Santa Fe National Historic Trail
National Park Service

City of Santa Fe
State Historic Preservation Division

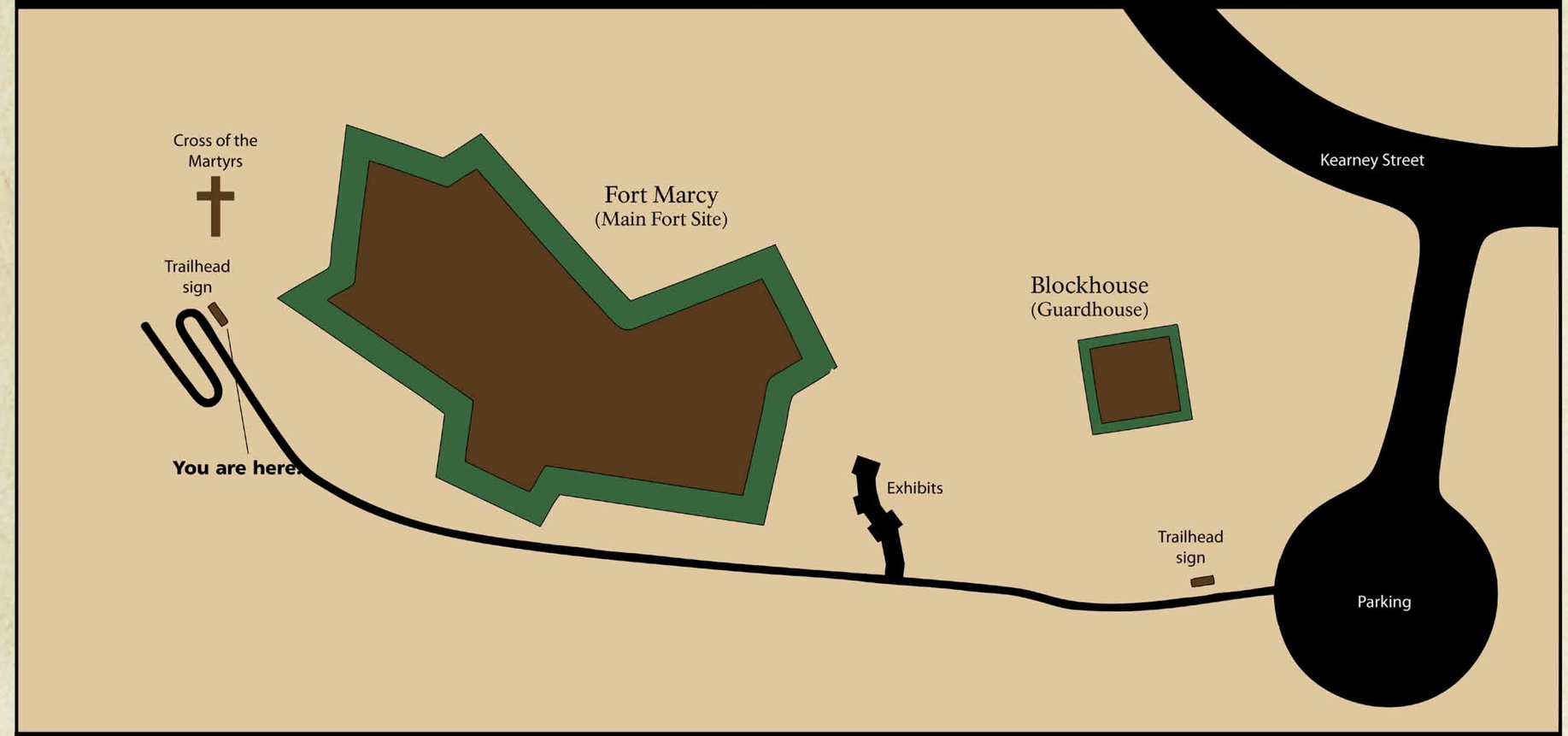
Welcome to Historic Fort Marcy

Fort Marcy was constructed in 1846 at the outset of the Mexican-American War by the U.S. Army following the invasion and capture of the Mexican city of Santa Fe. The Americans built a fort atop this hill to protect the troops in the case of an uprising. The fort provided a clear view of Santa Fe and sent a message to its residents that the city had a new government.

