

Bent's Old Fort

Bent's Old Fort
National Historic Site
Colorado

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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At a distance it presents a handsome appearance, being castle-like with towers at its angles . . . the design . . . answering all purposes of protection, defense, and as a residence. —George R. Gibson, a soldier who visited the fort in 1846

In the decades after the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, even as the earliest explorers crossed the continent, America's economic frontier expanded westward. Trappers went into the Rocky Mountains for beaver. Plains Indians showed their willingness to trade buffalo robes. The first wagons rolled between the Missouri River and Santa Fe, initiating regular commerce with Mexico.

Traders Charles and William Bent and their partner Ceran St. Vrain sought to establish a base where they could take advantage of all these trade opportunities. In 1833 they opened a fort (then called Fort William) on the north bank of the Arkansas River, the boundary between the United States and Mexico. It was close enough to the Rockies to draw trappers; near hunting grounds of Cheyenne, Arapaho, Kiowa, Comanche, and other tribes; and on the Santa Fe Trail, near a ford across the river.

After two months on the trail, travelers greatly anticipated this haven. It was the only place between Missouri and Santa Fe where they could refresh themselves and their livestock, repair wagons, and replenish supplies.

The Bents' Mexican trade grew rapidly as their caravans plied the route from Indepen-

dence and Westport to company stores in Santa Fe and Taos. There, goods like cloth, hardware, glass, and tobacco were exchanged for furs, silver, blankets, horses, and mules. Thousands of beaver pelts passed through the fort until the market for beaver declined in the late 1830s. After that, the Indian trade became the business mainstay. The fort's traders bartered American and Navajo blankets, axes, firearms, and other items for buffalo hides and horses taken in raids—no questions asked. The Bents' reputation made their traders welcome in most villages and drew growing numbers of Indians to the fort. Before long the company dominated the Indian trade on the southern plains.

In 1846, the fort (by then called Bent's Fort) was used for more than trading. Because the Bents were effective peacemakers with the tribes, their fort was headquarters for the Upper Platte and Upper Arkansas Indian Agency. It also became a military staging point for the United States' invasion of Mexico's northern provinces. Storerooms were filled with military supplies; some soldiers were quartered at the fort; military livestock stripped the land.

The military, and in later years, the growing stream of settlers and goldseekers disrupted the carefully nurtured Indian trade. The pas-

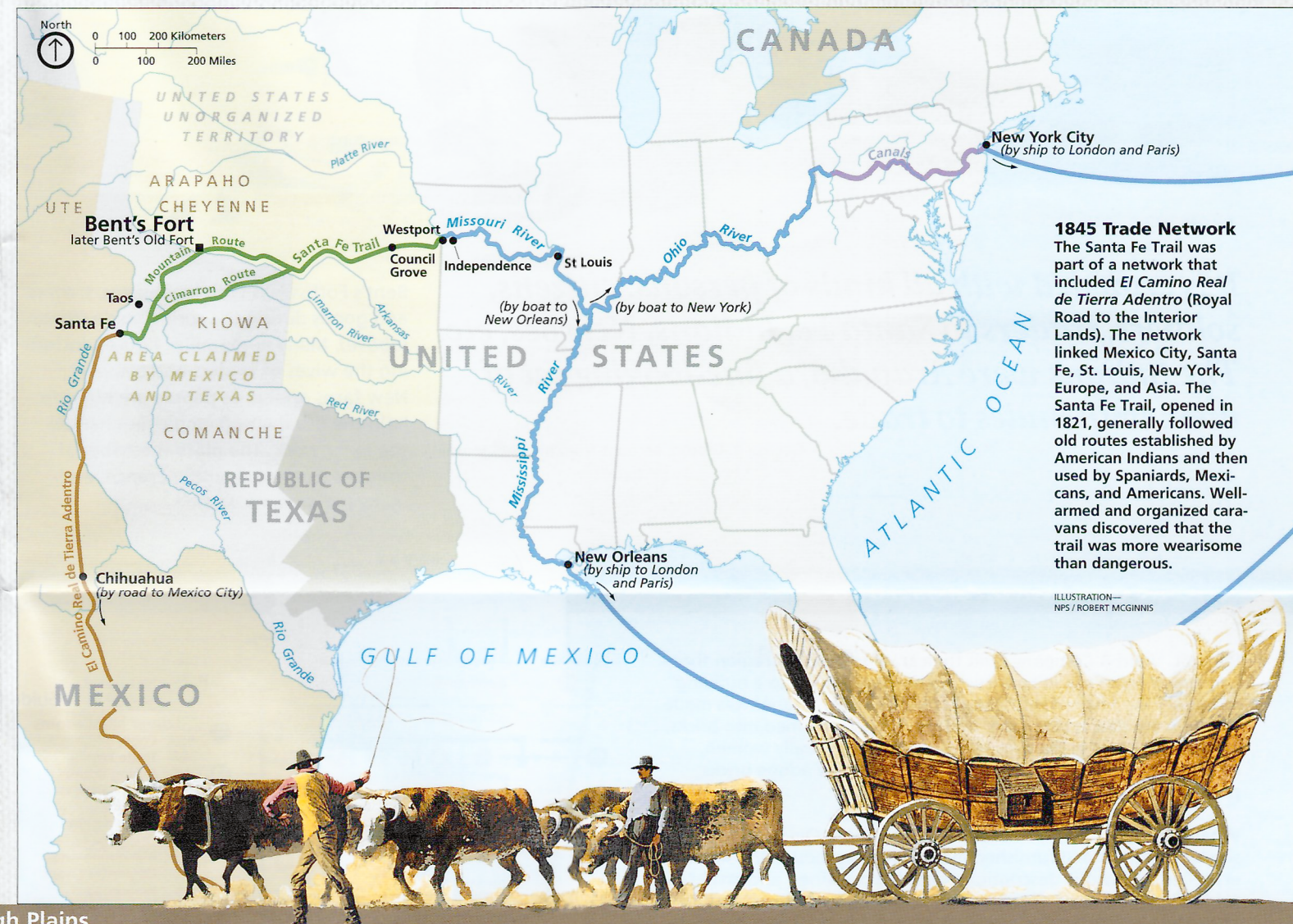
sage of these newcomers led to polluted water holes, decimated cottonwood groves, and declining bison. Trade was doomed by a cholera epidemic and escalating tensions between Indians and whites.

