



Santa Fe Trail National Scenic Byway

Click to view Area attractions and map in new window.

The year was 1821. It seemed the only way to satisfy his debts, so William Becknell placed an advertisement in the newspaper asking for a “company of men” to trade “to the westward.” In September of that year, they left Franklin, Mo. Transporting their goods on pack animals down old trails used by Indians and frontiersmen, they reached Santa Fe, Republic of Mexico, which had only recently gained its independence from Spain. They entered present-day New Mexico through Raton Pass. Thus was forged the Mountain Branch of the Santa Fe Trail.

Crossing Raton Pass was the hardest part of traveling the Mountain Branch. Richens Wootton established a toll road through the pass in 1865, charging \$1.50 for wagons, 25 cents for horses, and 5 cents a head for stock. Indians used the road for free. Interstate 25 parallels the old road. The byway follows Moulton Street southeast to Second Street in Raton, first known as Willow Springs. It became a water stop for stagecoaches and a freight stop on the Santa Fe Trail. The Santa Fe Trail National Scenic Byway picks up south of Raton on U.S. 64 and runs through Cimarron. Settled around 1844, it became the headquarters of the 1.75-million-acre Maxwell Land Grant in 1857. Wagon trains entered the plaza from the east after crossing the Cimarron River. Lucien Maxwell built the Aztec Mill, which survives as the Old Mill Museum (17th Street; open summers).

The St. James Hotel (866-472-5019) started as a saloon in 1873 and was expanded in 1880. First-floor rooms are named for the cowboys and outlaws who stayed here—people like Bat Masterson, Buffalo Bill Cody and Jesse James. Heading south, the byway passes through Rayado, a campsite on the Santa Fe Trail and a strategic point where the mountain route intersected two other trails. In 1849, Maxwell and Kit Carson decided to settle there and build a fort to safeguard travelers. A federal garrison post was established in 1850.

In 1822, after the huge success of his first trip, Becknell and 22 men loaded three prairie schooners with goods for a second expedition. Wagons couldn’t cross the mountains, however, so they headed south across the prairie from Cimarron, Kan. Entering New Mexico north of present-day Clayton, they created the Cimarron Cutoff. North of Clayton, N.M. 406 intersects McNees Crossing, where the trail forded the North Canadian River.

The byway travels west out of Clayton on U.S. 56 past the Rabbit Ear Mountains, an important landmark on the trail. Another notable marker, Point of Rocks, is north of U.S. 56 about 22 miles east of Springer. The party of Santa Fe merchant J.W. White was attacked near here in 1849, and 11 graves are located at the site. Now a private ranch, it is open to the public (505-485-2473 for directions). Springer, located six miles west of where the trail crossed the Canadian River, is home to the Santa Fe Trail Museum (505-483-5554; free), housed in the 1882 Colfax County Courthouse. The byway leaves Springer on the east I-25 frontage road and heads for Wagon Mound, the last major landmark on the trail, named for its resemblance to the top of a covered wagon.

The Mountain Branch and the Cimarron Cutoff intersected at Watrous, and then the trail went west to Fort Union (505-425-8025; open daily). The first of three forts was built here in 1851 to protect Santa Fe Trail travelers and supply other New Mexico garrisons. The melted adobe walls of the last fort stand on a rise, commanding an unobstructed 360-degree view of the prairie. Las Vegas was founded in 1835, and it became a major trading center on the trail. The byway follows the I-25 frontage roads west and then to N.M. 63 north into Pecos. Pecos Pueblo was still inhabited when the Santa Fe Trail opened in 1821, but after it was abandoned in 1838 it was used as a campsite by trail travelers. Kozlowski’s Ranch was a trading stop and stage station on the trail. Both of these historic stops on the trail are part of Pecos National Monument (505-757- 6414; open daily).

A granite marker on the Santa Fe Plaza commemorates the physical end of the trail. But the arrival of the railroad in Santa Fe in 1880 marked the literal end of almost 60 years of caravans rolling into the old town. Now trains transport freight through the mountains and across the prairie. The wagons may be gone, but the spirit of the Santa Fe Trail still lives.