The fort is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the State Register of Cultural Properties. Fort Marcy has been certified as a site along the Santa Fe National Historic Trail.

Follow the sidewalk to learn more about the history and construction of Fort Marcy.

Historic Fort Marcy at Prince Park



Prince Park was named for L. Bradford Prince, Governor of New Mexico from 1889 to 1893.
Historic Fort Marcy at Prince Park is managed by the City of Santa Fe.

Fort Marcy was designed as a "star fort," which allowed defenders to fire at attackers from multiple directions. You will see the ruins as you walk through the park.

This exhibit was made possible through a partnership between the City of Santa Fe, New Mexico State Historic Preservation Division, and the National Park Service. Working to foster the appreciation and preservation of the Santa Fe National Historic Trail, the National Park Service works with federal, state, and local agencies; American Indian tribes; non-government organizations; and private landowners.

Learn more: nps.gov/safe or santafetrail.org

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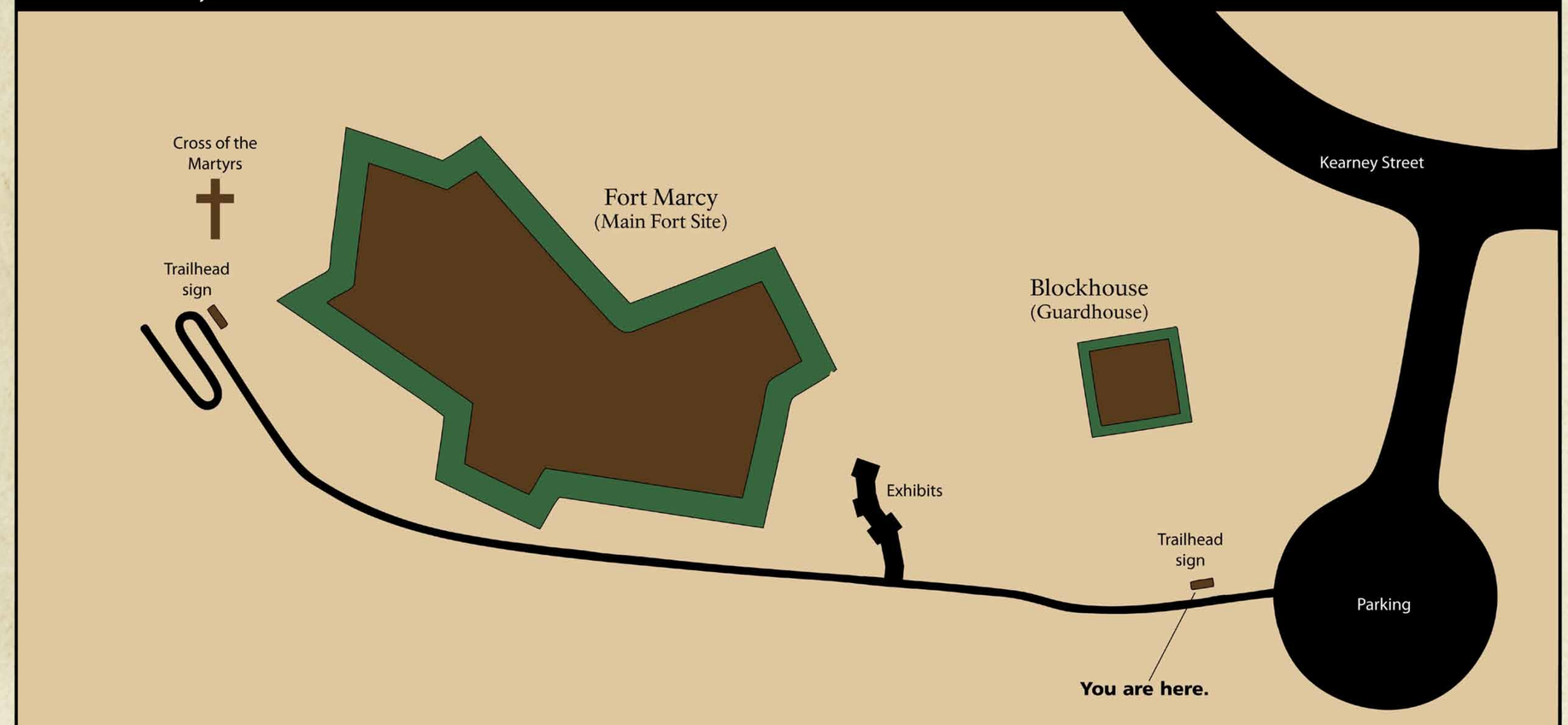

