

BENT'S OLD FORT
NATIONAL HISTORIC SITE

TRAIL MAP EL RIO NAPESTA LOOP TOUR



LIST OF STOPS

- Stop 1: Southern Departure from Fort
- Stop 2: Wayside Panel - Political Boundary
- Stop 3: Riverbank Through Time
- Stop 4: Commerce
- Stop 5: Wayside Panel - Soundscape
- Stop 6: Wayside Panel - Natural Resources
- Stop 7: Wayside Panel - Buffalo
- Stop 8: Cottonwood Trees
- Stop 9: Arkansas River - Uses
- Stop 10: Bird Sanctuary
- Stop 11: Prairie Grasses
- Stop 12: Bent's Old Fort Sign
- Stop 13: Wayside Panel - Santa Fe Trail
- Stop 14: Arch, D.A.R. History
- Stop 15: Marsh
- Stop 16: Parking Lot, Restroom, Picnic Tables

TOUR GUIDEBOOK

EL RIO NAPESTA LOOP TRAIL MAP WITH STOPS

<p>Stop 1:</p> <p>Southern Departure from Fort</p>		<p>*What's the longest time you've been away from home? Where did you go and why?</p> <p>The gravel path ahead leads to visitor parking. Take in the space around you. Whose homelands were these? Native Americans lived here for hundreds of years. The Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho lived in this area in the 1800s. Imagine their encampments all around the fort. Think about the various traders from Mexico, Canada, and ports around the country who came here to trade. What language did most traders know despite where they were from? Spanish.</p> <p>Josiah Gregg writes during his visit, "It is seldom that such a variety of ingredients are found mixed up in so small a compass. Here were the representatives of seven distinct nations, each speaking his own native language, which produced at times a very respectable jumble of discordant sounds."</p>
<p>Stop 2:</p> <p>Wayside Panel</p> <p>Political Boundary</p>		<p>What makes a country a country? National borders are often formed by geographic features. During the Bent's Fort years, the Arkansas River or Rio Napeste provided the political boundary between the U.S. and Mexico. From this view, you occupy what was part of the U.S. Colorado territory. Just across the river lay Mexico. By 1846, this stretch of water within the Borderlands region divided defenders of New Mexico from its new challenger, the United States. Wedged between and among Native American tribes and Mexicans, consider how both peoples viewed the Colorado territory. Long before Europeans or early Americans began their explorations, this land was governed by the Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, and Kiowa. David Beyreis writes, "the borderlands markets offered more opportunities than Missouri, and the new partners intended to top both ends of the commerce of the prairies."</p>

Stop 3:

Riverbank
Through
Time



At over 1400 miles in length, the Rio Napeste or Arkansas River has many bends and turns. Water levels and currents fluctuate with the seasons based on precipitation and snowmelt from the mountains. What you see today at this spot is likely very different from what people at the fort saw in the early 1800s. As humans have harnessed and controlled natural resources including watersheds, the width, depth, and extent of flowing fresh water has changed. How do you think riverbanks like this one were used?

*Visitor and naturalist Josiah Gregg notes, “The men in their leisure moments amused themselves with fishing. Cat fish and hickory shad are the only kinds I have ever seen in these waters.”

Stop 4:

Commerce



Before setting up the Bent, St. Vrain & Company, Charles Bent and Cheyenne Chief Yellow Wolf agreed to a business partnership based on harvesting buffalo robes and distributing them along the ends of the Santa Fe Trail. However, Bent’s Fort wasn’t just a manufacturing firm, it was a trading post. Goods were brought in from all over the world. Coffee from South America, sugar from Cuba, wool blankets from England, glass beads from China, chocolate and silver from Mexico, etc. This site was a commercial hub. Caravans of wagons, like our semis today, carried goods from this place to be traded or sold abroad.

*George Bent was both Cheyenne and Anglo. He grew up at both the fort and in nearby Cheyenne encampments. He stated, “In its best day Bent’s Fort employed over a hundred men: traders, hunters, herders, teamsters, and laborers. Most of the laborers were Mexicans who were paid about six dollars a month, usually in goods.” – George Hyde, *Life of George Bent*

Stop 5:

Wayside
Panel

Soundscape



Trees are important resources for human use as well as for animals. In a canopy of trees live not only birds, but skunk, porcupine, squirrel, raccoon, and bobcat – all recently spotted at Bent’s Fort. At this stop, listen to the soundscape. What sounds are natural or human created? How might the sounds from the 1830s and 1840s at Bent’s Fort been different than what you hear today?

