

FIRST DRAFT

# Bent's Fort in southeast Colorado an isolated fortress in the 1800s

A question arises as we approach Bent's Fort, or Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site as it's now called: Why here?

Why, in 1833, did Charles and William Bent, and their partner Ceran St. Vrain, choose to locate their new trading post on a swampy bend of the Arkansas River, far from the main route of the Santa Fe Trail trading road?



BOB SILBERNAGEL

"The valley is sterile there," historian David Lavender wrote. "Wood and grass were never abundant." Why choose this place when there was more timber and better grass 30 miles downstream?

Whatever their reasoning, the trading post was successful for 16 years. During most of that time, it was the largest structure between St. Louis and the Pacific Ocean. The partners' trading empire stretched from Mexico to Wyoming, from the Mississippi River into the Rocky Mountains.

Traders, trappers, travelers and Native Americans regularly visited. Seven languages were frequently spoken at the fort — English, French, Spanish, Cheyenne, Comanche, Sioux and Ute.

It was the only permanent supply stop for more than 800 miles along the road from Independence, Missouri, and Santa Fe.

The U.S. Army utilized its supplies on multiple occasions, most notably in 1846. That year, it served as a staging area for Gen. Stephen Watts Kearney's Army of the West as it prepared to invade New Mexico, then part of Mexico.

Bent's Fort was built in 1833 on the northern bank of the Arkansas River, about 70 miles southeast of present-day Pueblo. At the time, the Arkansas was the border between Mexico and the United States, so the site was an important stop before American traders crossed into Mexico.

However, this wasn't the main trade route at first. During the 1820s, most caravans on the Santa Fe Trail took the Cimarron Crossing, turning southwest near present-day Garden City, Kansas.

The Mountain Branch that reached Bent's Fort added 100 miles to the journey. It was rougher for wagons, and it required a steep climb over Raton Pass, between Colorado and New Mexico.

But the Mountain Branch also had more dependable water than the Cimarron Crossing, and there was less likelihood of Indian attacks — especially from the fearsome Comanches.

Moreover, a half-dozen Indian tribes frequented the area where the fort was built. Trading with multiple tribes for buffalo hides became a primary business of the fort.

Like so many early traders, the Bent brothers and St. Vrain were natives of St. Louis.

Charles entered the fur trade as a teenager, working in the Upper Missouri River Basin. Younger brother William joined a few years later. Beginning in 1829, they moved to trading on the Santa Fe Trail.

St. Vrain also worked in the Missouri River fur trade as a young man,



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

The entrance to Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site, as it appears today, near La Junta. The structure was built in 1833 and the Arkansas River is about a quarter-mile away.

but by the late 1820s, he had settled in Taos and conducted trade between Missouri and New Mexico.

Around 1831, Charles Bent and St. Vrain became trading partners. In 1832, they joined William in planning a trading post on the Santa Fe Trail. They settled on the site along the Arkansas River.

William Bent was to manage the post, while St. Vrain handled a company store in Taos. Charles obtained goods in St. Louis and shepherded caravans to the fort, then to Taos. But all three spent considerable time on the trails.

More than 100 experienced workmen were recruited from Taos and began working in late 1832 or early 1833 to construct the post. The structure was massive. The walls were 14 feet high, and roughly 3 feet thick. It was 137 feet wide by 178 feet long.

A corral nearly the same size was adjacent to the fort. But its walls were only about 5 feet high, so cactus was planted along the top to discourage intruders — animal or human.

On the northeast and southwest corners of the main structure, lookout posts were added, each with its own small cannon. A watchtower with a large bell was constructed over the main entrance to the fort.

Inside the structure, rooms were built around the central plaza — sleeping quarters for trappers and workmen, and larger quarters for the partners and guests. There was a large dining area and kitchen, a doctor's quarters, a blacksmith shop and carpenter's shop. There was storage for furs, ammunition, and trade goods.

Many visitors did business within the fort's walls, but spent their nights outside — Native Americans, including William Bent's Cheyenne friends, Mexican traders, mule skippers, ox-cart drivers and trappers not employed by Bent, St. Vrain and Co.

Dances, or fandangos, were frequent affairs at Bent's Fort, open to everyone. A slave woman named Charlotte Green, whom Charles had brought from St. Louis, was said to be the best dancer. She also served as cook, while her husband, Dick, did a variety of tasks for the Bents.

Storytelling, horse racing and other forms of gambling were regular activities. Large dinners were held on special occasions, with fruit and vegetables that had been hauled in. Gardens were



COURTESY OF NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Map showing the Santa Fe Trail with its two main branches. The Mountain Branch ran west to Bent's Fort, then turned southwest. (Location of Bent's Fort added by Bob Silbernagel).



JUDY SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

The dining room inside the reconstructed Bent's Old Fort.

attempted outside the fort walls, but fell victim to wandering livestock.

