



## The Santa Fe Trail



The Santa Fe Trail was more than a simple overland route for travel. The trail provided a path for the expansion of people and ideas to cross international, cultural, and economic borders. For the United States, it provided economic and cultural growth as the trail acted as a gateway and lifeline to the frontier of the west. For centuries, the trail would be heavily traversed and utilized by many peoples representing multiple nations, until the 1880's, when the trod of footstep and creak of wood on a wagon was replaced by the roar of a coal engine moving across iron rails.

### Early Trade

The Santa Fe Trail has a long and important history as an overland route in North America. Before the arrival of Europeans, the trail served as a branch in Native American trade networks. During Spain's expansion into what is today the southwestern United States, the trail would serve the Spanish conquistadors and explorers as a route of exploration, conquest, frontier defense, and as well as for trade and diplomacy with the Plains Indians. After the arrival of other

Europeans into North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, the Santa Fe Trail would continue to cross cultural barriers with trade as it had for Native American Nations, as a small trade developed between the French in the Mississippi Valley, and Spanish settlers along the trail, despite Spanish law against it. After the Louisiana Purchase, American explorers had the opportunity to travel the trail into New Mexico, and take back with them the picture of an isolated province starved for manufactured

### Expansion and Change

After Mexico's Independence from Spain in 1821, trade between the United States and Mexico exploded as Mexican and American traders joined in two-way enterprises that carried goods from east to west, and west to east. Fabrics, cutlery, and other goods went west from Missouri; bouillon, furs, and mules made their way east from Santa Fe. This commerce across the plains bonded Missouri and New Mexico together through economic interdependence, a bond that would be important as the United States was expanding westward.

The Mexican American War (1846-1848) brought

change to both the trail and the lands it crossed. After the war, the entire trail was a part of the United States as New Mexico became a territory. This change would make the Santa Fe Trail a priority for the US Army, and would lead to the establishment of Fort Union in order to command the intersection of the Mountain and Cimarron Branches of the trail, and further establish the presence of the United States Army in the new territories. The Santa Fe Trail changed as well, changing from a route of commerce to lifeline of empire, as settlers and soldiers began to occupy goods on the trail.

### Supply Line

With soldiers, animals, and personnel to maintain, an Army post required massive amounts of supplies to function. This need for supplies to keep the networks of southwestern forts and encampments along travel routes or located at reservations and trouble-spots, made the Santa Fe Trail, as a supply route vital to the success of westward expansion of the United States. Tons of supplies from the east would make their way down the trail and out west, under the supervision and direction of District Quartermasters.

Goods (subsistence, hardware, ammunition, etc.) came in two basic modes: stock

inventories, to the outposts; and bulk consignments for direct shipment to the individual posts. Typically during the post-Civil War era, stock and post orders flowed through the depot quartermaster office to Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, strategically located at the head of the Santa Fe Trail. Contract freighters guided huge ox-drawn wagons from Leavenworth to Fort Union, where some of the goods were unpacked for storage and later consignment to the field. The bulk post consignments were regrouped into military wagon trains that might drop supplies at several posts along a route of travel.

## Guardian of the Trail

“Subsequent events proved, however, that they (Kiowas) were watching the road closely to pounce upon an unprotected mail party.”  
– Pvt. Morris Peck

As the traffic on the trail increased so did threats to it, especially on the Cimarron branch where attacks from Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne raiders were a common occurrence. Fort Union protected commerce and traffic on the trail by serving both material and logistical functions of the Santa Fe trail.

Mounted troops from the post patrolled the trail, and provided escorts for mail, merchants, and individuals to secure the critical link between the frontier of the southwest and the eastern-half of the United States. Material support from the fort came on the grounds of the post in the form of a hospital where injuries and illnesses could be treated, sutler stores where goods could be acquired, and a mechanic's corral where damaged wagons could be repaired. This insured that traffic on the trail continued passed the post, and further into the western frontier.

## The Decline

The Santa Fe Trail served as a route for commerce, expansion, and ideas to cross cultural, international, and economic borders for hundreds of years. The destruction of the trail would come from the expansion of a new kind of trail. Instead of foot and wooden wheel, the railroad would utilize steel, coal, and iron to provide commerce and movement much faster than the old trail. The railroad allowed for the supply line to the west to grow more flexible, with drop-offs and shorter hauls directly to nearby posts from the railhead. As railroad tracks continued further west, more of the trail would be replaced, but travel and commerce would continue on the Santa

Fe Trail, in places where the railroad did not yet reach. However in 1879 the railroad came over the Raton Pass, and followed closely to the old trail as the rail bypassed Fort Union. Its supply operations gradually phased out and the supply depot that depended on the Santa Fe Trail as a lifeline closed in 1883.

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