While visiting Bent’s Fort in 1846, Susan Magoffin wrote, “There is the greatest possible noise in the patio [yard]. The shoeing of horses, neighing, and braying of mules, the crying of children, the scolding and fighting of men, are all enough to turn my head.”

Stop 6:

Wayside
Panel

Natural
Resources



Throughout the trail you’ll see prairie grasses, cottonwoods, willows, etc. All of these were used by Native American peoples for construction of homes, boats, baskets, tools, and even medicine. When Bent’s Fort began, this area was once forest. However, increased demand for these resources caused Bent employees to travel miles away to collect timber or graze livestock.

*“Then came the discovery of gold in California and the great rush across the plains in ‘49. By this time grass, wood, and game had been so nearly destroyed on the Oregon Trail up the Platte that large trains of emigrants began to use the Arkansas route... Famous groves of cottonwood trees where the Indians had camped in winter for generations disappeared in a single season.” – George Hyde from *Life of George Bent*

<p>Stop 7:</p> <p>Wayside Panel</p> <p>Buffalo</p>		<p>What's the #1 bestselling item at your favorite store? What do you think the #1 trade item at Bent's Fort was? Buffalo robes! Buffalo were plentiful in this area. Who do you think hunted and processed these robes for trade? Cheyenne and Arapaho men hunted the buffalo and the women spent ten days processing and softening each robe. What might they want to trade a buffalo robe for? Be sure to look for these trade items in our fort's trade room. Take the trail to your left!</p> <p><i>*"The buffalo where they range, may be relied upon to support a column of many thousand men; but their range is very uncertain. This year it was westward, between the 98th degree and the 101st meridian of longitude." - W.H. Emory, topographical engineer in 1846.</i></p>
<p>Stop 8:</p> <p>Cottonwood Trees</p>		<p>As you walk beside the river, notice the line of trees on either side. These are mostly cottonwood trees which typically live over 100 years. If you visit in the spring, you'll see the white fluffy "catkins" which hold the cottonwood seeds. To your left are several dead-looking cottonwoods. What do you notice about their bark? What might be the cause? A natural fire swept through here in 2022. Because trees are so scarce in the High Plains, cottonwoods were vital for building, firewood, and even food for horses and game animals. Fires and floods were sometimes devastating and sometimes revitalizing to those living in daily dependence on the land.</p> <p><i>*Topographical engineer W.H. Emory wrote, "The only tree of any magnitude found on this course is the cotton-wood, (Populus Canadensis,) and it frequently happens that not one of these is seen in a whole day's journey, and the buffalo dung and wild sage constitute the only fuel to be procured."</i></p>

Stop 9:
Arkansas
River Uses



Where does your water at home come from? The Arkansas River, once called the Rio Napeste, originates on the east slope of the Rocky Mountains flowing into both Kansas and Oklahoma. Southern Plains tribes utilized this life source for centuries. Records of European explorers encountering the Arkansas River date back to Coronado in the 1500s. Before the 20th century, why have people typically lived by rivers? Does the river look navigable today? Would you want to cross this spot by covered wagon?

*Regarding crossing the Arkansas River in June, Josiah Gregg writes, "I have witnessed a whole team down at once, rendering it necessary to unharness and drag each mule out separately: in fact, more than common exertion is sometimes required to prevent these dumpish animals from drowning in their fright and struggles through the water, though the current be but shallow at the place."

Stop 10:
Bird
Sanctuary

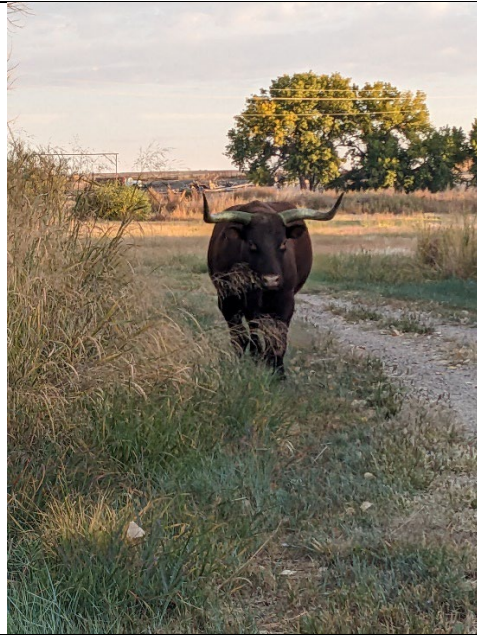


It looks like nothing more than a walking trail but keep your eyes open at both ground level and treetops. What bird species do you expect to see? Common ones in this area are red-winged blackbirds, northern flicker, ring-necked pheasant, marsh wrens, yellow warblers, house sparrows, great horned owl, northern harrier, and the rarer Virginia and black rails. When James Abert visited Bent's Fort in 1846, he reported seeing the killdeer plover. Today, there is a bird species named after him, the Abert towhee.

