

**The Great Prairie Highway**

The Santa Fe Trail stirs imaginations as few other historic trails can. For 60 years, the Trail was one thread in a web of international trade routes. It influenced economies as far away as New York and London. Spanning 900 miles of the Great Plains between the United States (Missouri) and Mexico (Santa Fe), it brought together a cultural mosaic of individuals who cooperated, and sometimes clashed. In the process, the rich and varied cultures of

Great Plains Indian peoples caught in the middle were changed forever. Soldiers used the Trail during the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War, 1840s border disputes between the Republic of Texas and Mexico, and America's Civil War, and troops policed conflicts between traders and Indian tribes. With the traders and military freighters tramped a curious company of gold-seekers, emigrants, adventurers, mountain men, hunters, American Indians, guides, packers, translators,

invalids, reporters, and Mexican children bound for schools in *Los Estados Unidos* (the United States). rule. With independence, they unlocked the gates of trade, using the Santa Fe Trail as the key. Encouraged by Mexican officials, the Santa Fe trade boomed, strengthening and linking the economies of Missouri and Mexico's northern provinces. The close of the Civil War in 1865 released America's industrial energies, and the railroad pushed westward, gradually shortening and then replacing the Santa Fe Trail.

**M**ovies and books often romanticize Santa Fe Trail treks as sagas of constant peril, replete with violent prairie storms, fights with Indians, and thundering buffalo (bison) herds. In fact, a glimpse of buffalo, elk, antelope (pronghorn), or prairie dogs was sometimes the only break in the tedium of 8-week journeys. Trail travelers mostly experienced dust, mud, gnats and mos-

quitos, and heat. But, occasional swollen streams, wildfires, hailstorms, strong winds, or blizzards could imperil wagon trains. grazed the teams, hauled water, gathered wood or buffalo chips for fuel, and cooked and ate the day's main meal, from a monotonous daily ration of 1 lb. of flour, 1 lb. or so of sowbelly (bacon), 1 oz. of coffee, 2 oz. of sugar, and a pinch of salt. Beans, dried apples, or buffalo or other game were occasional treats. Crews then repaired their wagons, yokes, and harnesses; greased wagon wheels; doctored

animals; and hunted. They moved on soon after noon, fording streams before that night's stop because overnight storms could turn trickling creeks into torrents. And stock that was cold in the harness first thing in the morning tended to be unruly. At day's end, crews took care of the animals, made necessary repairs, chose night guards, and enjoyed a few hours of well-earned leisure and sleep.

**W**estward from Missouri, forests—and then tall-grass prairie—give way to shortgrass prairie in Kansas. In western Kansas, roughly at the Hundredth Meridian, semi-arid conditions develop. For Trail travelers, venturing into the unknown void of the plains could hold the fear of hardship or the promise of adventure. Long days traveling through seemingly endless expanses of tall and shortgrass prairie, with a few narrow ribbons of trees along waterways, evoked vivid descriptions. "In spring, the vast plain

Deceptively empty of human presence as the prairie landscape might appear, the lands the Trail passed through were the long-held homelands of many American Indian peoples. Here were the hunting grounds of the Comanches, Kiowas, southern bands of Cheyennes and Arapahos, and Plains Apaches as well as the homelands of the Osages, Kansas (Kaw), Jicarilla Apaches, Utes, and Pueblos. Most early encounters were peaceful negotiations centering on access to tribal lands and trade in horses, mules, and other items that Indians, Mexicans, and Americans coveted. As Trail traffic

increased, so did confrontations—resulting from misunderstandings and conflicting values—that disrupted traditional American Indian lifeways and Trail traffic. Mexican and American troops provided escorts for wagon trains. Growing numbers of Trail travelers and settlers moved west, bringing the railroad with them. As lands were parceled out and the buffalo were hunted nearly to extinction, Indian peoples were pushed aside or assigned to reservations.

controlled conflicts between American Indians and Trail travelers. As the military presence grew, freighting and merchant operations burgeoned. In 1858, many of the 1,800 wagons traveling the Santa Fe Trail carried military supplies. In 1862, the Civil War arrived in the West. Confederates from Texas pushed up the Rio Grande Valley into New Mexico, intent on seizing the territory and Fort Union, and ultimately the rich Colorado gold

fields. Albuquerque and Santa Fe fell. But the tide turned at Glorieta Pass, New Mexico, on the Santa Fe Trail, in the most decisive western battle of the Civil War. Union forces secured victory when they torched the nearby Confederate supply train. The Confederates abandoned hope of reaching Fort Union—and of keeping their foothold in New Mexico. The Union Army held the Southwest and its vital Santa Fe Trail supply line.

