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THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE FUR TRADE IN THE
AMERICAN SOUTHWEST, 1821-1840

by

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A plan-B thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

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in

History

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THE INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE FUR TRADE IN THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST, 1821-1840

Introduction

Careful study of the published history of the American Southwest reveals that historians have not provided a comprehensive analysis of the infrastructure that enabled the fur trade in the American Southwest to thrive. Analysis of that infrastructure unveils an amalgamation of blended characteristics derived from the French, British, and American systems along with characteristics derived from the Southwest's own evolutionary development over time and space. This paper will detail and explain the shared characteristics of the Southwestern fur trade's infrastructure, emphasizing the animals, people, depots, and supplies, during the era of the soft fur trade, which dealt primarily with beaver from 1821 to 1840. This work will show how that infrastructure was significant to the success of the Southwestern Fur Trade.

In order to avoid conflicting interpretations of phrases such as "the Southwest," it is important to define some terms. For this work the Southwest is defined as the northern provinces of Old Mexico prior to the Mexican-American War. This includes lands south of the 42nd parallel, specifically as a region entailing modern day California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as Wyoming west of the Continental Divide. Infrastructure is defined as "the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities needed for the operation of a society or enterprise."¹ This study will advance a new theoretical approach to history by looking at the past as a series of infrastructures or components that allowed for, in this case, a fur trade to exist. This work will also highlight a region of rich and detailed history often left underexplored by historians.

¹ Oxford Dictionaries, "infrastructure," accessed August 27, 2013, oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/infrastructure?q=Infrastructure+.

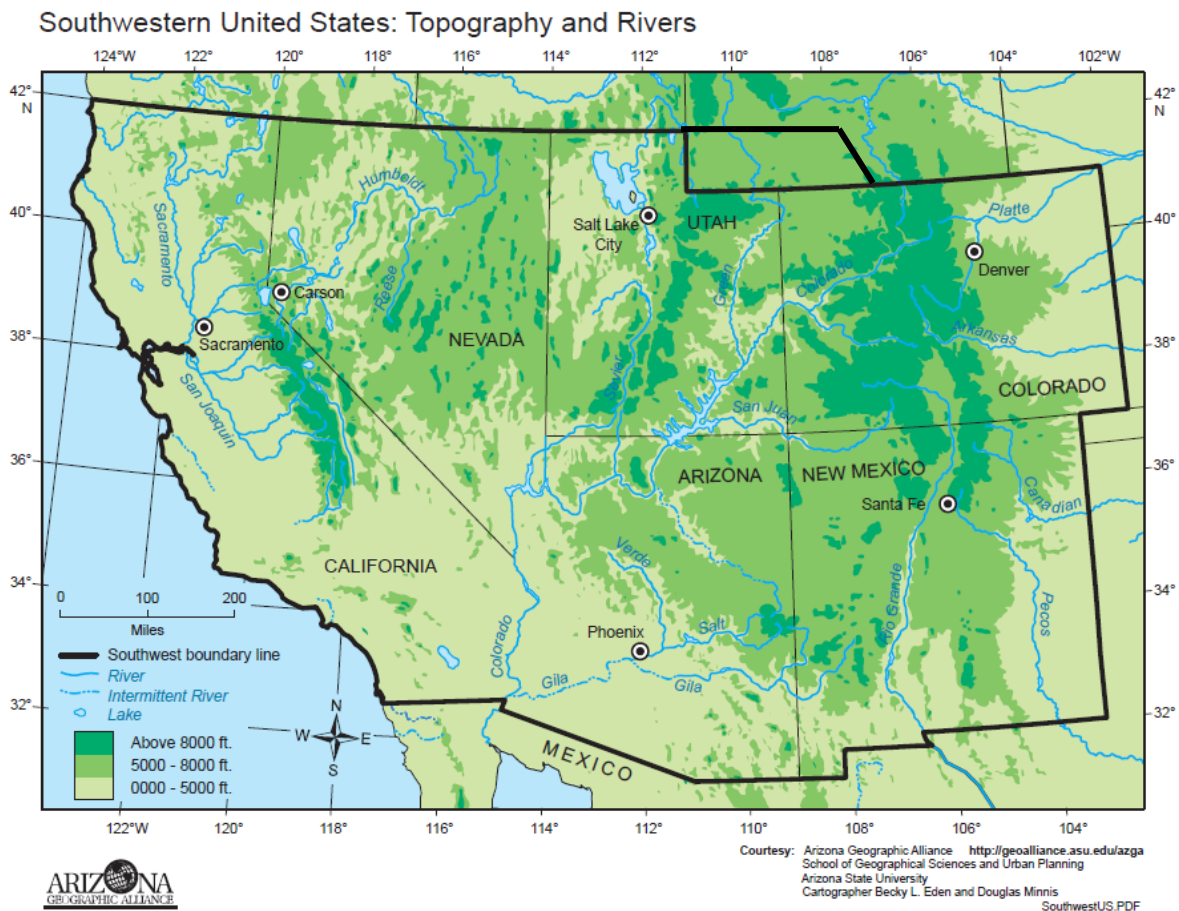


Figure 1. General Reference Map of the Southwest, adapted by author. Courtesy of the Arizona Geographical Alliance.

Spain, Mexico, and the Foreign Influx

The focus on wealth produced by silver and gold mining in North America was Spain's primary economic endeavor from the sixteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Spain's interest in fur was minimal with the exception of New Mexico. The Spanish fur trade targeted the coarse furs of animals like bison, elk, and deer. Due to few gold and silver deposits in New Mexico, the coarse fur trade grew in importance to the Spanish Colonists. Spanish missions doubled as trading posts, and a yearly trade-fair with the Spanish and Indians took place in Santa Fe starting in the early part of the eighteenth century. As the trade's importance increased,

Spaniards ventured farther north, penetrating the southern Rockies and the Great Basin region. Just prior to Mexican Independence, Spain's main export out of New Mexico was coarse fur. Spanish traders sent these furs south into the interior provinces reaching Mexico City and port cities such as Veracruz where they could be shipped overseas. The Spanish however, not only overlooked the economic benefit that the soft furs such as beaver could provide, but lacked the knowledge to procure such fur. In 1803, Governor Fernando Chacón wrote "this art [of trapping] is not practiced for no one is skilled or interested in it."² This was not the case in the United States, however, where the trade in soft furs increased rapidly due in large part to two centuries of experience. This Southwest trade in soft furs is the focus of this work.

Foreigners saw the value in trading furs in the Southwest while it was under the control of Spain. Many penetrated the northern Spanish border in an attempt to exploit the untouched soft fur industry and to explore the region for the first time. Men such as Baptiste La Lande, James Purcell, Zebulon Pike, Manuel Lisa, August P. Chouteau, Jules de Mun, and Etienne Provost entered New Mexico in the early nineteenth century while under Spanish rule. The Spanish however, thwarted foreign attempts to control the soft fur trade.³

Mexico's victory over Spain in 1821 resulted in Mexico's Independence, changing the dynamic of the Southwest.⁴ Mexico's desire to build a relationship with the United States and to allow foreigners into Mexican territory resulted in a flood of newcomers into the region. This

² As cited in David J. Weber, *The Taos Trappers: The Fur Trade in the Far Southwest, 1540-1846* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1982), 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 32-50.

⁴ It is important to note that the term "Southwest" emerged after the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848 as a reference to the southwestern part of the United States. Prior to 1848, the American Southwest was referred to as Mexico's Northern provinces, and prior to 1821, the region was known as Spain's Northern provinces. Prior to the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, Spain had claimed all lands west of the Mississippi River and north to the 42nd parallel. The treaty settled dual land claims made by the United States and Spain after the U.S. purchased the Louisiana Territory in 1803 from France. In order to be consistent throughout this paper and current with today's regional vernacular, the term "Southwest" will be used to identify the lands south of the 42nd parallel, including modern day California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, as well as Wyoming west of the Continental Divide, while under Spanish, Mexican, or American rule.

hugely increased trade, particularly after the opening of the Santa Fe Trail. These events resulted in a viable trade in soft furs in the American Southwest.

While Mexican citizens had little or no knowledge of the soft fur trade or the skill to procure such furs, American citizens did and therefore came to the Southwest. The influx of Americans in Mexico was in large part due to popular advertisements and the belief that one could make a profit. Newspapers such as the *Missouri Intelligencer* reported the movements of trappers and traders in and out of the Southwest from Missouri.⁵ Augustus Storrs appointed consul to Santa Fe in 1825, wrote a report to Thomas H. Benton about the caravan trade in New Mexico and the economic success of those involved.⁶ Benton specifically inquired of Storrs, “What amount in silver, mules, and furs, are returned in a given period—say for the year 1824?” Storrs replied:

In responding to this query, I shall include all the returns for merchandise, transported to Mexico, during the present year [1824], although these returns will not be complete until the year 1825. One company conveying 18,000 dollars worth of goods, did not leave this state until the 10th of November, ultimo; consequently, the returns will not take place until the next summer. Agreeably to this construction of the question, the returns, at the lowest estimates, will amount to 180,000 dollars. They consist principally in Spanish dollars and bullion. Exclusive of this, furs, taken in that country, by Americans, have already been returned, amounting, by actual sales, to 10,044 dollars.⁷

The United States in its effort to “promote a direct and friendly intercourse between the citizens of the United States and those of the Mexican Republic”⁸ by making a road from Missouri to New Mexico also facilitated movement into the Southwest. Unfortunately, the Republic of Mexico failed to control foreign immigration not only in New Mexico, but also Texas. Because

⁵ See for example, “From the Santa Fe Expedition,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, September 3, 1822, 3; “Santa Fe of New Mexico,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, September 17, 1822, 3; “—,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, October 8, 1822, 2; “Mr. Floyd’s Speech—the Santa Fe trade, &c.,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, February 18, 1823, 3; “Santa Fe,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, May 13, 1823, 3; and *Missouri Intelligencer*, June 17, 1823, 3.

⁶ Augustus Storrs, “Trade between Missouri & Mexico,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, January 15, 1825, 312-316.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

⁸ Treaty between the United States of America and the Great and Little Osage Tribes of Indians at Council Grove, August 10, 1825 as cited in Robert G. Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men: The Trappers and Fur Traders of the Southwest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), 134.

most foreigners in Mexico were from the United States, their American ideals pushed them to question Mexican law and rule. This led to rebellion and war. Just twenty-seven years after independence, Mexico lost much of its northern territory, including Texas and the the Mexican Cession.

Despite the Mexican government's limited ability to enforce laws, it did, however, increase its citizenship and conversions to Catholicism. To become a Mexican citizen, the government required foreigners to (1) live within Mexico's provinces, (2) convert to Catholicism, (3) learn to speak Spanish, and (4) swear allegiance to Mexico. After 1824 New Mexican officials issued trapping licenses only to its citizens who were baptized members of the Catholic Church. This was due to Mexico's Constitution of 1824 which recognized only one religion, Roman Catholicism.⁹ In order to ease their ability to move in and out of Mexican territory and to acquire trapping licenses, foreign trappers often became Mexican citizens by fulfilling the four governmental requirements.¹⁰ Those of French descent, typically Catholic to begin with, merely had to swear allegiance to Mexico. Antoine and Louise Robidoux as well as Ceran St. Vrain did just that. Others were literally baptized into an unknown faith and swore allegiance to a country to which they had little or no loyalty. Men such as Ewing Young, Richard Campbell, Julian Wilson, Richard Exter, William Wolfskill, James Baird and David Waldo are but a few examples.

Citizenship however, was not guaranteed. Manuel de Alvarez entered Santa Fe in 1825 with French trappers and traders from St. Louis. For one reason or another, his citizenship solicitation never came to fruition. Inquiring about this, he wrote from Santa Fe on November 27, 1826 to the Mexican government:

⁹ David J. Weber, *The Mexican Frontier: 1821-1846* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982), 22.

¹⁰ Weber, *The Taos Trappers*, 184.

Your Excellency . . . having presented two applications . . . asking for papers of naturalization of this Republic . . . and not having been successful in such purpose. . . I am setting forth in this [a third attempt at citizenship] and will say that I address this to Your Excellency, knowing your solicitude and kindness in such matters, that Your Excellency may be pleased to decide what your petitioner requests.¹¹

Even with Governor Baca's endorsement, stating that Alvarez "manifested great zeal for the Catholic faith,"¹² Spanish born Alvarez could not obtain Mexican citizenship.

