

# Bent's Old Fort

National Historic Site  
Colorado

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

**"Although built of the simple prairie soil, made to hold together by a rude mixture with straw and the plain grass itself, . . . [Bent's Old Fort] is constructed with all the defensive capacities of a complete fortification. . . . The dwellings, the kitchens, the arrangements for comfort are all such as to strike the wanderer with the liveliest surprise, as though an 'air-built castle' had dropped to earth before him in the midst of the vast desert."**

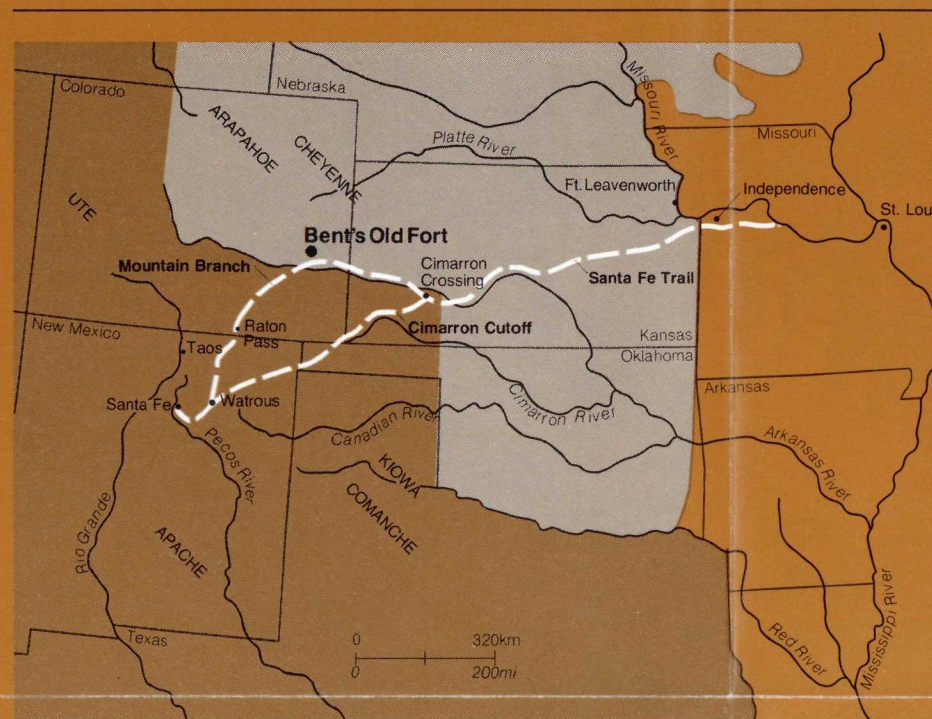
—Matthew C. Field, 1840

## Citadel on the Santa Fe Trail

Bent's Old Fort on the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado was once the frontier hub from which American trade and influence radiated south into Mexico, west into the Great Basin (and beyond to the Pacific), and north to southern Wyoming. It was built in 1833-34 by the brothers Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain and became the most important port of call and depot between Independence, Mo., and Santa Fe, N. Mex.

The trading activities centered at Bent's Old Fort were basically three-cornered. Trade goods of American manufacture were hauled along the Santa Fe Trail from Missouri. A portion of these goods was deposited at the fort, and the remainder continued down the Trail into Mexican territory where they were disposed of by St. Vrain and Charles Bent in mercantile outlets in Taos and Santa Fe. This same method operated in reverse, with goods of Mexican and Navajo origin being allocated to the fort or carried on to Missouri. The third corner consisted of the Indian tribes (Southern Cheyenne, Arapahoe, Ute, Northern Apache, Kiowa, and Comanche) who either traded their buffalo robes for goods at the fort or were reached by traders traveling to the Indian camps. The fort also catered to independent mountain men who bartered beaver pelts and other furs for the equipment and supplies needed to maintain themselves.

For a dozen years, the Bents and St. Vrain successfully maintained what amounted to a giant commercial empire. They were truly "mighty men," as one historian has written, "whose will was



The Santa Fe Trail began at Independence, Mo., the chief outfitting point for trading caravans after 1827, and ran across the Kansas plains to the Cimarron Crossing on the Arkansas River. Here the trail divided. One branch (the Cimarron Cutoff) crossed the river and continued southwest to a point near present Watrous, New Mexico, where the two branches merged into a single route again. The other,

known as the Mountain Branch, continued up the Arkansas beyond the Purgatoire River in Colorado, then followed a southwesterly course through Raton Pass. Though the mountain route was longer, it was the safer, easier road.

Because of its location on the Mountain Branch, Bent's Fort was easily accessible both to the several Southern Plains Indian tribes inhabiting the region and to the yearly caravans out of Santa Fe and St. Louis.

prairie law, who could sway whole tribes, who knew Indians and Mexicans as few others did." Yet, powerful as they were, they were destined to be overwhelmed by events beyond their control. Relations between Mexico and the United States had long been strained. With the approach of armed conflict in 1846, the Federal Government designated the adobe trading post as the advance base for Stephen Watts Kearney's invasion of New Mexico. As the war progressed, Government wagon trains congregated there in ever-increasing numbers. Government cattle overgrazed nearby pastures. Military stores piled up in the fort, and soldiers, teamsters, and artisans occupied its rooms.

