

Foundation Document

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site

Colorado



Contact Information

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Purpose



The purpose of BENT'S OLD FORT NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE is to

- *commemorate the historic role this trading post played in the "opening of the West"*
- *develop, maintain, and preserve the national historic site for visitor education and enjoyment*
- *interpret the significance of the Santa Fe Trail and the impact it had on the United States, Mexico, and the Southern Plains tribes*

Significance

Significance statements express why Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **Westward Expansion.** Between 1833 and 1849, the fort was the most important staging point for the U.S. commercial and military expansion into what is now the American Southwest, and played a vital role in developing political and cultural ties between the U.S., Mexico, and the Southern Plains tribes, culminating in the military acquisition of the adjacent Mexican territory.
- **Economy/Commerce.** From its beginning as the first permanent trading post on the Santa Fe Trail, Bent's Old Fort became one of the great centers of the fur trade from 1833 to 1849. Its strategic location between Mexico and the Southern Plains tribes, coupled with the trading company's diplomacy and influence, integrated the Southwest into a global economy reaching from the United States to Mexico, Europe, and Asia.
- **Role as an Agent of Change.** Bent, St. Vrain & Company's vision for the trading post created alliances through intermarriage, economic interdependence, and political cooperation that made it one of the Southwest's most important cultural crossroads. The fort's influence ultimately propelled multiple changes that had major long-term consequences for American, Mexican, and American Indian tribes' ways of life.
- **Santa Fe Trail.** The Santa Fe Trail was an international trade route carrying needed material goods between Missouri and northern Mexico, fostering the economic development of the Southwest and American westward expansion. Operated as a trading post by Bent, St. Vrain & Company, Bent's Old Fort's location and prominence led to the development of the mountain route of the Santa Fe Trail and played a critical role in trade relations with Mexico and American Indian nations.
- **Reconstructed Fort/Historic Setting.** The architecturally accurate, reconstructed fort and its historic setting preserves the interconnection between the natural and cultural environments and offers a unique living history experience that educates and allows visitors to "step back" in time. The fort is a national living history laboratory and training center that demonstrates many aspects of life at a remote post between 1833 and 1849.

Fundamental Resources and Values



Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **Reconstructed fort**
- **Historic setting**
- **The Santa Fe Trail**
- **Archeology and artifacts**
- **Living history**
- **Cultural traditions**

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Commemorative features commissioned by the Daughters of the American Revolution**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park— they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from — and should reflect — park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The history of Bent's Old Fort, encompassing the interaction among diverse cultures, including American Indian tribes, along the borderlands of Mexico and the United States, provides opportunities to explore ideas of security, sovereignty, and culture in the American West.

- The reconstruction of Bent's Old Fort and the preservation of cultural attributes (original artifacts, historic records, recreated lifeways, and the historic landscape) enable a deeper understanding of the people, places, and events of the fur trade era of the American West.

