



Foundation Document

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site

Colorado

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Contact Information

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This Foundation Document is recommended for approval by the DOI Interior Regions 6, 7, and 8 Regional Director.

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RECOMMENDED

Superintendent, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site

Herbert C. Frost

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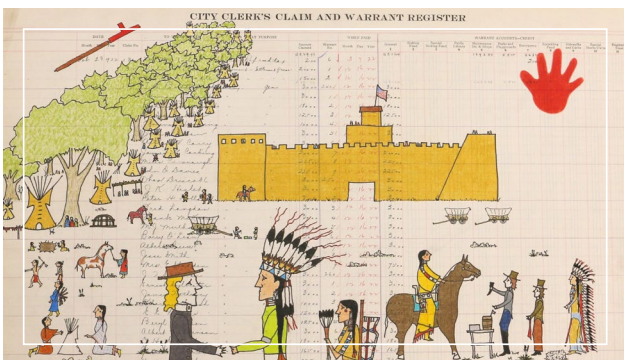
APPROVED

Regional Director, DOI Interior Regions 6, 7, and 8

Purpose



Strategically situated along the Santa Fe Trail, BENT'S OLD FORT NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE preserves a pivotal trade and military location within the Arkansas River watershed and interprets the site's impact on Native American Tribes, the United States, and Mexico.



Significance

Significance statements express why Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- One of the first permanent trading posts along the Santa Fe Trail, the site of Bent's Fort was selected by the Bent, St. Vrain, and Company on the recommendation of Cheyenne Chief Yellow Wolf to position the Cheyenne as major trading partners. Its strategic location along the US-Mexican border and the Arkansas River facilitated Native American interactions that integrated the American Southwest into a global economy connecting the United States and Mexico.
- The use and overuse of the mixed shortgrass prairie ecosystem and adjoining Arkansas River influenced the establishment and eventual relocation of Bent's Fort. Human activity impacted the environment, leading to conflicts between cultures in this region.
- Commerce at Bent's Fort leveraged existing cultural hierarchies and Native American trade networks, influencing the growth of the nation. Relocation, trade, assimilation, and negotiations marked early diplomatic efforts between the US Government and Native American Tribes.
- The Arkansas River watershed was a crossroads for territorial expansion among Spaniards, Native Americans, Texans, Nuevomexicanos, and the United States, defined by trade, commerce, and military action. Initially governed by sovereign Native American nations, this place has a history marked by conflict over land and resources, the near extinction of bison herds, and the displacement of Native American peoples.

Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Santa Fe Trail at Bent's Fort.** The site of Bent's Fort played a crucial role in establishing broader trade networks along the Santa Fe Trail. The convergence of diverse cultures at this strategic site has a legacy lasting far beyond the era of Bent, St. Vrain, & Company.
- **Historic Setting and Landscape.** The topographical viewshed has largely remained unchanged for centuries. The abundant natural resources, diverse wildlife, and the mixed shortgrass prairie and riparian ecosystem initially attracted Native Americans to the Arkansas River Basin. Freshwater sources and resources from the nearby Big Timbers supported long-term habitation and drew multiple cultures to the area, ultimately fostering trade and commercial ventures.
- **Bent's Fort Cultural Resources.** The cultural resources of Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site include a vast array of precontact/historic artifacts and archeological remnants that provide evidence of international trade, Native American Tribes, and various other groups who lived and interacted at the fort. The NPS constructed a replica fort in 1976, which reflects changing concepts and values related to memorialization and resource stewardship. Through important partnerships and research, Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site continues to interpret and promote stewardship of the site's numerous cultural resources.

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site contains **other resources and values** that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Commemorative features:** The Daughters of the American Revolution played a pivotal role in commissioning several commemorative features at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, including the Santa Fe Trail marker (1908), the Bent's Old Fort marker (1910), and the Entry Arch (1930). Further, the reconstructed fort (1976) represents 50 years of collaborative efforts from local, state, and national historic preservation and tourism groups.

- **Habitat for Threatened and Endangered Species:** The Arch Wetland provides habitat for the Eastern Black Rail, offering essential vegetative cover for this species. This freshwater marsh also supports other species, such as the Monarch butterfly. Like the Eastern Black Rail, the Arch Wetland offers the shallow water and saturated soil necessary for the Monarch Butterfly to thrive.