Christopher "Kit" Carson, a well-known figure of the American Southwest, spent years in the province but did not become a Mexican Citizen. He did embrace the Catholic faith. This may have been due in large part to a beautiful, fifteen year old Hispanic woman he later married.¹³ Others were not so willing to accept Catholicism and rejected any attempts at conversion. One such example comes from an account by James O. Pattie. After the successful completion of a job in California, Pattie received the following notice. This he had translated from Spanish to English:

I certify, that James O. Pattie has vaccinated all the Indians and whites on this coast, and to recompense him for the same, I give the said James O. Pattie my obligation for one thousand head of cattle, and land to pasture them; that is, 500 cows and 500 mules. This he is to receive after he becomes a Catholic, and a subject of this government. Given in the mission of St. Francisco on the 8th of July, in the year 1829. JOHN CABORTES¹⁴

When Pattie realized that the Mexican priest had included a coerced conversion to Catholicism as part of his payment, he could hardly contain his anger, despite knowing his life was in the hands of the Mexicans surrounding him. The priest sensed his displeasure and condescendingly asked him if he was unhappy with the deal. After much thought and a clear idea of the consequences, Pattie decided he would not hold back his true feelings. He wished to be in the

¹¹ As cited in Ralph E. Twitchell, *The Spanish Archives of New Mexico: Facsimile of the Original 1914 Edition*. Vol. 1. (Santa Fe: Sunstone Press, 2008) 339.

¹² *Ibid.*, 341.

¹³ Christopher Carson and De Witt C. Peters, *Kit Carson's Autobiography*. Ed. Milo M. Quaife, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 68. See also Hampton Sides, *Blood and Thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007), 9.

¹⁴ James O. Pattie, *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie*. Ed. Reuben G. Thwaites and Timothy Flint, (Cincinnati: John H. Wood, 1831), 286-287.

United States, where a man could count on honest payment for a job well done. Then the priest asked Pattie, “you regard my proposing that you should become a Catholic, as the expression of an unjust and whimsical desire!?”¹⁵ Pattie replied frankly:

I told him ‘yes, that I did; and that I would not change my present opinions for all the money his mission was worth; and moreover, that before I would consent to be adopted into the society and companionship of such a band of murderers and robbers, as I deemed were to be found along this coast, for the pitiful amount of one thousand head of cattle, I would suffer death.’¹⁶

Not all foreigners entering the American Southwest wanted to become Catholic, despite the apparent privileges stemming from a very Catholic government in control of the region. Over the course of Mexican control of the Southwest, from 1821 to 1848, foreigners, whether through legal compliance or outright defiance, found ways in which they could participate in the lucrative trade in beaver fur. The culmination of events that took place in the Southwest—the success of the coarse fur trade in northern New Spain; Spain’s loss of control in North America; Mexico’s liberation from Spanish control; and Mexico’s solicitation for Americans to enter Mexico—combined to set in motion the necessity of a fur trade infrastructure in that region.

The Infrastructure

The Southwest fur trade’s framework stemmed from other fur trade systems, namely the French, English, and Americans. The French fur traders in North America relied primarily on Native Americans to procure fur. They constructed trading posts along rivers and at locations frequented by natives so they could conveniently exchange furs for goods. French traders stored the furs until they were shipped on water-ways, or navigable rivers, to other locations.¹⁷

¹⁵ Ibid., 287.

¹⁶ Ibid., 287-288.

¹⁷ William R. Swagerty, “Marriage and Settlement Patterns of the Rocky Mountain Trappers and Traders.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 11, no. 2 (April, 1980): 162.

Jockeying for control of fur rich North America, the French and British systems developed in the same manner. In essence, the British system mirrored that of the French. In 1754, France and Great Britain's clash over the Ohio River Valley led to a nine year struggle, known by North Americans as the French and Indian War. The British victory over France, sealed with the Treaty of Paris of 1763, gave Britain control of the vast lands west of the Appalachian Mountains and north into Canada and therefore the fur trade therein. However, the British still relied on the fur traders of French ancestry that remained in that region. Many French fur traders became English citizens and retained their prewar employment now under the British Hudson's Bay Company or the North West Fur Company. These *engagés*, a French term used to denote a company employee, obtained fur through trade from Native Americans or by trapping. Most *engagés* were of French descent. Those who were not often married into French fur trade families. Like the French, the British constructed forts where their hired men could drop off the season's catch, resupply, rest, and return to the field to harvest more fur. Trappers and traders working for British companies relied on river systems as water-highways to transfer stored furs from their forts to coastal cities and overseas.¹⁸

In 1775, Great Britain was once again at war in North America, this time with her own colonies. Patriots led by George Washington's Continental Army triumphed. A second Treaty of Paris in 1783 gave the United States control of vast amounts of land. Americans, like the French and British before them, began to benefit from the fur trade in the Ohio River Valley. Americans built trading posts, many of which were under the auspices of the United States government factory system, one of, if not the earliest efforts "on the part of the United States government to

¹⁸ John R. Bockstoe, *Furs and Frontiers in the Far North: The Contest among Native and Foreign Nations for the Bering Strait Fur Trade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 203-224.

conduct a business in competition with private industry.”¹⁹ After the mid-1820s American fur companies utilized a rendezvous system where trappers and traders gathered annually in the interior Rocky Mountain West to exchange peltries. Once exchanged, traders took the accumulated furs overland with pack trains and eventually wagons to cities such as St. Louis, thereby replacing river boats as transportation.²⁰

In the Southwest, once the Americans became involved after 1821, natives, *engagés*, and free trappers procured furs. Fur traders in the Southwest utilized forts and trading posts, while also attending the annual rendezvous hosted by American companies.²¹ Trappers and traders transported goods and furs overland via pack animals and eventually wagons.²² In the Southwest, the river systems (including the Colorado, San Juan, Salt, Gila, Verde, Rio Grande, and Pecos), supported a habitat that attracted and sustained fur bearing animals yet made large scale navigation impossible due to their rough waters and failure to connect to important and populated areas such as St. Louis.²³ The fur trade’s infrastructure in the American Southwest relied on four instrumental components—the animals, the people, the depots, and the supplies. These components directly influenced the evolutionary development of the fur trade in the American Southwest.

The Animals

Animals were an integral infrastructural component of the fur trade in the Southwest. The demand for fur caused trappers and hunters to seek out specific animals without which the fur

¹⁹ Ora Brooks Peake, *A History of the United States Indian Factory System, 1795-1822* (Whitefish, MT: Literary Licensing, LLC, 2012), 1. On March 3, 1795, under the leadership of the Washington Administration, the U.S. government created the first act that provided for the factory system. *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ John D. Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur: Antoine Robidoux and the Fur Trade of the Uinta Basin 1824-1844* (Vernal: Oakfield Publishing Company, 1996), 22. A further discussion on the factory system and the rendezvous system can be found in this paper under the side heading “Depots.”

²¹ Weber, *The Taos Trappers*, 212.

²² *Ibid.*, 8.

²³ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 27.

trade in the Southwest could not be viable. By 1821, as a new government took control, Americans, including many of French descent, entered Mexican territory with the focus of acquiring beaver fur.



Figure 2. American Beaver or *Castor Canadensis*. Photo taken by author.

Beaver was the most significant of the soft fur bearing animals in the Southwest due to the fur's ability to be felted into fashionable hats.²⁴ The demand for these hats created a need for beaver fur and lured adventurous men to rivers and streams throughout the West and deep into the Southwest. Acquiring beaver skins increased trappers and traders chances of making a profit. Their regard for how this affected the environment was not considered. James O. Pattie described the process by which trappers "trapped a river clear."

We floated about 30 miles, and in the evening encamped in the midst of signs of beavers. We set 40 traps, and in the morning of the 10th caught 36 beavers, an excellent night's hunt. We concluded from this encouraging commencement, to travel slowly, and in

²⁴ Mountain men also trapped mink, otter, martin, muskrat and other soft furs that could be sold for a profit, however, their significance does not compare to that of the beaver.

hunters' phrase, trap the river clear; that is, take all that could be allured to come to the bait.²⁵

Pattie experienced success many times throughout his expeditions. On one such hunt, the overabundance of beaver created the need for Pattie and his men to build another canoe to haul the profitable cargo. In his own words he recalled:

We continued to float slowly downwards, trapping beavers on our way almost as fast as we could wish. We sometimes brought in 60 in a morning. The river at this point is remarkably circuitous, and has a great number of islands, on which we took beavers. Such was the rapid increase of our furs, that our present crafts in a few days were insufficient to carry them, and we were compelled to stop and make another canoe.²⁶

Trapper journals are replete with information on their successes and failures of catching beaver. Jacob Fowler's rudimentary journal is no exception. From Sunday, April 14 to Saturday, April 27, 1822, Jacob Fowler recorded the number of beaver he caught on eleven out of the fourteen days. Those two weeks were not particularly prosperous, for he had only trapped eighteen beaver; nevertheless, it was important enough for him to record.²⁷

²⁵ Pattie, *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie*, 192-193.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁷ Jacob Fowler, *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*. Ed. Elliott Coues. (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1898), 132-134.



Figure 3. Beaver lodge in the Wasatch Mountains east of Farmington, Utah. Photo taken by author.

The procurement of beaver became much more than an economic benefit as men traversed an often harsh environment. In the Southwest, as in other regions with beaver habitat, the use of this animal was multifaceted. Beaver meat provided food and nourishment for trappers and traders of the Southwest. Pattie wrote, “We now took an ample abundance of beavers to supply us with meat, in consequence of our reduced numbers.”²⁸ On another adventure, after two days without food, Pattie wrote, “We roasted some of our beaver meat, and took food for the first time in forty-eight hours, that is to say, from the time we left our Indian friends, until we reached

²⁸ Pattie, *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie*, 187.

this water.”²⁹ Trappers also used the meat to foster healthy relationships among Native Americans as Pattie demonstrated in the following passage:

In the morning their attention and curiosity were again highly excited, when we brought in our beavers, which amounted in number to thirty-six. After we had finished skinning them, we left the ample supply of food furnished by the bodies of the beavers, in token of our friendship, to these Indians, and floated on.³⁰

Horses and mules used by Native Americans, trappers, and traders carried trade goods to various places across the Southwest and then hauled any acquired furs back to Santa Fe, Taos, or St. Louis. Towards the end of the era, wagon caravans, led by animals, reached many isolated places.³¹ These animals not only carried goods, but the very people involved in trapping and trading. “As riding and pack animals horses [and mules] were indispensable,” writes historian John D. Barton.³² Beasts of burden were a necessity for the fur trade in the Southwest, more so than other regions of North America where major water-ways were the common means by which to travel.

Similar to the beaver, personal accounts of fur trade participants detail the uses of horses and mules. Jacob Fowler alluded to the fact that he and his men relied upon their horses and mules as he wrote, “[we] determined to lay by on act of Wood and the Poor State of our Horses—We have all Readey lost 13 Horses and two mules and the Remainder Hardly fitt for use.”³³ Pattie, after a skirmish with Native Americans where he received a wound inflicted by an arrow, wrote with relief about how his injury was not fatal, and how lucky he and his party were to still have their horses. He stated, “The Indians had 28 killed.”³⁴ Pattie and his men fared much

²⁹ Ibid., 219.

³⁰ Ibid., 197-198.

³¹ Between 1825 and 1840, several rendezvous had wagon caravans enter the Rocky Mountains with supplies mainly from the western United States (i.e. St. Louis, Missouri), but also from northern Mexico (i.e. Santa Fe, New Mexico). See E. Rick Williams, “Wheels to Rendezvous,” *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* 4, (2010): 108-125.

³² Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 60.

³³ Fowler, *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*, 35.

³⁴ Pattie, *The Personal Narrative of James O. Pattie*, 163.

better and had only one fatality. “Luckily our horses were on an island in the river, or we should have lost every one of them.”³⁵ This loss, by the tone of this passage, would have been dire.

