

Santa Fe Trail, 1821-1880



Painting by Robert Pummil

Eighteen Miles a Day

Hundreds of freight wagons laden with trade items once lumbered by here, passing just uphill from where you are standing. Large caravans took six to ten weeks to travel the 900 miles between Mexico (present-day New Mexico) and Missouri—advancing 18 to 21 miles each day. For 60 years the Santa Fe Trail linked the Eastern states and the Southwest together, fostering cooperation and conflict among U.S. citizens, Mexicans, and Plains Indians whose lands the trail crossed.

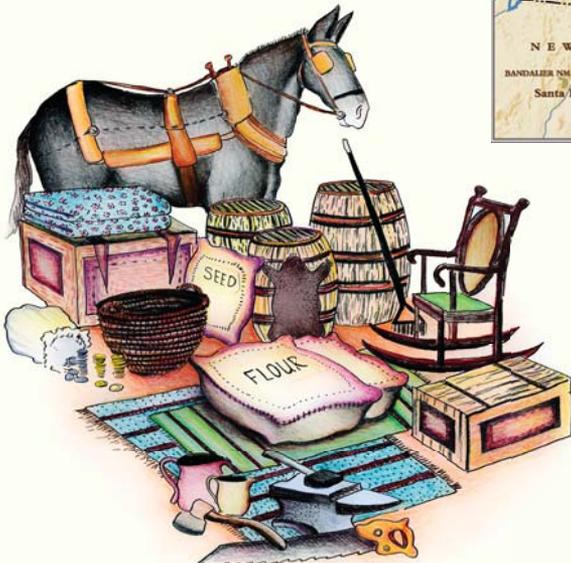
An International Freight Road

The Arkansas River, to the south, was an international boundary between Spain and the United States. The Spanish had long prohibited its territorial settlers from trading and manufacturing. When Mexico gained her independence in 1821, her people eagerly greeted the first American traders. Mexicans and Americans soon participated in a lively and profitable international trade.

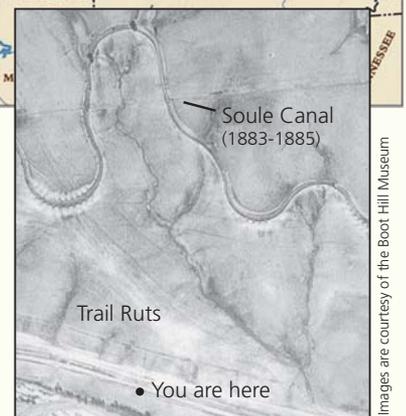
A National Road

In 1846, U.S. troops traveled the trail to invade and seize Mexico and the Southwest during the Mexican-American War. Two years later the war ended, and the international boundary moved closer to its present-day location, making the Santa Fe Trail a national road. Military freighting increased as army posts were established to protect trail travelers. By the 1860s, the railroad began to push farther westward, replacing the trail as it went, until it reached Santa Fe in 1880.

Cloth, hardware, notions, and even canaries were shipped from Missouri and Kansas to New Mexico. Wool and silver coins were hauled to the United States—along with Mexican jacks and jennets, which provided the parent stock for the famous "Missouri mule."



Santa Fe Trail ruts are still visible here. Walk the path leading up the hill and look for long, wide depressions, vegetation changes, and water courses running at odd angles. The path crosses the historic trail at each boardwalk.



Images are courtesy of the Boot Hill Museum