

# The Santa Fe Trail

## ~ Traffic ~

The *Santa Fe Trail* was the oldest and the first over which wagons were used in the westward expansion.

The *Santa Fe Trail*, primarily a commercial route, carried a stream of merchants' wagons and an increasing number of emigrants until it was replaced by the railroad in 1880.

At the height of commerce on the *Trail*, Independence was a gathering place for a diverse population of traders, trappers, bullwhackers, muleskinners, Mexican herders, and French voyageurs. Conestoga wagons, usually pulled by a dozen mules or six yoke of oxen, were piled with boxes and burlap-wrapped bales.

From Independence to Council Grove, which was about 150 miles, wagon companies traveled separately. Caravans formed at the general rendezvous point of Council Grove. From there, a journey of 600-700 miles brought traders to Santa Fe. Total travel time was usually six to eight weeks.

Wagons marched in parallel columns--two in eastern Kansas, and four in the dangerous Indian country. Each evening the wagons corralled to make camp, usually after crossing a stream.

The *Trail* served primarily as a commercial route, traveled by eager merchants and freighters. But it also served mountain men, military expeditions, California-bound gold-seekers, and even a sprinkling of early-day tourists.

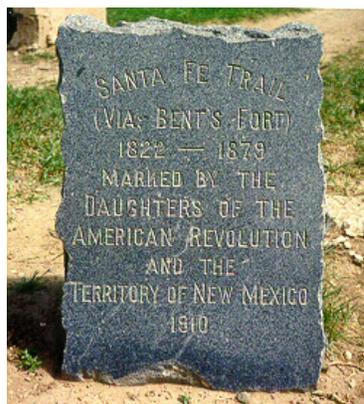
During the Mexican War, the route became a military highway clogged with freight and armies.

The annexation of New Mexico brought fundamental change to the Santa Fe. It became one of the principal highways binding America's East to its new West. The volume of trade increased steadily. By the early 1850s, mail and stagecoach service contributed to the growing traffic.

In response to Indian attacks, the government established new military posts. Near the western end of the trail, they built Fort Union with troopers constantly in the field.

Santa Fe Trail  
Via Bent's Fort  
1822-1879

Marked by the DAR and  
the Territory of  
New Mexico  
in 1910



<http://home.roadrunner.com/~gentutor>

## ~ Features ~

The *Santa Fe Trail* was originally developed as a route for commerce between Mexico and the United States. For the first 25 years of the Trail's history, Santa Fe lay in a foreign country, situated on the other side of dangerous Indian territory.

The Santa Fe trade had a modest beginning, but eventually ballooned into a million-dollar-a-year business.

Reaching from Missouri to New Mexico, the *Santa Fe Trail* cut across prairie, mountain, and desert. Travelers could choose between two branches--the northern route through the Colorado Rockies which was a difficult passage for wagons, or the southern Cimarron cutoff which shortened the journey by a hundred miles but took travelers far from reliable sources of water.

Missouri Senator Thomas Hart Benton called for an America "from sea to shining sea." In 1825, Congress appropriated \$30,000, including money for surveying and marking the route to Santa Fe.

During the California Gold Rush of 1849 and the Colorado Gold Rush of 1859, parts of the *Santa Fe Trail* were used by gold seekers.