Trappers used horses and mules in diverse ways. Like the beaver, they ate the meat of beasts of burden. This however occurred only during times of great need. Pattie shared an account in his personal narrative of an emotional predicament in which he found himself. Suffering from the want of food after a long and hard ride, the party elected Pattie to put his horse down for the evening meal. Realizing others had done so in days previous, Pattie had no choice but to go ahead and dispatch his animal. Sadly he wrote:

I loved this horse, and he seemed to have an equal attachment for me. He was remarkably kind to travel, and easy to ride, and spirited too. When he stood tied in camp among the rest, if I came any where near him, he would fall neighing for me. When I held up the bridle towards him, I could see consent and good will in his eye.³⁶

After raising his gun to his horses face, Pattie found the task impossible. He offered a beaver skin to anyone willing to kill the animal. Quickly, a man took Pattie’s offer and shot the horse. Had this not have happened, Pattie realized, “we should all have perished with hunger.”³⁷

Another personal narrative, dictated by Kit Carson, reveals a story of how unexpectedly remarkable mules were. Unlike Pattie’s personal horse, Carson’s men spared his mule, for it was not want of meat, but water, that drove Carson and those he was with to battle death. The Southwest has great stretches of desert that had to be traversed in order to get to the beaver-rich rivers and streams. About to cross such a stretch of land, Carson’s party made preparations to bring water in what Carson referred to as “tanks.”³⁸ A guard watched the tanks so that no one in the group helped themselves to more than their share. The party allotted each man a small amount to curb the horrendous thirst. Finally, after four days, they found water. “Before we

³⁵ Ibid., 163.

³⁶ Ibid., 184.

³⁷ Ibid., 184.

³⁸ Carson and Peters. *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, 11.

reached it, the pack mules were strung along the road for several miles. They had smelled the water long before we had hopes of finding any, and all made the best use of the strength left them after their severe sufferings to reach it as soon as they could.”³⁹ Thanks to the mules’ keen sense of smell, Carson and the others came upon water. Once at the watering hole, the party lingered for two days. “It would have been impracticable to continue the march without giving the men and animals the rest which they so much required.”⁴⁰

In the Southwest horses and mules were an important trade item. With the Old Spanish Trail open after William Wolfskill’s expedition of 1830 to California, trappers and traders could more easily exchange furs or other goods for horses and mules and drive them east to New Mexico. There traders sold the horses and mules. Following the Santa Fe Trail to Missouri, the traders used the money accrued with the sale of horses and mules to buy items such as:

Cotton goods, consisting of coarse and fine cambrics, calicoes, domestic, shawls, handkerchiefs, steam-loom shirtings, and cotton hose. A few woolen goods, consisting of super blues, stroudings, pelisse cloths, and shawls, crapes, bombazettes, some light articles of cutlery, silk shawls, and looking glasses.⁴¹

Some traders also involved themselves in human trafficking, using Native Americans as slaves—men used for manual labor, woman often for sex.⁴² They took these items to New Mexico to sell. This pattern was not uncommon in the Southwest, and though the routes and particulars varied, many profited.⁴³

Traders did not always acquire horses and mules in California. Approximately twenty days after the rendezvous of 1837, Carson, along with seven other men met with [first name

³⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 12.

⁴¹ Storrs, “Trade between Missouri & Mexico,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, January 15, 1825, 313.

⁴² Joe Meek described this practice while witnessing Antoine Robidoux use his Indian wife as part of a gambling chip in a game of “hand.” Francis F. Victor, *The River of the West*, (Reprint, Missoula: Mountain Press Publishing Company, 1983), 261.

⁴³ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 141. See also Ray A. Billington, *The Far Western Frontier, 1830-1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), 42.

unknown] St. Clair's party on an expedition to trade with the Navajo Indians. "We procured thirty mules from them and returned to Brown's Hole. After our arrival [Philip] Thompson took the mules to South Fork of the Platte, where he disposed of them to [William] Sublette and [Louis] Vasques and returned with goods suitable for trading with the Indians."⁴⁴ The Southwest trade encompassed not only fur, but many other goods that often changed hands from California to New Mexico to Missouri and back. The fur trade in the Southwest was complex, its infrastructure derived from other systems. Animals provided the ability to profit and to transfer goods. Transportation and survival depended on these animals.

The People

A second important component to the infrastructure of the Southwest was the people involved in trapping and trading as well as those who drove them to the task. As various styles of beaver felt hats became fashionable and popular, sales increased and consumers drove hat makers to acquire more fur. This led entrepreneurs such as John Jacob Astor, William Becknell, Manuel Lisa, and William H. Ashley to organize fur trading companies. The founding of these companies created jobs that required men to traverse often harsh and hostile country. Others ventured out without affiliations to any company. They often formed unofficial parties of like-minded and equally driven men looking to profit off the beaver trade. These men called themselves free men or free trappers. Warren A. Ferris described an incident involving free trappers while on an expedition near the Green River. His men, he wrote, "were dispatched in different directions in quest of a party of hunters and trappers, called Free Men, from the circumstances of their not being connected with either of the rival Fur Companies, but holding

⁴⁴ Carson and Peters. *Kit Carson's Autobiography*, 54.

themselves at liberty to trade with one or all.”⁴⁵ Their furs, like those working for fur companies, ended up in markets on the east coast of the United States or in Europe to be turned into hats. The sale of hats such as these kept the fur trade alive and well in the Southwest for nearly two decades.

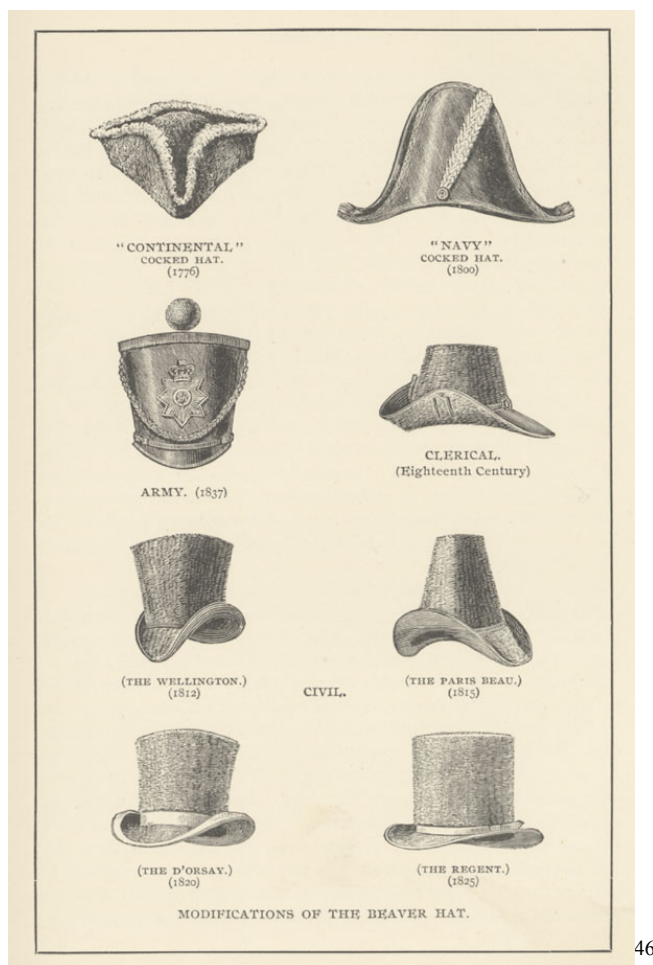


Figure 4. This illustration depicts various styles and fashions of beaver felt hats.

One of the reasons the beaver felt hat was popular for many years was due to the make-up of each individual beaver hair. Beaver are equipped with two types of hair—coarse outer

⁴⁵ Warren A. Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains: A Diary of Wanderings on the Sources of the Rivers Missouri, Columbia, and Colorado from February, 1830 to 1835*. Ed. Paul C. Phillips (Denver: The Old West Publishing Company, 1940), 40.

⁴⁶ Horace T. Martin, *Castorlogia: Or the History and Traditions of the Canadian Beaver* (London: Edward Stanford, 1892), 125.

guard hairs and a fluffy, oily and warm inner fur. The outer guard hairs were worthless and not used in the hat making process. The skin likewise was useless for beaver felt hats. Hatters sought the inner fur, preferably from the winter coat because it was thicker. The inner fur of the beaver is one of the softest of all fur bearing animals. On each individual hair of the inner fur are hundreds of scales that, when a beaver submerges underwater, cling to the scales of other hairs. That reaction and the naturally occurring beaver oil found in each beaver's oil glands, create a water resistant coat that allows a beaver to comfortably navigate frigid waters.



Figure 5. Photomicrograph of Beaver Fur Hair. Photo taken by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.⁴⁷

Hatters, like the beaver, utilized the hundreds of scales found on each hair of the inner fur. During the felting process, those scales facilitated the bonding needed in order to press a hat out of the felted fur. Other fur, such as wool, has many scales on each individual hair, but the softness of the beaver fur created a more elegant and itch-free final product that held its shape

⁴⁷ Douglas W. Deedrick and Sandra L. Koch, "Microscopy of Hair Part II: A Practical Guide and Manual for Animal Hairs," *Forensic Science Communications* 6, no. 3 (July, 2004): accessed November 14, 2013, http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/lab/forensic-science-communications/fsc/july2004/research/2004_03_research02.htm.

much longer under harsh conditions. Beaver fur felted more tightly, and unlike other felted fur, was comparable to fine chamois leather. Prior to the technological revolution and the process known as carroting, “the chemical treatment of fur to increase its felting quality,” beaver felt was the only sufficiently durable material known at the time to allow hatters’ to manufacture large brimmed hats.⁴⁸ The superiority of beaver fur for felting and the consumer demand for beaver felt hats sparked a North American hunt for that rodent that included the American Southwest.

It is unknown how many of the estimated total of 3,000 men who participated in the western fur trade made it into the Southwest.⁴⁹ However, a 1980 mixed methods study using quantitative and qualitative data by William R. Swagerty introduces interesting statistics that illustrate the evolutionary development of the fur trade in the American Southwest’s infrastructure. The study examined 312 mountain men, most of whom Swagerty deemed as trappers and traders. Nearly twenty-two percent began their careers in the Southwest typically in the mountains of Colorado and New Mexico.⁵⁰ Fifty-two of the trappers that entered the Southwest regularly married Spanish-American women either in Taos or Santa Fe. Nearly sixty-eight percent of all who settled in New Mexico, according to this study, married New Mexican women. No other fur trade system—French, British, or American, intermarried in such high numbers with non-Native women. Other systems that had high trapper-native unions benefitted in trade with the spouse’s tribe and allies, however, trappers and traders engaged in interethnic marriages to Spanish American and Mexican American women gained material wealth and acquired land.⁵¹

⁴⁸ J. F. Crean, “Hats and the Fur Trade.” *Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science* 28, no. 3 (August, 1962): 375.

⁴⁹ Harvey L. Carter and Marcia C. Spencer, “Stereotypes of the Mountain Men,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (January, 1975): 22.

⁵⁰ Swagerty, “Marriage and Settlement Patterns of the Rocky Mountain Trappers and Traders.” 162.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

Acquiring land and wealth in the Southwest allowed trappers and traders a more sedentary lifestyle. Land ownership and cultural similarities provided for a more stable marriage between New Mexican women and their trapper-trader husbands. Their marriages therefore tended to last longer than those between mountain men and Native Americans, a practice more common in the British, French, and American fur trade systems.⁵² Intermarriage was a culturally accepted norm among fur trade participants.⁵³

Marriage and family ties influenced the Southwest fur trade indirectly. Trappers and traders who married New Mexican women or Native Americans from the Southwest were more likely to continue to trade in that region. Two great examples of interracial marriage in the Southwest are Charles Bent and Kit Carson. Bent's Hispanic wife was María Ignacia Jaramillo. Ignacia, as she was called, was the widow of a Missourian with whom she had two daughters named Luna and Rumalda. Prior to marrying Bent, Luna passed away. The Bents however, raised Rumalda with the four children they had together—George, Virginia, Alfredo, and Teresina. George and Virginia died in infancy.⁵⁴ The Bents lived north of the plaza in Taos, in what became Bent's permanent home. He had a prosperous career as a fur trader in the Southwest and is most commonly associated with the fort that bears his name.⁵⁵

Carson had an Arapaho wife named Singing Grass. She was his first love and he adored her. They had two daughters, one named Adaline after Carson's favorite niece. They also called her by her Indian name, Prairie Flower. Singing Grass died due to a fever giving birth to their

⁵² S. Matthew Despain, forward to *Fur Trappers and Traders of the Far Southwest*, by LeRoy R. Hafen (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1997), xii.