The story of the Santa Fe Trail is a story of business—international, national, and local. In 1821, William Becknell, bankrupt and facing jail for debts, packed goods to Santa Fe and made a profit. Entrepreneurs and experienced business people followed—James Webb, Antonio José Chávez, Charles Beaubien, David Waldo, and others.

New Mexico extended connections to New York, London, and Paris. Traders exploited social and legal systems to facilitate business. Partnerships such as Goldstein, Bean, Peacock & Armijo formed and dissolved. David Waldo "converted" to Catholicism—and also became a Mexican citizen. Dr. Eugene Leitensdorfer, of Missouri, married Soledad Abreu, daughter of a former New Mexico governor. Trader Manuel Alvarez claimed citizenship in Spain, the United States, and Mexico.

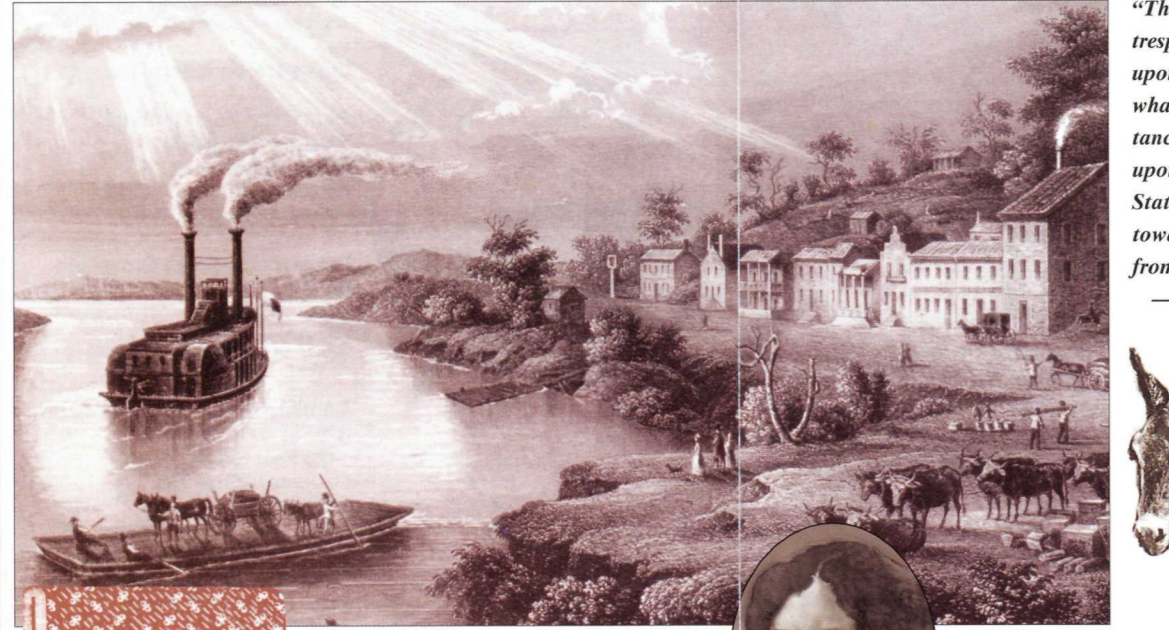
After the Mexican-American War, Trail trade and military freighting boomed. Both firms and individuals—such as Russell, Majors and Waddell, Otero and Sellar, and Vicente Romero—obtained and subcontracted lucrative government contracts. Others operated mail and stagecoach services. Trade created other opportunities. From New York, Manuel Harmony shipped English goods to Independence for freighting over the Santa Fe Trail. New Mexican saloon-owner Doña Gertrudis "La Tules" Barceló invested in trade, and trad-

er Charles Ilfeld ran mercantile stores. Wyandotte Chief William Walker leased a warehouse in Independence, and his tribe invested in the trade. Hiram Young bought his freedom from slavery and became a wealthy maker of trade wagons—and one of the largest employers in Independence. Blacksmiths, hotel owners, *arrieros* (muleteers), lawyers, and many others found their places along the Trail. Trade flourished. In 1822, trade totaled \$15,000; by 1860, \$3.5 million, or more than \$53 million in today's dollars.

