Bent's Fort:

An Outpost for Cultural Exchange and Exploration of the West

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"The Indian trade - transplanted by Bent, St. Vrain, & Company . . . filled the vacuum of the central plains, irrevocably tied the Southwest to St. Louis, and so helped prepare the way for the final influx that would make the nation whole."[1]
-David Lavender

Bent's Fort stood from 1833 - 1849 as an essential post for western trade in the middle of the Santa Fe Trail. The adobe castle invited a rich mix of American, Mexican, and Native American peoples to exchange goods and consequently became a hub for the exchange of culture. The fort also accelerated the exploration of the West by proving it was possible to live and thrive in the wide open plains and serving as a base for westward movement.

The Santa Fe Trail and the Creation of the Fort

The Santa Fe Trail was an 800-mile dirt path that flowed through the great plains of the American West, extending from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico.[2] Opened in 1821, it formed a link to valuable trade outposts in Mexican territory, providing a pathway for trade with Indian tribes occupying the vast land.[3] By the late 1840s nearly five thousand wagons a year made the journey.[4] No major settlements existed along the route until 1833 brought the establishment of the fort that overshadowed all others of the time:[5] Bent's Fort, "an adobe empire that shaped the destiny of the American Southwest."[6]

The fur trade drove much of the traffic on the Santa Fe Trail. The fur-trade period was romantic, filled with tales of spirited mountain men braving the western wilderness.[7] In the

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[1] David Lavender, *Bent's Fort* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1972), 110.
[2] Melvin Bacon and Daniel Blegen, *Bent's Fort: Crossroads of Cultures on the Santa Fe Trail* (Palmer Lake, CO: Filter Press LLC, 2002), 9.
[3] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, self-guided tour, La Junta, CO, 3 January 2016.
[4] Bacon and Blegen, 13.
[5] Arthur J. Fynn, "Fur and Forts of the Rocky Mountain West," *Colorado Magazine,* March 1932, 51.
[6] Lavender, 12.
[7] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," YouTube video, 28:19, posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS," June 4, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq35mc_IxWc&list=PLd1csdWoPwT6Jx9H1F1QOQEHKEVLTXEq4&index=2. Accessed 21 December 2015.

1830s, buffalo hides were the highest-demand, and trappers began to see trade with Native Americans as the best way to obtain them.

One man was especially intrigued by Indian trade: William Wells Bent.[8] William, born 1809, and his brother, Charles, born 1799, grew up in St. Louis, Missouri, a town "born facing west" consisting of shops filled with Indians, Negroes, Spaniards, Canadian trappers, and American hunters trading side by side, foreshadowing the variety to come at Bent's Fort.[9] The boys were inspired by wild tales of western trapping, and in the early 1820s, Charles entered the fur-trade business, trapping for a private company. William followed in his footsteps, and the two became experienced trappers and travelers. By 1827, the declining beaver-trade left Charles unemployed, bankrupt, and, after his father's death, responsible for William. Taking a risk, he turned towards New Mexican trade.[10] He and William led their first wagon train from St. Louis to Santa Fe in 1828. In the following years, Charles completed multiple trips, becoming one of the most accomplished and knowledgeable travelers and traders of the Santa Fe Trail.[11]

Meanwhile in Taos, a trading town near Santa Fe, a Frenchman and acquaintance of the Bents', Ceran St. Vrain, had established himself as a prominent trader. After numerous trips, Charles pursued partnership with St. Vrain: he would manage transportation of goods and Ceran would run Taos trade. Ceran agreed, and in 1830, Bent, St. Vrain, & Co. was established. The first year was a success: business flourished and the system proved very efficient.[12]

[8] Bacon and Blegen, 20.
[9] Lavender, 21.
[10] Lavender, 88-89.
[11] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[12] Lavender, 134.

As Charles initiated his business venture, William joined an independent trapping group in the winter of 1829.[13] It was during this time that he first encountered a group of Cheyennes along the Arkansas River. Out of kindness, he hid them from Comanche enemies, bonding with the Cheyenne tribe and unknowingly planting a seed that would influence the growth of the United States.[14] William became fixated with Indian trade, traveling between camps and bartering for goods. He built a headquarters stockade at Fountain Creek near modern day Pueblo, Colorado, where he stored merchandise and allowed customers to seek him out. By 1832, the growing business could support more imported goods. William described the opportunity to Charles, and the idea for a powerful central fort bloomed.

