

Bent's Trading Post at Big Timbers



Bent's New Fort
Santa Fe National Historic Trail

The Semmens Family
Santa Fe Trail Association
National Park Service

Today the image of buffalo herds moving across the plains is only a memory. For William Bent, buffalo were a means to an end in which he traded with Plains Indians and sustained his business. Bent relied on Arapaho, Cheyenne, Kiowa, and Comanche to hunt buffalo and tan hides—hides sought after by people worldwide to be used as soft, warm lap robes. Tribes exchanged 10 buffalo robes for one Navajo blanket (a cheap woolen blanket garnered fewer robes). Bent traded \$3 worth of trade goods for a prime hide, then sold the robe in Missouri for \$5.

In 1853 Bent moved to Big Timbers after the US Army occupied Bent's Old Fort; his brothers George and Charles died; his wife Owl Woman died; and a cholera epidemic killed half of the Cheyenne Tribe, all within a few years. Here was a new start with plenty of buffalo, timber, and forage. Builders used native rock to construct a new fort with walls 16 feet high for protection. Trade flourished with thousands of buffalo hides processed each year. Bent's New Fort lasted seven years as a trading post along the Santa Fe Trail that offered respite, supplies, and entertainment.

A good Navajo blanket was traded at the fort for ten buffalo robes.



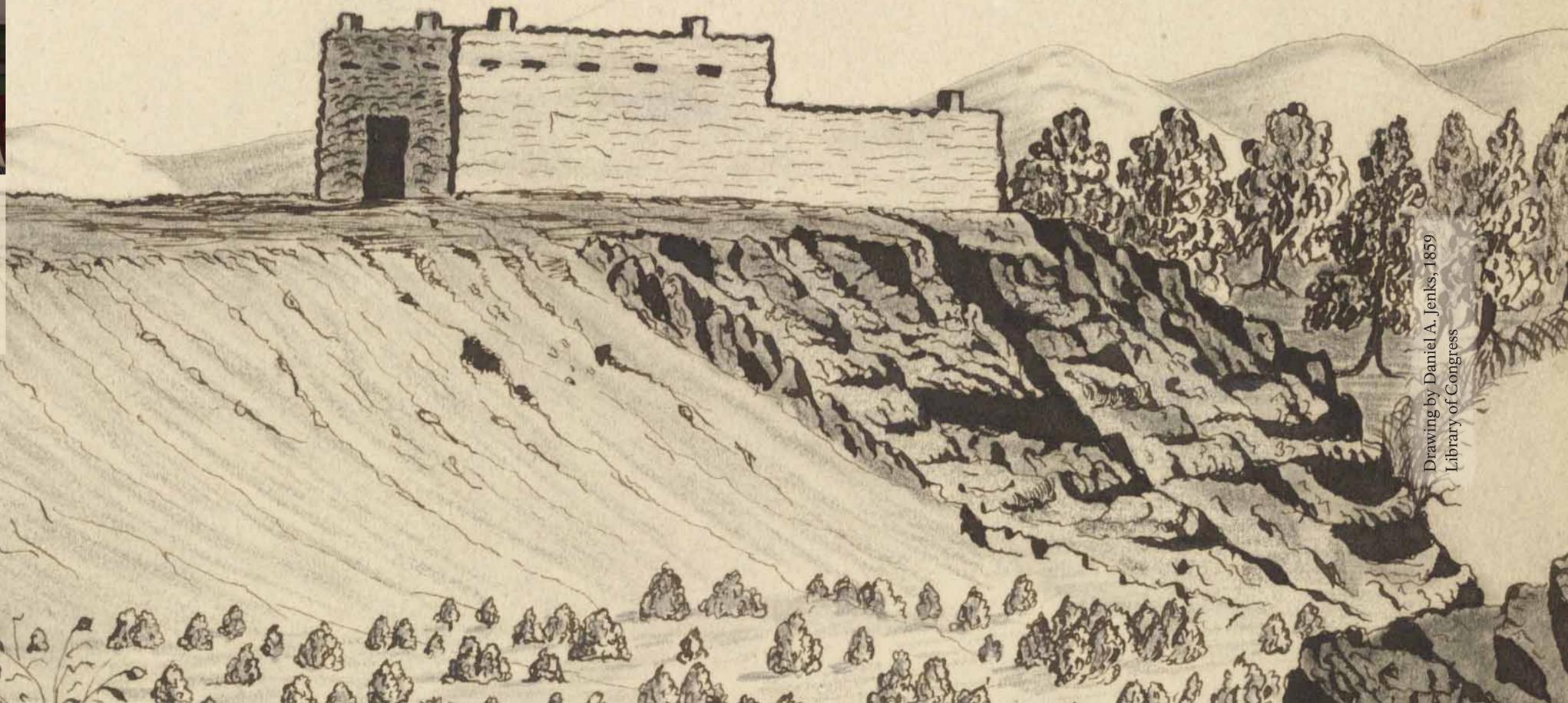
Buffalo robe press at Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site



Bent's company bartered calico, blankets, guns, gunpowder, flint, knives, European beads, clay pipes, Oriental tea, coffee, Mexican chocolate, and other goods—in order to acquire buffalo hides.



The Santa Fe Trail and Bent's trading empire in the Rocky Mountain west propelled the southern plains region into the global economy of fur trade.



Drawing by Daniel A. Jenks, 1859
Library of Congress