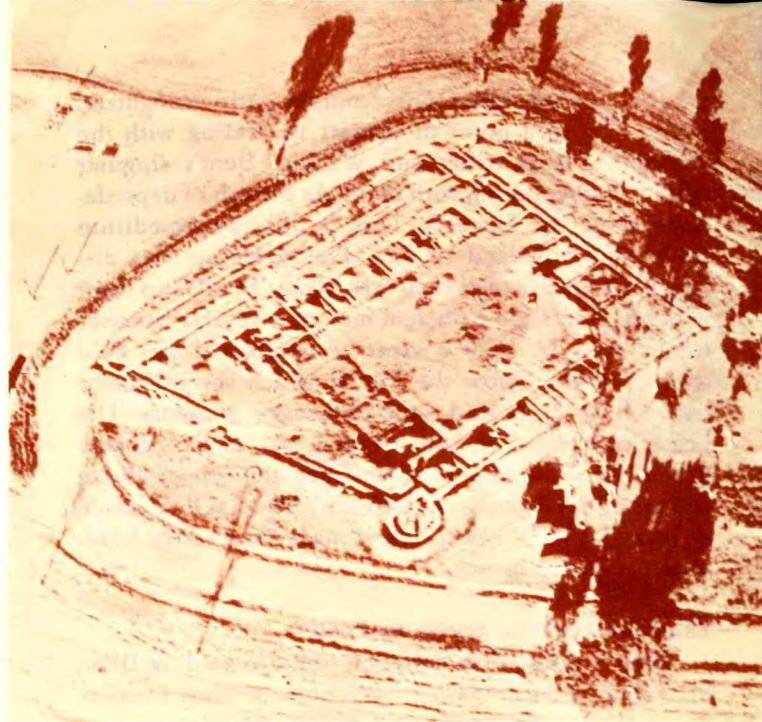
The monopoly of the fur trade on the entire Upper Arkansas Basin, which the partners obtained within 2 years after completion of Bent's Fort, did not go unchallenged. To the north, Fort Laramie passed into the hands of the powerful American Fur Company. Others also entered the field. After several years of fruitless competition, rival companies abandoned attempts to challenge Bent, St. Vrain and Company.

Life At The Fort

During its existence, Bent's Fort was the principal outpost of civilization on the Southwestern Plains and the only white establishment west of Independence, Mo. Employing normally about 60 men and women, it required the specialized services of numerous tradesmen. A mixed assortment of nationalities, personnel of the post included Americans, English, French, Germans, Mexicans, Indians, and halfbreeds, in addition to women and children of Mexican and Indian blood.

The fort was a favorite congregating point for traders and mountain men in the Southwest. Since it was the only place in the region where they might obtain merchandise for another season, traders and trappers came to the fort, bringing their Indian wives and halfbreed children, to dispose of their catch and outfit their expeditions as well as to visit friends there. All were made welcome.

While the fort was in its heyday, several prominent



Aerial view of excavation of old Fort Bent.

persons stopped for short periods and left descriptions of it. In 1839, it had three noted visitors—Thomas Farnham, lawyer, traveler, and writer; the German traveler and physician, Frederick Wislizenus; and Matthew Field, journalist from New York and New Orleans.

John C. Fremont, noted explorer, was at the fort in 1843 and 1845. Young Francis P. Blair, Jr., later general of the Union Army, Vice-Presidential candidate, and United States Senator, came to the post in 1845 to restore his health. In the 1840's, Francis Parkman, western historian, and George Frederick Ruxton, the English writer, stopped at Bent's Fort and left descriptions of the place.

Even before Bent's Fort had been completed, it was the principal point of contact between the Indians and whites on the Southwestern Plains. Situated on the borders of hunting grounds of several tribes, it had a great advantage over any rivals.