In the summer of 1832, the brothers and Cheyenne chief Yellow Wolf selected a location on the U.S./Mexico boundary.[15] Thirty miles above the Cheyenne meeting place, Big Timbers, the location considered traffic on the Santa Fe trail, trade potential with the Cheyenne, Ute, Kiowa, Arapaho, Pawnee, Comanche, and Apache, and the roaming grounds of more distant tribes; it was in the heartland of the plains (see Appendix I).[16] Around 100 Mexicans hired from Taos built the adobe fort.[17] On November 12, 1833, the completion of the largest structure between Missouri and the Pacific[18] was appropriately announced by a meteor shower: "Like an explosion of meteors on an autumn night, Bent's Fort would light the vast prairie, changing it forever."[19]

[13] Ibid., 111.
[14] Lavender, 128 - 129.
[15] Ibid., 138 - 139.
[16] Enid Thompson, "Life in an Adobe Castle," *Colorado Magazine,* Fall, 1977, 11.
[17] Lavender, 148.
[18] Bacon and Blegen, 24.
[19] Ibid., 27.

At the Heart of the Plains: The Exchange of Goods and Cultures

As Charles connected with eastern manufacturers and sent goods down the trail and St. Vrain handled Taos trade, William managed the fort. A "cosmopolitan feel of trade, politics, and society"[20] evolved. Between 1834 and 1849, a staggering variety of people made the fort a hub for cultural exchange. At any time the languages of Cheyenne, Comanche, English, French, Sioux, Spanish, and Ute were heard.[21] Occasionally the list included even German, Russian, Apache, or Navajo. These languages and the people who spoke them "wove together in a rich tapestry held together by the universal sign language of the plains."[22]

Trade motivated the gathering: people of different cultures exchanging goods from all over the world created an opportunity to access new and exciting things and encounter new ideas. In exchange for buffalo hides or horses,[23] Indians could attain manufactured items holding the power to revolutionize their lives, such as guns, powder, flints, knives, kettles, pots, brass, wire, and beads. Traders visited more distant tribes laden with goods.[24] Additionally, the fort served as a transfer point for trade with Santa Fe. For Mexican gold, silver, and mules, American traders offered imported rum and alcohol stills, clothing, sugar, coffee, rice, tea, and domestic items.[25] The market was elevated further to a global scale with the importation of such goods from Europe and Asia.[26]

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[20] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."
[21] Bacon and Blegen, 28.
[22] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."
[23] Joseph Jablow, *The Cheyenne in the Plains Indian Trade Relations, 1795 - 1840* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1950), 67.
[24] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[25] Thompson, 17.
[26] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," Posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."

The lure of trade inevitably invited the pool of cultures to mix. A visiting soldier journaled that the language variety was "'a perfect Babel of a place not only from heterogeneousness of tongues but from differences of character assembled. We had all sorts from polished gentlemen down to the rough daring man of the mountains. As well as the untamed savage.'"[27] The fort's employees consisted of nearly 100 men and women, including many nationalities and professions, from American and French clerks to Mexican herders.[28] The inhabitants fostered cultural exchange, especially because color, race, and religion had no significant impact on social standing at the fort. Charlotte Green, the Bent's slave cook, and Jim Beckwourth, a black mountain man, were held in high regard. At Bent's Fort, people of all classes and colors were included in daily "yarn spinning" (storytelling), and gambling, forming bonds between peoples of different heritage.[29] Mexican and Indian cooking styles were incorporated in the fort's meals.[30] The best example of cultural and societal union are the accounts of the nightly dances: Lewis Gerrard, a fort-visitor, wrote, "Such a medley of steps is seldom seen . . . the halting, irregular march of the war dance, the slipping gallopade, the boisterous pitching of the Missouri backwoodsman, and the more nice gyrations of the Frenchman - for all, irrespective of rank, age, and *color*, went pellmell into the excitement."[31]

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[27] George Rutledge Gibson, "A Journal of a Soldier Under Kearny and Doniphan," 1846 - 1847, File 9 Box 1, Bent's Fort Collection (MSS #55), Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1994.
[28] Nolie Mumey, *Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West: Bent's Old Fort and Bent's New Fort on the Arkansas River: Volume 1* (Denver, CO: Artcraft Press, 1956), 42.
[29] Bacon and Blegen, 34.
[30] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[31] Lewis Gerard, *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail*, Primary Sources on Bent's Old Fort 1828 - 1949: prepared for State Historical Society of Colorado by Gene M. Gressley, Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1953.