After Charles died in 1847, St. Vrain tried to sell the fort to the US Army. William Bent may have tried to burn the fort in 1849 before moving his trading houses 40 miles downriver to Big Timbers. He built Bent's New Fort there in 1853.

Bent's Old Fort was part of widespread change in the United States. The federal government had embraced Manifest Destiny, the belief that the United States had the right to expand across the continent. The company's influence with the Plains Indians and its political and social connections in Santa Fe helped pave the way for the occupation of the West and the annexation of Mexico's northern provinces. Its trade with Indians introduced a level of technology that irrevocably altered their culture. And the fort's immediate effects on the land and water were signs of wider environmental changes to come.

Right: Around 1830, oxen replaced mules on the Santa Fe Trail. They were slower, but cheaper and less likely to be stolen.

As the Santa Fe trade grew, traders also replaced Conestoga wagons (shown here) with larger, specialized rigs.



1845 Trade Network
The Santa Fe Trail was part of a network that included *El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro* (Royal Road to the Interior Lands). The network linked Mexico City, Santa Fe, St. Louis, New York, Europe, and Asia. The Santa Fe Trail, opened in 1821, generally followed old routes established by American Indians and then used by Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans. Well-armed and organized caravans discovered that the trail was more wearisome than dangerous.

ILLUSTRATION—NPS / ROBERT MCGINNIS

Bent, St. Vrain & Company

Charles and William Bent, sons of a St. Louis judge, were drawn to the Upper Missouri fur trade as young men. However, they sensed greater opportunities in the Southwest and led a caravan to Santa Fe in 1829. A year later



William Bent (1809–69)



Charles Bent (1799–1847)

Charles formed Bent, St. Vrain & Company with Ceran St. Vrain, an ex-trapper and Taos trader.



Owl Woman (*Mis-stan-star*) (?–1847)

Charles directed the Santa Fe trade, living in Taos and taking sea-



Ceran St. Vrain (1802–70)

sonal trips back to St. Louis. He married into a prominent Taos family and used his influence to smooth the way for American trade. In 1846, he was named Provisional Governor of New Mexico. Soon thereafter, he was murdered in Taos during an uprising of New Mexicans and Pueblo Indians.

William directed the Indian and trapping trade at the fort. He often lived with his Cheyenne wife Owl

Woman (*Mis-stan-star*) in her village, where he was known as Little White Man. William was largely responsible for the company's excellent reputation among the Indians.

St. Vrain ran the company's stores in Taos and Santa Fe. Like Charles he became a man of some importance in New Mexico, serving as American consul in Santa Fe in the mid-1830s.

