

*Bent's Fort, as depicted by Works Projects Administration artist Harry Miller.
Courtesy of History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.*

The Chaos of Conquest: The Bents and the Problem of American Expansion, 1846–1849

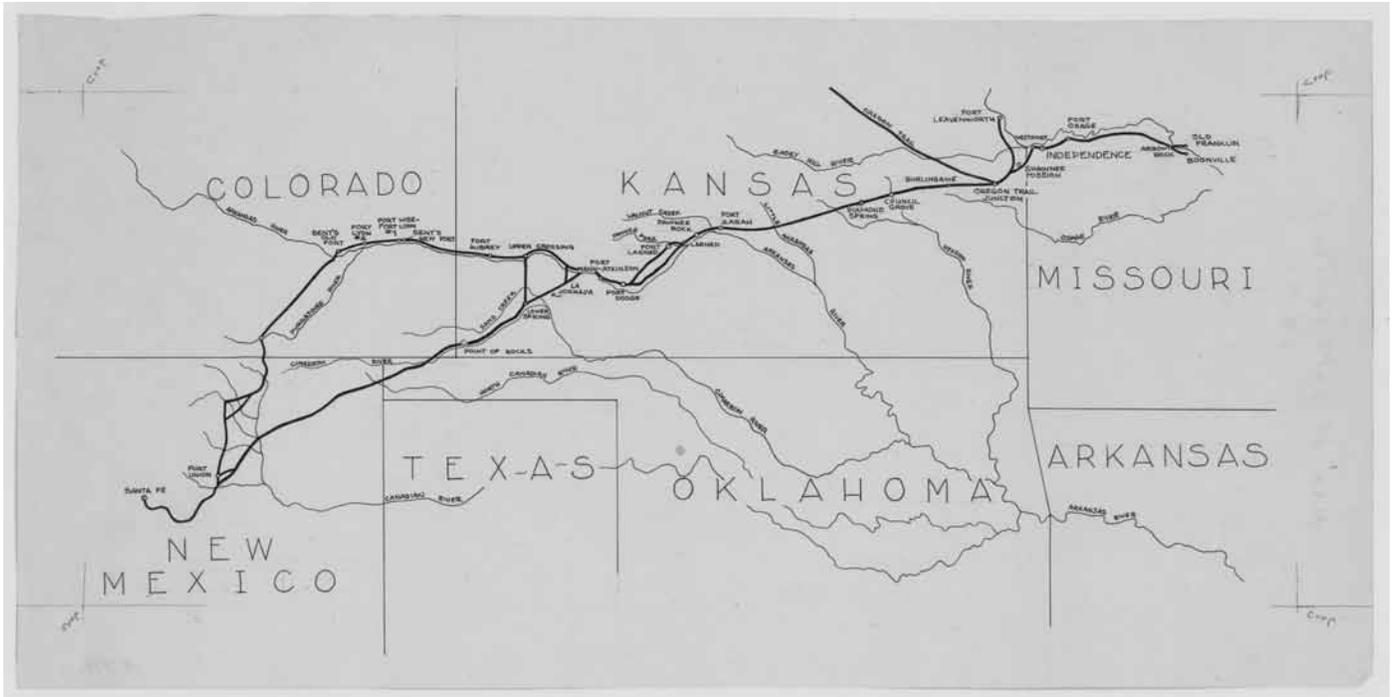
by David Beyreis

James K. Polk's election as the eleventh president of the United States upset Charles Bent deeply. Chief partner in the largest American trading firm in the Southern Plains, he feared that Young Hickory's aggressive expansionist platform would disrupt the delicate balance of regional power necessary to the maintenance of Bent, St. Vrain and Company's financial success. On January 24, 1845, from his home in Taos, Bent wrote Manuel Álvarez, the U.S. consul in Santa Fe, "I am fearfull that this election will cause difficulty between this and our country." Polk's policies, combined with the rise to power of nationalist hard-liners in Mexico City, worried the trader, and for good reason. Rather than profiting from the territorial aggrandizement of the United States when war came in 1846, Bent, St. Vrain & Company suffered grievous losses. Expansion intensified conflict between white settlers and local Indian tribes over access to diminishing natural resources such as grass, timber, and the region's shrinking buffalo herds. On its own, far from the reach of American power, the firm flourished. When the United States entered the Southern Plains, however, Bent, St. Vrain and Company's fortunes declined rapidly.¹

This article uses Bent, St. Vrain and Company as a case study to examine the impact of the U.S.-Mexican War on the American population living in the region at the time of the conflict. Historians of Manifest Destiny traditionally focus their work on the high politics of annexation and the philosophy rationalizing the American expansionist project. While these works contain much useful discussion of race, gender, religion, political philosophy, and international politics, there is a gap between the ideology of Manifest Destiny and its actual impact upon some residents of the region. Although historians of the West have done much to analyze the ways in which the Hispanic and Native American populations of the area creatively adapted to annexation, few aside from Anne Hyde and Elliott West have studied how expansion affected the lives and fortunes of Americans in the West. Perhaps this omission is due to an assumption that residents of the region not only actively supported Manifest Destiny but also consistently benefited from the extension of U.S. power into the area. The declining fortunes of Bent, St. Vrain and Company between 1846 and 1849 complicate the story

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1. Charles Bent to Manuel Álvarez, January 24, 1845, box 2, folder 65; February 21, 1845, box 2, folder 73; and February 23, 1845, box 2, folder 66, all in Benjamin Read Collection, New Mexico State Records Center and Archive, Santa Fe, New Mexico (hereafter cited as BRC and NMSRCA).



Drawn by Michael Snell, this map depicts the entire route of the Santa Fe Trail. During the late 1830s and early 1840s, Bent, St. Vrain and Company prospered as thousands of buffalo robes loaded down company wagons that rolled east over the trail every summer. The occupation of New Mexico by the United States and the discovery of gold in California, however, unleashed an unprecedented volume of traffic along the Santa Fe Trail. This destabilized William Bent's business operations, as violent confrontations between white travelers and Native American tribes like the Kiowas and Comanches increased dramatically.

of American expansion during this era. The collapse of the company demonstrates the ways in which annexation actively undercut the fortunes of Anglo traders who built economic enterprises whose success proved contingent on isolation from the military and political power of the United States. Furthermore, although the company is traditionally viewed as a spearhead of Manifest Destiny, its partners had a remarkably ambivalent relationship with the U.S. government. They called on government aid when it suited their interests and never demonstrated a disinterested desire to aid the extension of U.S. power into the West. On the contrary, when Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West marched into Santa Fe in August 1846, the event set in motion a chain of events that eventually undid the Bents.²

2. The literature on Manifest Destiny is extensive. Among the most useful works on American attitudes and justifications are Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York: Knopf, 1963); Norman Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald House, 1955); Albert Katz Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935); Thomas R. Hietala, *Manifest Design: Anxious Aggrandizement in*

The men who formed the partnership of Bent, St. Vrain and Company came to the borderlands with experience as western traders and deep connections in the St. Louis mercantile community. Charles and William Bent's family had come to Missouri from Virginia, and their father, Silas, was a respected member of the bar in his new home. Charles worked for the Missouri Fur Company as a clerk during the early 1820s and then trapped in the Rocky Mountains for Pilcher and Company, a small outfit based in St. Louis. When the firm went bust, Charles and his younger brother turned their eyes toward New Mexico. Ceran St. Vrain's family was enmeshed in the francophone political and economic milieu of early-nineteenth-century

Late Jacksonian America (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985); David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973); Amy S. Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Reginald Horsman, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981). For differing views, see Anne F. Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families: A History of the North American West, 1800 to 1860* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); and Elliott West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

St. Louis. When his father died, the young man lived with the prominent merchant Bernard Pratte before starting out on his own in 1824. St. Vrain outfitted fur trappers working out of his new home of Taos, New Mexico. He eventually trapped as well, traveling from the Gila River to the central Rockies.³

