

OSTA

The Old Spanish Trail Association (OSTA) is a citizens' group that studies, interprets, protects, and promotes use of the trail.

Members represent several Indian Nations, traditional Hispanic towns, and Anglos. Business, industry, artists, counties and cities, states and federal agencies along the route help develop exhibits, programs, and trail orientation for visitors who want to experience the many cultures and nature of this historic route.

Modern travelers along the route can find something of ethnology, folklore, religion, commerce, and romance crystallized in that sinuous line, streaking the virgin land of yesterday—the Old Spanish Trail.

OSTA, a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) organization, has advocated the OSNHT since 1994. It publishes research and interpretive papers, the periodical *Spanish Traces*, holds an annual conference, field trips, and chapter activities. Institutions, businesses, and people in 24 states plus England support the Association's work to help modern travelers to imagine the past.

On this trail you can sense the blending of cultures that give the Southwest its unique character. You can see the tough conditions that required courageous, devoted, and innovative people who survived here, in the face of brutal politics, cultural differences, and a harsh but spectacular natural environment.

Reading:

Hafen, L. and A. 1954/1993. *Old Spanish Trail*. U of Nebraska Press.

Crampton & Madsen. 2007. *In Search of the Spanish Trail*. Gibbs Smith Publishers.



Churro wool ready for weaving



Rio Grande style weaving



Striped cliffs guided Arimijo in southern Utah

HISTORY OF THE OLD SPANISH TRAIL

1829-1848



The three-pronged trail between Santa Fe and Los Angeles

In the early 1800s, traders on the Old Spanish Trail connected the small Mexican towns of Los Angeles, California, and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Native people had used parts of the three branches for centuries. They probably had followed ancient wild animal migration routes, along paths of least resistance.



OLD SPANISH TRAIL ASSOCIATION

www.oldspanishtrail.org

Writers called the *Old Spanish Trail* “the longest, crookedest, most arduous pack mule trail in the history of America.”

It travels through many cultural homelands and extremes of scenery—the most diverse of America’s long distance trails. Yet, few people know of its name or location or significance today.

Between 1829 and 1848, hundreds of Spanish-speaking traders, Indians, and even horse thieves traveled the routes. The first traders startled the Californians by emerging out of the Mojave Desert with hundreds of pack mules carrying finished woolen goods. After a few months of trading, they disappeared back into the desert, headed east, herding hundreds of fresh horses and mules to sell in Santa Fe.

"Caravans travel once per year from New Mexico to Los Angeles. These consist of 200 men on horseback, accompanied by mules laden with fabrics and large woolen covers... This merchandise is exchanged for horses and mules, on a basis, usually, of two blankets for one animal."

(Duflot de Mofras, a French visitor in 1841-1842)

This activity improved the economies of both northern New Mexico and southern California. Along the trail, Utes and Paiutes added to their horse herds by exacting tribute for passage across their lands. Even Midwestern agriculture benefited from the mules that Santa Fe Trail traders bought in California to sell to farmers moving into Missouri.

The Spanish/Mexican trading story started in 1829, when Antonio Armijo and friends took a nearly straight west route through deserts and canyons with 100 pack mules. Each carried 200-300 pounds of woolen dry goods. Californians accepted serapes, blankets, and mantillas in exchange for horses and mules, whose numbers had grown beyond the capacity of the land to feed them.

In 1830, Wolfskill, Yount, and a group of traders followed a less arid route by arching north of the deepest canyons via Green River, in today’s Utah. This became the Main Branch. A third route, the North Branch, went north from Okeh Owinge Pueblo, through the San Luis Valley and over Cochetopa Pass. It merged with the Main Branch near the Green River crossing. The Armijo route joined in southwest Utah.

Most travelers paused at *las vegas*, which was then a big spring and grassy meadows. Then they headed across the dry Mojave, over the San Bernardino Mountains to the San Gabriel Mission, nine miles from the pueblo of Los Angeles.

Nearly every year after 1829, weavers from Taos, Santa Fe, and Abiquiu supplied mule caravans with loads of weavings to carry the 1,200+ miles to warm the people in sunny *Alta California*.

Armijo, Wolfskill, Yount, Chavez and other New Mexicans found California pleasant and productive. They settled there.

Other Old Spanish Trail travelers, such as Trujillo, Baca, Peña, Wilson, Williams, Leese, Rowland and Workman, and later Robidoux, joined them. Many played key roles in the growth of this golden land. In 1848, Mexico ceded to the USA the vast territories of New Mexico and Alta California (now NM, AZ, UT, NV, and CA).

After 1848, the use of wagons by military groups and Mormons modified the trail route in some places. Soon, the “trail” became roads, then highways. Some segments of the interstate highways lie over the old mule trail. Everywhere the trail goes, it passes through the true Old West—a route of beautiful mountains, deserts, rivers and rural America. Cowboys still work here; Native Americans greet you in seven languages; descendants of Californios and Hispanos still live here.

In 2002, the U.S. Congress passed a bill designating the Old Spanish Trail as the nation’s **15th National Historic Trail**. President George W. Bush signed the bill into law on Dec. 4, 2002. Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton assigned the **Bureau of Land Management** and the **National Park Service** to jointly administer the trail on June 4, 2003.

Places along the trail evoke a sense of the conditions that existed in the 1830s and ‘40s. The skills and cultural history of those days are visible at special sites along the Old Spanish Trail.