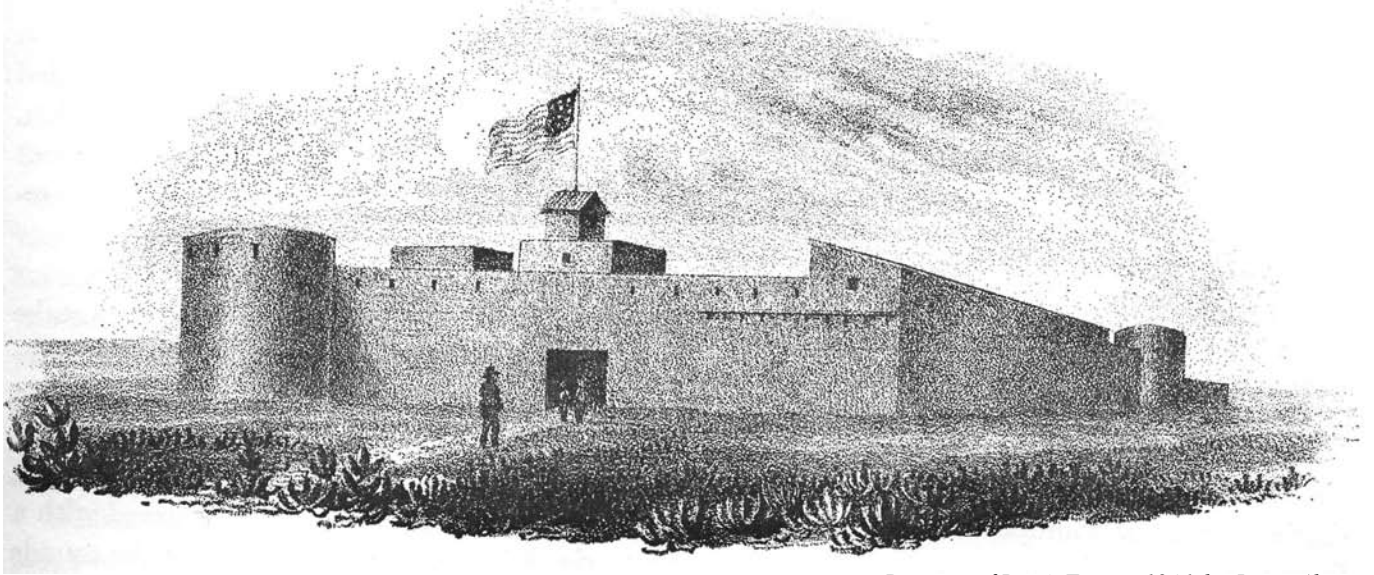




## Reconstructing the Castle on the Plains



*Drawing of Bent's Fort in 1846 by James Abert, courtesy of Colorado Historical Society Library.*

### A Unique Building

Bent's Old Fort was completely reconstructed by the National Park Service as a bicentennial project and first opened to the public on July 25, 1976. The state of Colorado joined the NPS in dedicating the fort, as that year also marked the state's centennial. The dual celebration was especially appropriate since this legendary trading post is acknowledged as the first Anglo-American settlement in Colorado, besides playing a pivotal role in the early history of the American Southwest. The building is unique because it is a complete reconstruction. In the entire National Park System there is not, original, restored, or reconstructed, another historic structure like Bent's Old Fort.

### After the Bents

The original post is documented to have been in existence in 1833 and was the largest of all trading posts in the mountain-plains region. It was abandoned and partially destroyed, probably by its owner William Bent, sometime in August 1849 after cholera ravaged the plains. However, some of the building did survive. Beginning in 1861 and continuing into the early 1870s, the remaining walls were revitalized and utilized as a stagecoach station and a post office. When a new stage line from Denver to Santa Fe bypassed the old fort, the stagecoach era ended.