The Bent brothers partnered with St. Vrain in 1830. Charles and William traveled to New Mexico for the first time in 1829, eight years after William Becknell had pioneered a viable trade route between the western Missouri settlements and Santa Fe, and immediately recognized the potential in the commerce of the prairies. The new firm of Bent, St. Vrain and Company was successful because it accommodated its business practices to local political environments and regional power dynamics. Charles and St. Vrain operated out of Taos and Santa Fe, shuttling between these towns, Missouri, and the Arkansas River, while William focused his efforts on cultivating trade ties with the Cheyennes and their neighbors. Connections in St. Louis combined with shrewd marriages and alliance building with Indian nations and parts of the New Mexico business community turned the partnership into the most profitable American enterprise in the Southern Plains.⁴

William Bent quickly moved into the Indian trade on the Arkansas River. Although it is impossible to date his movements with certainty, by 1834 or 1835, Bent had eliminated the competition of a trader named John Gantt, secured the goodwill of the Southern Cheyennes, and completed construction of Fort William, the largest trading post south of the Missouri River. Known by most westerners as Bent's Fort, the structure was a center of trade and sociability that helped the company become the most powerful trading firm in the region for nearly two decades.⁵

Kinship ties, gift giving, and adherence to native trade protocols created conditions in which the trade in buffalo

robes enriched the company. William Bent set the tone by marrying Owl Woman, the daughter of White Thunder, the spiritual leader of the Southern Cheyennes. Ties to Gray Thunder also linked Bent to the Council of Forty-Four, the Cheyenne peace chiefs who helped facilitate trade. The alliance was mutually beneficial, providing Bent with protection, political connections, and high-quality robes, while the Cheyennes secured a reliable source of American trade goods. Many of Bent's employees married into other Cheyenne bands and Southern Plains Indian tribes. Whether bartering for robes or seeking female companionship, company policy resembled a closely regulated courtship ritual rather than a set of preemptory demands. Such practices flourished in insulation from the potentially coercive power of the American state. The coming of white settlement to the Rocky Mountains and Southern Plains eventually disrupted these ties. After the war with Mexico, the ascendancy of white social and cultural mores marginalized mixed-blood families such as William Bent's and largely deprived them of their former influence.⁶

Those days were in the future, though, for during the late 1830s and early 1840s, the Bents and St. Vrain grew wealthy as thousands of robes loaded down the company wagons that rolled east over the Santa Fe Trail every summer. Most of the information about the size and scope of Bent's trade is anecdotal. For example, in 1839 and 1844, reports indicate that the firm shipped between six hundred and seven hundred packs of robes totaling several thousand items. The most detailed account comes from an 1842 St. Louis ledger that listed sales by Bent, St. Vrain and Company of 2,319 beaver skins along with 2,659 buffalo robes and miscellaneous peltry for \$15,953.73. St. Vrain's later estimate that the partners shipped forty

3. David C. Beyreis, "Business in the Borderlands: Bent, St. Vrain and Company, 1830-1849" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2012), 34-51; Harold Dunham, "Charles Bent," in *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1965-1972), 2:27-36; and Harold Dunham, "Ceran St. Vrain," in Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 5:297-305.

4. Beyreis, "Business in the Borderlands," 54-65.

5. Samuel P. Arnold, "William Bent," in Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 6: 61-70; Beyreis, "Business in the Borderlands," 61-73; Janet Lecompte, "Gantt's Fort and Bent's Picket Post," *Colorado Magazine* 41 (Spring 1964): 111-20; and LeRoy R. Hafen, "When Was Bent's Fort Built?," *Colorado Magazine* 31 (April 1954): 105-18.

6. The literature on intermarriage is extensive. Good sources include Hyde, *Empires, Nations, and Families*; Michael Lansing, "Plains Indian Women and Interracial Marriage in the Upper Missouri Fur and Hide Trade, 1804-1868," *Western Historical Quarterly* 31 (Winter 2000): 413-33; and Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980). On the Bents, see Beyreis, "Business in the Borderlands," 74-93. Good descriptions of the trade process written by men associated with the company include William Montgomery Boggs, "The William Montgomery Boggs Narrative," box 1, 53-54, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut; William M. Boggs, "The W. M. Boggs Manuscript about Bent's Fort, Kit Carson, the Fur Trade, and Life among the Indians," ed. LeRoy R. Hafen, *Colorado Magazine* 7 (March 1930): 48-49, 67; and Lewis Garrard, *Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail; or, Prairie Travel and Scalp Dances, with a Look at Los Rancheros from Muleback and the Rocky Mountain Campfire* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 35, 48, 50, 60, 67, 77.

thousand robes per year was probably an exaggeration. In a good year, company clerk Alexander Barclay said that his employers did up to \$40,000 in business. The numbers paled in comparison to the number of robes that flowed down the Missouri River from places such as Fort Union, but Bent, St. Vrain and Company's business was by far the largest economic venture in the Southern Plains.⁷

Charles Bent and St. Vrain settled in Taos and anchored the New Mexico wing of the company's ventures. Both men learned Spanish and established common-law marriages with local women. These intimate ties opened valuable new avenues for business, land acquisition, and political influence. As part of a larger expatriate Anglo- and Franco-American community in northern New Mexico, Bent and St. Vrain allied with prominent local Hispanic merchants whose economic interests led to financial success. These ventures also created powerful enemies. Men such as the influential Taos priest Antonio José Martínez accused the partners of smuggling, liquor trading, abetting multiple Texan attempts to invade New Mexico, and encouraging the region's Indian tribes in raids on Mexican settlements that secured horses and slaves. When war came in 1846, these tensions had been simmering for years.⁸

Although the company's partners could not completely avoid interactions with U.S. authorities, the Bents and St. Vrain did not actively promote the expansionist agenda of Manifest Destiny. Much as they wanted to conduct business on their own terms, far from outside interference, the principals called upon the government from time to time. In such cases, the partners sought aid to protect trade interests or their personal safety, not to press for

a permanent American presence in the region, let alone war with Mexico. For example, on his first trip over the Santa Fe Trail in 1829, Charles Bent captained a wagon train that benefited from the protection of an escort of U.S. dragoons. During the 1830s and 1840s, he urged Consul Álvarez to press for government interventions on the behalf of American mercantile interests threatened by discriminatory Mexican tariff policies and also to obtain justice for American citizens physically harassed or murdered in New Mexico. Even on the two occasions when Bent broached the idea of a U.S. military presence along the Arkansas River, he did so only to quash the activities of liquor smugglers that threatened to siphon off company profits. Additionally, the trader demonstrated his aversion to aggressive Anglo expansion when he provided information to the governor of New Mexico regarding the movements of Texas filibusters in 1841 and 1843. Under normal circumstances, the partners preferred that the United States government leave them alone because a weak American presence in the borderlands was key to the firm's success.⁹

