

## The Spanish Trail

### **Describe the Spanish Trail north from the “Vegas” to Santa Fe.**

The Spanish Trail connected Santa Fe, NM and Los Angeles. Three notable routes used for the section north of “Vegas” are:

- The Armijo Route refers to the route taken by Antonio Armijo’s 1829 group, the first commercial use of the Old Spanish Trail. North of “the Vegas,” (specifically, the current location of Las Vegas) Armijo’s route went through the border region of present-day Southern Utah and Northern Arizona, through areas now having towns like Mesquite, Fredonia, Page, Kayenta, Teec Nos Pos, La Plata & Aztec, ending at Abiquiu, NM, which is NW of Santa Fe.
- The Northern Route, used by William Wolfskill & George Yount in 1831 avoided the rugged canyons of the Colorado River crossed by Armijo in 1829 and headed further north above Santa Fe than Armijo did. This took the route through present-day cities like Durango, CO, and Moab, Green River, Salina, and Enoch, UT, before descending down the Virgin River area where Mesquite is now (and then Las Vegas, etc. to LA.)
- The North Branch headed even more north than the Northern Route. From Santa Fe, this route followed well-known trapper & trade routes through the Rio Grande gorge to Taos, then southern Colorado. It then went west through Cochetopa Pass and towns like Gunnison and Grand Junction before connecting with the Northern Route at Green River.

### **Describe the Spanish Trail route south from the “Vegas” to Los Angeles**

There were a few variations of the Spanish Trail heading south from the “Vegas” to Los Angeles; the variation was primarily between (the present-day areas of) Mesquite and Barstow. The variations in the trail include:

- The 1829 Armijo Route, which from Mesquite headed south down the Muddy River, then briefly adjacent to the Colorado River before heading west to Tecopa, passing the Amargosa and Mojave Rivers and then heading southwest to reach the Barstow area.
- Jedediah Smith took a similar route in 1826, but just past the bend of the Colorado River near Black Canyon, he traveled south through the Mojave Desert (including present-day Searchlight) before turning due West where he then connected with the common trail.
- The “Northern Route” of Wolfskill and Yount (1831) took a more northerly route after Mesquite than the others. Their route from Mesquite to Tecopa largely follows present-day I-15, and passes through present-day Las Vegas.

Once the trail(s) reached the Barstow area, there was just one main route which traveled through Cajon Pass, San Bernardino and on to Mission San Gabriel.

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## **What were some of the *original* names of places along the way?**

Santa Fe (of course!) Also, Taos, Abiquiu, Las Vegas, San Bernardino, Mission San Gabriel (& according to OST Assoc. website) Stinking Springs, Salt Creek, Alkali Canyon, Bitter Spring, and the Inconsistent River.

## **What are some of the current day names of towns and places along the routes.**

Santa Fe and Los Angeles (again - of course.) Also, variations of the route traveled through present-day towns such as Taos, Abiquiu, Alamosa, Aztec, Barstow, Cedar City, Durango, Grand Junction, Green River, Gunnison, Kayenta, Las Vegas, Blue Diamond, Mesquite, Page, Pahrump/Tecopa, and Redlands/San Bernardino.

The Trail originated in ancient, native American Indian trade routes. Between 1598 and 1830, Spanish (1598-1821) and later Mexican (1821-1830), and American (1821-1830) traders connected these native trade routes to complete the Old Spanish Trail.

Well-documented Spanish expeditions led from Santa Fe to central Utah. This Spanish traffic was fairly constant between 1765 and 1821 to trade with the Ute, including for slaves. The Utes, along with other unsavory characters, would often raid the many bands of Paiutes (mainly the Southern) to obtain their supply of slaves. Many of the Paiute bands moved miles away from the Trail to keep from being raided of their women and children.

In the 1820s, fur-trapping parties pushed west from New Mexico, following the Gila and Colorado rivers south of the Trail, while others used the Spanish route northwest from Santa Fe to trap the Green River in eastern Utah. These men included: Antoine Robidoux (who built forts on the North Branch), Ewing Young, Etienne Provost, William Wolfskill, George Yount, Jose Martin, Jedediah Smith, Kit Carson, and Ceran St. Vrain.

Mexican trader Antonio Armijo made the first commercial, round-trip journey along a southern variant of the route in 1829-1830. In that trip, Antonio Armijo, a merchant from Santa Fe, led 60 men and 100 mules on the known trails blazed northward by trappers and traders with the Utes, and backtracked along the route Spanish Padres Dominguez and Escalante recorded as they returned to Santa Fe from southern Utah more than fifty years earlier. While Armijo's caravan was camped on Christmas Day, 1829, about 100 miles northeast of present day Las Vegas, a scouting party rode west in search of water. Rafael Rivera, a young Mexican scout, wandered away from the rest of the group into the unexplored desert, in search of a shortcut.<sup>1</sup> He headed west of the Colorado River and stumbled upon what is now known as the Las Vegas valley. Camping on top of a mesa that overlooked the valley, he could see springs and meadows thriving in the middle of the desert. After two weeks, Rivera rejoined the group and led them to the valley.

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William Wolfskill and George Yount's commercial pack train of 1830-1831 inaugurated consistent use of the entire route from 1830-1848.

During the Mexican War, 1846-1848, the Americans' Army of the West conquered New Mexico, then blazed a new, southern variant of the route to California, hastening the end of the Old Spanish Trail. Several famous journeys were made along the Trail, from west-to-east, including one by Kit Carson and Lieutenant George D. Brewerton in 1848. After the Mexican War, wagon roads on competing routes largely ended use of the Trail.

In the 1850s and 1860s, portions of the Trail's eastern end were mapped by U.S. government expeditions, while the western portion of the trail witnessed Mormons heading to California. U.S. government expeditions included Capt. John W. Gunnison in 1853, and Lieutenant E.F. Beale in 1853. By then commercial traffic had died out, leaving wagon ruts visible where once only mules trod.