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**Santa Fe Trail Timeline**

- Pre-1540** American Indians establish trade and travel routes that later become part of Santa Fe Trail.
- 1540-1541** Francisco Vázquez de Coronado explores from Mexico to Quivira (Kansas).
- 1601** Juan de Oñate spends 5 months traveling with wagons and artillery through Plains.
- 1739** Paul and Peter Mallet make first French trading venture to Santa Fe from Illinois country.
- 1792** Frenchman Pedro Vial travels from Santa Fe to St. Louis for Spanish government.
- 1819** Financial panic creates need for hard currency in Missouri Territory. Adams-Onís Treaty between U.S. and Spain makes Arkansas River international boundary.
- 1821** Mexico wins independence from Spain. William Becknell's party from Missouri is welcomed in Santa Fe.
- 1825** Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri (right) arranges for U.S. Government to survey Trail.
- 1833-1834** William and Charles (left) Bent and Cerán St. Vrain build Bent's Fort.
- 1836** Texas wins independence from Mexico.
- 1844** Trader Josiah Gregg chronicles his trips over Trail in *Commerce of the Prairies*.
- 1846** U.S. invades Mexico.
- 1848** War ends. United States acquires almost half of Mexico's lands (including New Mexico) in Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (left).
- 1849-1852** California Gold Rush increases Trail traffic.
- 1851** Fort Union is established to help protect Trail commerce.
- 1861-1865** U.S. Civil War. 1862 battle at Glorieta Pass holds Southwest for Union.
- 1869** Trail grows shorter as railroads push westward.
- 1878** Railroad reaches Ratón Pass on Mountain Route.
- 1880** Railroad reaches Santa Fe; Santa Fe Trail slips into history.
- 1906** The Daughters of the American Revolution begins erecting Trail markers.
- 1986** Santa Fe Trail Association forms to help preserve and promote awareness and appreciation of Trail.
- 1987** Congress designates Santa Fe Trail under National Trails System Act.

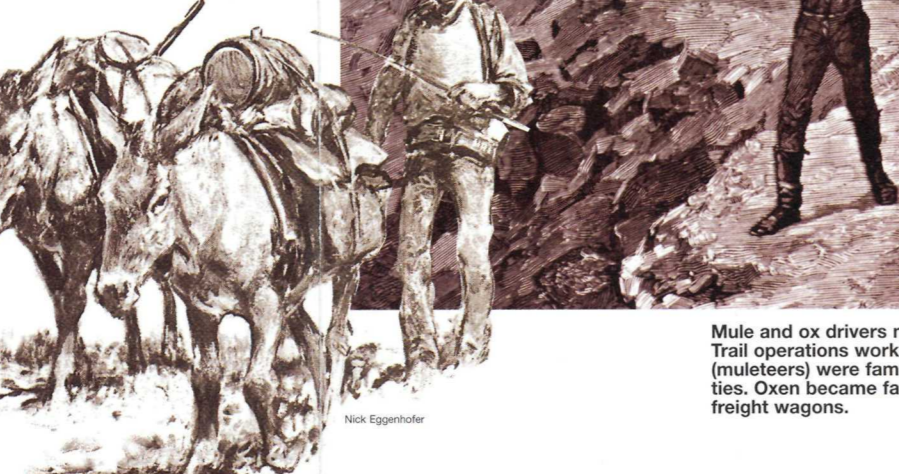


In 1821, the eastern terminus was Franklin, Missouri; by 1832, Independence, Missouri; and by 1845, here at Westport Landing (now Kansas City, Missouri). Textiles and hardware were traded west; silver and mules were traded east.

Emily Fisher's Independence Hotel catered to trail travelers.

*"The road . . . contemplated will trespass upon the soil or infringe upon the jurisdiction of no state whatever. It runs a course and a distance to avoid all that; for it begins upon the outside line of the outside State [Missouri] and runs directly toward the setting sun, far away from all the States."*

—Sen. Thomas Hart Benton, 1825



Mule and ox drivers made day-to-day Trail operations work. Mexican *arrieros* (muleteers) were famous for their abilities. Oxen became favored to pull freight wagons.