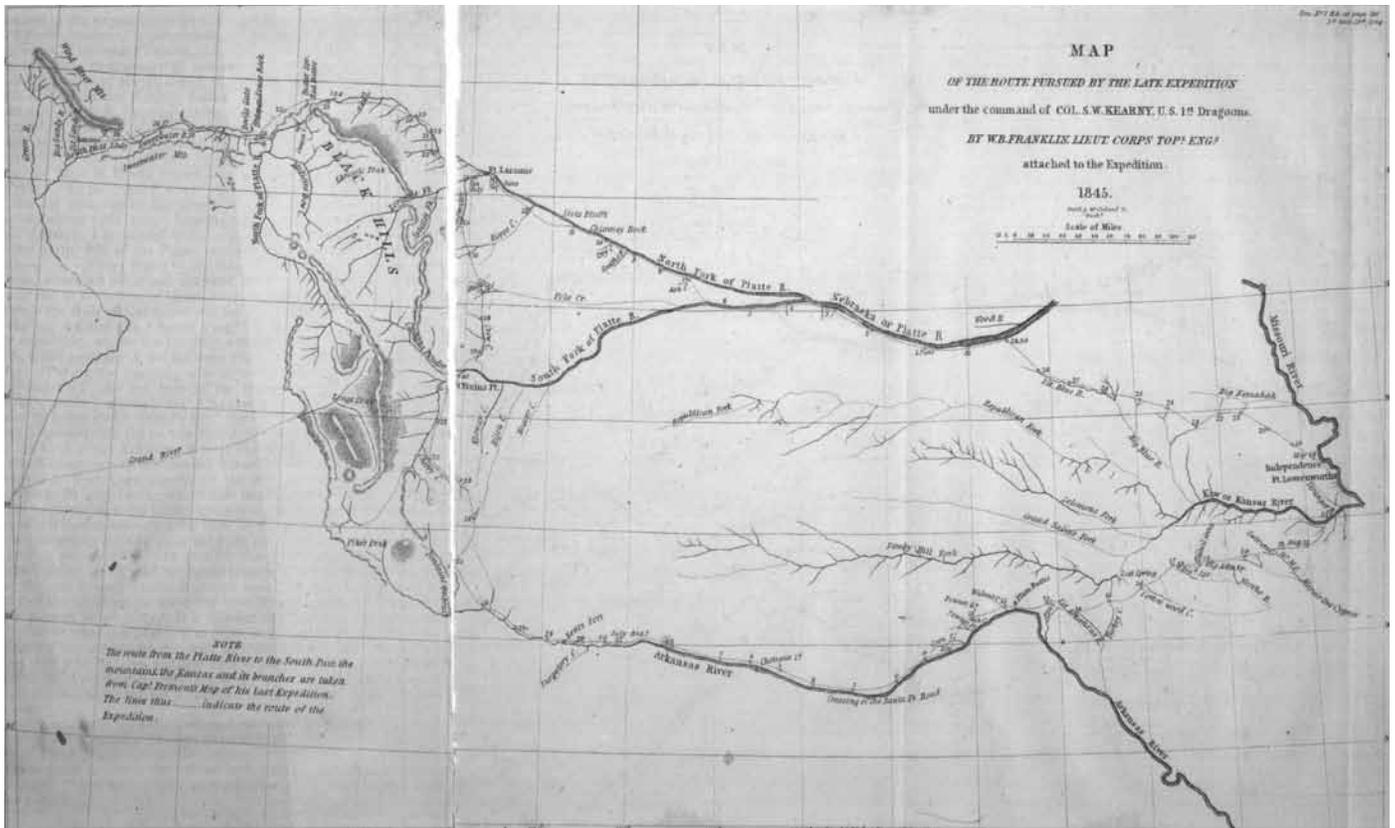
When the Bents dealt with the government before the war, they did not always benefit from the arrangements. In the summer of 1843, the company contracted with the government to purchase thirty-five thousand pounds of supplies, haul them to Bent's Fort, and store them there until the fall of 1844 at a reimbursement rate of \$0.08 per pound. However, the government reneged on the contract, leaving the company sitting on tons of provisions. Despite recommendations that they be reimbursed to a total of \$6,500, it took the partners nearly three years to collect

7. On the process of shipping robes, see George Bird Grinnell, "Bent's Old Fort and Its Builders," *Kansas Historical Collections, 1919-1922* 15 (1922): 52-54. George Hyde, *Life of George Bent, Written from His Letters* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968), 70-71, 84; and George Bent to George Hyde, September 1, 1917, box 4, folder 42, George Bent Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University (hereafter cited as GBP-Yale). For estimates of robes and profits, see J. F. A. Sandford to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., June 1, 1839, reel 26, frame 463, Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, part I: The Chouteau Collection, 1752-1925, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri (hereafter cited as MHS); *Missouri Republican*, June 12 and July 3, 1839; Boggs, "The W. M. Boggs Manuscript about Bent's Fort," 51; "Skin Sales," July 22, 1842, Journal EE, page 246, Fur Trade Ledger Collection, MHS; Mark L. Gardner, "Where the Buffalo Was Plenty: Bent, St. Vrain and Company and the Robe Trade of the Southern Plains," *Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* 43 (Fall/Winter 2007): 23, 28-29; and Alexander Barclay to George Barclay, May 1, 1840, box 1, Alexander Barclay Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley (hereafter cited as ABP).

8. Fine studies of intermarriage in New Mexico and the Mexican borderlands during this time include Rebecca McDowell Craver, *The Impact of Intimacy: Mexican-Anglo Intermarriage in New Mexico, 1821-1846* (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1982); Albert L. Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New

Mexico Press, 1999); and Louise Pubols, *The Father of All: The de la Guerra Family, Power, and Patriarchy in Mexican California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). A thorough study of Bent and St. Vrain in New Mexico is Beyreis, "Business in the Borderlands," especially pages 196-214 and 238-73. On Bent's unpopularity with Mexican nationalists, see Bent to Álvarez, January 30, 1841, box 1, folder 46; February 26, 1846, box 2, folder 74; and April 8, 1846, box 2, folder 82, all in BRC.

9. On the 1829 expedition, see William Waldo, "Recollections of a Septuagenarian," ed. Stella M. Drumm, *Missouri Historical Society: Glimpses of the Past* 5 (January-March 1938): 64-73; and Otis E. Young, *The First Military Escort on the Santa Fe Trail, 1829* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1952). On tariff duties, see Bent to Álvarez, April 20, 1843, Consular Despatches, Santa Fe, 1836-1846, Record Group 59, General Records of the Department of State, microcopy 199, reel 1, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, DC (hereafter cited as NARA). On the protection of Americans in New Mexico, see Bent to Álvarez, September 10, 1839, box 1, folder 39 and December 1, 1840, box 1, folder 42, both in BRC. On Bent and liquor smugglers, see Bent to Álvarez, September 19, 1842, box 2, folder 57, BRC and Bent, St. Vrain and Company to D. D. Mitchell, January 1, 1843, May 4, 1843, Records of the U.S. Superintendent of Indian Affairs, St. Louis, MO, 1807-1855, Microfilm Group 1130, reels 1-6, Kansas Historical Society, Topeka, KS. For Bent and the Texans, see Bent to



When the Mexican War began, American military leaders understood the potential of using Bent's Fort as a staging area for the conquest of New Mexico. To lead the Army of the West on this campaign, the government selected Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, a lifelong military professional who knew the region around the fort well. In 1845, Kearny led an expedition, depicted on the map shown here, whose purpose was to demonstrate the military might of the United States to both local Indian tribes and British officials attempting to exert control over Oregon Territory.

their money and even then only after much foot-dragging and dickering by army clerks and quartermasters.¹⁰

Isolation from the United States and the maintenance of political peace on the Southern Plains was critical to the success of the firm. The partners knew that violence could disrupt the company's trade. During the 1830s, for example, war between the Cheyennes and Comanches limited the scope of Bent, St. Vrain and Company's enterprises. Ties with the Cheyennes made it impossible to extend business south of the Arkansas River until a peace settlement between the tribes in 1840 allowed the partners to establish a trading presence in the heart of

western Comanchería. Furthermore, although Anglo and Hispanic traders annually plied the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and New Mexico, they rarely did so in numbers large enough to cause systematic native resistance. While the caravans proceeded cautiously, ever alert to possible attack, Indian raiding along the route never approached the level of intensity it reached with the commencement of the U.S.-Mexican War. Finally, until the war, government presence in the region was negligible. Between 1830 and 1846, only two sizable military expeditions reconnoitered the country around Bent's Fort. Only when the war commenced did traffic along the Santa Fe Trail increase to the point that violent confrontation became a consistent problem. As the number of travelers increased, so did the conflicts that led to the establishment of a permanent official U.S. presence in the region.¹¹

Álvarez, January 16, 1841, box 1, folder 44 and January 30, 1841, box 1, folder 46, both in BRC.

10. Louise Barry, *The Beginning of the West: Annals of the Kansas Gateway to the American West, 1540–1854* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1972), 497–98; "Petition of Bent, St. Vrain and Company," 29th Cong., 2nd Sess., Sen. Doc. 115, 1–3; and David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (1954; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 244.