Bent's Fort became known as a center of trade and an oasis on the vast high plains. Its reputation drew the adventurous, the scholarly, and the curious. Explorers, travelers, and journalists had a chance to stop here to observe the varied commerce and diverse cultures—and perhaps to meet famous guides like Kit Carson and Thomas Fitzpatrick.

Articulate travelers wrote of their experi-

ences. George Ruxton, an English writer and ex-soldier, described "leather-clad mountaineers" gambling away their pelts, Indians wrapped in buffalo robes leaning against the outside walls, and the fort's "striking appearance . . . on the vast and lifeless prairie." Adolph Wislizenus, a German-born doctor, left his Illinois practice to see the Rockies. He called the fort the

"finest and largest . . . we have seen on this journey." He foresaw the time when the "present narratives of mountain life may sound like fairy tales."

The Bents won the confidence of area Indians by seeking out their villages, offering plentiful trade goods, and trying to keep alcohol out of the trade. The Cheyenne often moved entire villages near the fort. William's marriage to Owl Woman (*Mis-stan-star*) helped



1845 peace talks between Cheyenne and Delaware in the fort's council room. Painting by Lt. James W. Abert.

cement good relations with the tribe.

Because of these good relations, the fort was the site of an 1835 peace council between the friendly

Cheyenne and Arapaho, and their old enemies the Pawnee. Organized by Colonel Henry Dodge, it was the first of several intertribal councils at the fort. The Bents

encouraged these talks, knowing that a stable trading environment was good for business.

The military presence became a fact of life in the fort's last years. We owe much of our knowledge of the fort's appearance to Lieutenant James W. Abert, a topographical engineer. In two stays at the fort in 1845 and 1846, he made many sketches of the structure and of the Indians who came here to trade.

Abert accompanied two of the fort's most famous visitors: Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny, who used the fort as an advance base for his invasion of New Mexico, and explorer John Charles Frémont. Frémont once wrote of being greeted at the post with "repeated discharges from the guns of the fort."

Typical goods that changed hands in the trade rooms included beaver pelts and buffalo robes, powder horns, tobacco, cloth and blankets, pipes, gunpowder, tools, dried foods, bells, and beads.

NPS

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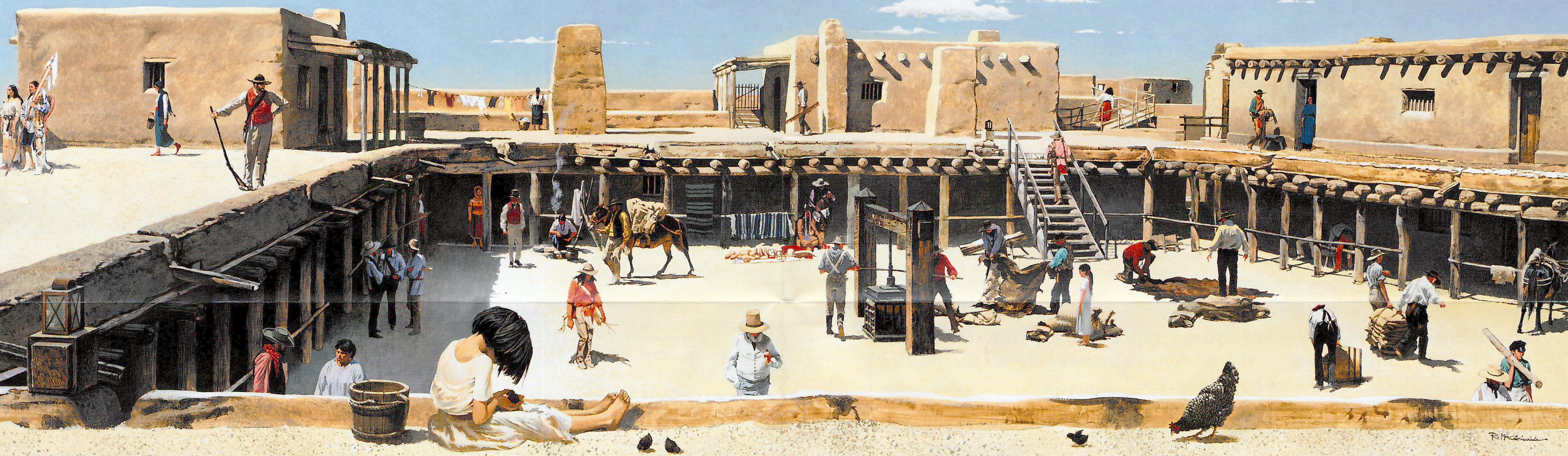
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It is crowded with all kinds of persons: citizens, soldiers, traders to Santa Fe, Indians, Negroes, etc. The Indians were Arapaho, a fine-looking set of men, with mules to trade.