*"The whole distance from the settlements on the Missouri to the Mountains in the neighborhood of Santa Fe, is a prairie country, with no obstructions to the route. . . . A good wagon road can . . . be traced out, upon which a sufficient supply of fuel and water can be procured, at all seasons, except in winter."*

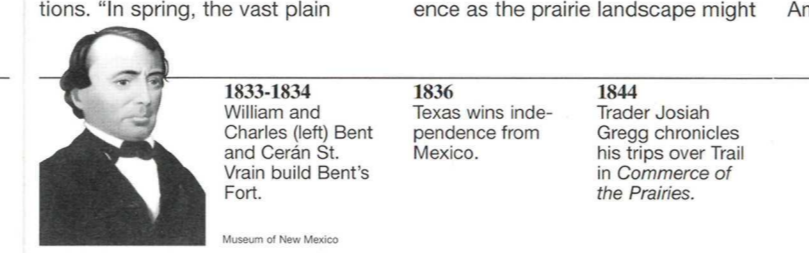
—Alfonso Wetmore, 1824



Pittsburgh-made Conestoga wagons hauled 2-3 tons. Later, wagons were made in Missouri.

**"The Vast Plain, Like a Green Ocean"**

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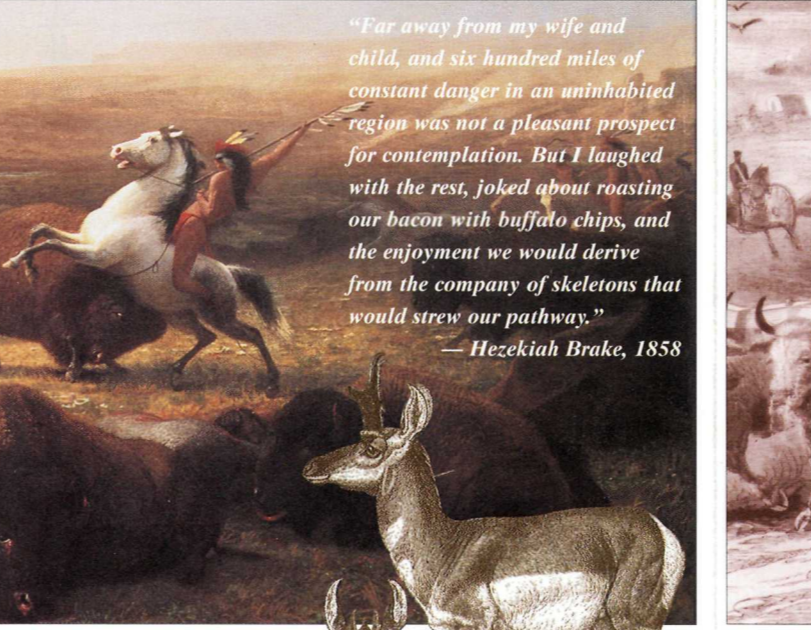
The Trail crossed prairies and semi-arid lands. Travelers might see fleet antelope (right). Buffalo were driven close to extinction in the 1870s. Some American Indian groups resisted encroachment by Euro-Americans on their lands and resources.

**"Soldiers and Forts"**

**S**uspicion and tension between the United States and Mexico accelerated in the 1840s, because Americans wanted territorial expansion, Texans raided into New Mexico, and the United States annexed Texas. The Mexican-American War erupted in 1846. General Stephen Watts Kearny led his Army of the West down the Santa Fe Trail, to take and hold New Mexico and Upper California and to protect American traders on the Trail. He



