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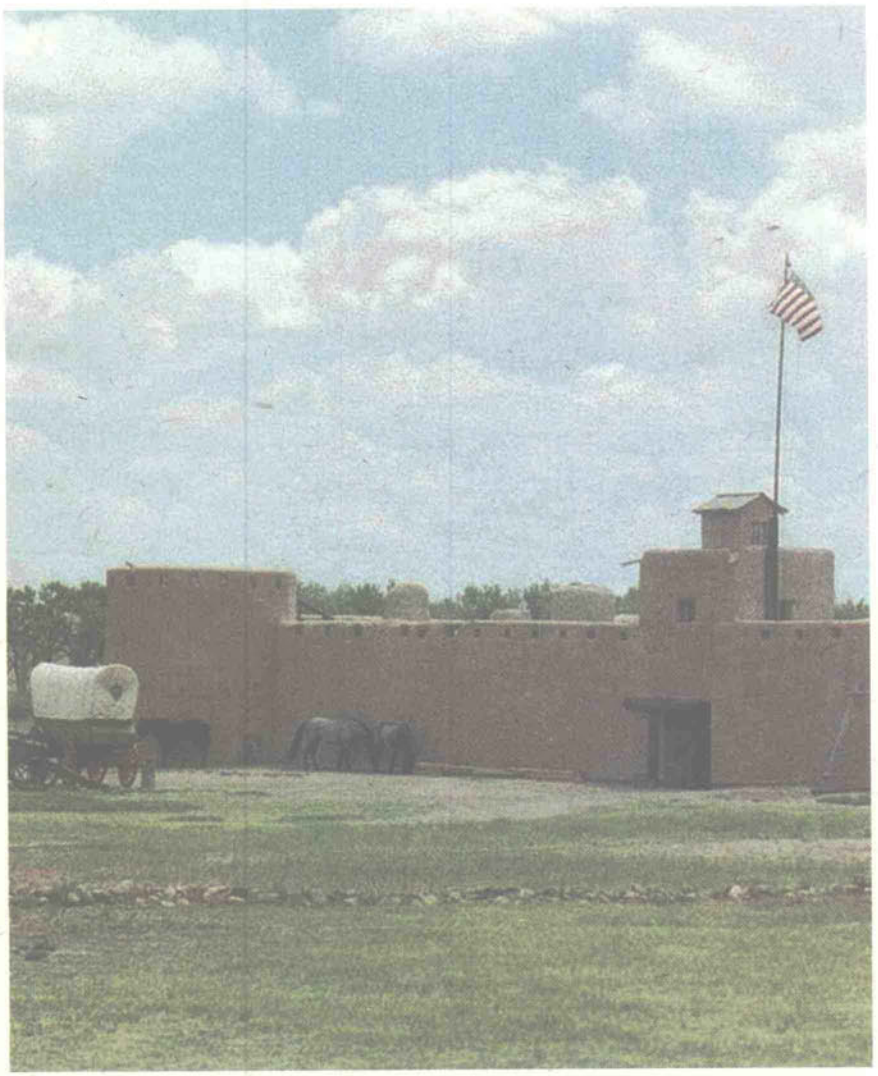
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site
La Junta, Colorado

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site
A Self-Guiding Tour



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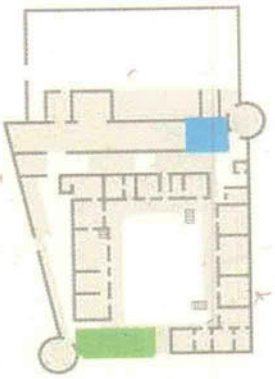
How to use this guide

This self-guiding tour booklet provides essential information on the history of Bent's Old Fort.
The National Park Service provides tours, living history programs, and a documentary film. Special events are offered throughout the year.



A map of the fort is located throughout this booklet and indicates rooms and areas of interest.

- Restrooms and a drinking fountain are located at the right-rear of the fort.
- The Indian trade room, display room, and AV room providing a 20-minute documentarty film, are located here.