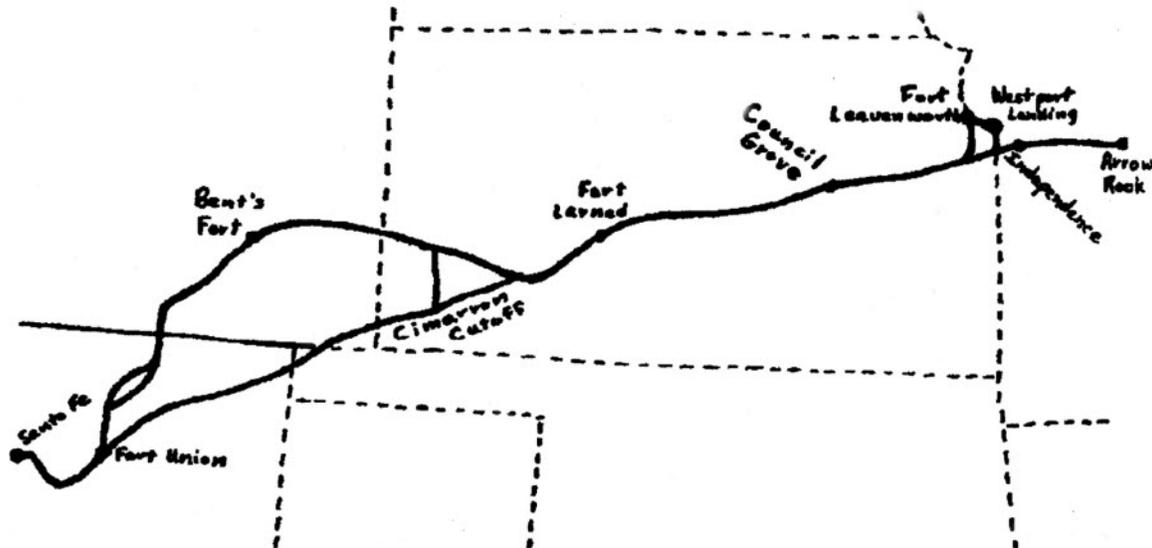
Dangers of the trail included Indians, prairie fires, scant water supplies, treacherous mountain and river crossings, accidents and disease (particularly cholera.)

Water and grass were the crucial elements for a successful venture--the fuels upon which the caravans depended and without which, both man and beast would surely die. Consequently, a trail would follow river systems. The Santa Fe Trail joined the Arkansas River. The Mountain Branch continued to follow the Arkansas or its tributaries. The Cimarron Cutoff left the Arkansas to meet and follow along the Cimarron River. Both routes then cut across land to meet again near La Junta and to head on to Santa Fe.

Trails from the distant Yellowstone and Platte converged with the *Santa Fe* at Bent's Fort on the Arkansas River, midway along the northern branch of the trail.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad reached Dodge City in 1872 and Trinidad, Colorado, in 1878. On February 14, 1880, a Santa Fe newspaper in celebration of the arrival of the railroad, spread an epitaph in bold type across its front page: "The Old *Santa Fe Trail* Passes Into Oblivion."

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## Timeline of the Santa Fe Trail

- 1609 The Spanish town of Santa Fe is founded.
- 1700s French traders make their way into Spanish territories, including Santa Fe.
- 1806-7 Zebulon Pike is captured by the Spanish and escorted to Santa Fe while exploring the Arkansas River area. He is released and returned to the United States in 1807, and his narratives are published in 1810.
- 1821 In this year in which Mexican Independence is declared, William Becknell's mule pack train leaves from Franklin, Missouri, and travels to Santa Fe on what is later known as the *Mountain Route*. After a successful trading trip, he returns to Franklin, having taken only 48 days for his journey.
- 1823 Stephen Cooper travels with a pack animal caravan and returns with 400 jacks, jennies, and mules. This is the beginning of the now world-famous Missouri mules.
- 1880 The first train rolls into Santa Fe on February 16 and the *Old Santa Fe Trail* commerce comes to an end.

## Route of the Santa Fe Trail

The 1821 Becknell expedition started out from Franklin, Missouri. The next year he made his departure from Arrow Rock, Missouri, just west of Franklin. As the Missouri frontier expanded, supplies boated upstream from St. Louis were landed at Fort Osage, and it became the departure point for caravans on the Santa Fe Trail. Gradually, the point of departure changed to Independence and later to Westport. By 1843, Westport was the eastern terminus of the *Santa Fe Trail*.

Becknell, in his second expedition in 1822, decided to blaze a wagon road. To that end, he chose to avoid the mountains and steer directly toward Santa Fe, leaving the Arkansas River and heading across the arid plains for the Cimarron. This wagon route became known as the *Cimarron Cutoff*.

Santa Fe, situated on a high plain surrounded by mountains, was the terminus point of the trail. Originally, the city was an outpost on the Mexican frontier far from the Mexico City government. During much of the early years, commerce was directly related to the Indian and fur trade operating out of Taos and Santa Fe. In 1848, with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago ending the Mexican War, Santa Fe became United States territory. At this point, the entire *Santa Fe Trail* was completely and officially within American territory.