Instances of interracial marriage were another prominent method of cultural crossing with the frequent coupling of white workers and Mexican or Indian women.[32] Marriage into a tribe offered company to lonely travelers and, more importantly, served a sounder method of forming relationships than offering copious amounts of alcohol (in his journal, Colonel Henry Dodge noted the Indians were "very fond of whiskey, and will sell their horses, blankets, and everything else they possess for a drink of it"[33]).[34] William Bent himself married a Cheyenne by the name of Owl Woman, and after her death married her sister, Yellow Woman. He made an effort to foster both cultures through his children, a perfect example of the type of cultural exchange that could occur.[35] It was not uncommon for lonely white traders to take Indian wives and have children with them, simultaneously benefitting tribal trade relations.[36]

Peace between cultures was another objective for William and his fort, both between tribes and between Mexicans and Indians.[37] Keeping good relations with the Indians was essential for business, but also demonstrated William's respect for the plains people.[38] He kept on good terms with the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and their enemies, the Kiowas, Comanches, and Apaches, overseeing trade with both sides at the fort.[39] William facilitated numerous intertribal councils and peace talks at the fort, the first between the Cheyenne and Arapaho and their old enemies, the Pawnee, in 1835.[40] Lieutenant James W. Abert, present for a

[32] Lavender, 177.
[33] Henry Dodge, "Colonel Henry Dodge Journal," 1835, Primary Sources on Bent's Old Fort 1828 - 1949: prepared for State Historical Society of Colorado by Gene M. Gressley, Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1953.
[34] Lavender, 185.
[35] F 50 B 2, Bent's Fort Collection (MSS #55), Library of the Colorado Historical Society. Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1994.
[36] Thompson, 20.
[37] Mumey, 57.
[38] Thompson, 15.
[39] Jablow, 66.
[40] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

later talk in 1845, noted how the Indians and whites negotiated frontier style: seated on buffalo robes on the council chamber's dirt floor.[41] George F. Ruxton, another visitor, journaled (with spelling errors) a similar scene during a peace talk in 1847: "Chiefs of the Shain, Kioway, and Arpaho, sit in solemn conclave with the head traders, and smoke the 'calument' over their real and imaginary grievances . . . over clouds of tobacco and kinnik-kinnik, these grave affairs are settled and terms arranged."[42]

Symbol of Manifest Destiny: Exploration of the Western Frontier

Bent's Fort played a significant role in the American movement to explore and expand to the West. Following Texas (annexed 1845), President Polk's call for acquisition of California and Oregon in the name of Manifest Destiny boosted momentum for Americanization of the plains, turning heads towards Bent's Fort.[43] The Bents had "built a vast mud castle that Mexico came to fear . . . There was reason. For here was the spearhead of American expansion to the Southwest."[44] Before the U.S. declared war on Mexico in 1846, general Stephen Watts Kearny's Army of the West advanced down the trail, stopping at Bent's Fort to restock supplies and reconvene.[45] As the war progressed, William Bent provided guides and relayed information that later convinced Kearny to continue his expedition to California after he annexed all of New Mexico.[46] At about the same time, John C. Frémont led an expedition to survey California, or, as he states in his journal, "of the prairie region southward,"[47] and Lieutenant J.W. Abert ventured

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[41] Thompson, 15.
[42] George F. Ruxton, "Life in the Far West," 1847 - 1848, Primary Sources on Bent's Old Fort 1828 - 1949: prepared for State Historical Society of Colorado by Gene M. Gressley, Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1953.
[43] Lavender, 260-261.
[44] Ibid., 11.
[45] Bacon and Blegen, 44-45.
[46] Lavender, 282.
[47] John C. Fremont, *Memoirs of my Life* (1886), Volume I, 426, F 9 B 1, Bent's Fort Collection (MSS #55), Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1994.

to survey disputed land in the present-day Oklahoma panhandle; both utilized the fort.[48] After leaving Bent's Fort, Kearny's troops took Santa Fe[49] in a quick, nearly-bloodless encounter, and "once the way was prepared, New Mexico, Arizona, and California were inevitably lost." The frontier leapfrogged past the fort, a crucial post for the physical invasion of the West.[50]