The steady flow of soldiers across the Plains during the Mexican War, together with the influx of settlers, goldseekers, and adventurers that came later, fouled the watering places, wantonly used up precious wood, and frightened away the bison. Bent, St. Vrain and Company was caught between the millstones of resentful Indians and invading whites. When Indian warfare commenced seriously in 1847, the days of rich trading were gone. The death of Charles Bent in a revolt in Taos, the sharp decline in business, and the departure of St. Vrain for New Mexico virtually destroyed any chance William Bent might have had to maintain operations. The final blow came in 1849 when cholera, most likely brought by emigrants, spread through the tribes. Bent, disillusioned and disappointed, loaded his family and employees into wagons and (whether he or Indians set fire to it will probably never be known) left his fort a smoldering monument to Manifest Destiny.

## Bent, St. Vrain & Company

The partners who formed Bent, St. Vrain & Company in 1831 were not new to the West. The brothers Charles and William Bent and Ceran St. Vrain had all ventured out from their native St. Louis to take part in the Upper Missouri fur trade. Armed with experience, some capital, and a willingness to do whatever was necessary to compete with other similarly minded entrepreneurs, they arrived in the Arkansas Valley in the late 1820s.

Within a few years, Bent, St. Vrain & Company had built up a profitable business

whose existence depended upon friendly relations with the Indians and Mexicans and upon suppression of competition. By skill and subtleness, the Bents (particularly William) achieved greater influence among the Indians than rival traders. Of the numerous tribes trading with the company, the most important were the Southern Cheyennes, upon whose hunting grounds Bent's Old Fort stood. William Bent, "Little White Man" to the Cheyennes, saw that relations continued as friendly as they were before the fort was es-

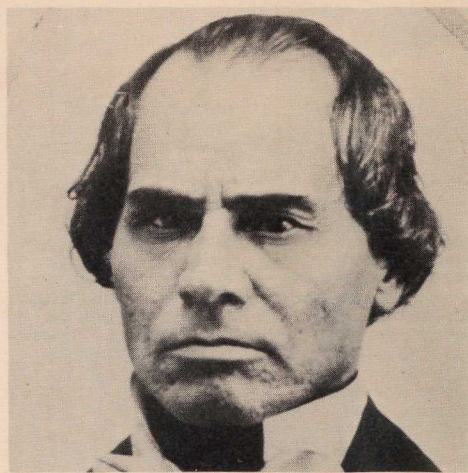
**Charles Bent, the senior partner in the firm, handled much of the business operations between St. Louis and Santa Fe, while William, his younger brother, managed the fort and dealt with the Indians and trappers. "Jolly, black-whiskered" Ceran St. Vrain spent little time at the fort but was active in the trade operations and mercantile outlets.**



Charles Bent



Ceran St. Vrain



William Bent



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tablished. He required his employees to be fair in bartering and restricted the use of whiskey, a favorite device of other firms.

In 1837, to strengthen ties with the Indians, William Bent married Owl Woman (left), daughter of Gray Thunder, a powerful Cheyenne priest. Bent also encouraged rival tribes to make peace with each other, for their intermittent warfare was bad for business. As a result of Bent's efforts, the deadliest of enemies could meet and trade at Bent's Fort in an atmosphere of peace. One such

council between Cheyenne and Delaware antagonists was recorded (right) by Lt. James W. Abert, a topographical engineer on John C. Frémont's 1845 exploring expedition. In 1846, largely because of William Bent's singular influence with the tribes, the United States Government chose the fort as headquarters for the Upper Platte and Arkansas Indian Agency.



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## An Invitation to Explore

Bent's Old Fort has been reconstructed as accurately as possible to its appearance in 1845-46, when Bent, St. Vrain and Company was at the zenith of its power, both commercially and politically. The furnishings of the several rooms are both antiques and reproductions. As you walk through the fort, keep in mind the various uses to which it was put and the people who lived, worked,

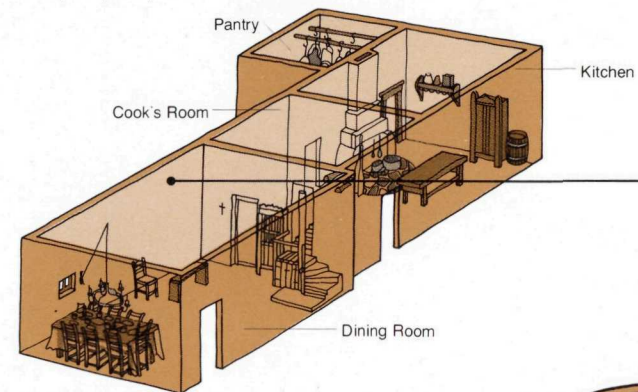
and visited here. Make your own visit one of discovery and you will be amply rewarded. Feel free to spend as much time as you want and don't hesitate to ask questions of the costumed interpreters. When you leave, we hope that you will have learned something of the unique contribution this trading post made to the opening of the American West.