William Bent was uniquely adept in dealing with the Indians. Married to a Cheyenne woman, he was particularly influential among that tribe and their allies. Known affectionately among the Cheyenne as "Little White Man," and by the Kiowa as "Hook-Nose-Man," he wielded great influence among the Plains tribes. As a result, many large trading parties visited the post. He also frequently served as liaison agent between the Mexicans and the Indians.

The United States Government early recognized Bent's Fort as a point of contact in dealing with the Southern Plains tribes and William Bent's singular talents in negotiating with them. As a result of depredations along the Santa Fe Trail, a military expedition under the command of Col. Henry Dodge was dispatched from Fort Leavenworth, Kans., in 1835 to meet with the chiefs and principal men of several tribes near Bent's Fort. In 1840 a great peace council was held about 3 miles below the fort at which several major tribes feasted, danced, and exchanged presents. The peace concluded at this council was never broken. When the Government established the Upper Platte and Arkansas Agency in 1846, with Thomas Fitzpatrick as its agent for these tribes, it made Bent's Fort headquarters of the agency.

The Fort And The Santa Fe Trail

Little information has been found regarding Bent, St. Vrain and Company's operations in New Mexico.

Charles Bent married into a prominent Mexican family during this period and lived in Taos where it appears he was a member of a closely knit foreign colony which dominated the economic life of the community. Sometime later the partners established a store in Santa Fe in addition to the one in Taos.

The Fort And The Mexican War

With the outbreak of the Mexican War in 1846, Bent's Fort assumed a new role. As a result, the New Mexican trade came to an abrupt end. The post's situation halfway between the Missouri River and Santa Fe made it an ideal location as a supply depot for the Americans operating in New Mexico. When Col. Stephen W. Kearny, with an army of 2,700 men in addition to 500 Mormons recruited at Council Bluffs, Iowa, marched from Fort Leavenworth to Santa Fe, most of the detachments went by the mountain route of the Trail and stopped several days at Bent's Fort. Many of the supplies were hauled from Fort Leavenworth to

Bent's Fort where they were unloaded and the wagons returned to the east.

The Mexican War resulted in far-reaching changes which were to affect the future of the fort. The Indian trade declined to a marked degree. Following his appointment as Governor of New Mexico, Charles Bent was brutally murdered. St. Vrain decided to withdraw from the business and devote his attention to vast holdings in Colorado and New Mexico. Failing to sell the fort to the Government in 1847, the owners dissolved their partnership 2 years later, leaving William Bent the sole owner. When he was unable to sell the giant trading establishment to the Government for what he considered it worth, he reportedly set fire to it. In 1852-53, he built a large stone post, known as Bent's New Fort, at Big Timbers on the Arkansas River, 35 miles below the old fort.

The Fort As A Stage Station

Following its abandonment in 1849, Bent's Old Fort remained unused for a decade, its massive ruins impressing travelers who passed by them. About 1859-61, the Barlow-Sanderson Stage Line, operating between Kansas City and Santa Fe, occupied it as the "home station." The company maintained living quarters for the superintendent and a general repair shop for the line.

Last Days Of The Fort

From the time of its abandonment as a stage station, probably in the early 1870's the old fort deteriorated. For a time it was used as a cattle corral, during which the adobe walls crumbled rapidly. Neighboring ranchers hauled away many of the adobe bricks to use in their own buildings. By 1912, parts of the walls were still standing. In most places, however, only mounds marked where they formerly stood.

Movement To Preserve The Fort

The movement to preserve the remains of Bent's Old Fort has been long and sustained. In 1910, the Daughters of the American Revolution placed a granite marker near the site. In 1928, the owners deeded much of the site to the DAR. In 1954, the DAR transferred its ownership to the State Historical Society of Colorado who partially excavated the site that year.

As a part of the National Survey of Historic Sites and Buildings of the National Park Service, Bent's Old Fort was recommended in 1959 for further study as a National Park. That same year a bill was enacted by Congress authorizing the establishment of Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