⁵³ See Rebecca M. Craven, *The Impact of Intimacy: Mexican Anglo Intermarriage in New Mexico, 1821-1846* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1974) and Albert Hurtado, *Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1999).

⁵⁴ David Lavender. *Bent's Fort* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1954), 230.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 176-177.

second daughter.⁵⁶ Her name is unknown. Carson later married a Cheyenne woman named Making-Out-Road but her dislike for Adaline and the constant contention between her and Carson resulted in a failed marriage. After a few months she evicted Carson from their teepee, a Cheyenne form of divorce.⁵⁷ Carson's Hispanic wife was María Josefa Jaramillo. Josefa, as she was called, and Bent's wife Ignacia, were sisters.⁵⁸ Together they had eight children—Charles, William (Julián), Teresina, Christopher (Cristóbal), Charles, Rebecca, Estella (Estefana), and Josefita.⁵⁹

While marriages and familial ties encouraged men such as Bent and Carson to stay in the Southwest, others' entered the region strictly for trade and profit. Prior to Mexican independence various trappers entered Spanish territory—Baptiste Le Land in 1804, James Purcell in 1805, and Manuel Lisa in 1806, to name but three.⁶⁰ However, the soft fur trade did not expand until William Becknell's first expedition to Santa Fe in 1821.

Due to the significance and success of Becknell's first expedition his contemporaries as well as historians have labeled him the founder of the Santa Fe trade, and the father of the Santa Fe Trail.⁶¹ Those titles are due in part, to his discovery of the Cimmaron cutoff on his second expedition to Santa Fe in 1822. This shortcut followed the Cimmaron River and avoided the mountainous Raton Pass.⁶²

⁵⁶ Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 37-45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁵⁹ Marc Simmons, *Kit Carson & His Three Wives: A Family History* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2003), 3-4 and 98. There has been some confusion among historians about the children of Kit and Josefa Carson. Hampton Sides incorrectly identifies Rebecca as the sixth child and fails to identify their first born son who died in infancy. Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 451.

⁶⁰ For a comprehensive analysis of the fur trade in the Southwest prior to Mexican independence see Weber, *The Taos Trappers*.

⁶¹ William Becknell, "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell from Boone's Lick to Santa Fe, and from Santa Cruz to Green River." Ed. Francis A. Sampson, *Missouri Historical Review* 4, no. 2 (January, 1910): 65.

⁶² Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 128.



Figure 6. Map of the Santa Fe Trail. Courtesy of the Santa Fe Trail Association.

Becknell's experience began June 20, 1821 with an advertisement in the *Missouri Intelligencer*. Becknell wanted “a company of men destined to the westward for the purpose of trading horses and mules, and catching wild animals of every description.”⁶³ According to fur trade historian Hiram M. Chittenden:

To William Becknell therefore belongs the credit of having made the first regular trading expedition from the Missouri to Santa Fe; of being the first to follow the route direct to San Miguel instead of by way of Taos; and the first to introduce the use of wagons in the trade. This last achievement was four [five] years before Ashley took [sent] his wheeled cannon to the Salt Lake Valley, eight years before Smith, Jackson, and Sublette took wagons to Wind river, and ten years before Bonneville took them to Green river.⁶⁴

Becknell proved that wagons could successfully travel the Santa Fe Trail. His contemporaries received the news quickly.⁶⁵ On Monday, July 1, 1822 Jacob Fowler recorded in his journal, “the last night Raised the Cricks So that We Have to leave the Waggon [road] We fell into two days

⁶³ As cited in Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 128.

⁶⁴ Hiram M. Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*. Vol. 1. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 501-502.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 509. It is important to note however, that Spaniard Pedro Vial had previously blazed a trail from Santa Fe to St. Louis, the opposite way of Becknell, in the early 1790s. Due to Spain's commercial restrictions, the trail went unused for the next three decades. See Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 125.

back Which Road Was maid by Becknal and His party on their Way to the Spanish Settlement.”⁶⁶ An article in the *Missouri Intelligencer* dated February 18, 1823 verifies Fowler’s statement: “But one wagon has ever *gone* from this state to Santa Fe and that was taken by Capt. Wm. Becknell.”⁶⁷

Becknell arrived in Santa Fe on November 15, 1821. A second expedition included John McKnight and Thomas James. They arrived in Santa Fe on December 1. The following month, a third group arrived led by Hugh Glenn. These first three groups to enter Santa Fe had common motivations to enter the trade. All had suffered from the Depression of 1819 and the lack of hard currency in states like Missouri.⁶⁸

Mexican officials, particularly those who served as New Mexican governors under the administration of the Republic of Mexico, facilitated trade with the United States during the first few years of independency. This was due in large part to New Mexico’s proximity to the United States. The political transformation however was quite complex and proved difficult for Mexico’s new regime. “Independence from Spain ushered in a new political order for Mexico,” noted historian David Weber.⁶⁹ Ripe with strife, the new government did provide more freedoms than the old Spanish system, incorporating a representative government on both provincial and municipal levels. Mexico’s Constitution of 1824 emulated that of the United States.⁷⁰ “In a dozen years, then, between 1812 and 1824,” wrote Weber, “Mexico had undergone a transformation from a political appendage of an absolutist monarchy to an independent federal republic.”⁷¹

⁶⁶ Fowler, *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*, 167.

⁶⁷ “Mr. Floyd’s Speech—the Santa Fe trade, &c.” *Missouri Intelligencer*, February 18, 1803, 3.

⁶⁸ Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 125-126.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

However, much of Spain's influence lingered in Mexican politics and government control changed and shifted with elections, coups, and deceit.

Governor Facundo Melgares set the precedent. He was in office before, during, and after the Mexican Revolution. He was the governor who welcomed Becknell's first expedition to Santa Fe and encouraged others to do the same. Becknell wrote in his journal that "after crossing a mountain country, we arrived at SANTA FE and were received with apparent pleasure and joy."⁷² This was perhaps due to the fact that Mexicans were just as eager to purchase goods from American traders as those traders were to sell.⁷³ Becknell continued:

The day after my arrival I accepted an invitation to visit the Governor, whom I found to be well informed and gentlemanly in manners; his demeanor was courteous and friendly. He asked many questions concerning my country, its people, their manner of living, etc.; expressed a desire that the Americans would keep up an intercourse with that country, and said that if any of them wished to emigrate, it would give him pleasure to afford them every facility.⁷⁴

Other governors too, were instrumental in opening trade, despite the justifiable fear of foreign invasion. Bartolomé Baca and Antonio Narbona, for example, realized the importance Americans played in harvesting beaver fur. Mexicans were not typically trappers, and both governors elicited the help of American trappers to teach interested locals.⁷⁵ Dr. Josiah Gregg detailed this information in *Commerce of the Prairies*, when he wrote, "Gov. Baca and his successor (Narbona) thought it expedient to extend licenses to foreigners, in the name of citizens, upon condition of their taking a certain proportion of Mexicans to learn the art of trapping."⁷⁶ It is also evident in the correspondence between the governors and foreigners with whom they issued licenses. Becknell responded to Baca in a letter: "Seur I have recvd the Lisance you

⁷² Becknell, "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell," 77.

⁷³ Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 128.

⁷⁴ Becknell, "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell," 77-78.

⁷⁵ Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 66-67.

⁷⁶ Josiah Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies* (New York: Henry G. Langley, 1844), 228.

granted me by the onrabel preste [priest] of santa Cruse Manuel Radar and will Comply with our orders and obey them punctaly. Thar is 10 of us to gether all amearican.”⁷⁷ Not all governors were so gracious. Mexico’s willingness to open up trade and Becknell’s ambitious first expedition to Santa Fe encouraged others to do business in the Southwest. Among those in Becknell’s first expedition was the well-known trapper, Ewing Young.⁷⁸

Ewing Young was the “central figure in the fur trade of the Southwest.”⁷⁹ Part of this fame stemmed from his role as leader of other famous fur trade participants. After his first expedition with Becknell in 1821, Young traveled the Santa Fe Trail seven more times between 1822 and 1826. From 1825 to 1831, Young traveled between Santa Fe, New Mexico and San Diego, California, trapping along the Gila River. He also traveled north from Taos, New Mexico through Colorado, then south by way of the Zuni Pueblo to the Colorado River to trap, eventually arriving once again in San Diego. In 1829 he hired a nineteen year old named Kit Carson.⁸⁰ In 1831, Young and George C. Yount traveled with William Wolfskill along the path that became the Old Spanish Trail. Young traveled across most of California going as far north as Oregon Territory where he visited Hudson’s Bay Company Fort Vancouver. Young’s travels

⁷⁷ As cited in Larry M. Beachum, *William Becknell: Father of the Santa Fe Trade*, Southwestern Studies, Monograph No. 68 (El Paso: University of Texas Press), 41. For a specific study on Bartolomé Baca’s role in the fur trade see J. Ryan Badger, “Bartolomé Baca and the Opening of the Mexican Southwest.” *Rocky Mountain Fur Trade Journal* (2013): 61-75.

⁷⁸ There is some confusion among historians as to which of Becknell’s expeditions Young accompanied. Hill argues that he was a member of the first expedition, Joseph T. Hill, “Ewing Young in the Fur Trade of the Southwest, 1822-1834,” *Quarterly of the Oregon Society* 24, no. 1 (March 1923): 6 as does Cleland, *Reckless Breed of Men*, 216. Holmes, argues that he was a member of the second expedition, Kenneth L. Holmes, *Ewing Young: Master Trapper* (Portland: Binford & Mort, 1967), 9 as does Despain in Hafén, *Fur Trappers and Traders of the Far Southwest*, xix. More confusion exists between historians on how many members were part of Becknell’s first expedition; however a contemporary account left by Captain Pedro Ignacio Gallego put the number at six. He wrote on November 13, 1821, “Left Ojo de Bernal about 9 a.m. Followed the usual formation. About 3:30 p.m. encountered six Americans at the Puertocito de la Piedra Lumbre.” See Michael L. Olsen and Harry C. Myers, “Diary of Pedro Ignacio Gallego: Wherein 400 Soldiers Following the Trail of Comanches met William Becknell on his First Trip to Santa Fe” *Wagon Tracks* 7, no. 1 (November 1992): 1.

⁷⁹ Hill, “Ewing Young,” 6. See also Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 152.

⁸⁰ Holmes, *Ewing Young*, 41.

and trapping expeditions were vast. He crossed trails and mingled with other prominent figures of the fur trade. Young retired in Oregon and passed away in 1841.⁸¹

Kit Carson, “the most famous trapper in American history and culture,”⁸² arrived in Taos in 1826, as an adolescent of just sixteen years. Carson ran away as a young boy, seeking adventure and a more exciting way to earn a living. Working as a saddler’s apprentice was not for Carson. He wanted to be on the move. Carson served as a teamster and cook when he first joined a trapping expedition but quickly became a proficient trapper and trader.⁸³ Although illiterate, he picked up quickly on the native languages of various Indian tribes, as well as French and Spanish.⁸⁴ Carson had a knack for tracking and knew his way around the wilderness. Later the U.S. Army capitalized on those talents, and Carson remained an integral part of the development and history of the Southwest. He served as scout and guide for John C. Fremont and Stephen W. Kearny and served in the Mexican American and American Civil wars.⁸⁵ After serving his country for many years, he retired from military service in Taos, where he passed away at age sixty-eight.⁸⁶

William Wolfskill entered the Southwest with Becknell’s second expedition in 1822, “destined to become almost as distinguished in the annals of the Southwest as Young himself.”⁸⁷ He spent much of his time trapping for beaver on the Rio Grande and the Colorado, called at the time, the Rio Grande of the West. Wolfskill also traded in horses and mules acquired in

⁸¹ Ibid., vii and 148-150.

⁸² Despain in LeRoy R. Hafen, *Fur Trappers and Traders of the Far Southwest*, xxi.

⁸³ Carson and Peters. *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, 5-7.

⁸⁴ Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 8.

⁸⁵ Carson and Peters. *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, 66 and 109 and Sides, *Blood and Thunder*, 243 and 344.