11. On the Cheyenne-Comanche Wars, see Pekka Hämäläinen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 164–65; Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.–Mexican*



This bust painting of Ceran St. Vrain was completed by Works Projects Administration artist C. Waldo Love. Originally from St. Louis, Vrain moved to New Mexico in the 1820s, outfitting fur trappers before partnering with Charles and William Bent in 1830. Following the dissolution of the company, St. Vrain remained in New Mexico, where he died in 1870. Courtesy of History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

When the war began, American strategists already knew the potential of using Bent's Fort as a staging area for the conquest of New Mexico. As part of a two-pronged campaign to invade Mexico's northern states, the Army of the West, a combined force of regulars and Missouri

volunteers, marched west on the Santa Fe Trail, mustered at Bent's Fort, and then struck into New Mexico. Commanded by Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, the force arrived at the post in midsummer. Kearny was a lifelong military professional who had served in the War of 1812 and come west in 1819. A stern disciplinarian, he authored a tactical manual for use by the new U.S. dragoons and turned the force into a crack unit. Kearny knew the region around the fort well. In 1845, he led a column of dragoons as far as South Pass on the Overland Trail before turning south toward the Arkansas River. Amid negotiations with local tribes, the colonel singled out the location of Bent's Fort as an ideal location for an Indian agency and recommended that the government establish a presence nearby to crush the local liquor trade.¹²

The actions of the Army of the West in 1846 and 1847 did nothing to endear the United States to William Bent. Kearny utilized Bent's Fort as his jumping-off point for the invasion of New Mexico without a by-your-leave from the company's partners. Rather, his men swarmed over the post in the summer of 1846, pestering the traders with demands for food and whiskey. The army's quartermasters made even more onerous impositions, seeking storage space for tons of supplies and matériel. In addition, thousands of head of government livestock gobbled the valuable grass along the Arkansas River in every direction. That summer, a Bostonian tourist and budding historian, Francis Parkman, had hoped to refit his men at Bent's Fort. Instead, he wrote, "It seemed as if a swarm of locusts had invaded the country." Army horses and mules had denuded the area around the fort of its grass. The young Brahmin had hoped to outfit his small party from the company's storehouse but found goods impossible to acquire. Kearny's army also used the facility as a supply depot once the Army of the West had moved on. By the

War (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 40–41, 48; Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 55–57, 72–81; Douglas C. Comer, *Ritual Ground: Bent's Old Fort, World Formation, and the Annexation of the Southwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 124. On Bent, St. Vrain and Company among the Kiowas and Comanches, see Janet Leconte, "Bent, St. Vrain and Company among the Comanche and Kiowa," *Colorado Magazine* 49 (Fall 1972): 273–93; W. D. Hodgkiss to Andrew Drips, March 25, 1843, box 1, Andrew Drips Papers, MHS; and George Bent to George Hyde, December 13, 1905, box 3, folder 4, GBP-Yale.

12. The standard biography of Kearny is Dwight L. Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny: Soldier of the West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961). On the 1845 expedition and the Army of the West, see Stephen Watts Kearny, "Report of a summer campaign to the Rocky Mountains &c., in 1845," 29th Cong., 1st Sess. Sen. Ex. Doc. 90, 210–13; and Will Gorenfeld and John Gorenfeld, *Kearny's Dragoons Out West: The Birth of the U.S. Cavalry* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 196–209, 216–30.

summer of 1847, the government was storing 120 tons of supplies at the post and sending thirty wagonloads of goods south to New Mexico every week. As if these impositions were not enough, William Bent and Kearny quarreled over Bent's salary to scout for the column as far as Raton Pass. Although he left the initial negotiations in a huff, William returned the next day and agreed to the contract terms. Kearny's skinflint mentality, however, probably did little to quell the trader's rising sense of indignation.¹³

American expansion had fatal consequences for the company's most prominent partner, Charles Bent. The conquest of New Mexico could have been the Bents' best moment. Although the company's partners did little to invite annexation, their business acumen and social ties within New Mexico made it natural for Kearny to consult them on policy issues. Charles Bent probably knew New Mexico better than any other Anglo, and from Kearny's perspective, appointing the merchant as the first governor of an American New Mexico made perfect sense. Yet the province's nationalists resented the conquest on principle, and Bent's ascension proved especially galling to the anti-American faction in the governor's hometown of Taos. There, on the morning of January 19, 1847, a riot protesting the incarceration of three local Hispanic men signaled a general uprising throughout the north that targeted symbols of the new regime. Charles Bent died in his home, shot and scalped by the rebels. Violence continued well into 1848, and by the time the U.S. Army

crushed the movement, hundreds were dead. Although anti-American sentiment in some corners of New Mexico predated the invasion, Bent's elevation to the governorship made him a prominent target of the violence.¹⁴

Charles Bent's death probably led to the formal dissolution of Bent, St. Vrain and Company in 1847. In the wake of the Taos revolt, St. Vrain and William briefly reorganized their operations under the title St. Vrain and Bent and opened a new store in Santa Fe, but the partnership did not survive the year. No details about the termination survive. However, with Charles Bent's demise, the firm lost its most powerful personality and driving force, and his death hit William especially hard. St. Vrain's deepening involvement in New Mexican business ventures, primarily freighting contracts with the U.S. Army, which proved more lucrative than the declining Indian business, may also have played a role. After cutting ties, St. Vrain remained in New Mexico, while Bent returned to the old company's fort on the Arkansas River and continued to trade with the Cheyennes.¹⁵

The occupation of New Mexico by the United States and the discovery of gold in California unleashed an unprecedented volume of travel along the Santa Fe Trail, destabilizing William Bent's business operations. Several thousand argonauts plied the routes from Missouri and Arkansas to New Mexico and Bent's Fort on their way to the gold fields. The crush of thousands of wagon wheels and hundreds of thousands of hooves spread out over miles of the landscape, decimated the local grasses, and carved ruts in the earth viewable from airplanes one hundred years after the rush subsided. The presence of so many soldiers, emigrants, freighters, and traders led to an equally unprecedented rise in raiding and violent confrontation with the region's Indians over water, grass, timber, and buffalo. While Bent strove mightily to maintain peace between the United States and his Cheyenne kinfolk, other tribes did not distinguish between Bent's wagon trains and those of other merchants or the government. Travel and trade became extraordinarily

13. Arnold, "William Bent," in Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 6: 75; Nolie Mumeay, *Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West: Santa Fe Old Fort and Bent's New Fort on the Arkansas River* (Denver, CO: Artcraft Press, 1956), 64; Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny*, 109; Janet Lecompte, *Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn: Society on the High Plains, 1832-1856* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), 199, 222; Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life* (1849; repr., New York: Macmillan, 1923), 306; George Rutledge Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier under Kearny and Doniphan, 1846-1847*, ed. Ralph P. Bieber (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1935), 161, 167-68; Susan Shelby Magoffin, *Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847*, ed. Stella M. Drumm (1926; repr., New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1962), 59, 66-67; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 263, 273-6; and Bent to Hyde, February 26, 1906, box 3, folder 4, GBP-Yale; Quartermaster Commissary to Richard B. Lee, August 11, 1846, and William E. Prince to Assistant Commissary of Subsistence, August 25, 1846 and September 1, 1846, all in William E. Prince Army Letterbooks, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT. On Bent as an expedition scout, see Clarke, *Stephen Watts Kearny*, 130; Abraham Johnston, "Journal," in *Marching with the Army of the West, 1846-1848*, ed. Ralph P. Bieber (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1936), 92; Henry Smith Turner, *Journals of Henry Smith Turner: With Stephen Watts Kearny to New Mexico and California, 1846-1847*, ed. Dwight L. Clarke (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), 67; Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier under Kearny and*

Doniphan, 180; and William H. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance from Fort Leavenworth, in Missouri to San Diego, in California* (Washington, DC: Wendell and van Benthuysen, 1848), 18.

14. On Bent's death, see Stephen Hyslop, *Bound for Santa Fe: The Road to New Mexico and the American Conquest, 1806-1848* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), 386-97.

15. Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 322, 334; Dunham, "Ceran St. Vrain," 5:313; *Santa Fe (NM) Republican*, November 20, 1847; Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 88; and Dorcas Carr to Silas Bent, December 26, 1848, box 1, William C. Carr Papers, MHS.

hazardous. As anthropologist Douglas Comer wrote, the war with Mexico “opened the area to new interests that would destroy the company and drive out William Bent’s adopted people.”¹⁶

The increasing volume of travelers along the Santa Fe Trail during and after the U.S.-Mexican War prompted calls for the government to establish a permanent presence along the Arkansas River. A cordon of strategically placed posts, garrisoned by mounted soldiers under the command of veteran leaders, would do much to promote regional peace and stability, observers concluded. An experienced agent to oversee Indian affairs was also necessary. In 1847, the government appointed former mountain man Thomas Fitzpatrick to the position. Fitzpatrick immediately threw himself into his work, informing his superiors that “I believe the duties of this Agency, properly and judiciously executed of more importance at this time than any other under the Indian Department.” Firm policy was necessary, he wrote, for the warriors of the Southern Plains were, “the most numerous, the *most* formidable—the most warlike—the best armed—the best mounted savages of any similar extent of country on the face of the globe.”¹⁷

From his base at Bent’s Fort, Fitzpatrick spent much of 1847 striving to maintain peace between the United States and the Cheyennes. Both the agent and William Bent recognized the paramount importance of cultivating good relations with the tribe. The Cheyennes’ desire to accommodate the U.S. government—largely a product of their close ties with Bent—combined with Fitzpatrick’s efforts, secured peace. In the spring of 1847, the agent convened a council at Bent’s Fort during which he warned the Cheyennes against raiding along the Santa Fe Trail. Although the two sides signed no formal treaty,

Fitzpatrick was confident that they had reached a mutual understanding. Cautiously optimistic about the prospects of a long-term peace on the upper Arkansas, the agent wrote his superiors, “I have used my best endeavor to keep quiet and reconcile the Indians hereabout, and I flatter myself that I have in a manner succeeded.” Yet he feared that the Comanches remained a threat to regional stability. The agent continued his efforts through the rest of the year, persuading the Cheyennes and most of the Southern Arapahos to refrain from joining the Kiowa and Comanche raiding parties along the trail. Because of these activities, Fitzpatrick and Bent felt confident that the tribe was content with the U.S. presence along the Arkansas and that the Cheyennes even sought to settle permanently in the region of Bent’s Fort and take up agriculture.¹⁸

Cultivating the good graces of the Cheyennes was crucial to Fitzpatrick, for attacks along the route from Missouri to New Mexico had escalated dramatically. From Bent’s Fort, he called for aggressive action against raiders along the trail. Much of the problem, the agent complained, resulted from the government’s coddling of the Indians. He complained of the “great forbearance and constant humoring of their whims” by bureaucrats and philanthropic lobbyists. As early as 1847, Fitzpatrick warned his superiors that the portion of the Santa Fe Trail between Bent’s Fort and Taos “is becoming daily more dangerous for small parties.” He griped that any treaties he concluded were “less than useless” without strong military support to back them. Until the military demonstrated its ability to track down and punish the raiders, there could be no peace in the Southern Plains. The agent concluded that “these Indians are not at all aware of our capacity or power to chastise them and never will believe it until they have proof of the fact,” something that only a resounding U.S. victory would accomplish. By 1849, complaints about the deteriorating situation formed a disconcertingly large part of the correspondence between officials in Santa Fe, St. Louis, and Washington. New Mexico governor and territorial superintendent of Indian affairs James Calhoun complained that he lacked sufficient manpower, especially cavalry, to punish Indian raiders. Without this force, the warriors had little respect

16. Lavender, *Bent’s Fort*, 335; Elliott West, *The Way to the West: Essays on the Central Plains* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1995), 18–19, 30–31, 48; Arnold, “William W. Bent,” in Hafen, *The Mountain Men and the Fur Trade of the Far West*, 6: 78; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 100; Lavender, *Bent’s Fort*, 289, 319; Lecompte, *Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn*, 221; and Comer, *Ritual Ground*, 219.

17. W. J. Ghent and LeRoy R. Hafen, *Broken Hand: The Life of Thomas Fitzpatrick: Mountain Man, Guide, and Indian Agent* (Denver, CO: Old West Publishing Company, 1931), 191–94, 211; and Thomas Fitzpatrick to James W. Abert, August 23, 1847, Fitzpatrick to William Madill, August 11, 1848, Fitzpatrick to Thomas Harvey, October 19, 1847, and Fitzpatrick to D. D. Mitchell, May 22, 1849, all in Record Group 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Letters Received, Upper Platte Agency, 1846–1856, microcopy 234, reel 889, NARA (hereafter cited as UPA-NARA). On the necessity of mounted troops, see Kearny, “Report of a summer campaign to the Rocky Mountains,” 212; and H. L. Routt to Robert H. Miller, December 6, 1847, folder 2, Robert H. Miller Papers, MHS.

18. William Y. Chalfant, *Dangerous Passage: The Santa Fe Trail and the Mexican War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1994), 25; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 108–09; LeRoy Hafen, “Tom Fitzpatrick and the First Indian Agency in Colorado,” *Colorado Magazine* 6 (March 1929): 55–56; Fitzpatrick to Harvey, October 19, 1847, reel 889, UPA-NARA.



This illustration, titled "Arrival of the Caravan at Santa Fe," was featured in Josiah Gregg's 1844 Commerce of the Prairies, a description of his early travels along the Santa Fe Trail. America's expansion westward following the war with Mexico transformed the trail into an overcrowded highway featuring merchant caravans, discharged troops heading east toward Missouri, and surveying parties. The crush of thousands of wagon wheels and hundreds of thousands of hooves spread out for miles, decimating local grasses and leaving ruts in the earth visible from airplanes a century later.

for the United States. Calhoun wrote simply, "They do not believe we have the power to chastise them."¹⁹

The heightened level of violence resulted in large part from the immense increase in traffic over the Santa Fe Trail. Never had the trail been as crowded as during and immediately after the war. Merchant caravans, soldiers marching to New Mexico, discharged troops headed east for Missouri, quartermaster supply trains, surveying parties, and dispatch riders clogged the route. In July 1847, Missouri soldier M. L. Baker wrote, "The whole

road is full of hostile Indians who are plundering all the trains not guarded by a military escort." Fitzpatrick drew a direct connection between the war with Mexico and the escalating Indian violence. "I can say that the country is at present in a far less state of security and tranquility than before the commencement of the Mexican War or before the marching and countermarching of United States troops to and from New Mexico," he wrote. The agent cited the total costs of the summer's raiding to drive home the urgency of his point. Fitzpatrick informed his superiors that the Comanches, Kiowas, and Pawnees were responsible for the deaths of 47 settlers, the destruction of 330 wagons, and the theft of 6,500 head of livestock. In August 1848, he was more blunt: "The Santa Fe Road at the present time is in...need of some speedy measures for its protection." By 1849, D. D. Mitchell, superintendent of Indian affairs in St. Louis, noted simply, "Our relations with the various prairie tribes . . . are very much changed

19. Fitzpatrick to Harvey, October 19, 1847, and December 18, 1847, Fitzpatrick to William Gilpin, February 8, 1848 and February 10, 1848, and Fitzpatrick to William Madill, August 11, 1848, all in reel 889, UPA-NARA; and James Calhoun to Madill, August 15, 1849, and October 1, 1849, in *The Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun While Indian Agent at Santa Fe and Superintendent of Indian Affairs in New Mexico* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1915), 20, 31–32.



Native American attacks against travelers on the Santa Fe Trail, portrayed here in another of Josiah Gregg's illustrations, became increasingly commonplace during and after the Mexican-American War. Teamsters, soldiers, emigrants, and Indians clashed over access to grass, water, firewood, game, and campsites. By 1849, this violence, combined with disease and a severe constriction of economic opportunity, led William Bent to abandon the fort that had made him and his partners famous.

by our territorial acquisitions in New Mexico, and on the Pacific Coast." Although he did not dispute the legality of this traffic, Mitchell pointed out that its increased frequency had spawned more violence than at any other time. Prior to the war, "there were only a few Mexicans and Indians passing through this section of the country," he noted. These travelers purchased safe passage through peaceful trade. Mitchell wrote that raiding declined dramatically during the winter months, when "there is no passing, and repassing of troops, traders, or immigrants across the plains, consequently no Indian depredations can be committed."²⁰

20. Bernard De Voto, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (1942; repr., New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 251; Walker D. Wyman, "The Military Phase of Santa Fe Freighting, 1846-1865," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 1 (November 1932): 415; M. L. Baker to M. D. Baker Martin, July 14, 1847, typescript letter, Mexican War Collection, MHS; Fitzpatrick to Harvey, October 19, 1847, December 18, 1847, and Fitzpatrick to Madill, August 11, 1848, reel 889, UPA-NARA; Chalfant, *Dangerous Passage*, 164; Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 320-21; Leo E. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967), 84; and Mitchell to Madill, June 1, 1849, and Mitchell to Orlando Brown, August 27, 1849, reel 889, UPA-NARA.

