

...the longest,
crookedest,
most arduous
pack mule
route in the
history of
America...

Old Spanish Trail

It is 1829, eight years after Mexico gained its independence from Spain. Traders from New Mexico, a province of Mexico at this time, travel overland to establish new commercial relations with Mexico's frontier settlements in the area of present-day California. They carry a variety of locally produced merchandise to exchange for mules and horses.

By this time Santa Fe is witnessing increased economic activity brought on by successful trade between the United States and Mexico. American, Mexican, and other merchants are bringing large quantities of manufactured products from the eastern United States into New Mexico using the Santa Fe Trail. Many goods are also traveling along El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro to and from the interior of Mexico.



Two Mexican Provinces

In 1829, Santa Fe (La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco de Asis), provincial capital of New Mexico, was a small frontier town that sheltered people from a diverse mix of countries and cultures. Approximately 700 miles to the west, Los Angeles (Pueblo de la Reina de los Angeles) was an even smaller ranch town. Consisting of little more than a church, a plaza, a few homes, and some government buildings, it was the largest Mexican community in an area of dispersed ranches, decaying Spanish missions, and tribal villages.

During the winter of 1829-1830, Antonio Armijo led approximately 60 men and a large mule caravan from New Mexico to California's Mission San Gabriel (also known as Mission San Gabriel Arcangel), located east of Los Angeles. The caravan carried goods produced in New Mexico, such as woolen rugs and blankets, to trade for horses and mules.

Other trade parties soon followed. Some found alternative routes; these were combined with Armijo's route and collectively became known as the Old Spanish Trail. It took Armijo's group about 12 weeks to reach California and six weeks to return on the trail that historians LeRoy and Ann Hafen called "the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule route in the history of America."



Ferdinand Deppe, San Gabriel Mission
(Mission San Gabriel Arcangel), 1832
COURTESY SANTA BARBARA MISSION ARCHIVE-LIBRARY

Mules and Men

The lands crossed by the Old Spanish Trail were daunting. For decades a diversity of people, including missionaries and fur trappers, ventured repeatedly into and across the vast territory between New Mexico and California.

By the time Armijo started his trip, New Mexican traders were familiar with the routes others had followed and were using the knowledge about the land gained by previous expeditions. The trips were arduous. Dramatically changing terrain and climate posed major challenges. Travelers suffered from thirst, entire groups lost their way, and they had to contend with severe weather and the harsh desert environment.

Commerce along the Old Spanish Trail began with the trade of horses and mules. In New Mexico, pack animals were scarce and prices were high. But in California, there was an abundance of horses and mules. This made for a lucrative trade opportunity. It also created at least one horse and mule rustling network. Americans, Native Americans, and New Mexicans teamed up to illegally capture and transport livestock to New Mexico for trading. California authorities tried to punish the thieves but were never able to control the illicit trade.

Illegal Captivity

Long before traders ventured into this region, Native Americans traveled and traded along many of the paths the caravans later followed. Petroglyphs reveal they witnessed the mule caravans along the route. Native guides had lengthy contact with Mexican and American traders.

Trade sometimes involved the exchange of illegal items, including humans. During the Trail's active years, frequent trade fairs were part of the local economy. Captives from a multitude of cultures and countries were ransomed at these fairs. This slave trade changed Hispanic and tribal cultures by displacing people, causing the loss of traditional knowledge, and by spreading violence. Human captivity and enslavement affected all who lived along the Old Spanish Trail.

