Fort Larned

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Fort Larned National Historic Site
Kansas

Santa Fe Trail: A Legacy Preserved at Fort Larned

"The overland trade between the United States and the northern province of Mexico seems to have...been rather the result of accident than of any organized plan of commercial establishment." Josiah Gregg

Journey Through Time

Visitors to Fort Larned National Historic Site's Santa Fe Trail Ruts Site have a unique opportunity to explore history first hand.

For nearly sixty years, uncounted wagon trains made the arduous journey between Missouri and New Mexico. As the wagons and the animals pulling them criscrossed the open prairie over the years, their wheels and hooves cut deep ruts into the ground. Today, most of the historic Santa Fe Trail has been reclaimed by nature or obscured by the hand of man. Fort Larned National Historic Site is one of the few places where traces of this once vital artery of commerce are preserved.

The Opportunity

In the early 1800s, Spain was unable to supply the people of New Mexico, on the outskirts of their vast colonial empire, with essential supplies and manufactured goods. As Mexico gained independence in 1821, a market suddenly opened for American goods in Mexico.

Once aware of the profitability of this trade, many entrepreneurs were willing to gamble their lives and fortunes against distance, terrain, hostile Indians, and the whim of Mexican customs officials in pursuit of financial gain. In 1821, merchant William Becknell completed the first risky trade voyage to Santa Fe. Following Becknell's success, thousands followed the route to Santa Fe over the next half-century. Traders loaded their wagons with American products such as textiles and manufactured goods and delivered them to Santa Fe. In return, New Mexico offered gold, silver, furs, and mules.

In 1826, the U.S. completed a formal survey of the Santa Fe Trail from Fort Osage, Missouri to Taos, New Mexico. During the Mexican War of 1846-1848, the Santa Fe Trail was one of the routes by which U.S. troops maneuvered into Mexico. The war ended with the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the transfer of most of the present-day American Southwest into U.S. hands.

The Santa Fe Trail saw ever-increasing use in the decades that followed the Mexican War. As the principal route to the lands of the southwest, the Trail aided the spread of American influence.

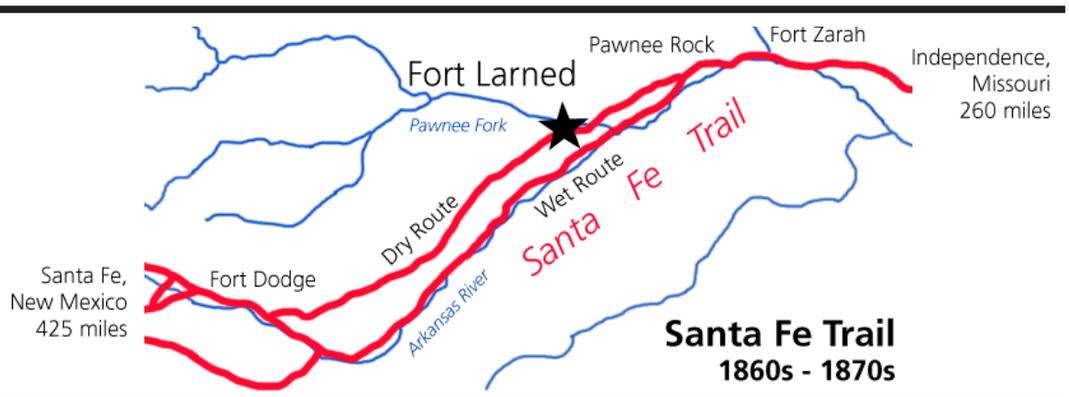
Protecting the Trail

By the 1860s, Santa Fe Trail traffic was at its peak and tensions with American Indians, whose way of life was under increasing threat, were climbing. Warriors of several Plains Indian tribes including the Kiowa, Comanche, Apache, and Cheyenne occasionally attacked the wagon trains.

In response, the U.S. Army completed a series of forts to support military protection along the Santa Fe Trail, including Fort Larned near the trail's halfway point. Fort Larned was first established in October 1859 as Camp on Pawnee Fork in direct response to an attack on a mail coach. Over the next decade and a half, Fort Larned was indispensable to the army and trail travelers, providing troops to escort the stages and wagon trains on the Santa Fe Trail. The escorts were usually comprised of ten to twenty infantrymen crowded into wagons.

By the 1870s, the railroad had eclipsed the Santa Fe Trail. With no need for military protection in a vastly altered landscape, Fort Larned ended its service in 1878.

Historic Map



A Legacy Preserved

Today, visible remnants of the Santa Fe Trail still exist, reminding us of the courage, determination, and sacrifice endured by those who took the trail and those whose lives the trail forever altered.

The contrast between the small area of the Santa Fe Trail preserved at Fort Larned National Historic Site and the surrounding farmland is stark. Unlike the tilled fields that surround it, the ruts area is filled with native grasses: buffalo, bluestem, and grama. Buffalo wallows, round depressions six to eight feet in diameter, mark where fly-plagued bison once sought relief. This native ecological system supported large tribes of American Indians, whose way of life was irrevocably changed by the trail and those it brought west.

Imagine this place as it was over a century ago, when, to the sound of whips cracking, harnesses jingling, and teamsters shouting, these now-fading wagon ruts were cut through the wild Kansas prairie.

Visiting the Site

To visit the Santa Fe Trail ruts preserved by Fort Larned National Historic Site, use the map to the right. The route is approximately 5.5 miles one-way on gravel and dirt roads to reach the site. *Under excessively wet conditions, portions of the route may be impassable.*

Directions:

1. Leaving Fort Larned National Historic Site, turn left (west) on KS Hwy 156.

2. Turn left (south) on 180th Ave and continue four miles to the junction with J Road.

3. Turn right (west) onto J Road and continue one mile.

4. Turn left (south) on 190th Ave. and continue about 1/2 mile to the parking area.

5. The parking area for the trail ruts site will be on your left.

Upon reaching the site, walk a very short distance along the mowed path to see the historic ruts up close. You may also climb the viewing platform to get a bird's eye view of the ruts.

The linear, U-shaped depressions in the ground were created by thousands of passing wagons between 1821 and about 1880. Unlike a modern, two-lane highway where cars travel single-file, the wagons taking the Santa Fe Trail usually traveled several wagons abreast in order to "circle the wagons" quickly in the event they were attacked, resulting in the several parallel ruts you see. In some places, the ruts split and join, giving the trail a braided appearance.

Continue the Journey

Many sites are dedicated to historical preservation of the Santa Fe Trail. Each offers its own unique part of the trail's overall history.

The Santa Fe Trail Center is a museum and research library located four miles east of Fort Larned. More information is available online at www.santafetrailcenter.org.

For a complete listing of sites on the Santa Fe National Historic Trail, including Fort Larned, Bent's Old Fort, and Fort Union, visit www.nps.gov/safe.