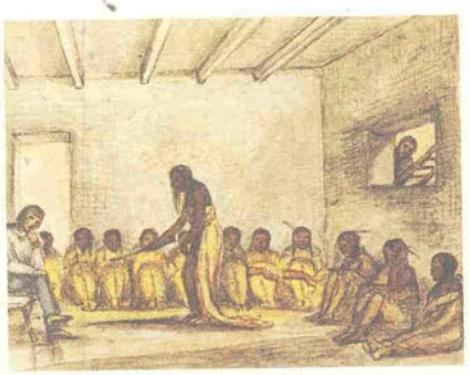
For your safety, please be aware of possible safety hazards:

- Please stay on the path, watch your footing, and keep off walls and room furnishings.
- Maintain a safe distance from animals.
- Pets must be on a leash, with you at all times, and may not enter rooms.
- Please leave all objects in place.
- Report safety hazards or emergencies to park rangers.

Bent's Old Fort was one of the significant centers of fur trade on the Santa Fe Trail, influencing economies around the world. Built by brothers Charles and William Bent and their business partner Ceran St. Vrain in 1833, the fort was the leading industry west of the Mississippi in the early 1830s. For 16 years, Bent, St. Vrain and Co. managed a prosperous trading empire. The Fort was located on the Arkansas River, the international boundary between two countries, Mexico on the south side of the river, and the United States on the north. Strategically located on an established road, it helped pave the way for the occupation of the west by the U.S. Army, and was an instrument of Manifest Destiny and the invasion of Mexico in 1846.

By 1849, the trade which had made Bent's Fort prosper was deteriorating. Local bison populations were in decline, cottonwood groves were wiped out, and the lives of the Plains Indians had been disrupted by trade and the growing stream of settlers, gold-seekers, and soldiers during and after the Mexican-American War. Clashes with the Plains Indians had become more frequent, cholera was sweeping the area, and William Bent's first wife and three brothers had died. Some theorize that he tried to burn down the Fort in 1849. In the early 1850s he constructed Bent's New Fort 40 miles downriver at Big Timbers, near present day Lamar, Colorado.

The Council Room was a neutral ground for Indian peace councils, and where terms of trade were agreed upon.



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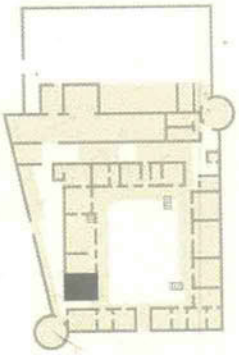
Council Room

In 1847, George Ruxton, an English traveler visiting Bent's Fort, described how Chiefs "sit in solemn conclave and smoke the 'calamet' over their real and imaginary grievances." He observed these problems being settled amid "clouds of tobacco and kinnikkinnik." The Fort's interpreters John Smith and William Guerrier would rise before the assembly, struggling to translate the words of Cheyenne and Arapaho into English. Kettles of coffee and tobacco twists sat in this room; each were considered appropriate presents to give Chiefs. On these occasions, the gathering was "flavored" by speech making and the graceful movements of sign language.

Buffalo

Horse and Rider

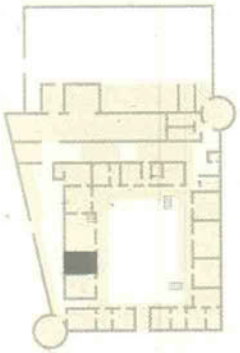
Water



In the 1830s, beaver pelts, called "hairy bank notes" could be bartered for trade goods. As beaver numbers declined, buffalo hides became the foundation of exchange.