How are these birds different from the ones swimming in the marsh? Why is this spot a good hangout for birds? Think about their diet and potential predators. Where's the best hiding place you've ever found?

Stop 11:

Prairie
Grasses



All along the trail you'll notice a variety of grasses. This region is known as the High Plains and is part of the short-grass prairie. What wildlife is supported by these grasses? A clue to one of the major mammals found here in the 1800s is the fact that 80% of short-grass prairie is made up of blue grama and buffalo grass. Buffalo preferred eating the shortgrass prairie grasses to those in tallgrass prairies.

Naturalist and traveler Josiah Gregg observed, "It is true that owing to their disrelish for the long dry grass of the eastern prairies the buffalo are rarely found so far east in autumn as during the spring..."

Stop 12:

Bent's Old
Fort Sign



Smile and say "Charlie!" Look to your left for the park sign to take a group photo or selfie. Charles Bent and his friend, Ceran St. Vrain, began this trading post together, but they didn't stay long. The two went to New Mexico to start other posts and left the management of Fort William (Bent's Fort) to William Bent, Charles' younger brother. Would you trust your business to one of your siblings?

*"Bent's Fort was the first permanent settlement in all the central Plains region and William Bent was the first American settler within the borders of the present state of Colorado. He went there in 1824 and lived there until his death in 1869."
George Hyde from *Life of George Bent*

Stop 13:

Wayside
Panel

Santa Fe
Trail



Right where you're standing was part of the Santa Fe Trail. U.S. and Mexican merchants began using the 500 mile trade route in 1821 after Mexico separated from Spain. This mountain branch stretched from Independence, Missouri to Santa Fe, New Mexico. Unlike other trails during this century, it was not begun as a route for settlement, but for trade. Bent's Fort was a place to supply, fix, rest, or trade on your way to somewhere else. So, who were the people passing through and what did they need or trade?

*David Beyreis in *Blood in the Borderlands* writes, "The company caravan, usually upward of thirty wagons, left Bent's Fort in April loaded with pelts and bison robes. Accompanied by teamsters, herders, hunters, and guards, the wagons managed between ten and twelve miles a day." How long did it take you to get to Bent's Fort today and what route did you take?

Stop 14:

Bent's Fort
Arch

D.A.R.
History



If you could preserve a place so that it is remembered hundreds of years from now, what would it be? Bent's Old Fort is a reconstruction based on the original 1833 trading post. Not much of the building remained at the turn of the century, so the La Junta chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution erected a marker at this site in 1912. In 1920, 4 ½ acres of site grounds were dedicated for its historic importance. It finally became a National Park Service historic site in 1976.

*"The Cheyennes are said to have met the Bent brothers on their first expedition south, and the building of Bent's Fort on the Arkansas in Colorado resulted from this meeting..." – George Bird Grinnell, historian

Stop 15:

Marsh



To your left is our wetlands which attracts a variety of year-round and migrating birds. Approach quietly as you peer over the grasses to see the water's surface and edges. You'll likely spot waterfowl, toads, rabbits, or even a muskrat in this marshy area. What animal do you hope to see today? How does having wetlands nearby benefit the ecology and culture of those living on this land?

*Historian from the late 1800s, George Bird Grinnell writes, "The feathers from the tail of the eagle were highly valued for use in adornment and for trade with other tribes, and at the proper season of the year some [Cheyenne] men devoted much effort to catching the birds."

Stop 16:

Parking lot,
picnic
tables,
restrooms



We enjoyed sharing Bent's Old Fort with you! The story of this location doesn't end with trade. It became a stagecoach stop and mail post. William Bent built Bent's New Fort just 40 miles east, but this site continued to be a well-known meeting point.

Before you go, think about what this place meant to the people and cultures who lived or visited here over time. How does Bent's Old Fort fit in history's narrative of westward expansion? How do you think the owners, merchants, enslaved, Mexican traders, various employees and Southern Plains tribal communities remembered Bent's Fort? How will you remember it?