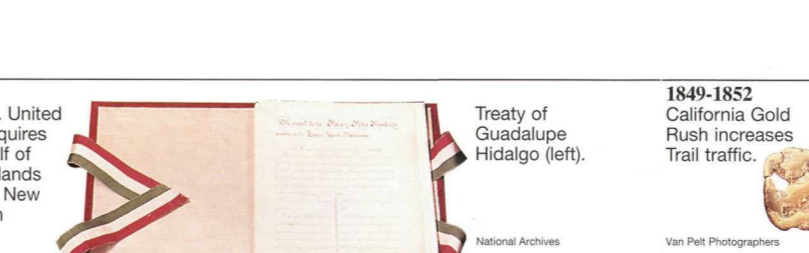
Museum of New Mexico



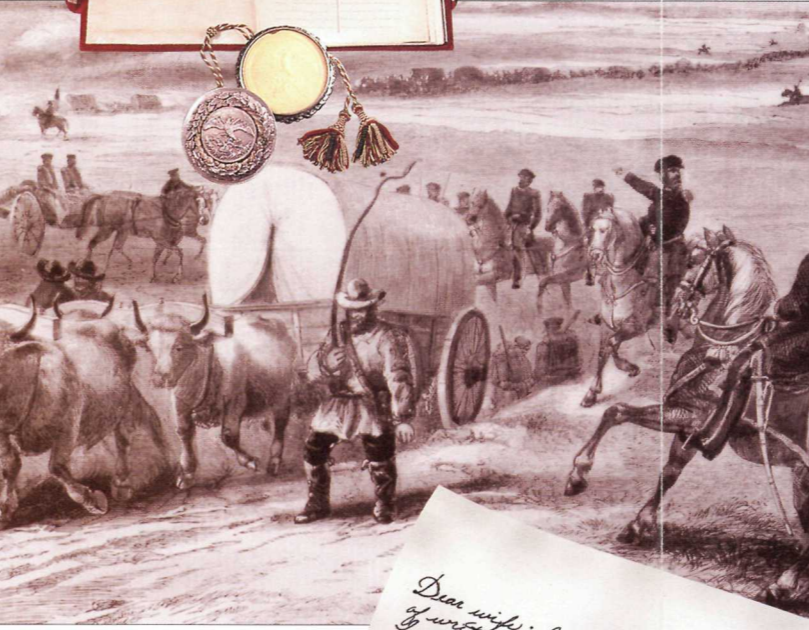
After the Mexican-American and Civil wars, military freighting grew, to support forts built along the route. This soldier's letter from Ft. Larned (right) talks about his health, Indians, and how much he wants to get back to the farm.

**Commerce of the Prairies**

**T**he story of the Santa Fe Trail is a story of business—international, national, and local. In 1821, William Becknell, bankrupt and facing jail for debts, packed goods to Santa Fe and made a profit. Entrepreneurs and experienced business people followed—James Webb, Antonio José Chávez, Charles Beaubien, David Waldo, and others.



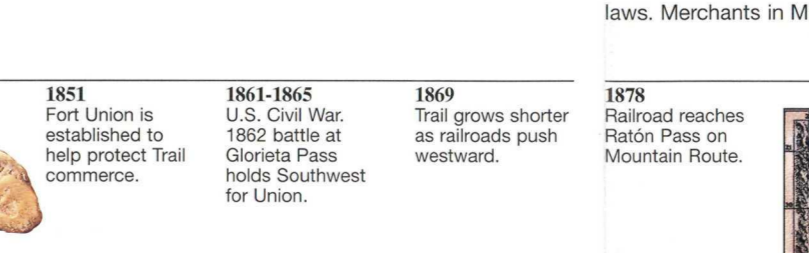
National Archives



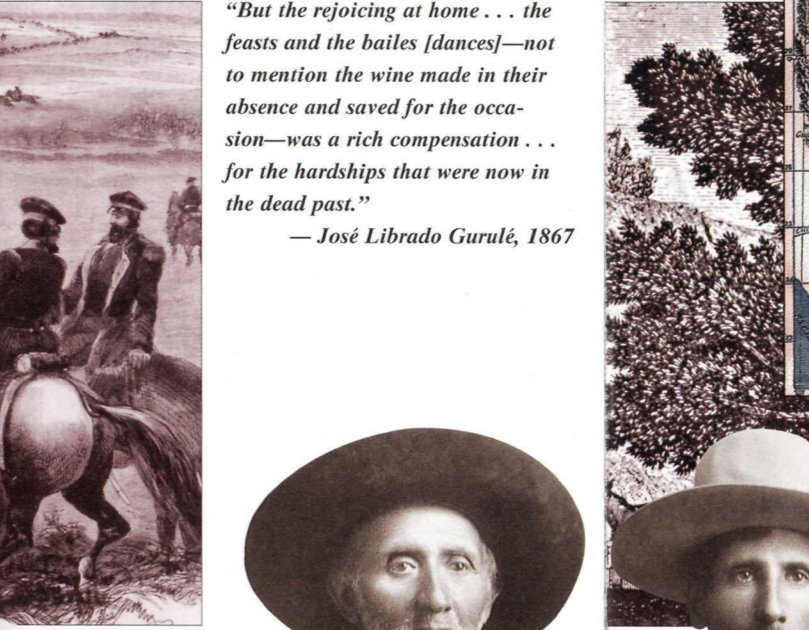
Santa Fe markets became glutted with goods, and traders sought southern markets along the Camino Real (Chihuahua Trail).