Trade Room

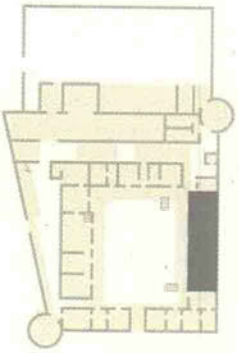
Also called a "general store," it served trappers, traders, Indians, the Fort's labor force, travelers, soldiers, and various adventurers. Bartering was performed here through a simple exchange of goods or an extension of credit. The shelves were stocked with calico, blankets, muskets, gun powder, flint, knives, clay pipes, kettles, coffee, chocolate, corn, and other goods imported from around the world. A separate trade room met the needs of the more difficult tribes through a small window at the entrance to the Fort. The trade rooms were places where all groups could interact in harmony. The Indians would trade their furs and hides for a variety of goods, such as cloth, muskets, iron ware, tobacco, brass rings, seashells, bracelets, and beads. Company traders were often sent to Indian camps to elicit business.



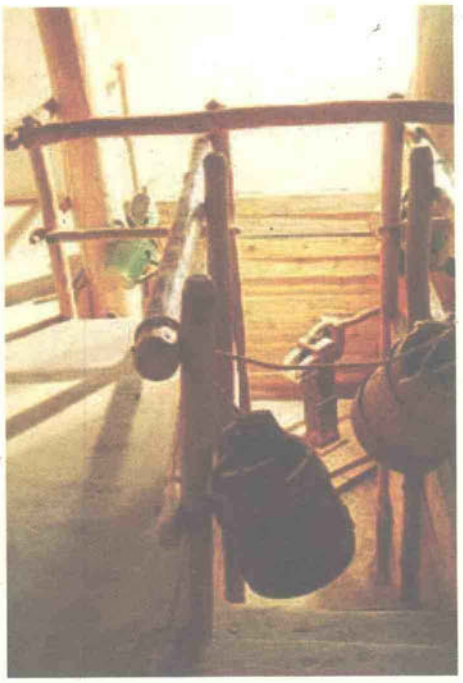
It took two full days for one Indian woman to brain tan a hide; the average woman could produce 20 robes each year.

Warehouses

The first and second warehouses were filled with barrels, bags and bundles of trade goods consisting of dry goods, tools, guns, gunpowder, and foodstuffs. The third warehouse, marked at its entrance by a locked door leading to a lower storage area, was used as a supply depot in 1846 during the war with Mexico. The last warehouse was the "bank vault" of Bent's Fort, containing buffalo robes, beaver pelts, and the furs of a variety of other animals. Buffalo hides were purchased for 25 cents in trade goods, and in turn were sold for $3 to $6. After being pressed in the fur press, each bale contained 8 to 10 buffalo robes, and weighed 100 pounds. Every year, as many as 15,000 of these bundled robes were carried by wagon to Independence, Missouri and then by riverboat to be traded in St. Louis.

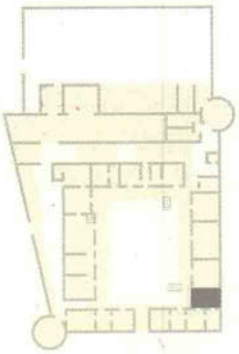


Important guests might be treated to the "civilized life" when visiting the Fort, which offered iced lemonade and mint juleps.



Well Room

At the Fort in 1846, visitor Philip St. George Cooke was treated by Ceran St. Vrain to "a pitcher covered with the dew of promise which brimmed with broken ice." Traveling the hot, dusty trail day after day, it is the little things that you come to appreciate. In July 1846, Susan Magoffin wrote of the icehouse receiving "more customers than any other room"and exclaimed that, "they have a well inside, and fine water it is-especially with ice." By the late 1840s a new ice house may have been built outside the walls, possibly two hundred yards west of the Fort on a rise of ground near the river.

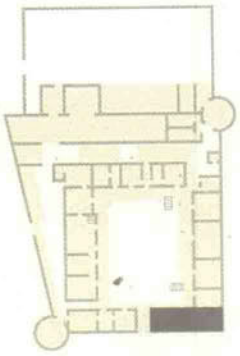


The diverse customs and lifestyles at the Fort made it a "cultural crossroads", as well as a place of assimilation and change.