Bent's Fort suffered few attacks. On several occasions, horses and mules left outside during the day were stolen by raiders, and once a Mexican herder was killed by Comanches.

Robert Bent, younger brother to Charles and William, was killed by Comanches as he hunted buffalo near the river.

Disease was another threat. A smallpox outbreak as the fort was being built took many lives. Bent's Fort was abandoned in part because of the 1849 cholera outbreak, and William Bent burned all but the adobe walls to prevent its spread.

Charles Bent was already dead by then, killed by angry New Mexicans in Santa Fe in 1847 after he had been appointed by Gen. Kearney as the governor of the newly acquired U.S. territory.

Ceran St. Vrain and William Bent dissolved their partnership in 1849. In 1853, William built Bent's New Fort 40 miles downstream on the Arkansas from the old fort. He leased it to the Army in 1860. William died in 1869 on his ranch near the old fort.

The abandoned old fort slowly disintegrated, and

few people paid attention until 1912, when the La Junta chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution put up a marker at the site, then acquired the land from a local rancher.

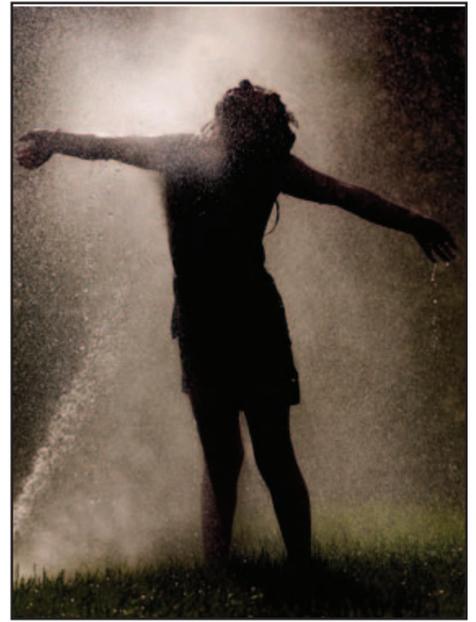
The site was transferred to the Colorado State Historical Society in 1954. In 1960, it was named a National Historic Site and taken over by National Park Service.

Reconstruction of Bent's Old Fort began in 1975, using dimensions recorded by Lt. James Abert when he visited in 1846 and sketches from other visitors. The reproduction opened in 1976.

For information, see "Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site," [nps.gov/beol/index.htm](http://nps.gov/beol/index.htm).

Sources: "Bent's Old Fort," by David Lavender; "Bent's Fort, Crossroads of Cultures on the Santa Fe Trail," by Melvin Bacon and Daniel Blegen; "When Was Bent's Fort Built," by LeRoy Hafen, *The Colorado Magazine*, April 1954; "Branches of the Santa Fe Trail," by Kathy Weiser, *Legends of America*, [legendsofamerica.com](http://legendsofamerica.com); "Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site," [nps.gov/beol/index.htm](http://nps.gov/beol/index.htm).

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

## CAPITOL COOL-DOWN

Ramona Allen of Topeka, Kansas, 6, plays recently in a sprinkler on the grounds of the Kansas Statehouse.

## Police investigate fire at Longmont pregnancy center

LONGMONT — A weekend fire at a Christian pregnancy center in north-central Colorado is being investigated as a possible arson, police in Longmont said.

The fire at Life Choices was reported at 3:17 a.m. Saturday, hours after the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* and said abortion laws would be decided by the states.

The front door was broken and the front of the building had been spray-painted with the words, "if abortions aren't safe neither are you."

On the concrete porch were the words "bans off our bodies."

The building sustained fire and heavy smoke damage.

Life Choices is a "Christ-centered minis-

try" that offers free services related to pregnancy and sexual health, information on reversing the effects of abortion pills and post-abortion support for guilt, shame, anxiety and depression, according to its website.

Life Choices Executive Director Kathy Roberts said the center is devastated and stunned "by this frightening act of vandalism."

The attack, she said, affects people who need support, such as pregnancy tests, parenting classes and financial assistance.

Police are asking people who live in the area to check their home surveillance video and forward any relevant video to police.

— Associated Press

The Daily Sentinel (ISSN 1445-8962)  
Printed editions published Wednesday thru Sunday, electronic editions published every morning at 734 S. Seventh Street, Grand Junction, CO 81501. Periodical Postage paid at Grand Junction, CO.  
Carrier home delivery prices: 13 weeks - \$65.00, 26 weeks - \$130.00, 52 weeks - \$260.00.  
Weekend delivery packages: Wednesday thru Sunday - \$244.40, Friday thru Sunday - \$197.60, Saturday & Sunday - \$163.80, Sunday only - \$163.80.  
Weekend "print only" delivery includes the following date in 2022: 11/24/2022. If you are an e-edition subscriber for 11/24/2022, you will not receive a printed paper.  
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