

# Great Sand Dunes

National Park Service  
U.S. Department of the Interior

Great Sand Dunes  
National Park and Preserve



## The Old Spanish National Historic Trail



Bundles of heavy woolen blankets - some patterned, some plain - were carried on mules. Photo courtesy Old Spanish Trail Association.

As you gaze across the broad San Luis Valley floor west of the dunes, imagine for a moment it is the 1830s. In the bright sun you see a long mule train slowly plodding across sandy grasslands, carrying heavy bundles of woolen blankets. These mules were being led by ordinary people who were making a long, arduous journey through some of the roughest wilderness in North America. As these weary sojourners and animals trudged north, what might they have felt when massive sand dunes appeared ahead of them, piled up against the Sangre de Cristo Mountains?

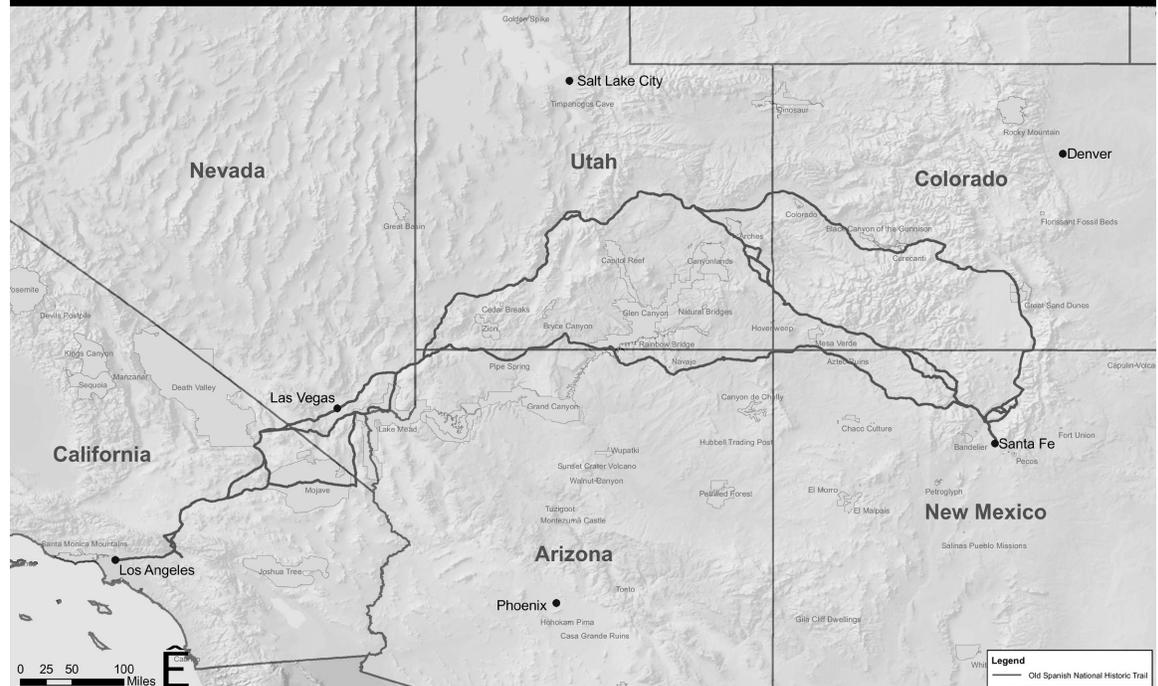
Crossing through sand, grasslands, and wetlands on the San Luis Valley floor was only a small part of a strenuous trek from Santa Fe to California that also included river crossings, canyons, and steep mountain passes. With the threat of raiders, horse thieves, illness, injury, thirst, and hunger, these expeditions reflect tremendous determination and strength that has inspired people for a century and a half.

### A Trail to Experience

Established by Congress in 2002 as America's 15th national historic trail, the Old Spanish Trail route spans six western states, including many locations accessible to the public. At Great Sand Dunes National Park, State Highway 150 and County Lane 6 on the southern border of the park follow or cross some of the Old Spanish Trail routes.

Because of sandy, shifting soils, no traces of the trail are visible on the ground near the park today. However, traces of some of the trail's seasonally varied routes through the valley have been observed from the air. Historical and visual evidence indicates one route passing by Indian Spring, through what is now part of Great Sand Dunes National Park.

### Old Spanish National Historic Trail



National Park Service Map

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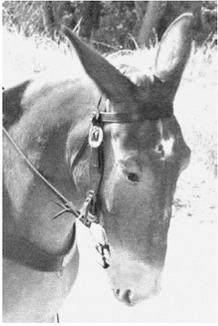
## Early Origins of the Trail

Before human presence, elk, bison, deer and bighorn sheep had established paths through the mountains and valleys of the West. American Indian tribes utilized some of these in making their own trails.

The travelers of the Old Spanish Trail followed a few of these American Indian trails, and pioneered new paths as needed. Many of these routes are still used today, as hiking trails or highways.

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## A Route is Established



Mules were the animal of choice to negotiate rocky canyons, sand, and steep mountains. NPS Archives

Handcrafted woolen blankets were being produced in what is now New Mexico in the 18th and 19th centuries, but there was little profit from the sale of them there. Foresighted traders knew that they could be traded for needed livestock in California, but the way there was long and treacherous. Some attempts to establish a route began as early as 1776, as the United States was birthed as a nation. In 1826 explorer Jedediah Smith pioneered a trail southwest from the Great Salt Lake into California, but there was still no known viable route known all the way from Santa Fe to California.

Late in 1829, Antonio Armijo finally discovered a complete route, leading the first caravan from Abiquiú, New Mexico, to Los Angeles. For the following 20 years, Hispanic and Anglo traders established variants of that first route, including a north branch through the San Luis Valley.

These early travelers frequently traded with Indian tribes along the way, although some groups attacked and stole horses or other goods. Established primarily for trade, the trail also felt the footsteps of many American Indian tribes, soldiers, and settlers looking to homestead farther west.

The Old Spanish Trail eventually became part of a trail network that also included the Santa Fe Trail and El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro. Santa Fe remained the hub for most southwestern trails.

In 1848 the United States acquired most of what are now the southwestern states of this nation. Other routes to California were found, and use of the Old Spanish Trail declined. While some sections are still used today as roads or trails, many visible portions of the trail began to fade back into grasses, soils, and sands.

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## Research and Protection

In 1994, the Old Spanish Trail Association was established “to study, preserve, and protect The Old Spanish Trail.” This non-profit organization has worked in cooperation with the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and local agencies to try to learn more about the trail, and to educate the public about this historic resource. Through the efforts of this group and many other agencies and citizens, Congress established The Old Spanish National

Historic Trail in 2002 to interpret the trail’s little-known history, and to preserve the scenic and cultural resources associated with the trail.

The complex task of coordinating interpretation, curation, and resource protection across six states has just begun. The National Park Service and Bureau of Land Management are responsible for administration of the historic trail.

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## For More Information

Visit the official National Park Service website for Old Spanish National Historic Trail at [www.nps.gov/olsp](http://www.nps.gov/olsp). The latest planning efforts for the national trail, and basic information about its history are available on this site.



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An official passport program cancellation stamp is available at many locations along the trail, including Great Sand Dunes.

The Old Spanish Trail Association maintains an in-depth website at [www.oldspanishtrail.org](http://www.oldspanishtrail.org), including photos, history, detailed maps, and suggested books and links.