Laborer's Quarters

These rooms housed the sleeping and eating quarters for the Fort's laborers, employees, and travelers from the states. About 150 Mexican laborers were brought up from Mexico to build the Fort. Some stayed, working as adoberos, packers, herders, and horsebreakers.

The adoberos were familiar with the techniques involved in adobe construction. These rooms reflect their customs and beliefs. Decades before the arrival of Americans, groups of Mexican traders plying biscuits, dried pumpkin, and corn had penetrated the plains north of Santa Fe. The presence of grinding stones, herbs and spices, pots and pans, and strings of chili peppers attest to the room's use by "Las Señoritas" as a place for cooking. They cooked for their families and prepared meals for the owners and their guests.



"My journey tells a story tonight different from what it has ever done before."

opening line from the diary of Susan Magoffin

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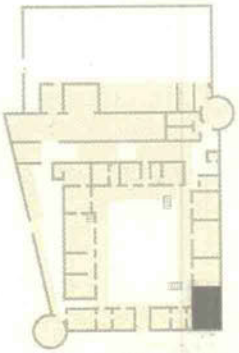
Doctor's Quarters

Doctor Hempstead, a resident physician, was known to have a well-stocked library, and according to visitor Lewis H. Garrard, it "afforded recreation and pastime during the dull intervals of the day."

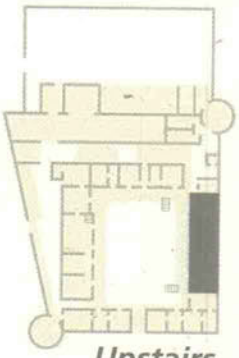
Susan Magoffin

During Susan Magoffin's stay at the Fort, she recuperated in the doctor's quarters. One of the first Anglo women to travel the Santa Fe Trail, she led a short but adventurous life. At eighteen years old in 1846, she married veteran Santa Fe trader, Samuel Magoffin. While crossing the Santa Fe Trail, Susan wrote about life and customs on the frontier. Traveling in style, her husband provided her with a private carriage, a small tent house, a maid, personal driver, and three servants. In her diary she proclaimed, "It is the life of a wandering princess, mine." Even though she traveled in luxury, her life was not without misfortune. Taken ill while enroute to Santa Fe with her husband, Susan Magoffin suffered a miscarriage upon reaching the fort.



Upstairs

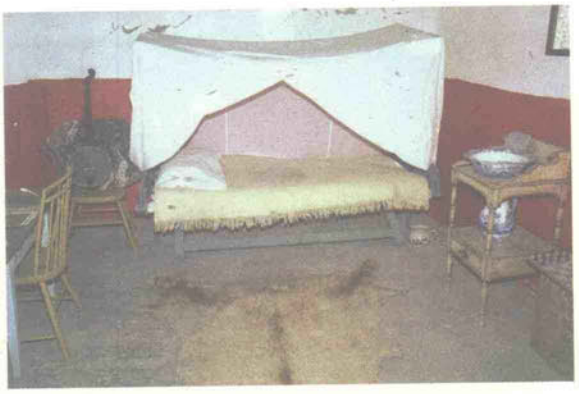
A soldier's diet may have been more harmful than bullets. Rations included coffee, hard tack, beans, and salt pork. The military was plagued with cholera, dysentery, and scurvy.



Upstairs

Living Quarters

These three rooms show the living conditions of the military, fort employees, and fur trappers. During the war with Mexico in 1846, the Fort hosted a varied group of boarders and employees. The Army of the West used these quarters as a hospital. French-Canadian and American frontiersmen lived and ate together in their quarters. The Fort became a strategic point for exploration, reconnaissance, and espionage. Trappers sampled the "civilized life," while company hunters remained in the area supplying the fort with buffalo meat and venison. They repaired moccasins and boots, patched their leather britches, and made chains and lead bullets. Some of the trappers and hunters that were employed by Bent, St. Vrain and Company included the legendary Kit Carson, "Old Bill" Williams, "Peg-Leg" Smith and "Uncle Dick" Wootton.



