Mertopolitan State University of Denver

Journey Through Our Heritage Program:

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Significance of the Santa Fe Trail

Thousands of years before Europeans colonized the new world, the native tribes of North America traded with one another using what is now known as the Santa Fe Trail. Although we know very little about the extent of this ancient trade route, some historians believe that it might have extended from Teotihuacan all the way to modern day New Mexico. The first evidence of trade that we know of along this route dates back to around 1200 A.D. where the native Pueblo people had trade relations with the Hopi tribe. Other evidence of pre-Colombian trade is indicated by archeologists discovering pottery shards of ancient pueblo Indian pots found in Aztec ruins. (http://www.nps.gov/azru/learn/education/classrooms/pottery-of-the-ancestral-pueblo.htm)

The Spaniards arrived in what is now Mexico in 1539 by the Camino Real (also known as the kings highway) and settled around the Rio Grande, the then founded the city of Santa Fe 1607 which later was associated with visions of gold and riches beyond all imagining and became the target of many explorers, adventurers and conquistadors. As for the Santa Fe Trail, it was used by the early Spanish explorers and conquistadors as a way to push further into the continent in hopes of finding the fabled seven cities of gold like the expedition headed by the conquistador Francisco Vázquez de Coronado in 1542. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francisco_V%C3%A1zquez_de_Coronado)

It wasn’t until 1725 that the French, attempting to reach Santa Fe from the east came upon the same area. Then in the year 1739, the brothers Pierre and Paul Mallet finally
arrived in the plaza of Santa Fe having hoped to establish trade with the province but along the way lost all of their goods. Luckily the officials in this provincial capital decided not detain the brothers or throw them in jail as they could have. Instead the Mallet brothers were allowed to stay in Santa Fe for about a year before they headed back to the Mississippi River country to attempt to return with more goods. Other Frenchmen entered New Mexico with trade goods on the other hand, were arrested, their goods were confiscated, and they were sent packing.

On the New Mexico side, realizing the potential value of trade within the empire, once Spain had bought the Louisiana Country from France in 1762, an itinerant gunsmith who was living with the Comanche was commissioned to open a trade route between San Antonio and Santa Fe. Pedro Vial became the unofficial explorer for New Mexico. He led expeditions between Santa Fe and Natchitoches, Louisiana, St. Louis, Missouri and San Antonio. Yet, because of conditions in the empire, these trade routes were never opened. But the people of colonial Mexico grew discontent under the colonial restrictions of Spain. Then revolution broke out in 1810 in Mexico but was quickly quelled. But doing so only resulted in the colonists’ growing evermore discontent with their foreign rulers. Then in the September of 1821, a revolt broke out in Mexico against Spanish rule which resulted finally in Mexico becoming a free country that could now trade with whomever they pleased.

The United States of the early 1800s, on the other hand developed an intense fascination with the Southwest territories. During this time Lt. Zebulon Montgomery Pike was sent west in 1806 to find the headwaters of the Red River. He and his party were captured by New Mexican soldiers and detained and eventually released and sent home. Other parties from the states attempted to trade in New Mexico and were either arrested and held or quickly sent home. Thus, by 1821, a number of parties from the United States had reached Santa Fe.

(\text{http://www.santafetrail.org/the-trail/history/history-of-the-sft/})

**The Mexican American War**

During the Mexican–American War, Stephen W. Kearny was promoted to brigadier general on June 30, 1846 and took a force of about 2,500 men to Santa Fe, New Mexico. His Army of the West (1846) consisted of 1600 men in the volunteer First and Second Regiments of Fort Leavenworth, Missouri Mounted Cavalry regiment under Alexander Doniphan; an artillery and
infantry battalion; 300 of Kearny's 1st U.S. Dragoons and about 500 members of the Mormon Battalion. The Mexican military forces in New Mexico retreated to Mexico without fighting and Kearny's forces easily took control of New Mexico.

Kearny established a joint civil and military government, appointing Charles Bent, a prominent Santa Fe Trail trader living in Taos, New Mexico as acting civil governor. He divided his forces into four commands: one, under Col. Sterling Price, appointed military governor, was to occupy and maintain order in New Mexico with his approximately 800 men; a second group under Col. Alexander William Doniphan, with a little over 800 men was ordered to capture El Paso, in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico and then join up with General John E. Wool; the third command of about 300 dragoons mounted on mules, he led under his command to California along the Gila River trail. The Mormon Battalion, mostly marching on foot under Lt. Col. Philip St. George Cooke, was directed to follow Kearny with wagons to blaze a new southern wagon route to California. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican%E2%80%93American_War)

2) History of Bent's Fort

William and Charles Bent, along with Ceran St. Vrain, built the original fort on this site in 1833 to trade with plains Indians and trappers. The adobe fort quickly became the center of the Bent, St. Vrain Company's expanding trade empire. The trade empire included Fort St. Vrain to the north and Fort Adobe to the south, along with company stores in Mexico at Taos and Santa Fe. The primary trade was with the Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians for buffalo robes.

