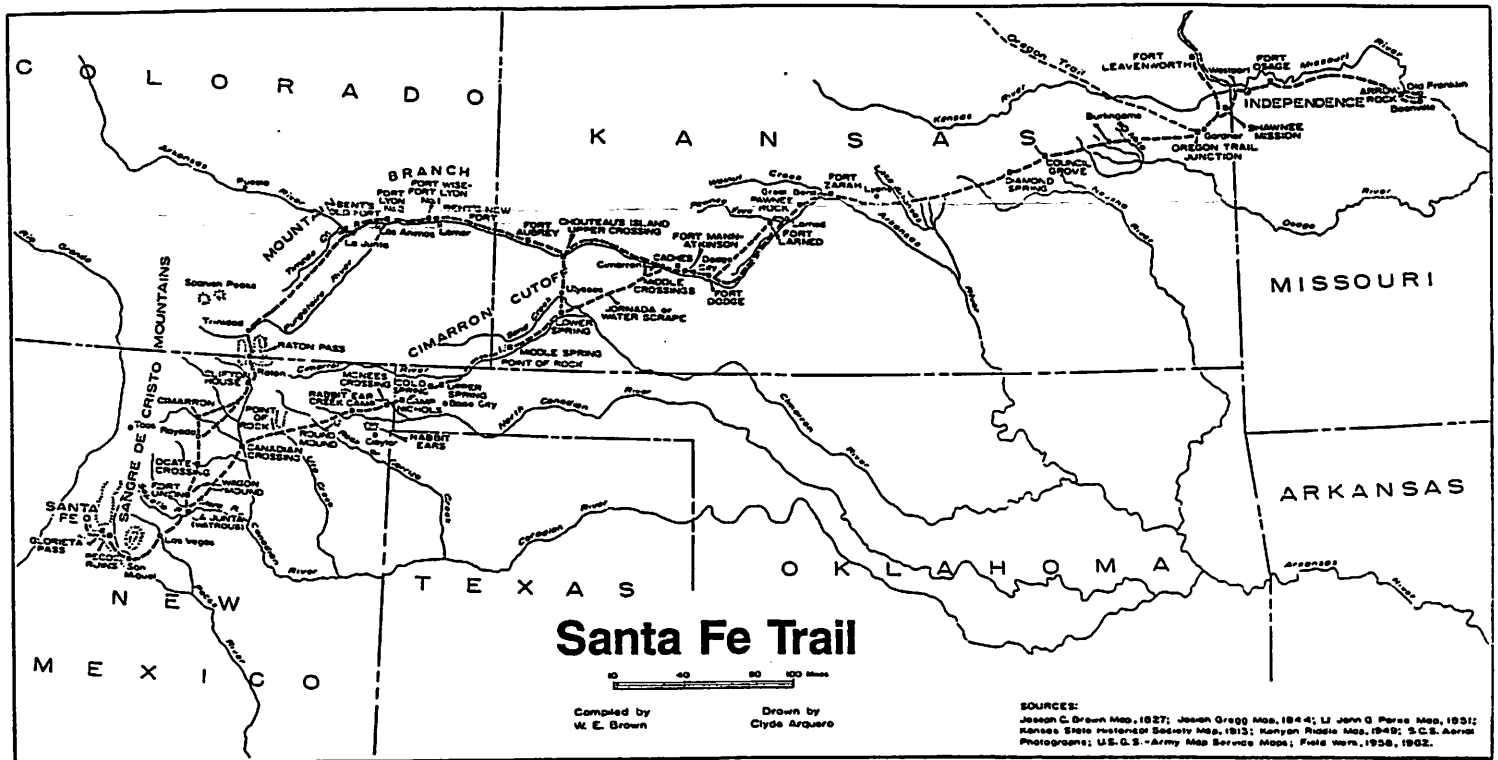


# Fort Union

National Monument  
New Mexico

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

## The Santa Fe Trail



### Beginnings

The Santa Fe Trail had an old history. It was a link in Indian trade networks ancient before the Spaniards came. It would serve the Spaniards of New Mexico as a route of exploration, frontier defense, and trade and diplomacy with the Plains Indians. In the 1700s, despite Spanish rules against it, a small trade began with Frenchmen from the Mississippi Valley. Later, Americans exploring the Louisiana Purchase visited New Mexico and carried back the picture of an isolated province starved for manufactured goods and eager for mercantile exchange. With Mexican Independence in 1821, the gates of trade opened wide. New Mexican and American traders joined in two-way enterprises that carried fabrics, cutlery, and other items "necessary for an assortment" west from Missouri; bullion, furs, and mules east from Santa Fe. This commerce across the plains welded Missouri and New Mexico together through economic interdependence, trading and financial partnerships, and marriage. By the time of the Mexican-American War (1846-48) New Mexico was already strongly attached to the United States by commercial and familial ties. In large measure, the military conquest and subsequent Mexican Cession, formalized an already established union.

## Guardian of the Trail

Fort Union commanded the intersection of the Mountain and Cimarron Branches of the Santa Fe Trail. In a larger sense the fort served as symbol and substance of national power in a vast new acquisition far removed from the eastern heartland. In this context the Santa Fe Trail changed from route of commerce to lifeline of empire. For several years, excepting an Army depot at the Arkansas Crossing, travelers saw no official flag west from Missouri until—8 weeks later—they reached Fort Union.



Founded in 1851, Fort Union served both martial and logistical functions. During the first few years Fort Union's mounted troops patrolled the trail. Later, the fort provided escorts for mail stages, the troops riding in wagons that lagged behind the impatient stage drivers. Until the Civil War period, wagon trains usually provided their own defense. Then the combination of increased Indian hostilities and raids by Texas-based Confederates forced a new regime of patrols, escorts, and subposts to protect all travelers and keep open the critical link between the Southwest and the States.