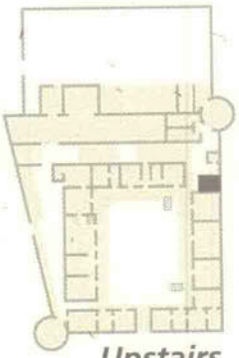
The clerks were often second in charge when the owners of the fort were absent, their titles were "store keepers and superintendants."

Clerk's Quarters

Clerks had many responsibilities, including overseeing security, and handling and accounting for all trade goods. They were qualified to read and write in the business language of credits and money units.

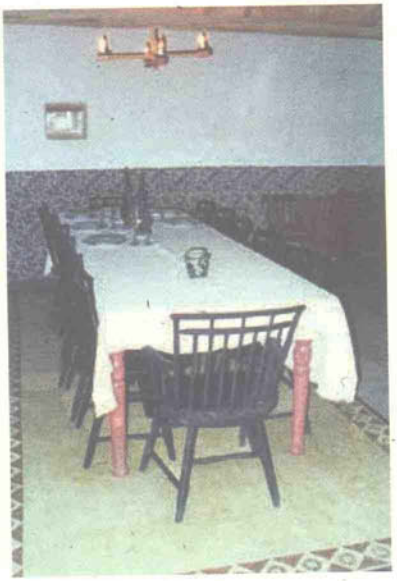
Frances Preston Blair Jr., clerk at the fort in 1846, came west in search of better health. Visitors often heard him sitting up at night playing the banjo. After leaving Bent's Fort, he went on to have a successful political career. Blair was even a candidate for Vice President of the United States in 1868.

Another clerk, Alexander Barclay, managed the Fort's stores, and kept the books from 1838 to 1842. After leaving Bent's Fort, he built Fort Barclay, a trading post located six miles from Fort Union, in New Mexico. Original trade ledgers were used in the reconstruction and furnishing of Bent's Fort.



Upstairs

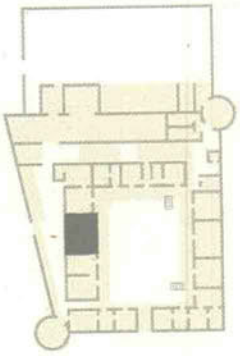
While dining at the fort, the separation of social classes was evident. The laborers cooked in their quarters or ate from a community cooking pot.



Dining Room

Lewis H. Garrard, a visitor to the Fort in the winter of 1846, exclaimed "My own unenviable thoughts occupied me through the solitary day; and only when Paint was turned in the corral behind the fort to chew dry hay, and myself with numb fingers gradually thawing in the long, low dining room, drinking hot coffee, eating bread, 'buffler,' and 'state doins,' and listening to Charlotte, the glib-tongued, sable fort cook, retailing her stock of news and surmises, did I feel entirely free to throw off care."

After traveling over a month on the trail, it was a treat to sit down and eat like "civilized" people. Along with dining, this room was used for other functions such as fandangos, when all social classes intermixed freely. Visitor Lewis Garrard recalled men "waiting for the rudely-scraped tune from a screaking violin" amidst "the boisterous pitching of the Missouri backwoodsman." Visitor Matt Field wrote that "all, irrespective of rank" gathered "to trip the light fantastic toe."

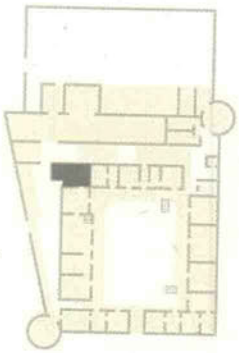


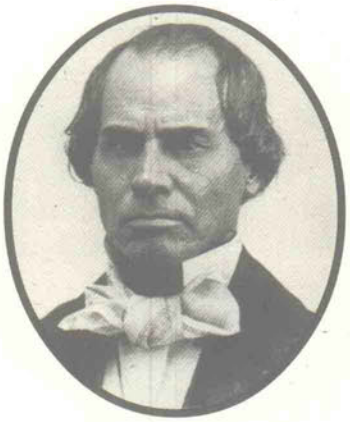
- Proceed through the Cook's Quarters to the Kitchen.

