Santa Fe, Oregon, & California
National Historic Trails
National Trails System

Santa Fe Trail Association
Oregon-California Trails Association
City of Gardner
National Park Service

Following Their Dreams

"We took the Oregon road, instead of that to Santa Fe and went twelve miles before we discovered our error. In returning two of our wagons broke down, by which we were detained two days until July 4th. We at last got fairly on the Santa Fe route." — Lucian Eastin noted in 1846

Between the 1830s and the late 1860s, historians estimate that as many as 350,000 men, women, and children traveled the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails. Traders, soldiers, trappers, missionaries, farmers, and fortune-seekers hoped to find purpose, wealth, or a better life in the west.

Motivated by the potential for wealth, Mexican and American traders and freighters hauled tons of valuable commodities back and forth on the Santa Fe Trail. During the Mexican War of 1846-48 thousands of U.S. Army soldiers traveled the trail over territorial disputes.

Trappers and mountain men returning from the Rocky Mountains in the 1820s and 30s brought back stories of a fertile land teaming with game and extraordinary wonders. Following the financial depression of 1837, many bankrupt farmers and merchants listened to these stories, and soon thousands were ready to abandon their old lives and move to the Oregon Territory where they could start over.

Then in the fall of 1831, a small group of Nez Perce and Flathead Indians traveled to St. Louis to visit their friend, and Indian Commissioner, William Clark. Their presence prompted eastern missionaries to establish mission outposts in the northwest where they could live, work, and teach among the various tribes.

Motivations for the westward movement changed after gold was discovered in California. Tens of thousands of wealth-seeking emigrants traveled the expanding network of trails and shortcuts in an effort to reach the gold fields before the boom ended.

Not all travelers found their destiny in the new land. Some turned back and nearly ten percent of the Oregon and California Trail travelers suffered fatal accidents, attacks, or succumbed to illness and were buried along way. Most pioneers were able to finish the journey—realizing their dreams.

"Cold and windy, so cold that every man had to put on two or three coats. The roads are the best I ever see. Camped on a branch of Blue River near the place of leaving the Santafee Road. Mcdonald was unwell all day yesterday. Last night and today quite sick." — Amos Josslyn May 1, 1849, In route to the California Goldfields

".....road bad – deep ruts and mud.....if an opportunity could have offered itself I should have returned home." — Charles Glass Gray, May 12, 1849, bound for California

"About 4 o'clock.p.m., I reached the point where I supposed the Oregon trail diverged from the Santa Fe' road. It was raining copiously." — Edwin Bryant, May 13, 1846, bound for California

"I wish you were all here with us going to the dear Indians. I have become very much attached to Richard Sak-ah-too-ah. 'T is the one you saw at our wedding; he calls me mother; I love to teach him - to take care of him, and hear them talk. There are five Nez Perces in the company, and when they are together they chatter finely." — Narcissa Whitman, June 4, 1836 bound for Oregon Territory.

For many, the adventure of traveling west was both frightening and exhilarating. Danger, trials and even death lay ahead and thousands of letters, journals, and diaries recorded these experiences.

Countless covered wagons carried families, gold rushers, and adventure seekers hoping for a better life. Image sources: upper, the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University; lower, Hastings House Publishers, artist Nick Eggenhoffer.