The raiders who lashed out at the interlopers struck Bent wagon trains along with the rest. In late May 1846, Comanches struck the annual eastbound Bent, St. Vrain and Company caravan west of the Pawnee Fork of the Arkansas, killing one man. Raiding accelerated throughout the summer, prompting St. Vrain to take greater care on his return trip to Bent's Fort. At first, he rode ahead of the caravan with a small escort. However, when an eastbound government wagon train warned him of Indian trouble ahead, the trader prudently waited for the rest of his men to catch up, "preferring slow travel and a large company to a small party and uncertain possession of his scalp," fellow traveler Lewis Garrard wrote. The following summer, another raiding party struck the company wagons, this time at the crossing of Walnut Creek. The attackers ambushed and killed one man while he hunted buffalo away from the rest of the party. In addition to this death, the *St. Louis Reveille* reported that "the rascals drove off large numbers of mules and oxen, belonging to the party." Another skirmish occurred less than a week later along Ash Creek without casualties. The plains remained dangerous enough for former company employee turned trader Alexander Barclay to seek the

protection of St. Vrain's return caravan "in consequence of the depredations of the Comanches during the summer in the neighborhood of Pawnee Fork."²¹

The bleakness of the situation along the trail prompted the government to action in 1847 and 1848. In the spring of 1847, an army detachment constructed Fort Mann, a tiny outpost east of the Cimarron Cut-off of the Santa Fe Trail. By June, Comanche raiders made occupation of the fort untenable. In November, troops commanded by William Gilpin reoccupied the fort. Gilpin's "Indian Battalion" proved singularly unsuited to the task of defending travelers along the road to Santa Fe. The underfunded, underpaid, undersupplied, and undertrained unit accomplished little of note between the reoccupation of Fort Mann and its final abandonment a year later. Gilpin did not fail for lack of effort. In the spring of 1848, mounted on horses and mules procured by William Bent, the Indian Battalion set out from northern New Mexico to conduct a sweep of the region along the South Canadian River in the Texas Panhandle. Gilpin proved incapable of finding any hostile Indians, let alone subduing them. However, other army detachments fought two decisive engagements with the Comanches during the same period, largely ending hostilities for the remainder of the year.²²

Despite his long string of letters requesting a military force to guard the trail, Agent Fitzpatrick was a caustic critic of the army's performance in 1847 and 1848. He wrote his superiors that "the Indians seem to have partially ceased their continued warring upon our people passing through the country, more particularly on the Santa Fe road, inasmuch as fewer attacks have been reported, and comparatively but little loss sustained last season." However, he did not attribute this to the Indian Battalion. Rather, the agent speculated sarcastically that during their raids in 1846 and 1847, the Indians had "secured so much booty by their daring raids upon travelers" that they "are now, and have been the past summer, luxuriating in and

enjoying their spoils." He cautioned that raiding would undoubtedly continue in 1849.²³

Conflict over natural resources along the length of the Santa Fe Trail lay at the root of the violence between white travelers and local Indian groups. Teamsters, soldiers, emigrants, and Indians clashed over access to grass, water, firewood, game, and campsites. Although accelerating environmental degradation adversely affected the Cheyennes, they did not strike out violently against the white intruders in the same manner as the Kiowas and Comanches. Years later, William Bent's son George recalled that emigrants bound for Santa Fe or California flooded the region, shooting buffalo, felling timber, and fouling traditional Cheyenne camping grounds. According to George, "in all the valleys for miles away from the river the grass was eaten down in the ground by the emigrants' hungry horses." Of this competition for the finite resources of the Arkansas River corridor, historian Elliott West noted, "One point becomes clear: Indians, white travelers, and their horses and oxen and mules were gobbling up and burning the very bejabbers out of one of the most vital, vulnerable, and limited habitats of the Great Plains." Thomas Fitzpatrick noted these phenomena. Although he did not feel that these problems were the fundamental cause of Indian hostility, Fitzpatrick worried that such issues heightened tensions. To head off the conflict, he recommended that the Indians be in some way compensated "for the trespass which they have of late commenced to complain of."²⁴

Reports of dwindling buffalo herds offered the most dramatic example of resource decline. Buffalo hunting had always been important to sustaining the commerce between Missouri and New Mexico. A steady supply of meat allowed traders to dedicate less wagon space to foodstuffs and more to trade goods. However, during the late 1840s, the combination of both civilian and military traffic with hunting expeditions by local tribes, tribes from the Indian Territory, and *ciboleros* from New Mexico placed increasing strain on the herds of the Southern Plains. Commentary on the wasteful hunting methods

21. Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 79; Barry, *The Beginning of the West*, 589, 686, 690; Frederick Wislizenus, *Memoir of a Tour of Northern Mexico, Connected with Colonel Doniphan's Expedition in 1846 and 1847* (1848; repr., Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1969), 10; Garrard, *Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail*, 15; Chalfant, *Dangerous Passage*, 88, 158–60; *Daily Reveille* (St. Louis, MO), June 15, 1847; *Daily Missouri Republican* (St. Louis), June 14, 1847; M. L. Baker to M. D. Baker Martin, July 27, 1847, typescript letter, Mexican War Collection, MHS; and Alexander Barclay, "Diary," August 7, August 24, and September 23, 1847, box 1, ABP.

22. Chalfant, *Dangerous Passage*, 48–53, 166–69, 186–95, 237–50; and Oliva, *Soldiers on the Santa Fe Trail*, 80–81, 92.

23. Fitzpatrick to Harvey, October 6, 1848, in "Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs," 30th Cong., 2nd Sess., H. Ex. Doc. 1, 472; and Fitzpatrick to Mitchell, May 22, 1849, reel 889, UPA-NARA.

24. Chalfant, *Dangerous Passage*, 23–24, 152; Wyman, "Military Phase of Santa Fe Freighting," 420; Hyslop, *Bound for Santa Fe*, 175, 321; Kevin Sweeney, "Thirsting for War, Hungering for Peace: Drought, Bison Migrations, and Native Peoples on the Southern Plains, 1845–1859," *Journal of the West* 41 (Summer 2002): 73; Hämäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 292–93; Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 96; West, *The Way to the West*, 27; and Fitzpatrick to Mitchell, May 22, 1849, reel 889, UPA-NARA.

of emigrants formed a staple of the primary literature of overland travel during this period. English adventurer George Frederick Ruxton, for example, condemned the "cruel slaughter made by most of the white travelers across the plains, who wantonly destroy these noble animals, not even for the excitement of sport, but in cold-blooded and insane butchery." Marcellus Ball Edwards, who marched to New Mexico with Kearny in 1846, condemned his comrades who senselessly blazed away at the herds, "either to count in the future the number he has destroyed, or to obtain a tongue, a hump rib, or a marrow bone."²⁵

Men long associated with Bent, St. Vrain and Company also noted the contraction of the herds. Alexander Barclay wrote his brother in 1838 that the hunters at Bent's Fort needed to travel only "fifteen or thirty miles" from the post to find buffalo. Seven years later, Barclay's report was grimmer. Although he hoped to enter the robe business on his own, he informed his brother that "the buffalo are decreasing rapidly" and that because of this decline, his future "is all uncertainty." In December, he continued, "the Buffalo robe business is becoming limited every year from the decrease of the animal itself which is now becoming such a rarity even at the foot of the [Rocky] Mountains that we have to go one or 200 miles to get the first sight of one." Years later in his memoirs, Dick Wootton, another former company employee, likewise recalled the decline of the herds with amazement. By 1846, William Bent himself recognized that his business was withering. That year, he considered moving the company's operations downriver to the vicinity of the Big Timbers, a site with better water, wood, and the shelter required by the buffalo during the winter.²⁶