Many visitors ask what remained of the Fort after it's destruction. The kitchen's limestone hearth was found intact during archeological excavations, and put back in place. Notice how the limestone has been worn smooth.

Kitchen

Typical smells in the kitchen may have been cottonwood smoke, spices, grease drippings, and the rank odor of spoiled meat and rotting foodstuffs. Amidst flying towels, steam, and clanging pots one could find the cooks. Several were employed at the Fort, but William Bent's slave, Charlotte Green received greater notice for her famous "flapjacks and pumpkin pies." Visitor George Ruxton wrote of her "foods that were celebrated from Long's Peak to the Cumbres Espanoles." Archeological deposits uncovered include wild game such as duck, turkey, pronghorn, venison, and buffalo. The ledgers of Bent, St. Vrain and Company of 1839 included flour, dried peaches, cheese, rice, almonds, raisins, 1,190 pounds of bacon sides, and 2 barrels of pork in addition to large amounts of coffee, tea, sugar, salt, mollases, and produce from New Mexico. Wild greens were used as spice and medicine.





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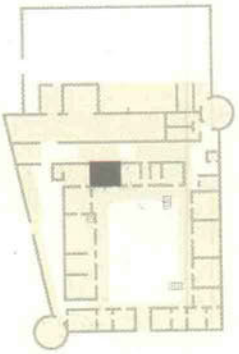
William Bent was known to the Cheyennes as "Little White Man." His fairness and respect for the culture was the reason for the company's excellent reputation among the Plains Indians.



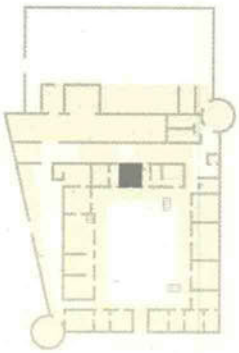
William Bent's Quarters

Born in St. Louis in 1809, William Bent spent the majority of his life in the west as a frontiersman. During his lifetime, he was a trapper, trader, scout, freighter, and Indian Agent. He became acquainted with the fur trade, New Mexicans, and the Plains Indians. His marriages with two Cheyenne women, Owl Woman, and later her sister Yellow Woman, resulted in a large and well-known family. As resident manager, he directed the Indian and trapping trade at the Fort. Bent occupied these private quarters, and often lived with his Cheyenne family in their village. His quarters would have reflected the varied cultures which influenced his world. A desk, washstand, and other furnishings represent his Missouri upbringing. Quillwork and buckskins indicate Cheyenne influences, and the occasional presence of his wife Owl Woman.

A large painted elk hide called a "Winter Count," contains a Cheyenne picture history. The paintings depict events like a meteor shower in 1833 called "the night the stars fell," the murder of Charles Bent, and outbreaks of measles and whooping cough which ravaged the Southern Cheyennes.

