



Foundation Document Overview

Santa Fe National Historic Trail

Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Oklahoma, New Mexico



Contact Information

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Trail Nature and Purpose



The specific nature of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail is as follows:

The SANTA FE NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL is a 1,203-mile historic corridor of commercial, military, and emigration travel, as it was used between 1821 and 1880, from Franklin, Missouri, to the multi-cultural city of Santa Fe, New Mexico. The historic route of travel crosses the Great Plains, linking the verdant Missouri River Valley with the arid southwest and the foothills of the Rocky Mountains, with crossings of the Missouri and Arkansas Rivers as well as numerous lesser streams. It includes many segments of historic remnants and related sites of historic use with open vistas and largely intact historic landscapes and settings.

As defined by the National Trails System Act, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail's purpose is:

“The identification and protection of the historic route and its historic remnants and artifacts for public use and enjoyment” [NTSA Sec. 3 (3)] and provision for “recreational use or historical interest based on historic interpretation and appreciation.” [NTSA Sec. 5 (b) (11) C].

Trail Significance

Statements of significance for national historic trails describe the distinctive nature of the trail and the significance of the trail in the nation's history. They focus on historical uses and experiences, important places, remnants, and geographies, and values that will assist in trail planning and administration. These statements are linked to the nature and purpose of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail and are supported by data, research, and consensus. They help to define the fundamental resources and values to be considered in planning, protection, and development of the designated route.

- The Santa Fe Trail was the first major trans-Mississippi trade, travel, and communication link between the United States and Santa Fe, which was part of northern Mexico until 1846. It became the primary two-way commerce and trade route between Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and created new economies through the accessible trade of domestic and international goods until the expansion of the railroad was completed in 1880.
- The Santa Fe Trail stimulated an impactful multicultural interaction of ideas, technologies, languages, values, and familial relations.
- The Santa Fe Trail played a critical role in the westward expansion and the progression of the military and governmental role in this region.
- The Santa Fe National Historic Trail includes many surviving in situ remnants of the trail that allow the public opportunities to understand and vicariously share the historical experience of travelers along the route.



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 trail and communicating its significance.

- **Historic Sites, Route Segments, and Landscapes**
- **Documents, Artifacts, Collections, and Stories**
- **Recreational and Educational Opportunities**
- **Partnerships**
- **Trail Communities, People, and Culture**



Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a trail or engaging with interpretive media about the trail—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a component of the National Trails System. Themes are derived from, and should reflect, trail purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for trail administrators to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all trail significance statements and fundamental resources and values. The Santa Fe Trail brought an international world economy to the early 19th-century U.S.-Mexico frontier, transforming the balance of power in the region that became the American Southwest.

- At great personal risk, early traders, explorers, and daring individuals sought opportunities along the trail to alter their fate.
- Today, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail provides opportunities to explore living cultures along the trail and expand our perceptions of the past. The story of the trail is still unfolding through ongoing dialogue and continual engagement.
- More than ruts, remnants, and wagons, the Santa Fe Trail was a conduit for culture, language, identity, and change. For some, the trail brought a chance for a new destiny; for others, it brought disease, displacement, and new challenges that endure today.
- Institutions of the U.S. government traveled west along the trail to consolidate U.S. control, disrupting local relationships and displacing indigenous and Hispanic populations; however, the dynamic and diverse communities along the route today show that many cultures play a role in the story of the Santa Fe Trail.
- Just as geography dictated travelers' choices, human actions along the trail were a catalyst for enduring environmental change across a panorama of fragile ecosystems.
- The Santa Fe National Historic Trail offers vicarious and varied experiences to engage with the past and forge personal connections.

Description

The Santa Fe Trail was primarily a commercial highway connecting Missouri and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Missouri trader William Becknell pioneered the route in 1821 when he left Franklin, Missouri, in September and headed over the plains to Santa Fe. Mexico had recently achieved its independence from Spain, and the new Mexican government—unlike its colonial predecessor—welcomed outside trade. For nearly three decades the Santa Fe Trail grew in international significance as a two-way commercial highway used by both Mexican and American traders. When the two nations went to war in 1846, the trail quickly became a military route for United States (U.S.) invading armies. When the war ended two years later, the route settled into the primary connection between the eastern United States and its new territories in the Southwest. The rapid expansion of the railroad network in the United States during and after the Civil War foretold the end of the Santa Fe Trail.

When the first locomotive reached Santa Fe in 1880, trail use, which was already greatly diminished, virtually ceased. Today, the national historic trail extends 1,203 miles across Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and New Mexico.

Administered by the National Park Service, the Santa Fe National Historic Trail is a component of both the National Trails System and the national park system. The National Park Service administers the Santa Fe National Historic Trail in partnership with other federal, state, and local agencies; tribal governments; nonprofit organizations; and private landowners. The NPS role includes leadership for the trail and establishing best practices and ensuring consistency among all partners involved with administration and on-the-ground management of the trail and trail resources.