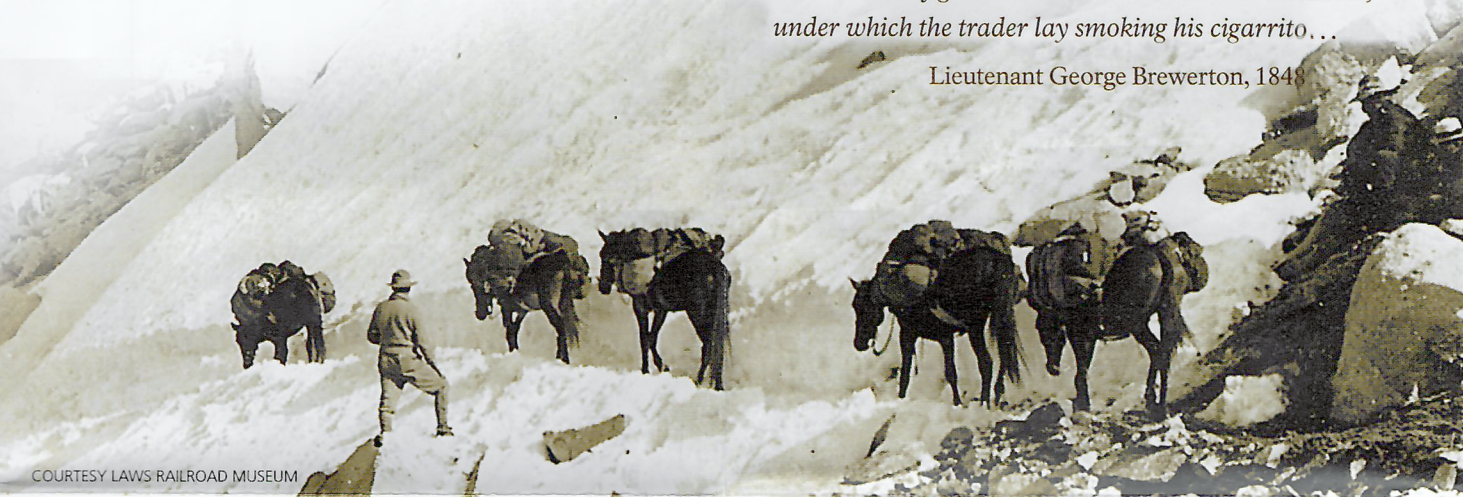
- 1821.....Mexico gains its independence from Spain.
- 1825.....Antoine Robidoux builds Fort Uncompahgre (Fort Robidoux) near present-day Delta, Colorado, where Native Americans and traders bargained for goods.
- 1829.....Antonio Armijo leads the first trade caravan from Abiquiú to Los Angeles, opening the Old Spanish Trail. Frequent caravans use the Trail for the next 20 years.
- 1830.....With considerable help from the Ute, Mojave, and Shoshones Tribes, William Wolfskill and George C. Yount blaze a northern route. It ascends into central Utah then heads southwest into California.
- 1834.....José Avieta and 125 men arrive at Los Angeles with 1,645 serapes, 314 blankets, and other goods.

Packing the Train

For the Old Spanish Trail, robust animals, good packing equipment, and a capable crew were the ingredients of a successful pack train. The outcome of the trip depended on the skills and abilities of those who packed and drove the animals that carried the merchandise.

New Mexicans had a well-deserved reputation as excellent horsemen and muleteers. American eyewitnesses marveled at the dexterity and skill with which they harnessed and adjusted packs of merchandise. Experienced travelers suggested that New Mexicans should always be used as teamsters for they "can catch up and roll up in half the time the average person does."

Packers were always in demand and utilized a variety of skills. They provided veterinary and blacksmithing services; secured loads with intricate knots, splices, and hitches; estimated the safe carrying capacity of pack animals; and they identified and treated animals suffering from unbalanced loads. Packers timed the travel day to stop at a meadow or creek bottom that provided good forage. They also lifted heavy loads, cared for the hooves of their animals, and "accomplish(ed) marvels with...a young sapling for a lever."



COURTESY LAWS RAILROAD MUSEUM

The Railroad and the End

In the mid-1840s new routes carried troops fighting in the Mexican-American War, pioneers bound for California, miners joining the gold rush, and still more traders into the West. In 1848, the Old Spanish Trail became a US trail when Mexico ceded the Trail's territory to the United States as a result of the Mexican-American War. Notable Americans that used the Trail included Kit Carson, who carried military dispatches in



JEANNE HOWERTON

- 1837.....José María Chávez and family settle in what would become named the Chávez Ravine in Los Angeles.
- 1837.....Political revolt and counterrevolution in New Mexico cause many to flee to California using the Old Spanish Trail.
- 1839.....José Antonio Salazar arrives in California leading a group of 75 men; Francisco Quintana carries domestic items worth \$78.25.
- 1841.....Francisco Estevan Vigil arrives in Los Angeles. He presents a passport and instructions describing a caravan commander's duties and responsibilities.
- 1842.....A party of 40 New Mexicans from Abiquiú settle Agua Mansa and Politana in California; Francisco Estevan Vigil and 194 men are issued passports and drive 4,150 California animals back to New Mexico.

Beasts of Burden

Mules had incredible strength and endurance, fared better than horses where water was scarce and forage poor, and recovered more rapidly after periods of hardship. Their hard and small hoofs withstood the shock and abrasion of rocky, boulder-strewn terrain.