For much of its 16-year history, the fort was the only major permanent white settlement on the Santa Fe Trail between Missouri and the Mexican settlements. The fort provided explorers, adventurers, and the U.S. Army a place to get needed supplies and services: wagon repairs, livestock, good food, water and company, and rest and protection in this vast "Great American Desert." During the war with Mexico in 1846, the fort became a staging area for Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny's "Army of the West". But due to a series of disasters and disease, the fort was abandoned in 1849. Archeological excavations and original sketches, paintings and diaries were used in the fort's reconstruction in 1976.

(http://www.nps.gov/beol/learn/historyculture/index.htm)
The American frontiersman Kit Carson was employed as a hunter by the Bent brothers in 1841, and regularly visited the Fort. Likewise, the explorer John C. Frémont used the Fort as both a staging area and a replenishment junction, for his expeditions.

**Important Historical Figures**

**Ceran St. Vrain** - French-American fur trader who was the son of French aristocrats who moved to the U.S. in the late 18th century. Later in life he was appointed U.S. territory governor, helped found Bent’s Fort, the Bent, St. Vrain Company.  
(http://intownlive.com/new-mexico/mora/)

**Charles Bent** - The older of the two brothers who in 1828 went forth from St. Louis onto the Santa Fe Trail and met Ceran St. Vrain (another trader) and through a business agreement worked together in order to found the Bent’s Fort trading outpost. Later was made a governor and assassinated by scalping.  
(http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/6-lesser-known-u-s-political-assassinations)
**William Bent**- The younger of the two brothers who founded Bent’s Fort and acted as a mediator for the Cheyenne nation later marrying the daughter (Owl Woman) of the chief White Thunder.

[http://www.nps.gov/nr/Travel/cultural_diversity/Bents_Old_Fort_National_Historic_Site.html](http://www.nps.gov/nr/Travel/cultural_diversity/Bents_Old_Fort_National_Historic_Site.html)

**Kit Carson**- American hero who throughout his life acted as a guide for explorers, fur trapper, a soldier who helped in the taking of the California territory from Mexico and massacred the natives in hopes of detouring them from attacking settlers.

[http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/carson.htm](http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/people/a_c/carson.htm)

**Colonel Stephen Watts Kearny**- known for his contributions in the conquest of California and the Kearny Code.

[http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&G Rid=18463](http://www.findagrave.com/cgi-bin/fg.cgi?page=gr&G Rid=18463)

**John C. Frémont**- military officer, explorer, and first anti-slavery Republican Party candidate

Santa Fe Trail and Bents Fort Questions

1. What year was Bent’s Fort Abandoned?
   a) 1808
   b) 1849
   c) 1772
   d) 1876

2. Why was Bent’s Fort abandoned?
   a) Failure of trade agreements
   b) The fort fell into disrepair
   c) War and disease
   d) The railroad

3. What are the names of the founders of Bent’s Fort?
   a) William Bent, Charles Bent, Ceran St. Vrain
   b) Lewis Vanderspuet, William Clark, Anton J. Benton
   c) Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, Oliver Queen
   d) Brigham Young, Joseph Smith, Arnold Cunningham

4. How long was the fort around before its abandonment?
   a) 28 years
   b) 33 years
   c) 10 years
   d) 16 years

5. On which pioneering trail was Bent’s Fort located?
   a) The Oregon trail
   b) The Santa Fe trail
   c) The Mormon trail
   d) The California trail

6. What commodity was mainly traded at Bent’s Fort?
   a) Food
   b) Fur
   c) Guns
   d) Livestock
7. What Native American tribe frequently traded with the fort?
   a) The Cheyenne
   b) The Cherokee
   c) The Sue
   d) The Apache

8. What ethnic group did Ceran St. Vrain consider himself to be?
   a) French-American
   b) Polish
   c) Irish-American
   d) Dutch-Irish

9. What famous frontiersman was employed for a time by William & Charles Bent as a trapper?
   a) Daniel Boone
   b) Davey Crocket
   c) Kit Carson
   d) Jim Bowie

10. In what year did archeologists reconstruct the fort?
    a) 1976
    b) 1932
    c) 1972
    d) 1968

11. What evidence did archeologists find in Aztec ruins that support the theory that the Aztec had trade relations with the Pueblo people?
    a) Pot shards
    b) Woven pueblo baskets
    c) A ceremonial urn
    d) None of the above
12. How far back do archeologists suggest trade has been going on along the Santa Fe Trail?
   a) 600 A.D.
   b) 100 A.D.
   c) 1200 A.D.
   d) 2000 A.D.

13. What was the name of the Spanish conquistador who led an expedition along the Santa Fe Trail in search of the seven cities of gold in 1542?
   a) Francisco Vasquez de Coronado
   b) Juan Ponce de Leon
   c) Hernan Cortes
   d) Alonso de Alvarado

Writing Exercise:

14. Below write a paragraph on what you have learned about the Santa Fe Trail and how significant it was to the creation of this country as we know it.