—George R. Gibson, account from his 1846 journal

Bent's Fort swells with employees, traders, and goods during the spring trade season (above). Many are familiar figures, including the wives of traders and trappers. New faces appear as people are hired to help the usual 40–60 employees handle the extra work. The place is a babel of tongues: English, Spanish, French, and many Indian languages.

The buffalo hunt is ending and Indians bring in tanned robes that will be baled in the fur press (center of illustration). The Cheyenne and Arapaho, on good terms with the Bents, are no longer required to use the trading window in the fort's entry; they enter the fort and head for the main trade room.

Company traders are returning to the fort with even more buffalo robes, which they acquired in the Indian camps. Although the beaver trade is declining, a few die-hard French-Canadian and American trappers continue to arrive with their winter pelts. Some, like Kit Carson, have abandoned trapping to become guides and hunters, supplying the fort with buffalo meat.

Soon the furs, pelts, and robes are piled into wagons. They are destined for St. Louis and other distant cities.

ILLUSTRATIONS—NPS / ROBERT MCGINNIS

Life at a Cultural Crossroad

Bent, St. Vrain & Company built their trading fort in a region that had few trees to use in construction. So they turned to a building material long favored by Mexicans: adobe. This material was made on site from clay, water, sand, and straw. It was formed into bricks, which then dried in the sun. Mexican laborers, usually women, maintained the adobe plaster. With this care, the adobe bricks proved reasonably durable in the dry climate.

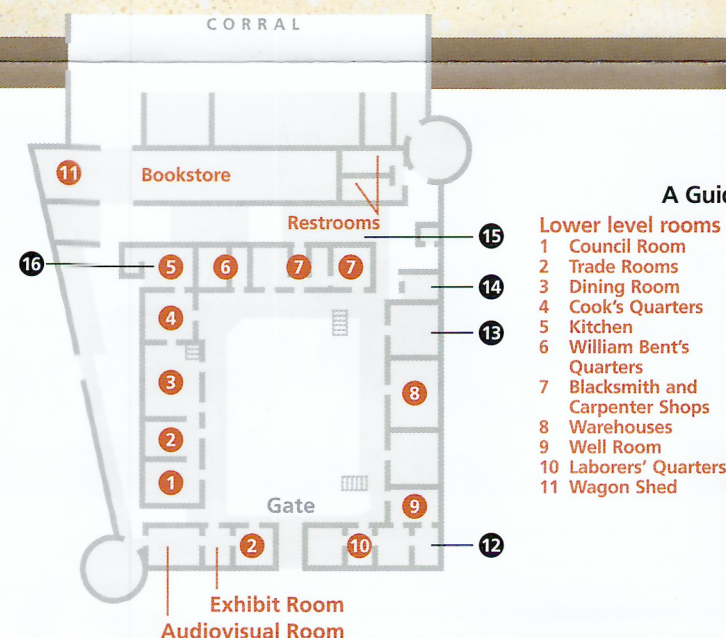
What you see today is a reconstruction of Bent's Old Fort, built with similar materials and furnished mostly with reproductions. Researchers relied on historic descriptions, detailed drawings, and archeological findings to ensure the appearance is close to that of the original. The most valuable of the drawings were those done by Lieutenant James Abert in 1845 and 1846.

The fort's no-nonsense appearance gave little indication of its role as a cultural crossroads. It was a stopping place for travelers from the East, an employer of Mexican laborers, a relaxation site for trappers and hunters, and a neutral ground for American Indian peace councils. Casual attitudes allowed for intermarriage and an easy mixing of groups at *fandangos* (dances).

People also intermixed freely in work areas and trade rooms.

Mexicans, Indians, and trappers could trade their furs and hides for goods ranging from blankets, cloth, iron wares, and powder to luxuries such as coffee, tobacco, brass rings and bracelets, and beads. Sometimes the terms of trade were agreed upon in the **council room**, which was also used as a parlor and for peace talks between tribes. The **blacksmith and carpenter shops** were other community focal points.