The fort symbolized American civilization in the western wilderness.[51] In the 1830s, only a few daring visionaries thought of continental expansion because the plains were thought to be for barbaric Indians, uninhabitable by white men.[52] The Bent's and their adobe empire inspired a new way of thinking: one could live, survive, and even thrive in the "golden glow of the West."[53] The Bent's and St. Vrain were pathbreakers themselves and their fort sheltered more well-known pathbreakers - Kit Carson, Jim Beckwourth, Old Bill Williams, and more- as they opened up the Southwest.[54] Their explorations led to settlement,[55] earning them the title of the real pioneers of the West.[56]

The company's influence with the Plains Indians and its social and political connections in Santa Fe helped initiate New Mexico's annexation and a U.S. presence in the West.[57] The fort was the first hand of American commerce in that part of the country,[58] accelerating the exploration and Americanization of the area in the 30s and 40s.[59] In his journal, George F. Ruxton described it as "very striking, standing as it does hundreds of miles from any settlement,

[48] Lavender, 262.
[49] Bacon and Blegen, 52.
[50] Lavender, 11.
[51] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[52] Lavender, 165.
[53] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."; Lavender, 46.
[54] Ibid., 11.
[55] Mumey, 1.
[56] Fynn, 57.
[57] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[58] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."
[59] Thompson, 25.

on the vast and lifeless prairie . . . the solitary stranger passing this lone fort, feels proudly secure when he comes withing the sight of the 'stars and stripes' which float above the walls"[60] (see Appendix II). "Outpost of manifest destiny" is a grand and fitting title for Bent's Fort. A catalyst for change, it ushered the idea for expansion to the Pacific. It is possible that without the fort and its connections, western expansion and the Mexican boundary would have evolved differently, or perhaps not at all. An essential jumping off point for expansion on the southwestern edge of the American frontier, it offered a way for the country to explore even farther west.[61] The fort's significance proved "bigger than its purpose, its functions, or its personalities. The fort had a profound effect on the westward movement. In fifteen short years, the entire frontier passed through its gates: trappers, traders, merchants, an army of conquest, gold seekers, ranchers, and finally farmers."[62]

Last Days and Legacy

The war with Mexico (1846 - 1848) initiated the undoing of the fort. Supplies meant for troops in Santa Fe piled up at the fort,[63] and the constant flow of supply wagons disrupted normal business.[64] The war excited the raiding spirit of many tribes, increasing the frequency of aggression.[65] The flood of emigrants and army trains also angered the Plains Indians because the buffalo were scared off and killed.[66] Tensions rose, the U.S. looked to police the plains, and the chaotic conditions hurt Indian trade.[67]

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[60] Ruxton, continued.
[61] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."
[62] Thompson, 25.
[63] Lavender, 288.
[64] Bacon and Blegen, 57.
[65] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[66] Lavender, 319.
[67] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

At one point, St. Vrain offered the fort to the government for $15,000 (the offer was declined) without consulting William, straining their relationship. In 1848, Ceran lost interest and turned over his share to William.[68] The War Department was still considering purchasing the fort, and William could have made a hefty sum, but he adamantly refused to sell for sentimental reasons.[69]

Indian trade declined with over-hunting of buffalo and an outbreak of cholera[70] when the 1849 California gold rush brought a tide of whites,[71] spreading the "Big Cramps" across the plains.[72] The epidemic extinguished half the Southern Cheyennes within weeks. With the Indian trade damaged beyond repair, the fort could no longer support itself. On August 21, 1849, "the death boom of the prairie's greatest feudal empire split the evening sky."[73] William Bent supposedly refused to let the army or Indians take over his monumental fortress and burned it to the ground himself.[74]

This mysterious termination is also somewhat tragic: the westward expansion facilitated by the fort ultimately led to the end of the peaceful era it created with the relocation of the Cheyenne and Arapaho.[75] "The ground in the vicinity of the old fort is a cemetery in which lies the bones of the Indians of both sexes and all ages; of trappers, traders, and adventurers, emigrants and American soldiers."[76]