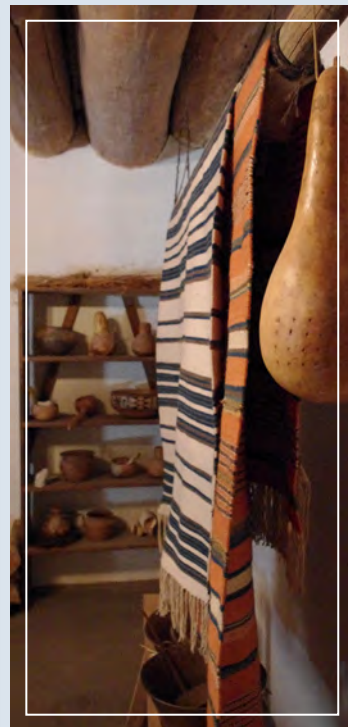
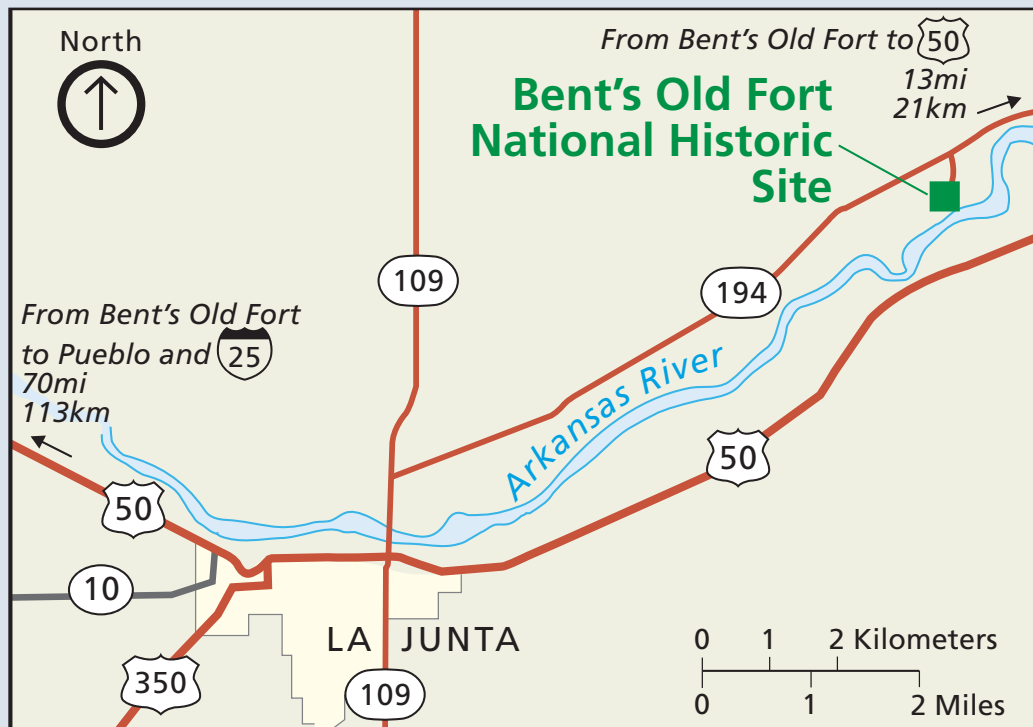


- The planning, construction, and successful operation of Bent's Old Fort was powerfully influenced by the geopolitical importance of its location along the Arkansas River within the shortgrass prairie ecosystem, illustrating the intimate connections between natural setting and human endeavor.

- Bent's Old Fort, by virtue of its role in the fur trade and the Santa Fe trade, was involved with international industries and early examples of multinational commerce, which today continue to transform the lives of human beings around the world.



Description



For much of its 16-year history, Bent's Fort (or Fort William) was the only major permanent settlement on the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and Santa Fe, Mexico. William and Charles Bent, along with Ceran St. Vrain, built the original adobe fort in 1833 to trade for buffalo robes with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes. The fort became the center of the Bent, St. Vrain & Company's expanding trade empire that included Fort St. Vrain to the north and Fort Adobe to the south, along with company stores in Mexico at Taos and Santa Fe. Situated along the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail, the fort provided explorers, adventurers, traders, and the U.S. Army a place to get needed supplies, wagon repairs, livestock, good food, water, company, rest, and protection in this vast "Great American Desert." During the war with Mexico in 1846, the fort became a staging area for Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny's "Army of the West." Disasters and disease caused the fort's abandonment in 1849.

Today, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site features a reconstructed version of the 1840s adobe fur trading post. Archeological excavations and original sketches, paintings, and diaries were used to replicate the features of the fort, which was reconstructed during the country's bicentennial and Colorado's centennial in 1976. Living history programs recreate the sights, sounds, and smells of the past with guided tours, demonstrations, and special events. At 799 acres, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site received 25,815 visitors in 2012.