Toward war's end the Cimarron Branch suffered severe attacks from Kiowa, Comanche, and Cheyenne raiders. In late 1864 Col. Kit Carson mounted an expedition from Fort Union that penetrated the Kiowa-Comanche stronghold in the Texas Panhandle. With the aid of field howitzers, the 1<sup>st</sup> New Mexican Cavalry stood off the Indians at the Battle of Adobe Walls. Next year Carson established Camp Nichols in what is now the Oklahoma Panhandle. Halfway between Fort Union and Cimarron Crossing on the Arkansas River, this subpost served as switch-point for escort troops and, in times of extreme danger, as refuge for travelers.

The start of the Civil War had brought a serious military threat to the trail and to Fort Union itself—a brigade size Confederate invasion that aimed to capture the western portions of the trail and the Colorado gold fields. With only a small cadre of regulars left after the bulk of troops had been sent to the eastern war, New Mexico lay vulnerable. New Mexico and Colorado Volunteers joined the regulars and in March 1862 repulsed the Confederates at Glorieta Pass, 70 miles west of Fort Union. Remains of the Star Fort, an earthen field-work, recall Fort Union's frenzied preparations to meet the onslaught.

Fort Union troops joined in post-war campaigns with other units to strike at the "Plains Indian Barrier." But these wars only indirectly related to the Santa Fe Trail.

## Supplying the Southwest

The Fort Union Depot came under command of the District Quartermaster. It was a separate and distinct operation from the military post. Its job was to supply the network of southwestern forts and encampments strung along travel routes or located at reservations and trouble-spots.

Goods (subsistence, hardware, ammunition, etc.) came in two basic modes: stock inventories stored in the depot's warehouses for later, on-order distribution to the outposts; 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 major western trails. Contract freighters guided the 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.

As the railroad's end-of-steel moved westward the supply line grew more flexible, with drop-offs and shorter hauls directly to nearby posts from the current railhead. In 1879 the rail road bypassed Fort Union. Its supply operations gradually phased out and the depot closed down in 1883.

The quartermaster operation lacked the flair of the cavalry charge, the heroics of the besieged infantry platoon. But without the men who processed supply orders, counted stock, cared for animals and wagons, packed freight, and then hauled it to the far posts, there would have been neither posts nor battles.