⁸⁶ Carson and Peters, *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, xx. For a complete biography see David Remely, *Kit Carson: The Life of an American Border Man* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press: 2012), and Hampton Sides, *Blood and thunder: The Epic Story of Kit Carson and the Conquest of the American West* (New York: Anchor Books, 2007).

⁸⁷ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 216.

California and goods acquired in the United States.⁸⁸ Traveling on the Old Spanish Trail he unsuccessfully trapped his way to California in 1830.⁸⁹ Traveling with Wolfskill were Young and Yount.

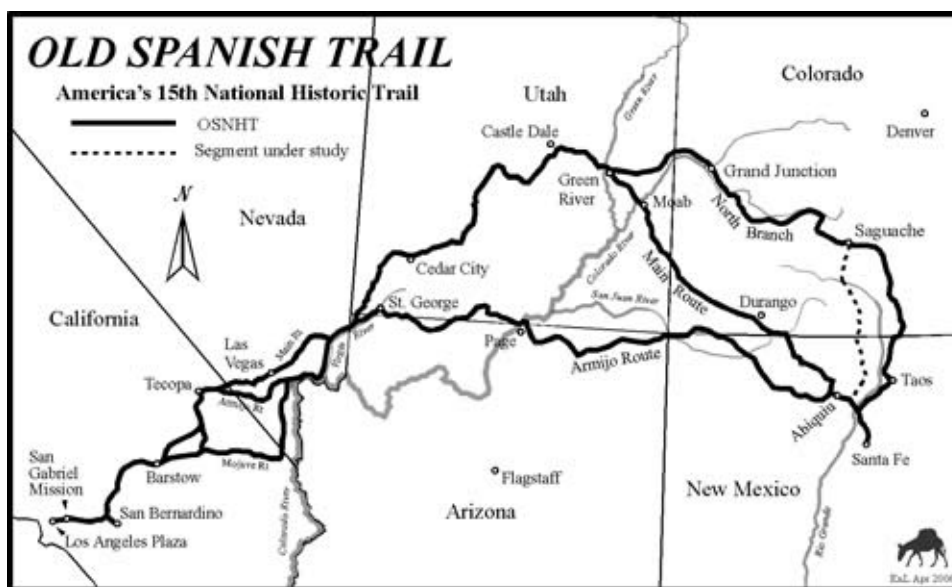


Figure 7. Map of the Old Spanish Trail. Courtesy of the Old Spanish Trail Association.

Only Jedediah Smith can rival the fame of Kit Carson as a fur trapper and trader. Smith began his career when he joined the Ashley Henry Fur Company under William H. Ashley, a business he later purchased. All of his explorations and dealings as a businessman, trapper, and trader finally led him to the Southwest. Smith's contributions to fur trade history, including that of the Southwest are many. Besides keeping a journal and being involved as a trapper and trader, Smith was an explorer. He was the first non-Indian to discover South Pass and was arguably the first non-Indian to travel overland to California from the American frontier.⁹⁰ Smith effectively

⁸⁸ H. D. Barrows, "William Wolfskill, The Pioneer." Annual Publication of the Historical Society of Southern California and Pioneer Register 5, no. 3 (1902): 287-290.

⁸⁹ Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 144-145. It is important to note however, that Cleland disagrees with Weber and other historians asserting that Wolfskill should not be given credit for opening the Old Spanish Trail. According to Cleland, no one man or specific expedition deserves that credit, for the trail represented the contributions of many, including Spaniard Juan María de Rivera (1765) and Spanish friars, Fray Francisco Anastasio Dominguez and Fray Silvester Valez Escalante (1776). Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 263.

⁹⁰ Dale L. Morgan, *Jedediah Smith and the Opening of the West* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1953), 193.

completed the route that Fathers Francisco Atanasio Dominguez and Silvestre Velez de Escalante failed to finish in 1776.⁹¹ He was the first non-Indian to transit the Sierra Nevada and cross the desert of the Great Basin. He also was the first non-Indian to travel overland from southern California to the Pacific Northwest.⁹² His explorations covered thousands of miles. Beyond his geographical accomplishments, Smith was a great leader, and an admirable Christian.⁹³ Smith died along the Santa Fe Trail in 1831 under the knife of Comanche Indians.

Smith and others created a successful fur trade in the Southwest. They organized the physical structures and facilities that made the fur trade in the Southwest operational. They created a demand for fur, procured them, and traded them. Businessmen, entrepreneurs, trappers, and traders, heeded the call. People bought beaver felt hats that were fashionable at the time and produced by hatters who first had to acquire fur. The Southwest was a staging ground, prepared by a revolution, the formation of a new nation, a change in politics, and an open invitation to trap and trade. The idea of “contingency, in the sense of people making choices, and choices making a difference in the world . . . of real choices that people actually made,”⁹⁴ provides a logical understanding of how the fur trade of the Southwest materialized, evolved, and eventually, disappeared. The trappers were not fully aware, “that the whims of fashion in Paris were affecting their livelihood”⁹⁵ in the American Southwest.

The Depots

The people involved in the fur trade of the Southwest relied on strategic locations in order to buy, sell, or trade the goods and furs accumulated. Various cities, forts, trading posts,

⁹¹ S. Matthew Despain and Fred R. Gowans, “Jedediah S. Smith,” in *Utah History Encyclopedia*. Ed. Allan K. Powell, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1994), 503.

⁹² Jedediah S. Smith, *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah S. Smith: His Personal Account of the Journey to California*. Ed. George R. Brooks, (Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 17.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 27. For a complete biography see Morgan, *Jedediah Smith*.

⁹⁴ David H. Fischer, *Washington's Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 364.

⁹⁵ Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 101.

factories, and rendezvous made up these essential depots, the third infrastructural component in the fur trade of the American Southwest. The most significant cities involved in the Southwest were Taos and Santa Fe. Their locations determined where traders took their furs for trade and eventual shipment, or where they resupplied. Both cities were much closer to the mountains than St. Louis, Missouri, which also played a dominant role in the fur trade. Dr. Josiah Gregg, a participant in the Santa Fe trade for nearly a decade, recounted the significance of another Missouri town:

People . . . have generally considered St. Louis as the emporium of the Santa Fé trade; but that city . . . has never been a place of rendezvous, nor even of outfit, except for a small portion of the traders who have started from its immediate vicinity. The town of Franklin on the Missouri River, about a hundred and fifty miles farther to the westward, seems truly to have been the cradle of our trade . . . and . . . continued for many years to furnish the greater number of these adventurous traders.⁹⁶

The proximity of Taos and Santa Fe to the United States, particularly the frontier towns of St. Louis, Franklin, and Independence, made the New Mexican towns' depots for buying, selling, and trading a geographically convenient location. Two major trails with maps already illustrated linked them to the United States and the Pacific coast. The distance between Mexico City and Santa Fe, and Santa Fe from Taos, created a naturally protected haven for foreigners evading Mexican officials, and provided unprecedented autonomy for New Mexican governors running the affairs of the region. This allowed for two strategic places of trade to develop as depots for the fur trade in the American Southwest. Josiah Gregg recorded the following description of New Mexico and delineated the importance of Taos and Santa Fe from other New Mexican villages:

The population of New Mexico is almost exclusively confined to towns and villages . . . The principal of these settlements are located in the valley of the Rio del Norte . . . The most important of these, next to the capital [of Santa Fe], is *El Valle de Taos* . . . No part of New Mexico equals this valley in amenity of soil, richness of produce, and beauty of

⁹⁶ Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 19.

appearance. Whatever is thrown into its prolific bosom, which the early frosts of autumn will permit to ripen, grows to a wonderful degree of perfection.⁹⁷

The beauty of Taos and the successes of agriculture in the valley influenced or persuaded trappers and traders such as Kit Carson and Charles Bent to make it their permanent home. However, several others used Taos as a place of trade and resupply.

Warren A. Ferris documented in his journal several instances where men headed to Taos to resupply because of its close proximity and the knowledge that merchants had available goods. Jedediah Smith, Milton Sublette, and David Jackson convinced Thomas Fitzpatrick to “go on with them to New Mexico, promising to give him an equipment at Toas [Taos], which would not be more than twenty days march from Cache Valley,”⁹⁸ nearly half the distance from Cache Valley to St. Louis. “[Benjamin O’Fallon] Fallen,” Ferris wrote, “went to Teos [Taos] last winter for supplies,”⁹⁹ from Pierre’s Hole. Another account written by Ferris dealt with a horse thief that claimed his horses “were presented to him, by the passing traders from Toas [Taos] to California,”¹⁰⁰ demonstrating that traders acquired goods in Taos and from there traded them in other regions.

George F. Ruxton documented the importance of Santa Fe when he wrote, “On the 17th we reached Albuquerque, next to Santa Fe the most important town in the province, and the residence of the ex-Governor Armijo.”¹⁰¹ Robert Fowler mentioned Santa Fe various times in his journal, at one point he wrote, “Clear With White frost We Set out Early to Join the party at the vilege Wheare We found all Ready to Start—all So James and mcnights [McKnight’s] party

⁹⁷ Ibid., 137-138.

⁹⁸ Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 125.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 206.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 277.

¹⁰¹ George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (London: John Murray, 1847), 185.

from Stafee [Santa Fe] Had Joined ours and all moved on together.”¹⁰² The men described by Fowler had left Santa Fe to join them, most likely because they had resupplied at the capital. Santa Fe’s significance as a trade depot is also apparent in the literature dealing with smuggling. To risk imprisonment or the confiscation of furs and goods to be in Santa Fe, the profit margin must have been significant, and it was.¹⁰³ Zenas Leonard described Santa Fe as the midpoint of trade between California and Missouri where transactions occurred and the various parties took merchandise back to California or back to Missouri, respectively. He explained:

The dry season is occupied by the inhabitants in gathering the mules into large droves and driving them off the market at Santa Fee, a distance of 12 or 1400 miles from this part of the coast, through a wild and desert country. Here they meet with ready sale at a profitable price from the traders of Missouri, who repair to Santa Fee annually for that purpose. These traders are generally well supplied with merchandize which they exchange at Santa Fee for gold and silver, and with these Calafornian traders for mules and Spanish hides. The price of a mule at Santa Fee is generally from 6 to \$10.— Merchandize is sold at a great advance, particularly silks, jewelry and groceries.¹⁰⁴

The time and difficulty involved in traveling from the interior of the Rocky Mountains and the Southwest to outlying cities prompted companies to establish forts and trading posts in the heart of fur trade country. Native Americans and trappers took their furs to sell and resupply at these forts and trading posts. Their success relied on a healthy relationship with the local inhabitants as well as their location. Many of the forts and trading posts that were lucrative were in high traffic areas, usually at the confluence of two or more rivers or along traveling routes. Bent’s Fort, for example, was located on the Santa Fe Trail and Arkansas River.

¹⁰² Fowler, *The Journal of Jacob Fowler*, 142.

¹⁰³ For literature on smuggling goods into and out of New Mexico see Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 93-94, 157-159, and 203. For estimates on profit margins see Storrs, “Trade between Missouri & Mexico,” *Niles’ Weekly Register*, January 15, 1825, 313.

¹⁰⁴ Zenas Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard: Written by Himself*. Ed. Milo M. Quaipe, (Reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), 170.

Ceran St. Vrain and Charles Bent built Bent's Fort in late 1832 or 1833.¹⁰⁵ Originally Fort William, Bent's Fort "became the most important fur-trade center of the Rocky Mountains area."¹⁰⁶ The fort dominated competition in both the Rockies and the Southwest, due in part to another trading post built by the partnership in 1837 called Fort St. Vrain. The strategic location of Bent's Fort shifted trade patterns in the Southwest, taking business away from Taos and Santa Fe. Taos' biggest competitor for furs from the Southern Rockies was Bent's Fort; however, many of the furs that passed through the fort came from Taos trappers. "Thus, Bent's Fort may have complemented the fur trade from New Mexico as well as rivaled it."¹⁰⁷ Trade ledgers of the fort's dealings are few, but it is evident that the main commerce was in buffalo robes and beaver pelts hunted and trapped by Native Americans and employees of the fort.¹⁰⁸

Several visitors and employees of Bent's Fort described its location and physical appearance. One such visitor was George F. Ruxton.