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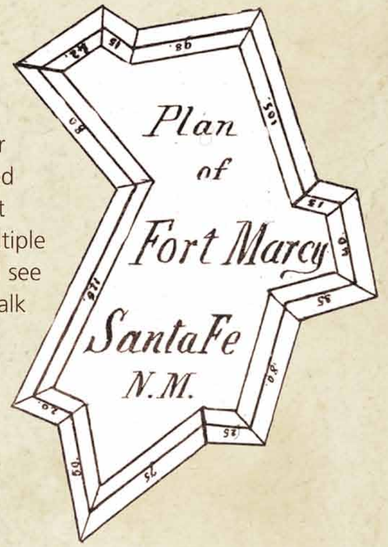

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Invasion of Santa Fe

U.S. President James K. Polk assigned the invasion of New Mexico and California to General Stephen Watts Kearny, who marched the Army of the West into Santa Fe on August 18, 1846. Governor and Commanding General Manuel Armijo had publicly demanded resistance to U.S. invasion, but he and his troops retreated in the face of Kearny's 1,500-man army.

Soon New Mexicans took up arms. They were afraid that the Americans would take away their land, culture, and religion. Some incidents, such as a skirmish between a U.S. military patrol and New Mexicans southeast of Las Vegas, left men dead. An uprising in Taos by New Mexicans and Pueblo Indian men resulted in the death of the appointed governor, Charles Bent.

"The whole population appears rife for the insurrection."

Captain J. R. Hendley, January 23, 1847

This 1846 illustration of La Parroquia, the parish church which became St. Francis Cathedral Basilica, shows Fort Marcy in the background. This is one of the few images of the fort.

Courtesy of the Yale Collection of Western Americana, image no. Zc54 848uqa

Symbolism of the Fort

Fort Marcy was never intended to be a permanent fortification. If needed, it was a place where troops could retreat, but its larger goal was to serve as a symbol of American military control. From the fort on the hill, all of Santa Fe was within gunshot.

The American military post and U.S. flag were a constant reminders to the New Mexicans of a foreign military presence, but the center of military activity was at the Post of Santa Fe. Located between the fort and the Palace of the Governors, it included the hospital, gardens, storehouses, and headquarters.