The Equipment

While the mule was the heart of the transportation system, the packing equipment played an equally significant role. The aparejo (packsaddle) was the central piece of gear and carried heavy, odd-sized items safely over long distances without injuring the animal. One observer described it as "nearer to what I consider perfection in a pack saddle, than any other form of pack saddle yet invented."

The line of march of this strange cavalcade occupied an extent of more than a mile...Near this motley crowd we sojourned for one night...Their pack-saddles and bales had been taken off and carefully piled, so as not only to protect them from damp, but to form a sort of barricade or fort for their owner. From one side to the other of these little corrals of goods a Mexican blanket was stretched, under which the trader lay smoking his cigarrito...

Lieutenant George Brewerton, 1846

1847 and 1848; military attaché George Brewerton; and John C. Fremont who led US government-sponsored survey trips for planning railroads in the West.

By 1869, a rail route connecting the plains of the Midwest with San Francisco Bay was completed. The Old Spanish Trail was no longer needed. Portions evolved into wagon roads for local travel, but the days of cross-country mule caravans on the Old Spanish Trail had ended.



BEN WITTICK, PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS
PHOTO ARCHIVES (NMHM/DCA), 015870

- 1843.....Juan Arce hauls merchandise worth \$487.
- 1844.....Francisco Rael transports domestic items and sheep worth \$1,748.
- 1846.....The Mexican-American War begins.
- 1848.....The Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo ends Mexican-American War; the Southwest becomes US territory.
- 1849.....Commercial caravans on the Trail largely cease as other, more direct routes develop.
- 2002.....The Old Spanish National Historic Trail is designated by Congress.

Earlier explorations provided essential knowledge about the lands and cultures between Santa Fe and Los Angeles.



Timeline

Pre-Trail Indigenous communities across the Americas are connected to each other by trading networks on every scale. Spanish explorers would use many of these Indigenous roads and trails as parts of their routes between New Mexico and California.

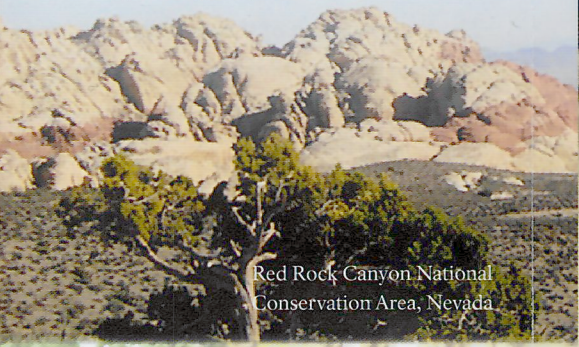
- 1598.....Don Juan de Oñate establishes San Juan de los Caballeros (near present-day Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo), the first Spanish colony and first capital in New Mexico.
- 1610.....Don Pedro de Peralta founds Santa Fe. It becomes the new capital of New Mexico.
- 1680.....The Indigenous Pueblo people plan and coordinate an uprising that drives Spanish colonists out of the New Mexican province for 12 years.

- 1765.....Guided by the Ute people, Juan María Antonio Rivera leads two parties from New Mexico to explore southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah.
- 1774.....Father Francisco Hermenegildo Garcés sets out from southern Arizona to find a path to the California missions. He follows the Mojave River and reaches Mission San Gabriel (Mission San Gabriel Arcángel).
- 1776.....Guided by Utes, Franciscan priests Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Francisco Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, follow Rivera's route to the Great Basin in western Utah.
- 1781.....Spanish colonists establish Los Angeles in California. Many of the colonists were of African descent.

Administration

The Old Spanish National Historic Trail was designated by Congress in 2002. The Trail runs through New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Utah, Nevada, and California. The Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service administer the Trail together to encourage preservation and public use.

These two federal agencies work in partnership with the Old Spanish Trail Association, Native American tribes, state, county, and municipal governmental agencies, private landowners, nonprofit groups, and others.



Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Nevada

Three Trails

Three trails, including the Old Spanish Trail, merged in Santa Fe. El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro (the Royal Road to the Interior Lands) was a wagon road between Mexico City and Santa Fe. The Santa Fe Trail, an international wagon route that crossed the plains, linked Missouri with Santa Fe.

The trails witnessed dramatic growth in use after 1821, when a large and diverse array of merchandise came to New Mexico from the eastern United States and Europe. Merchants took many of these products farther into Mexico using El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro and farther east using the Santa Fe Trail.