Bent's Fort is situated on the . . . river Arkansa, about one hundred miles from the foot of the Rocky Mountains . . . The walls are built entirely of . . . sun-burned bricks—in the form of a hallow square, at two corners of which are circular flanking towers of the same material. The entrance is by a large gateway into the square, round which are the rooms occupied by the traders and employés . . . with walls coloured by a white-wash . . . Their flat roofs are defended along the exterior by parapets of adobe, to serve as a cover to marksmen firing from the top . . . In the centre of the square is the press for packing the furs; and there are three large rooms, one used as a store and magazine, another as a council-room . . . the third is the common dining-hall, where the traders, trappers, and hunters . . . feast upon the best provender the game-covered country affords.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁵ The exact year that construction began is not certain. Weber provides both 1832 and 1833, See Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 211 and Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 98. Lavender, however, gives the 1833. See Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Milo M. Quaife in Carson and Peters, *Kit Carson's Autobiography*, 34.

¹⁰⁷ Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 213.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 211-212.

¹⁰⁹ George F. Ruxton, *Life in the Far West, Life in the Far West* (Reprint, New York: Ulan Press, 2012), 179-180. Ruxton's textual description of Bent's fort is visually portrayed by James W. Abert in his 1845 watercolor sketch "Bent's Fort." See James W. Abert, *Through the Country of the Comanche Indians in the Fall of the Year 1845*. Ed. John Galvin, (San Francisco:1970), 4.

Kit Carson provided “provender” for Bent’s fort, as described by Ruxton. Carson recorded, “I was kindly received at the fort by Messrs. Bent and St. Vrain, and was offered employment to hunt for the fort at one dollar per day.”¹¹⁰ Carson accepted their offer from his brother-in-law to be, and worked for Bent and St. Vrain until 1842 hunting the “game-covered country.”¹¹¹ The fort lasted nearly a decade beyond the era of the beaver trade. After changing ownership several times, William Bent, Charles’ brother, now the sole owner, had the fort burned to the ground. William was unhappy with the U.S. Army’s offer to buy the fort, perhaps because it undermined the sentimental value he had placed on it in his mind.¹¹²

Other forts were instrumental in the fur trade of the Southwest. Antoine Robidoux’s forts “served to extend the New Mexican fur trade”¹¹³ northwest of the main depot cities of Santa Fe and Taos. Robidoux, the “Kingpin of the Southwest fur trade,”¹¹⁴ built several forts in Utah’s Uinta Basin upon entering the area in 1824.¹¹⁵ In 1832, he purchased the Reed Trading Post, arguably the first permanent non-Indian structure and home in Utah, from William Reed.¹¹⁶ Adjacent to where the Reed Trading Post had been built, but further away from the river to avoid flooding from spring runoff, Robidoux built Fort Robidoux, also called Fort Uinta, Fort Winte, Fort Wintey, Fort Tewinty, and Fort Uintah.¹¹⁷ Due to the phonetic liberalism of the time,

¹¹⁰ Carson and Peters, *Kit Carson’s Autobiography*, 64.

¹¹¹ Bent and Carson, as previously mentioned, married sisters Ignacia and Josefa, therefore becoming brother-in-laws in 1843. *Ibid.*, 68.

¹¹² Lavender, *Bent’s Fort*, 338-339, and 443.

¹¹³ Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 213.

¹¹⁴ Cleland, *This Reckless Breed of Men*, 246.

¹¹⁵ Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 24.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-28 and 34.

¹¹⁷ LeRoy R. Hafén and Ann W. Hafén, *Old Spanish Trail: Santa Fé to Los Angeles with Extracts from Contemporary Records and Including Diaries of Antonio Armijo and Orville Pratt* (Glendale: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1954), 102. Historians’ accounts of Robidoux’s activities in the Uinta Basin differ. Wallace, Robidoux’s biographer, argues that Fort Robidoux was built in 1832. William S. Wallace, *Antoine Robidoux, 1794-1860: A Biography of a Western Venturer* (Los Angeles: Glen Dawson, 1953), 54. Barton, too, suggests 1832. Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 27-28 and 30. Weber, unsure that Robidoux was the actual builder of Fort Robidoux, believes it was built in the winter of 1837-1838. Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 213. Hafén and Hafén argue 1837. Hafén and Hafén, *Old Spanish Trail*, 102. Historians also confuse the forts. Like Hafén and Hafén, Weber posits that Fort

multiple spellings and names were not uncommon. Fort Robidoux's structure "consisted of a small group of log cabins with dirt roofs and floors, surrounded by a log palisade. The enclosed area of the fort was about sixty by sixty feet, with gate openings at both the north and south ends."¹¹⁸

Robidoux also built Fort Uncompahgre, probably in 1827.¹¹⁹ Robidoux was successful in the Uinta Basin, receiving minor competition from other trading posts such as Fort Kit Carson, Fort Davy Crocket, and Bent's Fort. For a brief period, Hudson's Bay Company and the American Fur Company, both of which were below the 42nd parallel and technically foreigners illegally trapping on Mexican soil, threatened Robidoux's Uinta Basin monopoly.¹²⁰ Robidoux's success did not last. His business decisions in the Uinta Basin directly affected the relationship between the Utes and New Mexicans. A French American turned Mexican citizen, Robidoux found it lucrative to trade whiskey, guns and ammunition for fur with the Indians. From that point on, a relatively good relationship between New Mexicans and the Utes declined rapidly. Not all ill-relations can be pinned on Robidoux between Utes and New Mexicans, but his trade practices inarguably contributed.¹²¹ The deterioration of the Ute-New Mexican relationship spilled over into the Uinta Basin. Eventually, Ute Indians burned both of his forts for several possible factors including Robidoux's trade good prices being too high for too long.¹²²

Forts in the Southwest continued to be used after 1840, a time period beyond the scope of this short work. Such posts included Fort Bridger, established in 1842 by James Bridger and Fort Buenaventura, established in 1846 by Miles Goodyear. Because Bridger and Goodyear

Robidoux and Fort Uinta were the same. Weber, *Taos Trappers*, 213. Barton, too, believes this to be the case. Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 46. Hafen on the other hand, posits that Fort Robidoux and Fort Uncompahgre were the same. LeRoy R. Hafen in Ruxton, *Life in the Far West*, 33.

¹¹⁸ Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 46.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 77-85.

¹²¹ Weber, *The Mexican Frontier*, 99-100 and Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 96.

¹²² Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 96.

established these forts toward the end of the soft fur trade, much of their business dealt with migrants heading west, including the Mormons. After establishing a firm settlement in the Salt Lake Valley, Mormons began to expand under the leadership of Brigham Young. This led to the purchase of both Fort Bridger and Fort Buenaventura.¹²³

The factory system (1795-1822) or the forts and trading posts created by the United States government functioned in much the same way. The government's purpose for creating factories was to control the fur trade by regulating interaction between traders, settlers, and Indians. Because the factories functioned at government expense, it was not imperative for factors to make a profit. With an abundance of funds and little accountability, its employees were not as motivated to establish good relations with indigenous peoples and the system struggled. That, accompanied by the misuse of funds and a continued practice of issuing private fur trading licenses, contributed to the factory system's demise in 1822.¹²⁴ This system never did reach the American Southwest, but its influence at the eastern trailhead of the Santa Fe Trail leading to the Southwest did indeed. One such example was Fort Osage.

¹²³ For more information on Fort Bridger and the Mormons see Hope A. Hilton and Lynn M. Hilton, "Fort Bridger," in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, 196-197. For more information on Fort Buenaventura see Richard W. Sadler, "Miles Goodyear," in *Utah History Encyclopedia*, 227-228.

¹²⁴ Weber, *The Taos Trappers*, 57. For a complete history of the factory system see also Peake, *A History of the United States Indian Factory System*.

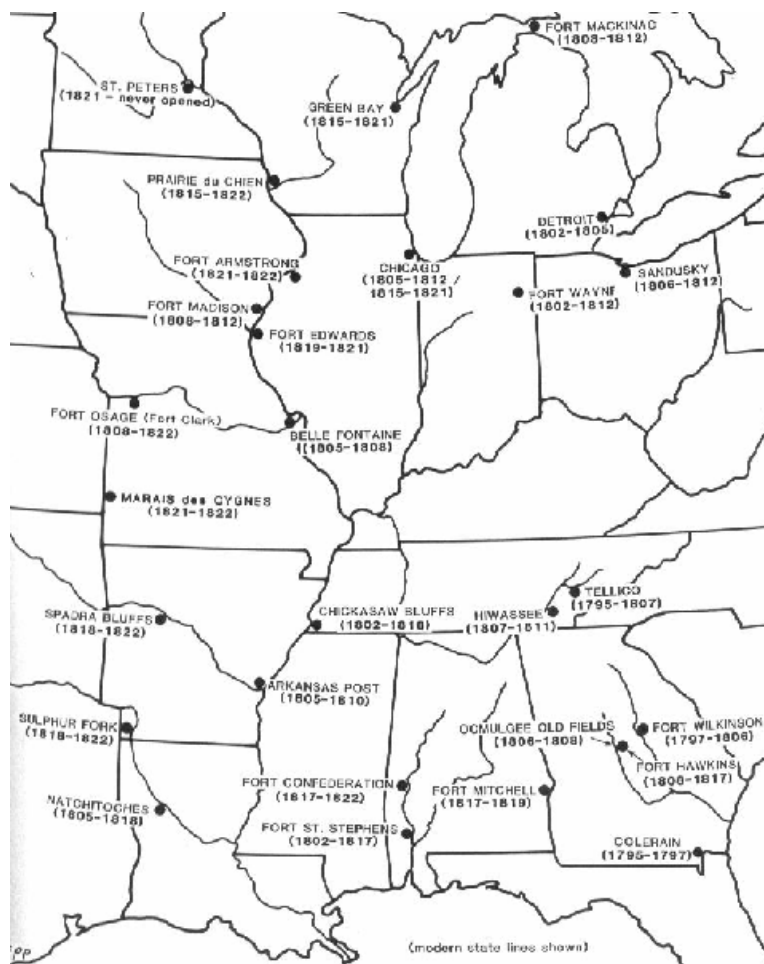


Figure 8. Fur Trade Factories, 1795-1822. Map courtesy of Dr. Jay Buckley, Associate Professor of History, Brigham Young University.

Volunteer dragoons in the United States army built Fort Osage in 1808 under the direction of William Clark. Its conception began on June 23, 1804, when Clark first visited the area during the journey of the Corps of Discovery.¹²⁵ For this reason, the army also referred to the post as Fort Clark.¹²⁶ Clark recorded briefly in his journal, “Set out at 7 oC Proceeded on N. 70 d. W 2 Ms. to an Isd.”¹²⁷ This short sentence references an island located on the Missouri

¹²⁵ Fort Osage National Landmark, “A brief History,” accessed December 13, 2013, www.fortosagenhs.com and Peake, *A History of the United States Indian Factory System, 1795-1822*, 20.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹²⁷ William Clark, *The Journals of the Lewis and Clark Expedition*, June 23, 1804.

River just east of present day Kansas City, in Sibley, Jackson County, Missouri. Four years later, Clark again visited the site and wrote:

Rose early examined the Situation and the points of a Small Is[lan]d. which is opposite, found the River could be completely defended and Situation elegant, this Situation I had examined in the year 1804 and was delighted with it and am equally so now, ordered the Boats to be unloaded and tools got ready to work, and fixed on the spot for the fort and other buildings—and ordered the Militia to clear the parade in front of their Camp.¹²⁸

United States soldiers finally abandoned this factory fort in 1827, several years after the factory system lost government funding. The fort however, was used for several more years, into the mid-1830s.¹²⁹

Fort Osage directly affected traders going in and out of Santa Fe from the United States.¹³⁰ William Becknell stopped at Fort Osage during his initial journey to New Mexico in September 1821. In his journal he wrote, “Arrived at Fort Osage, we wrote letters, purchased some medicines, and arranged such affairs as we thought necessary previous to leaving the confines of civilization.”¹³¹ Later he described the land beyond Fort Osage as “handsomely situated, being high in prairie, of exceeding fertility; but timber, unfortunately, is scarce.”¹³² A decade later, Zenas Leonard recorded the importance that Fort Osage played as a staging point for further westward exploration.