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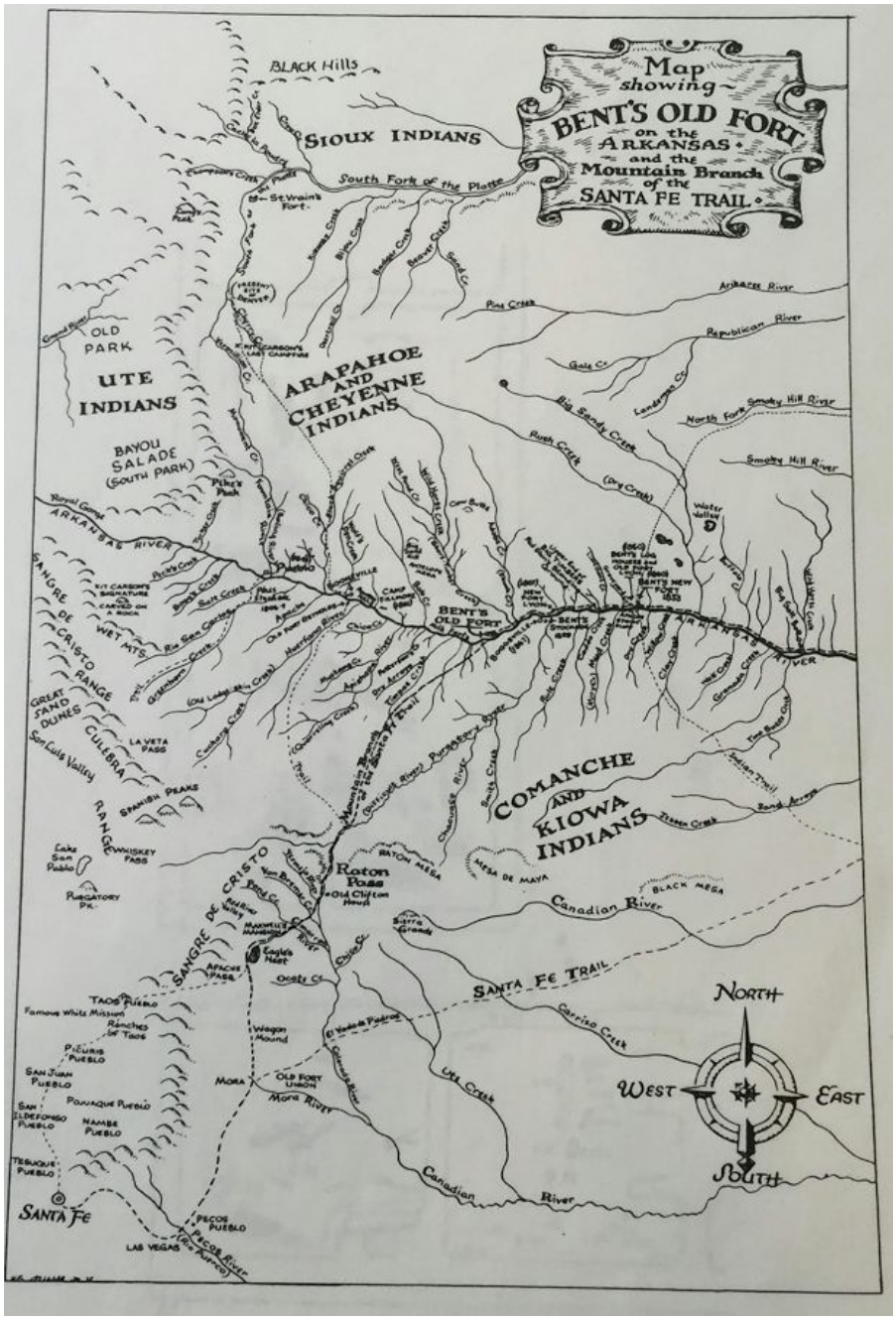
[68] Bacon and Blegen, 59.
[69] Lavender, 335.
[70] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.
[71] Lavender, 336.
[72] Thompson, 337.
[73] Lavender, 339.
[74] Bacon and Blegen, 60.
[75] "Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort," posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS."
[76] "An Historical Outpost - Old Fort Bent," The *Trail,* September 1924: 4, F23 B 1, Bent's Fort Collection (MSS #55), Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1994.