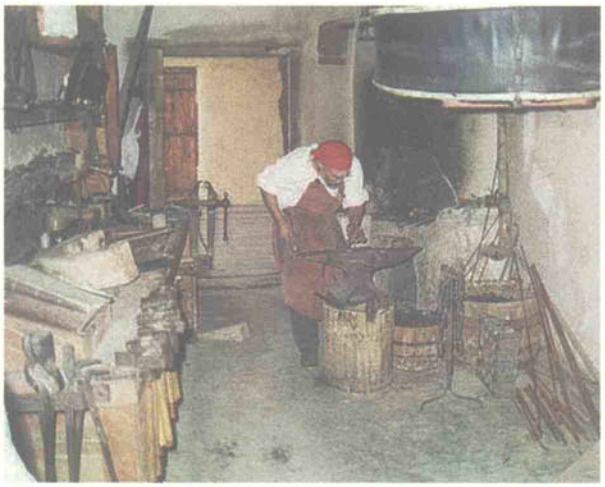
Fitzpatrick's Quarters

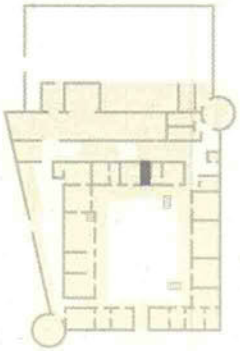
Indian Agent Thomas Fitzpatrick ran agency affairs during his stay at the Fort in 1847-49. He was appointed as the first agent for the tribes of the lower Arkansas River. Fitzpatrick wrote field reports to Washington from Bent's Fort, and presided over Indian councils and treaties. His views on Indian affairs included a fervent desire to rid alcohol from the Indian trade and to establish military posts on the Platte and Arkansas Rivers. The furnishings represent his lifestyle and relationship with the Plains Indians. Farming tools and seeds reflect his desire to introduce the Indians to agriculture. The beaded mocassins are a gift from the Arapaho family of Big Heart Woman.



Blacksmith's Shop

The activities in this room included constructing wagon parts, the manufacturing and repair of tools, livestock shoeing, and wheel repairs. According to visitors, most of the Fort's mechanics were Americans with a few Frenchmen. Their workshops were typically cluttered places. Prevailing smells included coal smoke and hot-shod hooves which smelled like burning hair. Tools included hammers, tongs, anvils, and a vice. Bent & St. Vrain ordered a 123 pound iron anvil in 1840 and they purchased a cowhide bellows for $20.00. Wagons were repaired and animals shod in the alley behind the shop. Beyond that is the wagon shed where freight wagons were stored in winter.





"The ring of the blacksmith hammer, and the noise from the wagoner's shop were incessant."

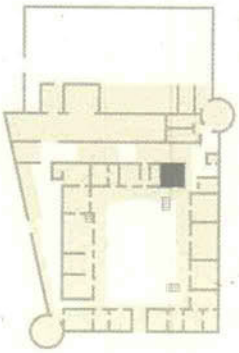
Lt. James Abert

- Proceed through the Craftsman's Quarters to the Carpenter's Shop.

On September 9, 1846, the St. Louis Missouri Republican reported that Bent's Fort employees complained of wagons falling apart from the dry desert air, "A great portion of the time was occupied in repairing them."

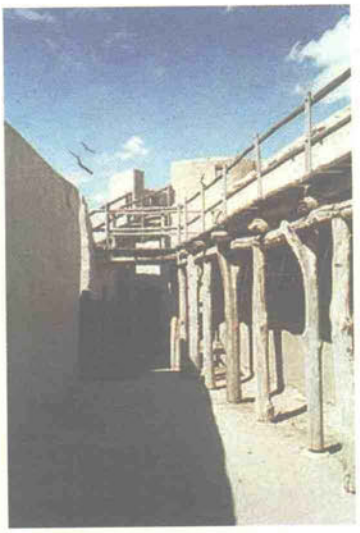
Carpenter's Shop

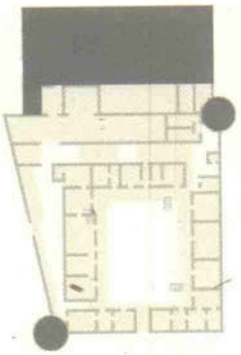
The repair of wagons was critical to the success of Bent's Fort. During some periods of the fort's history, it resembled a wrecking yard, with broken axles, fractured hubs, splintered side boards, mounds of white canvas and piles of abandoned tongues and spreaders. The fort's craftsmen were especially anxious to salvage the iron parts, which could be reworked into other useful pieces. One might find hooves to make glue, and rawhide -the duct tape of the 1840s. Hardwoods from Missouri were cut and shaved into wagon parts. Making do with what they had, they kept the wagons rolling.