We continued our journey in a western direction, in the state of Missouri, on the south side of the Missouri river, through a country thinly inhabited by the whites and friendly Indians, until we arrived at Fort Osage the extreme point of the white settlement. Here we

¹²⁸ William Clark, *Westward With Dragoons: The Journal of William Clark on His Expedition to Establish Fort Osage, August 25 to September 22, 1808*. Ed. Kate L. Gregg, (Fulton: Ovid Bell Press, 1937), 34-35.

¹²⁹ Milo M. Quaife in Zenas Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 4.

¹³⁰ Becknell, “The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell,” 66-67. See also “From the Santa Fe Expedition,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, September 3, 1822, 3 and “Mr. Floyd’s Speech—the Santa Fe trade, &c.,” *Missouri Intelligencer*, February 18, 1823, 3.

¹³¹ Becknell, “The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell,” 72. See also William Becknell, *William Becknell’s Journal to Santa Fe, 1821-1822* (Columbia: Missouri Historical Society, 1906), 58. This version differs slightly most likely because of a typographical error. Osage is written as Sage. “Arrived at Fort Sage, we wrote letters, purchased some medicines, and arranged such affairs as we thought necessary previous to leaving the confines of civilization.”

¹³² Becknell, “The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell,” 72. See also Becknell, *William Becknell’s Journal to Santa Fe*, 58. The versions differ slightly. The comma is missing between *unfortunately* and *is*: “handsomely situated, being high in prairie, of exceeding fertility; but timber, unfortunately is scarce.”

remained several days and purchased and packed up a sufficiency of provision, as we then thought, for our subsistence through the wilderness to what is called the Buffalo country; a distance of about 200 miles.¹³³

Although not located in the Southwest, Fort Osage proved to be an essential staging ground for expeditions to that region and other parts of the West.

The immobility of forts and trading posts, as well as the struggle to keep them stocked with needed goods and supplies led to innovation and change. Three years after the termination of the factory system, William H. Ashley inadvertently instituted the rendezvous system (1825-1840). To accommodate trappers and mountain men in the field, Ashley sent goods into the Rocky Mountains so that mountain men would not have to travel great distances to forts, trading posts, or depot cities. These goods were then sold or traded to mountain men, trappers, and Indians at exorbitant prices often profiting at a thousand percent. James P. Beckwourth described this phenomenon as an attendee of the 1825 rendezvous at Randavouze Creek. "There were some among us who had not seen any groceries, such as coffee, sugar, &c., for several months. The whiskey went off as freely as water, even at the exorbitant price he sold it for."¹³⁴ Below is a description of a typical rendezvous, although romanticized, the description is not misleading:

At a certain time, when the hunt is over . . . the trappers proceed to the "rendezvous," the locality of which has been previously agreed upon; and here the traders and agents of the fur companies await them, with such assortment of goods as their hardy customers may require . . . The trappers drop in . . . bringing their packs of beaver . . . to the value of a thousand dollars each . . . The goods brought by the traders . . . are sold at enormous prices . . . The "beaver" is purchased at from two to eight dollars per pound . . . The rendezvous is one continued scene of drunkenness, gambling, and brawling and fighting . . . groups are seen with their decks of cards, playing . . . the regular mountain-games . . . A trapper often squanders the produce of his hunt . . . and, supplied on credit with another equipment, leaves the rendezvous for another expedition . . .¹³⁵

¹³³ Leonard, *Narrative of the Adventures of Zenas Leonard*, 4.

¹³⁴ James P. Beckwourth, *The life and adventures of James P. Beckwourth, mountaineer, scout, and pioneer, and chief of the Crow nation of Indians. . . Written from his own dictation* (University of Michigan Libraries Reprint, New York: Sampson Low, Son, & Co., 1856),75.

¹³⁵ Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, 244-246.

Of the sixteen rendezvous that were held, five took place in the American Southwest. The participants of the annual rendezvous, particularly those that brought in supplies to the mountains, determined the location of the next year's gathering in an effort to accommodate their clientele.¹³⁶

Rendezvous System Rendezvous, 1825-1840¹³⁷

- 1825 – Randavouze Creek (Wyoming)
- 1826 – Willow Valley (Utah)
- 1827 – Sweet Lake (Utah)
- 1828 – Sweet Lake (Utah)
- 1829 – Popo Agie/Pierre's Hole (Wyoming/Idaho)
- 1830 – Wind River (Wyoming)
- 1831 – Willow Valley (Utah)
- 1832 – Pierre's Hole (Idaho)
- 1833 – Green River (Wyoming)
- 1834 – Ham's Fork (Wyoming)
- 1835 – Green River (Wyoming)
- 1836 – Green River (Wyoming)
- 1837 – Green River (Wyoming)
- 1838 – Wind River (Wyoming)
- 1839 – Green River (Wyoming)
- 1840 – Green River (Wyoming)

Rendezvous System Rendezvous that took place south of the 42nd Parallel and west of the Continental Divide

- 1826 – Willow Valley (Utah)
- 1827 – Sweet Lake (Utah)
- 1828 – Sweet Lake (Utah)
- 1831 – Willow Valley (Utah)
- 1834 – Ham's Fork (Wyoming)

¹³⁶ Chittenden, *The American Fur Trade of the Far West*, 38-39 and Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous* (Layton, UT: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc., 1985), 11.

¹³⁷ This list was compiled from Gowans, *Rocky Mountain Rendezvous*.

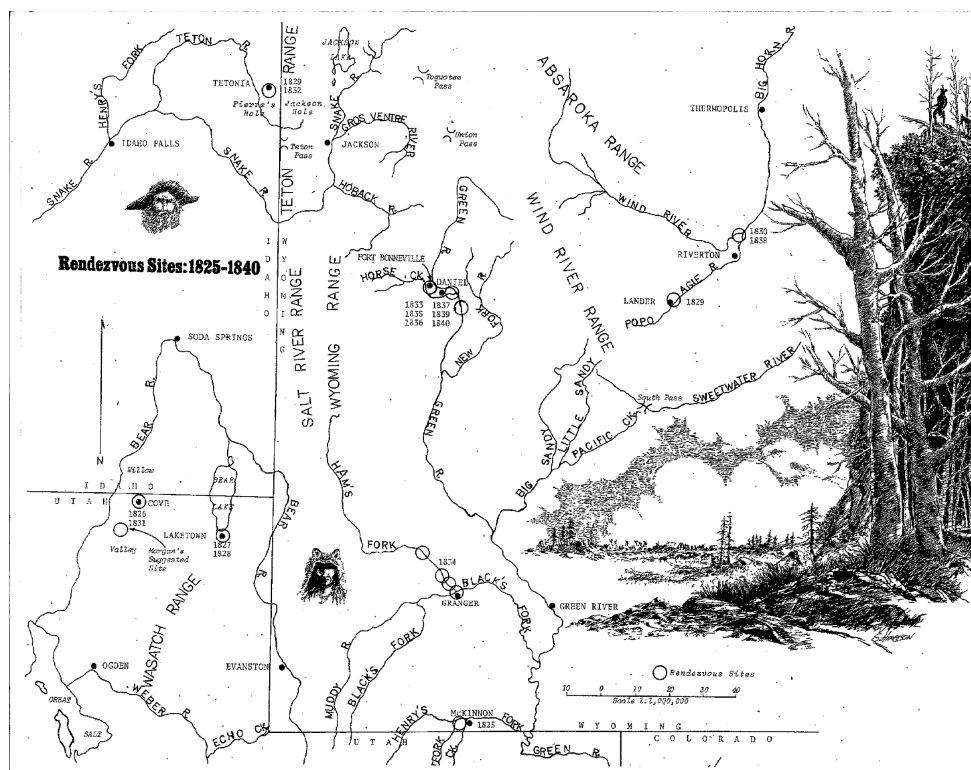


Figure 9. Rendezvous Sites, 1825-1840. Map Courtesy of Dr. Fred Gowans, Professor Emeritus, Brigham Young University

Although the system was very American and encouraged the gathering of free trappers, the rendezvous included a much more diverse group. Fur companies, including Britain's Hudson's Bay Company and Astor's American Fur Company, entered the Rockies and participated in the annual rendezvous. Dr. Marcus and Narcissa P. Whitman along with Henry and Eliza Spalding passed through the Rockies on their way to the Oregon Country to set up a mission to convert Native Americans to Christianity. Along their journey, they joined trappers and traders at the Green River Rendezvous of 1836.¹³⁸ An artist, Alfred J. Miller also attended one of the rendezvous, which happened to be the thirteenth; the Green River Rendezvous of 1837.¹³⁹ His

¹³⁸ See Narcissa Whitman, *Letters of Narcissa Whitman, 1836-1847* (Fairfield: Ye Galleon Press, 1996). Dr. Marcus Whitman also visited the Southwest including Bent's Fort in Colorado, and Taos, New Mexico. Lavender, *Bent's Fort*, 230. He also visited Fort Uinta in the Great Basin. Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 52.

¹³⁹ Alfred J. Miller, *The West of Alfred Jacob Miller (1837)*. Ed. Marvin C. Ross, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1953), xvii.

painting entitled “Rendezvous” visually depicts the scene which he witnessed.¹⁴⁰ His oeuvre has become invaluable historically as a visual record of the Western frontier.



Figure 10. “Rendezvous,” by Alfred Jacob Miller.

Many Native Americans from the surrounding regions also attended these annual gatherings.

William H. Ashley and Andrew Henry founded the Rocky Mountain Fur Company in 1823. The organization of the company began, however, in 1822 as these men began recruiting “Enterprising Young Men” to join the ambitious economic endeavor. The following advertisement appeared in the *Missouri Gazette & Public Advertiser* out of St. Louis, Missouri on February 13, 1822.¹⁴¹

To Enterprising Young Men. THE subscriber wishes to engage ONE HUNDRED MEN, to ascend the river Missouri to its source, there to be employed for one, two or three years—For particulars, enquire of Major Andrew Henry, near the Lead Mines, in the County of Washington, (who will ascend with, and command the party) or to the subscriber at St. Louis. Wm. H. Ashley. February 13

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 159. It is important to note that Miller’s paintings also include portraits of specific trappers and traders, including, for example, Etienne Provost in “Threatened Attack—approach of a large body of Indians,” and “Catching Up,”⁷⁶ and 197, as well as Black Harris in “Trappers,” and “Escape from Blackfeet,”²⁹ and 67. Miller’s paintings also provide a unique look into the material culture of the era.

¹⁴¹ It is important to note that Ashley’s call “To Enterprising Young Men” was eight months after Becknell’s ad in the *Missouri Intelligencer* on June 20, 1821. While both men were instrumental in the development of a fur trade in the Southwest, the popularity of Ashley’s initiation of the rendezvous system often overshadows Becknell’s initiation of the Santa Fe Trade.

Ashley placed a similar in the *Missouri Intelligencer*; the first newspaper published in Missouri outside of St. Louis, in the town of Franklin, on March 16, 1822. Another ad appeared in the *Missouri Republican*, also out of St Louis, on March 20, 1822.¹⁴² The *Missouri Gazette and Public Advertiser*, advertised on January 18, 1823 an ad that included the name of Ashley's partner, Andrew Henry. It read:

For the Rocky Mountains. THE Subscribers wish to engage One Hundred MEN, to ascend the Missouri, to the Rocky Mountains, There to be employed as Hunters. As a compensation to each man fit for such business \$200 Per Annum, will be given for his services, as aforesaid.—For particulars, apply to J. V. Garnier, or W. Ashley, at St. Louis. The expedition will set out from this place, on or before the first day of March next. Ashley & Henry. Jan 18

This partnership lasted one year, for Henry retired in 1824. One year later under the sole ownership of Ashley, the Rocky Mountain Fur Company began to sell supplies in the heart of the Rockies, facilitating the fur trade in the surrounding regions. One year after the rendezvous system's genesis, Ashley sold the Rocky Mountain Fur Company to a partnership of three men—Jedediah S. Smith, David E. Jackson, and William L. Sublette. All three men had joined Ashley's first expedition up the Missouri, answering the call of the 1822 advertisement. By 1830, the company again changed hands as new owners—Milton Sublette, Thomas Fitzpatrick, Jim Bridger, Henry Fraeb, and Jean Baptiste Gervais, took over the reins.

