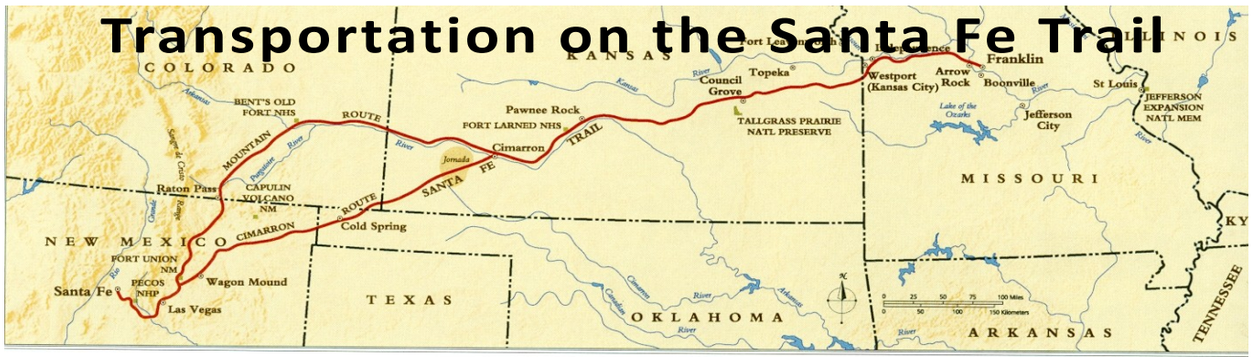
# Fort Larned

National Park Service
U.S. Department of Interior

Fort Larned National Historic Site




Is it fair to say we are accustomed to getting what we want and usually without delay? Most of us know of stores selling merchandise off the shelves quicker than they can restock! Supply and demand keeps the wheels of business rolling in the world. So what was this land like long ago without heavy duty rigs speeding down four-lane highways, carrying all our wants and needs? Imagine a route between two places in 1821. It is a mile wide, traveled in previous centuries by animals, native peoples, and early Spanish explorers. Now picture the road spreading across the Great Plains to New Mexico, and you have a glimpse of what was a thriving business thoroughfare known as the Santa Fe Trail.

## Hooves to Wheels

In 1821, Fur Trapper William Becknell organized a small party of trappers and traders to travel from Missouri to Santa Fe. Becknell was broke and looking for a way to repay his debts. Trading in Mexican territory was illegal, but the rewards outweighed the risks. They traveled on horseback carrying packsaddles, a difficult and tiresome way to move goods. Horses were not reliable pack animals. The journey across the Great Plains to Santa Fe and back was almost 800 miles and horses had to be watered and rested frequently. They were also attractive to Indian raiders.

When Becknell returned from Santa Fe, his pockets lined with silver, he was already planning his next trip using a different vehicle – wagons. Not ordinary farm wagons, but freight wagons capable of carrying heavy loads of merchandise. Think of freight wagons as the 18-wheelers of the 19th Century! Mules and oxen were a better choice for long distance hauls. Teams of powerful oxen could pull a freight wagon carrying three tons or more! They didn't need as much water and could graze on prairie grass.

## Ships of the Prairie

The Mexican authorities did not want the American traders in New Mexico, but the people in Santa Fe were eager for the goods the traders brought. And they had silver to spend! The merchants chose the items most likely to sell - cloth, clothing, hardware, tobacco, and gunpowder - were just a few of the items in demand.

Becknell's first few wagons reportedly cost him 150 dollars each. Sounds like a small price to pay considering the profit he made, but he paid a high price in hardships along the trail. At one point on the trip he nearly died of thirst. His experiences gave him the knowledge to map out the trail for others. After his third trip to Santa Fe in 1824 William Becknell earned the title "Father of the Santa Fe Trail."

Many historians differ strongly when it comes to the type of freight wagons that traveled the Santa Fe Trail. One fact you can be sure of: the great commercial highway boasted wagon styles as varied as the trail's terrain. On May 22, 1858 the *Western Journal of Commerce* printed an article that describes the freight wagons seen on the Santa Fe Trail:

*A wagon weighs about 4,000 pounds, the pole, the tongue, is 13 feet long. One of the hind wheels weighs 300 lbs. and is 64 inches in diameter. The tire is four inches wide, the hub twelve inches through and 18 inches deep.*

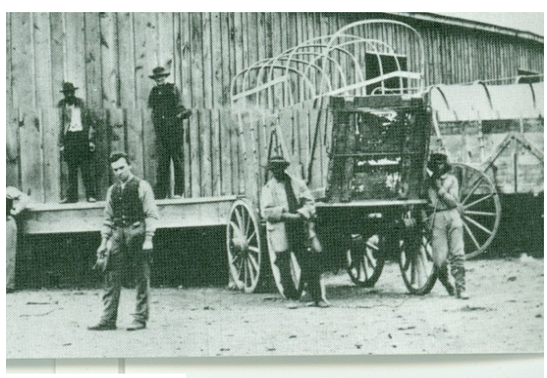
## Conestoga Wagon

To many observers along the trail the freight wagons appeared to be floating across the grassy plains and so the nicknames “prairie schooner” and “land ships” became popular descriptions. Another name was the “Conestoga”, which actually refers to a style rather than a brand. The Conestoga wagon originated in the Eastern U.S. and its history can be traced back to the 1700s in the Conestoga Valley of Pennsylvania. The original Conestoga wagons were manufactured in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and were commonly called “Pittsburgh wagons”. They were recognizable by their unique and creative construction. As the wagon bounced over uneven terrain the load would gravitate to the center. The slope of the bed made the goods pack tight.

Freighters used the canvas top to deceive officials in the Mexican Territory. They would hide cargo sandwiched into layer upon layer of canvas. The canvas from the wagon had many different uses post-journey. Visitors to Fort Larned will note the canvas covered flooring in the officers’ quarters. It was also used for ceilings, tents and tent repairs, and protective wrappings for fragile items. Eventually canvas would replace buffalo hides used on Indian tipis.

## Conestoga –Style Wagons

There were other manufactured wagons constructed much like the Conestoga that could hold 3,000 lbs. of cargo or more. These were referred to as freight wagons, or by the name of the manufacturer – Concord, Dearborn, and Jersey - to name a few. They probably replaced the Conestoga because their body style was simpler, making mass production cheaper. These wagons used more wood and less iron. The lighter the wagon the more goods you can pack into it. For decades Pennsylvania had a monopoly in wagon construction but by the 1840s that was no longer the case. Shops and factories were moving further west!



The original 1840s Conestoga wagon at the fort, located in the from Pennsylvania. Would you like to see another Conestoga built oric Site and by comparing the two wagons you will see the ighting years of the Santa Fe Trail.

## Shaping the Face of a Nation

The freight wagons all across the wide Plains helped shape the face of a young nation as much as the railroad did! Thousands witnessed a new land as they walked and rode alongside their wagons. Settlers, entrepreneurs, and traders on the Santa Fe Trail crossed rugged lands with the hope of a new and better life.

Freight wagons established a strong base of commerce in the new territories and forged ahead in the saga of the American West.