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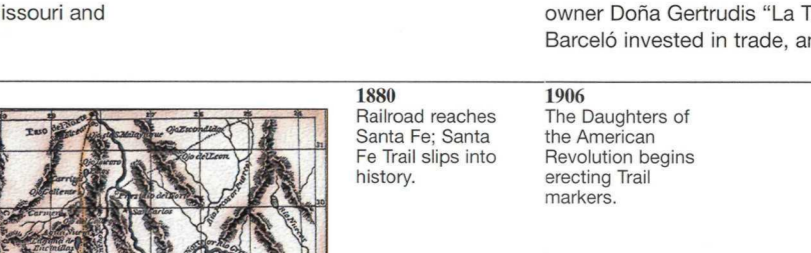
Colorado Springs Pioneers Museum



Mexican *arrieros* pack stock for trading north. Jesus Valpando (far left) began working on the Trail at age 13.

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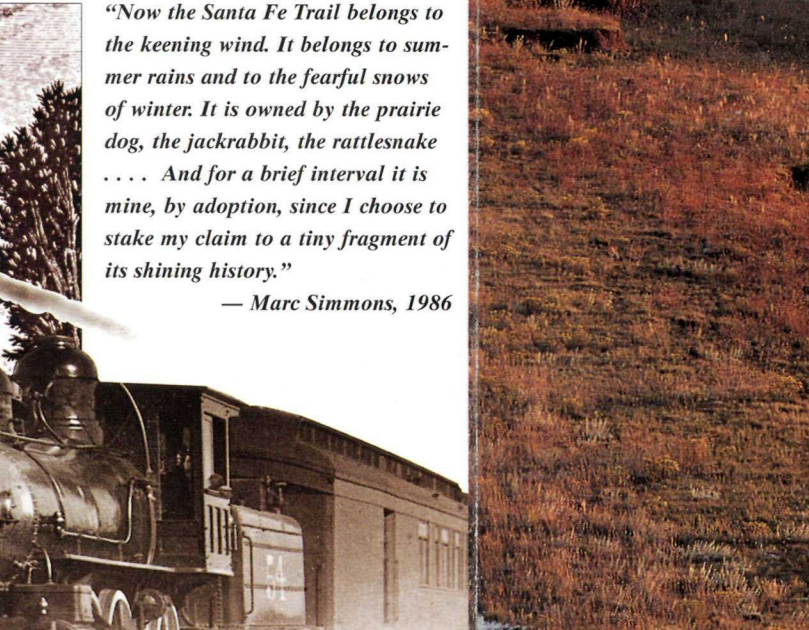
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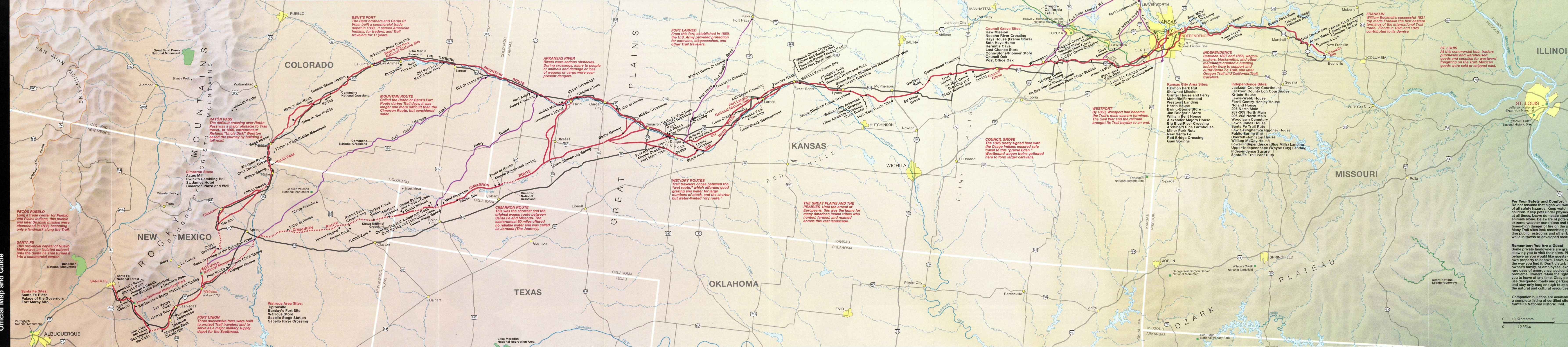
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Santa Fe Trail ruts  
 Overview photograph by George H. Meyer



