

Trail Remnants

Sometimes muddy, often dusty, the shared track of the Santa Fe, Oregon, and California trails once passed this way. Teamsters created this route, urging heavy freight wagons to and from New Mexico. In the 1840s-50s, pioneer families traveled this part of the Santa Fe Trail as they started west to Oregon and California.

Here travelers found an ideal camp, with water and good grazing. By the late 1840s, a stage stop called “New Santa Fe” offered several amenities: a post office, two general stores, an inn, a shoe shop, drugstore, blacksmith, and saloon. It was a last stop before entering Indian territory.

The wheels of heavy wagons, thousands of hooves, and the feet of generations of people wore deep ruts into the land. The rolling, grass-filled swales in front of you are the last hints in this area of these famous western roads.



At six o'clock we reached... (Little Santa Fe), which marks the separation between civilized and uncivilized life. Beyond were the vast plains... little known to the white man—the home of the Indian—land of the buffalo.

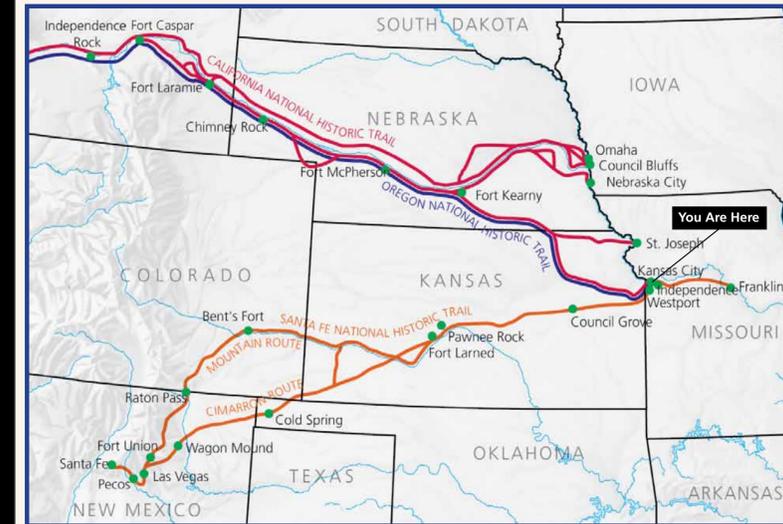
—William G. Johnson, Overland to California, 1849

Illustration by Charles Goslin, 1997

Three Trails at New Santa Fe

Santa Fe Trail teamsters, hauling hardware, cloth, furs, and silver, usually walked alongside large ox- or mule-drawn freight wagons. Space was too precious to allow a rider.

Oregon and California Trail emigrants used smaller farm wagons laden with food, tools, and family heirlooms for their one-way trip. There was no room for passengers. Only a sick child might bear the rough ride.



The Santa Fe Trail opened trade barriers from Missouri to Mexico, providing economic inroads into America that tendered riches all the way to Europe. Loaded with goods, emigrant wagon trains surged onto the Oregon and California trails—tramping across plains and over the Continental Divide toward the promise of wealth and land.

...we drove 20 miles to New Santa Fe... on the western borders of Missouri, where we encamped upon the prairie. The mail company had an agent... with whom the passengers found accommodations... There was an abundance of good cheer.

—W. W. Davis, 1853 to Santa Fe