Despite the impassioned denunciations of white hunting practices by travelers such as Ruxton, increased

traffic on the overland trails did not, by itself, cause the depletion in buffalo. Rather, the volume of emigration brought on by the end of the U.S.-Mexican War merely exacerbated long-term trends already quietly at work undermining the basis of William Bent's business. The way Plains Indians hunted buffalo contributed to their decline. Cows were the most vulnerable target because their meat was especially tender and their hides lighter, softer, and more pliable than those of bulls, factors that contributed greatly to their value as lodge coverings and trade robes. Killing these animals limited the reproductive capacity of the region's herds. Additionally, trade conducted from Bent's Fort created the potential for increased hunting targeted at white market demands. By providing a large and diverse amount of trade goods, the Bents and St. Vrain contributed to intensified hunting. Because the most lucrative buffalo grounds attracted the largest number of hunters from rival tribes, these areas were dangerous to hunt and became virtual no-man's lands. However, following the Great Peace of 1840 between the Cheyennes and Comanches, hunters from both sides of the Arkansas River poured into these neutral grounds, determined to provide food and lodging for increasing tribal populations while also satisfying the demands of white traders such as the Bents. Ironically, the peace that allowed Bent, St. Vrain and Company to expand its operations eventually undercut the partners financially. By the mid-1850s, Bent's trade had declined dramatically. During the winter of 1854, one of his workers estimated that about 230 packs of robes went east to Missouri, only about one-third the number that the company had acquired during its heyday in the 1840s.²⁷

25. Hyslop, *Bound for Santa Fe*, 10; Dan Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy: The Southern Plains from 1800 to 1850," *Journal of American History* 78 (September 1991): 482; Charles Preuss, *Exploring with Frémont: The Private Diaries of Charles Preuss, Cartographer for John C. Frémont on His First, Second, and Fourth Expeditions to the Far West*, trans. and ed. Edwin G. and Elisabeth K. Gudde (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), 84; George Frederick Ruxton, *Life in the Far West* (1849; repr., Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1951), 63; Marcellus Ball Edwards, "Journal," in Bieber, *Marching with the Army of the West, 1846-1848*, 130.

26. Alexander Barclay to George Barclay, October 14, 1838, June 19, 1845, and December 1845, box 1, ABP; Howard Louis Conard, "Uncle Dick" Wootton: *The Pioneer Frontiersman of the Rocky Mountain Region* (1890; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press 1980), 69; William H. Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 13; Garrard, *Wah-to-Yah and the Taos Trail*, 114; and Gibson, *Journal of a Soldier under Kearny and Doniphan*, 163.

27. On the targeting of buffalo cows, see George Bird Grinnell, *The Cheyenne Indians: Their History and Ways of Life* (1923; repr., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 2:126-27; Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 479-80; Boggs, "The W. M. Boggs Manuscript about Bent's Fort," 66; Bent to Hyde, August 8, 1911, box 3, folder 15, GBP-Yale; Gardner, "Where the Buffalo Was Plenty," 24. On clashes over hunting grounds, see Boggs, "William Montgomery Boggs Narrative," 57; West, *The Way to the West*, 61-62; and John Charles Frémont, *Memoirs of My Life. Including in the Narrative Five Journeys of Western Exploration, during the Years 1842, 1843-44, 1845-46-47, 1848-49, 1853-54. Together with a Sketch of the Life of Senator Benton in Connection with Western Expansion* (Chicago: Belford, Clarke & Company, 1887), 181. On the Great Peace of 1840 and its results for the local bison population see Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 483; and Pekka Hämäläinen, "The First Phase of Destruction: Killing the Southern Plains Bison, 1790-1840," *Great Plains Quarterly* 90 (Spring 2001): 110. For the 1850s, see James F. Milligan: *His Journal of Fremont's Fifth Expedition, 1853-1854: His Adventurous Life on Land and Sea*, ed. Mark J. Stegmaier and David J. Miller (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1988), 178.

Environmental factors combined with these hunting practices to place even greater pressure on both herds and hunters. Historian Andrew Isenberg wrote, "The destruction of the buffalo was not merely the result of human agency, but the consequence of the interaction of human societies with a dynamic environment." The bison population on the Southern Plains was probably never as large as thunderstruck white travelers reported and was always in flux. In a region as harsh as the Southern Plains, the margin for error was slim. The most successful inhabitants—human and animal—performed a delicate balancing act between their own needs and the finite natural resources surrounding them. However, during the mid-nineteenth century, environmental, social, and political pressures made it increasingly difficult to thrive. As historian James Sherow noted, "From around 1820 through the 1860s, the Plains Indians' adaptation strategies worked less well in a region undergoing rapid environmental change each passing year." Natural occurrences combined with increased hunting worked to undercut the economic position of both William Bent and his Southern Cheyenne trading partners.²⁸

Drought could administer a crippling blow to herds already reeling from natural hazards such as fire, disease, and the predation of both wolves and human hunters. As grass withered and rivers shrank, the carrying capacity of the buffalo ranges contracted. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, an unusually long pattern of wet weather on the Southern Plains broke. Between 1849 and 1862, the region suffered one of the worst droughts on record. Further complicating the situation, the drought struck at a time when the regional population had reached an all-time high. Beginning around 1800, Indian groups from all points of the compass began to converge upon the Southern Plains in search of the grass, timber, and water that were plentiful along the course of the Arkansas River. With them, the newcomers brought vast herds of horses, which competed directly with the buffalo for the grass and water of the region's river bottoms. Even in the wettest years, it could be difficult to find water on the Southern Plains. In years of drought, the competition between bison and Indian horse herds cut deeply into the

28. Andrew C. Isenberg, *The Destruction of the Bison: An Environmental History, 1750–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29–30; West, *The Way to the West*, 21, 33, 71; Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 470; and James E. Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic: High Plains Indians and Their Horses in the Region of the Arkansas River Valley, 1800–1870," *Environmental History Review* 16 (Summer 1992): 80.

bison population. Because of drought and diminishing amounts of grass and water, bison migrations shifted farther east, away from the Arkansas River hunting grounds of the Cheyennes and Comanches. These migrations caused great inconvenience and hardship for William Bent's best clients.²⁹

Squeezed by the arrival of so many new white travelers and faced with declining buffalo herds, the Southern Cheyennes were ill equipped to cope with the numerous epidemics that struck the Southern Plains during the 1840s. Smallpox first hit the region in 1839–1840. Possibly brought by Osage traders, the disease killed many Comanches, Kiowas, and Apaches across the Staked Plains. In 1845, measles and whooping cough afflicted the Southern Cheyennes. Tribal elders called it the year of the "Red Small Pox." Disease, in conjunction with shifting bison migration patterns away from the Arkansas River, in 1846 caused the Cheyennes a great deal of suffering. The specter of starvation loomed over the region.³⁰

The worst scourge, cholera, trapped the Southern Cheyennes from two directions. A bacillus transmitted through human excrement, tainted food, and contaminated water sources, cholera thrives in unsanitary conditions. Indian hunting camps were notorious for the offal strewn about, while white emigrant rest stops along the Platte River also had abysmal sanitation. The epidemic that began in 1849 was especially intense because of the massive number of travelers headed west for the gold fields. California-bound emigrants traveling the Overland Trail along the Platte River likely infected some Indian bands, who then transmitted it to others. By 1849, cholera reached as far south as the Kiowa country, killing hundreds. One Cheyenne tradition reinforces a northern

29. Flores, "Bison Ecology and Bison Diplomacy," 470, 481–82; West, *The Way to the West*, 17, 33, 38, 81; Elliott West, "Great Dreams, Great Plains: Jefferson, the Bents, and the West," in *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West: From Conquest to Conservation*, ed. James P. Ronda (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997), 164–66; Sweeney, "Thirsting for War, Hungering for Peace," 71–77; Sherow, "Workings of the Geodialectic," 75, 79; Hämmäläinen, *Comanche Empire*, 285, 296; Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 28, 110; Mitchell to Madill, June 1, 1849, reel 889, UPA-NARA; Emory, *Notes of a Military Reconnaissance*, 14; George Frederick Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (1847; repr., Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1973), 269; and Frederick Wislizenus, *A Journey to the Rocky Mountains in the Year 1839* (1840; repr., Glorieta, NM: Rio Grande Press, 1969), 53.