COURTESY PALACE OF THE GOVERNORS PHOTO ARCHIVES (NMHM/DCA), 155329

Old Spanish Trail Travel

The Old Spanish Trail's rugged terrain discouraged the use of wagons. It was always a pack route, mainly used by men and mules.

Traders used different routes from trip to trip, depending on weather and water. Caravans left New Mexico in the late summer or fall and returned from California in the spring. Early winter snows blocked mountain passes, and travelers chose their routes accordingly. In the spring, traders worried about late snows and floods. On every trip they worried about water and forage, often racing to known sources in order to beat other caravans to these crucial resources.

Explore Today

It is difficult to see traces of the Trail in the modern landscape. Most of the routes of the Old Spanish Trail have been reclaimed by nature or changed by later use. However, some of the landmarks that guided trail travelers can still be seen today.

The following sites offer opportunities to experience the Trail and some of the natural landscapes it crosses. This list contains only a small sample of places you can visit that are associated with the Trail. Visit the official trail websites for more information.

Arizona:

- Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Page (Headquarters)
- Navajo National Monument, Shonto
- Pipe Spring National Monument, Fredonia

California:

- Amargosa Canyon, Tecopa
- Desert Discovery Center, Barstow
- El Pueblo de Los Angeles Historical Monument, Los Angeles
- Juan Matias Sanchez Adobe, Montebello

- Mission San Gabriel Arcángel (Mission San Gabriel), San Gabriel
- Mojave National Preserve, Barstow (Headquarters)

Colorado:

- Canyons of the Ancients Visitor Center and Museum, Dolores
- Domínguez-Escalante National Conservation Area, Grand Junction Field Office, BLM
- Fort Uncompahgre, Delta
- Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, Mosca
- McInnis Canyons National Conservation Area, Grand Junction Field Office, BLM
- Museum of the West, Grand Junction
- Southern Ute Cultural Center and Museum, Ignacio
- Ute Indian Museum, Montrose

Nevada:

- Lake Mead National Recreation Area, Boulder City (Headquarters)
- Old Las Vegas Mormon Fort State Park, Las Vegas
- Red Rock Canyon National Conservation Area, Las Vegas

New Mexico:

- Aztec Ruins National Monument, Aztec
- Kit Carson Home and Museum, Taos

- Museum of Spanish Colonial Art, Santa Fe
- Rio Grande Gorge Visitor Center, Taos
- The Palace of the Governors, Santa Fe

Utah:

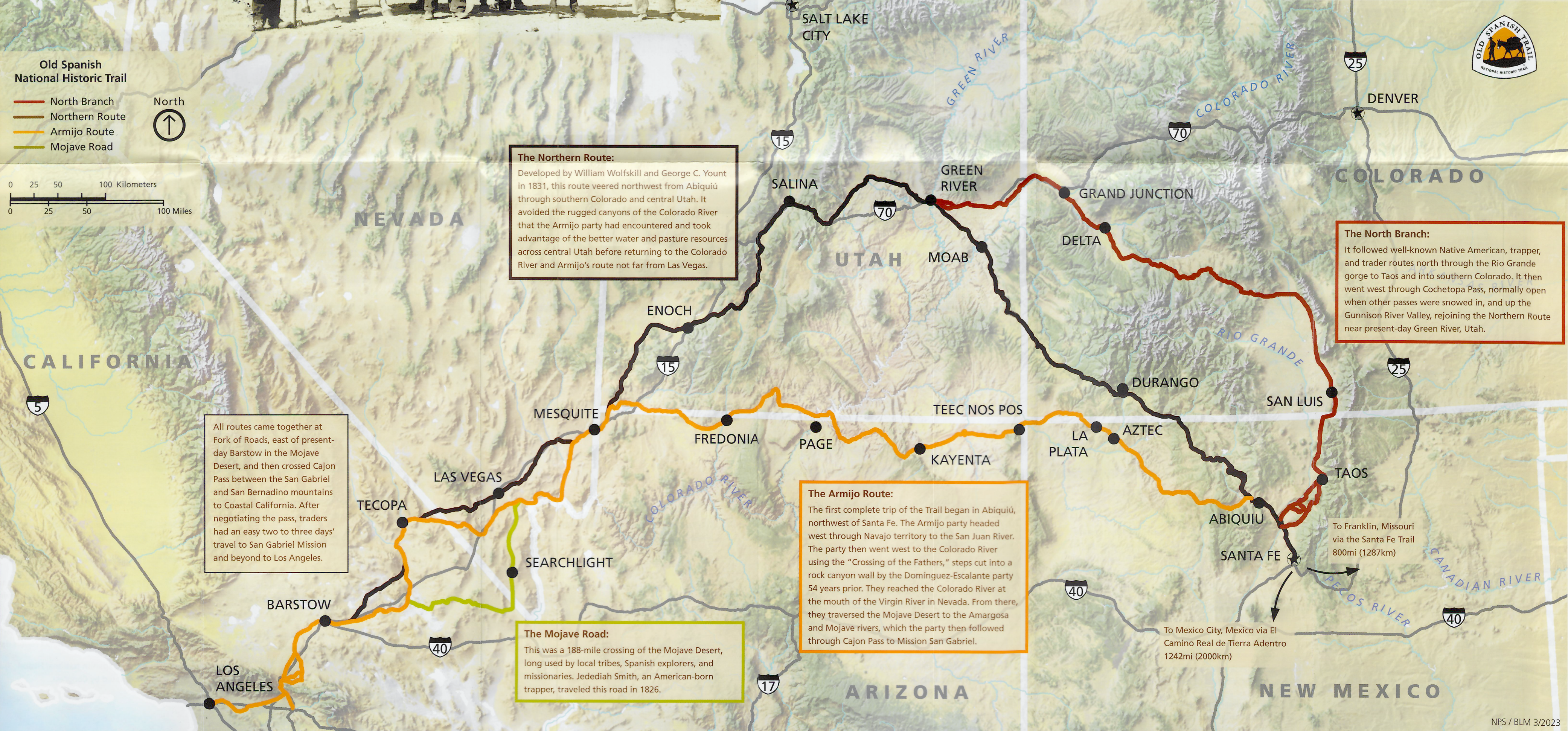
- Arches National Park, Moab
- Beaver Dam Wash National Conservation Area, St. George Field Office, BLM
- Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, Kanab (Headquarters), BLM
- Green River Gap, Moab Field Office, BLM
- John W. Powell River History Museum, Green River
- Moab Museum, Moab
- Museum of the San Rafael, Castle Dale
- Old Spanish Trail Heritage Loop, Price Field Office, BLM
- Richfield Visitor Center, Richfield

For more information, site locations, and trip planning tools, please visit the official trail websites:

Bureau of Land Management- Utah State Office
www.blm.gov/visit/old-spanish-trail-national-historic-trail

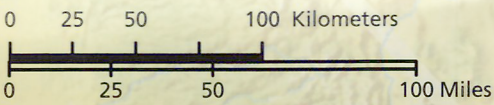
National Park Service- National Trails
www.nps.gov/olsp

Old Spanish Trail Association
www.oldspanishtrail.org



Old Spanish National Historic Trail

- North Branch
- Northern Route
- Armijo Route
- Mojave Road



The Northern Route:

Developed by William Wolfskill and George C. Yount in 1831, this route veered northwest from Abiquiú through southern Colorado and central Utah. It avoided the rugged canyons of the Colorado River that the Armijo party had encountered and took advantage of the better water and pasture resources across central Utah before returning to the Colorado River and Armijo's route not far from Las Vegas.

The North Branch:

It followed well-known Native American, trapper, and trader routes north through the Rio Grande gorge to Taos and into southern Colorado. It then went west through Cochetopa Pass, normally open when other passes were snowed in, and up the Gunnison River Valley, rejoining the Northern Route near present-day Green River, Utah.

All routes came together at Fork of Roads, east of present-day Barstow in the Mojave Desert, and then crossed Cajon Pass between the San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains to Coastal California. After negotiating the pass, traders had an easy two to three days' travel to San Gabriel Mission and beyond to Los Angeles.

The Armijo Route:

The first complete trip of the Trail began in Abiquiú, northwest of Santa Fe. The Armijo party headed west through Navajo territory to the San Juan River. The party then went west to the Colorado River using the "Crossing of the Fathers," steps cut into a rock canyon wall by the Domínguez-Escalante party 54 years prior. They reached the Colorado River at the mouth of the Virgin River in Nevada. From there, they traversed the Mojave Desert to the Amargosa and Mojave rivers, which the party then followed through Cajon Pass to Mission San Gabriel.

The Mojave Road:

This was a 188-mile crossing of the Mojave Desert, long used by local tribes, Spanish explorers, and missionaries. Jedediah Smith, an American-born trapper, traveled this road in 1826.