Oblivious to the fact that many of these rendezvous were actually outside the bounds of the United States, and located in the Southwest, foreigners gathered illegally in Mexico, essentially smuggling goods and furs in and out of Mexico as they were imported and exported from one country to another. Out of the sixteen rendezvous, traders supplied fifteen with goods coming directly from the United States. The only rendezvous supplied with goods from Mexico

¹⁴² Becknell, "The Journals of Capt. Thomas Becknell," 65.

was the Rendezvous of 1831 at Willow Valley where Thomas Fitzpatrick failed to arrive on time with his caravan from Taos and Santa Fe. Warren A. Ferris described the event writing:

The party reached Taos, on the Rio del Norte; and Fitzpatrick having received his equipment, departed for the mountains; but being unacquainted with the route, and having no guide, he missed his way, and fell on to the Platte, where he met with Fraeb as before mentioned. Fraeb met also on that river with a party of fifty men, led by a Capt. Ghant. They were all on foot, and led about their own number of pack horses, and were destined for the mountains.¹⁴³

In cities and towns, forts and trading posts, and at the annual rendezvous, trappers and traders of the Southwest exchanged furs and goods. The depots provided a physical location whereby these exchanges took place and made possible the development and success of the fur trade in the American Southwest. Other systems of trade did not utilize the same varieties of depots as that of the Southwest. These depots would not have been necessary had there not been a need for supplies that helped trappers and traders not only survive, but live in relative comfort as they traversed the vast lands of the Southwest. The supplies also benefitted other groups, such as New Mexicans, a practice that differed from the French, British, and American fur trade systems.

The Supplies

Native Americans as well as trappers and traders, relied heavily on crucial supplies to make trapping and hunting possible. Without supplies, traders would not have had the ability to accumulate furs, nor trappers the ability to procure them. The personal gear or accoutrements provided the means to survive and thrive in an environment often unforgiving and harsh. Beyond that, the supplies and trade goods financially allowed for large scale transfers of furs to take place.

¹⁴³ Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 125-126.

Starting with Becknell's first expedition from Missouri to Santa Fe in 1821, U.S. manufactured trade goods began pouring into the Southwest. The range of supplies transported, traded, and sold were enormous. Eventually, supplies found their way to the various depots—cities, forts, trading posts, and to a lesser degree, the rendezvous. Traders in the Southwest used caravans to deliver much needed and desired supplies. They outfitted these caravans with pack animals such as horses and mules, and eventually with wagons, as with Becknell's second expedition from Missouri to Santa Fe in 1822. Nine years later, the famous mountain man and explorer Jedediah Smith led an expedition to trade in Santa Fe. Accompanying Smith and his men to the Southwest were dozens of trunks and chests full of supplies. There were tools, such as saws, augers, nails, screws, files, rasps, and chisels; sewing supplies like thimbles, needles, and scissors; pocket knives, butcher knives, table knives, and pen knives, including pocket razors, shaving razors, and razor handles. The ledger listed shell, bone, marble, glass, coat, waistcoat, yellow, and common buttons; eating utensils comprised of knives, forks, spoons, cups, mugs, and fine china. Random items included account books, notebooks, writing paper, wrapping paper, window glass, mirrors, escutcheons, carbine keys, umbrellas, handkerchief holders, iron tacks, and pins, too, were in the chests and trunks. Textiles were the most common item found. Listed textiles included handkerchiefs of many kinds, cloth of a half dozen colors, shawls of various materials and styles, different colors of flannel, tunics, bombazine, linen, nankeen, chintz, muslin, cotton, batiste, percale, tacking calico, twill, lace and ribbons.¹⁴⁴

Native Americans, trappers, and others purchased or traded for goods from fur trade depots to facilitate their jobs of procuring beaver fur, to aid in hunting for food, and to fulfill their needs to live comfortably, and to support their individual desires and curiosities.

¹⁴⁴ Jedediah S. Smith, "Memorandum of Merchandise Taken by J. S. Smith for the South West Expedition" in *The Southwest Expedition of Jedediah Smith*, 205-214. The supply list has been substantially shortened and the goods categorized by the author.

Accoutrements provided a way to work and live. Ashley's knowledge of this need drove him into the Rockies with trade items to fulfill those necessities. George F. Ruxton documented the best generalized description of a trapper and the basic supplies required to outfit a trapping expedition:

On starting for a hunt, the trapper fits himself out with the necessary equipment . . . This equipment consists usually of two or three horses or mules - one for saddle, the others for packs - and six traps, which are carried in a bag of leather called a trap-sack. Ammunition, a few pounds of tobacco, dressed deer-skins for moccasins, &c., are carried in a wallet of dressed buffalo-skin called a possible-sack . . . The costume of the trapper is a hunting-shirt of dressed buckskin, ornamented with long fringes; pantaloons of the same material, and decorated with porcupine-quills and long fringes down the outside of the leg, a flexible felt hat and moccasins clothe his extremities. Over his left shoulder and under his right arm hang his powder-horn and bullet-pouch, in which he carries his balls, flint and steel, and odds and ends of all kinds. Round the waist is a belt, in which is stuck a large butcher-knife in a sheath of buffalo-hide, made fast to the belt by a chain or guard of steel; which also supports a little buckskin case containing a whetstone. A tomahawk is also often added; and . . . a long heavy rifle is part and parcel of his equipment. I had nearly forgotten the pipe-holder, which hangs round his neck, and is generally a gage d'amour, and a triumph of squaw workmanship, in shape of a heart, garnished with beads and porcupine-quills. Thus provided . . . he starts to the mountains . . . as soon as the breaking up of the ice allows him to commence operations.¹⁴⁵

Trappers relied on their guns as protection from Native Americans and dangerous animals like grizzly bears. The personal accounts of trappers and traders are riddled with stories of Indian attacks and skirmishes with grizzly bears where guns saved lives. Guns were also instrumental in procuring food, enabling these men to hunt buffalo, elk, and deer. Men used steel traps, perhaps the most obvious tool, to catch beaver and other animals in the streams located in the Southwest and other regions of the western frontier. Buffalo robes and wool blankets kept these men warm during cold nights and harsh winters. Saddles, *appishimous*, and other horse tack facilitated the use of their beasts of burden, which were themselves also items of trade in the Southwest.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁵ Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, 242-243.

¹⁴⁶ Warren A. Ferris described "*appishimous*" as "square pieces of robes, used under our saddles in travelling, or under our beds in camp." Ferris, *Life in the Rocky Mountains*, 126.

The quantity, variety, and type of trade goods differed with each businessman, although many typical items could be found at any trading post—wool blankets and cloth, lead and gunpowder, beads and awls, coffee and sugar. The location where traders hoped to sell and trade their goods and the people in those locales influenced the decisions of each trader. Supplies available at Fort Osage, Bent's Fort, and Fort Uncompahgre, for example, differed. Fort Osage was a government facility supplied by federal funds and subject to federal regulations. Bent's Fort and Fort Uncompahgre were private enterprises. Because Fort Uncompahgre was in Mexico, it was subject to the governmental regulations of that country. However, because of its isolation, Robidoux often disregarded the Mexican trade rules. His inventory was smaller than that of Fort Osage and Bent's Fort and came mostly from Santa Fe, not the United States. The various forts also catered to the needs of their customers. Robidoux traded guns to the Ute and Shoshone, a practice that did not happen at Fort Osage with the Osage nation.¹⁴⁷ Bent's Fort traded with the local Cheyenne as well as those passing through along the Santa Fe Trail.¹⁴⁸

Because most of the supplies purchased and used in the Southwest came from the United States, a type of trade developed where businessmen met not only the needs of trappers, but other inhabitants of that region. Most of the goods pouring into Santa Fe were intended primarily for New Mexicans, although trappers and Native Americans likewise benefitted from the imports. The French, British, and American systems of trade primarily catered to the needs of trappers and Native Americans.

When William H. Ashley arrived at the first rendezvous in 1825, his trade goods targeted the specific needs of trappers in the mountains. Ashley's supplies consisted of consumable items

¹⁴⁷ Barton, *Buckskin Entrepreneur*, 57.

¹⁴⁸ For a specific list of items found at Fort Uncompahgre and Bent's Fort see Oliver McCloskey and Scott Olsen, *Supply and Demand: The Ledgers & Gear of the Western Fur Trade* (USA: Scott Olsen and Oliver McCloskey, 2009), 158 and 160-161.

such as flour, sugar, salt, pepper, coffee, rum, and tobacco that he knew trappers needed to supplement their diet of meat and other edibles found naturally on the land. He brought items that interested Native Americans such as vermilion, ribbons, tomahawks, hoes, earrings, sleigh bells, kettles and beads of all kinds, and colors. Ashley also provided accoutrements difficult to make or repair in the field as well as other goods not readily available to the trappers that proved vital to their comfort and survival. Among those were guns, gun locks, gun powder, lead, flints, knives, axes, trap springs, saddles, fish hooks, fire steels, thread, needles, buttons, scissors, awls, files, blankets, flannel, silk and other types of cloth, pencils, soap, combs, pipes for smoking, shoes, tin cups, and looking glasses.¹⁴⁹ These goods were common not only to the rendezvous of 1825, but all of the rendezvous, including those that took place in the Southwest, below the 42nd parallel and west of the Continental Divide.

Supplies moved from one depot to another, from trader to trader, and from one hand to another. These goods were the life blood of the Southwest and allowed a trade in fur to flourish for just under a decade. The supplies, an essential infrastructural component, in essence, turned the wheels of the fur trade in the American Southwest.

Conclusion

Hundreds of books and articles have been written about the American fur trade. The academic spectrum ranges from the professional historian to the novice history buff intrigued with the lifestyles of mountain men and the romanticized descriptions of their lives that once filled the dime novels of the late 19th century. However, the literature that deals strictly with the Southwest fur trade is drastically smaller in proportion to the more popular British, French, and American systems. While interest in the Southwest fur trade seems to be increasing, its

¹⁴⁹ "Inventory of Goods available at the 1825 Rendezvous on Henry's Fork of the Green River." William H. Ashley Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St Louis, Missouri. Accessed November 21, 2013, <http://www.mtmen.org/mtman/html/ashlist.html>.

popularity continues to be shadowed by other areas of interest. One of the purposes of this short work is an effort to continue to increase the teaching of the history of the Southwestern fur trade. The perspective presented draws on the concept of infrastructures—“the underlying foundation or basic framework”¹⁵⁰ that allow for, in this case, a fur trade to exist. No other literature at this time about the American fur trade looks at infrastructure specifically as this work does. The origin of the term “infrastructure” is French, and has only been around since the early 20th century. The Latin *infra* means “below,” signifying the need for a foundation of support.¹⁵¹ The animals, the people, the depots, and the supplies created a foundation that supported the fur trade of the American Southwest from 1821 to 1840.

After nearly two decades, that fur trade came to an end. By the 1840s, its infrastructure weakened, it could no longer support a viable trade. The near extinction of beaver in the late 1830s and early 1840s made trapping an unproductive economic endeavor. This crippled the first infrastructural component—the animals. As new materials appeared and fashions changed, the demand for beaver felt hats decreased. The businessmen, entrepreneurs, and adventurers involved in the fur trade, likewise decreased, and the second infrastructural component—the people, weakened, their sites on different economic endeavors. The financial Panic of 1837 created a shortage of money which led to a substantial decrease in fur sales. The abundance of nutria in South America led to a new geographical extraction point for fur.¹⁵² The third infrastructural component—the depots, adapted to the economic changes to support other types of trade and business, or they disappeared altogether. Without animals, people, or depots, the fourth infrastructural component—the supplies, were no longer needed in the same ways or for

¹⁵⁰ Merriam-Webster Online, “infrastructure,” accessed March 16, 2014, i.word.com/dictionary/infrastructure.

¹⁵¹ Oxford Dictionaries, “infra,” accessed March 16, 2014, www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american-english/infra-.

¹⁵² Eric J. Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010), 282-283.

the same reasons that they were for the nineteen years that the soft fur trade existed in the Southwest.

For a time, however, the fur trade in the American Southwest's infrastructure—a blending of characteristics from the French, British, and American systems, did support an institution based on the extraction of beaver and a trade in goods and fur. The geographical landscape and governmental shifts helped create a political and economic environment conducive to such a trade. Money, fashion, and adventure lured men to the Southwest which in turn drove the evolutionary development of that infrastructure. Exploration, trail blazing, settlement, and cultural interactions all contributed to setting in motion people's choices that had lasting historical and environmental consequences; and ultimately shaped the American Southwest.

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