Julia Bent, daughter of William Bent and his first wife, a Cheyenne named Owl

Woman, received legal title to the property in 1870 as result of the Treaty of the Little Arkansas, which gave sections of land to mixed-blood children of white and Indian marriages. She lived at the post briefly in 1872 before selling the property to cattleman John Prowers later that year. Julia Bent was the building's last connection to William Bent. Prowers used the post as a line camp and cattle stockade.

During the 1880s, settlers along the Arkansas Valley hauled away most of the remaining bricks and timbers by the wagonload to build homes and barns. By the turn of the century, the fort was reduced to a pile of rubble.

### The Road to Reconstruction

The road to reconstruction began in 1912 when the La Junta Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a marker that still stands near the site's entrance. In 1920, the D.A.R. was given some 4.5 acres containing the fort ruins from a farm then owned by A. E. Reynolds, an elderly Colorado pioneer and entrepreneur. The D.A.R. is credited for not only preserving the site but for putting forth the first brave ideas of some form of reconstruction.

The State of Colorado purchased the land for the use and benefit of the Colorado Historical Society on June 14, 1954. The society took further steps toward reconstruction by

hiring Professor Herbert W. Dick of Trinidad State Junior College to do an archeological investigation of the site. Forty-two days of digging were undertaken in the summer of 1954. Beyond that, state funding for reconstruction never materialized.

By the year 1957 thinking began to turn to possible NPS involvement. The NPS quickly recognized the site's importance relative to the theme of westward expansion. Feasibility studies soon followed. President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed legislation authorizing the establishment of a national historic site at Bent's Old Fort on June 3, 1960.



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## Research

Intensive research became the first priority for the NPS. Dwight E. Stinson, Jr. was named historian and began searching for diaries and journals left by eyewitnesses of the old trading post. In addition to finding more than 20 written accounts, Stinson found pen and ink drawings and watercolor paintings of the fort, completed in 1845 and 1846 by United States Army Topographical Engineer Lt. James Abert. Abert's work provided approximately thirty percent of the information needed for reconstruction.

Jackson W. Moore was hired to do a second archeological excavation in 1963. Moore supervised a three-year excavation that revealed the layout of the fort and the most likely use of

each ground floor room. Some 35,000 artifacts were unearthed. The dig provided another thirty percent of the necessary information to rebuild. Conjecture and common sense provided the rest.

A four-man, blue-ribbon committee from within the ranks of the NPS was formed in 1965 to decide whether or not to rebuild—as a definite decision had yet to be made. The panel split down the middle for and against reconstruction. Objections centered around the obliteration of existing remains and the idea of a reconstruction based largely on conjecture. Eventually a decision was reached favoring a rebuild. President Gerald R. Ford signed legislation for reconstruction on August 31, 1974.

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## Reconstruction

Construction began on May 27, 1975. Clay, sand, straw and water were mixed by front-loading tractors in a 30 by 50 foot pit. A custom-built machine capable of producing 4,000 bricks per day was used to make 160,000 adobe blocks, each measuring 4 by 9 by 18 inches. Instead of the standard practice of laying adobe bricks on the ground, a concrete foundation was poured to protect the walls from the leaching of rain and ground water. Concrete, foam, and sand were poured for the floors under a surface of packed adobe to provide similar protection.

Skilled craftsmen, knowledgeable in ancient woodworking techniques, hand cut 800 cottonwood trees to provide timbers for the massive vigas that support the fort's roof. Over 112,000 linear feet of ponderosa pine were used to provide the smaller latias. Wood was fashioned by hand for doors and windowsills, while two blacksmiths produced several hundred pieces of hardware inside a reconstructed blacksmith shop.

Constructed of earth, wood, and iron from the blacksmith's fire, the fort stands today as one of our nation's best, and most unique, educational, architectural, and historical exhibits.



*Aerial view of NPS excavations of the fort under the direction of Jackson Moore, November 1964 (NPS photo)*

*View of NPS excavations of the fort under the direction of Jackson Moore, May 1964. This is the southeast area of the fort, including the kitchen and William Bent's quarters (NPS photo)*