When it came to eating and sleeping, however, the stricter norms of the day were followed. The owners had their own quarters and they ate in the **dining room**, which was also the fort's largest room. They employed Mexican cooks, and the Bents also had their enslaved cook, Charlotte, brought from St. Louis. She lived in the **cook's quarters** between the dining room and the **kitchen**. From here she could quickly supply food



A Guide to the Fort

- Lower level rooms**
- 1 Council Room
 - 2 Trade Rooms
 - 3 Dining Room
 - 4 Cook's Quarters
 - 5 Kitchen
 - 6 William Bent's Quarters
 - 7 Blacksmith and Carpenter Shops
 - 8 Warehouses
 - 9 Well Room
 - 10 Laborers' Quarters
 - 11 Wagon Shed

- Upper level rooms**
- 12 Susan Magoffin's Quarters
 - 13 Trappers' and Hunters' Quarters
 - 14 Clerk's Quarters
 - 15 Billiard Room
 - 16 St. Vrain's Quarters

and drink while overseeing other domestic chores. Her husband and his brother, also enslaved, worked at the fort.

Mexican laborers from Santa Fe and Taos, who built and maintained the fort, had their own rooms in the ground level **laborers' quarters**. Craftsmen ate and

slept where they worked; Indians slept outside the fort; and trappers and hunters lived and ate together in the **trappers' and hunters' quarters**. Free trappers stayed only long enough to trade their goods and sample civilized life. Company hunters remained in the area to supply the fort with deer, buffalo, and

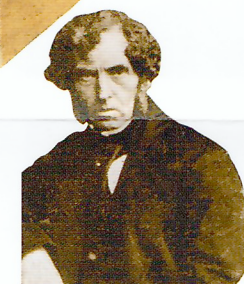
other meats. Most either cooked in their quarters or ate from a community cooking pot.

The few white women visiting the fort were given the best accommodations. **Susan Magoffin's quarters** offers a good example. Susan, wife of a prosperous trader, became ill on their

way to the fort. She suffered a miscarriage and was mostly confined to her room during her 12-day stay. Even so, in her diary she wrote that the fort "fills my idea of an ancient castle."



Susan Magoffin and her husband stayed at the fort while traveling the Santa Fe Trail.



Alexander Barclay, an Englishman, was the fort's manager from 1838 to 1842.



Lieutenant James Abert sketched a scene familiar in 1845, of a camp along the Arkansas River near Bent's Fort.

Visiting the Park

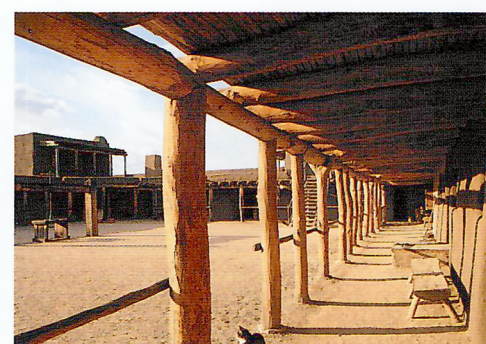
Begin your visit by viewing exhibits at the information kiosk near the parking lot. Then take a short walk to the fort where you can enjoy tours, programs, a film, and activities. For hours and to reserve group tours, call or visit the park website.



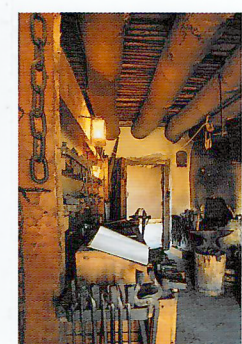
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The nonprofit Western National Parks Association sells books, postcards, and historical reproductions at the fort.

Accessibility
We strive to make our facilities, services, and programs accessible to all. Call or check our website for details.

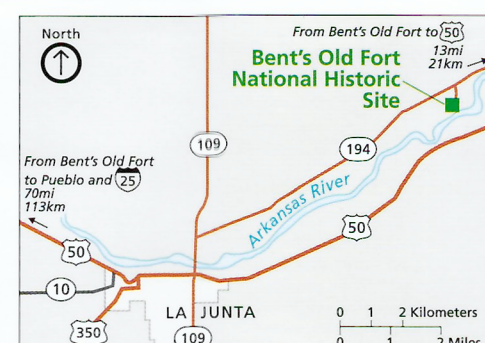


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For Your Safety
Watch your footing, and keep off walls.
• Pets must be on a leash; they are not allowed in fort rooms.
• Maintain a safe distance from animals.
• Report emergencies and safety hazards to park rangers.
• For firearms regulations check the park website.



Getting Here
The park is eight miles east of La Junta and 15 miles west of Las Animas on CO 194.

More Information
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site
35110 Highway 194
East La Junta, CO
81050-9523
719-383-5010
www.nps.gov/beol

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site is one of over 400 parks in the National Park System. To learn more about national parks, visit www.nps.gov.

National Park Foundation
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