Interpretive Themes

Interpretive themes are often described as the key stories or concepts that visitors should understand after visiting a park—they define the most important ideas or concepts communicated to visitors about a park unit. Themes are derived from—and should reflect—park purpose, significance, resources, and values. The set of interpretive themes is complete when it provides the structure necessary for park staff to develop opportunities for visitors to explore and relate to all of the park significances and fundamental resources and values.

- The planning, construction, and operation of Bent's Old Fort was powerfully influenced by the geopolitical importance of its location along the Santa Fe Trail and Arkansas River within the mixed shortgrass prairie ecosystem, illustrating the connections between natural setting and consequences of human endeavor.
- The stories of the multicultural traders and travelers using and passing through Bent's Old Fort reveal a fascinating tapestry of community, individualism, and unique cultural practices that underscores the complex relationships and societal hierarchies that existed in the Southern High Plains region.
- Bent's Old Fort marks a place of cross-cultural negotiation and exchange where people from Native American traditional lands, Mexico, and the United States attempted to navigate significant economic, political, geographical, and cultural differences despite conflicting values, allegiances, and shifting circumstances.
- Through interpretation, research, collections, and archeology, Bent's Old Fort Historic Site reveals stories that help us explore our evolving understanding of multicultural conflict, war and peace, displacement, migration, resilience, and the power of historic commemoration.

Description

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site straddles both banks of the Arkansas River, the largest river on the Southern Plains. It was known to the Jicarrilla Apache as Náabéshdi and the Spanish as the Río Nepesta. The landscape around the river was once home to vast herds of buffalo and continues to host a wide range of wildlife that call the shortgrass prairie of the high plains home.

This natural environment attracted human inhabitants because of its biodiversity. Fourteen traditionally associated Tribes consider the Upper Arkansas River Valley watershed part of their ancestral and traditional homelands. They and their predecessors lived and traded here since time immemorial. After the Louisiana Purchase, the river served as a closed international boundary between the United States and New Spain.

The future site of Bent's Old Fort witnessed several United States government exploratory expeditions to the region including the Capt. Zebulon Pike Expedition of 1806-07 and the Maj. Stephen Long Expedition of 1820. Lt. John C. Fremont stopped over at the fort during his second, third, and fourth expeditions during the 1840s and passed by the abandoned fort during his fifth and final expedition in 1853-54.

Mexico's hard-fought independence from Spain in 1821 opened the international border allowing trade with the United States. The resulting economic boom brought newcomers including Charles and William Bent and their partner Ceran St. Vrain, who formed a trading partnership with the Cheyenne and Arapaho, cemented by William Bent's marriage to Owl Woman, daughter of White Thunder, a Cheyenne tribal leader. This business and cultural alliance resulted in the construction of the fort along the international boundary, to take advantage of the rapidly increasing buffalo robe trade with southern plains Tribes, especially the Cheyenne, who referred to the trading post on the Arkansas River as Hoonimiyum (Stone House).

Westward Expansion by the United States led to the fort serving as a launching point for the US invasion of New Mexico during the US-Mexican War. The war brought chaos to the area through combat, spread of disease, and increased Santa Fe Trail traffic, leading to a decrease in natural resources and conflict with the Tribes.

These factors as well as others led to the abandonment of Bent's Old Fort by William Bent in 1849.

The fort would be reoccupied as a stagecoach station following the Pike's Peak Gold Rush of 1859. The arrival of the railroad in 1876 ended the stage line along this route; however, cattle ranchers continued to use the structure until the end of the century.

The Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) first sought to preserve the site in the 1920s due to relationship to the Santa Fe Trail. After a generation of stewardship, the DAR sold the site to the State of Colorado in 1953. The United States Congress authorized Bent's Old Fort as a unit of the National Park System in 1960. The park was established in 1963, and the NPS immediately initiated an archeological survey, led by Jackson Moore, Jr., which concluded in July 1966.

Moore's archeological study and research by NPS historian Dwight E. Stinson, Jr. provided critical information for planning, development, and interpretation at the park. Following an extensive internal review, in 1967 the NPS authorized a reconstruction of the fort. The replica fort was dedicated in July 1976, coinciding with the United States Bicentennial and Colorado Statehood Centennial. For more than a century, Bent's Old Fort has served as a place where Americans "commemorate the historic role played by such fort in the opening of the West."