30. Isenberg, *Destruction of the Bison*, 119; Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, 274; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 101; and George Bent to George Bird Grinnell, November 18, 1908, MS 5, folder 122b, George Bird Grinnell Collection, Autry National Center, Los Angeles, CA.



Following the destruction of his fort, William Bent worked briefly as an Indian agent, living in Kansas and Colorado, where he died of pneumonia in 1869. This photograph, taken that same year, depicts Bent (third from left) with members of the Arapaho tribe in front of an adobe building, while American soldiers look on from the roof. Courtesy of History Colorado, Denver, Colorado.

source for the disease. The story goes that a Cheyenne raiding party searching for Pawnees happened upon an emigrant camp already devastated by cholera. Although the Cheyennes recognized the danger and fled south, the disease followed them. One young warrior rode ahead of the raiding party to warn the main encampment along the Smoky Hill River in western Kansas. The messenger cried out that the whole war party was “now dying and falling off their horses with cramps.” The panicked families fled in every direction.³¹

Cholera also arrived from the east. George Bent recalled that all the Southern Plains Indians remembered the sum-

31. Ramon Powers and James N. Leiker, “Cholera among the Plains Indians: Perceptions, Causes, Consequences,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (Autumn 1998): 319–21, 326–27, 330–31; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 113; Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, 173; Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 96–97; and Bent to Hyde, March 16, 1915, box 4, folder 36 and October 6, 1916, box 4, folder 39, GBP-Yale.

mer of 1849 as the time “When the Big Cramps Took Place.” Cheyenne and Kiowa tradition says that Osage traders brought the disease to the Kiowas’ annual summer sun dance camp. During the ceremonies, a Kiowa sun dancer fell over and died in the medicine lodge. Then an Osage trader died. The Cheyenne warrior Porcupine Bull cried out for everyone to flee immediately. The Cheyennes joined the panicked mass exodus from the sun dance site that day, riding north towards the Arkansas River and inadvertently spreading the disease. They fled all night, George Bent recalled. Near the Arkansas, they encountered the cholera-stricken band from the Platte. The disease had trapped the Cheyennes. One warrior, Little Old Man, painted himself for battle and rode through the camp waving

his lance and crying out in despair, “If I could see this thing, if I knew where it came from, I would go there and fight it!” George Bent’s tribal sources told him that a “whole lot of them died and cholera was only [a] few days among them.” Cheyenne historian John Stands in Timber heard horrific stories of victims who spasmed “as if shot” before they died. The disease wreaked havoc on the tribe. Clans were decimated, and valuable cultural knowledge was lost when old people and holy men succumbed. The epidemic also began a slow shift in the locus of Cheyenne political power as the militant Dog Soldiers, a band who avoided all contact with the white settlers, ascended while the influence of the peace chiefs began to decline. Malnutrition and psychic shock compounded the trauma. The sickness ruined William Bent’s chances for a profitable trading season in 1849. Scattered and demoralized, the Cheyennes thought first of survival and only then of trade. This disruption, combined with the declining number of bison and the increasing hostility of the Comanches

and Kiowas along the Santa Fe Trail, made Bent's position on the upper Arkansas River increasingly untenable.³²

Unfruitful negotiations over the potential sale of the fort to the government probably pushed Bent over the edge. Prior to the dissolution of St. Vrain and Bent, St. Vrain apparently offered to sell the fort to the army for \$15,000 without consulting William. Stressing the size and location of the post, St. Vrain also offered the testimony of Kearny and John C. Fremont as references for the post's advantages. Nevertheless, the government turned down the offer. After the dissolution of his partnership with St. Vrain, William Bent probably also attempted to sell the fort. According to some accounts, the army offered Bent anywhere from \$12,000 to \$50,000 for the post. Others say that Bent initiated the negotiations and asked for \$16,000; when the army countered with an offer of \$12,000, Bent felt insulted. Rather than accept this lower bid, he took drastic measures.³³

William's son George wrote, "As no agreement could be reached he loaded what goods he could into his wagon and set fire to the powder magazines and blew up the fort." Although many accounts of the destruction of Bent's Fort exist, the best contemporary evidence shows that the trader set fire to the fort in the summer of 1849. In addition to accounts in Missouri newspapers, the superintendent of Indian affairs in New Mexico reported in the fall of 1849 that "one of the owners of Bent's Fort, has removed all property from it, and caused the fort to be burnt." William did not destroy the fort; that would have taken too much valuable gunpowder to accomplish. Archaeological evidence indicates that he set fire to the support beams and ceilings of the post's rooms, probably to prevent them from being used by a competitor. Later travelers used the fort as a campground and stagecoach station. Still despairing of the season's trade, and

probably piqued by the government, Bent moved down the Arkansas River to the vicinity of the Big Timbers, where he set up operations on a much-reduced scale and continued as an Indian agent and trader until his death in 1869.³⁴

The American expansion that followed the war with Mexico unleashed forces that helped destroy the fortunes of Bent, St. Vrain and Company, the most powerful trading operation on the Southern Plains. Between the 1830s and 1846, the firm's partners built up a lucrative trade with New Mexicans and local Indian groups. The success of this commerce often depended upon maintaining the distance between these clients and the United States. The war disrupted the balance of power in the region and helped set in motion forces that undid the Bent brothers and St. Vrain. The U.S. conquest of New Mexico sparked a nationalist backlash during which rebels killed Charles Bent. The boom in the volume of traffic along the Santa Fe Trail led to a corresponding increase in violent confrontations between white travelers and tribes such as the Kiowas and Comanches. Such violence made it difficult for William Bent to maintain normal trade patterns as emigrants, soldiers, and Indians competed for the region's rapidly diminishing resources. Travelers also helped spread diseases that severely weakened groups such as the Southern Cheyennes. These intertwined forces—political, military, environmental, and epidemiological—exacerbated preexisting tensions between William Bent and the U.S. government. By 1849, violence, disease, and a severe constriction of economic opportunity led Bent to abandon the fort that had made him and his partners famous. American conquest had helped create the chaos that destroyed Bent, St. Vrain and Company. [KH]

32. Bent to Hyde, January 23, 1905, box 3, folder 3; February 10, 1915, box 4, folder 35; March 16, 1915, box 4, folder 36; October 17, 1916, box 4, folder 39; and March 29, 1917, box 4, folder 41, all in GBP-Yale; George Hyde to Grinnell, February 9, 1916, MS 5, folder 51-B and October 12, 1916, MS 5, folder 51-C, George Bird Grinnell Collection; Mooney, *Calendar History of the Kiowa Indians*, 289; Berthrong, *Southern Cheyennes*, 113–14; Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 97n20; Comer, *Ritual Ground*, 226; John Stands in Timber and Margot Liberty, *A Cheyenne Voice: The Complete John Stands in Timber Interviews* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), 343; and Powers and Leiker, "Cholera among the Plains Indians," 335–36.

33. Lecompte, *Pueblo, Hardscrabble, Greenhorn*, 222; Dunham, "Ceran St. Vrain," 5:313; Ceran St. Vrain to Eneas Mackay, July 21, 1847, quoted

in Creswell Taylor, "Charles Bent Has Built a Fort," *Bulletin of the Missouri Historical Society* 11 (October 1954): 82–84; Ghent and Hafen, *Broken Hand*, 219; and Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 327, 335.

34. Hyde, *Life of George Bent*, 93; Bent to Hyde, February 26, 1906, box 3, folder 4, GBP-Yale; Barry, *Beginning of the West*, 883; *Daily Missouri Republican*, October 2, 1849; Calhoun to Madill, October 5, 1849, in *Correspondence of James S. Calhoun*, 42; and Jackson Ward Moore, Jr., "The Archaeology of Bent's Old Fort" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1968), 29, 43. The most thorough study of Bent's New Fort is found in Mumey, *Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West*, 123–221.