In 1976, the fort was reconstructed by the National Park Service using archaeological excavations, diaries, and original sketches. The reconstruction allows Bent's Fort to maintain a legacy of exploration as a place where visitors can fully immerse themselves in the past and explore what it was like to be at the adobe fortress which once stood as America's first stronghold for exploration and exchange in the Great Plains of the West.[77]

[77] Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site.

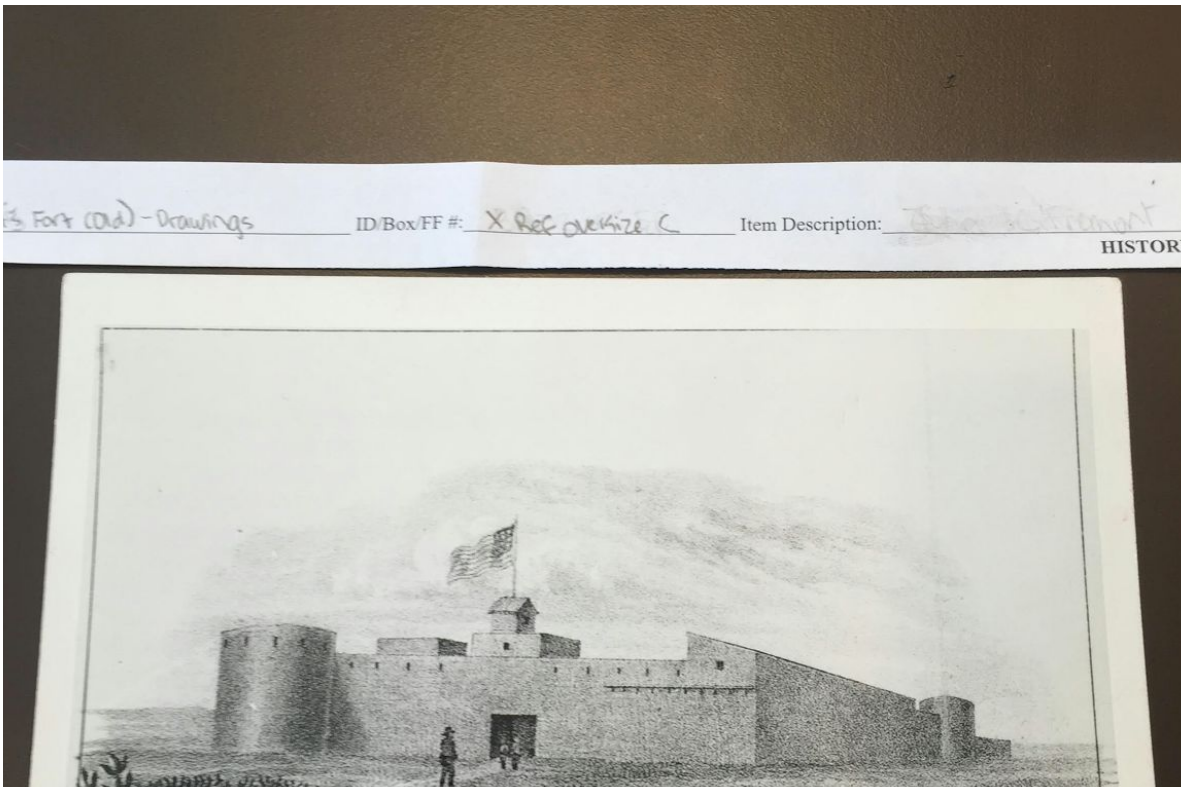
Appendix I



Map showing Bent's Fort in relation to Plains Indian tribes.

Miller Jr., Harry G. *Map showing Bent's Old Fort on the Arkansas and the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail.* 1954. X Ref Oversize C, Bent's Fort (Old) - Drawings, Library State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, CO.

Appendix II



An original drawing of the castle on the plains by Lieutenant J.W. Abert in 1845.

Abert, James W. *Bent's Fort.* 1845. X Ref Oversize C, Bent's Fort (Old) - Drawings. Library State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, CO.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Abert, James W. *Bent's Fort.* 1845. X Ref Oversize C, Bent's Fort (Old) - Drawings. Library State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, CO.

An original drawing by fort visitor and topographical artist J.W. Abert gives a visual to the many descriptions of the adobe castle on the plains.

Bent's Fort Collection (MSS #55). Library of the Colorado Historical Society. Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1994.