### Visiting the Trail Today

Private individuals and organizations own much of the Santa Fe Trail. Not all sites are open for public use, and some only for certain hours and days. Consult guidebooks and ask locally before going onto private land. Many state, county, and city museums, chambers of commerce, and tourist information centers provide Trail information. Distinctive signs mark the auto tour route that parallels the Trail. **Certified Trail Properties:** Non-federal historic sites, trail segments, and interpretive facilities that meet National Park Service standards for resources preservation and public enjoyment may become part of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail through voluntary certification. Look for the official Trail logo.

**For information write or call: Long Distance Trails Group Office—Santa Fe, National Park Service, Santa Fe, NM 87504-0728; 505-988-6888. For membership and activities information write: Santa Fe Trail Association, Santa Fe Trail Center, RR3, Larned, KS 67550.**

Background colors on the large map (color key below) suggest the vegetation changes Trail travelers witnessed en route. The box on the map silhouette below shows the area the large map covers.

**As you visit Trail sites, please heed the following to protect yourself, the Trail, and the rights of private owners. Unless otherwise indicated, hike on designated trails and keep off historic buildings, ruins, and other structures. Do not use metal detectors, dig at sites, or collect—or disturb—artifacts.**

**Trail sites on federal lands:**

- Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site (NPS)**  
35110 Highway 194 E.  
La Junta, CO 81050-9523  
719-384-2596
- Cimarron National Grassland (USFS)**  
P.O. Box J  
Elkhart, KS 67950  
316-697-4621
- Comanche National Grassland (USFS)**  
1420 East 3rd St.  
La Junta, CO 81050  
719-384-2181
- Fort Larned National Historic Site (NPS)**  
Rt. 3, Larned, KS 67550  
316-285-6911
- Fort Union National Monument (NPS)**  
P.O. Box 127  
Watrous, NM 87753  
505-425-8025
- John Martin Reservoir (U.S. Army Corps of Engineers)**  
Star Route  
Hasty, CO 81044-9715  
719-336-3476
- Kiowa National Grassland (USFS)**  
714 N. Main St.  
Clayton, NM 88415  
505-374-9652
- Pecos National Historical Park (NPS)**  
P.O. Box 418  
Pecos, NM 87552-0418  
505-757-6032
- Santa Fe National Forest (USFS)**  
1220 St. Francis Dr.  
P.O. Box 1689  
Santa Fe, NM 87504  
505-988-6940
- Colorado Welcome Center**  
109 E. Beech, Suite B  
Lamar, CO 81052  
719-336-3483
- Colorado Welcome Center**  
309 Nevada  
Trinidad, CO 81082  
719-846-9512
- Kansas Division of Travel and Tourism**  
700 S.W. Harrison, Suite 1300  
Topeka, KS 66603-3712  
800-252-6727
- Missouri Division of Tourism**  
P.O. Box 1055  
Jefferson City, MO 65102  
800-877-1234
- New Mexico Department of Tourism**  
P.O. Box 20003  
Santa Fe, NM 87503  
800-545-2040, ext. 751
- Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department**  
500 Will Rogers Memorial Bldg.  
2401 N. Lincoln Blvd.  
Oklahoma City, OK 73105-4492  
800-652-6552

Scale: 0 10 Kilometers / 0 10 Miles

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