Bastions and Corrals

Built for defense and protection of the Fort, round bastions tower at the northeast and southwest corners. The watchtower, with its flagpole attached, served as a guard post above the main gate. Each bastion had a swivel cannon that was never used in defense of the Fort. They were used for signaling and welcoming arriving trade caravans. Lt. James Abert noted in his diary that the corral wall was "planted with cacti, which bear red and white flowers." The spines of the cactus served to keep horse rustlers from stealing livestock. It's been said that "One Eyed" Juan could break horses without losing a silver dollar from beneath the sole of his boot. Mexican vaqueros broke horses and mules that were brought for trade. The corrals provided protection for the wagons and stock. Visitors were often impressed by the defensive capabilities of the fortification.





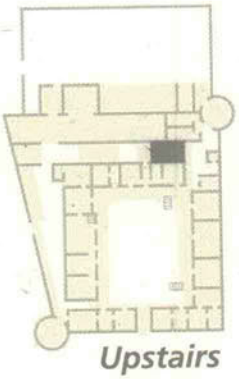
Serving as lookout posts, the bastions of the fort are typical of most castles, where two walls can be guarded from one position. Susan Magoffin wrote that the fort looked like an "ancient castle."

"They are gambling off their clothes till some of them are next to nudity."

Susan Magoffin, writing about the employees of her husband.

Billiard Room

Billiards helped travelers and employees cope with boredom, idleness, and loneliness. Journals and diaries mention that cards and games of backgammon, chess, and checkers were played to ease the long days and nights. Susan Magoffin exclaimed that "I hear the cackling of chickens at such a rate sometimes I shall not be surprised to hear of a cock-pit." William Bent's son George, recalled that "across one end of the room ran a counter or bar, over which drinkables were served." The company's 1839 ledger shows a diverse assortment of drink; 12 boxes claret wine, 37 gallons brandy, and 58 gallons of rum. Lt. James Abert used the room as an art studio, positioning a Cheyenne model "upon the billiard table." The man "sat perfectly motionless" until the painting was completed and then asked that his name "Bear Above" be written underneath.

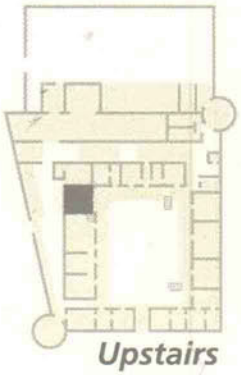


Upstairs

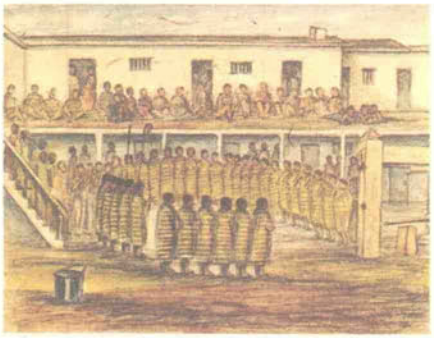
St. Vrain's Quarters

Trapper and Taos trader, Ceran St. Vrain was the son of a noble family dispossessed during the French Revolution of 1789. He was well-known and highly respected in Santa Fe, and his relationships in New Mexico were invaluable to the Bents. When St. Vrain was away, his quarters became a guest room.

One of the most notable guests was Lieutenant James Abert, a topographical engineer surveying the west with a U.S. Army expedition. In 1845, Abert described peace talks between the Cheyenne and the Delaware, and sympathized with the changes forced on the Indians by white settlers. As a naturalist, he sketched and studied the plants and animals of the area. While recuperating from an illness in 1846, he drew plans of the Fort, which provided architects with the necessary information to rebuild it in 1976.



Upstairs



Scalp Dance
by Lieutenant James Abert

Bent's Old Fort National Historic Site was established March 15, 1960 by Congress, and reconstruction was completed in 1976. The reconstruction is based upon original drawings, historical accounts and archeological evidence. The Fort is a faithful reproduction.

Suggestions for further reading

(Available in the park's bookstore)

Abert, Lt. James, *Expedition to the Southwest*
Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1999

Bent, George, *The Life of George Bent,*
Norman,OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968

Garrard, Lewis H., *Wah-to-yah and the Taos Trail,*
Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955

Gregg, Josiah, *Commerce of the Prairie,*
Santa Barbara, CA.: Narrative Press, 2001

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