Abandonment of the Fort

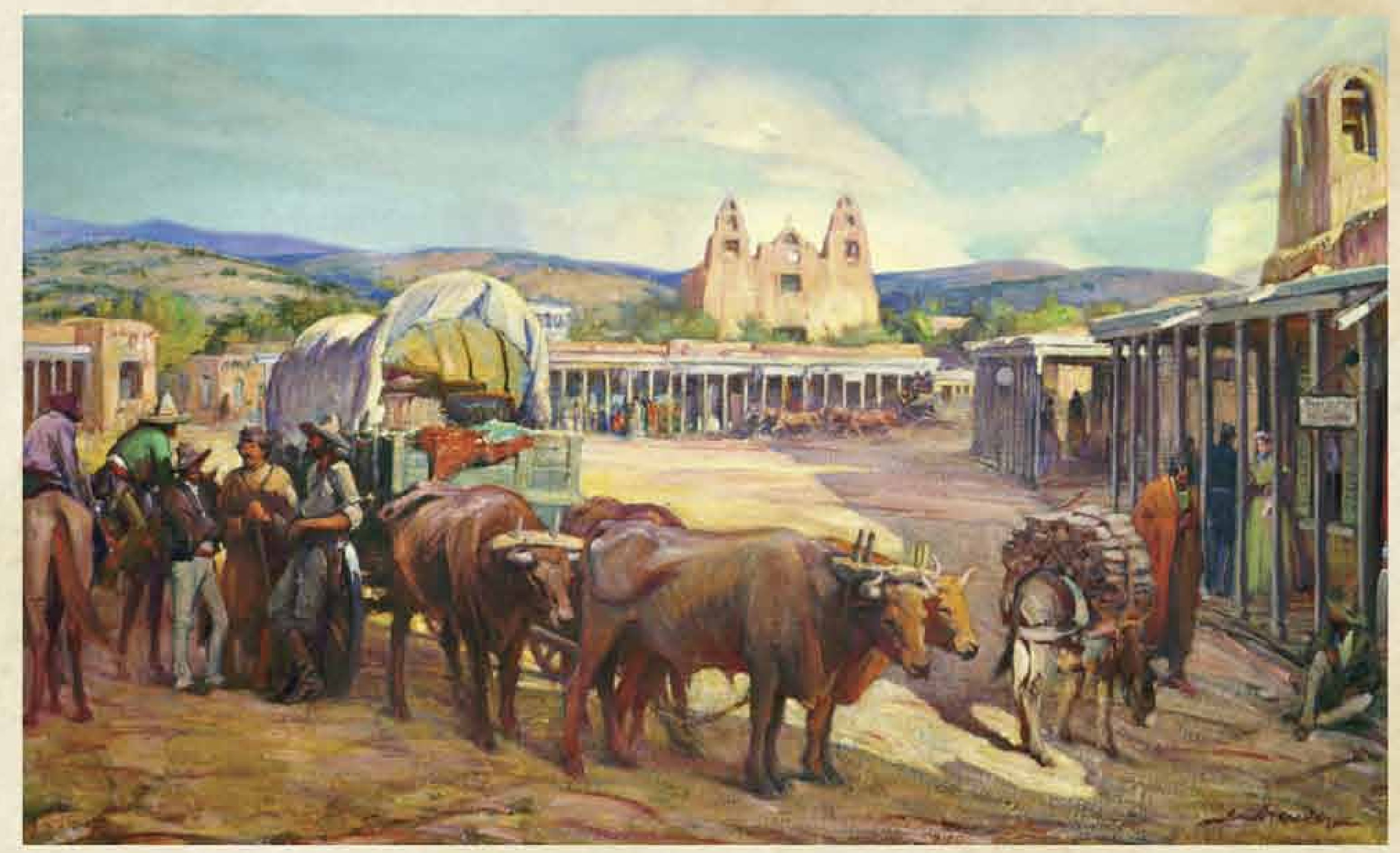
In November 1847, the artillery from Fort Marcy was moved to Army buildings closer to the plaza. In 1856, a traveler noted "the ruins of old Fort Marcy."

Witnessed from Fort Marcy Hill

You are standing on Fort Marcy hill, a site of human occupation for a thousand years. Puebloan Indians and their ancestors lived here. Between 1600 and 1680, the hill was common land for Santa Fe colonists. The Spanish built a small fort on a hill nearby to house the *guardia de prevencion*, the city guard. In 1846, early in the Mexican-American War, the hill became a haven for U.S. Army soldiers, who were threatened by local people opposing American occupation.

Turbulent times were seen from this hill above Santa Fe. The election of President James K. Polk in 1844 pushed the United States towards a policy of westward expansion. While the U.S. government annexed Texas and looked west at the Mexican provinces of New Mexico and California, Mexico refused to negotiate. Following a skirmish between Mexican troops and an American mounted patrol in a disputed area along the Texas-Mexico border, President Polk declared war on May 13, 1846.

This 1836 map shows Santa Fe and the Mexican province of New Mexico well beyond the border of the United States. A great deal changed during the following 14 years. In 1845 Texas became part of the United States. The next year New Mexico joined the Union. By 1850 California was in the U.S. and the present-day U.S.-Mexico border was established.



"The End of the Trail," by Gerald Cassidy, depicting Northen Mexico, 1836.
Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA), negative no. 6977

Three Trails to Santa Fe

The hustle and bustle of trade unfolding on the plaza below could be witnessed from Fort Marcy hill. Before 1821, the 1,600-mile El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (Royal Road of the Interior), from Mexico City to Santa Fe, had served as Santa Fe's only legal trading route and communications link with the outside world.

After Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, early traders like William Becknell discovered that there were big profits to be made by bringing trade goods over the 900-mile Santa Fe Trail that stretched between Missouri and Santa Fe. Soon, New Mexico merchants traveled over a third route, the Old Spanish Trail, trading wool for horses and mules in California.

With travel along three trails, Santa Fe became a major trading hub. Two-way commerce along the trails fostered international business, because merchants now had connections from Mexico to New York, London, and Paris. Ultimately, the Santa Fe Trail also became a major route for the American invasion of Mexico.

The Blockhouse Ruins

The large mounds you see on the rise to the right are the eroded remains of the walls of Fort Marcy's blockhouse. It was built in 1846-1847 on the highest place on Fort Marcy hill for use as a guardhouse and soldiers' quarters. Unlike the fort, blockhouse designer Gilmer ordered that the walls be constructed of sun-dried adobe bricks made in town by local workmen. The timber ceiling was covered with 2 to 3 feet of dirt. The interior walls were finished with white lime plaster.

"Nothing was left of Fort Marcy. Even the adobe walls had fallen. It was strange to stand there that evening where I had played more than eighty years before. Was it imagination, or did I hear voices? The half-remembered voices of children...or was it the sound of wind sighing down over the mesa?"

Marion Sloan Russell, 1850s resident of Santa Fe, revisited the city during the 1930s.

Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

Pictured are the ruins of an adobe building. After construction at Fort Marcy ceased in 1847, rain and wind began to wear away the high dirt walls. By the mid-1850s, children had claimed the fort as a playground, where they could conduct pretend battles among the ruins. By the 1880s, world-renowned Southwest archaeologist and Santa Fe resident Adolph F. Bandelier was intrigued with the ruins. He reported on his visits to the fort, and made detailed notes about the artifacts he discovered.

By the time this photo was taken in 1912 the old fort walls had become low mounds.
Courtesy of the Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

"Fort Marcy had been in ruins many years, but an old two-story building still stood there. Inside the building was another smaller one that was supposed to have been used by sharp shooters during the Mexican War. Erosion was opening many of the graves..."

Marion Sloan Russell

First Army Fort in the Southwest

Named for then-Secretary of War William L. Marcy, Fort Marcy was the first U.S. Army fort in the American Southwest. Commanding officer Brigadier General Stephen Watts Kearny directed Lieutenant William Emory to find the most "commanding" site in town for construction of a fort to protect the troops in the event of a local uprising. The fort also reminded New Mexicans of the power of their new American rulers.

The completed Fort Marcy was never garrisoned by soldiers nor saw the firing of a single shot. By the end of 1847, the guns had been removed and the adobe walls and other features began the slow process of erosion that continues today.

Courtesy Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA), negative no. 7605

General Stephen Watts Kearny

Even though thousands of people passed through Santa Fe in the mid-1800s, there are few photographs, illustrations, or other clues about the early years at Fort Marcy. What little we know about its construction comes from U.S. Army reports from officers such as Kearny, soldiers' letters home, and travelers' journal entries.

Fort Marcy as it may have appeared in 1846-1847. The main fort and its dry moat was built first, then the platform for gun emplacements, storage magazine for ammunition, and blockhouse. Today you can see the eroded remnants of the fort and blockhouse.

Building Fort Marcy

Lieutenant J. F. Gilmer, designer of Fort Marcy, first determined the shape of the fort, and then excavated a dry moat around it to shelter troops from enemy fire. Dirt from the moat was used to build nine-foot-high ramparts—earthen embankments topped with adobe walls to shield troops from attack. You can see deep depressions in the ground beyond this exhibit where the moat was located. The long, raised mounds that you can see on this end of the hill are all that remain of the ramparts.

The fort was built using rammed-earth construction. Troops hauled water up the hill, dampening soil whenever 10 inches were added to the walls. They then walked on top of it to compact each layer. The adobe walls on top contained pieces of broken pottery, bits of worked stone, and corn cobs from the hill's prehistoric occupation. Because there was no milled timber for gun emplacements, Gilmer reported that he intended to place cannons on "earthen platforms made firm by pounding."