History Colorado provides a collection of journal entries, articles, and other primary source material regarding Bent's Fort. The paper quotes first-hand accounts found in this collection multiple times. It was also used to gain insight about the fort from authentic, original accounts.

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, self-guided tour. La Junta, CO. 3 January 2016.

This recreation of Bent's Old Fort was used to gain general knowledge of the fort through a self-guided tour (with a printed guide). It offered an immersive experience that brought to life the topic in study and deepened the level of understanding life at the fort.

Fynn, Arthur J. "Fur and forts of the Rocky Mountain West." *Colorado Magazine,* March, 1932. Accessed 9 January 2016. http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Researchers/ColoradoMagazine_v9n2_March1932.pdf

The State Historical Society of Colorado's *Colorado Magazine* contains hundreds of articles about significant historical events and people in Colorado's history. This article discussed the importance of Bent's Fort, especially in comparison to other, smaller forts that existed during the same time.

Miller Jr., Harry G. *Map showing Bent's Old Fort on the Arkansas and the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail.* 1954. X Ref Oversize C, Bent's Fort (Old) - Drawings, Library State Historical Society of Colorado, Denver, CO.

This 1954 map provides a visual representation of where Bent's Fort stood in relation to the many Plains Indians tribes. It clearly shows how the location of the fort provided access to trade with many different peoples.

Primary Sources on Bent's Old Fort 1828 - 1949: prepared for State Historical Society of Colorado by Gene M. Gressley. Library of the Colorado Historical Society, Denver, CO: Colorado Historical Society, 1953.

A collection of journal entries, articles, and other primary source material collected for the State Historical Society of Colorado by Gene M. Gressley offers a convenient, narrowed-down collection of particularly

informative pieces. The paper quotes journal entries from this collection multiple times. It was also used to gain a general understanding of the fort and related topics through first-hand accounts.

Thompson, Enid. "Life in an adobe castle, 1833 - 1849." *Colorado Magazine,* Fall, 1977. Accessed 9 January 2016. http://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/files/Researchers/ColoradoMagazine_v54n4_Fall1977.pdf

This essay by Enid Thompson was especially helpful because of the way it was written. It is a brief publication that focuses on the historical significance and points of importance of the fort, and was used as one of the main references to write this paper.

Secondary Sources

Bacon, Melvin, and Daniel Blegen. *Bent's Fort: Crossroads of Cultures on the Santa Fe Trail.* Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press, 1995.

Bacon and Blegen present a well-organized history of the fort, incorporating illustrations and references to primary sources throughout. This publication was used as a starting point and backbone for research.

"Bent's Fort: Colorado's First Trade Center." History Colorado, http://exhibits.historycolorado.org/bentsfort/bents_home.html. Accessed 9 December 2015.

This online exhibit by History Colorado was used to explore the daily life at the fort. It is a creative, interactive website that offered many visuals and animations to present the information in an interesting way that made it a useful reference point to compare with other sources.

"Colorado Experience: Bent's Fort." YouTube video, 28:19. Posted by "Rocky Mountain PBS," June 4, 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mq35mc_IxWc&list=PLd1csdWoPwT6Jx9H1F1QOQEHKEVLTXEq4&index=2. Accessed 21 December 2015.

This episode of Colorado Experience was used to examine the significance of the fort in a broader context with the statements of historical experts. It offered many powerful quotes and ideas about the grand importance of the fort.

Jablow, Joseph. *The Cheyenne in Plains Indian Trade Relations, 1795-1840*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 1950.

Jablow explains in great detail the Cheyenne people and their involvement in the plains trade. In this paper, it was used especially to examine the role of peacemaking between tribes that William and Bent's Fort played.

Lavender, David. *Bent's Fort.* Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1972.

The longest and most detailed source used in the research process, Lavender's book provides a detailed account of the history of the fort, it's makers, and all events relating to the fort. It was one of the main sources used to compose this paper.

Mumey, Nolie. *Old Forts and Trading Posts of the West: Bent's Old Fort and Bent's New Fort on the Arkansas River: Volume 1.* Denver, CO: Artcraft Press, 1956.

Nolie Mumey offers another publication describing the life of the fort used to cross-reference facts and provide general information. The book also includes many excerpts of journal entries and letters to present information from primary sources, though none were directly incorporated into the paper.