**Safety Reminders** Don't let an accident mar your visit. For your safety and the safety of others, we ask that you exercise caution and common sense at all times. Please remain on the stairs and walks, and be careful going up and down the steep stairways. Don't let children climb on the walls or run on the upper gallery; there are no handrails.

**Cook's Room**  
Black Charlotte, the fort cook, and her husband, Dick Green, lived in the room just off the kitchen. The Greens had been Bent family slaves in Missouri. Charlotte was famous from Longs Peak to the Spanish Peaks for her slapjacks and pumpkin pie.

**Dining Room**  
This room, the largest in the fort, was used by traders, trappers, hunters, and all employees. Usually simple fare was provided; but on occasion elaborate meals were served here for celebrated visitors such as John C. Frémont on July 4, 1844, and Francis Parkman who, in 1846, was delighted to find "a table laid with a white cloth." One traveler used "Knives and forks and plates" here for the first time in 50 days.

**Kitchen**  
Dried buffalo meat and bread made of unbolted flour were prepared here and considered standard fare at the fort. Opinions about the bread differed, but the Comanche Chief Old Wolf definitely considered it fit only "to fuel a smoke-fire for coloring buckskins." Note the two adobe ovens outside in the inner corral area.



Note: rest rooms are located beyond the powder magazine near the rear bastion.

**Administration**  
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site is 13 kilometers (8 miles) east of La Junta and 24 kilometers (15 miles) west of Las Animas on Colo. 194. Both towns are served by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe

Railroad and by Continental Trailways buses. The site is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. The Superintendent's address is Box 581, La Junta, CO 81050.

**Traderoom**  
"In the store of the Fort—presumably for sale to trappers and travelers, and for use of the proprietors." William Bent's son, George, remembered, are "such unusual luxuries as butter crackers, Bent's water crackers, candies of various sorts, and most remarkable of all, great jars of preserved ginger...." The chief items of trade were buffalo robes, beaver pelts, and horses that the Indians, Mexicans,

and mountain men traded for factory-made goods from St. Louis.

Ready-made clothing was at a premium on the frontier. Lewis Gerard, a young adventurer and close friend of Ceran St. Vrain, traded for three shirts at Bent's Fort. He was also surprised to find pepper sauce available there. Blankets came from the Taos trade along with silver dollars and bullion.

**Bastions**  
These "little towers" prompted more than one 19th-century visitor to liken Bent's Fort to a medieval fortress. In one bastion, arms were kept in readiness; the other served as storage for tack and agricultural equipment. The swivel-guns atop each bastion were used only to invite Indians to celebrations, and to salute the arrival of dignitaries.

**William Bent's Quarters**  
There are actually two rooms here: William Bent's office, with an Eastern-style fireplace, and his adjoining bedroom. One traveler reported that the owners of the fort "laid on pallets of straw" and Spanish blankets. This was a Spanish colonial custom, as was the calico wainscoting used to keep the wash on adobe walls from rubbing off on the occupant's clothing.

**Blacksmith and Carpenter Shops**  
Several weeks in the summer of 1846, said "The ring of the blacksmith's hammer and the noise from the wagoner's shop were incessant." A blacksmith, carpenter, and related tradesmen worked in these areas throughout the fort's existence; a gunsmith operated here only briefly, during the later years.

**Trappers Quarters**  
Many of the mountain men who depended on the fort for supplies were "free trappers"—independent souls who paused here just long enough to sell their furs and sample the "civilized" life before they were off again for the mountains with another year's supplies. The company also employed trappers on a regular salary, but these men were obligated to turn their catch over to the Bent's.

**Military Quarters**  
When Kearney's Army of the West reached Bent's Fort in the summer of 1846, it brought with it evidence of the rigors of the trail. Twenty-one men were sick with dysentery and scurvy alone. Six would die here. When the army moved on, those unable to travel were left behind to convalesce.

**Susan Magoffin's Quarters**  
Susan Magoffin, enroute to Santa Fe with her husband, spent her 19th birthday here in 1846. She lost a baby during her brief stay but, nevertheless, managed to keep a meticulous diary that stands as one of the most complete descriptions we have of the 1846 fort. Her own furnishings—a bed, chairs, a wash basin, and table—were moved into the room for her convalescence, and she took all of her

meals there. The room had a dirt floor and possessed the unusual feature of two windows.

Mrs. Magoffin's room—like the adjoining four on this floor and several on the first—usually served as temporary quarters for travelers and fort employees. Most of these rooms were small and sparsely furnished, if at all.

**Billiard Room**  
Ranking second in pleasure only to drink and tobacco was gambling, and the billiard room was, at once, the most unusual and the most popular feature at Bent's Fort. "The love of gaming seems inherent in our very natures," the young Lewis Gerrard remarked. The original billiard table (the one in the room now is a reproduction) was brought to the fort from St. Louis in the 1830s.

**Warehouses**  
This row of rooms was used for the storage of furs and trade-goods during the winters. In the spring these storehouses were gradually emptied as trading expeditions departed to the surrounding Indian tribes, and wagon trains loaded with furs set out across the plains for St. Louis. For a brief period in 1846 this area was also used for temporary storage of military supplies.